

MINUTES OF EXECUTIVE MEETING: 12 AUGUST 2021

MEETING CONDUCTED VIA ZOOM

Present: First Minister (Chair)
deputy First Minister (Chair)
Minister of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs
Minister for Communities
Minister of Education
Minister for the Economy
Minister of Finance
Minister of Health
Minister for Infrastructure
Minister of Justice

In attendance: Junior Minister, TEO (Mr. Middleton)
Junior Minister, TEO (Mr. Kearney)

Interim Head of the Northern Ireland Civil Service
Head of Executive and Central Advisory Division
Sir Michael McBride, Chief Medical Officer
Professor Ian Young, Chief Scientific Adviser

INTRODUCTION

The First Minister chaired agenda items 1 - 3.

AGENDA ITEM 1

Covid-19 Report by the Minister of Health

1. The Minister of Health provided an update on the current impact of the pandemic on the health service, noting that ICU occupancy was under extreme pressure, and that as a result of bed occupancy and staffing pressures it was likely that some elective surgery will be cancelled in coming weeks. He provided an update on the vaccine certification app, which has now issued 58,000 travel certificates, with around 92% issued via the automated system.

2. The Chief Scientific Advisor gave a presentation on statistical data relating to the pandemic. He noted there had been a 15% increase in case numbers over the previous week, including an increase in the over 60s age group. Case numbers had increased across all local government districts. Northern Ireland's case numbers were higher than other parts of the CTA. Hospital admissions remained constant, although there had been an increase in ICU occupancy. The CSA noted that the trend for case numbers was in line with the optimistic scenario, and was following the central scenario for hospital bed occupancy admissions. Updated modelling will be provided for the next Executive meeting.

AGENDA ITEM 2

Actions from previous meetings

3. The First Minister advised that the action log had been circulated.

AGENDA ITEM 3

COVID Management

Executive COVID Taskforce – update

4. The Secretary to the Executive advised that the ECT Dashboard and the weekly written update on the Executive COVID Taskforce had been circulated to Ministers. She noted the Recovery Plan had been well received, and that work was ongoing regarding its implementation and ensuring alignment with the PFG outcomes framework and budget process.

**E (21) 165 (C) Health Protection (Coronavirus, Restrictions) Regs (NI) 2021:
Fifth Review of the Need for the Restrictions and
Requirements**

5. The Minister of Health introduced this paper.

6. The Executive agreed that:

- i. the requirement in regulation 2 for a review of the need for the restrictions and requirements in the Health Protection (Coronavirus, Restrictions) Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2021 (“the 2021 Regulations”) had been duly met;
- ii. the current restrictions and requirements in the 2021 Regulations, as amended, are at this point in time an appropriate and necessary response to the serious and imminent threat to public health which is posed by the incidence and spread of severe acute respiratory syndrome coronavirus 2 (SARS-CoV-2) in Northern Ireland;
- iii. overall the restrictions and requirements imposed by these Regulations continue to be proportionate to what the Regulations seek to achieve, which is a public health response to that infectious disease threat;
- iv. the regulations would be reviewed again in 4 weeks’ time on 2 September.

E (21) 167 (C) Self-Isolation for fully Vaccinated Close Contacts of COVID-19 Cases

7. The Minister of Health introduced this paper.

8. Following discussion, the Executive agreed to implement a change in approach to the management of self-isolation of close contacts of COVID-19 cases who are fully vaccinated with an MHRA approved vaccine, with effect from 16 August 2021, as follows:

- i. The individual identified as a close contact is fully vaccinated where ‘fully vaccinated’ is defined as: (i) more than 14 days after receiving the second

dose of an MHRA approved vaccine; or (ii) are taking part in, or have taken part in, an MHRA approved clinical trial for a coronavirus vaccine;¹

- ii. As a close contact of a positive case, everyone will continue to be advised to have a PCR test on day two and day eight, any close contact who tests positive following a PCR test will continue to be required to self-isolate, irrespective of their vaccination status;
- iii. Young people aged 5 to 17 who are identified as a close contact must self-isolate and book a PCR test. If the PCR test result is negative they can end their self-isolation. Should they develop symptoms they must self-isolate until they have a negative result from a PCR test;
- iv. Children under the age of 5 will be encouraged but not required to take a PCR test;
- v. Close contacts who are not able to be vaccinated for a clinical reason, will still be required to complete a period of self-isolation for the full 10 days;
- vi. Members of the public who are identified as close contacts and are fully vaccinated will be strongly advised not to visit hospitals or care homes for 10 days; they will also be advised to minimize contact with individuals known to be at higher risk should they contract COVID-19, for example those in the Clinical Extremely Vulnerable (CEV) group, for 10 days;
- vii. Additional safeguards will be required for those who are identified as close contacts and who work with vulnerable people, particularly health and social care staff, which will include an appropriate risk assessment;
- viii. Any individual (including those identified as close contacts) who develops symptoms should self-isolate and book a PCR test, it remains imperative

