



MOVING FORWARD: THE EXECUTIVE'S PATHWAY OUT OF RESTRICTIONS

**WE ALL
MUST DO IT
TO GET
THROUGH IT**



**LIMIT SOCIAL
CONTACTS**



**KEEP
DISTANCE**



**WEAR FACE
COVERING**



**WASH
HANDS**

Ministerial Foreword

We recently passed the anniversary of the first confirmed COVID-19 case locally. Over the past year, the Coronavirus pandemic has turned life as we knew it on its head. Thousands of families are grieving the loss of their loved ones. Wellbeing and livelihoods have been severely impacted.

Despite it all, in the worst of these times, people have united together in a huge societal effort to slow the spread of COVID-19. You have shown great resilience and resolve, following the public health advice, and your actions have saved many, many lives.

It is hard to believe that we have all endured a year of this deadly pandemic. All ministers in the Executive are fully aware of how hard the past 12 months have been on families, young people, the vulnerable, our heroic health care workers, the business community and many more. We know that not being able to have our families and friends at our homes has been particularly challenging.

The success of our vaccination programme, where more than 500,000 people have already received their first dose, is one of the ways that will help us get out of this pandemic and offers hope that there are better days ahead. It has been a positive development to date and is being delivered alongside our testing and contact tracing programmes.

The Executive has developed its planned pathway out of the current restrictions and the approach we will take as we move forward over the next few months.

The restrictions we introduced from Boxing Day and your adherence to the 'stay at home' message have flattened the curve of infection, driven down the Rt number to below 1 and taken the pressure off our health service.

But the numbers of people contracting COVID-19 are still too high and we are dealing with the complication of new variants of the virus that spread even more quickly from person to person. So our pathway out of the restrictions has to be a slow and cautious one because there is still a long way to go in the fight against the virus.

Consistent with the approach we set out last May, we have agreed that our strategic priorities remain the health and wellbeing of our citizens; our societal and community well-being and our economic wellbeing and revitalising the economy.

We have also agreed that we will be guided by four overarching principles when making decisions; that they will be evidence-based, necessary, proportionate and sustainable.

The Executive recently announced that there would be a phased return to school for some pupils with phase 1 from Monday 8 March and phase 2 from Monday 22 March. Subject to the levels of community transmission, the return of other pupils to school will commence immediately following the Easter holidays with the aim of all children returning to schools as soon as possible.

The number of people who can meet up outside from two households has also been relaxed and we have added to the list of retailers who can operate a click and collect service.

So as not to risk the progress we have made since Christmas and the success of our vaccination programme, the re-opening of society will be on a step-by-step basis. This gradual approach will be informed by a range of evidence and data.

We want a sustainable re-opening of the economy, because if we open too quickly, we risk going into another lockdown and we all want to avoid that possibility.

We will have difficult choices to make on the sequencing of how restrictions can be lifted. Everything cannot open at once and so we will need to prioritise what we can open. We will consider what will have the maximum positive impact to our citizens with the lowest possible risk of increasing the rate of the transmission of the virus.

The Executive understands the call for dates and certainty so plans can be made for business to reopen, for families to come together again indoors, to book a holiday, appointments made for the hairdressers or the chance to go out for a meal and a drink.

But we all know from our experiences over the past year that there are too many uncertainties with COVID-19 to be definitive.

We need to be sure that we are keeping the Rt number below 1; that there is capacity in the health service; that the vaccination programme remains on track; that our Test, Trace and Protect strategy continues to be effective and that there is good adherence to the public health advice.

We want to be honest and upfront with people. While there is the hope of better days ahead, putting in dates now for possible relaxations weeks away could not be done with confidence or certainty. As an Executive, we understand that businesses need time


to prepare to re-open. So we will continue to engage with all the sectors and work in partnership for a safe re-opening when the time is right. Each relaxation will need to be informed by the impact of the last on community transmission and the Rt number. The Executive is committed to a four-week review cycle, where we will monitor the data on a range of health and societal impacts, before considering what relaxations can be made safely.

The reality is that COVID-19 is going to be with us for some time and that means that we still need to take personal responsibility to protect ourselves and others.

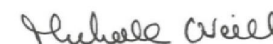
That means limiting our contacts; wearing a face covering, washing our hands, keeping our distance from others and when indoors, keeping rooms ventilated. This applies to everyone, whether you have had a vaccine or not. It also means we need to adapt how we interact in other situations and build resilience so that as restrictions ease leisure, hospitality, work places and businesses continue to take the necessary steps to remain COVID-secure to protect visitors, customers and employees. Improving fresh air flow, maintaining social distancing, hand hygiene and in some instances testing in certain sectors will all assist in us living more normal lives.

We have had many difficult days over the past 12 months, and there will be more difficult days ahead. But our vaccination programme and improved treatments mean there is now light at the end of the tunnel.

We will get to that end quicker if we take it one step at a time.



**The Rt Hon Arlene Foster MLA
First Minister**



**Michelle O'Neill MLA
Deputy First Minister**

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1. RECOGNISING YOUR EFFORTS

We are all aware of the impact that COVID-19 has had on every aspect of our daily lives. Our hospitals are functioning at almost full capacity and our invaluable healthcare staff right across the system are working extremely hard to care for us. Business owners and employees have had to manage the implications of significant restrictions which have been placed on their ability to operate. And we have all had to manage the difficult measures that have been placed on us in meeting our families, friends and loved ones.

We understand how difficult the past year has been and we want to acknowledge the grief people are suffering from the loss of loved ones. We also acknowledge that the year has brought challenges in many different forms. We recognise the personal sacrifices you have made and admire the resilience we have seen in many forms.

It is hard to put into words the commitment and dedication we have seen, and continue to see. We see nurses and doctors, social workers, dentists and pharmacists volunteer to return to work in huge numbers in support of patients, clients and their health service colleagues. Student nurses and doctors, social workers and pharmacists going straight into working in the midst of a global pandemic. The work of all the support staff who keep our hospitals going is inspiring.

Within the business community, it is clear it is about its people, its customers, its suppliers. The business community has shown great innovation, turning manufacturing towards supporting the health response, controlling the spread of the virus and protecting the health care workforce and system. We have seen digital innovation and transformation in health care provision, communication and data intelligence and in the transformation of the business sector and services. They have been our partners. People here excel at innovating and adapting and we have seen amazing examples of this.

We also want to recognise the invaluable work of those across our education sector who have had to make huge adjustments to the way they work to try to provide for your children and young people in these very difficult times.

Others who have been in the frontline keeping us all going, such as those in supermarkets, those employed in the recycling centres, and the people charged with maintaining our parks and outdoor spaces.

Our hospitality and wider retail sector staff, who have been through such difficult times of uncertainty, we want you to know you are supported.

And equally so at community level, where the voluntary and community sector and sporting codes have given so much in partnership with us. There are people and families who were shielding and self-isolating who relied so much on the voluntary sector and we are truly grateful. Volunteering, walking and cycling, the take up of new sports, innovation, and working in partnership and co-design in creative new ways have all been the positives over this difficult time.

And leaders from all faiths continue to demonstrate great leadership and are working constructively with us and the people they serve and support.

As a society and a community and individuals, our small, daily actions will continue to make a real difference. They mean we will do the right thing for our friends and families. They are more than the sum of their parts. They are how we will get through this.

We are making huge progress with our vaccination programme and there is further work to expand our asymptomatic testing programme. However, COVID-19 will remain in our community for some time and we all must continue to follow the basics to protect each other. This is our social contract with you.

While the health service has already done significant work to refocus its capacity, we must all work together to ensure it does not become overwhelmed and that there is enough capacity to deal with everyone who needs to access it when they need to.

We have every confidence we can do this together as we move forward in 2021. We will have to make some adaptations to how we work and socialise but there will be some good things to come from that too.

We, as an Executive, are committed to doing all we can to avoid the need for cycles of repeated, periodic severe restrictions that have been required so far. While there are uncertainties and there will be challenges, we are determined to do things differently in 2021 and we aspire to create an environment in which fewer restrictions are needed. This document sets out how we plan to achieve that.

