

# NI EXECUTIVE AUTUMN/WINTER **COVID-19 CONTINGENCY PLAN**

October 2021



GET  
TESTED



FRESH  
AIR



KEEP  
DISTANCE



WEAR FACE  
COVERING



WASH  
HANDS



## Ministerial Foreword

With the majority of Coronavirus restrictions now removed or in guidance rather than regulation, it is even more important that people continue to follow the public health advice to limit the risk from COVID-19.

This contingency plan sets out a realistic approach for the months ahead and details the actions the Executive has taken. It also outlines the options for measures it could take if the situation deteriorates to slow the spread of the virus and protect our health service.

It is based on the need to keep our society and economy open to the fullest possible extent and, hopefully, in totality.

Our schools and further education providers are back; our business and leisure sectors are open; and we can meet up with family and friends at home. Our aim is to protect that, whilst we protect our health service.

We have retained some basic but necessary measures in law so they can be effectively enforced where appropriate.

These include:

- the retention of a legal requirement for face coverings in public indoor settings; and
- the continued legal requirement for risk assessments to be carried out in certain settings and for visitor and attendee details to be recorded to support the work of the Test, Trace and Protect system.

In addition we will also retain a focus on flexible and hybrid working to reduce the number of contacts that take place in work settings - recognising that employers are well placed to engage with their workforce on the model that best suits their business.

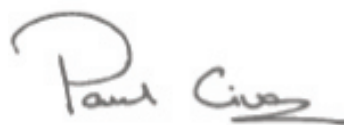
In the event that case numbers rise sharply or hospital pressures become unsustainable, the Autumn Winter Plan sets out a number of potential contingency measures which the Executive may decide to use. These include:

- more focused communications to emphasise the risk and the need for everyone to act immediately;
- the potential to deploy COVID status certification in higher risk settings if considered appropriate and necessary;
- a strengthening of arrangements for self-isolation for close contacts; and
- a re-imposition of a legal requirement for minimum social distancing in prescribed settings.

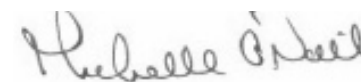
We have all come a long way together over the last 19 months and these worst of times have brought out the best in people.

There has been a huge societal effort to slow the spread of the virus and, in following the public health advice, many lives have been saved.

We need that effort to continue. The threat from the virus remains and if we are to continue to keep our society as open as possible and retain the progress we have made, then everyone must continue to stick to the public health advice.



Paul Givan MLA  
First Minister



Michelle O'Neill MLA  
Deputy First Minister

## Introduction

Steadily, over the course of this year, we have seen life return closer to normal. In March we published our Pathway out of Restrictions document and since then the Executive has sought to remove restrictions while carefully balancing health, economic and societal considerations.

While some restrictions remain in place, the extensive coverage of our vaccination programme combined with immunity in society as a result of natural infection has allowed many of the original restrictions to be relaxed or removed. Rules and regulations have mostly been replaced with advice and guidance on the practical steps people can take to help manage the risks to themselves and others.

While case numbers are gradually reducing, the pressures on our hospitals and our Health and Social Care (HSC) staff remain substantial. Data continues to show that the link between cases, hospitalisations and deaths has weakened significantly since the start of the pandemic.

The public's continued willingness to get vaccinated, to test and self-isolate if they have symptoms and to follow behaviours and actions that mitigate all methods of transmission has played a key role in lifting restrictions. It is vital that we do not lessen our focus on safer behaviours as we move into autumn/winter.

However, the last 19 months have shown the pandemic can change course rapidly and unexpectedly and it remains hard to predict with certainty what will happen. There are a number of variables including: levels of vaccination; the extent to which immunity wanes over time; and whether a new variant emerges which fundamentally changes the Executive's assessment of the risks.

In addition, winter is always a challenging time for the HSC. This winter could be particularly difficult due to the impacts of COVID-19 on top of the usual increase in emergency demand and seasonal respiratory diseases such as influenza (flu). There is considerable uncertainty over how these pressures will interact with the impact of COVID-19.

It is therefore prudent to develop an autumn/winter contingency plan to keep COVID-19 at manageable levels. This paper sets out a range of measures that could be deployed to contain the virus or to respond to surges or pressures that may emerge.

## Vaccine programme

The high level of vaccine protection, combined with other measures such as a strong focus on safer behaviours and personal responsibility, has enabled us to resume our lives without stringent restrictions.

