

Written Ministerial Statement

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Department for the Infrastructure

COVID-19 UPDATE

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Ms Mallon (The Minister for Infrastructure): This is not an easy time for any of us. We all need to play our part, right across society, by staying at home and following government advice strictly. This is about saving lives and protecting the health and well-being of everyone, particularly the most vulnerable in our society.

The advice is clear – all non-essential contact and non-essential travel must be avoided. In the context of that advice I want to set out for Assembly Members the steps that I and my Department are taking on three fronts: minimising the risks for our customers, staff and the wider public; securing connectivity for essential services and key workers; and supporting our health and social care system and our most vulnerable citizens.

Public Transport

The advice on public transport is very clear. It should not be used other than for essential journeys, and passengers should wherever possible avoid peak services. I have worked over the last two weeks to steer a careful course between maintaining public transport at a level needed to support and facilitate our essential workers while also dissuading other people from making unnecessary journeys.

I have agreed with Translink that it should move to operate a significantly reduced bus and train service. Buses are running on a holiday timetable and NI Railways on a Saturday timetable. Translink has also reduced its service timetable for Enterprise rail services.

These measures are in response to the clear public health advice to avoid all non-essential travel and also to the sharp downturn in passenger numbers as more and more people heed our advice to stay at home.

The service level that is continuing is designed to ensure that we can continue to provide public transport coverage across Northern Ireland while responding to the impact of reduced demand. The public should be assured - for those who need to travel, public transport will continue to operate and we will continue to ensure all those using public transport can do so safely in line with guidance on social distancing. I have also asked Translink to keep its service levels under close and constant review to ensure that those who absolutely need to travel can do so, that a strict social distancing policy of ensuring no more than 50% passenger capacity of a service is filled, and to have additional vehicles on stand-by if need arises. I will keep this situation under constant review and will update members and the public of any further changes to public transport.

Keeping our Water Infrastructure Working

Members know already about the pressures on our ageing water and wastewater infrastructure. NI Water has a well-tested major incident response regime in place to respond to operational emergencies and its priority continues to be ensuring the continued provision of water and wastewater services to customers while maintaining the safety and wellbeing of staff.

It is working tirelessly to make sure that supply interruptions are avoided or minimised, particularly at a time when we all need to be washing our hands regularly. It has also engaged in a public information

campaign to remind people of the sorts of behaviours that could interrupt supplies, including through blockages caused by inappropriate flushing of items such as wipes. I would ask members to help NIW get this important message out to the public, especially at this critical time. I remain in close communication with NIW and am monitoring the situation closely.

Freight and Haulage

In recent weeks we all have had cause to recognise and acknowledge the vital job done by our freight and haulage industry. It is the drivers, operators and logistics teams in this sector on whom we all rely to keep our supply chains functioning, to ensure that medicines and medical equipment can get delivered on time to the right place and, of course, to keep our supermarket shelves well stocked.

I had previously informed the Assembly about changes I had made to the requirements relating to drivers' hours to secure deliveries to supermarkets. As a further step, I have now also relaxed drivers' hours' rules for home deliveries until 2 April, to ensure supplies can be delivered to the doors of those working remotely or self-isolating. These steps will help ensure that food, non-food such as personal care, household paper and cleaning products, over the counter pharmaceuticals and other essential items can be delivered directly to consumers' homes.

I will be keeping the situation under constant review and will ensure measures are taken to extend the relaxation further if required. I have also reminded the industry that these steps are to facilitate all of us but that the responsibility for ensuring the safety of drivers and other road users remains with the operators and they must use those flexibilities in a manner that ensures no compromising of safety.

Ports and Ferries

I am also very conscious of the crucial role of our ports and ferry operators in maintaining supply chains at this time. While my direct powers in relation to both are very limited, it is important that I hear from this sector about the challenges it is facing and important too that my officials work closely with those leading ports and ferry companies. To that end, I have this week had a series of tele conferences with all of our main ports and main ferry operators. I know they have many concerns linked to the impact of the Covid-19 emergency on their business and I will be reflecting those concerns to other Executive ministers and to the Secretary of State for Transport.

I also support the measures taken by the Rathlin Island Ferry company which has restricted movement to essential journeys only to protect the island community.

Community Transport

I have also taken action to protect the health and well-being of people that use and provide community transport services by asking operators funded by the Department to suspend all Disability Action Transport Services and to significantly restrict Dial-a-Lift services to essential journeys only.

Whilst recognising the very significant role community transport plays in bringing people together and addressing social isolation in particular, at this critical time I have to take every step I can to protect the public. This is not a decision which I have taken lightly. I want community transport operators to be able to contribute to wider efforts to support the most vulnerable so I will maintain their funding through this unparalleled period and my officials stand ready to enter into discussions with operators to establish what scope there is for them to support their members and wider society during these times.

Driver and Vehicle Testing

Keeping people safe at this concerning time will cause inconvenience to customers and businesses, but it is necessary.

That is why I have moved to suspend driving tests for three months until Monday 22 June 2020, but this will be kept under review. Where there are exceptional circumstances, for example, for emergency workers and essential service drivers needing a driving test, the DVA will make all reasonable efforts to accommodate these customers.

