

FROM THE OFFICE OF THE MINISTER
Diane Dodds MLA



From: Diane Dodds MLA
Minister for the Economy

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To: Robin Swann MLA
Minister of Health

POST CHRISTMAS RESTRICTIONS

Thank you for your draft Executive paper of 17 December 2020 regarding the above.

I fully recognise the challenges faced by the health sector, the sterling job done in getting us through the pandemic and the need for you to consider the emerging situation. However, you will understand that it is imperative that papers of the nature and significance be circulated as early as possible to allow full consideration of their wide impact. In addition, I note the absence of one of the annexes referred to in the paper and would hope the absence does not inhibit consideration of the existing paper.

However, the paper is silent on a number of matters:

- the financial requirements and package of supports mechanisms required to be introduced to support the businesses likely to be impacted;
- The introduction of restrictions without the regulations and support packages in place to inform businesses in their planning has been a frequent source of criticism of the Executive;
- There has been no consideration of any alternate approach to dealing with the rise in transmission nor any consideration of the principles I corresponded to the Executive previously; and
- There is little scientific data to link the retail sector to specific transmission of the virus – there is a need for the data behind these proposals to be clearly articulated and demonstrated, I note your reference to the Non Pharmaceutical Interventions Paper presented to the Executive on 24 September.

I would encourage you to revisit the issue of click & collect. DfE officials have engaged with the retail sector and environmental health officers within the councils. I would suggest that the previous guidance provided can be tightened by introducing the following procedures:

Non – essential businesses operating click & collect services must:

- Only provide the service to those who have purchased and pre- paid items prior to arriving at the shop to collect the item(s);

- No access to the shop is permitted – the service can only be provided at the designated point for collection and the consumer must remain outside the premises;
- No payment transactions are permitted – the click & collect is a collection service only;
- Collection must be within allocated time slot; and
- No browsing of products or display of goods is permitted.

I consider the introduction of these additional requirements will reduce queueing and interactions between consumers and retail staff thereby enhancing their protection and maximising their safety.

I recognise that many smaller traders may not have access to online catalogues or the facility to accept payment and my officials will engage with the sector about these issues.

In addition I would suggest that our previous experience indicates that mobile phone stores including the repair of mobile phones should remain open. The mobile phone is a critical tool not only in supporting the Test Trace, Protect App and in addressing the social isolation and loneliness that we recognise the pandemic has generated, and in particular at this time of the year. I can provide further information if required.

Once again Tourism and hospitality businesses are already finding the current restriction period difficult. If we decide to close these businesses for 6 weeks we must fund them for 6 weeks. It has been an incredibly difficult year during which the tourism and hospitality industry has not been able to generate the revenue needed to see it through the Winter and into the Spring.

If a 6 week lockdown is agreed by the Executive, we need to use the 6 weeks to somehow identify how we re-open businesses on a sustained basis, and without the need for repeated circuit breakers and lockdowns. That is simply not sustainable.

Finally we have to consider the potential that the restrictions may have on Brexit preparations.

I am concerned about NI businesses readiness for the end of the EU exit transition period. There are a number of factors which will determine the scale of any disruption in January and further into 2021 including:

- the extent to which businesses have stockpiled in anticipation of disruption;
- GB to NI goods movement issues for example if customs paperwork is not completed correctly or if tariffs are applied to those businesses which haven't registered with the UK Trader Scheme
- Unforeseen issues with new UK Gov IT systems such as Trader Support Service and Goods Vehicle Movement Service.
- GB businesses ceasing to supply the NI market or placing conditions on sale to NI that the NI business will be responsible for transport to NI and all customs processes.

Issues arising to goods moving from GB could see sudden, significant and costly disruption to supply chains to NI businesses, particularly smaller entities, and ultimately consumers.

Despite the efforts of all departments we cannot prepare all businesses with the time, resource and information available. This is particularly true given the late clarity on a number of key issues for GB to NI trade.

These are the risks which could have the most immediate impact on our economy and society. I am concerned that any COVID restrictions could have the potential to exacerbate or compound these issues.

DfE intend to continue to support businesses to prepare with the resources of my Department and ALBs. This work will continue throughout the Christmas period and into the New Year.

I would ask that we consider the potential for any restrictions relating to COVID to compound the impacts which many of our businesses will undoubtedly experience arising from changes to the trading environment at the end of the transition period. This will also need to be reflected in any support packages we bring forward.

The proposed restrictions will have a detrimental impact on our already beleaguered local businesses. As an Executive we must that our response of cohesive, coordinated and commensurate. I would welcome discussions with the Finance Minister on the funding available for a further tranche of business support. The requirements will be depend on the length and severity of the restrictions.

I am copying this to the Attorney General, Departmental Solicitor's Office, First Legislative Counsel and to Executive Secretariat.

Yours sincerely

Personal Data

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Minister for the Economy