

COVID-19

KEY ISSUES AND LINES-TO-TAKE

MONDAY 28 SEPTEMBER 2020

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1. Latest advice

EXTENSION OF RESTRICTIONS

- On September 21 the Executive agreed that current restrictions to combat the spread of Covid-19 should be extended across Northern Ireland.
- Previously the restrictions, which focus on domestic settings, were applied in post code areas with the highest rates of Coronavirus.
- The Executive's decision came after a significant rise in new Coronavirus cases.

The restrictions are:

- No mixing of households in private dwellings, with exemptions for: bubbling with one other household; caring responsibilities including childcare; building or maintenance work, or the services of any trade or profession; supported living arrangements; visits required for legal or medical purposes; a business operating from a person's home; a funeral; a house move; marriage or civil partnership ceremony in a private dwelling where one partner is terminally ill.
- No more than six people to gather in a private garden from no more than two households. Children aged 12 and under from those two households are discounted from this total.
- The restrictions applied from 6pm on September 22. They will be regularly reviewed by the Executive.

People can:

- fulfil caring responsibilities, including childcare, e.g. to look after a grandchild
- travel, for example to go to work, but those who feel they need to travel should satisfy themselves that it can be done in a safe and socially distanced fashion
- attend a hospital appointment, dentist, optician or other health services
- fulfil any legal obligations
- children whose parents do not live in the same household can move between homes

Care home and hospital visits

- Visiting to care homes and hospitals may be curtailed.

- More frequent visits may be permitted in exceptional circumstances, including palliative care facilities and those receiving end of life care.

People previously advised to shield

- People who were previously shielding should be extra careful to keep themselves safe.

Schools and education

- Colleges, schools and early learning/childcare settings are not affected by these measures.

Places of worship, marriages, civil partnerships and funerals

- At this stage no changes have been made to the operation of places of worship, however this will remain under review.
- Marriages and civil partnerships can continue to take place, in line with the current restrictions. A marriage or civil partnership where one partner is terminally ill can take place in a private dwelling in an affected area.
- Funerals can continue to take place, in line with guidance.

Work and services carried out in private homes

- Workers and builders can continue to go into other people's houses to carry out work such as repairs, installations and deliveries. Professionals who offer services from their own home can continue to carry out their work with appropriate safety measures in place.

PENALTIES

- Action will be taken against those that break these rules, including asking people to disperse and issuing fixed penalty notices. The current penalties are:
 - a fixed penalty notice of £60 (reduced to £30 if paid within 14 days)
 - for subsequent offences the fixed penalty will double each time up to a maximum of £960
 - if court proceedings are taken, the fine available on summary conviction is up to £5,000 (level five on the standard scale)

REOPENING OF WET PUBS

- The Executive agreed on 17 September that wet pubs would be permitted to open on September 23.
- The indicative date of September 21 was extended by two days to enable new regulations for the hospitality sector to be put in place to support their safe operation.

Mandatory requirements include:

- The venue will be required as part of its risk assessment process to identify the number of people who can safely be accommodated in line with social distancing requirements, and must clearly display this figure in the premises;
- Hand sanitisation stations must be in place;
- The venue will be required to collect customer details to assist with the Test, Trace, Protect contact tracing programme;
- All service will be seated at tables. There will be no standing and no service at the bar;
- Customers must remain seated once in the premises, apart from using the facilities;
- Dancing will be prohibited in hospitality venues;
- A maximum of six people from any number of households can be seated at a table in a hospitality venue. Children aged 12 and under will be discounted from the total. [More than six will be permitted if they all belong to a single household.]
- Face coverings should be worn to enter and leave the venue and for movement inside. They are not required once seated.
- The regulations will apply to any venue serving alcohol or where alcohol can be brought in and consumed by customers.
- Beer bikes will not be permitted to operate.
- Hospitality businesses will continue to be subject to strict guidance, regulation and appropriate enforcement where necessary.

