

QUAD Meeting

13:15 Tuesday 9 June 2020

Note of Meeting

Ministerial Attendees

Arlene Foster – First Minister
Michelle O'Neill – Deputy First Minister
Robin Swann – NI Minister of Health
Declan Kearney – NI Junior Minister
Brandon Lewis – Secretary of State for NI
Simon Coveney – Minister for Foreign Affairs and Trade
Simon Harris – Rol Minister for Health

Travel Regulations/Quarantine

1. The Secretary of State for NI gave an outline of the recent developments on the travel regulations laid on Friday by the UK Government and the introduction of the quarantine provisions. He asked if they had caused any problems for NI.
2. The Deputy First Minister said that with the current lack of international travel there are very limited numbers of travellers and no problems have been identified by the airports.
3. The Minister for Foreign Affairs and Trade said that his country had been taking a different approach from the UK but to achieve similar outcomes, in so far that it is not mandatory to self-isolate. A 14 day quarantine period for those coming in from abroad is expected and notification of residence for that period is mandatory. He pointed out that they have no distinction for Irish citizens returning home or of persons from other nationalities, all asked to isolate for 14 days. They are considering reviewing this policy and will be considering travel zones/travel bubbles with countries having the same risk level or lower. The EU has been pressing for this and Ireland would be keen to have something similar in place with the UK.
4. The Minister for Foreign Affairs and Trade said that the advice from both countries at present is that people should not travel abroad unless essential. He said that following the announcement of the opening of tourism in Spain and Portugal from July, airlines have been aggressively advertising travel to those regions. This is causing tension with Government and confusion for the public.
5. The Secretary of State agreed, saying that some people have taking advantage of the aggressive advertising in the hopes that the quarantine arrangements will have changed by July when they will be returning from holiday.

6. The Minister for Foreign Affairs and Trade asked all participants to agree to reinforce the point on non-essential travel following this meeting.

Action: All administrations to reinforce the point on non-essential travel.

Health Ministers Update

NI

7. The NI Minister of Health said that notifications had been placed at both Dublin and Belfast International Airports to clearly warn travellers that they will be subject to the restrictions of the country in which they will reside.
8. He said that NI had reported no deaths yesterday for the second day in a row and less than 50 new cases overall. Also making good progress in care home with less than 60 now having any cases.
9. He said the NI Executive would be meeting on Thursday to consider a strategic approach to the easing of lockdown restrictions. He mentioned that the Executive had been somewhat taken by surprise by the Irish announcements on Friday about further easing of lockdown restrictions.
10. The NI Minister of Health said that the current focus is on looking to get services back to normal but while remaining ready to respond to the threat of a possible second wave.

Ireland

11. The RoI Minister for Health said he was encouraged by the NI figures. He said that in Ireland the introduction of Phase 1 of the easing arrangements did not seem to have had a negative impact on their R number which stills stands at between 0.4 and 0.7. They also have had very positive numbers recently with now having four consecutive days of less than 30 new cases.
12. Due to the reduced numbers they have started to use the extra testing capacity on vulnerable persons and they have been testing every single person in nursing homes. They have also been making good progress in tackling cases inside nursing homes, with covid now eradicated from 90 nursing homes which had clusters.
13. They are currently conducting research to scan the approaches being taking across a range of other countries to see what works best and they will be happy to share with NI once this work is complete.
14. As the numbers continue to steadily go down in hospitals they have commenced with phase 2 of the easing of restrictions, with the reopening of the retail sector and travel within counties or of up to 20 km from home.

15. They are well aware that increased movement means increased risks and want to see how Phase 2 progresses before confirming further easing.

Opening of Tourism Sector

16. The Minister for Foreign Affairs and Trade wanted to comment on the perceived lack of consultation by the Irish Government, mentioned by the NI Minister of Health. He said that there had been some initial consultation at senior official level in advance, but when he spoke to Ministers in advance of the announcement he got a sense that the announcements were putting some pressure on the Executive.
17. He said that he wanted to give them early notice that the Irish Government were considering a further easing of restrictions from 29 June on the tourism/hospitality sectors, opening of hotels, B and B's, restaurants etc. He said he was keen that NI/Rol officials speak more often to ensure there are less problems on any announcements.
18. The Secretary of State for NI said that the UK Government had been looking at similar easements from 4 July. He agreed it would be useful to have official conversations to ensure a more coordinated approach.
19. The Deputy First Minister said that the Executive was having a strategic discussion on Thursday on what the next steps will be on the easing of restrictions. She said that as part of those discussions it was important to have a consistent approach on the use of facemasks. She also said that an answer to the proposal to change the distance for social distancing measures was crucial i.e. moving from 2m to 1m. She said that she believed it was not yet the time for such a move at present but that it may be appropriate later.
20. The Secretary of State for NI said that in the UK the hospitality sector has been pushing hard for a move to a 1m distance, stating that only 30% of businesses in that sector would be viable at 2m, while over 75% would be viable at 1m.
21. The Minister for Foreign Affairs and Trade said that similar requests had been coming to the Irish Government. He said it was a difficult decision with a need to have a judgement call on when the lowering risk to public health allowed Ministers to offset against risks of damaging economic impacts.
22. The Rol Minister for Health said that at present it remained at 2m. The more the virus weakens the bigger the options for Ministers in dealing with economic factors. But he was worried that significant lobbying from the hospitality sector could be seen as undermining the 2m social distancing rules which are necessary at present for public health and could be needed again in a second wave.
23. The NI Minister of Health said that the time constraints originally attached to the distances have been lost and are not mentioned in any of the lobbying.

They had been 15 minutes at a distance of 2 metres, but only 3 minutes at a distance of a metre.

24. The First Minister said that the NI Executive were also looking at the idea of social bubbles, possibly learning from the New Zealand experience. She said that child care is a big issue for those returning to work and social bubbles was one option for easing the problems in that area.

Contact Tracing App

25. The Minister for Foreign Affairs and Trade asked how the UK were progressing with the Contact/Tracing App? He said that Ireland had been trialling a similar app for a while and hoped to have in use by the end of the month. He said it would be helpful if both apps had some interoperability built in, especially if they could facilitate travel.
26. The Secretary of State for NI said the NHS app is currently part of the overall strategy but was running in a pilot phase at the present time, although contact tracing has been put into place. He understood that the UK officials had been liaising with officials in NI and RoI on the introduction of the app.

Next Meeting

27. The Secretary of State for NI said it would be useful to have education Ministers available to speak and consider messaging and a joined up approach for September.
28. The Minister for Foreign Affairs and Trade said that the RoI Education Minister would be bringing some proposals to cabinet this week on the opening of some schools for a summer programme, aimed at providing some support for children with disabilities. They should be in a position to share some information on this next week.
Action: RoI to share proposals on summer education programme once they have been agreed.
29. The Minister for Foreign Affairs and Trade felt that it would be useful to hold the next meeting in advance of 29 June, so that participants could discuss next steps in the easing of restrictions.
Action: Next Meeting to be held before 29 June and to have Education on the agenda, with Education Ministers in attendance.