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MEMORANDUM E (20) 134 (C)

FROM: FIRST MINISTER AND DEPUTY FIRST MINISTER

DATE: 11 JUNE 2020

TO: EXECUTIVE

**FINAL EXECUTIVE PAPER – CORONAVIRUS, RESTRICTIONS REGULATIONS
– EXECUTIVE REVIEW PROCESS**

1. The Executive discussed on Monday the need for restrictions easements to be considered on a joined-up, strategic basis with interdependencies and cumulative impacts understood. This paper contains:

- i. a summary of action taken since the Executive meeting on Monday 8 June;
- ii. an update on the two metre rule and face coverings;
- iii. a list of proposals to relax restrictions with a brief commentary on relevant issues for each. A summary completed by DoH is attached at Annex A which includes an assessment of the cumulative impact of the easement of restrictions.
- iv. next steps.

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Steps taken since 8 June Executive meeting

Meetings have taken place which recognise the current state of the Covid crisis management and the potential to lift restrictions in the next formal review which must be concluded by 18 June. We have therefore decided to postpone for a few days our planned discussion on Recovery, to enable a discussion on restrictions at the Executive meeting on 11 June.

The Executive is asked to note the work undertaken since the last meeting to ensure a joined up approach on restrictions easements and we recommend that decisions are taken on the following basis:

- issues should be grouped so that cumulative impacts can be assessed and understood;
- impacts for other sectors must understood and planned for. Transport, education and childcare are vital enablers and they need to move with decisions on easements;
- citizens' issues are increasingly at the heart of the decisions we need to take, now that the immediate crisis objectives are under control. That includes long term health and economic well-being;
- strong communications are vital so that the basis for our decisions are understood, sectors have time to prepare, and citizens can clearly understand what we are asking them to do;
- while the approach so far has not been to take decisions based on a timetable, we can recognise that some sectors will benefit from indicative future dates. We have asked officials to consider this further and to provide advice;
- this means our decisions will be taken on the basis that sectors and citizens will have the information they need, including some indicative dates, guidance where necessary, and strong messaging, and
- social distancing will remain a vital part of the response and recovery phases. The precise advice may change over time and must be well thought through and explained.

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Two Metre Guidance

One of the most significant cross-cutting issues both for these relaxations and for peoples' lives more generally is the current social distancing guidance which indicates wherever possible individuals from separate households should retain a two metre separation to reduce the risk of onward spread of the virus. It is proposed that the Executive takes some time with the Chief Medical Office and/or Chief Scientific Advisor to understand their advice on whether there is any scope to change that guidance currently and, if not, what circumstances might pertain which would allow such a change to be made in future. Our understanding is that their advice currently is that it would be premature to make any change.

However, in recognition of the potential for change to be possible at some time in the future, it is proposed that Departments begin some preparatory work to understand the implications of a change to either one and half metres or one metre separation. It would be important that this would be done in a way which avoids creating an expectation of change or any diminution in adherence.

The Department for Economy has explained the challenges facing businesses in particular given the need for them to make investments now to prepare to open under two metres of separation with the attendant risk that some of that investment might turn out to be nugatory if the guidance changes before they are able to open.

In addition, it is recognised that there is scope to put in place mitigating measures in some instances to overcome situations where two metres of distancing is not possible. An example is perspex screens in use in many retail environments. The Department of Health has agreed that it would consider any proposal from a Department to reduce the two metre separation if evidence of the proposed mitigating measures could be provided in support of that. This would enable consideration to be given to the potential benefit from a reduction alongside the risk to health.

Face coverings

A further issue which the Executive has previously discussed is whether there is any need for face covering to be introduced on a mandatory basis following announcements by the UK Government last week. The Department of Health has explained that its advice on the use of face coverings as circulated on (6th May 2020 – appended as Annex B for ease of reference) remains extant. No Department has

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brought forward a proposal for the introduction of mandatory face coverings to date but it remains possible that that will change in the future.

Proposals for amendment to Coronavirus Regulations

The following proposals for amendment have been both received and processed in accordance with the normal template for these purposes.

- 1) opening of the remainder of retail over and above those retailers already permitted to open;
- 2) allow house moves generally;
- 3) allow training for elite athletes and indoor elite training facilities to open;
- 4) allow places of worship and community centres to open for the purpose of providing daycare; amend the restrictions on gatherings for the purpose of providing daycare;
- 5) allow indoor visits;
- 6) allow outdoor gatherings of up to 10 people.

This paper briefly addresses relevant considerations for each of the relaxations in turn after looking at two issues which have cross-cutting impact – the two metre rule and face coverings. Annex A summarises six requests for easements.

i. Opening of the remainder of retail over and above those retailers already permitted to open

The Executive has already considered the risks and benefits of enabling the remainder of retailers to open. An indicative date of 12 June was announced subject to confirmation by the Executive on 11 June. There was a related discussion about shopping centres which has now been clarified. There is no regulatory barrier to shopping centres opening, but there has been a mixed economy of shops inside which were open or closed. As noted previously, opening of indoor shopping centres is of higher risk.

If the Executive is content, this request can now be confirmed to take effect tomorrow, and the amendments to the regulations are being prioritised for this.

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Retailers have had notice of tomorrow's opening, and the LRA guidance has been updated. Guidance has also been prepared by the British Retail Consortium. DfC has prepared guidance on management of public spaces which will also assist, and was reviewed in draft earlier this week by local government representatives on the NICS Guidance Group.

Combined with earlier easements, retail will be open and the next focus will be on close contact service providers such as driving instructors and hairdressers.

ii. Allow house moves generally

This request would require an amendment to the restrictions regulations to enable house sales and moves, and would cover the end to end process such as viewing, securing a mortgage and the house move itself.

The amendment to the regulations would enable people to leave home for these reasons. DfC suggest an implementation date of Monday 15 June to enable some time for preparation. Guidance has been prepared on all aspects of the house move process which can be issued immediately. DfC plan to engage further with stakeholders.

iii. Allow training for elite athletes and indoor elite training facilities to open

SportNI have developed a framework which is aligned to the Executive's Framework for Decision Making. Other restrictions would be lifted later in the 5 stage plan. Coaches and medical personnel working in this field would also be enabled to work under this request.

Amendments would be required to enable people to leave home for this purpose. Outdoor facilities would be able to open but DoH would not support indoor facilities.

DfC have suggested an implementation date of Monday 15 June and guidance will be available from some sporting bodies.

This easement would enable the Executive to move on to consider other easements for sport.

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- iv. Allow places of worship and community centres to open for the purpose of providing daycare and to extend the restrictions on gatherings for the purpose of providing daycare

This would enable places of worship and community centres to open for the purpose of daycare and would operate in line with the definition of key worker for childcare purposes and guidance will be available. There will be benefits for the economy if parents are able to return to work.

Amendments will be required to the regulations. DoH has asked for an implementation date of Friday 12 June.

The issue of informal childcare is urgently under consideration by DoH and DE and will be the subject of further advice to the Executive.

- v. Permit indoor visits

Ministers have requested action on this issue, to enable families, friends and support networks to meet indoors. This would mark the final step of phase 1 of the 5 stage plan. It is an important step for citizens. There are a number of ways this can be approached. We are mindful of the decisions taken in other jurisdictions and we wish to put in place the best arrangements for our citizens consistent with the Covid situation, and we wish to build on this as we move through the pandemic. The policy justification is tackling harm by enabling people to meet in a planned and understandable way. We therefore propose that we clearly signal that we are in the process of closing step 1 and that we take an immediate step of enabling people who live alone to form a small support unit (a bubble) with one other household. This would enable the person to visit, stay over and spend more time with their support network. We would strongly advise that the person maintains a support network of one household only. Regulations would be amended to enable the person to leave their house for this purpose. We believe this would help tackle isolation and we can build on that first step by reviewing the situation again next week, with a view to enabling indoor visits from one household to visit another household in more limited circumstances. Taking a step by step approach will enable clear messaging targeted at sectors of our society. We would propose to return to this important issue next week, in line with our objective of putting citizens at the centre of our decision making.

