

Ambassador to Ireland discusses differences in the UK and Irish approach to tackling coronavirus

We are living in extraordinary times. I celebrated 40 years as a diplomat on St Patrick's Day and have never known anything like the COVID-19 (coronavirus) crisis. Its impact is global and nobody is immune from it.

I want to begin by paying tribute to all our remarkable health workers, those keeping supermarkets stocked, those keeping law and order on the streets and the millions of other people across our across these islands who are keeping the essential fabric of society going so effectively.

I was inspired by the scenes last Thursday night across our cities – so many people clapping in the darkness, whilst key monuments were illuminated in the colours of our respective health services. They were a reminder of what unites us, and of the solidarity that will help us all through these challenging times.

The British Embassy continues to operate and provide services, including consular assistance. But in largely virtual form. Like so many of your readers, we are now mostly working from home.

It has been quite a learning curve and a top priority has been looking out for each other. We have been helped by lots of the great advice that's out there about looking after our mental health and by creative use of virtual alternatives to social interaction.

I know there has been a lot of interest in any differences in the UK and Irish approach to tackling COVID-19. My message is simple. Both governments are doing everything they can to delay and to flatten the curve. To do so, we are following the advice of our expert scientists, especially our Chief Medical Officers.

Those who say we are not following the science are wrong. The advice we are following reflects the specific patterns of development of the virus in both countries and informs any new measures to counter the disease. So we will sometimes take different steps but our shared objectives are protecting our health services and saving lives.

As we do so, our two governments are in close contact recognising the unique circumstances of our across these islands, including of course the border between Northern Ireland and Ireland, but also the Common Travel Area.

As well as the call between the Prime Minister and the Taoiseach, there have been recent conversations around common challenges between our Secretaries of State for Health, Foreign Affairs, Northern Ireland and Transport with the Tánaiste and other Irish counterparts. Our Chief Medical Officers are in

contact too.

After speaking with Tánaiste Simon Coveney, Foreign Secretary Dominic Raab underlined the importance of our countries working together more closely than ever as we pull through this crisis. And that is why the whole Embassy team is hard at work facilitating bilateral engagement.

A good practical example is the shared challenge of repatriating those of our citizens who have been stranded abroad. There has been strong collaboration in a number of countries, including the repatriation of a number of Irish citizens from Wuhan, the cruise ships Princess Diamond and Silver Shadow, and most recently from Peru. We are grateful for Irish Government assistance on repatriation of British citizens too.

Understandably, we are all focused on the situation where we are. But we cannot defeat this pandemic without international co-operation. To defeat COVID-19 once and for all we need to make this kind of cooperation truly global.

The UK sees several key strands to this. We believe we need to cooperate to build the resilience of vulnerable countries, develop a vaccine, and support the global economy.

The UK has so far pledged £544 million in aid to support the global efforts to combat COVID-19, including contributions to the WHO, Red Cross and UNICEF to help vulnerable countries. But much more is needed and we are encouraging other countries to consider what they can give.

Developing a vaccine and distributing this equitably to those who need it is going to be essential to tackling the disease and preventing it from returning. British researchers are working hard on this, just like their Irish counterparts. We have put £250 million towards the wider global effort to find a vaccine and some promising signs are emerging.

And finally, once the crisis eases, the international community will need to work together to help our economies to recover as quickly as possible and get all of those who have sadly lost their jobs through this crisis back into employment. These are the priorities we are supporting through the G7 and G20.

We do not know when the pandemic will end. It may take some time. But the remarkable spirit that I see right here in Dublin and across these islands convinces me that we will get through this and that the deep ties that bind us will be even stronger.

Robin Barnett, British Ambassador to Ireland

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- Only go outside for food, health reasons or work (but only if you cannot work from home)
- If you go out, stay 2 metres (6ft) away from other people at all times
- Wash your hands as soon as you get home

Do not meet others, even friends or family.

You can spread the virus even if you don't have symptoms.

Coronavirus (COVID-19)

Dear stakeholder,

We would like to update you on the SSR0's current operations and adjustments we are making as result of the Coronavirus (COVID-19) pandemic.

Our office at Furnival Street is closed but all our team are operating remotely, and we will continue to provide support to stakeholders and deliver all our statutory functions. Access to DefCARS is available as normal and we will provide support to contractors in the normal way through our Helpdesk. Whilst we will not able to meet with you in person for the time being, we are happy to discuss any issues with you via video conferencing or telephone. We will also provide remote on-boarding support for contractors new to the regulatory framework.

We recognise that contractors may have difficulty complying with their reporting obligations during the pandemic. We are not empowered to agree extensions to statutory reporting deadlines, but we have suspended the release of new compliance queries and follow-up on existing queries, and we will maintain this suspension until 24 April 2020. We will review the position again prior to that date and consider a further pause if the current situation is unchanged. We encourage contractors to try to submit reports on time but, if a date cannot be met, to submit the report as soon as is practical, explaining reasons for late submission in the report. This will inform the MOD, which is responsible for enforcement, and any compliance reviews by the SSR0.

Many of you will be focused on dealing with challenging issues arising from the pandemic and we intend to review our engagement, in order not to distract from that focus. We will not initiate any major consultations or issue working papers for comment for the time being. We have one consultation already open in relation to our reporting guidance and we will extend the closing date for responses to 1 September 2020. We are postponing all site

visits. We plan to go ahead with the next Operational Working Group (OWG) meeting on 29 April by teleconference if there is interest, so that we can update you on our current and future work and to hear from you on these and other issues.

We will shortly publish our Corporate Plan for 2020-2023 and I am grateful for your engagement and contributions to the development of the Plan. As the Plan extends over three years, we are confident that we can accommodate a period of reduced engagement during the pandemic. We will keep under review the delivery of our Corporate Plan activities and make appropriate adjustments to the planned pace and timing to reflect the environment in which we are operating.

If you have any concerns or queries, or if you would like some additional support, please do not hesitate to contact our helpdesk or others at the SSR0.

Yours sincerely

George Jenkins OBE Chairman

High street benefits from £22 billion grants and business rates package

Thousands of high street firms are beginning to receive £25,000 cash grants and will be exempt from business rates from today (Wednesday 1st April 2020) – as they begin to benefit from a £22 billion package.

As part of a raft of unprecedented measures announced by the Chancellor to support those affected by the coronavirus outbreak, eligible properties, including those in the retail, hospitality and leisure sectors, will not pay business rates for the next 12 months. The measure comes into force today and will save firms in England £11 billion.

The smallest businesses in these sectors are also beginning to receive one off grants of either £10,000 or £25,000, with money landing in their bank accounts.

Rishi Sunak commented:

High street businesses are at the core of what keeps our economy thriving.

That is why we are taking the unprecedented step to provide businesses with the vital cash they need to ensure their survival during this difficult time, with 300 businesses having already

received money in their accounts.

An early payment of £3.4 billion was made to local authorities last week (Friday 27th March 2020) to ensure grants would get to businesses as soon as possible. Westminster City Council paid grants to 300 businesses on Monday night. Every local authority in England has now received the full amount of grant funding they need to support their local businesses.

The business rates holiday, which also applies to England's nurseries, forms part of the government's economic response to Covid-19.

Business Secretary Alok Sharma said:

Business rates can often be one of the main fixed costs for small companies up and down the country, which is why today's suspension of business rates for retailers and our hospitality and leisure industries will offer much-needed support in these challenging times.

The rates relief and grants are in addition to the government's wide-ranging support for the economy. This includes the government paying the wages of millions of employed and self-employed people by covering 80% of monthly incomes through the Coronavirus Job Retention Scheme and the Self Employment Income Support Scheme.

For devolved matters, including the business rates measures, the Devolved Administrations will receive funding under the Barnett formula to support businesses in Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland. So far the UK government has provided £5.3 billion of funding to the devolved administrations to support people, business and public services in response to Covid-19.

This includes over £2.7 billion for the Scottish Government, over £1.6 billion for the Welsh Government and £900 million for the Northern Ireland Executive.

Cllr Rachael Robathan, leader of Westminster City Council, said:

We are proud to play our part in the government's scheme to ensure that businesses are getting the financial assistance that they need.

The first 300 grants worth more than £3 million have now gone to some of the borough's small businesses and we are working as fast as we can to process others.

Help to companies now is vital to help them survive and be ready for normal trading when the epidemic eases.

Nathan Clark, Director of the Brudenell Social Club in Leeds, welcomed the

news, commenting:

The schemes and support measures brought forward by the Chancellor in respect of Covid-19 have and will undoubtedly aid Brudenell Social Club navigate through one of our greatest business challenges in our 106 year history.

We will look to utilise all schemes where possible, such as the small business grant, alongside furloughing our employees and furthermore appreciate the business rates holiday which will give us much more flexibility in our cash-flow over that period.

This package will give us a fighting chance to pull through and continue to support the community in the future.

Mike Cherry, National Chairman, The Federation of Small Businesses said:

Many small businesses across England in the retail, hospitality and leisure sectors alongside nurseries, estate and letting agents and bingo halls, will be very pleased that the one year business rates holiday has started.

This intervention combined with the quick delivery of grants for those small businesses eligible for the expanded Retail Discount and the 700,000 small businesses in receipt of small business rates relief and rural rate relief, could be the difference between surviving this crisis or folding.

Kate Nicholls, CEO UK Hospitality, said:

These are, naturally, very concerning times for businesses in the hospitality sector. Ours was one of the first sectors to feel the significant impact of the crisis as customers began to avoid social gatherings.

Cash flow is effectively at zero for many employers in hospitality, so we needed swift and significant support to ease the burden. The business rates holiday for our entire sector, the third largest in the country, will provide a substantial boost to businesses when they most need it.

This will help many employers survive the crisis and should help put us in a position to begin rebuilding our industry, and the wider economy, once the current challenges have been met.

Further information

If eligible businesses have made payments in the meantime, they will be

refunded by their local authority. We are working with local authorities to ensure new bills are issued as soon as possible.

In most cases, local authorities will need to collect details from small businesses in order to be able to make payments. Local authorities will be in touch with all eligible businesses shortly.

The two business grant funding schemes help businesses manage their cashflow by: * Providing grants of £10,000 to small businesses eligible for Small Business Rates Relief or Rural Rates Relief; * For businesses in the retail, hospitality or leisure sectors: providing £25,000 grants per property, for each property with a rateable value over £15,000 and below £51,000; and £10,000 per property, for each property with a rateable value of £15,000 or less.

Read more about the government's Covid-19 economic response measures [here](#).

[New advice to protect homes of England's seahorses and seabream](#)

These new packages of online advice, now available on the Natural England's [Designated Site System](#), cover sites which are home to England's seahorses, black bream breeding sites and internationally important populations of seabirds.

These sites include the Isles of Scilly Special Protection Area (SPA), Utopia Marine Conservation Zone (MCZ), and Studland Bay MCZ in Dorset. In line with the government guidance, Natural England is also working on advice for four new Marine Conservation Zones (MCZs), protecting our diverse species and habitats in the blue belt around the English Coast.

In common with most organisations dealing with the effects of COVID-19, Natural England is following [government guidance](#) and taking all steps necessary to protect our staff and help prevent the spread of the virus. This includes the advice and guidance we offer, and our regulatory work.

Anna Millard, Conservation Advice Project Manager said:

Conservation Advice helps us turn protected sites from lines on a map into something that can be well-managed and delivers conservation gains.

By conserving and restoring these sites, we can help to build more resilience into our landscapes and seas, protecting them for future

generations.

The nine sites are found in the Western Channel and Celtic Sea and the Eastern Channel. Gavin Black, Marine Senior Adviser, Wessex Team, tells us more about why this piece of work is important in aiding conservation efforts in the Dorset area.

Studland Bay, Dorset

Studland Bay is a sheltered bay just outside Poole Harbour. It is home to important seagrass beds and the only known location where both species of British seahorse have been recorded breeding. Due to its location and sheltered conditions it is a very popular place to anchor for recreational vessels. Making sure activities in the site do not damage seahorse habitat is highly important for the survival of this species.

Since the Government [designated Studland Bay MCZ](#) in May 2019, the Marine Management Organisation ([MMO](#)) has a duty to introduce appropriate management to further the conservation objectives of the site. The new conservation advice package will enable targeted discussions on the most suitable and sustainable management options available.

Black seabream Marine Conservation Zones (Southbourne Rough, Poole Rocks, Purbeck Coast)

Black seabream move up and down the English Channel. Every year between March and July they come inshore to find areas of flat bedrock with a shallow veneer of gravel to make nests. The male bream constantly clears the nests of wayward gravel particles and must continuously protect the eggs against a whole host of hungry predators.

To safeguard nesting black bream at this vulnerable stage of their life cycle, last year three sites in Dorset, namely Southbourne Rough, Poole Rocks and Purbeck Coast, were designated MCZs. Natural England's expert advice will inform discussions with stakeholders and, alongside gathering additional data, will refine options for management.

Across Natural England, colleagues have been working hard, meeting our statutory obligations to deliver well evidenced, easily accessible conservation advice for protected sites on land and in the sea. Conservation Advice packages are now available for over 350 of our most important protected areas in both the marine and terrestrial environments.

All nine draft packages will be open for comments online until Wednesday 17 June 2020.

- learn more about how to access the Conservation Advice packages by watching the how to video on Natural England's [YouTube channel](#)
- marine advice packages are now available on the [Designated Site System \(DSS\)](#).
- terrestrial sites are available on the 'Access to Evidence' [catalogue](#)

- organisations and individuals can comment on the NE draft advice until Wednesday 17 June 2020. For more information, please email MCAProject@naturalengland.org.uk
- all sites will be available through the DSS in the near future