

# Written Ministerial Statement

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## The Executive Office

### COVID-19: LOCALISED RESTRICTIONS

*Published on Thursday 1 October 2020.*

**The First Minister and deputy First Minister:** We are writing to provide Members with an update on the course of the Coronavirus epidemic and recent decisions that we as First Minister and deputy First Minister, along with the Northern Ireland Executive, have taken to limit its spread in the Derry City and Strabane District Council through the introduction of further localised restrictions.

Amendments to the Health Protection (Coronavirus, Restrictions) (No. 2) Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2020 published on 30 September imposed increased restrictions on venues where alcohol may be consumed across Northern Ireland.

A decision was made at the Executive today that further increased restrictions are required in the Derry City and Strabane District Council as a result of an alarming increase in the incidence rate of the virus in this area.

On 29 September, just two days ago, a statement was made on additional restrictions to the hospitality industry as a result of the increasing confirmed COVID-19 cases.

These were presented in the context of the backdrop against which decisions in relation to the hospitality restrictions had been made and it sent a stark message – transmission rates of the COVID-19 virus through household contacts and informal interactions in the community are increasing significantly.

The increase in the number of confirmed positive cases is not because more tests are taking place. As the Health Minister and the Chief Medical Advisor said in their media statement yesterday, the increase we see in confirmed cases is because the transmission rate has increased and is continuing to increase.

Since the statement made to the Assembly on Tuesday:

- There has been a further increase in the daily number of people tested positive. Yesterday the number was 424.
- Unfortunately, there have also been 2 further deaths bringing the death toll to 581.
- Yesterday, there were 70 Covid patients in hospitals across Northern Ireland, with nine in intensive care. This brings the number of hospital patients to nearly 25% of peak levels during wave 1.

There is evidence of widespread community transmission in several parts of Northern Ireland.

However and of great concern, the Derry City and Strabane District Council has an incidence of 323 new Covid-19 cases per 100,000 population as of yesterday afternoon. This compares with an incidence of 133 cases per 100,000 population in Belfast, the next highest area of incidence.

If allowed to continue this will inevitably lead to an increase in hospital admissions and deaths, which we must try to minimise. This is a cause for alarm and for definitive action to be taken.

Given the clear evidence of significant and continuing community transmission, and the proximity to Donegal where additional restrictions are already in place, the Executive has agreed to introduce a range of additional restrictions in the Derry City and Strabane District Council area as soon as practically possible.

This decision has not been taken lightly but is considered necessary and proportionate to reduce the accelerating transmission of the virus in this area.

A number of measures will be imposed by regulations. Those are that:

- No indoor gatherings should take place where people from different households are mixed, with certain exemptions in place for: weddings, wedding receptions, funerals and post funeral gatherings (existing restrictions and strict social distancing requirements continue to apply); services of worship in places of worship; indoor sport for individual training only (e.g. no exercise classes); workplaces where working from home is not possible; educational settings; managed youth and childcare services.
- Hospitality venues can remain open for take-away, delivery and outdoor dining only. Wet pubs can serve customers outdoors only. Existing restrictions for outdoor settings will continue to apply. Hotels can only provide services to residents as per previous restrictions. A support package for affected venues will be brought forward.
- All museums, galleries and cultural attractions must remain closed and libraries can operate a call and collect service.
- Outdoor gatherings are permitted, up to a maximum of 15 people only. There cannot be gatherings of more than 15 people even with a risk assessment.
- Sports training and sporting events are exempt but they must take place without any spectators.

**These restrictions will be in place for a time limited period of a minimum of two weeks, and will be reviewed weekly.**

In addition, the following measures are recommended in guidance:

- People living in Derry and Strabane local government district area are required to avoid all unnecessary travel. Similarly, people should only travel to the area where it is absolutely necessary.
- People working in the Derry City and Strabane District Council should continue to work from home where possible.
- Schools, Early Learning and Childcare services in the local government district area will remain open.
- Adult and Higher Education Institutions will also stay open. Managed youth settings will remain open. However, in these settings, protective measures should be reviewed and steps should be taken to limit congregation as much as possible.
- People are asked to walk, cycle or use private transport, shared only with members of their household where possible. Where public transport is taken, social distancing should be observed and face coverings should be worn.

Guidance will be provided to people living in the Derry City and Strabane District Council – this is advice they are strongly urged to follow to reduce the risk of virus transmission.

The additional measures proposed for the Derry City and Strabane District Council complement those imposed in Donegal since the 28th of September– what happens in Donegal impacts on the Derry City and Strabane District Council area and vice versa.

The restrictions will be in place for two weeks in the first instance, and will be reviewed on a weekly basis.

The Executive recognises that this will have an adverse impact on businesses and the local economy and is planning a support package, the details of which will be announced as soon as possible. We will also be making further representations to the Treasury on the need for greater support measures for our economy.

We know that localised restrictions are an established method of suppressing the virus. Returning to the previous lockdown is not where any of us want to go and that means taking effective localised action now.

The restrictions announced today will be kept under active review and will stay in place no longer than is necessary.

In addition, the level of fines for breaching the restrictions in place, not just in Derry City and Strabane District Council but across Northern Ireland is under review. The outcome of this will be made available presently.

This is a tough time for everyone and the Executive is conscious of the toll it is taking on our society, particularly those who will be the subject of the enhanced restrictions. However, we all know that doing nothing is not an option – we have to protect our fellow citizens and our health service.

We repeat the simple message made on Tuesday to the Assembly - if each and every one of us does our bit we will help bring the epidemic to an end sooner rather than later and by doing that, save lives.

A key aspect is complying with the measures that are put in place to help curb the spread of the virus.