As we move into autumn/winter the focus of our successful vaccine programme will be:

- Maximising uptake of the vaccine among those that are eligible but have not yet taken up the offer;
- Rolling out the booster vaccination programme to specified groups; and
- Offering a first dose of vaccine to 12-15 year olds.

## Test, Trace, Protect

The Test, Trace, Protect system remains critical to the Executive's plan for managing the virus over autumn/winter. It helps to find positive cases and makes sure they and their unvaccinated contacts self-isolate when advised, thus breaking chains of transmission. This helps reduce pressure on the HSC, as well as enabling individuals to manage risks to themselves and to others.

The Executive will continue to expect everyone with COVID-19 symptoms to self-isolate and take a PCR test. If an individual tests positive for COVID-19, they should continue to self-isolate for 10 full days after the symptoms started. These arrangements will remain in place in order to prevent those who are infected from mixing in the community and passing on the virus.

The programme of regular asymptomatic testing using Lateral Flow Devices also remains important in the months ahead, helping to find positive cases early and contributing to breaking chains of transmission. This programme will continue to be kept under review.

## Safer behaviours and actions that reduce the spread of COVID-19

It is vital that we clearly communicate to citizens the behaviours and actions that are expected of them, particularly as we move in to autumn/winter, to reduce the risk from COVID-19. This contingency plan offers an opportunity to reinforce and refresh the Executive's message about safer behaviours. These will be built around three key issues:

**Vaccination** – seeking to maximize uptake across the various vaccination strands;

**Ventilation** – whether that is natural or mechanical; and

**Face coverings** – in particular in crowded and enclosed settings.

The creation of social norms about what is expected of people and building on positive behaviours remain core aspects to any effective messaging approach.

The messaging should also focus on the need to take small but important actions now to reduce the risk of more severe measures later in the winter.

## Restrictions for retention – Baseline measures

While the importance of personal responsibility cannot be overstated, the devolved administrations have retained some baseline measures in law to give them added force and to allow for effective enforcement where that is appropriate.

In addition, at its meeting on 14 September, SAGE reiterated the importance of acting early to slow a growing epidemic. Early 'low cost' interventions may forestall the need for more disruptive measures and avoid an unacceptable level of hospitalisations.

The following sections identify a number of baseline measures which will be retained during the autumn/winter period, subject to the legal requirement to regularly review all restrictions and to ensure that restrictions are proportionate and do not remain in place longer than is necessary.

## Face coverings

Currently, face coverings are required in all indoor settings accessible to the public, unless an individual is exempt. This includes shops, shopping centres, public transport, etc.

Scotland has retained a legal requirement to wear face coverings in indoor public places. Wales have retained a similar legal requirement although they have excluded hospitality. In Ireland, from 22nd October face coverings will still be required on public transport, in indoor retail, and in hospitals and other healthcare settings.

SAGE estimates that widespread application of face coverings is likely to have a small but significant impact on transmission, as face coverings mitigate most transmission routes. SAGE evidence also states that face coverings (if worn correctly and of suitable quality) are likely to be most effective in reducing transmission indoors where other measures, such as social distancing and ventilation, are not feasible or are inadequate.

Face coverings are a very visible reminder that the risk presented by the virus that causes COVID-19 has not gone away. Use on public transport remains high but anecdotally there has been a fall-off in use across different settings as more relaxations have been introduced. In addition, recent polling carried out for the Executive's Adherence Group suggested that compliance would fall by around 30% if the requirement was moved into guidance.

The statutory requirement in relation to face coverings will be retained as a baseline measure. There will need to be some adjustment of the current arrangements to take account of recently announced relaxations for hospitality and other indoor settings.

## Encourage flexible and hybrid working where practicable

Currently the advice from the Executive is to work from home where you can. Where practicable, employers are encouraged to facilitate their employees working from home. Employers that require staff to come into the workplace should complete a risk assessment and some may have introduced regular COVID-19 testing for employees as part of these measures.

SPI-M and SAGE have advised that high levels of homeworking have played a very important role in preventing sustained epidemic growth in recent months. However, the overall socio-economic effects of the working from home guidance are complex. Working from home has reduced the frequency of commuting for many workers resulting in reduced consumption in direct office-related spending, indirect social consumption (such as in retail and hospitality) and transport use in city centres. However, some of this reduced consumption is displaced to surrounding areas where homeworkers live and therefore partly replaced by increased consumption of other goods and services closer to home.

