

EXECUTIVE APPROACH TO CORONAVIRUS DECISION-MAKING

Ministerial Foreword/Introduction

The lives and livelihoods of many of you have been severely affected in the past weeks by the impact of the Coronavirus pandemic and the measures we have needed to put in place to control the infection.

While it feels like Covid-19 has been in our midst for a long time, the first recorded case in NI was actually only 9 weeks ago on 27 February 2020. Since then, as of [insert date of day before publication], [xxxx] people have tested positive for the virus and [yyy] people have sadly lost their lives.

This document sets out the approach that the Northern Ireland Executive will take in undertaking its regular reviews of the Coronavirus Regulations which have placed unprecedented restrictions on the way we all live our lives. This has been an extraordinary ask in what are extraordinary times and the vast majority have complied with the regulations. As a society, we should be proud of the way we have responded to that ask.

It is also clear that, without those restrictions and the very high levels of compliance right across our community, the pain and suffering from Coronavirus would have been very much greater and the impact on our health service would have been far more severe.

We know that as we begin to consider, as an Executive, how best to move towards reducing those restrictions, there will be different and competing views about the timing and the most pressing next relaxations. Our approach will be to look ahead to the future – to recognise that we need to create a ‘new normal’ because we cannot simply return to where we were - and to retain the flexibility to respond as new information comes to light.

In pursuit of this, we will be led by the science and not by a calendar setting artificial deadlines. We will take the best medical and scientific advice available to us into account in reaching the judgments required, but we also want to be honest and say

that the decisions we reach – whether to keep the restrictions or relax them – will be judgments, balancing the continued need to control this infection against the very real impacts the restrictions are having on our health and well-being, economy and way of life. The reality is there is no single or easy answer to this complex issue, but we will endeavour to reach sound judgments, based firmly on what we believe is for the best and we ask that you would continue to abide by those restrictions that are considered necessary.

We must do this if we are to minimise the risk of needing to reintroduce restrictions later on.

It is not what any of us want to hear but the truth is that we will not see a return to the normal ways of living we had before the pandemic. This pandemic has affected all of our lives in multiple ways and it will take a whole of society approach and collective effort if we are to minimise its impact, and then make the best possible recovery from it.

Your efforts throughout this unprecedented period have helped to flatten the curve of infection and save lives; and we thank you for that.

We can continue to do so with your help.

1. Current position

1.1 The Executive has taken decisive action to address the pandemic. On 28 March 2020, the Northern Ireland Executive passed regulations introducing restrictions to slow the spread of Coronavirus, help our Health and Social Care system cope with the situation and ultimately save lives. The regulations required the closure of certain businesses and prohibited anyone from leaving their house except for very limited reasons. The regulations also banned gatherings of more than two people from outside the same household.

1.2 The reasons to leave our homes include the need to:

- work, or deliver voluntary or community services, where that cannot be done at home;
- go to a shop for food or a chemist for medication;
- basic necessities such as taking our animals to the vet;
- take exercise either alone or with others who live in the same house as we do;
- get medical assistance;
- help a vulnerable person that we are caring for, or to provide emergency assistance;
- donate blood;
- attend a funeral of a close family member or someone that we live with;
- fulfil a legal obligation;
- access critical public services;
- move house if absolutely necessary.

1.3 In addition, the Executive has stopped or reduced a range of public services delivered by Government and sent clear and consistent advice that people should stay at home unless they need to leave for one of the purposes set out in the Regulations.

1.4. Alongside that, in order to respond to the problems caused by the restrictions, the Executive has put in place a wide range of measures to help citizens, employees and businesses who have been badly affected through no fault of their own.

1.5. At the time the Regulations were made, the scientific modelling work suggested that, in a Worst Case scenario where no social distancing measures were introduced, there could be up to 15,000 deaths from the pandemic.

[insert chart showing number of cases testing positive by day]

1.6. The public have reacted to the public health emergency by showing very high levels of compliance with the regulations. As a result of those actions the revised modelling has since indicated that the Reasonable Worst Case scenario within the first 20 weeks of the pandemic is now 1,500 deaths. This clearly illustrates both the importance of the regulations, and the impact on lives the public's response has made.