2. CURRENT POSITION

The pandemic has had a significant impact on each of us as citizens and all aspects of our lives. Throughout the course of the pandemic, we have relied on scientific and medical evidence and advice to inform our decisions. The current restrictions require us all to stay at home unless it is necessary to leave, for example to exercise, to work if it cannot be done from home, and for essential shopping.

Large parts of our business sectors are also required to close, alongside the sports, arts, and culture sectors. The majority of our children and young people are not in face-to-face teaching in schools and colleges and there are restrictions on visiting family and friends both in our homes and outside. And there are self-isolation requirements in place for those arriving here.

Health impact

The first week of January saw the peak of transmission here since the pandemic started, with an Rt¹ rate of 1.5 - 1.9 in the community and an average number of positive tests per 7 days of 1,820. Hospital capacity at times exceeded 100%, with nearly 600 COVID-19 patients in our hospitals, of which more than 70 were in ICU.

This has had a significant impact on wider health and social care provision. Responding to the significant number of patients with COVID-19 has meant that most HSC Trusts have had to postpone other non-COVID related services, including for some of the most serious conditions such as cancer. This is not a sustainable position and is one that the Executive wants to rectify.

All viruses change and mutate and most of these will be of no significance. The emergence of new variants that are more transmissible may result in more people needing hospital care and some of these variants may have implications for our current vaccines. This has added an additional layer of complexity. We can expect to see new variants arise anywhere where cases and transmission of the virus is high. However such variants will only be identified where countries are undertaking sufficient surveillance and whole genome sequencing. The importation of some of these variants from other countries remains at the forefront of our considerations and is also now central to our risk management approach. We will be fully participating in the international travel quarantine arrangements that have been put in place to ensure our approach aligns as much as possible across these islands. The emergence of new variants reminds us that cases and transmission need to be lower. Measures to reduce cases and prevent spread will reduce all

variants currently here and the risk of new variants emerging here. While in the weeks and months ahead we may see local outbreaks and pockets of increased cases, we must remain alert to ensure the virus does not escape our control and become dominant in our community again. We must keep the Rt value below 1, which ensures that the epidemic continues to shrink and does not grow.

However, although the price has been high we must not lose sight of the progress we have made. Because of the efforts you have made by staying at home as much as possible, working from home and the sacrifices of many in the business and hospitality sector, the Rt number has reduced to less than 1 and the pressure on our health service has started to reduce. Undoubtedly lives have been saved.

We are also making significant progress in the vaccination programme. As at 28 February 2021, there had been 558,597 vaccine doses administered here. This is made up of 525,400 first doses and 33,197 second doses. We are making good progress in vaccinating the nine priority groups identified by the Joint Committee on Vaccination and Immunisation (JCVI). We will then move onto vaccinating the rest of our community in line with JCVI advice. Further details on our vaccination programme are contained in Section 3 below.

Societal impact

It is clear that the pandemic and restrictions have had an impact on the physical and mental wellbeing of many people. The impact of the lack of connectivity and the ensuing social isolation cannot be underestimated. We acknowledge that the past year has brought challenges in many different forms and resulted in lost opportunities for so many.

The impact on housing means that the number of people in temporary accommodation has risen significantly. This has been coupled with an increased risk of rent arrears especially for private renters, and introduces the possibility of a future spike in mortgage arrears and repossessions. The Department for Communities has brought forward a number of interventions to assist those who are experiencing homelessness.

Within the field of sports, arts and culture, there have been reduced opportunities for participation, which has consequential impacts on physical and mental wellbeing across all ages.

¹Rt - rate of transmission: the number of secondary cases for each infectious case

The financial impact has been heavy for many people, with increased levels of unemployment and further pressure on those on low incomes and those already at risk due to financial stress. This has led to further issues in relation to access to food and sufficient fuel for some of our citizens. It is also important we recognise the vital work of the voluntary and community sector in minimising the impacts in their local communities by providing vital support and promoting community cohesion.

Across society, it would be difficult to imagine anyone who has not been negatively impacted by this pandemic to some extent and it is vital we address these impacts.

Economic impact

The pandemic has had a profound impact on our economy. It is estimated that economic output fell by around 25% at the height of lockdown in spring 2020 and by around 10% over 2020 as a whole. Around 250,000 people overall have availed of the Coronavirus Job Retention Scheme (CJRS) and 78,000 have claimed the first Self-Employment Income Support Scheme (SEISS) grant. As of 31 January 2021, some 106,000 were still furloughed under CJRS and 62,000 were availing of SEISS support here, totaling around 168,000 jobs.

Many businesses here have adapted to new modes of working and many consumers have changed their spending habits. Many of these adaptations have been positives and many will be necessary and beneficial into the future. However, many sectors and sub-sectors have been effectively closed, or severely restricted in their activities. Thousands of businesses have been directly impacted. These include those within close contact services, aviation, food & accommodation, tourism, as well as arts, entertainment & recreation and numerous retail businesses.

However, indications are that output over the past few months may have fluctuated between 5% and 15% below normal levels, which is within the realms of a very severe economic downturn.

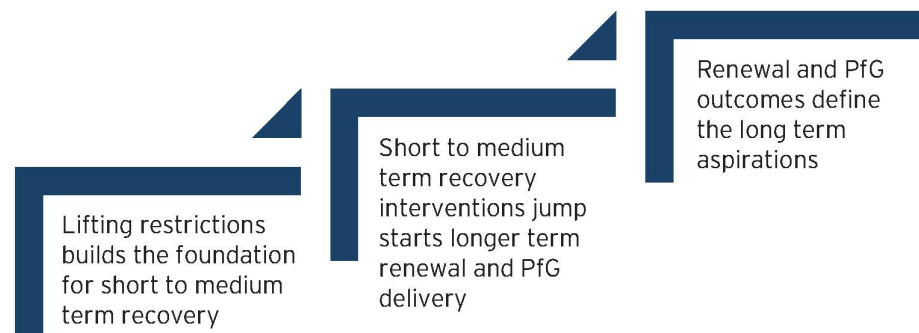
The latest restrictions are in place at a time of increased financial vulnerability and stress for firms. For example, according to the Office for National Statistics, 75% of single site businesses in the Accommodation & Food Services industry here had no cash reserves, or less than three months of cash reserves, compared with 57% across the UK.

While the various job support schemes have limited the levels of unemployment, they have not been able to save every job. The latest Claimant Count here (i.e. those claiming Jobseeker's Allowance and the number of Universal Credit

claimants placed in the 'Searching for Work' conditionality group) was 56,700 in January 2021, around double (+91%) the level of a year ago. Similarly, data from the latest Labour Force Survey indicates that the number of people in employment decreased by 35,000 over the year, driven by a 26,000 fall in the number of 16-24 year olds in employment.

Moving forward

The Executive is focused on building a careful and ambitious longer term plan for moving forward in 2021 and beyond. This consists of three key programmes of work which comprise our overall Roadmap to Recovery:



This document outlines the first step in the Executive's Roadmap to Recovery and sets out how the Executive will approach the relaxation of restrictions. All steps will be underpinned by the core themes of: **mitigation; adaptation; and resilience.** Mitigation of risk and harm, adaptation to reduce the risks to the recovery and longer term resilience to prevent future risk from the pandemic.

We are already working on a focused and targeted recovery plan for the next 24 months, as a key link to our longer term ambitions outlined in the draft Programme for Government. We will publish more information about that soon. This is where we will look at the adaptations to how we work and socialise, and we will look for positives from the past year, such as our greater sense of community, innovations and new service models, increased walking, cycling and volunteering and opportunities to promote health and wellbeing connectedness.

3. HOW WE ARE PROTECTING AND SUPPORTING YOU

The Executive is committed to finding the most effective way of managing the transmission of COVID-19. While the nature of the virus and the new variants mean that some level of restrictions is likely in the future, we want to ensure this is kept to a minimum.

The Executive has established a COVID-19 Taskforce, which leads and co-ordinates its response to, and recovery from, the pandemic. The Taskforce brings together the many strands of the Executive's overall response to the pandemic, by joining up the work already taking place across government Departments, Local Government and public sector agencies.

We have asked the Taskforce to maintain a focus on individuals and families, as we know how important these are to you.

