



The
Executive Office

www.executiveoffice-ni.gov.uk

Stormont Castle

BELFAST

BT4 3TT

Tel:

I&S

Email: ps.ministers@executiveoffice-ni.gov.uk

**ROBIN SWANN MLA
MINISTER OF HEALTH**

13 January 2022

CORR-1177-2021

Dear Robin,

Thank you for your letter of 23 December reaffirming your perspective on the current COVID situation.

It would be remiss of us not to respond to your concerns on the decisions we, as the Executive, have taken in response to the Omicron variant.

As you will appreciate, the decisions we take are taken collectively as an Executive. Ministers are able to comment, articulate reservations or disagree at the meeting. It was therefore somewhat surprising to receive your letter which in some respects went beyond the discussion that we had.

As you aware we have always endeavoured to make balanced and informed decisions based on the scientific and health data you provide, whilst considering the impact on our economy and our society. None of these decisions have been taken lightly or without great consideration by every member of the Executive.

The decisions taken by the Executive on the 22 December reflect that consideration, and while you may not feel the interventions go far enough on this occasion, we would note that the package of measures considered came from the Executive's COVID Taskforce (ECT) in partnership with officials from your department and advice from the CMO and CSA.

The Executive agreement to introduce a grace period before implementing enforcement on some measures agreed on 22 December was born from a lengthy discussion to which you were party. It simply reflects the practical realities of businesses being able to prepare for the requirements placed on them and for exempt individuals being able to secure evidence that they are exempt for a disability related reason from wearing face coverings. It is important that we balance the need to reduce transmission of the virus whilst also managing any unintended consequences of our decisions.

We agree that any preparatory work you would like to see commencing on a package of stricter interventions should be led by you and your department. As you have stated, your responsibility is to protect the public and health services and therefore the lead on the development of any public health measures and interventions sits firmly with you.

Our officials in TEO have been on hand to support the relaxations and restrictions processes given the lack of capacity within your own department and will continue to do so. However, any work to prepare for stricter measures and NPIs should ultimately be led by your officials in collaboration with other departments. This must be driven by scientific and health data alongside consideration of economic and societal factors to enable us, as an Executive, to make informed and collective decisions on the best way forward.

The collective nature of Executive decision-making is facilitated through the ECT and its Cross Departmental Working Group, which has representation from all departments as well as PSNI and Local Government. This arrangement plays a vital role in identifying and addressing the various socio-economic impacts of placing restrictions on our society to enable balanced Executive decision-making and demonstrates the benefits of investing in such partnership working. We have no doubt that officials across the departments, alongside PSNI and Local Government colleagues will continue to provide that role for any measures you bring forward in the coming days or weeks.

Meetings of the Executive will continue to take place regularly and more often as necessary which has been the practice throughout this pandemic.

At the heart of the Executive is a will to do what is right, what is necessary and ultimately what is best for everyone in our society. We will continue to do all we can to work with you

and our other Executive colleagues to ensure our collective decision-making meets the challenges of our COVID response.

We have cc'd this letter to all our Executive colleagues.

Yours sincerely,

Personal Data

**PAUL GIVAN MLA
FIRST MINISTER**

Personal Data

**MICHELLE O'NEILL MLA
DEPUTY FIRST MINISTER**