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Your reference:
Our reference:
Date: 5 May 2020

Dear David

EXECUTIVE APPROACH TO DECISION MAKING

1. Thank you for your note which includes proposals for decision making in relation to Coronavirus. Unfortunately it was not possible to meet the original timescale for response, but I am sure you will understand the need to consider these issues very carefully given what is at stake. I also recognise the hard work which has been done to get the paper to this stage of development. There will, of course, be different views around the Executive table as to how to move forward. While this must have made it a challenging exercise, diversity of opinion is welcome if it leads to better outcomes. It is important to understand however that a number of outcomes are directly related. Restrictions are obviously necessary for public health but at the same time, create massive economic impacts which in turn affect peoples' financial circumstances, their health and wellbeing and ultimately their life expectancy.
2. The challenge now is to achieve a coherent and effective decision-making framework. In doing so, it is important to note that there are no options available which can remove or mitigate all risk. Whatever decisions we make will inevitably have some negative impacts associated with them. Our objective therefore must be to reach a considered and responsible position, and to adapt that position as we move ahead and circumstances change.
3. This means recognising that the restrictions which have been put in place are there for a purpose and were originally implemented to reduce public health risk.

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It also means recognising that the price of those restrictions has been an unprecedented human impact. We are only in the early stages of that economic downturn and have yet to feel the very real human costs that it will bring in terms of the health and wellbeing of the people of Northern Ireland. The relationship between economic activity, health and wellbeing is very well established. We know that life expectancy and morbidity is much higher amongst people living in poverty and in deprived areas, compared with wealthier areas. In moving ahead we will need to reflect on the inevitable reduction in health and wellbeing, and increasing mortality, which will follow the restrictions associated with the pandemic. Specific examples of these impacts include: stress; mental health issues and domestic violence, resulting in poorer quality of life, morbidity and lives lost.

4. Unfortunately, the nature of these issues means that we are unable to directly quantify the link between our decisions and economic harm, poverty and morbidity. Likewise there are always some uncertainties in any modelling of behavioural measures and their effect on infection rates and morbidity (including those with COVID-19). We do however know that the curve will turn on COVID-19 infection rates and associated deaths in the coming weeks. As this happens, we will need to be prepared for the change to come. We will need to take decisions at each stage that take into account all of the relevant factors, primarily based on public health now and into the future.
5. It is worth noting, that businesses and wider society have been making these difficult decisions throughout the crisis. One example has been in the agri-food sector. COVID-19 has highlighted the importance of our food chain, at a local, national and international level; and we can never take this for granted.
6. Employees and employers in the agri-food industry worked through the challenges in a constructive way to protect public health through various means while maintaining production and logistics. This was not, and is not, easy but I am sure we are all extremely grateful to the industry for doing this and for avoiding the harm which would have come in the wake of disrupted supply lines. Had we collectively taken an inflexible and impractical approach, food production would have stopped, bringing with it unique and unprecedented impact on our society.
7. It will be important for the next draft framework to build on this approach and to include a clear process, specifying the milestones necessary to allow us to move the situation forward in a responsible way. We owe this to our people who have been patiently waiting for clarity and a way forward through the crisis. That framework will need to take a considered approach which incorporates all of the public health, economic and social factors that apply. It should also build in options for pragmatic measures that can be taken to protect public safety and reduce the risks associated with changing restrictions. It is an obvious point, but anything that we agree in relation to all of this will need to be considered against

medical and scientific evidence and will need to take into account the scope to use testing, tracking and tracing arrangements.

8. Finally, it is important that we prepare for life after the current pandemic. There is work ongoing in relation to the Recovery Plan and that work needs to be informed by the approach we take to decision making (and vice versa). A very important aspect is the need to plan for a Green Recovery, so that we plan for an economic and social model that protects human health in the long term, addresses climate change, leads to a growth in green jobs and supports the improved health and wellbeing to our whole population. I hope to have further discussions with Northern Ireland Executive colleagues about this in the coming weeks and months.
9. I hope you find these comments helpful.

Yours sincerely

Personal Data

EDWIN POOTS MLA
Minister of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs