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**FROM: NAOMI LONG MLA
MINISTER OF JUSTICE**

DATE: 11 NOVEMBER 2020

TO: FIRST AND DEPUTY FIRST MINISTER

COVID-19: EASE OF RESTRICTIONS

We are all acutely aware of the difficult decisions with which we are faced and of the need to find consensus on a way forward, ahead of the current Coronavirus Regulations expiring on Thursday night.

The discussions we have had over the past week have been challenging for us all but I believe that we must now face up to the stark choice which faces us during this pandemic and I believe we have no option but to find a path which best protects lives whilst mitigating against the worst economic impacts of restrictions. This seems to be an objective on which we are all agreed.

I have been reflecting on the meetings we have had to date and on the compromise paper proposed by the Economy Minister, which we then amended further during last night's discussions. I fear that in the discussion about what would be **relaxed** to achieve consensus we may have lost sight of the extensive range of other restrictions which would be **retained** by doing so, and **which will fall on Thursday if we fail**.

As I understand it, if we cannot agree the Health Minister's paper of 4 November, which recommends a two week extension of the current restrictions (my preferred option), then we must consider what other options remain on the table which will best achieve the protection of life and certainty of livelihoods which we all desire. If we do not support either paper, then as I understand it, the following will occur from Friday 13th November:

- The entire hospitality sector will reopen, including hotels and wet pubs;
- Indoor sport and organised contact sport can resume;
- Universities will no longer be asked, in guidance, to deliver distance learning to the maximum extent possible;
- Mass events involving more than 15 people will be permitted, subject to a risk assessment;

- Gym classes will resume;
- Large weddings will be permitted;
- Two households will no longer be required to form a bubble together, but indoor gatherings of no more than 6 people from 2 households and outdoor gatherings of up to 15 people will be permitted; and
- The “work from home” message could be lost.

I consider these to be very significant relaxations relative to where we stand now, bordering on reckless. At the point at which these restrictions were passed by the Executive just last month, we were confident that activities such as gym classes, contact sports and household mixing posed a sufficient risk to merit restricting them in this way. I am unsure what has changed in this regard. It is also worth stating that we kept wet pubs closed throughout the summer and, although I fully appreciate the significant economic impact that had on those businesses, we did this because we had evidence to demonstrate the risk that drinking in bars posed to the spread of the virus. Again, I do not believe this has changed.

Looking ahead to the rest of November and December, it seems almost certain that the R number will rise to above 1 and we will be forced to revisit the possibility of restrictions before, or even during, the Christmas period.

I would urge colleagues to be mindful of the potentially limited choices today and to work together to find a consensus: it is critical for public health, for our society and economy and, to be frank, for public confidence in our ability to lead Northern Ireland through this crisis that we do so.

I am copying this memo to Executive Colleagues, the Attorney General, Executive Secretariat and the Office of the First Legislative Counsel.

Regards,

Personal Data

NAOMI LONG MLA
MINISTER OF JUSTICE