SOCIAL DISTANCING

- Two metres remains the optimum distance to maintain distance where possible, but a distance of no less than 1 metre between individuals should be adhered to.

FACE COVERINGS

- The use of face coverings in certain indoor settings, such as shops or shopping centres, is mandatory. You must also wear a face covering on public transport.

2. Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs

£25 MILLION DAERA COVID-19 FUND

- The pandemic had a significant impact on the industry. For this reason, in May the Executive agreed a £25 million package to alleviate the financial strain on Northern Ireland's farm incomes. It is directed towards those affected the most.
- Applications from the dairy, beef, and sheep sectors to the £25 million DAERA Covid-19 Support Fund closed on September 23.
- 11,277 farm business were eligible to apply. DAERA received 11,177 applications.
- This accounts for £18.2 million of the funding.
- 173 eligible farm businesses did not apply. Therefore £49,000 has not been claimed.
- The application form can be located on DEARA's online services of the website.
- Applications to the fund from the potato sector opened on September 9 and will close on September 30.
- Applications from the ornamental horticultural sector will open later in September.
- While the window to apply is relatively brief this is in order to assure that the financial support is directed to where it is needed as soon as practically possible.
- The application process has been streamlined and simplified in order to achieve delivery as quickly as possible.
- The division of finance to date represents £21.4 million from the £25 million support package.
- As further market disturbances cannot be ruled out, approximately £7 million has been held in reserve should the agricultural and horticultural industries experience further market disturbances as a result Covid-19.

3. Communities

SUPPORT FOR VOLUNTRY AND COMMUNITY SECTOR

- A further £10.8 million of funding is being made available to the voluntary and community sector to assist recovery, and prepare for any possible second wave of Covid-19. The grant funding will be made available in October with £9.7 million to cover six months' salaries up to March 2021 for groups and the remaining £1.1 million to cover running costs. This follows previous payments totalling £13 million which were issued in early April to around 400 organisations to enable the continued delivery of key services to those most vulnerable and at risk within our communities.
- The Department is giving £3.2 million in additional funding to Councils to allow them to support the voluntary and community sector as it continues to recover and help citizens to get through the COVID-19 crisis. The funding will support grassroots community and voluntary organisations working with individuals and communities during the pandemic and will be used for community support, access to food and financial wellbeing.
- The Department has joined forces with local philanthropists to invest £500,000 in the Voluntary, Community and Social Enterprise Sector. The Department is providing £250,000 match funding for the pioneering initiative to tackle social issues. This funding will help to create five new funds aligned with the Programme for Government objective to 'Improve wellbeing for all by tackling disadvantage and driving growth'.

SUPPORT FOR SOCIAL ENTERPRISES AND CHARITY SECTORS

- A £7m Covid Social Enterprise Fund opened on 28th September which recognises the important role that Social Enterprises play both as an economic driver and a platform for social change. A Social Enterprise is a trading business that sells goods and services, whose primary objective is to achieve social and/or environmental benefit. They are different from charities and voluntary organisations which do not have financial independence through trading income.
- The COVID-19 Charities Fund has awarded grants to hundreds of local charities to help them with the financial difficulties they faced as a result of the pandemic.

SUPPORT FOR TENANTS

- Legislation is being extended to protect private renters from eviction during the pandemic, to 31 March 2021. The Private Tenancies (Coronavirus Modifications) Act requires landlords to give tenants a 12-week notice to quit

period before seeking a court order to begin proceedings to evict and therefore reduce the possibility of tenants in the private rented sector becoming homeless. The legislation was due to expire at the end of September, but the Minister ensured the protection is available until next year.

SUPPORT FOR TOWN AND CITY CENTRES

- DfC is investing £10m in the Capital Covid-19 Recovery Revitalisation Scheme which will be used in larger town and city centres, with a further £1m coming from the Department of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs (DAERA) to be used for smaller settlements. The funding deliver measures to will help provide a safe environment for visitors, shoppers and workers in town and city centres. This may include measures such as shop frontage and awnings/canopies; outdoor furniture; heaters and queueing systems; PA/Tannoy and digital screens, and other signage.

