

From the Minister of Finance

Matthew O'Toole MLA and Diane Forsythe MLA
Finance Committee
By email

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Our reference:

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Matthew, Diane, a chairde

EXPEDITED CONSIDERATION OF THE DEATHS AND STILL BIRTHS (SIGNING OF CERTIFICATES) REGULATIONS (NI) 2026

I am writing to ask you to consider expediting your deliberations on the Deaths and Still-Births (Signing of Certificates) Regulations (NI) 2026, prepared by my Department, so as bring effect to the Deaths, Still-births and Baby Loss Bill as quickly as possible.

Detail

As the Committee is aware, GRO currently conducts the remote registration of deaths and still-births under the provisions of the Coronavirus Act 2020 (Registration of Deaths and Still-Births) (Extension) (No. 2) Order (NI) 2025. The powers made under this Order are due to expire on 24 March 2026.

The Deaths, Still-Births and Baby Loss Bill completed its Final Stage in the Assembly on 2 December 2025. Among other matters, the provisions of this Bill include permanent powers to replace those of the Coronavirus Act 2020 in relation to remote registrations.

However, despite the nearly three-month period since the conclusion of Final Stage, my Department is yet to receive Royal Assent for this Bill. This delay in the enactment of the Bill is putting pressure on the implementation timetable for the powers in the Bill. There is now very little time left to both receive Royal Assent for the Bill, and to bring the required supplementary regulations – the Deaths and Still-Births (Signing of

Certificates) Regulations (NI) 2026 – into effect before the current Coronavirus Act 2020 Extension Order expires.

The latest information provided to my officials is that Royal Assent is now expected by the beginning of next week (commencing 23 February 2026) at the latest. The NIO have informed us that King Charles has signed the Bill. NIO are arranging its collection from the Palace and its delivery to the Courts to be sealed this week.

Request

As the Finance Committee has noted on several occasions, it is not desirable to continue to depend on the provisions of the Coronavirus Act 2020. It is my strong preference not to bring forward a further Extension Order for these powers if this can be avoided, and not to use valuable Committee and Assembly time to consider a further temporary ‘stop-gap’ measure when we have recently agreed equivalent permanent powers.

To avoid a further Extension Order, I would be grateful if the Finance Committee would consider setting aside the newly established four-week ‘evidence gathering’ period in advance of considering these regulations.

A draft copy of these regulations is attached for your information and to inform your deliberations.

By providing these in draft form for the Committee to consider ahead of Royal Assent, I hope that you will be willing and able to formally consider these regulations at your meeting on 25 February 2026.

Subject to your considerations, this timetable would enable the required regulations to come into effect on 18 March 2026, in advance of the expiry of our current Coronavirus Act Extension Order.

I am grateful to the Committee for their continued support for this Bill. The Registrar General, Dr Philp Wales would be happy to meet with you both and provide any additional briefing or information required.

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**JOHN O’DOWD MLA
MINISTER OF FINANCE**