

# Written Ministerial Statement

*The content of this written ministerial statement is as received at the time from the Minister. It has not been subject to the official reporting (Hansard) process.*

## Department of Health

### REVIEW OF HEALTH PROTECTION REGULATIONS

*Published at 6.00 pm on 18 February 2021.*

**Mr Swann (The Minister of Health):** Mr Speaker, as Members will be aware the No. 2 Regulations, as amended, required the Department of Health to review the need for the restrictions and requirements in the Regulations on or before 18th February 2021.

That review, the seventh, was guided by the four principles that the Executive agreed in May 2020: focus on purpose; necessity; proportionality; reliance on evidence. The purposes of the Regulations are (i) to protect the health of the population by limiting the spread of COVID-19 infection in order to minimise the numbers of cases and deaths, and (ii) to ensure as far as possible that the health care system has the capacity to care for COVID-19 patients and care for all patients, present and future.

On the basis of this review, taking into account in particular the ongoing (albeit decreasing) hospital pressures and community transmission, the threat of new variants emerging and the as yet partial vaccination coverage, I concluded that the current restrictions and requirements are a necessary and proportionate response to the epidemic at this point in time. This conclusion was supported by the Chief Medical Officer and the Deputy Chief Scientific Advisor. This was subsequently supported by the Executive earlier today.

Based on current data, with the exception of the three amendments highlighted below, it was further agreed by the Executive today to extend the current restrictions for a further 4 weeks, until 1 April, with the next formal review on or before 18 March. The timing of the next formal review will allow the Executive to make decisions well in advance of the Easter weekend.

As the overall situation improves, the need to more frequently revisit the proportionality and necessity of the restrictions increases, bearing in mind that as always we are able to make amendments between the formal reviews if they are indicated based on emerging evidence. This will allow the Executive to consider again additional amendments in advance of the next formal review in four weeks. These proposed timeframes balance the need for caution while also maintaining vigilance on the necessity and proportionality of the restrictions given their wide-reaching impact on the lives of residents of Northern Ireland and on our economy.

The three amendments made to the regulations are summarised below.

#### **‘Click and Collect’ for non-essential retail**

The Minister for Economy made a proposal for the introduction of contactless ‘Click and Collect’ for non-essential retail businesses. The introduction of limited ‘Click and Collect’ services from Monday 8th March was agreed for baby equipment shops, clothing and footwear shops, and electrical goods shops, recognising that over the course of these protracted restrictions these items have effectively become essential.

#### **Public inquiries**

The Department for Infrastructure had requested that an amendment to the regulations be made to allow them to progress a public inquiry in Nightingale Court facilities. The objective of the proposed amendment is to allow the Department for Infrastructure (or any other government department) to recommence face-to-face hearings using Nightingale Court facilities, ensuring that the objectives of the Department’s regulatory regime can be restored.

### **Outdoor gatherings (not in private dwellings)**

I was mindful of the need to provide some additional flexibility to the population in respect of outdoor gatherings excluding private dwellings. I therefore recommended that effective from the 8th March the limit of people (including children under 12 years) was increased from 6 to 10, from no more than 2 households. The restrictions on all other outdoor gatherings including sporting events remain unchanged.