

## COVID 19 – GOVERNANCE FOR AUTUMN AND WINTER

### Context

The rise in positive test numbers has shifted the effort from lifting restrictions back towards restrictions being required. Some decisions and actions have been taken, of necessity, very quickly, and it would be timely to agree governance arrangements for the coming months on the basis that we may be in this space for some time.

2. This is an entirely new situation:

- The first restrictions were wholesale, designed by UKG and adopted on a DA basis, had no degree of localisation and were supported with a significant central finance arrangement; and
- Public sentiment and business reaction will also be different and the impacts will be seen concurrent with other events during Autumn and Winter.

### Executive decision making to date

3. The Executive has been in a number of phases. There was no clear cut off point between phases and there was some overlap. In summary:

#### *Response and restrictions (1)*

- The initial response phase was stood up in the form of CCGNI meeting daily, reducing in frequency and formally closing;
- Restrictions on individuals and businesses were via a mix of regulations and guidance. The first Regulations took effect on 27 March;
- During the response phase, the Executive met initially daily from, reducing in frequency to once per week;
- In this phase, the focus was on the emergency response informed by the daily sitrep;
- The Executive worked to its Covid 19 Strategy and Action Plan, which contained planning assumptions and the status of the activities. The planning assumptions were last updated on 15 May;
- A Point in Time Review was conducted on 28 May and considered by the Executive on 4 June, which concluded that the remaining response activities could be rolled into other work;
- Crucially, the Executive published its Approach to Decision Making on 12 May.

#### *Relaxations (1)*

- The first restrictions were lifted on [a];
- Between [b] and [c], a total of [number of regulations] were made in response to Executive decisions to ease restrictions;
- Each easement was in line with the Approach to Decision Making, and involved Departments recommending easements in a template designed by DoH. Each request

was risk assessed by CMO and CSA, and recommendations then submitted to the Executive by TEO;

- The optimum point in time for the prevalence of the virus and the maximum easements being in place was on 10 August;
- In tandem with lifting restrictions, the Executive approved additional mitigations to control the virus in the form of face coverings. These were first required on public transport, then in retail, and finally in other settings such as banks.

#### *Restrictions (2)*

- The return to restrictions began on [e] with the introduction of restrictions in domestic settings in certain post code areas. Predominately Belfast, parts of Lisburn and Ballymena;
- The restrictions on domestic settings were rolled out to all areas on [f];
- Specific restrictions for hospitality were put in place on [g], albeit with the sector then able to open on a fuller basis (ie wet pubs could now open);
- Further restrictions were put in place on [h] to require hospitality settings to close at 11pm. These took effect on [h];
- Restrictions were put in place in Derry and Strabane on [i];
- A similar package of restrictions rolled out across all council areas took effect on 16 October. These will remain in place until 14 November and can be reviewed. Any decision in respect of these restrictions will require a decision of the Executive.

4. This reflects the position from 16 October until 14 November and the strategic aim is to break the chain of transmission to create headroom for HSC given the rising positive test numbers, hospitalisations, ICU occupancy and the age demographics. Other jurisdictions have packages of measures in place and the arrangements here are specific. No two jurisdictions across the Islands have exactly the same measures, and regional approaches are being developed in England. There is no formal status for this four week phase but the terms circuit break or fire break have been used. Care is needed with the terminology as each jurisdiction has different interpretations of those terms. Lockdown should also be avoided as a term. The remainder of this paper refers to a **Restrictions Event** for shorthand.

5. Some jurisdictions have developed tiered approaches, through which decisions move up and down a scale depending on prevailing circumstances. A three tier model is under consideration here. A decision is awaited on whether to have (and then if so publish) a tiered approach for here.

