

Coronavirus (COVID-19) regulations guidance: what the restrictions mean for you

Following an increase in coronavirus (COVID-19) cases, additional restrictions have been introduced for people in Northern Ireland. These new restrictions are in place to help reduce the spread of coronavirus and to help manage the pressures on our health and social care system. During this time, the single most important action we can all take is to stay at home.

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Regulations

The current regulations are in place until 5 March 2021. They will be reviewed on 18 February 2021.

The regulations will be available on the Department of Health website:

- [Health protection coronavirus restrictions regulations](#)(external link opens in a new window / tab)

Some of the restrictions will be in law through regulation, while others will be in guidance.

Everyone is legally required to comply with the regulations.

If you fail to comply with the regulations without reasonable excuse, you are committing an offence. For some offences you may be given a [fixed penalty](#) or a fine on summary prosecution.

What the new restrictions mean

The restrictions apply to everyone in Northern Ireland.

A summary guide outlining the restrictions is available at this link:

- [Coronavirus \(COVID-19\): a guide to the restrictions - January 2021](#)

A question and answer section on the restrictions is available on the Executive's website:

- [COVID-19 measures January 2021 - questions and answers](#)(external link opens in a new window / tab)

Stay at home

You must stay at home.

The single most important action we can all take is to stay at home to protect the health service and save lives. No-one may leave their home without reasonable excuse.

Leaving home

You must not leave, or be outside of your home except where necessary. You may leave the home:

- to obtain goods or services from any business permitted to open
- to take exercise, as permitted in the regulations
- to visit your bubble
- to visit hospital, GP, medical appointments or health services (including mental health)
- to provide care or assistance to a vulnerable person, or to provide emergency assistance
- to avoid injury, illness or risk of harm (including domestic abuse)
- to go to work, or provide voluntary or charitable services, if you cannot reasonably do so from home
- to access education or childcare
- to access critical public services (for example, MOT or social care services)
- to attend to the care, welfare and exercise of an animal
- to fulfil a legal obligation, such as attending court or jury service
- to donate blood
- to attend a place of worship
- to attend a wedding or civil partnership
- to attend a funeral or visit a burial ground
- to continue access and contact between parents and children who do not live in the same household
- to facilitate a house move, and to do associated activities for that purpose, including viewing properties and making arrangements for removals

A full list of circumstances is included in [the regulations](#)(external link opens in a new window / tab).

Visits to food shops, pharmacies and other essential stores should be limited and as seldom as possible. Be organised and only buy what you need. You do not need to stockpile goods as supply chains are secure.

Households

Households are not allowed to mix indoors in private homes.

Certain exemptions apply, including:

- bubbling with one other household
- childcare
- building or maintenance work
- the services of trades or professions (close contact services are not allowed)
- providing care or assistance, including social services, to a vulnerable person
- giving or receiving legal advice or assistance, or fulfilling a legal obligation
- providing emergency or medical assistance to any person
- a house move, and to do associated activities for that purpose, including viewing properties and making arrangements for removals
- a marriage or civil partnership where one of the couple is terminally ill

Children whose parents do not live in the same household can move between homes as normal.

Gardens

Households are not allowed to mix in private gardens, with the exception of **two households that have formed an exclusive bubble with each other**.

A maximum of 10 people, including children, can be in a private garden at any one time (an exception applies for households of more than 10 people).

Household bubbles

You can form one bubble with **one** other household.

The two households in the bubble can be of any size, however indoor meetings between households in the bubble are limited to a **maximum of 10 people**, including children, at any one time.

To contain the risk of spreading the virus, **a household cannot be part of more than one bubble.**

Therefore, members of the two households within a bubble will not be permitted to have close contact with visitors from a third household. They should maintain social distancing from people outside of their bubble.

If anyone within your bubble develops symptoms, all members of the bubble should self-isolate.

Particular care needs to be taken if any member is regarded as a vulnerable person in terms of the virus, which may include someone who is medically vulnerable.

If a household wishes to change the household that they bubble with, the household **must wait 10 days** from the last visit of the original linked household before starting a new bubble with another household.

Overnight stays

An overnight stay in a private home is not allowed unless it is a member of your bubble.

Exemptions, including for emergency reasons, are detailed in the regulations.

Indoor and outdoor gatherings (excluding private dwellings, weddings, and funerals)

Up to **six people** (including children of all ages) from a maximum of **two households** can meet outdoors, or in non-domestic indoor settings for a permitted reason.

You should maintain social distancing by being at least two metres apart, as well as good hand and respiratory hygiene practices.

You may not organise, operate or take part in an indoor or outdoor gathering which consists of more than six people.

The following exemptions apply:

- a gathering in a workplace, if it is not possible to work at home
- a gathering to provide emergency or medical assistance to any person
- blood donation and vaccine sessions

- elite sports (not spectators)

Medically-vulnerable and older people

Medically-vulnerable and older people are asked to be particularly careful in following the advice on limiting household contacts, social distancing, hand washing and wearing a [face covering](#).

