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FROM: DAVID STERLING

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TO: PS/FIRST MINISTER AND DEPUTY FIRST MINISTER

Follow up to Executive Meeting on 30 March 2020

I am writing to advise you on the steps we are taking following the Executive meeting yesterday afternoon and to seek your advice on the daily rhythm of meetings you would wish to move to going forward.

Executive Covid Strategy and Plan

Following the Executive's endorsement of the draft Strategy and Plan yesterday we have written to departments asking them to:

1. Sharpen up the priorities and actions within the Plan including identifying any new priorities or actions which need to be included;
2. Identify Senior Responsible Owners (SROs) at Senior Civil Service level (SCS) for each action; and
3. Provide a RAG assessment for each action.

We are also working with DoH to ensure that the most significant and important aspects of the DoH Emergency Response Strategy are reflected in the Executive's overall Plan.

Data

It is important that ministers have a regular updates on all priority actions. We are working to streamline existing arrangements so that departments, as far as possible, only need to submit data updates once on a daily basis and that this should be sufficient to ensure the following are updated on a consistent and real-time basis:

1. the CCG Daily Sitrep;
2. the data requirements of the Executive's Strategy and Plan; and
3. any UKG data requirements.

Timescale

There is a significant amount of work to be done here and we want to ensure the revised Plan is as robust and purposeful as possible. We are giving departments until Thursday morning to get back to us. This is to allow time for the necessary work and clearance by departmental ministers. Our intention would be to turn this around and submit a revised version to you before close of play on Thursday.

Future Rhythm of Executive Meetings

There are a number of items of Executive business currently in circulation:

[EXEC-0036-2020]	[The Welfare Supplementary Payments (Loss of Universal Credit or Housing Benefit) Bill to Extend Social Sector Size Criteria Mitigation]
[EXEC-0064-2020]	[Sentencing (Pre-Consolidation Amendments) Bill – LCM (DOJ)]
[EXEC-0067-2020]	[City and Growth Deals/Inclusive Future Fund – Proposed Way Forward (DOF)]
[SUB-1139-2020]	[NSMC Appointments (TEO)]
[EXEC-0071-2020]	[Non Domestic RHI - Proposed increase in Tariff (DFE)]
[EXEC-0078-2020]	[The European Grouping of Territorial Co-operation (Amendment etc.) (EU Exit) Regulations 2020 (DFE)]
[EXEC-0079-2020]	[Department of Justice Legislative Programme: Approval for Stalking Bill (DOJ)]

My suggestion is that the Executive should next meet on Friday this week to consider:

- All those items of Executive business which cannot be cleared by correspondence;
- The revised Executive Covid Strategy and Plan including proposals for future Executive engagement; and

- The DfC plan for "Shielding" the 40,000 people with vulnerable medical conditions.

Going beyond Friday, I would welcome your advice on the future rhythm of meetings. You are both currently attending or dialling in to CCG on a daily basis and I hope this is giving you a good oversight of the work that is going on across the public sector to manage the crisis. Your attendance also affords an opportunity for priority issues to be escalated very rapidly to you.

The ECCMC meetings have considered almost all the main high risk issues (with the exception of the DfC Shielding plans) and hence have probably reached a point where we need to consider their future utility. As I see it, Executive ministers need a governance framework where:

- You can meet sufficiently frequently to keep on top of issues without imposing unacceptable time burdens on hard-pressed ministers and officials;
- Executive decisions can be taken quickly when necessary; and
- The requirement for ministers and officials to be physically present is minimised.

This last point has become crucial. My understanding is that the Cabinets in London and Dublin are not meeting regularly and any meetings are now exclusively conducted by video conference.

We have a duty of care to our staff and I am increasingly concerned about the risk that arises even when it is theoretically possible to practise social distancing in a meeting room. We also need to recognise that we should be setting an example in this regard. Accordingly my recommendation is that we should be moving to Executive meetings (of whatever format) being held exclusively by VCR.

Conclusion

In conclusion I would ask you to:

1. Note the work we are doing to revise the Executive Covid Strategy and Plan;
2. Agree to an Executive meeting this Friday;
3. Advise what structure and rhythm of meetings you would like to move to going forward something I would be happy to discuss); and
4. Agree that Executive meetings should be conducted by VCR from now on.

Personal Data

DAVID STERLING
Head of the Northern Ireland Civil Service