SUPPORT FOR LOCAL COUNCILS

- At the end of September the Executive allocated £40m to councils to help address their financial pressures as a result of the COVID-19 crisis. This is in addition to the £20.3m allocated in May.

SUPPORT FOR ARTS AND SPORTS SECTORS

- At the end of September the Executive announced a £29m support for the culture, language, arts and heritage sectors impacted by the coronavirus pandemic. This allocation is in addition to other funds the Department for Communities has previously announced. A £5.5m Creative Support Fund has already been established by the Department of which, to date, £1.9 million has been paid to small to medium organisations in addition to just over £0.5 million to individuals.
- A further £2m was secured to help the sports sector deal with the impact of lockdown restrictions. This re-opening of this fund will help those clubs who were unable to apply during the initial funding round and will also help clubs to deal with social distancing and PPE measures they now have to put in place.
- A £1million Covid Safe Sports Pack Fund has been opened, which will be administered by SportNI, and will be used for purchasing equipment to help clubs ensure a safe return to sport for children, participants, coaches, volunteers and parents.

4. Economy

QUEEN'S UNIVERSITY STUDENTS SELF-ISOLATING

- **Note – this is a matter for the university in the first instance. If pressed, we have the following LTT which has not, as yet, been deployed.**
- It is extremely unfortunate that some of our higher education students have tested positive for Covid-19, and our first thoughts are clearly to wish them a speedy recovery.
- We encourage any students who have tested positive to follow the public health guidelines as well as any guidelines put in place by their university, and self-isolate in their student accommodation in order to protect themselves, as well as prevent the spread of the virus to any other students.
- We welcome the fact that QUB is fully supporting any student in its halls of residence who has tested positive, and has in place robust protocols to prevent further spread.

APPRENTICESHIP RECOVERY PACKAGE

- The Minister recently announced a support package to minimise apprenticeship job losses, maintain and grow the supply of apprenticeship opportunities and support apprentices who have been displaced and lost their apprenticeship.
- £14.3million Apprenticeship Return, Retain and Result initiative will see employers offered £3,700 for every apprentice that they bring back from furlough and retain until they have completed their apprenticeship.
- £12.5million Apprenticeship Recruitment Incentive will offer £3,000 per apprentice to employers for each new apprenticeship opportunity created between 1 April 2020 and 31 March 2021.
- An Apprenticeship Challenge Fund opened today (28 September), supporting innovative approaches to increase apprenticeship opportunities in Northern Ireland. Successful applicants could receive one-off awards of up to £50,000.

NIAO REPORT – RHI AND GRANT SCHEMES

- Cost controls have been implemented in the **non-domestic RHI Scheme** to ensure that the scheme operates within budget and there is no incentive to overproduce heat whilst promoting energy efficiency.
- By the end of this financial year (2020/21) completion of the programme of 100% inspections and the outworking of ongoing compliance actions in combination with the reduction in tariffs will provide additional controls to prevent and detect any abuse of the scheme.

- DfE is currently taking forward work towards closure of the scheme in line with the commitment detailed in the New Decade, New Approach deal.
- It is important to note that the C&AG accepted that the **grant scheme** was required to be designed and delivered at a rapid pace in exceptional circumstances, recognised that the risk associated with fraud and error and value for money required the Departmental Accounting Officer to seek a Ministerial Direction, and that he recognised DfE's progress in recovering ineligible payments made to 374 businesses as well as producing a lessons learned report covering the three business grant schemes and commissioning research on the impact and value for money of its Covid-19 interventions.
- DfE is working to address the issues raised in the report.