I have also suspended MOT tests with all vehicles eligible to be issued with a Temporary Exemption Certificate (TEC). The issuing of TECs has also been extended to include four-year-old cars due their first MOT to ensure they can remain on the road, if given the ongoing health advice, the journey to be made is essential. Four-year-old cars will be given a TEC for six months from the date that their MOT test should have been due. Issuing the certificates will take some time but the exemption will automatically apply from the due date. The PSNI has agreed to our request that given these exceptional circumstances, where PSNI detects a vehicle without a valid MOT certificate, it will in suitable cases, exercise its discretion under the law, in circumstances where there is no identified risk to public safety. It is important that drivers realise that they are responsible under the law for the roadworthiness of their vehicle at all times.

For taxis which require specific taxi licensing tests, new legislation would be needed to allow existing taxi licences to be renewed. Despite best efforts, this is proving challenging to resolve. However, I want to reassure taxi drivers that we are working urgently on options to help them at this difficult time. I recognise the taxi industry is being hard hit by this public health and economic crisis. I also am working with Executive colleagues and pushing hard for more support from the UK Government for the self-employed. While I only have responsibility for regulation, and financial support for the industry rests with other Executive colleagues, I have asked colleagues if we can work together to help the industry during this challenging time, including exploring possible options for redeployment of their services to support vulnerable people at home and our community during this crisis.

I am also ensuring those applicants that apply online to renew their driving licence are having their applications processed by staff working remotely. Unfortunately, those applications which cannot be processed online, will be prioritised and processed when it is safe to do so.

Planning

I have ~~also~~ written to councils to make it clear that they should not take unnecessary enforcement action against public houses, restaurants and cafes operating takeaway services during the coronavirus crisis. These measures will provide vital flexibility to public houses, restaurants and cafes to keep operating and will ensure people are able to safely stay at home while still supporting local businesses.

I have asked my planning officials to urgently bring forward legislation to amend the requirement for public events as part of the pre-application process for major planning applications, given that they cannot happen at this time. This change will help the planning system to support our economy and ensure developments can be taken forward more quickly after this crisis has passed.

It is essential that my officials and local government officials work together to ensure the planning system responds as effectively as possible to this crisis. My Chief Planner has therefore provided an update containing information and advice to all council Heads of Planning on the implications of the Covid-19 emergency for the planning system.

Driving

With the sharp reduction in traffic volumes, and given the advice on staying at home, I took the view that we could not consider traffic enforcement officers to be essential workers. I therefore took the decision to suspend on-street parking enforcement in those areas where my Department has responsibility for parking enforcement and also to suspend on-street parking charges. However, we will continue to take action where illegal parking is unsafe or blocking access to emergency or essential services.

Those who need to be on our roads may have noticed that the Department's variable messaging road signs are also being used to deliver key public health messaging in response to the crisis.

For those essential workers who need to be on our roads, I am also appealing for extra care to be taken as they drive. They need, now more than ever, to be driving safely, obeying the rules of the road and paying attention to other road users. Our health service should not be having to deal at this critical time with the consequences of serious collisions.

Supporting our people

I have the privilege of being Minister for a Department of around 3,000 civil servants who deliver a wide variety of public services on which we all rely – and a responsibility along with my senior officials to make sure they too are being supported to follow the public health advice.

Wherever it is possible, staff have been facilitated to work from home. Where possible, we have also closed offices to members of the public. This all presents its own social and technological challenges, including in maintaining service delivery, but it is the right thing to do.

Where the functions our people deliver are essential and cannot be done away from the workplace, my senior team with the support of the NICS central HR team, has been working hard to make sure those staff have the advice and support to keep themselves and others safe. This is often challenging and I know that, like the rest of us, staff have many concerns – but we take our responsibilities seriously and continue to work constructively with staff and their union representatives and to ensure that Public Health Agency advice is communicated and followed.

I would like to place on record my thanks and appreciation to the DfI teams who are working so hard and determined to play their full part in helping us respond to this public health emergency.

Supporting our health and social care staff

Finally, I have worked to identify ways in which my Department can support our dedicated and hardworking health and social care staff, particularly those on the front line in our hospitals and care homes, putting their lives on the line to save ours.

I am pleased to report that I have been able to take some key actions in this area. Yesterday, in partnership with Translink and with the support of the Minister for Health and his Department, I announced that our health and social care workers would, during this emergency period, have free travel on all Translink services and also on the Strangford ferry. I hope this step is helpful in supporting them in their journey to work.

As a smaller and very practical step, I have opened the car park at the Crumlin Road Gaol, which my Department owns, for free for health service workers.

My department will continue to work with the Health Trusts and the Department for Health to explore other ways in which we can support front line staff during this difficult time.

Conclusion

In the coming days and weeks there is a lot to do – we have some answers – but not them all. I am proud of my Department's effort and the tireless work of my staff to do all we can to add to the effort.

I want to place on the record my thanks to all the stakeholders who are working collaboratively, in partnership with me and my Department to find a way through issues. I will continue to hold stakeholder teleconferences so I can hear concerns from those across the North. I know time is short and that everyone is working to get the answers we so desperately need. I want to assure people my priority is swift decision making and clear, consistent communication.

I appeal to people to be patient, to act to keep yourself and others safe – and to support those on the frontline. I promise to do all that I can, as quickly as I can, as we face into these dark and trying days together.

Finally, I wish to thank elected representatives and members of the public who are showing their support across Northern Ireland as I work to find solutions to protect our communities during this crisis.

Most importantly, I call on everyone to follow the advice to stay at home to save lives.