

FROM THE OFFICE OF THE MINISTER
Diane Dodds MLA



From: Diane Dodds MLA
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To: Arlene Foster and Michelle O'Neill
First Minister deputy First Minister

EXECUTIVE APPROACH TO CORONAVIRUS DECISION MAKING:

Thank you for your draft Executive paper of 6 May 2020 regarding the above.

I acknowledge that there is now more recognition of the economic and social impacts of the pandemic and agreement that the Executive needs to act across all fronts to suppress the virus and mitigate the negative impact on livelihoods. However, there is still a glaring omission in this paper. As I have said previously there needs to be a consideration of economic and social impacts. You have stated that there is an assessment criteria ((2.4(iii)) on economic impact) but it is not evident and referred to.

I note the paper is significantly different with no options now presented but a five stage approach offered instead. I also note that you have accepted my comments at paragraph 1.6 on a recession every month and at paragraph 2.5 on the need for action across all fronts, which is good, however, they are merely passing references to the economic and societal impacts. The paper still lacks any meaningful, substantive assessment of social and economic consequences.

There is still no analysis on changes made in other jurisdictions. For example, you will be aware from my Department's analysis that Germany has taken a staged approach to opening retail by limiting the first stage to retailers under 800m², while Belgium has taken a sectoral approach allowing garden centres and hardware shops to be among the first to open. What have been the health impacts of these changes and how relevant is their experience to ours?

I fully support the paper's statement that businesses, schools, churches, sporting organisations etc must show responsibility. But we must also recognise that our trade bodies, businesses and unions have already stepped up to this responsibility.

I still have profound concerns about the messaging in the Stages table. The very technical language which describes Stage 1 is more restrictive than the types of

activity and messaging we expect to see and it can be/will be interpreted in different ways.

Invest NI is reporting that some 5,000 employees from its client companies will be coming back to work, and many more in the wider economy will be on a similar path. I expect that nearly all of these businesses and employees will be baffled by the conditions set that they (a) must be outside and (b) and cannot touch hard surfaces. This has no currency in the real world and we risk looking entirely detached from what is happening around us if we include this language.

I note there is no reference to 'travel' with the exception of 'public transport'. What protection is being put in place from 'importing' the virus (planes and ferries)? Other countries have imposed quarantine, some (like Rol) seem to have a formal declaration to be completed by people arriving in the country re where they are going to be over the next 7/14 days. This will be an important piece of the jigsaw in the re-opening of the economy – business travel; for example, contractors working on planned maintenance in our local powers stations. Tracing will only be effective if there is this full picture being developed.

I believe there is likely to be strong criticism of this paper and the Executive if we do not include a clear timetable on when each stage will commence and restrictions are to be eased. I believe the approach set out in this paper, if adopted, will lead to a reduction in the levels of compliance with the current restrictions, particularly if the decision is simply to review again at the end of May. As mentioned in my last letter, clarity of messaging on this is essential for public confidence and business critical.

I am copying this to the Attorney General, Departmental Solicitor's Office, First Legislative Counsel and to Executive Secretariat.

Yours sincerely

Personal Data

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Minister for the Economy