

# North East hospitality venues to retain Covid measures

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North East hospitality businesses will maintain many Covid-19 operating practices despite the ending of restrictions on the so-called 'Freedom Day', businesses said.

The Government's social distancing and mask-wearing guidelines will officially end tomorrow, though the Prime Minister has urged people not to "throw caution to the winds" when England's restrictions ease.

NE1, the business improvement district company for Newcastle, representing 1,400 city centre businesses, said the day marks a milestone for the hospitality calendar.

Chief executive Stephen Patterson said: "From our discussions with Newcastle's businesses we expect the vast majority to make slight revisions to their venues whilst retaining many of the Covid guidelines and operating practices moving forward.

"Several restaurants we have spoken to are planning to make minor tweaks like removing partitions between tables and dining areas but without reinstating additional seating, keeping things more or less the way they have been.

"The majority are very much focused on providing safe environments for their customers and staff and making people

feel confident and safe to return and enjoy all the city has to offer. We expect the changes to be subtle and measured, and will evolve over time, rather than a wholesale shift on Monday.

Malhotra Group owned venues, which include the Three Mile and Leila Lily's, will operate a hybrid system which it intends to review each week after getting customer feedback.

As a company, it will maintain current measures in all sites, due to the rise in cases in the North East, to protect both staff and customers.

Director Atul Malhotra said: "We still feel customers will be nervous so will have specific areas for vertical drinking, as well as areas continuing to be table service with app ordering.

"We want to allow customers to be able to walk to the bar and have some normality, while still maintaining processes to protect staff and other customers."

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Debrah Dhugga, chief operating officer at The Apartment Group (TAG), which owns venues including As You Like It, Beach Box in Jesmond, The Joiners Arms near Alnwick and The Palm in Sunderland, said vertical drinking would return.

But outdoor areas have been extended as the firm believes customers prefer the spacious options of al fresco drinking and dining.

Ms Dhugga said: “Many of us will still struggle to benefit due to continuing Covid safety measures, staff shortages and supply issues. The changes will enable the reopening of our businesses, including late night venues, music venues and help our pubs and restaurants operate in a more relaxed social-distancing rule.

“It is still a long road back for the industry, however this is a critical move that will unleash a sector that is eager to get back to normal trading.

“Yet a decision not to ease rules on self-isolation until August 16 could lead to severe staff shortages this summer. Self-isolation is already causing carnage for most of us as operators and almost taking away the excitement of Freedom Day.

“We need a system now whereby people can test, and where they

immediately find they don't have Covid can come back to work.”