

FROM THE MINISTER OF HEALTH



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Email: private.office@health-ni.gov.uk

Your Ref:

Our Ref: SUB-0443-2021

Date: 21st April 2021

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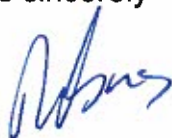
Dear *Members*,

DEBATE ON 23 MARCH 2021 ON THE HEALTH PROTECTION (CORONAVIRUS, RESTRICTIONS) (No. 2) (AMENDMENT No. 5) REGULATIONS (NORTHERN IRELAND) 2021

Please see copy letters in response to questions raised by Pam Cameron MLA, Cara Hunter MLA, Paula Bradshaw MLA, Carál Ní Chuilín MLA, Dolores Kelly MLA, Jonathan Buckley MLA and Gerry Carroll MLA during a debate on a Motion on the above matter on 23 March 2021.

I would be grateful if you could arrange for these letters to be deposited in the library for the benefit of all Members.

Yours sincerely



Robin Swann MLA
Minister of Health

FROM THE MINISTER OF HEALTH



Department of
Health

An Roinn Sláinte

Mánnystrie O Poustie

www.health-ni.gov.uk

Gerry Carroll MLA

By Email: gerry.carroll@mla.niassembly.gov.uk

Castle Buildings
Stormont Estate
BELFAST, BT4 3SQ
Tel: 028 9052 2556
Email: private.office@health-ni.gov.uk

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Dear *Gerry*,

THE HEALTH PROTECTION (CORONAVIRUS, RESTRICTIONS) (No. 2) (AMENDMENT No. 5) REGULATIONS (NORTHERN IRELAND) 2021 - QUERIES RAISED DURING THE MOTION DEBATE

Thank you for your contribution to the Assembly debate on 23 March 2021 on the above Regulations. I promised to write in relation to the queries you raised.

You expressed concern about lifting restrictions too early and ensuring that there are plans to reviews restrictions if more are need. As an Executive we are committed to doing all we can to avoid the need for cycles of repeated, periodic severe restrictions that have been required so far. While there are uncertainties and there will be challenges, we are determined to do things differently in 2021 and we aspire to create an environment in which fewer restrictions are needed.

We will continually monitor a broad range of data, information and statistical indicators to inform our decisions on whether to relax restrictions, or whether we need to return to strengthening them. Our analysis will be based on the World Health Organization's conditions for adjusting restrictions and will include maintaining the Rt number below; Health Service capacity for COVID and non-COVID; test, trace and protect data and intelligence; population immunity, including vaccination programme progress; and the emergence of new variants.

In December 2020, the Executive established an Executive COVID Taskforce, to be chaired by the interim Head of the Civil Service, to support a coherent and comprehensive response to the pandemic going forward. The Taskforce includes a number of work streams relating to adherence and compliance, protecting the public, strategic communications and recovery.

On 2 March this year, the Executive published its planned pathway out of the current COVID-19 restrictions. The Pathway is supported by a revised process for a 4-week Executive review cycle. The new process also permits a more urgent consideration of proposals from Departments deemed to have urgent or compelling reasons to fall outside the four week review process.

In this new process, the management of the changes to the restrictions regulations moved to the COVID Strategy Group in the Executive Office (TEO).

TEO now hold the lead responsibility and operational management of the process leading to Executive decisions on the ongoing need for restrictions and the requirement to amend the regulations. This responsibility includes receiving and managing all proposals from Executive departments, management of the decision making process and facilitating consultation with departments on the drafting of amendment regulations. This work is supported by a Cross-Departmental Working Group, chaired by the Director of the TEO COVID-19 Taskforce team with membership from all 9 Departments and key stakeholders, including local government and PSNI.

On the question of the policing of protests, this is not a matter for the Department of Health but is an operational matter for the Chief Constable, with whom you may wish to raise your concerns, and also with the Minister of Justice.

