



Department for

Infrastructure

An Roinn

Bonneagair

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STATEMENT TO THE AD-HOC COMMITTEE ON THE COVID-19 RESPONSE

In keeping with my intention to keep the Assembly informed on the response to COVID-19, I intend to make an Oral Statement to the Ad-Hoc Committee today.

I attach a copy of the Statement for your information and distribution to members.

Yours sincerely

**NICHOLA MALLON MLA
Minister for Infrastructure**

STATEMENT TO AD HOC COMMITTEE ON DfI COVID-19 RESPONSE

Mr [Principal] Deputy Speaker, I am grateful for the opportunity to update the Ad Hoc Committee today.

This is not an easy time for any of us – it is an unimaginable time for all of those families who have lost their loved ones to COVID-19 and are denied by the same virus the traditional way of saying goodbye that we have known and drawn comfort from for hundreds of years. I begin today by sending my heartfelt condolences to every one of those families. I know I speak for all of us in this chamber when I say we are with you and you are in our prayers.

The challenges we are facing due to coronavirus cannot be underestimated. The words crisis, emergency, pandemic are now everyday language. But Mr Deputy Speaker, this is not everyday life. While we are dealing with the chaos, the pain, the suffering, we must also be strong and have hope that this, extraordinarily difficult time, will not last forever.

I'm proud to stand here a citizen of this place, thanks to the efforts and the leadership across our community, we have seen positive signs that our health service is coping and that social distancing measures are working. But we cannot be complacent, as my colleague the Minister for Health has continued to stress, we must, all of us, must, continue to play our part. Because each of our individual actions will determine the future for our community. It is a huge responsibility and one I know the people of Northern Ireland are prepared to bear.

Mr Speaker, I wish to update members on my actions to deliver on my responsibilities as your Minister for Infrastructure. I am clear that addressing the unique challenges presented by coronavirus requires us all to work together towards the common goals of protecting the health and well-being of our health care workers and our citizens, and crucially in saving lives.

I welcome the opportunity to provide an update to Assembly Members on the ways in which my Department is contributing to the fightback against COVID-19. I wish to set

out clearly for Members that I am doing all that I can within my remit and powers and also by working collaboratively to support Executive colleagues, especially the Minister for Health, in our collective endeavour to support our precious NHS and save lives.

Water and Waste Water

I'm sure members will agree that there are few services more critical to our health and wellbeing than the availability of clean drinking water and the ability to treat effectively our waste water.

Through this crisis, NI Water has worked tirelessly to ensure that those services continue. This has involved prioritising essential work and changing work practices to ensure that social distancing rules are adhered to. Keeping staff and customers safe has been, I know, a key focus of NI Water.

NI Water's frontline workers are undertaking essential maintenance and repair work to make sure that our water keeps flowing and that our drains don't get blocked, and I would encourage the public to show them support - they deserve our respect and our thanks.

NI Water is also doing what it can to support its customers. I am pleased to be able to announce that NI Water will not implement the increase in tariffs planned for April, and will hold off on this until October at the earliest. The company will also defer issuing bills until July at the earliest. This will create a short-term cash flow problem for NI Water, but I am putting arrangements in place to resolve this within my current budget cover.

More concerning however is the very sudden loss of income from the non-domestic sector as a result of this crisis which will not be recovered. This is creating a serious gap in NI Water's operating budget, which must be met. I have already raised this matter with the Minister of Finance and Executive colleagues and will continue to work with them to find a resolution that manages this risk, protecting this vital service and protecting our communities from COVID-19.

Connectivity

Mr [Principal] Deputy Speaker, I want to turn to the issue of connectivity. The need for connectivity at a time when we are separated has never been greater. Now more than ever, it is so very important that we continue to manage and maintain our transport network. We must ensure that emergency services can be kept moving and that key workers, including healthcare staff, equipment and supplies can travel safely or be transported to where the need is greatest.

Our ports and airports, the key gateways into the north, are struggling during this crisis to maintain air and sea connectivity. The ban on non-essential travel, which is needed to fight this pandemic, means that passenger numbers have plummeted.

In addition, as non-essential businesses close, the downturn in manufacturing production has also had a significant impact on our hauliers and ferry operators.

These sectors are interconnected: we rely on our ports, ferry companies, hauliers and airports to ensure supply chains are maintained. If we fail to maintain resilience in those supply chains it will impact each and every one of us and it could impact our ability to restore our economy when the health emergency recedes.

