

FROM THE OFFICE OF THE MINISTER
Diane Dodds MLA



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To: Arlene Foster - First Minister
Michelle O'Neill - deputy First Minister

10 MAY EXECUTIVE APPROACH TO CORONAVIRUS DECISION MAKING

Thank you for your draft Executive paper of 10 May 2020 regarding the above.

Unfortunately, it would seem that most of my concerns raised in my response to the 6 May version still exist around the 11 May version of the paper and many of those still stand. However, the Prime Minister's announcement last night fundamentally changes how we must approach this document.

Through the course of today we will learn more about the UK Government's road map for reopening the economy and society. It is essential that as we progress to control this virus that we make every effort to move in lockstep with the UK Government, the Devolved Administrations and the Republic of Ireland.

Again within the paper there is no commentary on learning from other places (across Europe and elsewhere). It would be really helpful as previously documented, if the paper could provide us as Ministers analysis on changes made in other jurisdictions. For example, you will be aware from my Department's analysis that Germany has taken a staged approach to opening retail by limiting the first stage to retailers under 800m², while Belgium has taken a sectoral approach allowing garden centres and hardware shops to be among the first to open. What have been the health impacts of these changes and how relevant is their experience to ours?

A key element in this consideration of when to encourage economic and social engagement is a better understanding of how the disease is impacting across the community. If the impact is increasingly confined to care and residential homes, is that not a justification for relaxation of general public constraints while ensuring that these establishments have sufficient PPE, testing etc to create a barrier to further spread.

This draft document risks us falling out of step with both the decisions being taken around us and the actions of businesses in Northern Ireland. For example, my paper last week called for 'Work Safe' messaging for the construction and manufacturing sectors. This was matched in the PM's statement last night and also reflects the hard work that many businesses and employees have put into making their work places safe. This confidence building is not visible in the document before us this morning.

Invest NI is reporting some 5,700 employees from its client companies will be coming back to work, and many more in the wider economy will be on a similar path. The 5 steps in this paper all seem academic given the absence of any even tentative dates as to when we will start the process or the anticipated timeline between phases (weeks or months?) etc. that businesses will not unreasonably demand. There is no recognition of input already provided by business, trade bodies and unions. Most importantly there is a passing reference to undertaking an assessment of economic impact and yet no evidence is provided of such as assessment.

I do appreciate that there are many factors at play here on determining how we move into the recovery phase. Many of these factors are inter-related and complex. One obvious key issue is what position we take on re-opening schools. Sending some comfort to children at this stage that we have a plan is important. This in turn will then shape public perceptions and the propensity to consider returning to work.

Furthermore, there is no commentary on wider travel (risk around tracing regime for people who do not live here but rather travel in and out of the region for work through the sea and airports). Tracing will only be effective if there is a full picture.

We should take time to rethink, to take stock of the plans being set out by the UK Government. We also need to assess the public expenditure impact of our interventions to date and how long we can continue to provide financial support in such a wide range of measures.

I am copying this to the Attorney General, Departmental Solicitor's Office, First Legislative Counsel and to Executive Secretariat.

Yours sincerely

Personal Data

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