

Written Ministerial Statement

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The Executive Office

DECISIONS OF THE EXECUTIVE ON COVID-19, 7 OCTOBER 2021

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Mr Givan (The First Minister) and Mrs O'Neill (The deputy First Minister): The Executive has today agreed a number of gradual and proportionate relaxations to the current Coronavirus restrictions, informed by medical and scientific advice.

The use of mitigating measures is key in easing restrictions and engagement has taken place across sectors on the partnership effort required to facilitate relaxations.

14 October relaxations

From next Thursday, October 14, the Executive has agreed that:

- Further relaxations around the numbers permitted in private dwellings and a move away from the maximum number of people allowed to gather from 15 from four households to an overall cap of 30.
- The requirement for audience members to be seated when watching performances in indoor venues will be removed.

The regulations in relation to large house parties and raves will remain in place and are still not permitted.

The Executive has also agreed a further package of relaxations from October 31. Over the next few weeks, further work will be carried out with the sectors to prepare for appropriate mitigations to be put in place in advance of the regulations being lifted.

31 October relaxations

The Executive has agreed a date of October 31 for the following relaxations, with mitigations in place:

- Allow people to move around hospitality premises and indoor venues, including being able to stand to have a drink and eat food.
- The restriction on indoor dancing will be lifted.
- The need to maintain social distancing in hospitality settings, such as pubs and restaurants will move to guidance. Whilst the legal requirement for social distancing will now be removed, people are asked to keep close face-to-face contact to a minimum at all times.
- Nightclubs will be permitted to reopen.

Mitigations

These relaxations rely on the adoption and implementation of measures that will help reduce the transmission of the virus and allow people to gather more safely in settings that would otherwise be considered higher risk.

Extensive engagement has taken place with the arts, entertainment and hospitality sectors and there has been a positive response to taking additional steps to ensure the safety of customers, staff and the wider community.

It is strongly recommended that venues and event organisers require individuals to demonstrate one of the following:

- Proof of having been fully vaccinated for more than two weeks;
- Proof of a negative PCR test or rapid lateral flow test taken within 48 hours of entry to a venue (a lateral flow test taken at home will need to be reported into the public reporting system); or
- Evidence of a positive PCR test result for COVID-19 within the previous 180 days and following completion of the self-isolation period.

Some venues are already implementing these measures to help keep people safe and provide assurances to those attending their venues that all appropriate measures are being taken to protect them.

As we step our way out of restrictions, it requires both personal and sectoral responsibility. This is very much a partnership effort and the Executive Covid Taskforce will work with sectors in advance of the regulations being lifted to ensure the appropriate mitigations are in place.

Autumn Winter Covid contingency planning

The Executive also considered its Autumn Winter Covid Contingency Planning and what options it has at its disposal in the event of rising cases numbers or unsustainable pressures on our hospitals.

Options include:

- Having available the ability to deliver COVID-status certification in certain settings if it was considered desirable and appropriate;
- The potential to tighten arrangements for self-isolation or minimum social distancing in higher risk settings; and
- Fresh, cohesive messaging about safe behaviours focusing on maximizing vaccine uptake, the need for effective ventilation and the importance of wearing a face covering, particularly in crowded and enclosed settings.

These options will build on the measures we have retained to help reduce the spread of the virus, those being flexible and hybrid working, the requirement for businesses to carry out risk assessments and record visitor and attendee information, and the requirement to wear face covering in certain settings, such as in shops, shopping centres and public transport.

Personal responsibility and safer choices

We have come a long way through exceptionally challenging times – all of our lives have been changed in previously unimaginable ways.

But we have made great progress and we have been able to remove the vast majority of the necessary measures that stopped us doing things we once took for granted.

We would again like to take this opportunity to ask everyone to continue making safer choices and follow the public health advice. Take up the vaccine; keep washing your hands, wear a face covering

as required and open a window when with others. This will help to keep you and others safe, and therefore help reduce the pressure on our health system as we move into a time of year that is always a tough time for our health service and its workers.