



NORTH SOUTH MINISTERIAL COUNCIL

TWENTY-FIFTH PLENARY MEETING

**NSMC JOINT SECRETARIAT OFFICES,
ARMAGH, AND BY VIDEOCONFERENCE**

18 DECEMBER 2020

JOINT COMMUNIQUÉ

1. The twenty-fifth plenary meeting of the North South Ministerial Council (NSMC) was held at the NSMC Joint Secretariat Offices, Armagh, and by videoconference on 18 December 2020.
2. The Northern Ireland Executive was led by the First Minister, the Rt. Hon. Arlene Foster MLA, and the deputy First Minister, Michelle O'Neill MLA, who jointly chaired the meeting. The Irish Government was led by the Taoiseach, Micheál Martin TD. A full list of the members of both delegations is attached as an Annex.

JOINT SECRETARIES PROGRESS REPORT

3. Ministers welcomed the resumption of NSMC sectoral meetings and noted that meetings have taken place in all NSMC Sectors since the last Plenary meeting in July 2020. They noted that, having regard to Covid-19 restrictions in both jurisdictions, meetings took place via videoconference and that 'in person' meetings will resume as soon as public health conditions permit.
4. The Council noted that each sector has considered a wide range of issues including Covid-19 recovery, priorities and work programmes and the

implications of UK withdrawal from the EU as well as various sector specific matters.

RESPONSE TO COVID-19

5. The Council was briefed by the Chief Medical Officers, Dr Michael McBride and Dr Tony Holohan, on the current public health situation and the ongoing close cooperation in the response to the Covid-19 pandemic. Ministers discussed the measures being implemented in the two jurisdictions to protect public health and limit the transmission of the virus.
6. The Council expressed its sympathy to all those who have lost loved ones as a result of the Covid-19 pandemic and commended the citizens in both jurisdictions for their compliance with the restrictions imposed as a result of the pandemic and their efforts and perseverance in helping manage the outbreak. The NSMC also expressed its gratitude to all those who have participated in the response to the Covid-19 pandemic, particularly the frontline health and social care workers who have demonstrated commendable bravery, resilience and commitment to their work and expressed appreciation to the wider workforce of essential workers who have kept various services and facilities operational, often in challenging circumstances.
7. Ministers recognised the impact of the pandemic on society and on the economy in both jurisdictions and welcomed the measures put in place by both Administrations to support communities and businesses affected by the crisis and to assist economic recovery. The recent progress in the development and roll-out of a vaccine was welcomed.
8. The Council noted that a meeting of the NSMC in the Health sector took place on 2 October and reviewed ongoing co-operation in responding to the pandemic, and that the issue of the response to Covid-19 was considered in meetings of the Council in relevant sectors. Ministers agreed that future meetings of the Council in relevant sectors, will continue to consider how agreed collaborative approaches can contribute to the promotion of economic and social recovery in a Covid-19 context.

IMPLICATIONS OF UK WITHDRAWAL FROM THE EU

9. Ministers recalled that at its last Plenary meeting on 31 July 2020 the Council recognised that both jurisdictions share a common interest in minimising disruption to trade and economic activity on the island and noted that discussions have taken place across the various NSMC sectors on the implications of the UK withdrawal from the EU. They noted that, in light of the ongoing negotiations, full clarity on the impact on cooperation in a number of areas is not yet available.
10. The Council agreed that, irrespective of the outcome of negotiations, engagement between the Administrations on this matter should continue, both

within the structures of the Council and elsewhere, taking account of the evolving position. Ministers noted the role conferred upon the NSMC in relation to the submission of proposals concerning the implementation and application of the Protocol to the Specialised Committee which has been established to consider issues related to the Protocol on Ireland/Northern Ireland and agreed that officials should work to develop an appropriate mechanism for Ministers to agree for referring proposals to the Specialised Committee.

