

Written Ministerial Statement

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The Executive Office

DECISIONS OF THE EXECUTIVE ON 22 DECEMBER 2021

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Mr Givan (The First Minister) and Mrs O'Neill (The deputy First Minister): The Executive has today agreed a package of measures to limit the spread of the COVID-19 Omicron variant. These measures, and their effectiveness, will be kept under continuous review as the situation develops. The Department of Health will take forward the amending of regulations where required,

While there are still some uncertainties about the full impact of this new variant, we know from the evidence available that the infection rate here will rise sharply in the coming days and weeks. Omicron is now the dominant strain in new cases reported daily.

The scale of infection and the rate of transmission will be extremely challenging for our whole society and will result in significant pressures in hospitals, the Health and Social Care system and the wider workforce. An intervention is therefore required alongside the vitally important booster vaccine programme.

The Executive has agreed that from 06:00 on 26 December:

- Nightclubs will close.
- Dancing in all hospitality venues will not be allowed. (Does not apply to weddings or civil partnership celebrations)
- All indoor standing events will not be allowed.

From 06:00 on 27 December, the following apply:

- It is strongly recommended that household mixing should be reduced to a maximum of 3 households.
- There will be a legal requirement for businesses to take reasonable measures to achieve 2m social distancing in office spaces or, where this cannot be achieved, to provide alternative mitigations.
- It is strongly recommended that you should work from home where possible and where that is not possible that there should be regular workplace testing.
- There will be a statutory duty on businesses to take reasonable measures to promote compliance with face coverings requirements, with a grace period until 7 January before enforcement is implemented.
- The exemption of wearing a face covering where it causes severe stress will be removed and the onus of proving an exemption on medical grounds will be on the individual, with a grace period until 7 January before enforcement is implemented.
- There will be a legal duty on retail businesses to take all reasonable steps to minimize transmission of the spread of the virus, with a grace period until 7 January before enforcement is implemented.
- You will be required to be seated in all indoor hospitality settings with a maximum of 6 people, or 10 people from a single household allowed, at a table. (Children aged 12 and under are

not counted in the total. This requirement does not apply to weddings or civil partnership celebrations)

- Indoor seated and all outdoor events can proceed and it is strongly recommended that face coverings should be worn, LFD tests should be taken before attending events and there should be no multi-household travel in the same vehicle.

This package of measures has been informed by medical and scientific advice, based on the best evidence we have available at this time. It also takes into account wider economic and societal impacts.

We recognise the enormous strain being felt by businesses throughout this difficult period, including the hospitality sector and its workers.

The Executive is currently developing a financial support package based on the circumstances and challenges facing businesses. The Executive will be reconvening next week and will take into account any further interventions that may be required.

All measures will be kept under regular review in light of the public health situation and the most up to date data.

Given the unpredictability of the Omicron variant at this time, the Executive and our officials continue to plan for different scenarios so that we are in a position to respond rapidly to the emerging evidence should further steps be needed. The availability of necessary funding to resource plans is crucial. The Executive will continue to press Treasury for adequate financial support and the reintroduction of the furlough scheme to support workers and businesses should this be required.

We cannot emphasise strongly enough that we all have a part to play in stemming the spread of Omicron.

Getting vaccinated and taking up the booster is a vital defence against both transmission and serious disease. The Executive has put on record its appreciation of the healthcare teams in the vaccination centres, GP practices and local pharmacies for once again stepping up and delivering record numbers of jabs in recent days.

All Ministers are fully aware of the impact COVID-19 has had on families who have sacrificed so much over the past 20 months to keep themselves and their loved ones safe.

The Christmas holidays are a time for families and we ask that everyone does all they can to protect their loved ones.

In particular, everyone should take a lateral flow test before meeting someone from another household. If you are travelling over the holidays, you should take a test before starting your journey.

As we move in to one of the most difficult times we have faced throughout this pandemic, we are again asking everyone to look after themselves and each other by following these steps:

- Get your first and second vaccine doses, and get your booster;
- Work from home if possible;
- Limit your social contacts;
- Meet outdoors when possible;
- If meeting indoors, make sure the rooms are well ventilated;
- Wear a face covering in crowded indoor spaces;
- Take a lateral flow test before meeting others; and
- Practice good hand and respiratory hygiene.