

FROM THE OFFICE OF THE JUSTICE MINISTER



Minister's Office Block B,  
Castle Buildings  
Stormont Estate  
Ballymiscaw  
Belfast  
BT4 3SG

Tel: I&S

[DOJAssemblySection@justice-ni.x.gsi.gov.uk](mailto:DOJAssemblySection@justice-ni.x.gsi.gov.uk)

**FROM: NAOMI LONG MLA  
MINISTER OF JUSTICE**

**DATE: 13 MARCH 2020**

**TO: EXECUTIVE COLLEAGUES**

I am writing following the updates we have received on COVID-19 and the advice we have now issued to the general public on prevention, containment and delay of the virus.

It is clear that public concern is high, not least in respect of an apparent difference in the advice being followed north and south of the border, especially in relation to school closures and public events. This has, unfortunately, not been helped by conflicting messaging emerging from the Executive itself.

The danger with such confusion or perceived conflict between Ministers and the advice of the Chief Medical Officer is that people may ignore the core advice of the CMO and the risk of transmission will actually increase. A united, joined-up Executive response is, in my view, most likely to reassure the public and effect compliance with any measures being introduced.

I believe that, in addition, and building on the excellent work undertaken to date by the Minister for Health and Chief Medical Officer, we need to more clearly and consistently not only communicate the guidance to the public but also the advice on which it is

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based and rationale for the approach taken. If people better understand not only what action is required but also why, it may help allay fears and increase compliance.

Further, providing information on preparedness for each department may also assist with improving public confidence in the Executive's response to this crisis and counter the false narrative that we have adopted a "do nothing" approach.

I, therefore, suggest that we consider increasing communication around the actions each Department is taking in terms of planning, balancing the need for public reassurance and avoiding creation of further anxiety about circumstances for which we must be prepared but which we hope may never crystallise. Perhaps, this could be achieved via a series of written or oral statements to the Assembly.

Finally, whilst to date the focus has rightly been on the health consequences of the pandemic, increasingly businesses and individuals are seeking reassurances regarding what actions the Executive intends to take to alleviate the economic and financial consequences of this pandemic.

Actions including but not limited to rates reductions/holidays, compensation for event cancellations, access to benefits for self-employed people and gig economy workers, care for those who are homeless including rough sleepers, and support for SMEs whose business continuity insurance may not cover novel diseases have all been raised with me over the last 24 hours. Whilst I recognise that such decisions require Executive approval and may have consequences on our limited resources unless implemented

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UK-aside, some pro-active communication in this regard may reassure those affected that we are aware of and seeking to be responsive to these genuine concerns.

An early conversation to develop a cross-Executive approach on these issues would therefore be an important part of combating public anxiety and confusion.

I look forward to your response.

Best Regards,

**Personal Data**

**NAOMI LONG MLA**  
**Minister of Justice**