You asked about support for those who are self-isolating. To date, the Executive has provided over £300m to alleviate the hardship experienced by individuals and communities during the pandemic covering a wide range of needs. These include: a non-repayable Discretionary Support Self-Isolation living expenses grant; the provision of more than 150,000 food boxes to those in need; and interventions to support our homeless and provide protection for tenants.

The Discretionary Support Self-Isolation living expenses grant is tailored to individual and family circumstances with no limit to the amount that can be awarded. More than one grant can be paid if people need to self-isolate again and there is no limit to the number of grants that can be claimed.

Turning to your question about pay, the pay round for 2021/22 for nurses and other healthcare staff has not yet been finalised. The one per cent referred to is included in the evidence submitted to the NHS Pay Review Body by the Department of Health and Social Care in England, which stated that any award above 1% will require re-prioritisation. This is not an offer of a pay award.

Any decision on a pay award for NI health workers will be taken after the pay review bodies make their recommendations. I do not intend to pre-empt those recommendations. NHSPRB is expected to publish its report in May 2021.

Our pay award decisions can also only be taken in the context of a wider public sector pay policy set by the Department of Finance.

I trust that this response helps to answer the points you raised.

Yours sincerely



Robin Swann MLA
Minister of Health

FROM THE MINISTER OF HEALTH



Department of
Health

An Roinn Sláinte

Máinystrie O Poustie

www.health-ni.gov.uk

Jonathan Buckley MLA

By Email: jonathan.buckley@mla.niassembly.gov.uk

Castle Buildings
Stormont Estate
BELFAST, BT4 3SQ
Tel: 028 9052 2556
Email: private.office@health-ni.gov.uk

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Dear *Jonathan,*

THE HEALTH PROTECTION (CORONAVIRUS, RESTRICTIONS) (No. 2) (AMENDMENT No. 5) REGULATIONS (NORTHERN IRELAND) 2021 - QUERIES RAISED DURING THE MOTION DEBATE

Thank you for your contribution to the Assembly debate on 23 March 2021 on the above Regulations. I promised to write in relation to the queries you raised.

You asked about making vaccines available to our neighbours in the Republic of Ireland. The vaccines used in Northern Ireland are provided by the UK Government. The Joint Committee on Vaccination and Immunisation (JCVI), an independent expert group, has recommended that the HSC offers vaccination first to those at highest risk of catching the infection and of suffering serious complications if they catch the infection. This includes frontline health and social care workers, care home residents and staff, and those with certain clinical conditions. When more vaccine becomes available, the vaccines will be offered to other people at risk as soon as possible. It is for the UK Government, which supplies the vaccines, to decide to which counties outside the UK it might offer vaccine.

I understand the point you made about helping the economy, including the hospitality and wedding sectors, to plan ahead. We also understand the wish of people to travel and acknowledge the importance of tourism and hospitality to the economy.

On 15 April the Executive decided that from 23 April close contact services can resume. From 30 April, we have agreed to:

- Increase the numbers permitted to gather in Domestic Setting Outdoors – to 15 people from no more than 3 households
- Reopen all of retail;
- Reopen and permit overnight stays in self-contained tourist accommodation for one household only;
- Reopen unlicensed premises, outdoors only with a maximum of 6 people from 2 households per table and contact details recorded;
- Reopen licensed premises, including social clubs, outdoors only, limited to 6 people from no more than 2 households and contact details recorded;

- Remove the curfew on takeaways;
- Remove the curfew on off licences; and
- Permit individual activities in gyms, swimming pools and other large venues – including with a carer and to allow 1-2-1 training/coaching with social distancing.

From 24 May we hope to be able to make the following changes, although that date will be reviewed nearer the time in light of developments in disease activity over the coming month:

- Reopen unlicensed and licensed premises indoors with mitigations
- Reopen the remainder of Tourist Accommodation
- Allow visits indoors in Domestic Settings
- Reopen indoor visitor attractions; and
- Resume indoor group exercise and training in numbers limited to suit the venue.

In December 2020, the Executive established an Executive COVID Taskforce, to be chaired by the interim Head of the Civil Service, to support a coherent and comprehensive response to the pandemic going forward. The Taskforce includes a number of work streams relating to adherence and compliance, protecting the public, strategic communications and recovery.

