

**FROM: NICHOLA MALLON MLA**  
**Minister for Infrastructure**

**DATE: 6 May 2020**

**TO: DAVID STERLING**  
**HOCS**

**REF:**

## **EXECUTIVE APPROACH TO CORONAVIRUS DECISION-MAKING**

Thank you for your memo and draft paper received today, 6<sup>th</sup> May..

As your paper notes, as an Executive we are under a legal obligation to next review the Coronavirus Regulations by 9<sup>th</sup> May. Your memo notes that the Department of Health is currently working on finalising the current review of the regulations. Given that we are due to discuss and possibly make a decision on this at tomorrow's Executive meeting, it is important that this paper from the Department for Health is circulated as a matter of urgency to give Ministers time for careful consideration. Tomorrow does not give sufficient time.

Given the absence of any accompanying medical and scientific advice, it is impossible to provide informed commentary in response to your paper. This is compounded by the absence of detail, clear advice for the public, timeframes and protective proposals to deal with the virus including availability of PPE, testing, tracing and tracking.

At our meeting on Monday I set out my views on the approach I believe as an Executive we should take; a strategic, planned and phased approach guided and defined by the:

- Medical and scientific evidence.
- Testing, track and tracing capabilities
- Availability of PPE, planning for social distancing and other protections.
- Consideration of face coverings for public places including as a public confidence building measure
- Island wide cooperation as per the scientific advice of the Chief Scientific Advisor
- A clear communication plan providing clear advice to the public, including workers and employers with clear explanations on what they are being asked to do, when and why.
- Need for Recovery to build on the opportunity to do things differently and better.

It is difficult to see any of this clearly present in either of the two options as they stand. While it is not possible within the timeframe of your request, and the reasons above, to provide a detailed analysis of each option, in response to your request for comment I would ask that you note some of immediate concerns listed below.

### **Option 1**

It is not approved by the Chief Medical Officer and the Chief Scientific Advisor. It makes specific reference to public transport without consultation with my Department. It suggests (paragraph 4.5) that public transport capacity could be as high as 50% at the first stage. This is unlikely to be the case. If we fully apply current social distancing advice to buses and trains, capacity could be reduced to as little as 15%. The idea that this could be “flexed” as we progress through the stages is unrealistic – we do not have six or seven times as many buses, train carriages or drivers that can be suddenly pressed into service. There would also be significant cost implications. For that reason we will have to carefully control demand for public transport in the short to medium term. Executive colleagues will also need to recognise that any decisions to reopen schools or heavily public transport dependent sectors such as retail will need to be carefully considered in terms of demand management. This proposal also sits alongside a current request from the Finance Minister to consider furloughing Translink employees.

It provides no sense of a timescale or rationale for the approach at each phase. It provides no medical evidence or scientific assessment for Ministers to consider the merits of each proposal nor does it provide advice for the public on what safety measures, testing and tracing regime will underpin it.

### **Option 2**

The second option provides very little information or detail to the public. It proposes no timeframe, while there is indication that the CMO and CSA support a 5 staged approach, there is no accompanying medical or scientific assessment, or reference to reassure the public on what safety measures, testing and tracing regime will underpin this approach. This option as presented will also fall short of public expectation, built up by some Members of the Executive. It is worth noting that this paper for the public setting out NI's roadmap to recovery says more about what we are currently doing than what will happen next which is what people anxiously want to know.

I appreciate this is a very challenging piece of work difficult. The Executive's roadmap to recovery must be evidenced based, based on testing and tracing, and recognize the interconnectedness of the work of our Departments and society. Our success as a society in fighting Covid19 depends on our ability to keep people with us. We are losing people in terms of compliance. Different employees are being recalled into work without any overarching framework set by the Executive. As an Executive it is imperative that we have a coherent plan, clearly communicated and explained otherwise we will lose people and lose control.

I reiterate my request above for the urgent circulation of the Department of Health's paper, and my request at Monday's meeting, for the Chief Medical Officer and the Chief Scientific Advisor to be present at tomorrow's meeting to provide their advice. I am content to meet with Executive Colleague this evening to discuss this paper if colleagues think that would be helpful.

I am copying this to Executive colleagues, the CMO and the CSO.

Yours sincerely

**Personal Data**

**NICHOLA MALLON MLA**  
**Minister for Infrastructure**