GRANT SCHEMES

- The Executive introduced an unprecedented range of financial support to help businesses impacted by Covid-19 with the objective of protecting jobs, preventing business closures and promoting economic recovery. DfE has paid out more than £338million to date collectively across the schemes.
- £10,000 Small Business Support Grant – 24,603 businesses have received payments totalling more than £246million.
- £25,000 Retail, Hospitality, Tourism and Leisure Grant – 2,976 businesses have received payments totalling more than £73million.
- NI Microbusiness Hardship Fund – 4,284 businesses have received payments of up to £5k or £10k totalling c. £23million.
- The Economy Minister announced two more support schemes totalling £6million to be delivered by Invest NI to help retailers, wholesalers and SMEs generate business online and gain access to finance to assist growth.

BUSINESSES UNABLE TO ACCESS GRANT SCHEMES

- We understand the frustration and disappointment felt by those, such as the newly self-employed, who have not received specific grant support to date.
- The Economy Minister recently met representatives of the #ExcludedNI group.
- Support for the self-employed is dealt with at a UKG level and any solution for those who fall outside the current support measures requires a further UKG level intervention. The Executive has written to the Chancellor to urge the Treasury to bring forward further measures across the UK.
- The Executive will also consider options for how the underspend from the Business Support Grant Schemes might be used for further economic support.

5. Education

REOPENING OF SCHOOLS

- Revised New School Day guidance was published on 13 August setting out an updated approach to the full reopening of schools, including special schools.
- The updated guidance and the full reopening of education settings was informed by advice provided by the Chief Medical Officer and Chief Scientific Advisor.
- This guidance remains agile and is updated to reflect public health advice. We will continue to keep under review all medical and scientific developments.

GUIDANCE ON USE OF FACE COVERINGS IN SCHOOLS

- Face coverings are not recommended as being compulsory for routine use in classroom settings. However, staff and pupils may wish to use them during the routine school day and this is acceptable. The Department also recommends that pupils, teachers and school staff wear a face covering in corridors and other communal areas of post-primary schools.
- As every school is different, the Department has not prescribed a 'one size fits all approach' – this is not possible and would not be practical. School leaders are asked to consider the strategic guidance and put this into practice in their own schools to the best of their ability.

SCHOOL ATTENDANCE

- All schools should follow the latest guidance on attendance for children and young people who have health conditions or who live with individuals who have health conditions or are pregnant. If in doubt, specific advice should be sought from a Hospital Consultant or GP.
- However, there will be a small number of children where medical guidance would be to refrain from school. The school should satisfy themselves, through evidence provided by the family that the pupil is shielding due to underlying medical conditions. If this is not possible then an unauthorised absence should be recorded.

IF SCHOOL CHILDREN DEVELOP COVID SYMPTOMS

- The Chief Medical Officer sent a letter to parents and carers of school children on 10 September, which outlines actions which should be taken by them if children develop Covid-19 symptoms. It is being issued alongside a leaflet for parents/carers produced by the Department of Education, with advice on the steps to take if a child, or anyone they live with, develops symptoms. The leaflet for parents/carers is on the Department's website.

SCHOOLS COVID DATA

- The Department of Education is working with the Education Authority (EA) to examine and record existing data sources relating to Covid-19 including information on teacher attendance. Weekly information on attendance at educational settings is being published by the Department.

FUNDING FOR EDUCATION RESTART

- To help support education settings address many of the pressures arising as a result of Covid-19, a significant package of funding has been made available, which includes: £17.5million towards the cost of substitute teachers and other school expenditure; around £25million for PPE; £5million for school wellbeing initiatives; £3.1million for home to school transport; and £1.4million to support special educational needs.
- The Department was also recently allocated Covid funding, including: £9.2m for schools (schools reopening (£8m), Pre-School Settings (£1m) and (£200,000 for Special Educational Need support).
- The Department will continue to monitor funding requirements as schools reopen and as the pandemic progresses.
- Education Minister has also announced an increase in the award to childminders from the Childcare Recovery Support Fund. This includes an additional £300 to childminders for the period from July to August 2020. The closing date for applications has been extended to 2 October 2020.

