I made a statement on 16 March and would like to provide a further update to Members on the arrangements that are being made within the Department of Justice to continue to deliver essential public services in the face of the challenges presented by Covid-19. Officials briefed the Justice Committee last Thursday and did so again this morning.

We are committed to providing reassurance that across the justice family we are working together to mitigate the impacts of this pandemic. Our priority is to ensure public safety, the safety of our staff and those in our care and to maintain access to essential justice services.

In this context can I take this opportunity at the outset to place on record my appreciation, and the appreciation of the staff within my Department, for the recent decision to keep non-urgent Assembly business under review and to manage the use of written questions in particular. This will enable staff to focus on the maintenance of essential services while, through regular statements like this, I can provide frequent and timely information to Members on how we are handling the situation.

Contingency Planning
Key to our contingency planning is strong communication and collaboration right across the wider justice system and with other Executive colleagues.

Significant work continues across the Department’s business areas, agencies and NDPBs, to develop and refine the contingency plans and emergency response plans that we need to have the resilience to continue operating in the event of increased staff absence. The Department’s Operations Centre has recently been opened and I believe the Department is doing everything it can to prepare.

As I stated before, we have identified the highest priority public services that need to be maintained and will, if necessary, make further resources available to do so. But this is a dynamic situation and significant resource is being devoted to ensure we keep our plans under review in light of emerging information, and as the scale of what we are all facing becomes clearer.

Our Staff
We know it is estimated that 50% of the workforce will take time off as a result of Covid-19 during the total period of the outbreak and that, during the peak weeks of the outbreak, (a period of 3-4 weeks), we can expect up to 20% of staff to be absent at any one time. That is before absence for other routine reasons is factored in.

Safeguarding our staff is paramount and we continue to take proportionate steps, in line with PHA guidance, to ensure staff wellbeing. We have asked individuals displaying symptoms to stay at home. We are reducing non-essential social contact particularly for those in vulnerable groups. People have been asked to work from home where possible, limit use of public transport and avoid unnecessary social gatherings. Staff have also received the central NICS advice clarifying working arrangements and
physical distancing measures to help reduce the transmission of COVID – 19 and I understand more will be forthcoming, including in the light of the recent decision to close schools.

For those who must work in the office we are taking action to enable physical distancing and it has been recommended that meetings should not take place unless absolutely essential and other tools used to avoid face to face meetings.

We have asked that everyone continue to maintain the highest possible personal hygiene, including thorough and frequent hand washing. In certain areas, such as prisons, protective clothing is available for staff.

**Legislation**
The Emergency Coronavirus Bill, which is being debated in the House of Commons at Westminster today, gives us the powers we need to take the right action at the right time to respond effectively to the progress of the outbreak.

The Justice Committee was briefed on the detail of the Bill earlier today. At a high level, the measures in the Bill fall into five broad categories: (1) measures to contain and slow the virus; (2) measures to increase the available health and social care workforce; (3) measures to ease the legislative and regulatory requirements on frontline staff; (4) measures to allow us to manage the deceased with respect and dignity; and (5) measures intended to provide support to people.

The powers relating to policing and justice functions will help to alleviate the administrative burdens in that regard, in the event that widespread absences related to the spread of Covid-19 reduce our capacity to deliver those functions. Provision is also made for additional powers for the police to support actions taken by the relevant health authorities to prevent the spread of the coronavirus. These will enable the police to enforce sensible public health restrictions, including returning people to isolation and, where necessary, directing individuals to seek relevant treatment or attend suitable locations for further help.

The Bill includes certain powers of direction to enable local government to direct private providers in the death management industry (for example funeral directors, mortuaries and crematoriums), individuals and services to implement a central plan.

**Specific Issues**
Under the Reasonable Worst Case Scenario (RWCS), the Justice system would continue to deal with the highest priority issues to maintain public safety but are likely to need to stop work of a lower priority.

We all appreciate the sensitivities involved in planning for what we could potentially be dealing with if the Coronavirus really takes hold here the way it has done in other countries across Europe.
I don’t want to create unnecessary anxiety. Of course I don’t. But what my officials and I do want to do, is to ensure we are as prepared as we can be for the worst case scenario.

All too sadly, Mr Speaker, we have already heard from the Health Minister that the worst case scenario involves up to 15,000 people losing their lives to the virus.

As a society, we do not like talking about death but it is a sad reality that we will unfortunately have to increasingly do so as the Coronavirus spreads.

As figures rise, and all the evidence points to the fact that they inevitably will, my Department will be working to ensure that respect and dignity for the deceased and bereaved is preserved.

We are taking precautions to prepare for the risk that the normal burial arrangements are not sufficient. We will do all we can to ensure dignity for the deceased and their family. We must also safeguard public health. In the event that the virus hits Northern Ireland very hard, then we have seen elsewhere in the world that this gives rise to challenges which we are working to meet.

We are working with all of those involved to enable as many people as possible to be buried or cremated in the usual way. Nonetheless, pressures on the system as a result of coronavirus are likely to mean that some families may need to wait for longer for the burial or cremation of their loved one. We have already seen restrictions on attendance at the crematorium, with services being conducted at gravesides. The wider health crisis may well mean there need to be restrictions on attendance at funerals – but that is a matter for health experts to advise on.

As I have mentioned already, the Westminster Bill contains powers in this regard that are intended to help with potential pressure on the system, at every stage up to burial or cremation.

These are sensible, precautionary powers that we need to provide for, in the event of the worst case scenario, but that is not to say they will happen.

Another of our most significant issues continues to be the impact on the Prison Service. Our priority during these unprecedented times will be to support our staff and keep safe those in our care. The challenges faced by the Prison Service should not be underestimated, we have just under 1,600 people in custody and we know that 32% of our prison population suffer from mental health issues, 50% from addictions and 55% have a history of self-harm. Many of those in our prisons fall into the high risk category both in terms of age and underlying medical conditions.

The Prison Service working closely with the South Eastern Trust have identified isolation units, which they have been using on a precautionary basis over the past few weeks. All prisoners placed in isolation so far tested negative and thankfully we have no confirmed cases of COVID19 in our Prisons.
It has been the objective of the Prison Service to maintain as normal a regime as possible for as long as possible. However, on Friday past I agreed with the Director General that all prisons visits should be suspended from today. The Prison Service is working on a range of measures that will allow contact to be maintained between prisoners and their families during the period of suspension.

In my last statement I focussed on the issues being faced by the Courts and Tribunal’s Service. Significant steps have been taken since then, including guidance issued by the Lord Chief Justice, to minimise the number of people who need to attend court and to prioritise the most urgent business.

**In conclusion**
We remain committed to playing our part in tackling this crisis and keeping people safe. But Mr Speaker, people need to get real and today I am echoing the call for social responsibility that began via social media over the weekend.

I applaud those who are doing the right thing and those well known local people who are using their influence to call upon more people to do the right thing. Now it’s time we ALL did the right thing.

I have talked about emergency legislation today but the best and easiest way to protect the public is for us all to wash our hands and to follow the guidance: Stay at home where we can, social distance where we can’t.

None of us have ever faced a challenge like this. What may have seemed inconceivable a few short weeks ago is increasingly becoming our present day reality and it may remain our reality for a reasonable length of time.

We are planning and preparing with that in mind. We will continue to follow PHA guidance. If that guidance changes, we will move quickly to adapt our approach and our planning accordingly.

There are difficult times ahead for all of us and we will need to be there for each other as a caring and compassionate society like never before.