On 2 March this year, the Executive published its planned pathway out of the current COVID-19 restrictions. The Pathway is supported by a revised process for a 4-week Executive review cycle. The new process also permits a more urgent consideration of proposals from Departments deemed to have urgent or compelling reasons to fall outside the four week review process.

In this new process, the management of the changes to the restrictions regulations moved to the COVID Strategy Group in the Executive Office (TEO).

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Yours sincerely



Robin Swann MLA
Minister of Health

FROM THE MINISTER OF HEALTH



Dolores Kelly MLA

By Email: dolores.kelly@mla.niassembly.gov.uk

Castle Buildings
Stormont Estate
BELFAST, BT4 3SQ
Tel: 028 9052 2556
Email: private.office@health-ni.gov.uk

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Date: 21st April 2021

Dear *Dolores,*

THE HEALTH PROTECTION (CORONAVIRUS, RESTRICTIONS) (No. 2) (AMENDMENT No. 5) REGULATIONS (NORTHERN IRELAND) 2021 - QUERIES RAISED DURING THE MOTION DEBATE

Thank you for your contribution to the Assembly debate on 23 March 2021 on the above Regulations. I promised to write in relation to the queries you raised.

During the debate you highlighted the need to support health and social care staff, especially their mental health and well-being. Throughout the pandemic, staff have pulled together to help tackle the virus and continue to work tirelessly to ensure that our patients, clients, staff and public are as safe as possible. It is only through the ongoing teamwork of our HSC staff across our services that we are able to tackle the spread of COVID-19 (coronavirus). Part of the reason for continued restrictions is to protect our health service and staff which has had such a tough year. We need to give the service, including the staff, the chance to recover.

I very much share your concerns staff welfare. Support for staff is available through line managers, human resources and occupational health departments, chaplaincies, and through trade unions, professional bodies and other staff networks. Guidance and answers to frequently asked questions from HSC staff about the virus and staff issues is available at:

[Questions and answers for HSC staff | HSC Public Health Agency \(hscni.net\)](#)

On the question of mental health, the COVID-19 pandemic, and the ensuing restrictions, have been difficult and stressful for all of us. I wish to reinforce that there is support and help available to anyone who needs it. Information on looking after mental health and the support which is available across Northern Ireland can be found at www.mindingyourhead.info.

The COVID Wellbeing NI part of the website contains a number of direct actions which can be taken to provide help and support during this difficult time. This includes free online Stress Control classes and a new apps library to assist people to self-help. The Minding Your Head website also contains a directory of services of local community and voluntary

groups who are available to help with a range of issues. This support and these initiatives remain in place as we continue to battle COVID-19 and the impact of the pandemic on our communities' mental health. Mental health services are also available to those who need it and can be accessed through GPs.

You also asked about equestrian centres and show jumping and when they might resume. On 15 April the Executive decided that the following can resume from 30 April: equine Assisted Therapy and Learning (EATL) on an indoor and outdoor basis in gatherings of up to 30 people; outdoor sport organised by a club, individual or individuals affiliated will be extended to include squad training; and competitive outdoor sport organised by a club, individual or individuals affiliated, with participant numbers not exceeding 100 and no spectators permitted.

You also asked about the visiting policy for long-term patients in a hospital setting as opposed to a care home and when it might be relaxed. I have no doubt that the past 12 months have been hard, and that hospital visiting restrictions have been particularly challenging. We keep this under constant review as we seek to balance patient and family needs with transmission risk. The current visiting guidance is available at: <http://www.health-ni.gov.uk/Covid-19-visiting-guidance>

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I trust that this response helps to answer the points you raised.

Yours sincerely



Robin Swann MLA
Minister of Health

FROM THE MINISTER OF HEALTH



Carál Ní Chuilín MLA

By Email: caral.nichuilin@mla.niassembly.gov.uk

Castle Buildings
Stormont Estate
BELFAST, BT4 3SQ
Tel: 028 9052 2556
Email: private.office@health-ni.gov.uk

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Dear *Caral*.

