



**FROM: CHRIS STEWART
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GOVERNMENT**

DATE: 7 July 2020

**TO: PS/FIRST MINISTER
PS/DEPUTY FIRST MINISTER**

copy recipients listed below

**COVID-19 – NOTE OF A TELECONFERENCE: CHANCELLOR OF THE DUCHY OF
LANCASTER AND DEVOLVED ADMINISTRATIONS**

Main Participants:

Chancellor of the Duchy of Lancaster (CDL)
Secretary of State for Northern Ireland (SOSNI)
Secretary of State for Wales (SOSW)
First Minister for Northern Ireland (FM)
deputy First Minister for Northern Ireland (dFM)
First Minister for Scotland (FMS)
First Minister for Wales (FMW)

Introduction

1. CDL welcomed participants and suggested a focus on:
 - a stocktake and forward look in relation to managing the pandemic; and
 - a discussion of the forthcoming statement by the Chancellor of the Exchequer on an economic recovery package.

Stocktake and next steps in managing the pandemic

2. CDL noted that the UK Government and the devolved administrations had adopted broadly similar strategies, with differences reflecting differing social and economic circumstances, and differences in the incidence and prevalence of the disease. He acknowledged that there had been some disagreements, and that the approach of the UK Government had not been without error.

Wales

3. FMW outlined the approach in Wales. He noted that the four nations had each used the 'headroom' to lift restrictions in different ways, reflecting local circumstances. Recent priorities in Wales had included: schools; non-essential retail; hospitality; outdoor hospitality; and travel restrictions. He indicated that there would now be a period of consolidation of approximately three weeks, to allow for

assessment of the changes made to date. He noted that the decrease in the rate of infection had slowed, and that there had been two localised outbreaks in North Wales, which had been successfully managed.

4. FMW noted that, whilst engagement with the UK Government had been generally good, he was disappointed by the handling of the introduction of quarantine arrangements following foreign travel. He noted that information sharing had been incomplete and not timely, with frequent unexplained changes to the list of countries to which the regulations applied.
5. FMW pressed for early agreement on the operation of the Joint Biosecurity Centre.

Northern Ireland

6. FM noted the recent changes, including:
7.
 - the re-opening of the hospitality sector;
 - the opening of places of worship, following very positive engagement with faith leaders; and
 - the planned re-opening of schools (for key year groups) in August.
8. She emphasised that the approach was one of measured relaxation of restrictions on the basis of social / community partnership, and welcomed the generally positive and responsible public approach to the opening of the hospitality sector.
9. FM noted that the rate of transmission of the virus in Northern Ireland was believed to be at the lowest rate achievable without a vaccine. She agreed with the concerns expressed by FMW on the matter of quarantine after travel, and expressed a strong preference for a joint approach on that matter.
10. The dFM emphasised the very good progress made, noting that there had been no reported deaths for three consecutive days, and that there were no patients with Covid-19 in intensive care units. She noted that the Executive intended to consider suspending the restriction limiting citizen movement later this week¹. She emphasised the importance of a common approach to quarantine restrictions, and the need to avoid differences between the approach in Great Britain and other jurisdictions.

Scotland

11. FMS outlined the successful approach in Scotland of measured relaxation of the restrictions, with recent developments including: tourism; indoor hospitality; and household visits.
12. Looking ahead, FMS suggested the need for a joint public statement on a shared objective of maintaining the rate of transmission at the lowest achievable level. She expressed concern that there was a perception that an increased rate of transmission would be considered tolerable in England (CDL offered reassurance that this is not the case).

¹ Regulation 5 of the Health Protection (Coronavirus, Restrictions) Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2020.

13. FMS emphasised the importance of a common approach and understanding of the protocols for the handling of local outbreaks. She echoed the concerns expressed in relation to quarantine, noting that the autonomy of the Scottish Government to make decisions on the matter, and its difficulty in doing so in the absence of timely, comprehensive information, had been wrongly portrayed in the media as 'blocking'.
14. FMS emphasised the importance of providing clear advice and guidance on intra-UK travel, to avoid the need for 'local quarantine'.
15. CDL responded to the points made. He agreed on the need for better information on quarantine, noting that some of the difficulty had arisen because the data on infection rates was subject to rapid change in real time.

Statement by the Chancellor of the Exchequer

16. CDL noted that some details of the forthcoming statement had already been made public, with the remainder to be announced tomorrow (8 July). They would include some UK-wide measures, as well as measures for England, for which the devolved administrations would receive Barnett consequential allocations.

Scotland

17. FMS welcomed the economic interventions made to date. She suggested that consideration should be given to a cut in the rate of VAT, especially for sectors such as tourism and hospitality; and suggested that the ending of the furlough scheme ought not to be premature, and that tapering would reduce the risk of a sharp rise in unemployment.

Northern Ireland

18. FM welcomed the economic measures that had been introduced. She shared the concerns of FMS on the need to avoid a 'cliff edge' ending of the furlough scheme. FM expressed a particular concern about the aerospace industry, and suggested the need for a UK-wide intervention, to ensure the survival of the industry and the maintenance of the skilled workforce until the expected recovery in 2020/21.
19. The dFM expressed similar concerns, and suggested that the withdrawal of the furlough scheme ought to be tailored, taking account of the particular risk to sectors such as tourism and hospitality, and the needs of young people. She emphasised the need for any withdrawal of the furlough scheme to be matched by corresponding economic support initiatives for those sectors and population groups most affected.

Wales

20.FMW expressed similar concerns, with a particular focus on the aerospace industry, and the need for phased withdrawal of the furlough scheme.

21.CDL concluded by thanking participants, and agreeing to consider carefully the suggestions on joint messaging.

Personal Data

CHRIS STEWART

**cc PS/Minister Lyons
PS/Minister Kearney
David Sterling
Anthony Harbinson
Karen Pearson
Name Redacted
Neill Jackson**