As we move forward in 2021, we are investing in a range of areas aimed at protecting and supporting you. These include:

A continued focus on the vaccination programme

Our COVID-19 vaccination programme began on the 8 December 2020 and by 28 February 2021, there had been 558,597 vaccine doses administered here. This is made up of 525,400 first doses and 33,197 second doses.

Our model for vaccine deployment has been designed to be pragmatic, agile and flexible. At present, there are two main delivery models: the 7 large regional vaccination centres operated by the 5 HSC Trusts and the primary care led model, which sees vaccine being administered at 321 GP Practices. In addition to this, the vaccine has also been administered in all 483 care homes to residents and staff, as well as to housebound patients by District Nurses working in partnership with GP Practices. Subject to vaccine supplies, we also intend to bring the network of community pharmacy stores into the programme to increase availability of the vaccine and ensure we maximize uptake rates.

Our vaccination programme is following the prioritisation list recommended by the Joint Committee on Vaccination and Immunisation (JCVI). JCVI has identified 9 priority groups, which are focused preventing COVID-19 mortality and protecting health and social care staff and systems. JCVI has also advised that the prioritisation for the rest of the adult population following the completion of

priority groups 1 to 9 should follow an age-based delivery model that will facilitate rapid vaccine deployment.

While the vaccination programme is dependent on the supply of vaccine, rapid progress has been made. By 17 February, the vaccine had been offered to those in priority groups 1 to 5. It is now being extended to those in priority group 6, which should be completed during March. By 26 February, all care homes had been visited to offer and deliver their first dose, and second doses of the vaccine.

As of 28 February, 525,400 had received their first dose of the vaccine. 96% of those aged 80 years and over had been vaccinated along with 91% of those aged between 75 and 79 years of age, 86% of those aged between 70 and 74 years of age and 70% of those aged 65-69 years of age.

Vaccines will protect most people from severe disease and will prevent many deaths. No vaccine is 100% effective and will not fully protect everyone. Not everyone will be vaccinated. The vaccine is currently not authorised for some individuals such as children and some people may not take up the offer of a vaccine. This means vaccines will not be 100% effective against symptomatic infection even in those vaccinated, and they will not be 100% effective against severe disease and death.

That is why a significant number of people could still be infected because they have not been vaccinated or because the vaccine does not work for them. This might mean that some measures to limit transmission are still needed for some time even after all adults have been offered a vaccine. This could include measures such as face coverings and social distancing, effective contact tracing through Test, Trace and Protect and further targeted asymptomatic testing. How many and for how long such precautions will be necessary after all adults have been offered the vaccine is still uncertain.

The vaccination programme is still in its early stages and to be sure of its success, we will continue to closely monitor its impact on serious illness and hospitalisations. On a positive note, there is emerging evidence of fewer outbreaks in care homes. The long term success of the programme depends on achieving high uptake rates in all sections of the adult community and therefore every effort will be made to ensure the programme continues to be rolled out rapidly.

A targeted expansion of asymptomatic testing

The Executive is participating in the Mass Population Testing Programme, which aims to substantially increase COVID-19 testing using Lateral Flow Devices (LFDs). The overall objective is to identify and halt transmission of the virus before it spreads. These new technologies make it possible to test at far greater scale, frequency and at speed. This is important as up to a third of people with COVID-19 we know are asymptomatic.

Testing people who are asymptomatic (i.e. do not have symptoms) is already underway using LFDs across a range of settings, including frontline healthcare workers, staff and pupils in schools and universities, staff and visitors in care homes, and one programme in industry.

We are working to expand this programme to strategically align with the testing already underway and will include:

- Targeted testing at a community level in those Local Government Districts with a persistently high prevalence and rate of community cases.
- Bringing further companies and sectors on-board the asymptomatic testing programme in a planned way, including National Critical Infrastructure and Emergency Services. Our plans are progressing well to bring Translink and the NI Fire and Rescue Service on-board.
- Building on momentum created in the food sector and aligning with the strategic prioritisation of the food sector by making testing available in a structured way across the agri-food and food and drink sectors.

Testing will continue to be available for everyone who has COVID-19 symptoms.

Contact tracing

Whilst we realise that contact tracing is not the complete solution for the many challenges that this pandemic poses to society, we know it is a vital part of our fight against the virus alongside the vaccination and asymptomatic testing programmes.

Test, Trace and Protect (TTP) will help support the easing of social and economic restrictions and keep people safe. As the number of cases fall and wider community transmission of the virus becomes less prevalent, TTP will become more important in identifying local outbreaks and responding rapidly to these and to new Variants of Concern.

Over the past year, the Contact Tracing Service has continued to evolve with professionally qualified healthcare staff leading on the tracing of positive cases and their contacts. This person centred approach will play a key role in the completion of risk assessments and managing what can often be very complex cases involving clusters and outbreaks. This aspect will become even more challenging in the time ahead with the emergence of new variants of the SARS-COV-2 virus. Contact tracing will also remain fully aligned with the expansion of whole genome sequencing capability here, as both will play an important role in managing future phases of the response.

The overall capacity of the Contact Tracing Service has also benefited from a refreshed approach to workforce planning, with a robust contingency plan now in place to ensure that the Service is well positioned to respond to future variations in case numbers. In addition, well-embedded innovative digital solutions including the digital self-trace, a texting service and the StopCOVID NI App, have all added significantly to its overall efficiency.

As we move forward in 2021, if you are contacted by the Contact Tracing Service, we ask that you engage fully with it. If you are asked to self-isolate, it is really important that you do so. This is perhaps one of the biggest contributions you can make to the ongoing efforts to curb the spread of the virus.

Behaviour to stay safe and protect each other

As restrictions are relaxed, everyone must continue to follow the advice to reduce transmission. Businesses must also continue to take necessary precautions as restrictions ease to remain COVID secure and protect employees and customers. Relevant departments, organisations and local government will continue to provide further advice on how businesses can improve fresh air flow in indoor workplaces and introduce regular testing to reduce risk where appropriate.

Protect yourself and others

- Wash your hands well and often.
- Wear a face covering when indoors or in an enclosed environment.
- Keep your distance from anyone outside your household or bubble and respect their space.
- Meet with others outdoors where possible.
- Limit the number of people you meet and how long you meet for.
- Open windows and allow the fresh air in.
- Download and use the StopCOVID NI app.
- Get a test immediately if you have symptoms.
- Self-isolate if you have symptoms, have a positive test, or had contact with someone with COVID-19.

Travel arrangements

The Executive will keep our travel arrangements and advice under review as we move through the Pathway and throughout our recovery phase. Travel and tourism remain very important to our economy, and we appreciate how much families are looking forward to their holidays when it is safe to do so.

The Executive wants to see a return to international travel when the time is right. The current arrangements reflect the general stay at home message, and our concerns about new variants arriving here. There are no international flights arriving here at the moment. We are developing arrangements for mandatory, managed self-isolation on arrival from countries to be determined by the Executive, where there are considerable concerns about new variants.

We continue to ask everyone to avoid travel unless absolutely necessary. For travel within the Common Travel Area, we ask people to self-isolate for 10 days on arrival. This does not apply to those who routinely travel for essential purposes such as work.

We ask everyone to continue to consider very carefully whether travel is necessary and to follow the travel advice on nidirect.

Prioritising funding for recovery

The Executive has been provided with additional funding, which is a key enabler to help manage the serious and detrimental effects of the pandemic.

The Executive has announced an ambitious set of financial supports and our aim is that these will assist everyone in our community. We are preparing to send vouchers to every home to help stimulate economic activity and protect local jobs. We are also providing additional assistance to those in most need, with additional fuel payments and free school meals during the holidays. We have supported business sectors and we have provided additional support to the arts and sports sectors and to charities.

Support for those on low incomes who are required to self-isolate either because they have tested positive or have been identified as being in contact with someone else who has tested positive will continue to be critical. We are looking at the barriers to self-isolation and are taking steps to overcome these.

Our aim is to ensure that these programmes will collectively minimise the need for future restrictions whilst also stimulating growth. The Executive will focus on taking forward measures that support a health, societal and economic recovery.