[insert suitable chart on social distancing compliance]

1.7. While this is still an awful prospect and one we continue to work to reduce, it is clear that the actions taken by people across the region have made a huge difference. Each of you has contributed to saving lives. In addition to the legal requirements, the Executive has also been clear in promoting a #stayhome message, encouraging as many people as possible to work from home across all sectors. We know that the overall approach has been really tough for many people and particularly for those who have been asked to shield themselves. We applaud the many volunteers who are providing help and support to others and the sense of community support that has sustained so many.

1.8. The pandemic has taken a very heavy toll in lives lost and others facing serious illness. We all owe a huge debt of gratitude to key workers who have kept essential services going in a range of different areas. We owe a very particular debt to those who work in our Health and Social Care system who have placed themselves at personal risk to save the lives of fellow citizens.

[insert photo of people clapping healthcare workers]

1.9. There is also a wider health impact. Prior to coronavirus, our health and social care system was already facing huge strategic challenges in the form of an ageing

population, increasing demand, long and growing waiting lists, workforce pressures and the emergence of new and more expensive treatments. All of these pressures have been exacerbated by coronavirus. Elective and diagnostic services have had to be curtailed. At the end of December there were some 305,000 patients on the outpatient waiting list, more than 90,000 waiting for inpatient and day case admissions and more than 141,000 patients waiting for diagnostic tests. As of 22 April 2020, more than 9,000 elective care and inpatient admissions had been cancelled, of which more than 2,000 were red flag referrals.

1.10. We face the same challenges as others and as a result, we have worked closely both on a 4-nations basis within the UK and on a North-South basis with the Irish Government, including through a Memorandum of Understanding entered into by the two Chief Medical officers. The Executive is committed to good co-operation on both an East-West and North-South basis, as well as learning from other jurisdictions elsewhere too. Rightly, however, the decisions on the future approach to the restrictions are for the Executive to take based on the best analysis of the situation here.

2. Basis for decision making

2.1 The Health Protection (Coronavirus, Restrictions) Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2020 came into force on 28 March 2020. In the first review, required on or before 18 April 2020, no changes were made. Since then, adjustments have been made to allow family members to visit the graves of their loved ones while adhering to social distancing and to clarify the grounds on which it is reasonable to travel for the purpose of exercise.

2.2. The next review is due to take place no later than 9 May 2020. Each review is a major decision point and the Executive takes its responsibilities for these decisions very seriously.

2.3. As context to its reviews, the Executive will take account of measures to reduce transmission, including the increased availability of testing, the use of surveillance or tracking methodology and the availability of contact tracing for those who have come into contact with those who test positive for Coronavirus. Where IT solutions, such as Apps, can assist, we will use them and encourage you to do the same. However, no matter how good such Apps are, they will be meaningless unless used widely across society.

2.4. The Executive has agreed that the ongoing reviews of the Regulations will consider the following aspects;

- i) Evidence and analysis relating to the pandemic, including the latest medical and scientific advice, the estimated level of transmission and the impact of relaxations on the future trajectory of the pandemic;
- ii) Capacity of the health and social care services to deal with COVID-19 cases as well as the need to resuming normal services;
- iii) Assessment of the wider health, societal and economic impacts of the regulations, including identifying the areas where greatest benefit and lowest risk would result from relaxation.

2.5. The public health analysis relating to the pandemic will always be the most important consideration, as we are committed to maintaining our approach of minimising the harm caused by the pandemic and avoiding the Health and Social

Care system being overwhelmed as a result of an increase in people falling seriously ill. However, when the public health impacts begin to reduce and the numbers of people testing positive and requiring hospitalisation are clearly in sustained decline, so the societal and economic factors will play a greater part in the decision making process.