We suggest an implementation date of Saturday 13 June and guidance will be prepared. Those who are in the shielding group will be advised not to avail of

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this first easement. Further guidance will be provided about how to safely form a small support unit. The Executive is asked to note the focus on guidance rather than setting out what can and cannot be done in regulations.

Considerations around the formation of larger “bubbles” are more complex and would require further consideration. While the Health advice is that bubbling should not generally be recommended, there may be some circumstances where it could be useful for individuals. Those taking part in a bubble must be fully informed at the risks especially if there is a vulnerable person in the group. Individuals would need to understand that they can be part of one bubble only and that if one person is suspected of having COVID everyone in the bubble must self-isolate.

It is recommended that the Executive keeps the issue under review.

vi. Amend to permit outdoor gatherings of up to 10 people

As set out in the Framework, step 2 envisaged raising the number of people who can meet outside from 6 to 10. This will be on the basis that social distancing between people who do not share the same household would still be required. Guidance will be amended.

Next Steps

If the Executive is content with the above recommendations, guidance will issue and amendments will be made to the regulations. A press statement will be prepared, and given the range and nature of the easements, this will need to explain the underpinning rationale.

Next steps will then be to look at the remaining issues in an holistic way and to map to an indicative timetable. Work is already underway on competitive sport and libraries, on which advice may be ready for the Executive next week, and then museums. Other issues such as caravans and second homes, and further advice on tourist accommodation will also be submitted soon for Executive consideration.

DoH will conduct a formal review of the regulations, as required, for next Thursday's Executive.

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Recommendations

The Executive is asked to:

note the update on the epidemic;

note the actions since the last meeting of the Executive;

discuss and agree a way forward on the six proposed easements, including implementation dates, regulation changes and guidance;

note the cumulative impact assessment; and

note next steps.

**THE RT. HON. ARLENE FOSTER MLA
FIRST MINISTER**

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

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Coronavirus restrictions: amendment proposals, 10 June 2020: Department of Health assessment of risk

- 1 This paper sets out the case for six proposals to amend the Health Protection (Coronavirus, Restrictions) Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2020; offers an assessment of the level of risk associated with each proposal, along with the potential benefits of each; and offers an holistic view of the level of risk if these are implemented as a package of changes at this stage of the epidemic.
- 2 The following proposals have been submitted to, or prepared by, DoH:
 - 1) open the remainder of retail over and above those retailers already permitted to open;
 - 2) allow house moves generally;
 - 3) allow training for elite athletes and elite training facilities – excluding indoor facilities – to open;
 - 4) allow places of worship and community centres to open for the purpose of providing daycare; amend the restrictions on gatherings for the purpose of providing daycare;
 - 5) indoor visits, and
 - 6) allow outdoor gatherings of up to 10 people.

Current state of the epidemic in Northern Ireland

- 3 The value of R is currently estimated, from modelling, to be in the range 0.5 – 0.7. The seven-day rolling average of new cases is now 10, as of 7 June, which is the lowest since 19 March, having reached a peak of 117 cases on 18 April. The seven-day rolling average of hospital admissions, as of 7 April, is 4, having peaked at 44 on 4 April. As at 10 June, we have had four consecutive days with no COVID-19 deaths.
- 4 There have been in total 4,818 confirmed cases. 61,518 individuals have been tested. 78,441 tests have been completed. Testing capacity is 4,915. There have been 537 deaths.

Summary assessment of amendment proposals

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- 5 The Chief Medical Officer and the Chief Scientific Adviser have considered the risks associated with each proposal. The risk ratings in the matrix table reflect their views of the level of risk associated with each relaxation to the regulations at this stage in the epidemic.
- 6 They have also considered the totality of the risk associated with the implementation of the proposals as a package at this stage in the epidemic. They advise that this would carry a reasonable prospect of maintaining R at less than 1.

DoH RISK AND BENEFIT ASSESSMENT MATRIX

Overall rating of risk or potential benefits: key

- 3: highest risk
- 2: significant risk
- 1: moderate risk
- 0: negligible risk or benefit, or neutral
- +1: moderate benefit
- +2: significant benefit
- +3: greatest benefit

Notes

- 1 The ratings for each proposal are intended to reflect a qualitative assessment of the risks and potential benefits. They are not scores that can be summed.
- 2 The risk is rated with full account taken of the **current** rate of virus transmission.

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Possible change to restrictions / requirements	Impact on transmission <i>leading to serious disease</i> as at 10 June 2020.	Health impacts medium to long term	Society	Economy
	RISK	POTENTIAL BENEFIT		
Regulation 4: closure of shops (“Further restrictions and closures”)				
(1) Opening of the remainder of retail over and above those retailers already permitted to open.	- 0.5 to -1	0	+2	+3
<p>Proposed by DfE.</p> <p><u>Commentary</u></p> <ol style="list-style-type: none">Consistent with Step 2 ‘Retail’ of Executive Approach to Decision-Making.The largest high street retailers are set to use the latitude within the existing regulations to open in any event, and so this creates a complex assessment as we cannot simply gauge the risk compare to the observed level now – we need to gauge this risk of taking action compared the risk of not taking action.Obviously there is extra risk as additional stores would be opened. However, the counterfactual also involves increasing risks, potentially very similar in magnitude, since not taking action comes with the (very likely) risk of a host of local retailers following the lead of the big clothing retailers and opening anyway without any NI Executive direction or planning – and in doing so creating similar or equivalent health and transmission risk.So the risks here relate to those for the planned opening retail over and above that which will occur under the current regulations with the big clothing retailer opening. There is potentially extra transmission risk as additional stores would be opened. However, there is also much risk (maybe at least as great) in not acting to open the remainder of retail in a planned way and a host of local retailers following the lead of the big clothing retailers and opening anyway.As a result the scoring of the transmission risks reflects the increment risks of taking action in a planned way. It assumes that somewhat more stores are opened somewhat earlier under the planned route – however, this is not at all certain <u>and it is entirely plausible that the counterfactual (inaction) position has just as much transmission risk as at that inherent within this proposal.</u>The proposal, however, offers some opportunity to manage the situation, set a timetable, communicate a clear message, plan mitigations, encourage compliance and adhere to				

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guidance. Actions/protocols/guidance can be put in place to mitigate the risks associated with the application of the UKG Guidance in NI.

7. For society inaction creates substantial risks around public confusion as to what shops can and cannot open and what the public can and cannot leave home for. Without action we are in an untenable position whereby a store can open to sell a product but it would be a criminal offence for people to leave their home to buy it. This is not a credible message to communicate to people and so the proposal offers the opportunity to manage the situation, set a timetable and communicate a clear message to the public and help maintain confidence in the approach of the Executive. Again the Societal score above is assessed against the likely counterfactual position.
8. On the economic assessment this proposal is obviously a direct economic proposal. The assessment here is in line with the assumptions made earlier, in that under the proposal it assumes that somewhat more stores are opened somewhat earlier under the planned route (relative to the counterfactual). This delivers additional economic benefit earlier, and since we are dealing within one of the biggest sectors in terms of GVA and Employment, that impact will plausibly be very substantial.
9. Currently both England and in the Republic of Ireland are now embarking on similar paths and similar timetables for the reopening of the remainder of retail. This proposal would also place Northern Ireland in a similar position on a similar timetable.

Regulation 5(2): reasonable excuses to leave the place where one is living

(2) Amend Regulation 5(2) to facilitate house moves in general.	-1	+1	+2	+3
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Proposed by DfC.

Details of proposal to amend the Regulations:

Amend 5(2) to add:

(xx) to undertake any of the following activities in connection with the purchase, sale, letting, rental or re-mortgage of a residential property—

(i) visiting estate or letting agents, developer sales offices or show homes;

(ii) viewing residential properties to look for a property to buy or rent;

(iii) preparing a residential property to move in;

(iv) moving home;

(v) visiting a residential property to undertake any activities required for the purchase, sale, letting, rental, sale or re-mortgage of that property or an interest in it.

Commentary

- 1 Consistent with Step 2 of Executive Approach to Decision-Making.

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<p>2 The N. Ireland market has been most negatively impacted in terms of housing transactions compared to the rest of the UK as noted by official HMRC registered transaction levels in April 2020.</p> <p>3 N. Ireland's economy is estimated to have contracted by -3.9% in the first quarter of 2020; the most of all UK regions and almost double the UK average (-2.0%). Any further measures to delay the economic recovery (including the housing market) compared to other parts of the UK will exacerbate regional imbalances.</p> <p>4 Construction sector has one of the highest GVA 'multiplier' effects of all industries in the economy. Similarly, the real estate industry has one of the highest 'employment multiplier' effects in the economy. As such, these are two sectors which play a key role in stimulating the economic recovery.</p> <p>5 There is evidence of pent up demand building up across all tenure types and that many households are currently in difficult housing situations because they are unable to move. This includes households who are currently living in overcrowded accommodation or those in households where there is a family/relationship breakdown.</p> <p>6 Also there is evidence that COVID-19 is negatively impacting on living situations in other ways, including data showing that more people experiencing violence and harassment and financial difficulties.</p> <p>7 In the social housing sector there has been a significant drop in allocations due to current restrictions, with many more households being required to be housed in less than ideal and more expensive temporary accommodation, such as, hotels and b&b.</p> <p>8 Significant work has taken place across the housing industry here to put in place operational guidelines to ensure compliance with current public health policy.</p> <p>9 This will be supplemented by Departmental guidance that will aim to adequately mitigate the risks identified.</p> <p>10 The Department consider that the reopening the housing market meets the test of the four guiding principles (which are a focus on primary purposes, i.e. controlling transmission and protecting healthcare service capacity; necessity; proportionality, and reliance on evidence). This is because (as supported by the evidence in this template) that a reopening of the housing market offers significant social/economic benefits at low risk, especially in the context of a new or different market (this will not be a return to normality) supported by clear guidance to protect public health.</p> <p>11 That the current regulations should therefore be amended to remove the restriction that house moves are only permitted in those circumstances deemed 'reasonably necessary' and are replaced by the circumstances set out above.</p>				
(3) Amend to permit elite athletes to commence	-0.5	+2	+2	+1

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training and to allow elite facilities to be open for restricted use (excluding indoor facilities).				
<p>Proposed by DfC.</p> <p><u>Commentary</u></p> <ol style="list-style-type: none">1 Consistent with Step 2 of Executive Approach to Decision-Making.2 A measured approach to a return to play has been laid out in the SportNI framework which has been aligned to the Executives 5 Step Plan and the evolving health messages.3 The document has been developed following engagement with UK Sport and Sport Ireland as well as input from medical personnel from a sporting background.4 The framework has been developed with input from Governing Bodies and will be published and shared with the wider sports sector providers and Governing Bodies.5 Each individual Governing Body has a protocol in place for athletes to adhere to which will assist with risk assessments and help manage the risk for staff and participants.6 Different sports now have specific dates that require elite players to return to training in order to prepare for a return to competitive games later in the summer. These include players from Ulster Rugby, Cricket Ireland and premierships clubs in the Irish League as well as the League of Ireland.7 If the elite players/athletes cannot return to controlled training this will impact their ability to take part in competitive sport later this year, subject to continued health and scientific assessments.8 There remains a restriction on training in large groups, sharing of equipment and contact in training with no competitions taking place.9 The attendance of spectators remains restricted.10 The change aligns the regulations with the announcements by the Executive for a return to outdoor activities and sport.11 The change allows for elite sports and their athletes to begin to prepare for a return to contact training and eventually international competition/events when it is safe to do so and permitted by the Executive's Plan.12 The number of elite athletes and appropriate support (coaches/medical personnel) covered by the change in regulations would be in the region of 200.				

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Regulations 4 and 6				
(4) Allow places of worship and community centres to open for the purpose of providing daycare and to extend the restrictions on gatherings for the purpose of providing daycare.	-1	0	+2	+3
<p>Proposed by DoH.</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. This would be consistent with the approach already adopted in relation to the opening of schools for children of key workers. 2. The definition of key worker for childcare purposes was set intentionally tighter than the schools definition at the start of the pandemic to minimise the number of children attending childcare facilities. Unlike schools, physical space in childcare settings is more limited, particularly in the homes of childminders. 3. The Executive has now agreed that the definition of key worker for childcare purposes should be extended to allow parents to access childcare in order to return to work, in line with the Executive recovery plan. Settings need to be able to open for this purpose. 4. Following advice from the Chief Scientific Adviser, a range of measures will be put in place to ensure, as far as possible, that safety is maintained in infection control terms. Those measures will include restrictions on group size, and groups being required to be kept apart. Supporting guidance will also be published. 5. The benefit of enabling church halls and community centres to open for the purpose of providing childcare will support the economy and the Executive's five stage recovery plan, on the basis that parents are unlikely to be able to return to work without access to childcare. 				
Regulation 5: restriction on movement				
(5) Amend to permit up to 2 people from another household to visit another household indoors.	-0.5	+2	+2	0

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Proposed by DoH.

Commentary

1. This would be consistent with Step 1 'Family and Community' in the Executive Approach to Decision-Making.
2. The list of reasonable excuses for leaving the place where one is living does not include visiting another household indoors. This has resulted in people from different households, including close family members, being unable to meet indoors. This restriction has been considered necessary to reduce the risk of transmission through close contact over a prolonged period of time.
3. The benefits associated with easing this restriction are considerable. There is good evidence that social support in general reduces stress and enables people to cope with difficult working conditions. Equally emotional support enables people to endure difficult but necessary public health interventions and helps in reducing psychiatric symptoms after disasters. Overall, practical and emotional support from others can be protective for health. As well as these general effects, vulnerable groups in the population rely most on informal networks of care, information and support that have direct effects on physical and mental wellbeing, and people with pre-existing mental health conditions are likely to be most disadvantaged. The social infrastructures of households and associated social networks are particularly important in those most disadvantaged by social isolation, predominately the elderly, disabled and rural dwellers where social networks are less dense.
4. Since the imposition of the restrictions people have relied largely on virtual contact by electronic means and by telephone. The limitations of such means of communication are self-evident, not least the fact that some older people do not have access to internet-based contact. Allowing people to visit family members and others indoors would have clear benefits in terms of health, wellbeing and society.
5. For those who cannot arrange for outdoor meetings of up to six people with appropriate social distancing, indoor meetings of up to two other people (preferable the same contacts) from outside a household can occur **providing social distancing is maintained of greater than 2 metres and meetings are less than 15 minutes in duration in a well ventilated area**. Appropriate precautions must be taken in relation to contact with hard surfaces and advice on regular hand washing before and after the home visit. Given the increased risks associated with indoor contact individuals may wish to consider wearing face coverings to protect those they are visiting. Those working as health care workers need to exercise particular caution to limit the risk to vulnerable people.
6. **Exception: Current advice is that the extremely vulnerable who are in receipt of a shielding letter can go outside to meet up to one other person (preferably the same person) from outside their household providing social distancing is strictly followed. We do not currently recommend any indoor meetings for those individuals who are shielding apart from members of the same household who they are living with.**

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<p>7. It would be difficult to make this exception in amendments to the Regulations, not least because this would be very difficult to enforce. This should therefore be the focus of public messaging.</p> <p>8. More generally, SD risks will be higher with indoor visits but could be mitigated by strong public messaging on the continuing need for social distancing and good hand and respiratory hygiene. The roll-out of the test, trace and isolate strategy will also mitigate the risk.</p>				
Regulation 6 – restrictions on gatherings				
(6) Amend to permit outdoor gatherings of up to 10 people	-1	+2	+2	+1
<p>Proposed by DoH.</p> <p><u>Commentary</u></p> <ol style="list-style-type: none">1. Consistent with Step 2 'Family and Community' in the Executive Approach to Decision Making (gatherings of up to 10 people outdoors).2. Clear benefits in terms of personal well-being and society.3. It would meet the current criteria for lowest risk activities: outdoor activities ... during which social distancing can be maintained for individuals who do not share a household contact and where there is no shared contact with hard surfaces.				