The need at that stage will include helping those most severely affected by the pandemic - including those with long term conditions from COVID-19; those who have lost business/employment; those whose lives were most affected by the need to shield or, in the case of the elderly, having to stay home as much as possible; and in health terms, taking forward the much needed transformation of the health service and bringing the other services that were reduced throughout the pandemic back up to speed.

As we move forward in 2021, alongside protecting you through vaccines and asymptomatic testing opportunities, we will increase our focus on a planned and targeted Recovery Programme.

4. OUR SOCIAL CONTRACT - A PARTNERSHIP APPROACH

The current stage of the pandemic means we are unable to return to a life as we knew it and it is likely the virus will remain as part of our lives. It is important that in order to keep people safe as we move forward in 2021, we will regularly and carefully consider what mitigations are required, and for how long, in order to reduce transmission.

To avoid putting significant restrictions in place again, there are opportunities for the Executive, for sectors and for individuals to work in partnership with each other. We have spoken before about our Social Contract. By this we mean working in partnership together to a common goal.

The Executive

In addition to the work on vaccines, asymptomatic testing and contact tracing outlined in Section 3, we are taking forward a number of important measures to help us live with COVID-19.

We will work in partnership with all sectors to ensure we have an approach which has an emphasis on mitigations and adaptations in order to build resilience which reduces the need for further restrictions and limits the impact of any that may be required in the future.

The Executive is committed to ensuring everyone affected financially by COVID-19 has access to adequate support.

Support for Individuals and Communities

To date, the Executive has provided over £300m to alleviate the hardship experienced by individuals and communities during the pandemic covering a wide range of needs.

These include:

- a non-repayable Discretionary Support Self-Isolation living expenses grant;
- the provision of more than 150,000 food boxes to those in need.

- interventions to support our homeless and protection for tenants.
- The social security system has also been made more flexible to relieve hardship.
- Communities have been supported through the provision of funding for the arts and culture; sports; the Community, Voluntary and Social Enterprise and charities sectors.
- Local councils received additional funds to help cover the loss of income normally generated through facilities such as leisure centres and theatres and to enable them to create safer shopping, visiting and working environments.

We are fortunate here to have an excellent network of community and voluntary sector organisations who we know have been working so hard through this pandemic. We will continue to work with them to take messaging into local areas in a way which works best for their communities.

Support for Businesses

The Executive has provided over £370m of lifeline support to over 30,000 businesses covering all sectors and occupations here.

In addition to the £25k and £10k Business Support Schemes for Large, Small and Micro businesses in 2020, the following schemes have been launched:

- Covid Restrictions Business Support Scheme, Part A and B;
- Newly Self-Employed Support Scheme;
- Wet Pubs Business Support Scheme;
- Rate relief and holidays;
- Limited Company Director's Support Scheme;
- Large Tourism and Hospitality Business Support Scheme; and
- Bed and Breakfast, Guest House and Guest Accommodation Scheme.

Through the Localised Restrictions Support Scheme, the Executive has provided £185m of much needed support for businesses which have been required to close or severely limit their operations. We have also allocated £25m to provide support for taxi drivers and private bus and coach operators.

We continue to look at the support available and engage with the business sectors to ensure we can address any new needs as they arise.

Adherence to Public Health Guidance

The most powerful tool we have at our disposal in the fight against this virus is our own behaviour and the actions each and every one of us take to protect ourselves and others.

Increasing the level of adherence to the public health guidance remains one of the most important factors in controlling the transmission of the virus and allowing us to return to more normal ways of living. We are therefore focusing on ways to make it easier for you to understand and adhere to the public health guidance.

The Executive is reviewing the information available to people who need a test or who need to self-isolate. We will make sure you have all the information you need if you have symptoms from booking a test right through to exiting from self-isolation. The COVID-19: Wrap Around guide will ensure your journey through the process is supported by having access to all the information you need to stay safe and keep others safe.

We want to work with you in a partnership to get us through this. We do not want to have to use penalties, but we recognise in some cases that is the only way we can achieve results to help protect us all. We will therefore continue to look at whether those with an enforcement role need additional fines and penalties available to them.

Our actions

Small steps have big impacts and when added together, the overall effect makes a significant difference. Being part of a community effort is something to be personally proud of, knowing our own individual actions through simple steps such as social distancing, hand hygiene and wearing face coverings can help save lives.

Where you can, you should wear a face covering. The majority of us are now doing that but there are those who genuinely cannot. We recognise this and have therefore placed exemptions in the regulations to help those in that position.

We should also be aware of the people who were previously shielding or have become clinically vulnerable since the first wave. We have listened to their worries and concerns about being outside again. Our streets, shops and other settings do not look the same and that may be hard to imagine for those of us who have not had to shield. We can all create a safer environment where everyone feels as safe as possible by taking the necessary steps to control the virus, for example by practicing social distancing and respecting everyone's space. That is another small but important step and we will all want to be part of that.

And, as we have said, if you are asked or required to self-isolate, you must do so. This is one of the most important ways we can help avoid more stringent restrictions which will impact you, your family and your community.

5. HOW WE WILL MAKE OUR DECISIONS

When we published our Approach to Decision Making last year, we explained how our decisions would be taken. The key building blocks outlined in that document have guided us well so far and will continue to do so.

From the outset our **strategic priorities** have remained constant:

- The health and wellbeing of our citizens;
- Our societal and community wellbeing; and
- Our economic wellbeing and revitalising the economy.

We reaffirm these priorities, with a particular emphasis on **people and families** as we know how important this is to everyone.

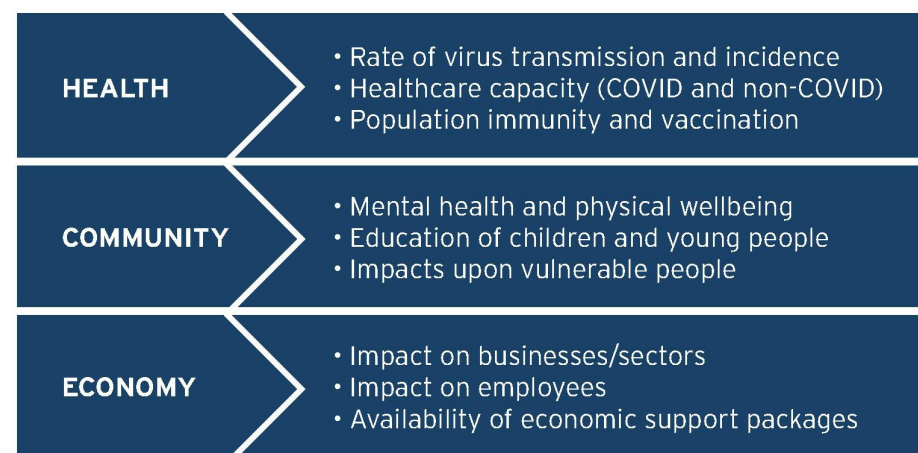
We will seek to identify those areas where greatest benefit and lowest risk would result from relaxation. We have learned from our experiences over the past year and we have refined the guiding principles that we will apply when considering whether a specific restriction or requirement should be retained, withdrawn or modified.

We are committed to implementing best practice and any learning from other jurisdictions as we move out of these restrictions. This will include working closely with colleagues across these islands to ensure that our collective approaches are informed by the evidence. We will seek to ensure we are aligned as far as possible, recognising that at times the course of the epidemic here will determine the most appropriate response and time frame.

In essence, we will consider four overarching principles:

- **Evidence-based.** Proposals for change or for the retention of a restriction or requirement should be informed by the best available evidence and analysis
- **Necessary.** A specific restriction or requirement should be retained only as long as it is considered necessary to provide the right public health response to the incidence or spread of COVID-19.
- **Proportionate.** The detrimental impacts on health, education, society and the economy that can reasonably be attributed to the restriction or requirement should be tolerated only as long as the risks associated with withdrawal or modification are assessed to be more severe.
- **Sustainable.** We need to build our communities and economy back up in a way that builds resilience, is long term focused, and viable.

In applying these principles, our decisions will be guided by range of factors, including:



We remain committed to a **staged approach** for the lifting of restrictions and further detail on this is set out in Section 6 below.