Working from home where practicable remains beneficial over the autumn/winter period as it will help reduce the transmission risk inside and outside of the workplace, including by reducing the number of people taking public transport and the number of face to face meetings and social activities, and thereby reducing community and household transmission. Employers are well placed to engage with their workforce on the best model that suits the needs of their business.

### Requirement to carry out risk assessments

Risk assessments are a vital tool which help people to identify the risks of coronavirus transmission in particular settings and to identify practical measures which can be taken to avoid, reduce or prevent those risks. Risk assessments have become embedded across a wide range of settings including indoor and outdoor gatherings; workplaces; retail; hospitality and events; and culture, arts and leisure.

As more activity moves indoors over the autumn/winter period it is important that we redouble our focus on the completion of risk assessments and the effective application of the risk mitigations that they use. The current arrangements for risk assessments, both statutory and guidance, will be retained as a baseline measure.

### Recording visitor and attendee information

Currently there is a legal requirement on specified businesses to record visitor and attendee information. This applies to close contact services; hospitality; indoor attractions; indoor leisure facilities; tourist accommodation; and marriage or civil partnership ceremonies.

Visitor or attendee information (which includes name, telephone number and date/time of visit) must be retained for 21 days and can be requested by an authorised person to support contact tracing and prevent the spread of infection.

Given the importance of the Test, Trace and Protect system the current requirements to record visitor and attendee information will be retained as a baseline measure.

### Ventilation

In addition to the core messaging and baseline measures noted above, there is work being developed by the Executive's COVID Taskforce in relation to ventilation. Due to the importance of fresh air in limiting the spread of COVID, it would be desirable to set out in guidance the practical steps everyone can take to maximise fresh air in order to reduce the risk of airborne transmission, taking into account the colder months when more activities take place indoors.

As part of this work the Taskforce is considering options to support improved ventilation in key settings by:

- Providing further advice and support to businesses to help them check their ventilation levels and introduce Carbon Dioxide (CO<sub>2</sub>) monitoring where appropriate;
- Enhanced easily accessible messaging specifically on ventilation and what is good practice and what is not (e.g. drawing in air from outside rather than recycling air inside); and
- Exploring options for the targeted deployment of CO<sub>2</sub> monitors in key areas of the public sector estate.



## Potential contingency measures

If the data suggests the HSC is likely to come under unsustainable pressure, there are a number of contingency measures that could be deployed in response in order to seek to avoid the need to resort to more disruptive measures.

Ideally it would not be necessary to deploy these contingency measures but given the uncertainty around transmission rates and the ever-present risk of new Variants of Concern which demonstrate greater transmissibility or capacity for vaccine escape, setting out contingency measures in this Autumn Winter Plan will ensure the public and businesses know what to expect if further measures become necessary.

The Autumn Winter Plan aims to prioritise measures that can help control transmission of the virus while seeking to minimise economic and social impacts recognizing that the earlier introduction of 'low cost' interventions will avoid more disruptive interventions later and unacceptable hospital pressures.

- (i) More robust communications - Communicating clearly and urgently to the public that the level of risk has increased, and with it the need to behave more cautiously. Our ongoing public information campaign will flex in line with risks;
- (ii) The potential enhanced use of COVID-status certification in certain settings. At present we are encouraging a voluntary arrangement but will keep an alternative approach under review;
- (iii) Changes to self-isolation arrangements to strengthen advice for social contacts to self-isolate until they have a negative PCR test. We currently ask everyone with symptoms to self-isolate and take a PCR test;
- (iv) Re-imposition of a legal requirement for social distancing in settings which give rise to greatest risk of transmission. For most settings social distancing advice is in guidance at present.

## Communications

Communications have been effective at highlighting key messages and supporting the public to follow safer behaviours. From the outset effective communications have played a pivotal role in equipping citizens to make better

and safer choices, and providing them with quality guidance around more complex issues like ventilation.

In a contingency plan scenario, the Executive would issue clear guidance and communications to the public and businesses, setting out the steps that they should take to manage the increased risks of the virus.

## COVID-status certification

Over the summer, organisers of large outdoor events applied a form of COVID-status certification by requiring attendees to present proof of a negative lateral flow test. More recently major event organisers have voluntarily been using COVID-status certification in the fuller sense by requiring ticketholders to produce evidence of vaccine status or negative test.

Following its decision to remove the legal requirement for social distancing in respect of indoor seated venues, the Executive strongly encouraged the application of a range of other mitigations including COVID-status certificates based on vaccine or negative LFD test, or positive PCR test.