NEW DECADE, NEW APPROACH COMMITMENTS

11. The NSMC Plenary meeting held on 31 July 2020 outlined a way forward on aspects related to New Decade, New Approach commitments and requested that relevant Ministers and their officials take forward discussions on these commitments, including where appropriate through the work of relevant NSMC sectors.
12. Ministers noted that discussions on various commitments have taken place at NSMC Sectoral meetings and bi-laterally between Ministers where the commitments are being advanced outside the NSMC structures and:
 - noted the commitment of both Administrations to the delivery of the A5 Western Transport Corridor and that next steps for the project will be informed by the Interim Report from the Public Inquiry;
 - noted that both Administrations continue to work together to progress the Ulster Canal restoration project and the Ulster Canal Greenway, Phase 1 of the restoration (Upper Lough Erne to Castlesaunderson) is now complete and that Phase 2 of the restoration (Clonfad to Clones) will commence in early 2021. The design, engineering feasibility and pre-construction stage of Phase 3 (Castlesaunderson to Clonfad) will commence in 2021;
 - welcomed the strategic approach that is being taken to the review of the rail network across both jurisdictions and the engagement that has taken place around the development of Terms of Reference for the review with a view to launching the tender process in the first quarter of 2021;
 - noted that both Administrations are considering next steps to progress the Narrow Water Bridge project and Ministers will explore further how the project may be advanced, including at the next NSMC Transport meeting;
 - noted that the Department of Transport has commenced a review into air connectivity and is engaging with relevant stakeholders, including the Department of the Economy and the Department for Transport (UK) and that the review will consider the potential impacts on regional connectivity, sustainability and climate change;

- welcomed the work being undertaken by Leitrim County Council and Fermanagh and Omagh District Council to take forward the development of the Sligo-Enniskillen Greenway as a joint project;
 - noted that senior officials from the Department of Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science and the Department for the Economy will meet to discuss Higher Education provision in the North West region early in the New Year;
 - invited Derry City and Strabane District Council and Donegal County Council to develop a statement of updated strategic priorities for the North West Region to inform the ongoing engagement of both Administrations with the North West Strategic Growth Partnership; and
 - welcomed the recent cooperation between both Administrations in relation to supporting research through Science Foundation Ireland's Covid-19 rapid response call and noted that further discussions will take place between Ministers and officials in relation to cooperation in the area of research and innovation;
13. The Council agreed that *New Decade, New Approach commitments* should remain on the agenda of relevant NSMC sectors and that further updates will be provided to the Council at future NSMC Plenary meetings.

FUTURE NSMC MEETINGS

14. The Council approved a schedule of NSMC meetings proposed by the Joint Secretariat, and agreed that at upcoming sectoral meetings Ministers will consider priorities and work programmes in the relevant sectoral areas. The Council agreed that the next NSMC Plenary meeting will be held in June/July 2021.

**Joint Secretariat
18 December 2020**

**MEETING OF THE NORTH SOUTH MINISTERIAL COUNCIL
18 DECEMBER 2020**

Irish Government	Northern Ireland Executive
Micheál Martin TD Taoiseach	Rt. Hon. Arlene Foster MLA First Minister
Leo Varadkar TD Tánaiste and Minister for Enterprise, Trade and Employment	Michelle O'Neill MLA deputy First Minister
Eamon Ryan TD Minister for the Environment, Climate and Communications and Minister for Transport	Diane Dodds MLA Minister for the Economy
Paschal Donohoe TD Minister for Finance	Deirdre Hargey MLA Minister for Communities
Michael McGrath TD Minister for Public Expenditure and Reform	Nichola Mallon MLA Minister for Infrastructure
Simon Coveney TD Minister for Foreign Affairs and Minister for Defence	Conor Murphy MLA Minister of Finance
Norma Foley TD Minister for Education	Edwin Poots MLA Minister of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs
Roderic O'Gorman TD Minister for Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth	Robin Swann MLA Minister of Health
Helen McEntee TD Minister for Justice	Peter Weir MLA Minister of Education
Heather Humphreys TD Minister for Social Protection, and Minister for Rural and Community Development	Declan Kearney MLA Junior Minister, The Executive Office
Darragh O'Brien TD Minister for Housing, Local Government and Heritage	Gordon Lyons MLA Junior Minister, The Executive Office
Catherine Martin TD Minister for Tourism, Culture, Arts, Gaeltacht, Sport and Media	
Stephen Donnelly TD Minister for Health	

Simon Harris TD Minister for Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science	
Charlie McConalogue TD Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine	