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TO: FIRST MINISTER AND DEPUTY FIRST MINISTER

The Rt Hon Arlene Foster MLA

Michelle O'Neill MLA

EXECUTIVE APPROACH TO CORONAVIRUS DECISION MAKING

I wish at the start to register my concerns at the time made available to comment substantively on this document.

Economic and social impacts

Any paper on this important issue should have been a balanced assessment incorporating the social distancing guidance paper that I circulated to Executive Colleagues last week. There is not enough (indeed any) contextual information up front on the economic consequences, including its impact on health and wellbeing.

There needs to be an honest and frank assessment of the damage that this issue will have on people's lives and future standard of living for years to come. In simple terms, on its own, each month of shutdown is akin to a large recession. These forces are having severe economic, social and health impacts across Northern Ireland. For those people who have lost their jobs, been victim of domestic violence or have had urgent health treatments cancelled, the news that we as an Executive will consider these issues at some future, but not determined time, will bring little comfort. Indeed it risks holding the Executive to public ridicule.

The language within the draft paper also reinforces a 'binary' narrative of health versus economy and society, when the opposite must surely be the case. As an Executive we need to act on all these fronts at the same time to suppress the virus and mitigate the negative impact on livelihoods.

Options

Our decisions at this critical stage of the pandemic will be critically assessed against both the evidence and the actions by the UK Government, other Devolved Administrations and the Republic of Ireland. The Executive's decisions on the options will need to be framed in this context.

The presentation of just two options seems an artificial constraint. There are other variations that could be considered.

Option 2 includes very technical language that will be difficult for the public to understand, and closes with the offer of clarity in the coming weeks. This will not be good enough at a time when the public is looking for clarity, and businesses and employees need the confidence to make the right decisions for their workplaces.

I am also concerned that Option 2 looks to be tightening the Executive's position. It is very difficult to understand which businesses would fall into each stage, and it is entirely possible that manufacturing sectors would be seen to be excluded from Stage 1. We are aware that many businesses in the manufacturing and construction sector are looking to restart, and are investing significant time and resources into making their workplaces safe for their employees. We do not want to undermine these efforts to keep our economy alive.

We should be looking to build confidence so that businesses and staff can go back to work at the right time. Option 1 does this to a certain extent, and is consistent with the narrative of other administrations.

I would like to see more detail on why there is the delay in getting advice from the Chief Medical Officer and the Chief Scientific Advisor to deliver on the Executive's last decision when other countries seem to be able to get this. Stating that you had clear advice from the Chief Medical Officer and the Chief Scientific Advisor that there is not the time to complete this table accurately and publish it in the coming days is unacceptable. There is a real risk that as an Executive we will be seen as becoming detached from the real world, the measures being taken around us and the economic and social consequences developing in front of us.

Across both options there is a glaring omission, particularly after the Aer Lingus revelations earlier this week. Our approach to the future needs to account for people arriving into Northern Ireland at seaports and airports. I understand that arriving from outside Northern Ireland via RoI is covered by its public health declaration form that requires stating how/where isolation is carried out.

Yours sincerely,

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Minister for the Economy