

FROM THE OFFICE OF THE MINISTER
Diane Dodds MLA



From: Diane Dodds MLA
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To: Arlene Foster MLA and Michelle O'Neill MLA
First Minister and deputy First Minister

HOSPITALITY CLOSING TIME – legislative vehicles

Thank you for your draft Executive paper of 24th September 2020 regarding the above.

The increase in COVID-19 cases in Northern Ireland, and across the British Isles, is concerning. As an Executive we have taken decisive action in the last two weeks aimed at restricting the spread of the virus.

I am in favour of going further by bringing forward the closing time for hospitality businesses. However, we need to give this very careful consideration to ensure we get this right.

I recommend that we introduce a closing time of 11.00pm or later (whatever time we decide on should factor in a 30 minute 'drinking up' period, eg if closing at 11.30pm, last orders are at 11.00pm). There are a number of reasons for this:

- I am very aware of concern amongst hospitality businesses, including hotels, at the potential for an earlier closing time. This is particularly important for food providers where a 10.00pm closing time would effectively rule out a sitting and the opportunity to generate essential revenue.
- They are also concerned about crowd management outside establishments. None of us want to see this undermine the excellent social distancing regimes that exist inside hospitality businesses.

- An earlier closing time could have the unintended consequence to encourage people to continue their socialising in groups at home, something we must deter.

I note the Executive paper suggests that we decide on a closing time for the hospitality sector first, and consider other sectors to be considered next week to allow time for detailed consideration by officials.

I am supportive of this approach. I am very aware that we are, of necessity, making policy and legislation at speed. However it is essential that in introducing new legislation we get this right in order that it is enforceable, and does not have unintended consequences or loopholes.

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

Yours sincerely

Personal Data

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Minister for the Economy