ENGAGE PROGRAMME

- Education Minister has launched a £11.2million Engage programme aimed at addressing the impact of Covid-19 on children's learning.
- The funding, agreed by the Executive in June 2020, will enable all primary and post primary schools to provide additional teaching support for pupils, particularly those from disadvantaged backgrounds. It will also seek to address the impact of Covid-19 in terms of lost learning and will support those pupils most in need.

ACADEMIC SELECTION OPTIONS

- The Department's focus is on ensuring that post primary transfer is delivered in a timely fashion for every pupil in Northern Ireland. As the tests are set by private organisations the Department does not have control over the timing of any transfer test, but needs to ensure the process of transfer is deliverable.
- Following discussions that involved the Department, EA, and test providers, the Department determined that if test providers elected to move their assessments to January 2021, it could ask EA to adjust its timetable for the 2020/21 post primary transfer process. This was based on the most up to date information provided by all parties including changes to the time taken to provide the test results by the AQE Ltd and PPTC.

6. Finance

FUNDING ALLOCATIONS

- The Executive has agreed COVID-19 funding allocations of £165 million which will see a funding injection for business, infrastructure, culture, schools and local councils.
- As an Executive we have been considering our approach to economic recovery to ensure that the funding we have available makes the greatest possible impact.
- The allocations will provide vital help to businesses as well as continuing to protect the vulnerable.
- The allocations are as follows:
 - £29m for cultural recovery - this on top of the £4m previously allocated means that a total of £33m is going to this important sector.
 - Over £29m is being provided for a range of business interventions including support for the tourism industry and a Holiday at Home voucher scheme as well as investment in skills and youth training and further business support.
 - £40m is being allocated to ensure local councils can continue to provide essential services and support those in need.
 - Recognising the importance of capital projects to stimulating our economic recovery, £14.8m is being allocated for the A6 Flagship with £15m being provided to NI Water to accelerate a number of projects.
 - Other allocations include:
 - £11.4m Waste Management
 - £9.2m for schools (schools reopening (£8m), Pre-School Settings (£1m) and (£200,000 for Special Educational Need support).
 - £5.8m University Research & Development
 - £3.5m for Higher and Further Education PPE
 - £5m to support Roads Winter Service
 - £1.6m for the COVID Track, Trace and Protect App

WINTER ECONOMY PLAN

- The Finance Minister has welcomed the fact that a job support scheme has been introduced to replace furlough, however he still has concerns and has sought clarity in relation to the scheme with the Chief Secretary to the Treasury.
- Many businesses have taken on substantial debt during the COVID pandemic. The Finance Minister has been calling for reasonable repayment arrangements and welcomes the additional time provided to repay these loans.
- The extension of the 5% VAT rate for hospitality and tourism is also welcome given how badly impacted these sectors continue to be.

CANCELLATION OF AUTUMN BUDGET

- The Finance Minister spoke with the Chief Secretary to the Treasury and raised the cancellation of the Autumn Budget. He has significant concern about the decision to cancel the Autumn Budget as it will make it more difficult for the Executive to develop its spending plans.

INTERNAL MARKET BILL

- Finance Minister, Conor Murphy has joined with the Welsh and Scottish Finance Ministers in voicing concerns about the financial implications the UK Internal Market Bill will have on devolved governments.
- The powers enable the UK Government to undertake spending in devolved areas, including for replacement EU funding, without any engagement with devolved nations.
- Finance Ministers also voiced concerns about what this could mean for future consequential funding arrangements.

NISRA – COVID

- Latest figures published by NISRA show that nine deaths involving COVID-19 occurred in the last week, from 12th to 18th September, bringing the total of COVID-19 related deaths to 896.
- Of this total:
479 (53.5%) took place in hospital;
355 (39.6%) in care homes;
Eight (0.9%) in hospices; and
54 (6.1%) at residential addresses or other locations.

