

Departmental Comments provided by: June Ingram

- The Minister for Health's paper seeks consideration of the need for urgent restrictions in additional areas of Northern Ireland.
- It details a substantial increase in COVID cases over the weekend, with 222 reported on Saturday and 176 on Sunday.
- This has been associated with increases in Belfast and neighbouring postcodes and rapid increases in areas contiguous with border areas of ROI where significantly increased numbers have also been reported (Louth and Donegal).
- The paper identifies a marked variation in COVID cases in Local Government Districts, with Causeway Coast and Glens the lowest and substantial increases in Armagh City, Banbridge and Craigavon, Newry, Mourne & Down, and Belfast in spite of the local restrictions introduced there.
- Test, trace and protect has not identified significant clusters to explain the high incidence in any of these areas – cases are mainly household or community (unknown) transmission.
- The Minister identifies a number of other postcodes that could easily reach an incidence of 80 in the next couple of days.
- The Minister has identified the following recommendations:
 - (i) That local restrictions should be extended as soon as possible to those postcodes with an incidence over 80/100k over the last seven days, and to neighbouring postcodes which are close to 80. This would include

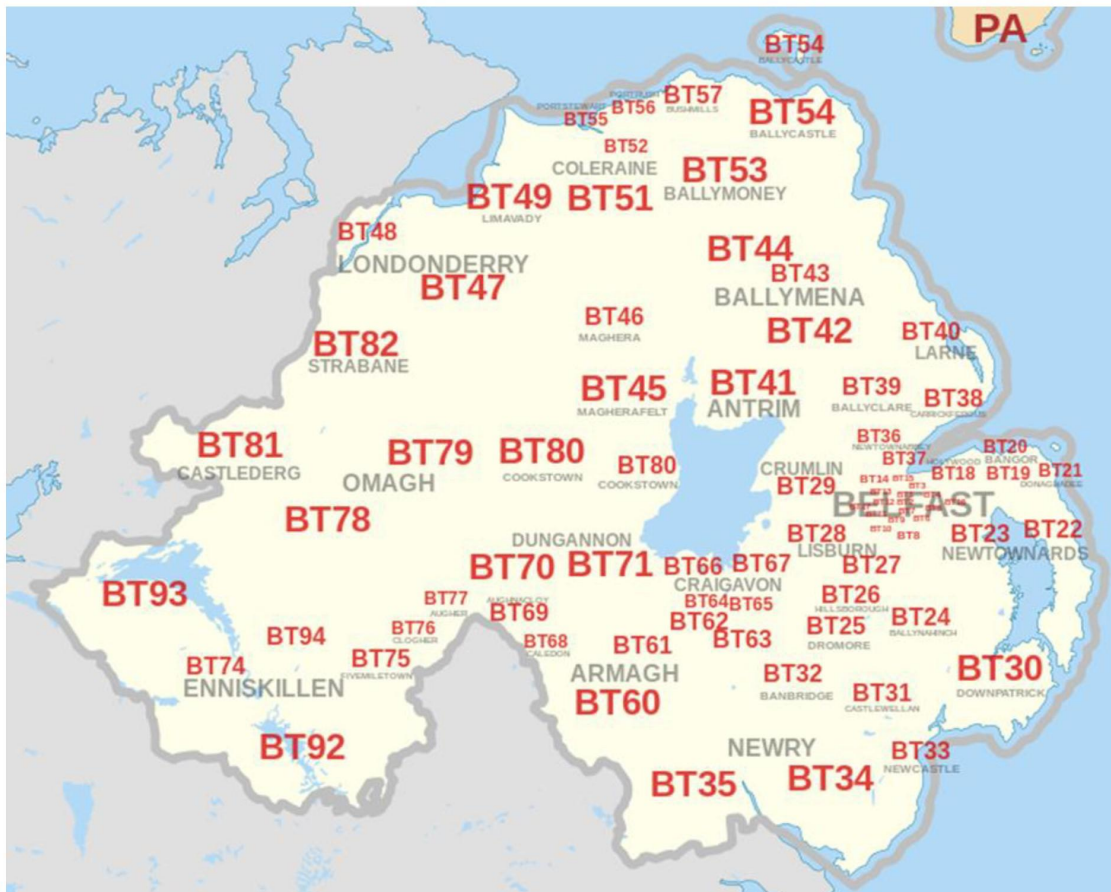
the following postcodes: BTs 25, 34, 48, 60, 62, 68, 82, 92; or

- (ii) That local restrictions should be extended to the following postcodes (to include those postcodes above plus some neighbouring areas at high risk – see map in Annex A) namely BTs 25, 34-35, 48, 60-68, 81-82, 92-93; or
- (iii) That current local restrictions are applied NI wide; and
- (iv) That this should be accompanied by strong messaging about the possible need to apply further local restrictions if numbers continue to arise.

- The localised restrictions introduced by the Executive are:
 - No mixing of households in private dwellings, with exemptions for: bubbling with one other household; caring responsibilities including childcare; essential maintenance, supported living arrangements; visits required for legal or medical purposes; or marriage or civil partnerships where one partner is terminally ill;
 - No more than six people to gather in a private garden from no more than two households;
 - Anyone living in these areas is asked to avoid unnecessary travel outside the restricted areas;
 - Care homes and hospitals in these areas will be advised to significantly curtail visits as soon as practicable. One member of a family will be permitted a visit once a week while these localised restrictions apply. More frequent visits may be permitted in exceptional circumstances, including palliative care facilities and those receiving end of life care.
 - Medically vulnerable and older people living in these areas are asked to be particularly careful in following the advice on limiting household contacts, social distancing, hand washing and wearing a face covering, given the local levels of Covid-19.
- The use of postcodes as a delineation has caused anomalies in some instances with restrictions applying in one part of a town (e.g. Armagh & Ballymena) and introducing arbitrary divisions within communities.

- The guidance relating to travel may leave those attempting to enforce it in a highly subjective position as the definition of essential travel will ultimately be open to all sorts of subjective interpretations.
- The guidance to avoid all but essential travel will in effect close hospitality.
- The paper does not identify or quantify any potential recommendations for vulnerable groups or those previously shielding, any provisional assessment of the current localised restrictions.
- Nor does it reference essential or key workers or closure of specific sectors in the paper.

Annex A



FROM: DIANE DODDS MLA

Our Ref:
Your Ref: E (20) 218 (C)

DATE: September 2020

TO: Robin Swann MLA

Need for urgent restrictions in additional areas

Thank you for your Executive paper of 21 September 2020 regarding the above.

I have noted the contents of the paper and the recommendations therein.

I would be grateful for a further assessment of the continued and expanded use of postcodes as a delineation which has caused already anomalies in some instances with restrictions applying in one part of a town (e.g. Armagh & Ballymena) and introducing arbitrary divisions within communities.

I am also concerned about the nature of the guidance relating to travel which may leave those attempting to enforce it in a highly subjective position as the definition of necessary and unnecessary travel will ultimately be open to all sorts of subjective interpretations. It is absolutely essential that in the messaging, the Executive is clear that Restrictions are not being imposed on the hospitality and retail sectors or wider economy.

I am mindful of the delicate balancing required in continuing to develop and implement restrictions including the need to minimise the impact on the economy. It would be very helpful to have a provisional assessment of the current localised restrictions and the effectiveness of the related communications, including in relation to travel and those in the most vulnerable groups.

In addition, it is vital that we have clarity of how long we will allow the current restrictions to be in place to measure their impact, before determining whether additional restrictions are necessary.

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

DIANE DODDS MLA