Since 26 December 2020, '[clinically extremely vulnerable](#)' (CEV) people who are working and are unable to do so from home are advised not to attend the workplace.

Travel

You **must not** leave your home unless you have a reasonable excuse (for example, for work or education purposes).

You **should not travel more than 10 miles from your home** in order to take exercise.

A full list of reasons permitted is included in [the regulations](#).[\(external link opens in a new window / tab\)](#)

Where travel is necessary for work, education and other essential purposes, you are asked to walk, cycle or use private transport, shared only with members of your household where possible.

- [Safer travel guidance for public transport users, walkers, cyclists, drivers](#)

Face coverings

The use of [face coverings](#) is mandatory on public transport, in taxis, private buses, coaches and on aircraft, in train and bus stations and in airports unless an exemption applies. This includes:

- boarding any mode of public transport
- when on board any mode of public transport

and

- when present on public transport premises or stops

Childcare

Childcare can continue to be provided by a person registered in accordance with the Children (Northern Ireland) Order 1995 or any childcare provided free of charge.

Informal childcare arrangements are also permitted to continue.

Education settings

Pre-school education settings, primary and post primary schools are required to provide remote learning to pupils until the half-term break in mid-February.

Special schools will remain open as usual.

Vulnerable children and children of key workers will have access to schools for supervised learning. Only one parent/guardian is required to be a key worker.

- [Department of Education website - frequently asked questions](#)(external link opens in a new window / tab)

Direct payments will be made to families whose children are entitled to free school meals.

Further and Higher Education institutions should deliver distance learning to the maximum extent possible.

Hospitals and healthcare

Hospital visits are currently restricted due to the current high Alert Level (Level 5).

While certain exceptions to the restrictions include:

- a birth partner supporting a woman during certain hospital visits
- for a person receiving end-of-life (palliative) care
- to accompany a baby/ child (paediatrics/ neonatal) in hospital
- for patients with dementia or a learning disability

you are recommended to read the guidance below and also to check before you visit, as restrictions are subject to change depending on prevailing circumstances in particular settings.

Hospitals, GP practices, dentists and pharmacies continue to provide care for those with health needs.

You should continue to seek advice from health and care professionals such as GPs, nurses and pharmacists.

Ignoring potential health problems or symptoms can have serious consequences, so it is vitally important that you do not delay in seeking help.

- [Regional principles for visiting in care settings in Northern Ireland](#)(external link opens in a new window / tab)

Care homes

The guidance recommends that visits to care homes are also restricted.

You are recommended to read guidance below, and check the applicable arrangements with the individual care home:

- [Regional principles for visiting in care settings in Northern Ireland](#)(external link opens in a new window / tab)

Hospitality and accommodation

Hospitality venues such as cafes, restaurants, pubs, bars and social clubs must remain closed, with the exception of providing food and drink for takeaway, drive-through or delivery.

Businesses providing takeaway services must close at 11.00 pm and off-sales must stop at 8.00 pm. Outdoor areas are not permitted to be used.

The provision of food and drink in motorway services, airports and harbour terminals is allowed.

Accommodation

Hotels, guesthouses, bed and breakfast establishments, hostels and caravan sites and self-catering accommodation are only able to operate on a restricted basis.

Accommodation can be provided for:

- those already resident
- work-related purposes
- vulnerable people
- those in emergency situations

and

- people unable to return to their main address

Entertainment, leisure activities and cultural attractions

Leisure and entertainment venues such as theatres, concert halls, cinemas, amusement arcades, bingo halls, bowling alleys, skating rinks, inflatable parks, go-karting venues, soft play centres, fairgrounds and funfairs, indoor museums, galleries, visitor and other cultural attractions are not permitted to open.

Outdoor visitor attractions are not permitted to open, along with drive-in events.

A full list of businesses is defined in [the regulations](#)(external link opens in a new window / tab) .

Outdoor parks, play areas, outdoor areas of properties operated by the National Trust and the outdoor areas of stately homes, historic homes and castles are permitted to remain open.

Community halls are allowed to remain open, but must adhere to current guidelines.

Libraries are allowed to provide 'call and collect' services.

Theatres and concert halls are permitted to open for rehearsals or a live recording without an audience.

Business

Anyone who can work from home **must** work from home.

Those who cannot work from home, for example, workers in food production, construction, manufacturing, logistics or distribution can continue to go to work.

Employers should take every possible step to facilitate their employees working from home.

They must also take all reasonable steps to safeguard the health, safety and well-being of employees during the COVID-19 emergency, whether working from home or in the workplace.

Employers that require staff to come into the workplace must complete a mandatory risk assessment.

Retail and services

To reduce social contact, the regulations require some businesses to close and impose restrictions on how some businesses provide goods and services.

Close contact services

Close contact services, such as hairdressers, beauticians, make-up and nails, tattoo and piercing parlours, tanning shops, massage, electrolysis, well-being and holistic treatments, and driving instructors (except for motorcycles) are not permitted to operate.

