

Democratic Unionist Party



Mr David Sterling

Head of the Civil Service

Stormont Castle

Belfast

29th March 2020

Dear David,

There will be additional and significant challenges across our system over the coming days and weeks with the projected increase of impact of Covid-19. This will require enhanced coordination and communication both within the Executive and the system, but also to the public.

Therefore, I welcome that you are working on a draft Strategy, as discussed on Friday, on how we can ensure a strong, united and strategic approach across the Executive to the Covid-19 crisis to meet the increased challenges.

As you develop this Strategy for consideration on Monday, I thought it would be useful to raise a number of observations.

Firstly, at the heart of our approach must be to ensure our system is prepared and ready to meet the challenge. Our joint aim must be to protect life, giving all possible support to ensure this happens. This logically means that we must follow the medical and scientific advice at all times, and that politics should play no part in the decisions made. Reliance on this expert advice must be at the heart of any strategy and our decision making.

This means we must also continue to access the expert advice available across the UK, working in collaboration and ensuring full integration through our Chief Medical Officer in Northern Ireland and continued working within the SAGE framework. This is in acknowledgment that the SAGE system is also taking full cognisance of the international

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expertise, WHO and learning from the tracking of the epidemic across the world and in other countries.

Critical to this will be continued access to information across the system in Northern Ireland. Ministers need timely and accurate information to provide the foundation for our decision making. The Strategy must look at ways that this internal flow of information can be enhanced especially to meet the anticipated increase in the challenges we will face over the coming days.

Secondly, all departments and all aspects of our system must be able to clearly articulate their needs to a central point of contact to enable the Northern Ireland Executive to move swiftly to address these. In particular, there has been coordinated work thus far in relation to procurement especially around PPE. I know many people on the front line of health care are concerned and want better and improved access to PPE. We must ensure all our workers are safe at all times. However, I believe the system must perform better to identify and act to address these issues as quickly as possible. The Strategy should look on how this can be enhanced.

Thirdly, it is important that we continue and enhance our communication with the public. I recognise how important this is at a time when people are very worried and many are losing their jobs and seeing significant impacts on their businesses. In addition Government is moving at pace to deal with daily developments by high-level announcements that leave a strong and understandable desire from the public for detail. There needs to be an enhanced approach to getting information to Ministers in a timely way to communicate this to the public. We need to ensure we have reliable and accurate information as quickly as possible. We need to ensure we maximise all communication platforms to get clear messages out to the public. The Strategy should look at urgent measures to enhance our communications with the public.

Fourthly, at this time of making policy at an unprecedented speed, we need to ensure the best possible processes to develop approaches that are fit for purpose. I know this is a very difficult challenge, but it is one we must rise to if we are to ensure that people are best protected. It is important that we continue to be fully involved in the HM Government's processes around developing policies, that will often apply across the UK, in a timely way. Many of those measures have been very welcome. We must continue to ensure we fully benefit from UK Government measures, especially given the United Kingdom's position of relative size and strength giving us the ability to do more to support people through health,

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benefits and our economy.

It is imperative that our Executive makes informed decisions, based on evidence and expert advice. It is critical we continue to be fully integrated within those networks across the UK including SAGE and policy cooperation. We must have a strategic approach that addresses any emerging challenges while ensuring we are planning and preparing a system that can meet the difficult situation that we are projected to face in the coming days. We must have clear and timely communication with the public.

In addition, given our unique system of Government in Northern Ireland it is important that Ministers work closely together, particularly at this time, whilst also recognising the legal framework that Ministers are responsible for their respective departments subject to the matters that are required to be brought to the Executive. This is a careful balance that must be respected in order to ensure future, positive working with all the 5 parties of the Executive, particularly the smaller parties.

Undoubtedly dealing with this crisis will have many significant impacts on our Northern Ireland Executive business in the months and years to come, including our Programme for Government, budget and other policy priorities. This will require a fundamental reassessment of current proposals once the critical period of this crisis has passed.

I want to acknowledge the hard work of so many across the system thus far, along with the tireless work of so many on the frontline. I look forward to considering your draft Strategy tomorrow.

Yours sincerely

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