6. A STAGED APPROACH TO RELAXING RESTRICTIONS

The programmes outlined in Section 3 and the guiding principles in Section 5 provide the context within which future decisions on whether to relax certain restrictions will be taken.

As outlined above, even though we are making good progress with the vaccination and the asymptomatic testing programmes, we still need to regularly look at what measures are required in order to reduce transmission and keep people safe. No vaccine is 100% effective and not everyone will be vaccinated. Even after all adults have been offered a vaccine, this might mean that some measures to limit transmission are still needed for some time.

From the start, our approach to relaxing and putting restrictions in place has been informed by the data and expert advice. As we have said already, the Executive is clear that we want to avoid the cycle of repeated, periodic severe restrictions. It is our belief, and hope, that by working together we can avoid another block of restrictions such as that we are currently in. We must find ways to keep our society and economy running in a more steady and predictable pattern.

The Executive continues to prefer a pathway approach which is not locked into firm dates, although we appreciate fully that some sectors benefit from indicative dates to aid planning. Our experience over the summer period last year was that it was possible to bring some easements forward, while some unfortunately had to be delayed or not implemented.

We continue to favour a flexible approach over a rigid framework which might not be possible to meet. Equally, we understand entirely that people, families and businesses want maximum certainty and indeed hope.

So our commitment remains that we will explain our decisions, give as much notice as we can, engage with key sectors, balance the health, societal, family and economic impacts, and account for our decisions in the Assembly.

Learning from our experiences over the past year, we have updated the Pathway the Executive will follow in relaxing the restrictions, using the criteria set out in Section 5.

The Pathway outlines the phases through which we plan to reduce and remove the restrictions that are currently in place.

We have developed nine pathways each of which has five phases:



Home and Community



Education and Young People



Culture, Heritage and Entertainment



Sports and Leisure Activities



Worship and Ceremonies



Travel and Tourism



Work



Retail and Services



Hospitality

Progress through the phases will be based on a range of evidence and will seek to balance the benefits for us with the potential impact on the transmission of the virus. This means we may be in different phases across the nine pathways at any given time.

We will keep the suppression of the virus at the forefront of our considerations across all phases and beyond. If we move too quickly to relax restrictions, we will end up in a similar position to last autumn and the new year, with transmission rates rising fast and our health service often operating at or beyond maximum capacity. With the emergence of new variants, it is even more important that the approach is a cautious one.

Even though we are making rapid progress with the vaccination programme, we still need to regularly look at what measures are required in order to reduce transmission and keep people safe.

Keeping the Rt number below 1 and as low as possible, remains the most effective way of suppressing the virus on a longer term basis, including any new variants. This has been our commitment in the past and will continue to be so going forward.

Consideration of the linkages and alignment across the various pathways is critical to the success of this work. We know that sections of the hospitality industry are dependent on progress along the travel and tourism pathway for example. We will be mindful of the need to take decisions across a number of pathways to ensure maximum benefit to the sectors involved. We will also need to be mindful of that cumulative effect on the Rt number and other indicators as well as the potential for a further spike in cases, which may require the pausing of relaxations or the reintroduction of restrictions.

Whilst we have laid out the pathways in phases we can assure you that we will consider the pathways as a whole. Where it becomes clear that we can move certain relaxations forward in the process, to an earlier phase, we will do so. Our cautious approach will not result in us delaying progress where the evidence clearly shows we can move ahead. As always, it remains our collective intention that no restrictions will remain in place any longer than they are deemed necessary.

The Executive will therefore adopt one overall approach to relaxations, rather than treating them as a series of individual decisions.

7. HOW WE WILL MOVE ALONG THE PATHWAY

Moving along the Pathway will be a careful and considered process. We will look to take small, incremental steps within each phase and will allow time between each step of relaxations to monitor the impact of those choices on the spread of the virus and on our health system and then to respond accordingly.

Any relaxation of the current restrictions increases the risk of an increase in transmission. The sequencing of relaxations on the Pathway will therefore be informed by the risk that each activity poses.

Not all activities within each phase carry the same risk. Some are riskier than others. That is why we are adopting a cautious and incremental approach within each phase.

As we have seen already, the course of the pandemic has been highly unpredictable and is likely to be so for some time yet. That is why we do not favour setting dates at this stage. We want to prevent businesses, communities and sectors investing in planning for opening dates that may need to be flexible. It will require a minimum

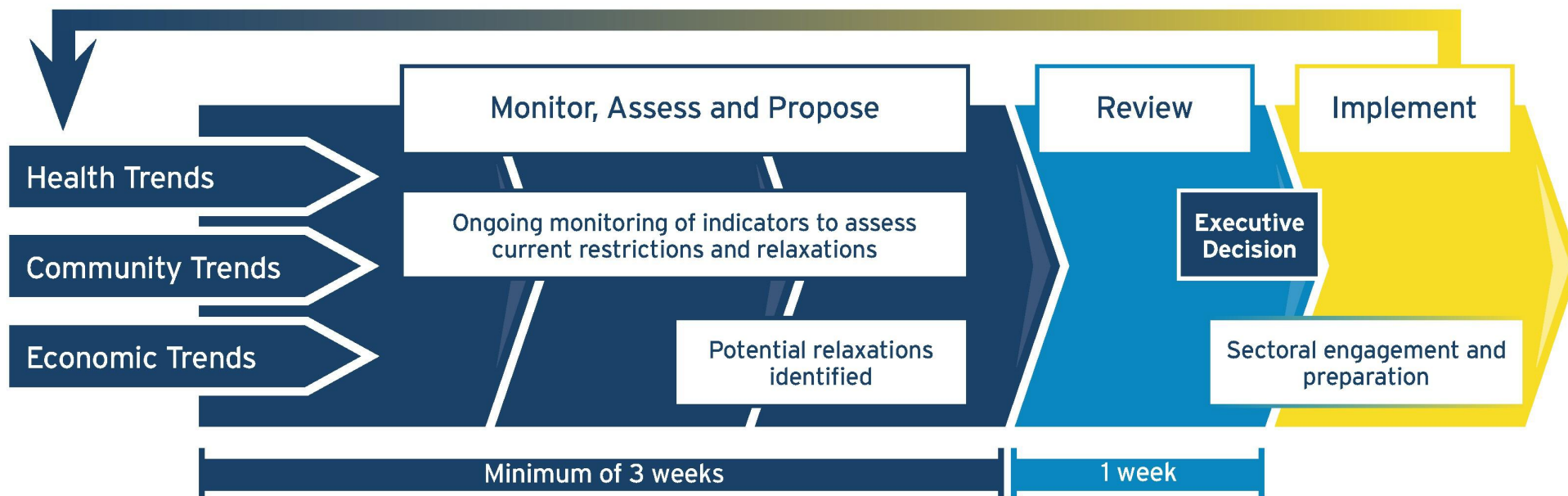
of three weeks to assess the impact of each significant relaxation before we decide on the next.

We are committed to giving you as much notice as possible, on a regular and ongoing basis, so that you can prepare for any changes we will be making. We will maintain a strong focus on relaxing restrictions as soon as it is possible and advising you of our forward plans.

We have therefore put in place a cycle of regular review and action to ensure we maintain momentum and progress along the Pathway.

We will continually monitor and assess the impact of relaxations and after taking each decision, we will pause and reflect on the health, societal and economic impacts before reviewing and moving to the next decision. In particular, we will look for linkages and consistency across each of the pathways, as not all sectors will move at the same pace.

The Executive's Approach to Easing Restrictions



We will continually monitor a broad range of data, information and statistical indicators to inform our decisions on whether to relax restrictions, or whether we need to return to strengthening them.