Research evidence and SPI-M modelling indicates that being vaccinated reduces the risk that a person will become infected with the virus, and further reduces their risk of transmitting coronavirus.

Retaining an option to deploy COVID-status certificates if required may provide a targeted and proportionate means to reduce risk while maximizing our ability to keep open certain settings and events where transmission is higher. In addition, the need to be vaccinated may encourage the remaining sections of the eligible population yet to be vaccinated to take up the offer of a vaccine.

The Executive has not taken any policy decisions on the basis for COVID-status certification. However, the development of the appropriate enabling infrastructure to underpin a system of COVID-status certificates is underway so they can be deployed if, and in what circumstances, the Executive considers that it is appropriate to do so.

In addition, the development of a local solution provides a basis for the continued voluntary use of COVID-status certificates as well as ensuring that our citizens are not precluded from accessing events or activities in other jurisdictions where certificates are required.

### Changes to self-isolation advice

From 16th August the rules in relation to self-isolation changed so that anyone who is fully vaccinated no longer needs to automatically self-isolate for 10 days if someone they have been in close contact with tests positive. Instead, they are encouraged and advised (but not required) to get a PCR test on day two and day eight of the 10-day period. People who are not fully vaccinated will still need to self-isolate for the 10 days.

Anyone who is symptomatic, whether vaccinated or not, is still required to self-isolate until they get a negative result from a PCR test. If the PCR test is positive individuals must self-isolate for the 10-day period.

In the event of a need to apply stricter controls over autumn/winter, a further option may be to strengthen the advice that all close contacts must self-isolate until they receive a negative PCR test result.

Changes in guidance around self-isolation advice for contacts could be used as part of flexing up, with a focus on what are likely to be the highest risk contacts and settings. This would probably include household contacts in the first instance, and isolating until a negative PCR is returned would be a first step. It would be possible to apply a graded stepping up of that advice if required (ultimately, for example, to include all close contacts regardless of setting).

### Re-imposition of legally required social distancing in higher risk settings

We know that social distancing significantly limits capacity in indoor settings and therefore it is economically impactful. It is, therefore, anticipated that re-imposing a legal requirement for social distancing would be a decision that the Executive would not take lightly.

However, in the event that the health situation was such that more controls were considered necessary, the mandating of social distancing in clearly defined, higher risk settings may be an option.

### Conclusion

When we published our Pathway Out of Restrictions we said that our decisions would be evidence-based, necessary, proportionate and sustainable and that we would regularly and carefully consider what mitigations are required, and for how long, in order to reduce transmission.

At the front of our minds has been the health and wellbeing of our citizens, our societal and community wellbeing, and our economic wellbeing and revitalizing the economy.

Throughout this year, the Executive has taken regular stock of the situation and the available data, and impacts on our people, in line with our key principles.

We understand that some people will have wanted us to move more quickly, while others have been content with the careful and cautious approach. We hope we have built confidence on the part of our people to exercise safer choices for themselves and to adhere to the public health advice.

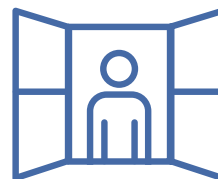
However, COVID remains with us and we need to continue to find ways to manage the situation. From the start, our overriding aim has been constant. We must protect the health service so it can cope and provide the services that everyone needs.

The baseline and contingency measures set out in this Autumn Winter Plan, combined with a commitment from the public to follow guidance on safer behaviours will help us to manage the challenges that may arise over the autumn/winter period. It is imperative that we do everything we can to keep citizens safe, keep sectors open and manage pressures in our hospitals.

**Follow the public health advice this autumn/winter and make safer choices to protect yourself and others, by:**



Getting the COVID-19 vaccine



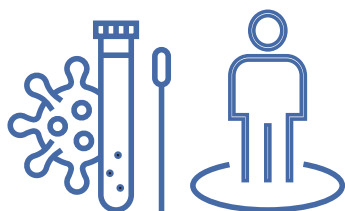
Meeting outdoors or  
somewhere well ventilated



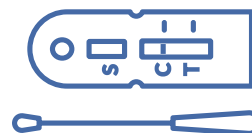
Keeping your distance



Wearing your face covering  
in crowded or indoor  
settings



Self-isolating and taking  
a PCR test if you have  
symptoms



Taking regular LFD tests if  
you don't have symptoms to  
reduce the risk of spreading  
the virus



Washing your hands  
regularly, and covering your  
nose and mouth if coughing  
or sneezing



Working from home where  
practicable, or a mixture  
of home and office based  
working