

Jayne Brady
Head of the Civil Service



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FROM: Jayne Brady

DATE: 22 December 2021

TO: First Minister and deputy First Minister

SUBJECT: COVID 19 OMICRON: Public Health and Assembly Business

Issue: Assembly business during the current
Pandemic surge due to Omicron.

Timescale: DESK IMMEDIATE.

Press Office Advice: Has the potential to attract media
attention

FOI Implications: In the event of a request for disclosure of
information contained in this submission
under the FOI Act, the request would be
considered in the context of the relevant
provisions of the legislation, including
any relevant exemptions that may be
applicable.

Financial Implications: Not applicable.

Equality Implications: Not applicable.

Legislative Implications: Not applicable.

Executive Referral: To be referred to Executive colleagues for
consideration.

Recommendation: It is recommended that Ministers:

- (a) note the contents of this submission; and
- (b) issue the attached draft letter (Annex 1) to the Speaker of the Assembly, if content.

BACKGROUND

1. The First Minister and deputy First Minister had written to the Speaker to the NI Assembly in March 2020 on the back of correspondence relating to the Assembly's approach to business following the onset of the COVID pandemic. A further letter in January 2021 recorded gratitude for the relaxations granted which were invaluable to enabling a focus on Covid-19 activity.
2. This second letter noted that the Executive was again engaged in managing and combating the subsequent escalation of the pandemic. In light of this, a further request was made for consideration to be given to the reintroduction of some modification of business, with particular attention to the use of Priority Written Questions and the level of priority to be accorded to debates on No-day Named Motions.
3. The exponential growth of the Omicron variant now means we need to write again to seek the assistance of the Assembly. The Omicron variant has proved to be highly infectious with a doubling rate of 2-3 days and is spreading quickly across the population. While the Executive is doing everything possible to mitigate the spread, we know that within the coming weeks much of the population will be infected. This is likely to impact:
 - (a) directly in terms of severe illness for some of those infected and therefore also in terms of pressures on our hard pressed health and social care services which are already operating over capacity;

- (b) indirectly as a result of sickness absences across the economy, including the public sector – it is not possible to provide precise estimates but this could approach a third of the workforce; leading to...
 - (c) wider societal disruption and negative impacts, particularly for those who are most vulnerable and therefore are most in need of our services.
4. The pressures created by Omicron are already impacting on the work of **all departments**. As a result, we are standing up emergency arrangements and are in the process of re-deploying staff across the NICS in the form of a surge team capacity. In light of this, we recommend asking the Assembly to consider deploying emergency measures for the purposes of relieving these pressures.

CONCLUSION

5. We are therefore requesting that Ministers' write to the Assembly on the basis of the draft attached at **Annex 1**.

RECOMMENDATION

4. It is recommended that you:
- (a) note the contents of this submission; and
 - (b) issue the attached draft letter (**Annex 1**) to the Speaker of the Assembly, if content.

Personal Data

Jayne Brady

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Letter to Speaker

COVID OMICRON: PUBLIC HEALTH AND ASSEMBLY BUSINESS

We had written to you in March 2020 on the back of correspondence relating to the Assembly's approach to business following the onset of the COVID pandemic. A further letter in January 2021 recorded gratitude for the relaxations granted which were invaluable to enabling a focus on Covid-19 activity.

The second letter noted that the Executive was again engaged in managing and combating the subsequent escalation of the pandemic; and also that it is often those Ministers who are most directly engaged in this work who experience the greatest volumes of inquiry from members through questions. In light of this, a request was made for consideration to be given to the reintroduction of some modification of business, with particular attention to the use of Priority Written Questions and the level of priority to be accorded to debates on No-day Named Motions.

The exponential growth of the Omicron variant now means we need to write again to seek your assistance. This variant has proved to be highly infectious with a doubling rate of 2-3 days and is spreading quickly across the population. While the Executive is doing everything possible to mitigate the spread, we know that within the coming weeks much of the population will be infected. This is likely to impact:

- (a) directly in terms of severe illness for some of those infected and therefore also in terms of pressures on our hard pressed health and social care services which are already operating over capacity;
- (b) indirectly as a result of sickness absences across the economy, including the public sector – it is not possible to provide precise estimates but this could approach a third of the workforce; leading to...

- (c) wider societal disruption and negative impacts, particularly for those who are most vulnerable and therefore are most in need of our services.

The pressures created by Omicron are already impacting on the work of Departments. The impact is most obvious for the Department of Health but every single Department will be seriously impacted, whether because additional measures are needed to support those most affected or because of the need to ensure that essential services can be kept going in the face of high levels of infection and the expected significant absence levels that will follow. As a result, we are standing up emergency arrangements again and are in the process of re-deploying staff across the NICS in the form of a surge team capacity. Within all departments, ministers and their senior teams will have to prioritise continuously in the weeks ahead to make sure the focus is firmly on responding to this latest and gravely worrying aspect of the pandemic

In light of this, we are reluctantly asking the Assembly to consider deploying emergency measures for the purposes of relieving these pressures, which will only become more acute in the coming weeks and to ensure that your staff and ours are given the time and space to focus on the immediate challenge. This request is not being made lightly. We would assure you that Executive Ministers fully acknowledge their duty of accountability and their continued willingness at all times to fulfil this.

Accordingly, with your agreement we would ask that our officials discuss appropriate mitigations with your team in order to ensure that we collectively provide the best possible response for the people who need our services most. We are copying this letter to Executive colleagues.

First Minister

Deputy First Minister