THE HEALTH PROTECTION (CORONAVIRUS, RESTRICTIONS) (No. 2) (AMENDMENT No. 5) REGULATIONS (NORTHERN IRELAND) 2021 - QUERIES RAISED DURING THE MOTION DEBATE

Thank you for your contribution to the Assembly debate on 23 March 2021 on the above Regulations. I promised to write in relation to the queries you raised about people bringing new variants into Northern Ireland when travelling.

The protection of the lives and welfare of everyone is paramount, and no effort will be spared in that regard. People travelling to Northern Ireland from outside the Common Travel Area (GB, ROI, Isle of Man and Channel Islands) must complete an online UK passenger locator form, provide evidence of a negative coronavirus test (taken within 72 hours of departure) and self-isolate for 10 days. Those arriving from a 'red list' country must enter mandatory hotel quarantine for 10 days.

A COVID-19 test is not required at this time for travel within the CTA. However, people entering Northern Ireland from other parts of the CTA are asked to self-isolate if they are here for more than 24 hours, in the same way as those coming to Northern Ireland from abroad. This is a Public Health requirement, rather than a legal obligation, and is designed to mitigate against the potential spread of variants which may be prevalent in other parts of the UK.

We know that many travellers arrive here via the Republic of Ireland. There is a continuing conversation between the Executive and the Irish Government and both Chief Medical Officers from the Republic and Northern Ireland are in regular contact. Our Department of Health counterparts in the Republic of Ireland are contacting by text message all passengers arriving there from outside the CTA and who have indicated that they are travelling north, to remind them of the requirement to complete the UK passenger locator form and direct them to the current regulations in Northern Ireland.

As restrictions are changing frequently, travellers should monitor news and government information sites to ensure they are aware of the latest developments. The NI Direct website <https://www.nidirect.gov.uk/articles/coronavirus-covid-19-regulations-guidance->

what-restrictions-mean-you provides advice regarding any travel restrictions which are currently in place across the UK.

I trust that this response helps to answer the points you raised.

Yours sincerely

A handwritten signature in blue ink, appearing to read 'Robin Swann', is positioned above the printed name.

Robin Swann MLA
Minister of Health

FROM THE MINISTER OF HEALTH



Paula Bradshaw MLA

By Email: paula.bradshaw@mla.niassembly.gov.uk

Castle Buildings
Stormont Estate
BELFAST, BT4 3SQ
Tel: 028 9052 2556
Email: private.office@health-ni.gov.uk

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Date: 21st April 2021

Dear *Paula,*

THE HEALTH PROTECTION (CORONAVIRUS, RESTRICTIONS) (No. 2) (AMENDMENT No. 5) REGULATIONS (NORTHERN IRELAND) 2021 - QUERIES RAISED DURING THE MOTION DEBATE

Thank you for your contribution to the Assembly debate on 23 March 2021 on the above Regulations. I promised to write in relation to the queries you raised about crowding in supermarkets and about social distancing at food vans and coffee stands in parks and public spaces.

As restrictions are relaxed, everyone must continue to follow the advice to reduce transmission. The most powerful tool we have at our disposal in the fight against this virus is our own behaviour and the actions each and every one of us take to protect ourselves and others. Increasing the level of adherence to the public health guidance remains one of the most important factors in controlling the transmission of the virus and allowing us to return to more normal ways of living.

I appreciate the thought, time and expense that business owners have given to putting additional safety measures in place, but businesses must also continue to take necessary precautions as restrictions ease to remain COVID secure and protect employees and customers. Relevant Departments, organisations and local government will continue to provide advice and support.

We want to work with the public and with businesses in a partnership to get us through this. We do not want to have to use penalties, but we recognise in some cases that is the only way we can achieve results to help protect us all. We will therefore continue to look at whether those with an enforcement role need additional fines and penalties available to them.

