

**Meeting with First Minister, Deputy First Minister, Irish Minister for Foreign
Affairs and NI and Irish Health Ministers
1 February 2021
5-6pm**

STEER

- With continuing pressure on healthcare in the UK and Ireland, this is an opportunity to ensure that each jurisdiction is in close contact with one another and that there is alignment where possible.
- You should open the meeting and then pass over to Simon Coveney for comment before asking the FM, dFM and NI Health Minister to provide a brief update on where things currently stand, ahead of the next review point on 18 February and the Executive's recent discussion on education.
- This is also an opportunity to recognise and support the cooperation between the UKG, NIE and IG on travel restrictions and data. Following engagement at senior official level, the Irish Transport Minister has committed to amend Ireland's Passenger Locator Form (PLF) to require incoming passengers, including those going on to NI, to provide a place of residence/address on the form. The Irish Government has also publicly committed to conclude arrangements with NI on data sharing and follow-up with passengers who travel via Ireland to NI. This amendment should support NI's efforts to enforce measures to control the spread of the virus. Until changes are implemented, however, we can expect this to be continually raised by NIE and DoH officials.
- The FM has expressed doubt that the issue is resolved. We recommend that you highlight the positive cooperation on this issue. If necessary, you should reiterate the importance of regular dialogue and join-up between governments and encourage continued link-up between officials to resolve this issue.
- You could also enquire about the NIE's deliberations on whether to align with UKG's policy on hotel quarantine. If they were to implement a similar policy to Ireland and England, there would be an opportunity to collaborate on implementation and messaging. TEO has set up a task and finish group which is considering this issue currently and officials met with CO on Monday.
- The attendance of health ministers will assist in focussing this meeting on coordination on the response to Covid-19 and it would be most productive to keep the focus here and not on transition issues.
- This is the first of these meetings since October and represents an opportunity to restart a regular rhythm of quad meetings. We recommend that

you suggest the next meeting to be the third week in February ahead of the next NIE review point on 18 February.

- There is a joint statement to be issued immediately following the meeting. To ensure the statement is released promptly, you will ask all participants to confirm they are all content with the statement that has been sent to them. Further communication activity is outlined in Annex A along with a draft statement in Annex B.

SPEAKING POINTS

1) Recent review of restrictions in NI

- I would appreciate an update on how the NIE are approaching the review of restrictions on 18 February?

2) Ongoing travel coordination

- I am keen to emphasise that travel restrictions in Northern Ireland and Ireland are now much more similar - with pre-Departure Testing required - and promote a strong message to people both in Ireland and Northern Ireland to avoid non-essential travel.
- I would appreciate an update on the Executive's thinking on proposals for hotel quarantines for international arrivals from high risk countries?
- I am keen to work within this group to ensure coherent messaging and to ensure that systems in NI and IE can work together to prevent the spread of new variants of Covid-19.

3) Health Data sharing between NI and IE

- I welcome the Irish Transport Minister's commitment last week to amend Ireland's PLFs to support NI's efforts to control the spread of the virus.
- Further, the public commitment to conclude arrangements with NI on data sharing and follow-up with passengers who travel via Ireland to NI is a significant step forward in our joint response to the pandemic.
- I am pleased that progress has been made and am keen to continue supporting discussions on this important issue as necessary. I understand that this issue is not yet resolved but am determined that we can continue to work together to find a solution.

4) Joint Statement (Annex B)

- It would be helpful to issue a joint statement as we have done before. My officials will be in touch to agree this directly after this meeting.

[If raised]

5) MACA

- I am happy that UKG are supporting healthcare capacity in Northern Ireland at this crucial time and I understand that military personnel are now providing support to hospitals in Northern Ireland.
- NIO are working with DoH and MoD to make sure that the right messaging around military intervention and I am keen to continue talking with the relevant stakeholders to make sure that messaging is sensitive but also emphasises that intervention was required to protect the healthcare system in Northern Ireland.
- Is there anything I can do to help with this?
- What's your assessment of the healthcare capacity in Northern Ireland with this support in place?

Irrelevant & Sensitive

Article 16 and Vaccines

- I of course welcome the decision taken by the EU over the weekend to change course on their original move to unilaterally invoke Article 16 of the Protocol. The Protocol was put together in good faith with our partners in the EU, in order to uphold our mutual obligations to peace, prosperity and stability in Northern Ireland.
- We have been working hard to deliver the Protocol in line with the agreement reached last year. We have addressed issues that have arisen but there is further work to be done. I am keen to ensure we have a common understanding of the issues.

Background

NI Restrictions

Northern Ireland's 6 week period (from 26 December to 6 Feb) of increased restrictions has been extended until 5 March, which ministers will review after 4 weeks (on 18 Feb). The 'stay at home' restrictions continue to have legal force and Ministers will next week review the ongoing period of remote learning for schools.