¹ <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/letter-from-the-deputy-chief-medical-officer-to-uk-vaccine-study-volunteers/open-letter-from-deputy-chief-medical-officer-to-uk-residents-who-have-volunteered-to-take-part-in-covid-19-vaccine-studies>

that symptomatic individuals self-isolate immediately until they have a negative result from a PCR test;

- ix. Those testing positive by PCR must self-isolate for a full period of 10 days irrespective of whether or not they have symptoms;
- x. The Contact Tracing Service in the Public Health Agency will continue to contact all close contacts, including those who are fully vaccinated) in order to provide public health advice and guidance;
- xi. The current system of financial support via the Department of Communities should continue for people in financial hardship who have to self-isolate, because they have either tested positive or are a close contact of someone with the virus (that is close contacts other than those defined as fully vaccinated at point i) above);
- xii. Anyone who has symptoms should isolate immediately and book a PCR test. It remains imperative that people must self-isolate if they develop symptoms until they have a negative result from a PCR test. Anyone who has a positive PCR test result should isolate for a full period of 10 days even if they are asymptomatic;
- xiii. Lateral Flow Device (LFD) tests continue to be used in Northern Ireland as part of a wide programme of asymptomatic testing. If an individual receives a positive LFD test result they should self-isolate and book a PCR test. Fully vaccinated members of their household (that is, those that meet the criteria at point i above) will not be required to self-isolate. If household members do not meet this criteria they must self-isolate. If the confirmatory PCR test is negative, both the individual and any remaining household members or other close contacts can be released from isolation.

It was agreed that guidance will be developed regarding close contacts in school settings, to ensure children in the same year groups are treated the same.

E (21) 170 (C) COVID Restrictions in Education

9. The Minister of Education introduced this paper.

10. Following discussion, the Executive agreed:

- a. The requirement for school bubbles will be removed for the beginning of the school year with mitigating measures remaining in place.
- b. The requirement to wear a face covering will remain in place for the first six weeks of the new term and remain under review. However, for subjects where social distancing is possible, such as drama in a large hall, face coverings are no longer required. Further guidance will be issued to schools by the Department of Education.
- c. There will be a full return to extra-curricular and support activities as well as youth services.

E (21) 168 (C) COVID 19 - Ratification of Relaxation of Decisions: domestic settings, house parties, raves, night clubs, school settings, face coverings, working from home, socially distance, FE Colleges, school setting, live music/dancing, conference centres.

11. The First Minister introduced this paper.

12. The Minister for the Economy and Minister for Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs noted their support for withdrawing the messaging to work from home. The Minister of Justice noted her support for retaining the working from home guidance. The interim Head of the Civil Service noted that the messaging being developed in England was to 'start to prepare to return to work', and suggested the ECT could develop proposals in line with this approach for consideration at the next Executive meeting; she also suggested that an update could be provided at a forthcoming

Executive meeting regarding the NICS 'New Ways of Working' project, following recent engagement with staff and trades unions.

13. Following discussion, and consideration of the advice provided by the Department of Health, CMO and CSA, the Executive agreed to a number of relaxations, and to the retention of current restrictions as detailed in Annex A. It was agreed that the Executive would consider the remaining restrictions at its next meeting.

E (21) 169 (C) COVID-19 – Longer term restrictions and public health measures discussion paper

14. The First Minister introduced this paper.

15. The Minister for the Economy stated his concern that continuing restrictions governing international travel and the disparity in entry requirements between the Republic of Ireland and Northern Ireland, would cause long-term harm to the tourism industry here.

16. Following correspondence from the Minister of Health, the First Minister and deputy First Minister suggested that preparatory work to scope out what would be required to launch a domestic COVID certification scheme, if the Executive decided to pursue such a policy, would be for the Department of Health to take forward. The interim Head of the Civil Service confirmed that TEO and the ECT could co-ordinate the development of policy proposals in this area for Executive agreement, but that the development and delivery of the consequent IT solution was not a TEO responsibility.