2.6. In the absence of a vaccine or an effective treatment for Coronavirus, we have to recognise the risk that the numbers infected by Coronavirus will grow again at a future point and may require some restrictions to be re-imposed. We want to avoid that situation if we possibly can and will therefore act with the long term health of people in mind.

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3. Social Contract

3.1 For our society to make the best possible recovery from Coronavirus we will all need to work together. This will require a new form of social contract in which we all play our part.

3.2 For our part we will:

- Continue to resource the NHS to fight Coronavirus and meet the other health needs of the population;
- Put in place robust arrangements to test, track and trace those infected by, or at risk of infection from, Coronavirus;
- Set out clear guidance for everyone in the community including specifically for those who need to self-isolate;
- Provide guidance to all those affected as the current restrictions are relaxed;
- Support the most vulnerable in our society;
- Continue to be transparent in our approach through regular statements to the Assembly, briefings to Assembly Committees and daily media briefings and by explaining fully the decisions we reach at review points.

3.3 In return we ask that you will:

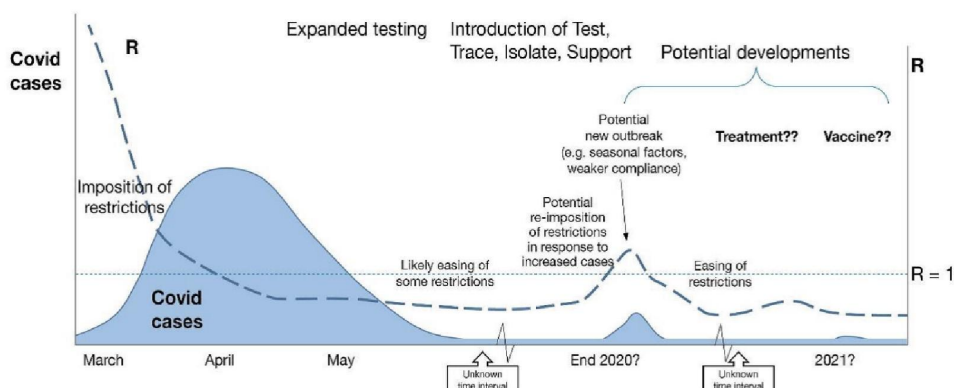
- Wash your hands regularly and in line with the best practice guidance;
- Have good respiratory hygiene in terms of coughing or sneezing into a tissue or the crook of your elbow;
- Follow the social distancing guidelines and remain two metres away from those outside your household to the greatest extent possible;
- Abide by the need to self-isolate either because you have symptoms yourself or because you have been in touch with someone who has symptoms or has tested positive for Coronavirus. This includes if contacted by the track and trace arrangements in place;
- Follow the approach set out in the Regulations at any given time and the advice being offered by the Government based on medical and scientific evidence. We will provide enforcement powers as necessary to address any small minority who may seek to ignore the rules in place.

3.4 We also expect businesses to behave responsibly in terms of following best practice for their workforce by ensuring social distancing is observed wherever possible and by meeting all of the other guidance in place for the sector involved. We recognise that the vast majority of businesses want to have a healthy workforce and will act responsibly but where this does not take place we will put robust enforcement arrangements in place.

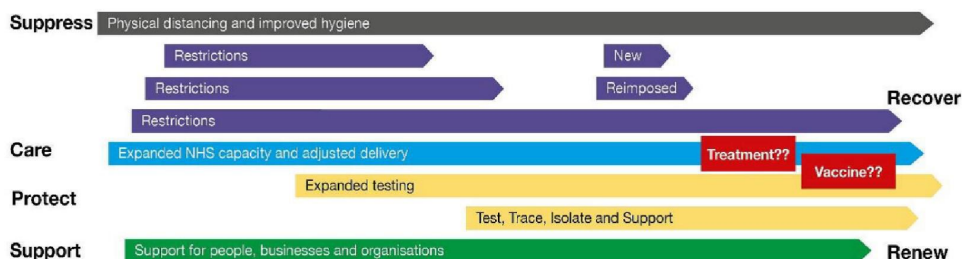
3.5 If we all succeed in operating in line with this approach, we will be most successful in reducing the transmission of the disease and in recovering from the major health, societal and economic damage that has been done to our community. That, in turn, will put us in the best possible place for future growth in all arenas. The alternative is too grim to contemplate. More of us lose our lives with more risk that our health services become overwhelmed and greater economic and societal suffering. In addition the ability to relax the restrictions or the need to re-introduce them will become unavoidable.

