



Full statements from First Minister Arlene Foster and deputy First Minister Michelle O'Neill on Covid-19 response

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The First Minister Arlene Foster and deputy First Minister Michelle O'Neill make statements in relation to Covid-19 below:

First Minister Arlene Foster:

Good afternoon.

The level of fear and uncertainty in almost every family is unprecedented.

I have never before witnessed such anxiety across all sectors.



The First Minister Arlene Foster (right) and deputy First Minister Michelle O'Neill

There is only one topic of conversation on everyone's lips.

We're all worried.

We are worried about our elderly parents. My own mother is 86 years of age, although she will not thank me for saying it.

People who work in a busy public facing setting are worried about carrying home the virus to their husband, their wife, their son or their daughter who

may already be struggling with an underlying respiratory condition.

Women and men who have devoted their lives to building a good business can see their livelihood being placed in jeopardy by an invisible enemy.

I understand the worry. I understand the sleepless nights.

It's human nature to be concerned about our nearest and dearest.

Michelle and I come from very different political backgrounds but circumstances are very similar.

We are mothers, daughters and sisters trying to do the right thing as politicians.

Despite our political differences, we recognise that the coronavirus has no political considerations.

It will not discriminate.

It is neither British nor Irish, unionist or nationalist.

Our response must mirror this.

Politics must be set aside.

Coronavirus and its societal and economic impact is bigger than all of us.

Today we stand united as leaders to help guide Northern Ireland – our people – through this time of unprecedented challenge.

We know that in the time ahead we will have to dig deep and draw on the fount of human endeavour, of neighbourliness and of unity of purpose and spirit. Together we will succeed.

Today I want to say to every citizen, whether young or old, regardless of class, creed or background that we will do everything in our power to help.

Government is only worth having if its purpose is to serve the people we represent. The deputy First Minister and I, along with Executive colleagues will work collectively to do everything possible for all our people.

The response and recovery to Covid-19 is the only issue on our agenda at the moment.

In this battle we will need to work together as neighbours.

We will need to help each other.

This is a time for social distancing but it's not the time to be selfish or to walk by on the other side.

This is the time to be that Good Samaritan.

We all have our part to play.

Let us put into practice that unique Northern Irish spirit which recognises the humanity in every situation and has brought us through some very dark days.

Let me set out some measures to the public. As we do so we are pledged to be in regular and focused communication with the public. I, and other colleagues will be available on a daily basis to communicate and to keep you updated on what actions and measures we are taking.

Measures on schools

Our school principals, parents and pupils have been in a holding pattern based on medical advice for the last week.

Today we have agreed that all schools will close from Monday the twenty third of March.

The societal and economic impact of this measure will be enormous as parents have to adjust their routine to deal with this unplanned long-term closure.

Our medical advice was to delay this step for as long as possible as the closure will likely take us beyond the natural break for summer.

This is unprecedented.

We are exploring how our schools can continue to be a base for the education of children whose parents are health service staff or other key workers such as the blue light services.

Educating our children also cannot cease. Remote learning and home packs for self-study are all being explored over the period ahead.

I thank and express my deep appreciation to all our teachers, support staff and those helping to staff our schools for all they have done and I look forward to day when we will see our schools fully functioning again.

A-level and GCSE exam preparation has already been disrupted.

We are speaking to the exam bodies to get clear guidance for schools and parents. As soon as we have a clear answer we will make it public.

There is also an impact on free school meals and this is an issue that the Minister for Communities alongside Executive colleagues will address.

Secondly, this is an economic crisis as well as a public health crisis.

The deputy First Minister will now comment on the initial economic measures which have been agreed.

Deputy First Minister Michelle O'Neill:

Today I stand here before you not only as a joint head of government, but also as a daughter, mother, a sister and an aunt.

We are in an unprecedented health emergency, the likes of which we have never experienced in our lives.

I know only too well how frightened and concerned many of you are feeling.

We all have family, friends and neighbours, and we are worried about their well-being.

This evening, I want to speak to all of you from the heart and to reassure our entire community that we will, as political leaders, do all in our power to protect everyone in our society.

There is only one priority at this time and that is to save lives and to mind people.

I want to reassure our elderly people and everyone living alone that you will be cared for, and the best possible care will be provided to anyone who falls sick at this time.

This virus has changed everything.

It cannot be business as usual.

This is already impacting our economy, businesses, public services, jobs, and people's livelihoods.

And it's a very difficult time and we know you need our full support and resources.

It does your heart good to see the community response that is already happening on the ground, people are amazing and our greatest asset.

I thank every one of you. And we are going to need that community spirit in the days ahead.

We are:

Going to launch a communities response plan - Voluntary & Community Sector Emergencies Leadership Group (food distribution, tackling food poverty, free school meals, those self-isolating, connecting with communities on the ground);

Going to launch a community support fund (getting essential support to people);

Going to launch an enhanced discretionary support fund - this will be grants given to people for essential needs;

Exploring support for people on the private/social rented sector; and

Exploring support for people in crisis and emergency accommodation.

This is a time for all of us to reach out, reassure and support one another.

We each live in the shadow of each other.

We need to be compassionate and caring for each other.

We need to come together as never before.

I want to pay tribute to all of our doctors, nurses and health service staff, you are the backbone of this fight to treat people and save lives.

There are going to be a range of measures coming forward and over the coming days there will be daily updates detailing them.

I am pleased to be able to announce a new grant scheme. These represent our immediate response to yesterday's announcements by the British Chancellor and will in total cost some £370 million.

We will be considering further measures in the coming days and will make further announcements.

An immediate grant of £10,000 will be provided to all small businesses who are eligible for the Small Business Rate Relief Scheme.

That is all businesses with a NAV up to £15,000.

This will ease their immediate cash flow pressures.

We estimate that this scheme will cost £267,000,000 and assist some 27,000 businesses.

An immediate grant of £25,000 will be provided to companies in the retail, tourism and hospitality sectors with a rateable value between £15,000 and £51,000.

We estimate that this scheme will cost £100,000,000 and assist some 4,000 business.

Together these schemes will provide some £370 million of assistance to some of our most vulnerable businesses.

The schemes will be administered by DfE / InvestNI working with DoF's Land and Property Services.

The Executive has already committed to providing a three month rates holiday to ALL businesses from April to June.

We hope to make further announcements in the coming days.

As a power sharing government know that we are absolutely united on your behalf.

That is what you all deserve.

That is what we as ministers are 100% committed to delivering.

Your health and well-being is paramount.

We are pledging, to you all, that the sole focus of government has now turned to doing everything that is necessary to secure our public services; and to ensure that our employers, workers and their families are supported.

Our power sharing government is determined to ensure that we act swiftly and decisively in your interests.

Acting together and standing together, government with community, I know we will come through this.

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