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MEMORANDUM E (XX)

**FROM: ROBIN SWANN MLA
MINISTER FOR HEALTH**

DATE: 6 May 2020

TO: EXECUTIVE COLLEAGUES

**USE OF FACE COVERINGS IN NORTHERN IRELAND AS PART OF OUR
RESPONSE TO CORONAVIRUS**

Introduction

1. Colleagues will be aware that there has been much public debate about the use of facemasks by the general public during the COVID-19 epidemic.
2. Firstly, as a point of terminology, I would wish to differentiate between the use of “facemasks” (i.e. masks manufactured to a required standard, for use in a clinical setting); and “face coverings” (i.e. material used to cover the face, often homemade, used by individuals in day to day life). In respect of their use by the general public, we are focussed on face coverings – not least because:
 - This is not a clinical issue, and coverings to that standard are not required (and, more importantly, we don’t want the public to mistakenly think such a standard is required); and
 - We do not want to place a further strain on clinically required supplies of PPE.
3. This is clearly an issue on which we, as an Executive, now need to give guidance to the wider community. This issue is not completely

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straightforward, and is certainly not one where a simple “better safe than sorry” approach should point us to recommending the deployment of face coverings – essentially there are two competing issues:

- a. On the one hand, while the scientific evidence may be weak, there is clearly some benefit from the use of face coverings;

however:

- b. There is a risk that the use of face coverings may provide a false sense of security to both wearers and others, and thus diminish adherence to social distancing and good standards of hand washing and respiratory hygiene.

4. In terms of paragraph 3, the position of the NI Strategic Intelligence Group, chaired by the Chief Scientific Advisor, Professor Ian Young, is that:
 - Evidence for benefit of face covering in the community is weak overall and benefits are likely to be small;
 - Evidence is stronger for reducing transmission of infection by infected individuals than for protecting healthy individuals from infection
 - On balance, there is sufficient evidence to recommend (but not mandate) face covering in enclosed environments where social distancing cannot be maintained, for short periods. In practice this means public transport and retail environments in the main;
 - Evidence is not sufficient to recommend face covering outdoors or in enclosed environments for long periods;
 - Cloth face coverings are recommended to avoid risk of shortages of respiratory masks which should be prioritised for the highest risk settings;
 - Face coverings may provide a degree of false reassurance which leads to reduced compliance with more important behaviours (such as social distancing);

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- A significant programme of education will be required around face covering technique, including wearing, taking on and off, disposal and washing of reusable masks. This should also include emphasis on the need to maintain social distancing and good hand hygiene at all times; and
 - Availability of face coverings will need to be addressed, including how to construct home-made face coverings. This should include measures to ensure that segments of the population are not disadvantaged by lack of access to face coverings.
5. In view of this - and while recognising the particular risk highlighted in paragraph 3(b) - my view is that we should move to **recommend** (as opposed to require) that the public consider the use of face coverings for short periods in enclosed spaces, where social distancing is not possible.
6. Such a position is based on the view of our own Strategic Intelligence Group, and is consistent with the position of SAGE, which has concluded that “on balance, there is enough evidence to support recommendation of community use of cloth face masks, for short periods in enclosed spaces where social distancing is not possible.”
7. Subject to the agreement to this position by Executive colleagues, my Department will consider what further guidance on this matter is required.

Recommendation / Decision sought

8. I recommend that the Executive:
- i. Agrees we **recommend** (as opposed to require) the public consider the use of face coverings for short periods in enclosed spaces, where social distancing is not possible; and
 - ii. Notes that my Department will consider what further guidance on this issue is required.

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I am copying this paper to the Attorney General and Departmental Solicitor, and to First Legislative Counsel.

**ROBIN SWANN MLA
MINISTER OF HEALTH**

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