



An Roinn Gnóthaí Eachtracha
Department of Foreign Affairs

Our Ref: FOI/Req/2021/032

Date: 15 February 2021

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 and meetings in from the 22nd of November (Date of my last FOI) to the date this request is received, 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.*

Please note that this request was received 22 January 2021. This request therefore contains records dating 22 November 2020 to 22 January 2021.

I have identified 11 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 2 of the records and refused access to 9 records.

Refusal in this instance for 3 of these records relates to section 33 (2) (b) (i) 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.

I have exempted 6 records under Section 33 (1) (c) of the Act, which refers to records which, if released, could be reasonably considered to adversely affect matters relating to Northern Ireland.

The Department of Foreign Affairs is responsible for managing relations with Northern Ireland. Based on the Department's direct knowledge and expertise, its strongly held position is that the mere granting of access to records could be reasonably considered likely to adversely affect matters relating to Northern Ireland by introducing doubts with regard to the security and confidentiality of our communications. It is important to maintain that mutuality of trust. I have considered the possibility and likelihood that the release of these records could negatively impact this function of the Department's work and I am satisfied that the balance favours refusal rather than release.

For clarity, please be reminded 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. In this context, the Minister for Foreign Affairs, and officials in this Department, continue to facilitate regular, necessary contact and coordination with Northern Ireland counterparts.

Regular engagement is ongoing also between Health Ministers, Chief Medical Officers and relevant Ministers on specific issues.

On Monday 2 February, with the Minister of State for Northern Ireland, Robin Walker MP, Minister Coveney 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.

This was the latest in a series of regular conference calls in this format, following the first such meeting, which took place in Armagh on 13 March 2020.

While not in the scope of this request, the joint statement released by participants following that meeting may be of interest and can be accessed at the following link:

<https://www.dfa.ie/news-and-media/press-releases/press-release-archive/2021/february/joint-statement-following-quad-meeting-on-covid-19-.php>

Health is, as noted in our previous response, one of the formal areas of North-South cooperation under the North South Ministerial Council (NSMC). The response to Covid-19 on the island was therefore discussed at the NSMC Institutional meeting of 16 December 2020 and the NSMC Plenary meeting of 18 December 2020. The joint communique released following each of those meetings 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, (€10 for medical card holders). A copy of the medical card should be provided to avail of the reduced fee. 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