Health trends will be based on the World Health Organisation's conditions for adjusting restrictions and will include:

- Maintaining the Rt number below 1
- Health service capacity for COVID and non-COVID
- Test, trace and protect data and intelligence
- Population immunity, including vaccination programme progress
- Emergence of new variants

Community factors reflect the fact that we have all been living with the pandemic for some time, so we will be monitoring the impact of decisions on areas such as:

- Mental and physical health
- Isolation
- Resilience
- Education impact
- Equality impacts
- Homelessness placements and use of temporary accommodation

Economic data and indicators are critical to ensuring that decisions will have the best impact on starting the road to economic recovery, and will include:

- Overall and sectoral economic health (including "scarring")
- Labour market performance
- Viability and financial vulnerability of businesses
- Availability of job support and business support
- Number of benefit claimants

Our next steps

The Executive's next review of the Coronavirus Regulations will take place on 16 March and we do not expect the current picture to change significantly before Easter. We recently announced that there would be a phased return to school for some pupils with phase 1 from Monday 8 March and phase 2 from Monday 22 March. Subject to the levels of community transmission, the return of other pupils to school will commence immediately following the Easter holidays with the aim of all children returning to schools as soon as possible.

The Executive has committed to a four-week review cycle, where we will monitor the data on a range of health and societal impacts, before considering what relaxations can be made safely.

Our next consideration of potential relaxations will therefore take place in mid-April.

While the Executive will formally review and make decisions on restrictions every four weeks, our monitoring cycle provides us with the ability to move more rapidly on emerging priorities should the need arise before the next review point.

Guided by our health, scientific and policy advisors, each review cycle will consider what capacity there is for the Executive to make any relaxations across the nine different themes.

Our approach to further relaxations will likely focus on those activities which are of most benefit to our health and wellbeing, community and the economy and considered to result in a lower risk of increasing transmission. In practice, this is likely to include families first, outdoor activities/venues where it is possible to implement effective mitigations and practice social distancing, before those indoor activities/venues, where there is a higher risk of transmission.

Dates for Comprehensive Formal Reviews by the Executive:			
16 March	15 April	13 May	10 June



HOME AND COMMUNITY

LOCKDOWN

1 Lockdown Restrictions

- Contact limited to own household and support bubble
- Up to 6 from 2 households can meet outdoors not at a private dwelling

2 By the end of this Cautious First Steps phase...

- Up to 6 from 2 households can meet outdoors at a private dwelling
- Up to 10 from 2 households can meet outdoors not at a private dwelling
- Stay at Home messaging relaxed

3 By the end of this Gradual Easing phase...

- Up to 6 from 2 households can meet indoors in a private dwelling
- Increased numbers allowed for organised outdoor gatherings not at a private dwelling
- Restricted numbers allowed indoors not at a private dwelling

4 By the end of this Further Easing phase...

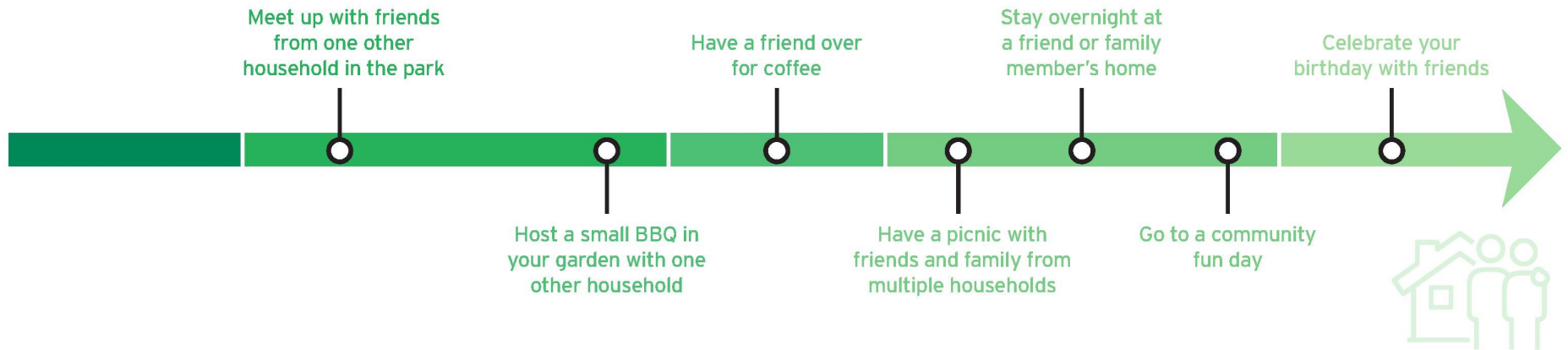
- Up to 10 from 2 households can meet indoors and outdoors in private dwellings
- No household limits on meeting outdoors not at a private dwelling
- Overnight stays allowed
- Increased numbers allowed indoors not at a private dwelling

5 Preparing for the Future

- Household limits lifted in private dwellings
- Organised outdoor gatherings are limited only by risk assessment and mitigations

RELAXATIONS

EXAMPLES OF WHAT THIS MIGHT MEAN FOR YOU





EDUCATION AND YOUNG PEOPLE

LOCKDOWN

1 Lockdown Restrictions

- School buildings closed except for vulnerable and key workers' children
- HE & FE students and apprentices essential face-to-face learning permitted
- Special schools, EOTAS and childcare open
- Targeted youth services and interventions

2 By the end of this Cautious First Steps phase...

- Partial return to classroom teaching
- Remote and online learning remains an option
- Partial return to practical face-to-face learning for FE students and apprentices
- Partial re-opening of generic youth services

3 By the end of this Gradual Easing phase...

- Full return to classroom teaching for schools
- Wider range of outdoor learning has resumed
- Extended Schools activity has resumed
- Further re-opening of generic youth services

4 By the end of this Further Easing phase...

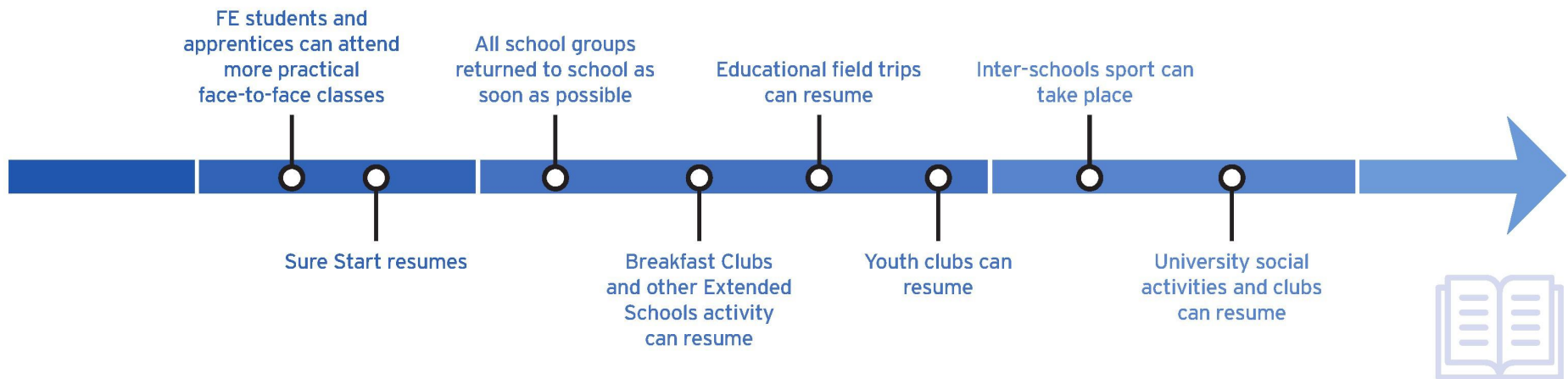
- Increased face-to-face teaching for HE & FE students, and apprentices
- Inter-schools sport allowed
- School clubs, FE colleges & university student extracurricular and support activities and youth services resumed

5 Preparing for the Future

- FE colleges and universities full return to face-to-face teaching
- Spectators allowed at school performance events

RELAXATIONS

EXAMPLES OF WHAT THIS MIGHT MEAN FOR YOU





CULTURE, HERITAGE AND ENTERTAINMENT

LOCKDOWN

1 Lockdown Restrictions

- Indoor and some outdoor visitor attractions closed
- All indoor seated venues closed
- Theatres and concert venues open for rehearsal and recording

2 By the end of this Cautious First Steps phase...

- All outdoor visitor attractions reopen

3 By the end of this Gradual Easing phase...

- Indoor visitor attractions, including heritage sites reopen
- Libraries reopen
- Low-risk activities including organised rehearsal and practise can take place

