



An Roinn Gnóthaí Eachtracha
Department of Foreign Affairs

Our Ref: FOI/Req/20/199

Date: 27 November 2020

Dear Deputy Pringle,

I refer to the request which you have made under the Freedom of Information Act 2014 for access to records held by this Department, as follows:

All records of correspondence between this department and relevant counterparts in both the Northern Ireland Executive and/or the British Government related to:

1. The coordination of response to the Covid19 pandemic between the two jurisdictions on the island of Ireland.
2. The adoption of an aligned Covid19 strategy between the two jurisdictions on the island of Ireland.
3. Specifically, the adoption of an aligned “Zero Covid19” strategy between the two jurisdictions on the island of Ireland.

For clarity, please be aware that the Department of Health is leading on our response to the Covid-19 pandemic, and therefore on operational cooperation with the Northern Ireland Executive.

While not leading on these issues from a public health perspective, the Department of Foreign Affairs has a role in certain related aspects and leads on contact with Northern Ireland more generally.

I have identified 15 records that fall within the scope of your request. The records are listed in the schedule attached.

I have made a decision to grant access to 14 of the records and refuse access to 1 record.

Refusal in this instance relates to section 33 (2) (b) (i) Security, defence and international relations. Section 33 – Security, defence and international relations. The Department of Foreign Affairs operates in a complex and diverse international environment. A mutuality of confidence exists in the communication between this Department and our interlocutors. This is particularly the case in respect of diplomatic communications. I have considered the possibility and likelihood that the release of these records could result in negative consequences, and prejudice the ability of this Department to effectively discharge its functions and to continue to engage with outside interlocutors and stakeholders. To do otherwise would risk compromising the State’s capacity to engage with international partners through diplomatic and other channels.

There is regular and ongoing North-South contact and cooperation on the island in response to COVID-19 at both operational and political level. As public health measures are under constant review in both jurisdictions, it is agreed to be essential to maintain strong North-South collaborative arrangements and, wherever possible, consistency of approach.

In April, this cooperation was formalised in a Memorandum of Understanding (MoU) on the public health response to the pandemic between the Government and Northern Ireland Executive by then Minister for Health Simon Harris T.D. and Northern Ireland Health Minister Robin Swann and the two Chief Medical Officers.

Further, with the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland, Brandon Lewis, the Minister for Foreign Affairs, Simon Coveney T.D., has jointly chaired a number of conference calls with the First Minister and deputy First Minister and both Health Ministers, to discuss the ongoing response to COVID-19.

Meetings took place in this format on the following dates:

- 14 March 2020
- 31 March 2020
- 9 April 2020
- 30 April 2020
- 19 May 2020
- 9 June 2020
- 12 October 2020

I have not included records related to the arrangements of those meetings in this response. I have, where available, included the press statements issued following these meetings in order to provide some further detail on the issues discussed.

Health is one of the formal areas of North-South cooperation under the North South Ministerial Council (NSMC), through which the existing strong and enduring relationships between health systems and officials on the island of Ireland continue to be strengthened

The response to Covid-19 on the island was also discussed at the NSMC Health and Food Safety meeting on 2 October 2020. The joint communique released following this meeting is included in the records annexed to this request.

Right of Appeal

Should you wish to appeal this decision, you may do so in writing to the Freedom of Information Unit, Department of Foreign Affairs, 76-78 Harcourt Street, Dublin 2 or by email to foi@dfa.ie. A fee applies for an appeal for access to non-personal information; the level of this fee has been set at €30. For methods of payment, please contact FOI Unit at foi@dfa.ie, or 01-4082857.

You should make your appeal within 4 weeks (20 working days) from the date of this notification. However, the making of a late appeal may be permitted in appropriate circumstances. The appeal will involve a complete reconsideration of the matter by a more senior member of the staff of this Department.

Yours sincerely

Niamh Clarke
Ireland, UK and Americas Division,
Department of Foreign Affairs