I want to assure Members that I am doing everything I can to ensure our ports, ferry companies, hauliers and airports receive the support they need so that they can continue to provide the connectivity and the critical supply chains we need especially between here and GB.

As well as working on a cross-departmental basis, in particular with the Economy and Agriculture Ministers, I have been engaging with my counterparts in Wales and Scotland, with the result that we have been able to set out a clear and compelling – and shared – case to the Secretary of State for Transport for intervention to support supply chains. I am also continuing to engage with my counterpart in the South as we

need to maintain the critical supply of food, and in particular oxygen through Dublin port.

As well as focusing on ferry links, we are also very much focusing on the needs of our hauliers so they can stay in operation and are able to maintain the supply of critical goods for us and ensure that essential trade from here to GB and from Dublin to the North can continue.

As I have said several times to date, information sharing and co-operation across these islands is key in the fight against COVID-19.

Relaxation of driver hours

In addition, Members will be aware of changes I have made to the requirements relating to drivers' hours to secure and maintain deliveries and movement of all important goods that people in our communities, in particular vulnerable people, need at this time.

This temporary relaxation of the rules reflects the current exceptional circumstances we find ourselves in and must only be used where necessary. I will continue to keep the position under constant review and will ensure measures are taken to extend the relaxation further if required, making sure that the balance is maintained between relaxation and road safety as we protect our community at this difficult time.

Public Transport

Our public transport network continues to play a key role in facilitating essential travel, including for many in our Health and Social Care sector at this difficult time. It is for that reason that the public transport network continues to operate, albeit in a reduced capacity.

Translink has introduced working practices to ensure all staff who attend work can follow social distancing guidelines. Gloves and hand sanitisers are being provided to all front-line staff and protective screens have been fitted to all buses in use. All staff carrying out cleaning duties are trained to follow a safe system of work and I am assured are given the correct PPE.

As a small token of our appreciation to the life-saving work that our health care colleagues are delivering, I have introduced free public transport for health workers during the COVID-19 outbreak.

Translink also continues to engage with all the Health and Social Care Trusts offering assistance for any transport related services including passenger transport or delivery services. This has been well received by all of the Trusts and is providing important support to our workers while they face unprecedented pressures.

In relation to ensuring connectivity across the region for key workers and goods, I have supported the Rathlin Ferry operator and the local community on Rathlin to ensure that essential goods, services and support continues to be provided to the island.

Community transport operators have also been contributing to wider efforts to support the vulnerable. I have been heartened to see how Community Transport Operators have transitioned their services to assist with the delivery of prepaid groceries, prescriptions, food parcels or fulfilling essential journeys and am pleased that, with the support of Minister Poots, I have been able to support them in doing that.

Taxis

The outbreak of COVID-19 has caused significant challenges and changes to a wide range of businesses and the taxi industry is no exception. The regulations introduced by the Health Minister allow taxis to continue to operate but they do so in a context where only essential travel is permitted and I know they face real challenges.

My announcement last week provides for the automatic renewal without prior testing of taxi vehicle licences which were due to expire during the current emergency. This will ensure that these vehicles can remain on the road during this period. This is a temporary measure reflecting the exceptionally challenging times of this current pandemic.

My officials are also working urgently with officials in DFT to find a solution to licences requiring medical assessment. As soon as I am in a position to update affected drivers and members I will immediately do so.

At the same time, I have been encouraging other ministerial colleagues to respond to the needs of taxi drivers and operators with clear health and safety guidance on keeping drivers and customers safe, and to explore opportunities for the sector to repurpose their services to play a wider role in supporting those who are being shielded or who are vulnerable.

I will continue to work with Ministers to ensure that we do all that we can as an Executive to assist taxi drivers, who are a key part of our transport network and should be supported at this time.

Essential Services

Mr [Principal] Deputy Speaker, the need to avoid non-essential travel and maintain social distancing in line with Government advice has also made it necessary for me, and all other Ministers, to prioritise services and determine which departmental functions should be significantly reduced or stopped during this emergency period.

In determining which services to prioritise, I have reflected the need to stop the spread of the virus and save lives, and the need to support those working to keep us safe and keep our critical supply chains open and to protect livelihoods.

A further consideration is to ensure that we keep a focus on the work needed to avoid unnecessary problems or difficulties that could divert the emergency services or disrupt necessary travel, while maintaining support for the most vulnerable in our communities.