17. Following discussion, the Executive agreed to note Executive Memorandum E (21) 169 (C), and that they would return to the areas covered by the paper at the next Executive meeting.

The deputy First Minister chaired the remaining items in the agenda

AGENDA ITEM 4

Other issues requiring Executive agreement

Irrelevant & Sensitive

AGENDA ITEM 5

Urgent Decisions

20. The Executive noted the following urgent decisions, taken in accordance with paragraph 2.14 of the Ministerial Code.

Irrelevant & Sensitive

E (UP) (21) 23 High Street Scheme

AGENDA ITEM 6

Any Other Business

Irrelevant & Sensitive

Irrelevant & Sensitive

Date of next meeting

25. The date of the next scheduled meeting of the Executive in department/COVID format would be notified in due course.

E (21) 168 (C) COVID 19 - Ratification of Relaxation of Decisions: domestic settings, house parties, raves, night clubs, school settings, face coverings, working from home, socially distance, FE Colleges, school setting, live music/dancing, conference centres.

DECISIONS ON THURSDAY 12 AUGUST

Number	Proposal	Decision
1.	Domestic Setting Indoors – remove all restrictions on the numbers who can meet indoors at a private dwelling (Currently ten from three)	Retain
2.	Domestic Settings Outdoors – remove all restrictions on the numbers who can meet outdoors at a private dwelling (Currently 15 with no household limit)	Remove limit
3.	Remove the ban on large house parties from the regulations	Remove ban for outdoor parties Retain for indoor
4.	Remove bubbles/linked households (noting previous agreement to retain these until no 9 below, as otherwise restrictions in hospitality would increase with the removal of linked households).	Remove bubbles provisions
	Remove ban on raves - indoor or outdoor parties of more than 30 set to pulsing music	Remove for outdoor Retain for indoor
5.	Move use of face coverings from regulations to guidance only i.e. repeal the face coverings regulations in their entirety	No change
6.	Move requirement to SD from regulations to guidance only (including for public transport.)	No general change but agreed to public transport aspect
7.	Withdraw messaging to work from home.	No change

Number	Proposal	Decision
8.	<p>Remove all remaining restrictions on hospitality sector including:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> the limit of 6 per table, the need for table service, the ban on people moving around the premises and enable people to stand to consume food/drink (and consequently allowing e.g. snooker, games machines etc to restart), and remove restrictions on post marriage celebrations. 	<p>Limit of 6 to be removed, along with post marriage celebrations restrictions. Rest remains Engagement to take place</p>
9.	Remove the requirement to collect and retain visitor information from regulations	No change
10.	<p>Return to full face-to-face on-site delivery in FE colleges, universities and NSCs and to move to as 'normal' an academic learning environment as possible in advance of the new academic year.</p> <p>It is proposed that there is a removal of social distancing restrictions in classrooms (although still to be advised where practical and in line with Executive recommendations).</p>	Agreed to proceed
11.	Remove any then extant restrictions on live music and dancing in licensed and unlicensed premises which provide or sell food and drink (whether or not including intoxicating liquor) for consumption on the premises.	No change
12.	<p>This would include:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ➤ For indoor, live-performance events remove the current requirements: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> that entry to performances for audiences is only by ticket, purchased in advance; and that audience members must have allocated seats and remain seated throughout the performance. <p>The removal of these requirements will restore ticketing and seating arrangements to the discretion of event organisers, informed by industry norms and their established</p>	

Number	Proposal	Decision
	<p>risk assessment processes.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ➤ Remove the current restriction of live music to background or ambient levels in venues where that restriction currently applies ➤ Remove the restriction on audience dancing in indoor settings. 	
13.	Nightclubs permitted to reopen	No change
14.	Conference centres and exhibition centres permitted to reopen	Agreed to proceed
15.	<p>Schools return - Subject to the prevailing public health conditions, and in line with the removal of restrictions on society more generally, DE proposes that school “bubbles” and the requirement to wear face coverings in the classroom would be removed from guidance.</p> <p>Full return of extracurricular and support activities and youth services.</p>	<p>The requirement for school bubbles will be removed for the beginning of the school year with mitigating measures remaining in place.</p> <p>The requirement to wear a face covering will remain in place for the first six weeks of the new term and remain under review.</p> <p>However, for subjects where social distancing is possible, such as drama in a large hall, face coverings are no longer required. Further guidance will be issued to schools by the Department of Education.</p> <p>There will also be a full return to extra-curricular and support activities as well as youth services.</p>