#### **Executive decision making going forward**

6. The Executive will require an **Exit strategy**, and officials are working on the basis of an immediate 7 week planning horizon:

- **Week 1, w/b 12 October:** decisions, communications and regulations made for the four week restrictions package (Restrictions Event);
- **Weeks 2 and 3, w/b 19 October:** officials to develop **options for Exit Strategies**. FM and dFM have asked for a paper to go to the Executive on 29 October. The paper will therefore need to be submitted on Tuesday 27 October for agreement and circulation to Executive colleagues. It is considered unlikely that the Executive will have sufficient data at the two week period to select an option, but it will be useful if options are narrowed;
- **Weeks 4 and 5, w/b 2 November:** officials will refine the options in line with the emerging data, to be ready for replacement restrictions to take immediate effect at the end of the four week period. This will require **an Executive decision** in the week beginning 9 November and a **robust handling and engagement plan**, and **ramped up communications for individuals and citizens**. It may be necessary to use the Tuesday Executive for the decision as Thursday would leave little time for proper communications and development of replacement regulations; and
- **Weeks 6 and 7, w/b 16 November:** this provides a two week period during which it is not impossible that the Executive will have decided to extend, or a period to keep under close review the replacement restrictions.

7. It is recommended that officials also use weeks 6 and 7 to **review the Restrictions Event Regulations**. This is recommended because there is a high likelihood of a further period of restrictions being needed before and/or after Christmas. The review should focus on areas where more freedoms may be permissible in future Restrictions Events. The operating principle should be to avoid where possible infringements and restrictions.

8. It is also recommended that officials concurrently begin **planning for the remainder of the financial year**, with an additional focus on seasonal events and activities such as Remembrance Sunday, Halloween and Christmas.

#### **Support to the Executive: structures and governance**

9. As we have not been here before, bespoke governance arrangements are urgently needed to provide best support to the Executive and to aid decision making.

10. The Executive has decided on its general approach via a formal decision and the publication of its Arrangements for Decision Making. It is also noted that the Executive has approved a Recovery Framework which assumed a more benign situation. This is not in the public domain although there was an aim of having a published document. There may now also be a move towards a tiered approach. It will be important that these three elements are kept in step with each other and do not result in contradictory strategies or messaging.

11. Crucially, if a tiered approach is introduced it will be essential to explain if it is a departure from the Approach to Decision Making, or complementary to that.

12. In support of the overall strategy, we proposed to bridge existing work into four workstreams. The main elements are already being delivered. This is about creating closer line of sight on interlinking issues, and ensuring that decisions are informed and delivered in a systematic way. It is proposed to adopt the following groups, to sit underneath CCGNI in a programme managed way:

- **Communications and culture of compliance:** this group will bring together overall communications with existing work on law enforcement (refocused onto compliance), and strategic engagement undertaken by the JMs. It will have an interest in handling plans to support Executive decisions. **EIS would lead this group**, with TEO support, and with key Depts attending (DfC, DOJ, DfE, DE, local government and PSNI). It would rely heavily on Departmental stakeholder networks as well;
- **Finance:** this group will ensure that the finance mitigations and the restrictions move forward together. It will make best use existing finances across Depts, and will ensure that the packages are developed in line with the impact of necessary restrictions. Health should have a seat and TEO can provide support. It should be attended by DoF, DfE, DfC and EIS. Key supporting products would be a single section on NI Direct to support citizens and businesses to find the right packages. A lead Department should be identified;
- **Legislation:** this group exists and will be formalised as a workstream. It will be where Health and TEO work in support of each other to develop and deliver restriction regulations. It will provide a forum for issue resolution and clarification, and it will draw together the work needed for Assembly debates; and
- **Strategy.** This will have an immediate focus on the 7 week period, but in the context of planning for the remainder of the financial year. This group should be small and will commission work packages as needed from within existing teams. The workstream leads for the other three groups above would attend. TEO will provide admin support.

13. There will be three cross cutting groups which are already in place:

- The existing modelling group. This is chaired by Professor Young and meets weekly. The modelling data informs the Executive each week via the Minister of Health's report, and it is crucial to policy decisions;
- The existing cross Departmental Group which meets on Tuesdays. This is chaired by TEO and provides an opportunity for Departmental policy leads to discuss issues. Local Government and PSNI attend; and
- Face coverings working group. This is ad hoc and meets as needed to provide advice to the Executive on settings where face coverings should be worn. TEO lead with CSA.