- No one is permitted to leave home without a reasonable excuse
- Travel over 10 miles from home is advised against
- Households are not allowed to mix indoors in private homes or gardens, with the exception of household bubbles
- Schools are providing remote learning, with some exceptions
- Hospitality venues must remain closed
- Takeaway services must close at 23:00
- Off-sales must stop at 20:00
- Hotels and accommodation services are limited
- Entertainment, leisure and cultural venues are not permitted to open
- Close contact business services are not permitted to operate
- Only essential retail is permitted to remain open
- Click and collect is not permitted for non-essential retail, however delivery is allowed
- Funerals and marriages are limited to 25 people

Schools

The Executive has now decided that schools will remain closed until at least 8 March, in line with UKG's decision on English schools.

Ireland Restrictions

The Irish Government has extended the current Level 5 public health restrictions, which will now remain in place until 5 March. Schools, currently closed for all students, will be reopened at the earliest opportunity - likely through a phased return beginning with children with special education needs.

Travel restrictions

Top Level Detail on UK and Ireland Announcements on Hotel Quarantine:

NI Position: Northern Ireland have not yet made a decision on whether to align with UKG policy. TEO will manage this decision and have set up a task and finish group. They are keen to level out the following issues that CO are hoping to provide answers to at 4pm today:

- What is the legal basis for intervention?
- Is this an immigration point or a public health point.
- How will Ireland be engaged and coordinated with? TEO noted that the quad will take place this afternoon where discussion would be possible.
- How would the governance for this work?

UKG Position:

- Increase checks/enforcement of the current quarantine system;
- Be much clearer that people should not be leaving home for any non-essential or leisure travel. As part of this stronger police presence at airports. (DfT and HO work here but I assume an FCDO element too);
- Tighten the list of exemptions (i.e. list of those exempt from travel/quarantine restrictions);
- Implement hotel quarantine for people travelling from red list countries - whilst noting that this would take a few weeks to stand up. Quarantine would be for 10 days; and
- Only apply this to returning UK citizens, as most other travel is banned from red-list countries.

Irish Position

- The Irish Cabinet yesterday agreed to introduce a range of measures to increase compliance, including a range of mandatory quarantine measures.
- Mandatory quarantine 'at a designated facility' will be required for passengers from South Africa and Brazil; and for those who arrive without a pre-departure negative test result. In other cases, passengers will be required by law to quarantine at home.
- Current travel regulations for overseas arrivals to Ireland will also apply to those who arrive via Northern Ireland.

- The Irish Government also announced an extension to Level 5 restrictions until 5 March, under which non-essential international travel is not permitted.

Pre-Departure Testing

England and Ireland now require a negative test to be provided to the carrier 72 hours before a passenger begins travel. Northern Ireland require anyone who has been outside the CTA within 14 days from entering NI without providing a negative PCR test. This would mean all arrivals in Ireland and Northern Ireland from outside the CTA will require Pre-Departure Testing.

Annex A: Communications Plan

Covid-19 quad meeting with Minister for Foreign Affairs Simon Coveney TD, FM, DFM & both Health Ministers

Objectives:

- To demonstrate ongoing cross border collaboration in the battle against Covid-19 during this current lockdown period
- The UK Govt & Irish Govt will update each other on latest developments including trajectory of the disease North and South; impact of local restrictions & travel restrictions; review of restrictions
- To build and maintain positive relationships with the Irish Govt

Comms Activity:

- *As it may take some time to agree the statement between all parties involved we propose two tweets. The first will be issued immediately after the meeting and the second with the link to the statement on gov.uk.*

Tweet 1

Today Minister of State @WalkerWorcester & Minister @simoncoveney co-chaired a #Covid19 Quad meeting w/ @DUPLLeader, @moneillsf & both health ministers. They discussed the increasingly serious pressures facing healthcare 🏥 and the need for strong coordination.

Tweet 2

Following today's meeting, Minister of State @WalkerWorcester, Minister @simoncoveney, @DUPLLeader & @moneillsf issued a joint statement reaffirming the need for continued cooperation & coordination inc. travel restrictions to limit the spread of #Covid19. Read 📌 [LINK TO FULL STATEMENT ON GOV.UK]

Annex B: Draft statement following Covid-19 meeting

Today the Minister of State for Northern Ireland Robin Walker MP and the Minister for Foreign Affairs, Simon Coveney TD, jointly chaired a conference call with the First Minister Arlene Foster, deputy First Minister Michelle O'Neill, Health Minister Robin Swann and Minister for Health Stephen Donnelly to discuss the ongoing response to Covid-19.

All of the participants acknowledged the very difficult situation being experienced by many in the recent weeks, especially those who have lost family members and loved ones to Covid-19. They expressed their deep gratitude for the continued remarkable dedication and efforts of health workers, front line workers and all working to respond to this pandemic.

They discussed the latest developments in the collective effort to combat the pandemic, and the need to continue the close cooperation between the Northern Ireland Executive, the Irish Government and the UK Government in order to best manage the increasingly serious pressures facing healthcare, and the importance of providing clear messaging to the public.

They considered the latest positions in terms of Covid-19 restrictions with a view to adopting similar approaches wherever possible.

They reaffirmed the need for continued cooperation and coordination, including with regard to international travel restrictions, in order to limit the spread of Covid-19.

All participants agreed to continue to meet regularly in this format, in addition to the ongoing regular engagement between Health Ministers, Chief Medical Officers and relevant Ministers on specific issues.