7. Health

COVID-19 SITUATION

- The R Number is currently around 1.5
- The current increase in cases should be viewed as the precursor of increasing cases in the over sixties with resulting pressure on the hospital system and increasing deaths, as has been observed in many European countries including France and Spain.
- Community transmission also remains widespread, associated with multiple small clusters rather than a small number of larger outbreaks.
- This sharp rise in both positive cases and hospital admissions is clearly very worrying hence the need for the new restrictions, but if we act now and follow the public health advice closely we have a chance of seeing these numbers decrease in the following weeks. Download the Stop Covid NI app.
- The public is asked to follow the Executive's regulations which are now legally enforceable
- We would urge everyone who is eligible for the winter flu vaccination to get it.

TESTING

- Tests are solely for those who have symptoms or have specifically been referred for a test by the Contact Tracing Service.
- Anyone who tries to book a test and is unable to do so, or who is offered a location or time which is not convenient, is strongly encouraged to wait a few hours and then try again.
- There are four fixed testing sites and six mobile testing units across Northern Ireland which, alongside alternative testing options such as home kits, offer a current capacity of more around 6,000 per day.

VACCINE TRIALS

- Northern Ireland has been chosen as one of the regions to take part in a major UK trial of a potential vaccine to help in the fight against COVID-19.
- It is hoped that up to 350 volunteers from Northern Ireland will participate in the trial.
- The trial being run by Novavax will be supported in Northern Ireland by the NI Clinical Research Network, which is funded by HSC R&D Division.
- The trial will take place in sites across the UK including Northern Ireland and it is anticipated the first participants will be recruited here at the start of October.

CROSS-BORDER CO-OPERATION

- The Chief Medical Officer for Northern Ireland Dr Michael McBride and the Acting Chief Medical Officer (ACMO) for the Republic of Ireland Dr Ronan Glynn met on Friday to review the ongoing COVID19 pandemic.
- The meeting discussed the growing prevalence of the virus in both jurisdictions and underlined the need for ongoing cooperation between NI and

the ROI and respective public health teams under the existing Memorandum of Understanding.

- Close collaboration between the relevant authorities in NI and the ROI will continue and be strengthened in the coming days to address the concerning trend in case numbers on both sides of the border, not alone in Donegal and Derry/Londonderry, but also in other areas along the border where the profile of the disease continues to evolve.
- They appealed to everyone to avoid all but necessary travel across the border. It is also recommended that employers on both sides of the border make every effort to facilitate employees to work from home if possible.

HOSPITAL OUTBREAKS

- The Health Minister Robin Swann has announced that Level Three Serious Adverse Incident investigations will be undertaken on the Covid-19 outbreaks at Craigavon Area Hospital, Daisy Hill Hospital and Antrim Area Hospital.
- These will be independently chaired and the findings will be made public.
 - All the actions requested to reduce spread have been implemented by Trusts and support is available for families, patients and staff.
 - The news of the deaths of patients at these hospitals is extremely distressing and disturbing.
 - Deepest sympathies go to the families and friends of those who have passed away.
 - This situation demands thorough and expeditious investigations. Patients and bereaved families are entitled to answers.

REBUILDING HSC SERVICES

- Running both Covid and non-Covid services is a massive challenge. Work to re-build services will take time and will be entirely dependent on the path Covid will take. It is inevitable that there will be further hospital based outbreaks and clusters in the months ahead.
- Infection control measures are going to be with us for some time and inevitably, despite our rebuilding efforts, this will have an adverse impact on waiting times for procedures. Trusts are doing all that they can to maximise theatre and bed capacity.

CARE HOMES

- Covid-19 remains an active and significant threat to Care Homes. It is vital that the Health and Social Care system does everything it can to protect and support residents and staff.
- Care homes are encouraged to develop the concept of care partners. Care partners will be more than a visitor. Care partners will have previously provided an essential element of maintaining their relative's physical and mental health, and/or provided specific support and assistance to ensure that communication or other health and social care needs are met due to a pre-existing condition. Without this input a resident is likely to experience significant and/or continued distress.

- Care partners will need to be designated and agree to a number of measures, which may be specific to the individual care home and its visiting policy. There may be two designated care partners sharing this role, one at a time, across the week.

