

Written Ministerial Statement

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The Executive Office

DECISIONS OF THE EXECUTIVE ON COVID-19, 26 JULY 2021

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Mr Givan (The First Minister) and Mrs O'Neill (The deputy First Minister): A special meeting of the Executive took place today to discuss hospital waiting lists.

Further consideration was also given to proposed relaxations to the Covid-19 restrictions.

Waiting lists

Tackling the hospital waiting list crisis is a collective priority for the Executive.

We received an update today from the Department of Health on the current situation and discussed plans to improve outcomes for patients.

When the institutions were restored in January 2020 on the basis of the New Decade, New Approach agreement, all parties in the Executive agreed that transforming our health service was an immediate priority. This included a commitment to address waiting times, which had been building over many years.

The Covid pandemic has compounded pressure on the hospital system and sadly, this has resulted in even more people waiting longer for the care and treatment they need. This is not an acceptable situation to the Executive and all Ministers today reinforced their commitment to supporting the Health Minister and the wider Health and Social Care System in implementing a programme of investment and reform.

It has been necessary that, as an Executive, our focus has been on managing the response to pandemic for the last 18 months, but now is the time to refocus on this crucial issue and take the action needed to reduce waiting times and ensure people get the treatment they need as quickly as possible.

We understand the frustration felt by all those waiting for appointments, particularly those who have been waiting for long periods of time. We know the very real impact this can have on everyday life. We want to give all those waiting an assurance that we will do all we can to improve the situation.

We also put on record our heartfelt gratitude to the HSC workforce for their efforts to provide care and services for patients in the most challenging circumstances.

Relaxations to Covid-19 restrictions

The Executive gave further consideration to a number of proposed relaxations to the Covid-19 restrictions and received further advice from our health and scientific advisers.

The Executive has decided that the following easements will come into effect from 18:00 on 27 July:

Concert Venues, Theatres and Other Indoor Venues (seated)

Audiences will be permitted to return to performances.

Live music will be permitted for rehearsals and performances, with no restriction to background or ambient levels of volume.

Entry to performances for audiences will be by ticket only. Tickets must be purchased in advance of the performance.

Audiences for indoor events must have allocated seating and remain seated (unless using facilities) and are not permitted to dance.

Social distancing of 1m required.

At this time it is not possible to permit such events for other indoor facilities contained within larger premises. For example, function rooms of hotels are not included in today's decisions.

Indoor Domestic Settings

Up to ten people from no more than three households will be allowed to meet in a home. If one household has ten members, the maximum is increased to 15 from no more than three households. Children 12 and under are not included.

Face Coverings in places of worship

The requirement for the wearing of face coverings in places of worship, during acts of worship, will be moved from regulations into guidance only. Face coverings will still be legally required when entering and exiting the building and will be strongly advised whilst singing or moving around the premises.

MOT Centres

The vehicle can be shared by the examiner and customer for 5 minutes with both wearing a face covering, for the most part the customer will be diagonally opposite the examiner while the vehicle is being driven and the examiner conducts the brake roller test. However, for the small number of two seat vehicles, the customer will be side by side with the examiner with both wearing a face covering.

The requirement for vehicle examiners to wear face coverings at all times in the test hall will be removed as this increases the risk of trips and slips in a semi-industrial environment.

Customers will be permitted to be seated safely in the test hall for approximately 8 minutes, socially distanced and wearing a face covering, while the underbody inspection of the vehicle is being conducted.

The remaining issues still awaiting ratification will be discussed further at Thursday's Executive meeting when we expect to have a clearer picture of the link between cases and subsequent hospitalisation.

We urge everyone who can, to please get both doses of the vaccine as soon as possible to help protect yourself and others. Information is available at nidirect.gov.uk/covidvaccine as to where you can walk in for a jab or book an appointment.

As always, we also ask everyone to continue following the public health advice to help keep yourself, and everyone else, safe.