

FROM: DAVID STERLING
DATE: 20 MAY 2020
TO: RICHARD PENGELLY

Our ref: SUB73/2020

EXECUTIVE BUSINESS

Thank you for your letter of 20 May advising me of your decision to move the Emergency Operations Centre to five day working. Your letter of thanks to the staff concerned is well deserved and I would like to add my own appreciation to it.

You also raised issues around the current operation of the Executive.

It is unarguable that the Covid-19 crisis, with the need for rapid decision making and an increased number of Executive meetings, has placed considerable strains on the normal procedures for the management of Executive business and a great deal of reactive improvisation has been required. I am grateful for your recognition of our efforts within TEO to manage this situation. I do, however, need to record my view that the situation you describe has not arisen purely as a product of the internal operation of TEO, and its remedy therefore solely in our gift, but also of a situation to which most if not all departments have been contributory elements.

In particular, a general expectation has arisen that papers circulated at short notice will be included on the agenda of the next Executive meeting, even if this is the next day. As a result, a large volume of potential business has to be processed by TEO at short notice; the agendas for meetings have become overloaded; and meetings are taking up an increasing amount of Ministerial time. As an illustration of our current situation, three significant papers which Ministers have requested be tabled at tomorrow's meeting have not yet been circulated at time of writing.

At the same time both Ministers and officials are expressing dissatisfaction at the short time available to consider papers or prepare briefing before meetings.

This situation is inherently contradictory and, as you rightly recognise, is not conducive to proper collegiate, considered, decision making. While the need for urgent response must remain a key determinant of our current approach to business, it has also not been clear that the timescale in which agreement is being sought is actually justified in all circumstances. The solution to this does not lie in more meetings, but rather the proper sequencing of business across meetings, and we intend to take a closer look at how this might be achieved. Following consideration

and consultation with FM and dFM we would intend to move to a timetable whereby any paper intended for an Executive meeting on Monday or Thursday should be circulated **at a minimum** no later than 24 hours in advance. The First Minister and deputy First Minister would also reserve the right, in the light of the volume of business for any Executive meeting, to defer any paper to a further meeting, where no apparent urgency is attached. The short gaps between Executive meetings make it likely that deferral until the following meeting is unlikely to have major negative consequences in many if not the majority of cases.

We will, as I have indicated, be giving consideration to these and other changes but, in the meantime, I would also ask you all, that, when clearing draft Executive papers for submission to your Minister, you give special attention to the timescale being sought for agreement and take such steps as necessary to moderate any unrealistic expectations.

I am copying this to Permanent Secretary colleagues,

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DAVID STERLING
HEAD OF THE NORTHERN IRELAND CIVIL SERVICE