In common with other departments, my department is ensuring that staff who can work from home are not required to be in the workplace. Where a job can be done from home, my senior team has made clear that staff are expected to work from home. And I am pleased to report that this is happening.

We have also moved a number of our services online including DVA's driver licensing renewal service

There are, however, some services that people rely on and that simply cannot be delivered from home, including essential works on our transport, water and sewerage infrastructure.

Where staff do have to come into the workplace or onto a site to perform an essential role, then all necessary steps are being taken to protect them. This includes ensuring adequate social distancing and that appropriate personal protection equipment is made available and used, in line with the relevant guidance.

In order to protect staff and enable my Department to focus resources on responding to the COVID-19 pandemic, a number of DfI functions and services that could not be considered essential have, however, been stopped or significantly reduced. I have suspended parking charges for DfI-operated on-street parking and parking enforcement (with a small team retained to respond to illegal parking that is unsafe or blocking access to or for emergency or essential services); Driver and vehicle testing for all but emergency or essential services has also been temporarily suspended.

Reducing or stopping these services has meant that we can refocus some of our efforts to support our health trusts in the fight against coronavirus. I can assure Members, however, that I understand the inconvenience that this presents and that this situation is being kept under regular review in line with public health advice.

Planning System

Turning to planning, I also want to highlight for members some of the steps I have taken to ensure that our regional planning system continues to function effectively.

Thus far, I have issued letters to councils urging a relaxed and positive approach to enforcement specifically around essential deliveries and also for pubs, restaurants and cafes providing takeaway services during this emergency period. My officials have

also provided information and advice to all eleven councils on the ongoing operation of the planning system through this time.

We will continue to play our part within my department, by progressing the statutory casework we handle, including notified and called in planning applications and also to discharge our responsibilities on council's development plans.

I also hope shortly to bring forward a legislative amendment to the Assembly which, subject to members' agreement, would temporarily remove the requirement to hold a public event as part of Pre Application Community Consultation for major planning applications. To support this, I would also propose to issue guidance for applicants and Councils on appropriate replacement measures to ensure that public participation in the process is not compromised.

I am also aware that the operation of Council Planning Committees has been impacted. My officials have moved quickly to approve amended schemes of delegation to reduce the number of applications which would be required to go before planning committees. They have also been liaising with officials in the Department for Communities who are working to prepare Regulations concerning the meetings of district councils which would, if agreed, enable committees to operate effectively during this time.

I can assure the Assembly that, in planning and right across my department's functions, we will continue to work closely with other jurisdictions, councils and planning stakeholders to explore the obstacles and the temporary solutions needed to get us through this period.

Support for our health and social care service

Mr [Principal] Deputy Speaker, throughout this period, however, I have maintained a focus not only on the responsibilities of my own department but also on how my Department can make its skills and resources available to support others, particularly in our health service.

Through the use of DVA Vehicle Test Centres in Belfast and Newtownards to date. I am proud to have been able to support the Health Minister in helping to rapidly increase testing to help save lives.

My Department has also provided storage space at depots in Dungannon and Craigavon for use as required by the Southern Health & Social Care Trust. This has freed up much needed space in Craigavon Area Hospital and provides a local secure and accessible facility for daily transfer of supplies.

A further approach for storage space in the Greater Belfast area has been received from our health service colleagues and we will do whatever we possibly can to assist in meeting their needs.

I have provided access to free parking at Crumlin Road Gaol for health care workers based at the Mater Hospital, and from last Friday, I also opened up access to the site at the Gaol for Belfast Health and Social Care Trust to facilitate decontamination of ambulances and disposal of contaminated PPE material.

I want to put on record my appreciation to all of the staff in my Department from the beginning of crisis have worked tirelessly to find solutions to the new challenges this virus presents.

We are all in this together and in my Department we will continue to do all I can to support the work of Minister Swann and our health care heroes as they put their lives on the line to save ours.

Conclusion

Mr [Principal] Deputy Speaker, in closing, there is no doubt that these are incredibly challenging times. Sadly, it is likely that the days ahead will be even more difficult. However we must continue to work together and support each other to ensure we continue to deliver for all of those who rely on our public services.

Together we can get through this and never before has the message been so clear to the people of Northern Ireland to stick together, while staying apart. My message Mr Deputy Speaker to everyone at home – is that all of us can and we must play our part.

The advice is clear, stay at home to save lives.

Looking out for each other, we will get through this, we will recover from it and we will be stronger as one community from it.