

Northern Ireland hotel sector calls for roadmap to normality from Executive

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The Northern Ireland hotel sector has called on the Executive to detail when it will lift all pandemic-related restrictions and relax international travel rules.

While welcoming the lifting of self-isolation, the resumption of conferences and exhibitions and the removal of maximum table sizes, the Northern Ireland Hotels Federation (NIHF) said the remaining restrictions are impacting on the sustainability and viability of its member businesses.

Chief Executive Janice Gault said a pathway with dates for the removal of all regulations would be “hugely beneficial” for the hotel and wider hospitality sector.

She added that Northern Ireland's approach to international travel also needs to be aligned to the rest of the UK.

“We are deeply disappointed to see that there has been no consideration of a realignment around international travel, she said. “Rules remain difficult with travel on an all-inclusive island of Ireland basis proving very challenging, given the differing rules in Northern Ireland.

“This has resulted in the removal of Northern Ireland from travel itineraries and there are concerns that this could impact future contracts.”

Ms Gault was speaking following the relaxation of some restrictions by the Executive which will come into effect from Monday, August 16.

They include scrapping the restriction on the number of people who can gather outdoors in a domestic setting, including the ban on outdoor house parties.

The provision for bubbles or linked households will be removed, along with the restriction on outdoor raves.

The requirement to maintain social distancing on public transport at all times will be lifted to allow for a return to higher capacity on transport links. No other amendments were made on the requirement to socially distance.

The limit of numbers permitted at tables in hospitality venues will be removed. This will also apply to post-marriage celebrations.

Conference centres can reopen allowing conferences and exhibitions to resume.

But continued restrictions on international travel are holding the industry back, Ms Gault said.

“Over the summer, the staycation market has been performing well and the sector is keen to see travel from other destinations restored. Uncertainty about travel does little to restore confidence and encourage visitors. There is an appetite for visitors to come to Northern Ireland in the Autumn but testing, conflicting regulations and lack of clarity are doing little to promote tourism’s cause.”