StopCOVID NI APP

- The app was launched on July 31 and has been downloaded almost than 370,000 times and users have been receiving exposure notifications to self-isolate.
- We look forward to Scotland being able to join us in setting up interoperability with NI and the ROI, allowing all three apps to work with each other.
- It's hoped that the StopCOVID NI app will be extended to children and young people shortly

GP SERVICES

- GP practices are still providing face to face appointments for those patients who are assessed as requiring them and all practices have been provided with a supply of Personal Protective Equipment to allow them to do so safely.
- GPs are operating a highly efficient system of telephone triage for patients.

VISITING GUIDANCE FOR HOSPITALS AND CARE HOMES

- All health and social care facilities in Northern Ireland should move to facilitate one face-to-face visit per week by one person. The province wide guidance applies to hospital and care homes as well as other facilities.
- The visiting guidance will be kept under ongoing review.
- Every effort should continue to enable other forms of visiting (e.g using technology) to ensure residents and patients maintain social connections.
- Additional advice on compassionate visits – for instance for those receiving end of life and palliative care – should be facilitated. These arrangements will have to be agreed in advance with the ward or care home.
- In Hospices, one visitor for one hour daily is recommended where the environment is Covid-19 secure.
- In maternity services – one partner will be able to accompany the pregnant woman to dating scan, anomaly scan, early pregnancy clinic, fetal medicine appointments and when the woman is in active labour (to be defined by midwife). Visits in antenatal and postnatal wards will be for one person for up to one hour once a week.
- In augmented care areas of burns, renal and cancer services, this should be permitted in Covid-19 secure environments. This means maintaining social distance of up to 2m, attending to hand hygiene and good respiratory hygiene, good ventilation and appropriate use of PPE and wearing face covering.

8. Infrastructure

FACE COVERINGS ON PUBLIC TRANSPORT

- New legislation making the wearing of face coverings mandatory on public transport came into force on 10 July as part of the recovery process from Covid-19 to support efforts to reduce the risk of transmission.
- The requirement applies to passengers and also staff in public areas who are not protected by a screen. However, there are exemptions for those who are not able to wear a face covering for specific health and medical reasons and for children under the age of 13. Outdoor areas of a ferry where social distancing can be maintained are exempt from the requirements, along with school transport.

MOT TESTING

- From 20 July, MOT testing has resumed for priority vehicle groups, including those vehicles that are not able to avail of Temporary Exemption Certificates (TECs). This includes taxis and buses due a first time test; vehicles not previously registered in Northern Ireland; vehicles whose MOTs have expired by more than 12 months that includes vehicles previously declared SORN and those sold by car dealerships.
- MOT testing for other vehicles such as four year old cars and motorbikes, three year old light goods vehicles and testing of heavy goods vehicles and trailers resumed from 1 September. The first set of reminder letters with details of how to book a test at the appropriate time issued on 5 August.
- The DVA intends to re-open its online booking service for HGVs and trailers from 1 October and all other eligible vehicle categories from 12 October.
- The Belfast Trust has confirmed they will hand Belfast test centre back to DVA on 2 October. Vehicle testing for cars and LGVs in Belfast is scheduled to commence shortly thereafter.

DRIVER THEORY TEST

- From 6 July, the DVA has reinstated driver theory tests at its 6 centres. Compliance with PHA guidance on social distancing will initially limit capacity.
- The DVA has been working closely with the theory test provider to provide additional test slots for customers wishing to book a theory test.

PRACTICAL DRIVING TESTS

- Practical driving tests were suspended until 22 June 2020. This suspension was extended until driving tests could be delivered safely in line with public health advice and guidance on social distancing.