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On 2 March this year, the Executive published its planned pathway out of the current COVID-19 restrictions. The Pathway is supported by a revised process for a 4-week Executive review cycle. The new process also permits a more urgent consideration of proposals from Departments deemed to have urgent or compelling reasons to fall outside the four week review process.

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I trust that this response helps to answer the points you raised.



Robin Swann MLA
Minister of Health

FROM THE MINISTER OF HEALTH



Cara Hunter MLA

By Email: cara.hunter@mha.niassembly.gov.uk

Castle Buildings
Stormont Estate
BELFAST, BT4 3SQ
Tel: 028 9052 2556
Email: private.office@health-ni.gov.uk

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Dear *Cara,*

THE HEALTH PROTECTION (CORONAVIRUS, RESTRICTIONS) (No. 2) (AMENDMENT No. 5) REGULATIONS (NORTHERN IRELAND) 2021 - QUERIES RAISED DURING THE MOTION DEBATE

Thank you for your contribution to the Assembly debate on 23 March 2021 on the above Regulations. I promised to write in relation to the queries you raised.

You asked about extending 'click and collect', and about ensuring support for businesses continues, and you called for the reopening of gyms. As an Executive, we will continue to engage with all the sectors and work in partnership for a safe re-opening when the time is right. The Executive is committed to a four-week review cycle, where we will monitor the data on a range of health and societal impacts, before considering what relaxations can be made safely.

We have always said that we will not have restrictions in place longer than they need to. We are moving in the right direction and it is important to bring optimism and certainty to this improving picture. Every one of us has a part to play in maintaining progress – by getting vaccinated when our turn comes and by sticking with the actions that have served us well for the past year – including social distancing, wearing a mask, washing hands. It is also vital to remember that outdoor settings are significantly safer than indoors.

On 15 April the First and deputy First Minister made a Statement to the Assembly on the Executive's decision to ease restrictions. Among these are that from 30 April, we have agreed to reopen all retail. From 30 April individual activities in gyms, swimming pools and other large venues will be permitted – including with a carer and to allow one to one training/coaching with social distancing. From 24 May we hope to resume indoor group exercise and training in numbers limited to suit the venue.

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I trust that this response helps to answer the points you raised.



Robin Swann MLA
Minister of Health

FROM THE MINISTER OF HEALTH



Pam Cameron MLA

By Email: pam.cameron@mla.niassembly.gov.uk

Castle Buildings
Stormont Estate
BELFAST, BT4 3SQ
Tel: 028 9052 2556
Email: private.office@health-ni.gov.uk

Your Ref:

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Dear Pam,

THE HEALTH PROTECTION (CORONAVIRUS, RESTRICTIONS) (No. 2) (AMENDMENT No. 5) REGULATIONS (NORTHERN IRELAND) 2021 - QUERIES RAISED DURING THE MOTION DEBATE

Thank you for your contribution to the Assembly debate on 23 March 2021 on the above Regulations. I promised to write in relation to the queries you raised.

During the debate you referred to the increase, to take effect from 12 April, to allow up to six people (including children) from no more than two households to meet up outdoors in a private garden, while maintaining social distancing. You asked that we consider increasing that to take account of the needs of larger families.

We have always said that we will not have restrictions in place longer than they need to. We are moving in the right direction and it is important to bring optimism and certainty to this improving picture. Every one of us has a part to play in maintaining progress – by getting vaccinated when our turn comes and by sticking with the actions that have served us well for the past year – including social distancing, wearing a mask, washing hands. It is also vital to remember that outdoor settings are significantly safer than indoors.

On 15 April the First and deputy First Minister made a Statement to the Assembly on the Executive's decision to ease restrictions. Among these are that from 30 April, the number of people permitted to gather in domestic setting outdoors will increase to 15 people from no more than 3 households.

In December 2020, the Executive established an Executive COVID Taskforce, to be chaired by the interim Head of the Civil Service, to support a coherent and comprehensive response to the pandemic going forward. The Taskforce includes a number of work streams relating to adherence and compliance, protecting the public, strategic communications and recovery.

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