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By email  
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10 March 2020

Dear Sir Mark

## **COVID-19 PUBLIC SECTOR PREPAREDNESS**

Thank you for your letter of 5 March.

In relation to the position in Northern Ireland, I attach information on the two most critical areas of public service delivery: health and social care; and criminal justice (In relation to its main role, the Northern Ireland Department of Justice carries the responsibility for managing excess deaths). I will follow this up in due course with further information on the broad range of public services. For present purposes, I would assure you that the approach in relation to services such as education and welfare support is similar to (and informed by) the approach in corresponding Whitehall Departments.

One unique Northern Ireland factor that is worth emphasising is the land border with Ireland. There are three particular dimensions that we need to take into account when planning and delivering our response to COVID-19.

Firstly, and most obviously, Northern Ireland Departments and public sector bodies need to work closely with Irish counterparts in planning and delivery. In that regard, the recent COBRA decision to permit sharing of information with Irish colleagues is very welcome.

Secondly, the four-nations and evidence-based approach is rightly the cornerstone of our collective efforts. However, we need to be mindful of the effect that any difference

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of approach (even minor) by Irish colleagues can have in influencing public behaviour and political responses. A recent, although thankfully transient, example was the difference in travel advice to Northern Italy, on which Irish authorities initially took a more precautionary stance. That matter has, of course, been overtaken by events in Italy.

Thirdly, it has been rightly recognised that changing citizen behaviour will be the key to success as we move from the '*contain*' phase to the '*delay*' phase. With that in mind the need to align our communications activities with those of Irish colleagues is important, as the effectiveness of our measures will depend, in part, on the behaviour of a population group that effectively straddles the border.

I welcome the close co-operation with Cabinet Office colleagues, which will continue to be vital in the months ahead.

I am copying this letter to Madeleine Alessandri at the Northern Ireland Office, and to the Chief Medical Officer, Doctor Michael McBride.

Yours sincerely

**Personal Data**

**DAVID STERLING**  
**Head of the Northern Ireland Civil Service**

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