A full list of businesses and exemptions are defined in [the regulations](#)(external link opens in a new window / tab) .

This also applies to those who provide mobile close contact services from their homes and in other people's homes, those in retail environments, as well as those studying hair and beauty in vocational training environments.

Exemptions apply for:

- film and TV production
- services ancillary to medical, health and social care services
- sports massage and therapeutic services for elite athletes

Retail

Only essential retail is permitted to remain open.

Click/phone and collect facilities will not be permitted for non-essential retail businesses, however delivery is allowed.

Retail premises can only remain open if the business is wholly or mainly an essential retail business.

Where an essential retail business has another, separate business embedded within it that is required to close, the embedded business must close.

An essential retail business may also continue to sell goods typically sold by non-essential retail businesses. For example, a supermarket that sells food is not required to close off or cordon off aisles selling accessories.

You can travel to any retail outlet that is permitted to be open under the regulations.

Essential retail businesses include, but are not limited to:

- food retailers, supermarkets, convenience stores, off licences and newsagents
- pharmacies and chemists
- fuel suppliers
- building supplies and hardware stores (equipment for building maintenance and repairs - such as keys, locks, nuts, screws, washers, hinges, latches, handles, wire, chains, belts, plumbing supplies, electrical supplies, tools, and machine parts)
- bicycle shops
- agricultural supplies shops and livestock markets
- motor vehicle repair shops
- banks, building societies and credit unions
- post offices
- funeral directors
- laundrettes and dry cleaners
- dental services, opticians, audiology services, chiropody, chiropractors, osteopaths and other medical or health services
- veterinary surgeons, dog groomers and pet shops
- telecommunications and IT repair and maintenance

The full list of businesses that are permitted to remain open is defined in [the regulations](#)([external link opens in a new window / tab](#)) .

Off-licences and supermarkets are not permitted to sell alcohol after 8.00 pm.

An essential retail business may be operated from a market stall, and may continue to trade as such.

Car boot sales and car washes are not permitted.

Garden centres and homeware stores must remain closed.

Car washes are only permitted to open for the cleaning and disinfection of vehicles for the purposes of food safety, infection control or animal disease control. No domestic vehicles.

Other services

Estate agents are permitted to remain open to facilitate the buying and selling of property, including associated activities such as the viewing of properties. Individuals are not permitted to enter the shop.

Household waste and recycling centres are permitted to remain open.

Work carried out in private homes

Unless they are specifically required to close under the regulations, workers, builders, tradespeople and other professionals can continue to go into people's houses to carry out work such as repairs, installations and deliveries.

Music lessons and private tutoring are permitted, as long as social distancing is maintained and there is no close contact.

Exercising and sports

Exercising outdoors

You should minimise time spent outside your home.

You can leave your home to exercise in a public outdoor place:

- by yourself
- with the people you live with
- with your bubble
- or, when on your own, with one person from another household

You **should not travel more than 10 miles from your home** in order to take exercise. If, when you arrive at your proposed destination, there are crowds which will make social distancing difficult you should find an alternative place to exercise.

Sporting activities

Indoor and outdoor sport is not permitted, other than at elite level.

Elite training and competition can continue, both indoors and outdoors.

Elite sporting events must be held behind closed doors without spectators.

The definition of an elite athlete is set out [in the regulations](#)([external link opens in a new window / tab](#)).

Horse racing can take place behind closed doors, in line with the elite sport regulations and animal welfare considerations.

All sports facilities such as leisure centres, gyms, health clubs, swimming pools, tennis courts, golf courses, fitness and dance studios must close.

Other facilities, including activity centres, equestrian centres (access for the purpose of animal welfare is permitted), marinas, and venues relating to motor sport and water sport must also remain closed.

You cannot participate in personal one-to-one training sessions or group activities such as running or cycling.

Physical education delivered by or for schools, pre-schools and other education providers is permitted to continue.

Marriages and civil partnerships

Marriages and civil partnerships ceremonies are limited to 25 people. This number includes children under 12 and the celebrant.

A risk assessment for over 15 people is required.

[Face coverings](#) must be worn by all unless exempt, other than those in the marriage party.

Receptions or post ceremony gatherings are not permitted.

Funerals

Funerals are limited to 25 people.

Pre and post-funeral gatherings are not permitted.

The remains of the deceased may be taken back to private homes, but wakes are not to be held and funeral services in private homes are not to take place.

Existing restrictions on households apply.

A person responsible for organising or operating a funeral or associated event elsewhere must comply with [guidance on managing funerals and](#)

[associated gatherings](#)(external link opens in a new window / tab) issued by the Department of Health.

For information about the City of Belfast Crematorium, visit the [Belfast City Council website](#)(external link opens in a new window / tab).

Any mourner displaying symptoms of COVID-19 should not attend a funeral, as they pose a risk to others.

The Public Health Agency has produced a number of useful documents to help bereaved families during the COVID-19 pandemic.