3.6 The diagram below was originally prepared by the Scottish Government but shows graphically the complexity of managing the pandemic by drawing out the many factors to be taken into account in setting the way ahead.

Graphical representation of our approach



Approach: Approximate Timescales



4. A staged approach to relaxing restrictions

4.1 At this point in time, everyone is looking ahead to the point at which relaxations to the current unprecedented restrictions on freedom can be introduced. We share that ambition.

4.2 We recognise that many people would like to see a timetable set for the relaxation as well as a clear description of what each step will comprise. Our approach will take account of the best medical and scientific advice available at the time of each review. That evidence, which will include an analysis of actions taken in other countries and jurisdictions who are further along in this wave of the pandemic, is constantly evolving.

4.3 The Executive shares the aspiration of all of you – that we will be able to return to a more normal way of living our lives soon. While this will take significant time, we can guarantee that we will not retain the restrictions for any longer than is absolutely necessary. However it is important that when taking decisions now, we recognise the risk of having to re-introduce restrictions if cases rise sharply again. That is why we will only decide to relax restrictions when we are sure that that is in the long term interest of the health of the population.

4.4 We are committed to sharing with you as clear a future approach as we can. No-one can be absolutely sure what will happen in relation to the pandemic in coming weeks and months so for that reason we need to retain the flexibility to act in line with the best information at the time. But we also accept that many people want to be able to plan ahead and have the hope of more freedom and opportunity in the future. So we have set out below some indicative stages for the relaxation of restrictions which are based on the best information available to us. We have deliberately not set dates for each stage as to do so would suggest more certainty about the future than we can stand over, but we will always be clear when the next review of the regulations will take place.

4.5 **[Option 1:** [Note: Consistent with May 4 Executive decision but clear advice received from CMO/CSA that more time is needed to develop an evidence-

based staged approach and that 5 stages should be adopted to show better the slow step by step approach that will be needed.]

- Stage 1 was completed on [7] May and the Executive decided [tbc]

	Stage 2	Stage 3	Stage 4
Work	Message change to 'work safe' from 'stay home'. Outdoor workers, construction and manufacturing can return subject to completed risk assessment. Remote working is default position.	Phased return to office and onsite working subject to risk assessment. Remote working is default position.	All able to return to work subject to mitigations where social distancing not possible. Remote working still strongly encouraged.
Retail	Non-food retail can open where numbers limited and social distancing/suitable mitigating measures in place as per risk assessment	Other 'contact' retail (hairdressers, fitness studios, tattoo/piercing can open subject to mitigations following risk assessment	High density retail (restaurants, cafes, pubs) can open subject to risk assessment – probably on a limited basis to start with.
Education	Increased use of school for children of 'key workers'. ?School places open to some children of non-key workers.	[Youth services/summer schemes open on limited basis subject to risk assessment]	Schools return at start of new academic year on a partial opening basis
Transport	Public transport operates with limited patronage - ?half capacity. [Masks?]	Public transport flexes to meet demand subject to mitigations being in place	Public transport flexes to meet demand subject to mitigations being in place
Socialising	Can meet those outside household in groups of up to [4/6] if retain social distancing. Funerals can accommodate up to [15] people	??	Can meet in extended groups subject to social distancing or other suitable mitigations. Funerals and church services can recommence.
Sport, culture and leisure activities	Can undertake activities where social distancing is possible (eg golf, tennis,). ?Museums and galleries.	Outside non-contact sports (eg playgrounds), indoor leisure facilities (eg swimming pools). Cinemas can open subject to social distancing	Contact sports. Nightclubs, concerts open on a restricted basis

Option 2: [Note: Less specific than Option 1 but deliverable much more quickly]

A roadmap to recovery

The Executive will make its decisions on the relaxation of restrictions by assessing against these five stages relating to the level of interaction with others, inside and outside. The stages reflect the scientific advice that outside activities are less risky.

