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**MEMORANDUM E (20) 203 (C)**

**FROM: First Minister and deputy First Minister**

**TO: Executive**

**DATE 3 September 2020**

**FINAL EXECUTIVE PAPER: COVID 19 – POTENTIAL EASEMENTS OF RESTRICTIONS**

**Introduction**

This paper should be read in conjunction with the updates from the Health Minister, and the TEO paper on powers and procedures etc. In line with the Executive's agreed approach of taking a cautious, step by step approach to the easing of restrictions and the principle of keeping restrictions in place only as long as is necessary, this paper makes proposals on the following:

- Pubs and bars etc, private members clubs serving alcohol only indoors (wet pubs);
- Soft play areas;
- Theatres and concert halls for seated live audience events; and
- Conference venues

**Context**

2. The Executive will be updated on the current position with positive Covid 19 cases, and the R values. The Executive will consider steps which are proposed for offences, and restrictions aimed at protecting responsible hospitality. Further work is proposed on face coverings.

3. Departments have submitted templates on remaining restrictions and these are considered in detail in Annex A. Some easements are possible this week. The

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Executive will want to consider the wider benefits of enabling specific easements for societal, health and economic reasons in a situation where positive case numbers are a concern. If the Executive is content to proceed with the proposals below, communications will be important so as to not dilute the essential public messaging about risk and the need for ongoing adherence to the basics.

4. The key consideration is the need to keep restrictions under review and to make easements as soon as it is possible to do so, while having a clear message to the public.

### **Pubs, bars etc, and private members clubs serving alcohol indoors**

5. The Executive has considered previously. There is no change in CSA's risk assessment and reopening for this sector is not recommended at this time. There are options available such as setting a new indicative date, awaiting to assess the impact of the restrictions to be put in place for responsible hospitality proposed in the TEO paper, and/or exploring possibilities for a specific support package. It is recommended that the Executive discusses and agrees the next steps.

### **Soft play areas**

6. This is a higher risk sector, with media reporting of financial distress, and some potential implications for schools. The risk assessment remains as before and CSA would wish to understand the mitigations in more detail. Draft guidance has been prepared which sets out mitigations based on preparations in other jurisdictions, which has been reviewed by the industry representatives. It is recommended that an indicative date is set and communicated. The sector is open in Wales and England, and Scotland has indicated 14 September. Subject to any further work being required on guidance and Executive endorsement on 10 September, an indicative date of 14 September is proposed.

### **Conferences and exhibitions**

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7. Regulations currently prevent conference facilities opening including those which take place at hotels. The restriction is based on the venue rather than the activity which means that some venues will be able to host, whereas traditional conference venues are prevented from hosting less riskier events. The attached risk assessment would support some easements, short of full conferences. DfE officials are working on guidance. The proposed date is 14 September.

### **Theatres and concert halls**

8. Theatres and concert halls are already open for the purpose of rehearsals and recordings without live audiences. The proposal is for this sector to open for live audiences, providing social distancing measures can be put in place. This is supported by CSA provided that it does not engage standing audiences with live music. A new opening date would need to be agreed as this was previously proposed for 1 September, but not ratified by the Executive. The main venues have cancelled most of their Autumn schedule and issues of financial viability remain to be resolved. An enabling opening date of 14 September would be consistent with other proposed easements. If this sector is to reopen on an enabling basis, officials will need to cross refer to the TEO paper on serving alcohol at relevant venues. There is a need to avoid bars in this sector being treated as wet bars if this is not permitted more generally. Officials will be asked to reconcile.

### **Communications**

9. Any easements agreed by the Executive will need to be assessed on their merits but also in the context of concern about the number of positive test cases. An overall communications approach will be essential, which subject to Executive approval will include a blend of restrictions and easements and this will require a very clear message about risk and actions needed to mitigate risk while enabling easements at the same time.

### **Recommendations**

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10. The Executive is invited to:

- assess the proposals at Annex A;
- discuss and agree next steps for “wet pubs”;
- agree and communicate an opening date of 14 September for soft play areas, subject to consideration of mitigations and ratification by the Executive on 10 September, which may involve a further pause if needed;
- agree and communicate that conference facilities may open on 14 September for limited activities, and that guidance will be prepared; and
- theatres and concert halls will be enabled to open from 14 September in line with other easements. Officials will be asked to reconcile arrangements for hospitality and serving of alcohol.

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

**Michelle O’Neill MLA**  
**deputy First Minister**

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