

## NI Executive's plans for easing Covid-19 lockdown are a good start but more detail is needed, says think tank

Stormont's five-phase plan for relaxing restrictions is a solid basis for starting to re-open society. However, more focus is needed on testing capacity and contact tracing, says Pivotal.

If lockdown measures are to be eased off safely, robust testing and contact tracing are essential. The Executive needs to show how it will build such systems and when they will be in place, according to research from Northern Ireland's only independent think tank.

Published today, *Moving out of Lockdown* welcomes the Executive's recent commitments to expand testing. However, it concludes that not only should testing capacity increase to ensure it meets existing commitments, but that consideration should be given to extending testing further to non-symptomatic people who are in contact with any at-risk individuals – not just those in care homes.

Local contact tracing needs to work in tandem with the Republic of Ireland's system, due to the number of people crossing the border every day, according to new research from Pivotal.

The briefing paper analyses how several countries around the world are emerging from lockdown, and draws lessons from this for Northern Ireland. It is the first in a series of papers by Pivotal on how Northern Ireland recovers from Covid-19. This research aims to inform public debate and assist policy makers in their decision making.

The paper notes that there are various factors to consider when easing Covid-19 lockdown restrictions. Some of these are epidemiological, such as the number of infections and current estimated reproduction rate of Covid-19 locally (the 'R' number).

However, others relate to the systems put in place by governments, such as testing programmes and contact tracing systems. The Northern Ireland Executive has made some commitments on these fronts but, according to Pivotal, more detail is needed.

**Ann Watt, Director of Pivotal, said: "Across the world, governments are trying to balance the protection of public health with the need to allow a phased return to economic and social activity. Evidence from other countries indicates that effectively combining systems of testing and of contact tracing allows many lockdown measures to be gradually and safely eased off.**

**"This focus on robust testing and tracing allows the economy to begin a recovery more quickly, and allows people to see more of their families and friends.**

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"The recent commitment from the Health Minister to extend testing to anyone aged over five with symptoms is very welcome, as is the targeted programme of testing non-symptomatic care home residents and staff. The capacity to deliver these tests to all those eligible must be in place.

"As lockdown measures are eased, testing in Northern Ireland should be expanded further. We need to see more investment in testing capacity, not just for those with symptoms but also for those who do not yet have symptoms. As we move out of lockdown, this increased focus on testing larger numbers of individuals will help detect cases early and minimise the future spread of the virus.

"The second important element to help us emerge from lockdown is effective contact tracing. The Executive should provide more details about how this will work in practice in Northern Ireland. A robust system operating on a large scale is essential, whether the contact tracing is done manually or through an app. This includes making sure there are clear data-sharing procedures in place with the Republic of Ireland and Great Britain on contact tracing.

"Northern Ireland already has a manual contact tracing system in place. The UK is developing its own smartphone contact tracing app, but Health Minister Robin Swann has indicated this will not be used here, and that Northern Ireland is working on its own app. However, as yet no timescale has been provided for when this might be ready."

The Pivotal paper also said that clear communication from government on the lifting of restrictions helps to build confidence and ensure compliance. At present, there is a lack of clarity in advice for some particular groups.

It found that the "shielded" group (those who are most vulnerable to Covid-19), parents and carers, and employees and employers who cannot work from home all have significant outstanding questions about how lockdown easing impacts on them.

The paper said further that, in the longer-term, a clear border policy that takes account of from where inbound international travellers have arrived will also need to be laid down in detail.

Pivotal's next Covid-19 briefing paper, due to be published in late June, will look at the economic impact of lockdown on Northern Ireland, and consider what is needed to help businesses and individuals recover.

## Notes for Editors

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1. Pivotal is an independent think tank launched in September 2019. Pivotal aims to help improve public policy in Northern Ireland.
2. The latest report, *Moving out of Lockdown*, can be found [here](#). This report is the first in a series that will look at how Northern Ireland can best recover from Covid-19.
3. Pivotal's first report *Moving Forward – putting Northern Ireland on track for the future* was published in November 2019. Its second report *Good Government in Northern Ireland* was published on 5 March 2020.
4. Pivotal's Board of Trustees provides oversight of its work. They are Peter Sheridan (Chair), Chief Executive of Cooperation Ireland; Lisa Faulkner Byrne, Project Coordinator, EPIC; Richard Good, public policy consultant; Olwen Lyner, Chief Executive, NIACRO; Seamus McAleavey, Chief Executive, NICVA; and Alan Whysall, Honorary Senior Research Associate, Constitution Unit, University College London.
5. A wider Reference Group has helped steer the development of Pivotal and will provide ongoing guidance.
6. Pivotal's Director Ann Watt is a former senior civil servant with 20 years' experience in public policy development and delivery. Most recently Ann was Head of the Electoral Commission in Northern Ireland.
7. Pivotal has received funding and in-kind support from Belfast Harbour Commissioners, The Community Foundation Northern Ireland, the Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade, The Joseph Rowntree Charitable Trust, NICVA, Queen's University Belfast, Ulster University.
8. For further information about Pivotal see [pivotalppf.org](http://pivotalppf.org) or contact Pivotal's Director Ann Watt on 07932 043835.
9. Follow Pivotal on Twitter [@pivotalppf](https://twitter.com/pivotalppf).