4 By the end of this Further Easing phase...

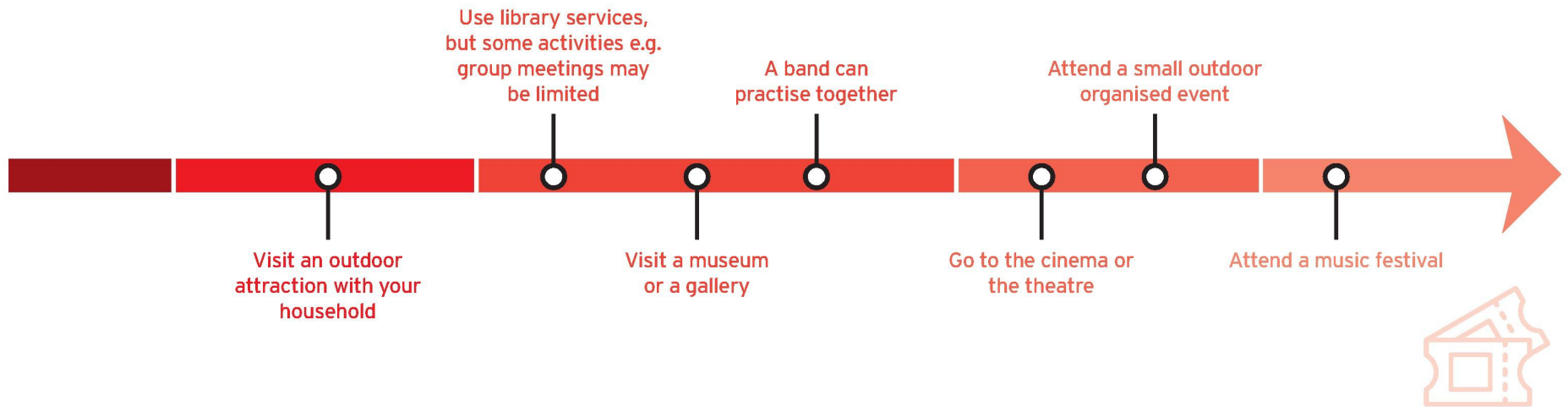
- Seated venues, including theatres, concert venues and cinemas reopen
- Amateur and youth performance activity can take place, with mitigations
- Outdoor organised events can take place, with limited numbers

5 Preparing for the Future

- Larger outdoor organised events, concerts and festivals can take place

RELAXATIONS

EXAMPLES OF WHAT THIS MIGHT MEAN FOR YOU





SPORTS AND LEISURE ACTIVITIES

LOCKDOWN

1 Lockdown Restrictions

- Outdoor exercise with own household or one other person - stay in local area
- Training and competition for elite athletes permitted

2 By the end of this Cautious First Steps phase...

- Outdoor sports facilities re-open for training and organised group activities
- Outdoor competitive sport can resume with no spectators
- Outdoor sport for children can resume with accompanying responsible adults allowed to attend

3 By the end of this Gradual Easing phase...

- Leisure centres and all indoor sports facilities reopen, including swimming pools and gyms
- Indoor group activities and classes resume
- Leisure activity venues reopen, including soft play
- Indoor activities for children can resume with accompanying responsible adults allowed to attend

4 By the end of this Further Easing phase...

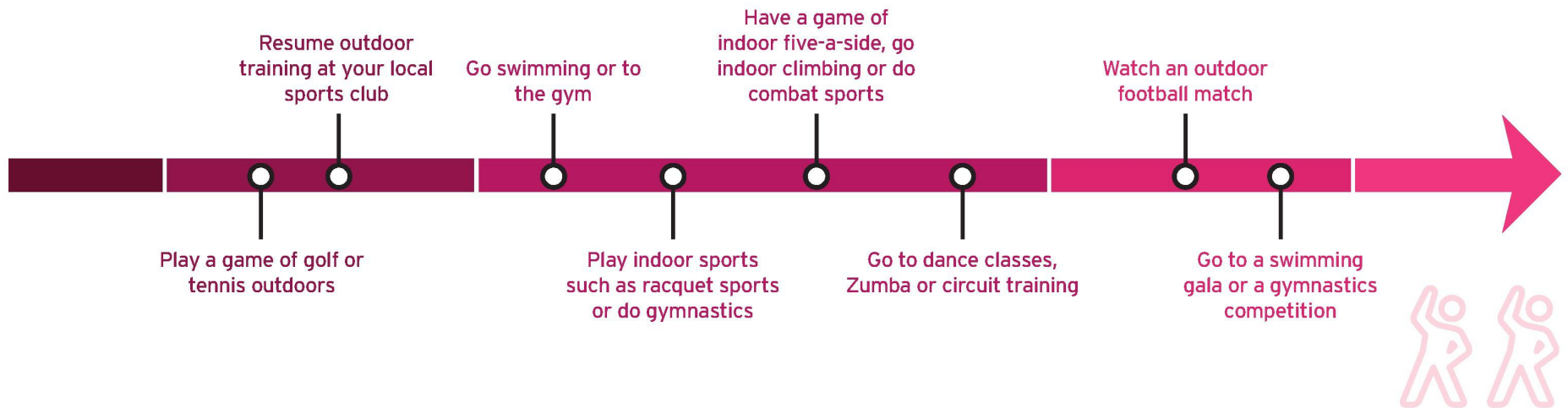
- Limited number of outdoor spectators allowed
- Limited number of indoor spectators allowed

5 Preparing for the Future

- Further outdoor spectators allowed
- Further indoor spectators allowed

RELAXATIONS

EXAMPLES OF WHAT THIS MIGHT MEAN FOR YOU





WORSHIP AND CEREMONIES

LOCKDOWN

1 Lockdown Restrictions

- 25 guest limit at civil partnerships, marriages and funerals
- Pre- and post-gatherings not permitted

2 By the end of this Cautious First Steps phase...

- Return to services in places of worship with a risk assessment
- Increased numbers at indoor and outdoor civil partnerships, marriages and funerals with a risk assessment

3 By the end of this Gradual Easing phase...

- Receptions can take place with mitigations and limited numbers
- Pre- and post-funeral gatherings can take place, with mitigations and limited numbers

4 By the end of this Further Easing phase...

- No upper limit on numbers for pre- and post-gatherings for civil partnerships, marriages and funerals - determined by venue risk assessment
- Limited live music at receptions

5 Preparing for the Future

- Further mitigations relaxed for pre- and post-gatherings for civil partnerships, marriages and funerals
- Live music, entertainment and dancing at reception

RELAXATIONS

EXAMPLES OF WHAT THIS MIGHT MEAN FOR YOU





TRAVEL AND TOURISM

LOCKDOWN

1 Lockdown Restrictions

- Public transport with safety measures in place
- All tourist accommodation closed, with exceptions
- Essential travel only

2 By the end of this Cautious First Steps phase...

- Public transport capacity increases in line with demand, within limits of social distancing requirements

3 By the end of this Gradual Easing phase...

- Caravan sites open, but shared facilities remain closed
- Hotels, guest houses and B&Bs reopen, with mitigations
- Public transport returns to full service, with mitigations

