



Subject:	Motion: Access to Maternity Wards for Birthing Partners – Response from Minister of Health
Date:	18th December, 2020
Reporting Officer:	John Walsh, City Solicitor and Director of Legal and Civic Services
Contact Officer:	Jim Hanna, Senior Democratic Services Officer

Restricted Reports	
Is this report restricted?	Yes <input type="checkbox"/> No <input checked="" type="checkbox"/>
If Yes, when will the report become unrestricted?	
After Committee Decision	<input type="checkbox"/>
After Council Decision	<input type="checkbox"/>
Sometime in the future	<input type="checkbox"/>
Never	<input type="checkbox"/>

Call-in	
Is the decision eligible for Call-in?	Yes <input checked="" type="checkbox"/> No <input type="checkbox"/>

1.0	Purpose of Report or Summary of main Issues
1.1	To consider a response from the Minister of Health in relation to a motion on Access to Maternity Wards for Birthing Partners.
2.0	Recommendation
2.1	The Committee is asked to consider the response.
3.0	Main Report
	<u>Key Issues</u>
3.1	The Committee will recall that the Council, at its meeting on 2nd November, passed the following motion which had been proposed by Councillor T. Kelly and seconded by Councillor Bunting:

“This Council notes with concern the current restrictions placed around access to maternity wards for birthing partners due to COVID-19. Furthermore, it recognises the varying measures across the Belfast Health and Social Care Trust area and the additional availability of 15 minute COVID-19 testing, agrees to write to the Health Minister asking that further consideration is given to a consistent approach thus allowing birthing partners to be afforded increased access to antenatal, maternity and neonatal services.”

3.2 A response has now been received from Minister Swann, a copy of which is attached.

3.3 The Minister explains that the restriction of visitors to hospitals has been a key strategic component of managing the Covid-19 pandemic and that it had been introduced to protect patients, visitors and staff from the risk of infection.

3.4 As a result of the Executive’s decision to invoke limited additional restrictions across Northern Ireland, in response to increasing Covid-19 transmissions, updated visiting guidance for maternity services was published and took effect from 23rd September. A copy of that guidance can be accessed via this link <https://www.health-ni.gov.uk/Covid-19-visiting-guidance>. The guidance confirms that the specific restrictions for each care setting are aligned to the pandemic alert levels/R value and is based on the best scientific advice available, with restrictions applying in line with the current regional alert level position. The Minister points out that the alert level is currently at Level 4, which is defined as “a high or rising level of transmission – enforced social distancing”. This means that for expectant mothers:

“Birth partners will be facilitated to accompany the pregnant women to dating scan, early pregnancy clinic, anomaly scan, in the event of pregnancy loss and bereavement, Fetal Medicine Department, when admitted to individual room for active labour (to be determined by midwife) and birth and, to visit in antenatal and postnatal wards for up to one hour once a week.”

3.5 The Minister refers to the fact that the motion states that varying measures are being applied across the Belfast Health and Social Care Trust area. He points out that these restrictions apply equally to all Health and Social Care Trust maternity settings across Northern Ireland. However, it should be noted that the decision to permit visitors into a facility on a day-to-day basis still lies with the midwife in charge and that it will be based on a risk assessment of that specific setting and is dependent upon the ability to ensure the safety of patients, staff and visitors.

3.6 The Minister then addresses the request for clarification on whether an additional availability of fifteen minute Covid-19 testing would allow for further consideration to be given to the restrictions. He explains that one of the key priorities of the Department of Health is to ensure that there is sufficient capacity to test everyone in Northern Ireland who require a test, in line with current policy. This, he points out, includes anyone who has symptoms, as well as testing to support the risk assessment and management of clusters and outbreaks. Routine Covid-19 testing, including fifteen minute testing, has not been implemented for partners of expectant mothers and there are no plans to do so. However, this position will be kept under review as new scientific evidence and new technologies become available.

3.7 The Minister stresses that these restrictions are not just in place to protect patients and their visitors but are necessary due to the need to protect the safety of others, including other families, all health and social care staff and the wider population, through social distancing

3.8	<p>and the following of all infection control procedures. He confirms that the visiting guidance, which is structured to take account of variances in the ongoing rate of infection across Northern Ireland, will remain in place for the duration of the pandemic. The guidance has been written in such a way as to require different levels of restriction, based upon the regional position in terms of surge assessment and that, whilst his officials keep the guidance under review, no significant changes were anticipated currently.</p> <p>The Minister concludes by recognising that this has been a challenging time for all families and that the management of the crisis has meant that many difficult requests have been made and will continue to be made of the public around all aspects of health service provision. Normal maternity care provision, in particular, has had to be adapted to reduce the spread of infection and to protect expectant mothers, their families and those staff providing care.</p> <p><u>Financial and Resource Implications</u></p> <p>None associated with this report.</p> <p><u>Equality or Good Relations Implications/Rural Needs Assessment</u></p> <p>None associated with this report.</p>
4.0	Document Attached
	Copy of response from the Minister of Health