- The DVA has reinstated driver testing services where testing can be done safely in line with Public Health Agency advice and guidance on social distancing requirements. This includes motorbike driver testing from 6 July and tests for drivers of buses, tractors and module 4 CPC tests for lorry, bus and coach drivers from 20 July.
- Practical car and lorry driving tests resumed from 1 September 2020, initially prioritising those requests from key workers followed by those customers whose tests were cancelled due to lockdown. The DVA will contact these customers directly to arrange appointments.
- An information pack to help prepare for the new testing process was issued to all Approved Driving Instructors and Approved Motorcycle Instructors on 19 August, and was published on nidirect the following day.
- The DVA estimates it will take around 6 to 8 weeks to clear the backlog of approximately 3,800 customers in the priority groups. The DVA is continuing to process requests for high priority workers and these customers will also be offered driving test appointments. The DVA will open its online booking system for all new customers seeking to book a car or motorcycle practical driving test from 5 October and has written to all Approved Instructors to advise them of this position.
- Practical driving tests will resume at Craigavon test centre from 1 October.

9. Justice

PRISONERS REFUSING FOOD AT MAGHABERRY & HYDEBANK

- The NI Prison Service has confirmed a number of separated prisoners at Maghaberry and Hydebank Wood are refusing food.
- The prisoners say this is in protest at a decision to place a separated prisoner in the Covid-19 Isolation Unit at Maghaberry after he returned from Craigavon hospital on 15 September.
- The Prison Service has a number of processes in place to mitigate the risk of infecting the wider prisoner population with COVID-19 which includes placing prisoners in isolation for 14 days.
- Throughout the pandemic the Prison Service has been careful to follow the advice of the Public Health Agency and since March 2020 over 1,300 men have come through the Isolation unit at Maghaberry before progressing into the main prison population.
- During the 14 days a person in the isolated area will have access to healthcare, legal representation, showers, and can maintain family contact.
- The Prison Service is aware of a planned demonstration at Maghaberry Prison this weekend.

CASE WITHIN PRISONS

- To date, there has been one confirmed case of COVID-19 within the Northern Ireland Prison establishments.
- A man remanded into the custody to Maghaberry Prison on 3 September tested positive for Covid-19. As with all new committals during the pandemic he was separated from the main prisoner population to ensure the safety of staff and other prisoners.
- The robust processes put in place in response to the pandemic have ensured this has been contained, and the Prison Service will continue to take all necessary steps to ensure the safety of everyone in our prisons during these challenging times.

VISITING PRISONS

- The Northern Ireland Prison Service moved to ease restrictions on visiting prisons under new guidance from 27 July.

- An extensive programme of virtual visits was introduced in response to the pandemic. They have been hugely successful and have allowed many people to contact loved ones where they had not been able to do so before.
- Virtual visits are continuing alongside the re-introduced visits for close relatives of people in custody.

COURTS

- A programme of work is continuing on the incremental recovery of court business, initiated by the Lord Chief Justice. Any increase will be guided by the Public Health Agency advice.
- Jury trials - one of the cornerstones of our justice system - restarted on 19 August after very significant effort by the Courts and Tribunals Service, the judiciary, the legal profession and the wider justice family to enable these to be conducted in a way that keeps everyone safe.
- An individual who was in Craigavon courthouse on 7 September tested positive for Covid-19. As a result, business from one courtroom was relocated to Dungannon Courthouse on 8 September as a precautionary measure to facilitate cleaning and disinfection, in line with Public Health Agency guidance. The courtroom was reopened to business on 9 September.

DOMESTIC VIOLENCE

- We recognise that home is not always a safe space for everyone, especially for victims of domestic violence and abuse.
- A full range of work is ongoing, in partnership with our statutory and voluntary partners, to help raise awareness of the support services available and to ensure the provision of practical measures for victims during this challenging period.

LEGISLATIVE ERROR

- This unintentional error in legislation, which dates back to 2009, was not picked up until very recently.
- We are particularly concerned about the impact on the victims of these offences and note that the PPS has been working closely with Victim Support and Nexus to ensure that those affected are both advised of the problem sensitively and receive proper support from the outset.
- We are assured that the PPS will be reapplying the prosecutorial test to determine whether any of the cases should result in fresh prosecutions.”