4 By the end of this Further Easing phase...

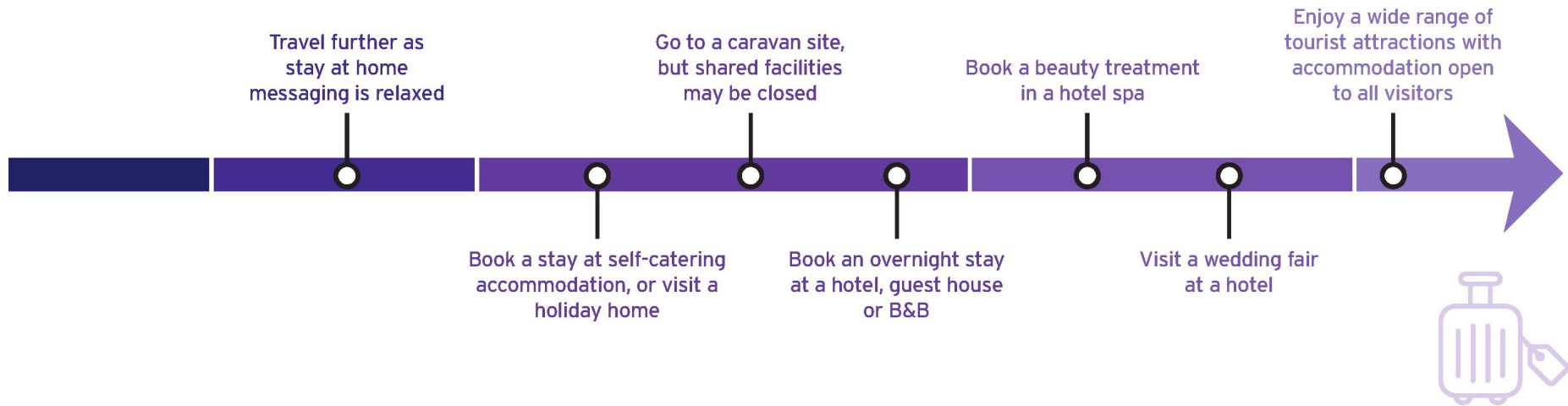
- Hostels, bunkhouses, campsites and other accommodation with shared facilities open
- Campus accommodation for tourism purposes open
- Hotels can offer wider range of services beyond accommodation & meals

5 Preparing for the Future

- Public transport running at full service with reduced mitigations
- Preparing for the full return of leisure travel

RELAXATIONS

EXAMPLES OF WHAT THIS MIGHT MEAN FOR YOU





WORK

LOCKDOWN

1 Lockdown Restrictions

- Remote working is the default position
- Those who cannot work from home can attend work

2 By the end of this Cautious First Steps phase...

- Relaxation of restrictions on workplace attendance
- Working from home where possible remains recommended approach

3 By the end of this Gradual Easing phase...

- Phased return to on-site work and office spaces
- Seminars and meetings can take place

4 By the end of this Further Easing phase...

- Revised risk assessments allow more workplaces to reopen
- Work conferences can resume

5 Preparing for the Future

- Workplaces fully reopen

RELAXATIONS

EXAMPLES OF WHAT THIS MIGHT MEAN FOR YOU





RETAIL AND SERVICES

LOCKDOWN

RELAXATIONS

1 Lockdown Restrictions

- Essential retail only
- Non-essential retail is closed, including Click & Collect
- All close contact services closed
- Curfew on alcohol off-sales

2 By the end of this Cautious First Steps phase...

- Click & Collect for non-essential retail allowed
- Driving lessons and tests can resume

3 By the end of this Gradual Easing phase...

- All non-essential retail now open
- Off-sales curfews lifted
- Close contact services can resume, with mitigations

4 By the end of this Further Easing phase...

- All close contact services open without appointments, with remaining mitigations
- Increased in-store capacity in all retail

5 Preparing for the Future

- All retail and close contact services open with reduced mitigations

EXAMPLES OF WHAT THIS MIGHT MEAN FOR YOU





LOCKDOWN

1 Lockdown Restrictions

- All hospitality closed, except for takeaway sales
- 11pm takeaway curfew

2 By the end of this Cautious First Steps phase...

- Curfews lifted on takeaway
- Premises where alcohol cannot be consumed open with table service, 6 people from 2 households

3 By the end of this Gradual Easing phase...

- Premises where alcohol can be consumed, excluding wet pubs, open with table service, 6 people from 2 households

4 By the end of this Further Easing phase...

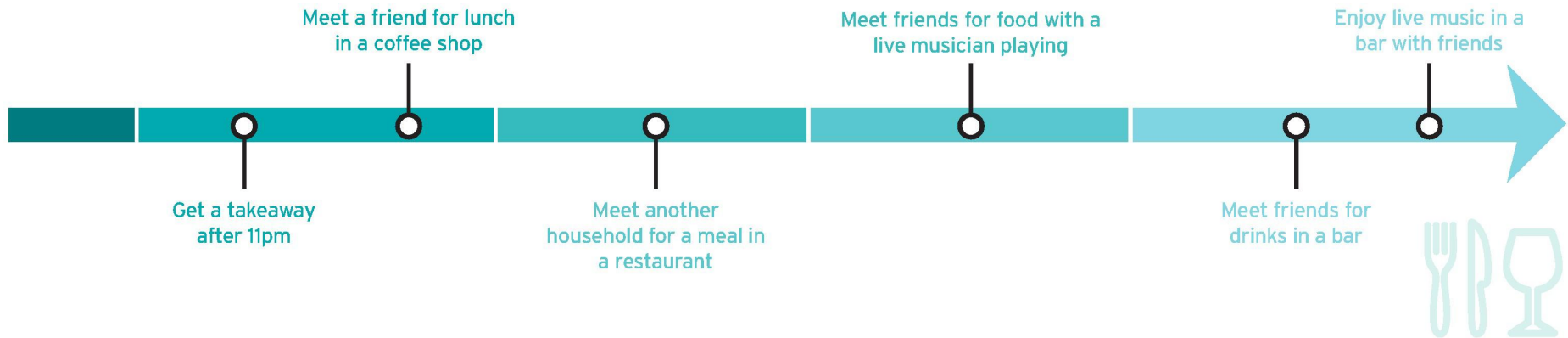
- Wet pubs open with table service, 6 people from 2 households
- Limited entertainment relaxations

5 Preparing for the Future

- Bar service permitted in wet pubs
- '6 from any' relaxed
- Live entertainment in hospitality venues
- Nightclubs open

RELAXATIONS

EXAMPLES OF WHAT THIS MIGHT MEAN FOR YOU



8. IN CLOSING

We want everyone to minimize the risk by following the public health advice.

That means:



Limiting social contacts;



Maintaining social distancing;



Washing your hands well and often;



Wearing face coverings; and



Using the StopCovidNI app.

When possible, meet in a well-ventilated area.

These measures will be in place for some time and will be the last to be lifted.

If you feel unwell, self-isolate immediately and book a test.

The symptoms include:



A high temperature



A new, continuous cough



A loss or change to your sense of smell or taste

You can access the PHA symptom checker here:
covid-19.hscni.net/symptoms

Advice and Support

Get the most up-to-date information on any government services affected by coronavirus at: nidirect.gov.uk/coronavirus

COVID-19 Community Helpline

If you have been advised by your GP to 'shield', are an older person or vulnerable, you can contact the freephone COVID-19 Community Helpline. You will get advice and access to lots of support services, including food, medication or emotional support.

- Freephone: **0808 802 0020**
(7 days per week, 9am-5pm)
- Email: Covid19@adviceni.net
- Text: **ACTION** to **81025**
- On line: **Complete a form on the Advice NI Website**

Benefits

If you currently receive benefits, you will continue to receive your payments and are excused from signing. If your employment has been affected by coronavirus, find out about benefits including Universal Credit at: nidirect.gov.uk/coronavirus

Warm, Well and Connected

More information on Warm, Well, Connected programmes is available on Healthy Living Centre Alliance website.

Rural Support

For help and support for farmers and rural families go to: ruralsupport.org.uk or freephone **0800 138 1678** or **028 2177 2100** at your local rate.

Healthy Living Alliance **028 90631 0346**

Lifeline

If you or someone you know is in distress or despair Lifeline are there to help 24/7 on freephone **0808 808 8000**. And visit mindingyourhead.info for more advice on mental health.

Support for Businesses and Employees

nibusinessinfo.co.uk

Get business support, advice and guidance including financial support schemes, policy information and help with managing current challenges at: nibusinessinfo.co.uk/coronavirus

Invest NI

Find business continuity programmes, advice and support covering strategy, finance, people, operations and innovation at: investni.com/covid19response

Medical Information and Advice

More help and advice is available from these organisations.

Department of Health

Download the StopCOVID NI App for the latest information and advice. Search for StopCOVID NI in your app store.

NHS

You can ring **NHS 111** for information or advice and they will help you decide if you need to contact your GP.

Public Health Agency

Get the latest health information and advice at: pha.site/coronavirus