NIO Summary of the NI Executive Recovery Document

The NI Executive document *Coronavirus Executive Approach to Decision Making* was published and debated in the NI Assembly today, 12 April. The document states an ambition to relax restrictions and shares a five-point plan. The NI Executive approach is 'conditions-based' rather than linked to fixed dates for when each step of the plan might be reached, with a warning that the process will take "significant time". The NI regulations will continue to be reviewed every 3 weeks, as required under legislation.

Current Restrictions

NI currently has stricter measures in place than England, retaining the 'stay at home' message rather than adopting the 'stay alert' message. Exercise is still only allowed once a day, there is less of a focus on encouraging people back to work, there is no date in place for schools to return and social interaction is still only to happen within the household.

The First Minister's announcement that accompanied the publication of the measures recognised that these measures were stricter than England: "now is not the time to lift restrictions ... if restrictions are lifted too soon, or in a way that we cannot control, we will see the negative results of that in the days and weeks ahead."

The Deputy First Minister supported this message, and appealed to the public to be patient and told the Assembly that "the restrictions remain in place at this time, because it is necessary and because it is thankfully working."

The Road Map

Step One

Groups of 4 to 6 people who are not from the same household being able to meet outdoors while maintaining social distancing. Opening of: drive-through church services, churches for private prayer, of outdoor spaces and public sports amenities, drive-through cinemas and more sports, including some water activities, golf and tennis.

Step Two

Groups of 10 able to meet outdoors, team sports training on a non-contact basis in small groups, re-opening of some libraries and open-air museums, as well as indoor activities involving limited contact of less than 10 minutes and with two to four people.

Step Three

Groups of up to 30 being able to gather outside, re-opening of more libraries as well as museums and galleries, concert and theatre rehearsals resuming and larger indoor gatherings.

Step Four

Socially distanced church services, resumption of competitive sport behind closed doors or with a limited number of spectators, leisure centres re-opening and outdoor concerts resuming on a restricted basis.

Step Five

Resumption of close physical contact sports, return of competitive sport, spectators at live events on a restricted basis as well as the re-opening of nightclubs and concerts on a limited basis.

Comparison to Ireland and UK Roadmap

At first glance, the NI roadmap has more in common with the Irish and UK government plans than differences All three plans favour a phased approach involving relaxing rules on outdoor activity, reopening of some parts of the economy, with indoor activity and close proximity social gathering coming in the later stages. NI, like Ireland, is not putting a limit on the number of households who can mix in the early stages, and is instead putting a limit on overall numbers. The key difference is that NI is not relaxing any restrictions straight away (which both the UK and Irish Government did) and they have declined to put specific dates on any of the stages - again, unlike the UK and Ireland.

Other Key Points

Timeframe: In response to a question at the Assembly, the First Minister said she hoped that the final stage of the plan would be reached by the end of the year.

Testing: The severe impact of coronavirus on care homes and the most vulnerable in NI society is recognised and the NI Department of Health will implement an urgent expansion and intensive programme of testing for residents and staff in care homes. This expansion is expected to commence immediately.

Two-way: The risk of having to reintroduce restrictions if cases rise sharply again is recognised along with a commitment to only decide to relax restrictions when the Executive is sure that that is in the long-term interest of the health and wellbeing of the population.