Five stages:

1. Outdoor activities (work and leisure) 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.
2. Indoor activities involving limited contacts of less than 10 mins and interactions of only 2-4 people that maintain social distancing and prevent congregating in places for any extended period.
Outdoor activities involving small groups of less than 10 people during which it may be difficult to maintain social distancing but where contacts are brief (less than 10 minutes).
3. Indoor activities involving larger number of individuals where social distancing can be maintained for individuals who do not share a household connection.
Outdoor activities involving larger groups of less than 30 people during which it may be difficult to maintain social distancing but where contacts are brief (less than 10 minutes).
4. Indoor activities involving larger numbers of individuals where social distancing cannot be consistently maintained but contacts are limited and last less than 10 minutes.
Outdoor gatherings involving larger numbers of individuals where social distancing cannot be easily maintained and multiple contacts of less than 10 minutes are likely.

5. Indoor gatherings of large numbers of people where social distancing cannot be easily maintained and multiple contacts of more than 10 minutes are likely.

4.7 The next stage of our work will be defined in greater detail how each of these stages will impact on the main activities each of us will want to undertake. So for each of the areas below, we will assess what can be done using the five stage approach above.

- i. We want people to have a good family and social life, to be able to visit friends and relatives and we understand the huge benefits from returning to our family circle. We will consider if steps can be taken towards this and how this can be done safely.
- ii. We also understand the huge personal benefits of being able to exercise outdoors, walk in open spaces, and visit places which mean so much to us. We will consider what steps could be taken towards this, how people would be able to keep safe, and what this might mean for those who look after and provide services at the places we like to visit.
- iii. We all want to see a strong economy but in practice it may be necessary for the economy to return on a sectoral basis. Any business which opens must offer a safe working environment. We will take a partnership approach with our business community and trade unions in developing plans to enable more businesses to open safe.
- iv. We also recognise the importance of education to our young people and will put in place plans to address the consequences of time lost in the classroom.
- v. We recognise that travelling to work is a key factor for many employees and we will consider how public transport can safely enable travel. Alongside that, we will look for opportunities in the different working patterns in place now and work to provide greater choice for those who are able to work remotely so as to reduce the pressure on workplaces, public places and transport systems during the recovery period.

- vi. The current arrangements place a particular burden on the most vulnerable in a range of different ways from the elderly and those with underlying health conditions who need to self-isolate to those who are at risk in their homes. We will work to provide safe ways to give the most vulnerable more freedom.

4.8 All of these areas are interlinked and need to be seen as one overall approach rather than a series of individual decisions and that is the way in which we will approach this suite of measures.

4.9 Before the next review at end May 2020, we will provide greater detail about the application of the five stages.

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5. Conclusion

5.1 These are the most challenging times any of us can remember. It is only if we work together in Government and across society that we will minimise the suffering caused by the pandemic, tackle the challenges ahead most effectively and seize the opportunities that will arise.

5.2. The decisions taken by the Executive have all been based on the need to slow the spread of Coronavirus, help our Health and Social Care system to cope and ultimately to save lives.

5.3. There will be times when there are strongly held but contrasting views on the right decision about the next steps. We have set out the criteria the Executive will use in reaching those conclusions and we will continue to communicate with you about the reasons for the decisions we reach at every review point.

5.4. The steps we are all taking are working and they will enable the restrictions to be relaxed in stages when the time is right. In the meantime we ask that you continue to adhere to the regulations and follow the official advice provided. By doing that, we will be able to remove the restrictions more quickly and restore your freedoms to work, visit and play.

[5.5 Before the next review at the end of May, we will set out with greater detail how the five stage approach will impact on what we can do in our daily lives. We will also develop guidance to underpin the decisions to relax restrictions as and when they are taken.]