

# Re-Opening Hotels in Northern Ireland

## A Survey by the Northern Ireland Hotels Federation

The Northern Ireland Hotels Federation is the representative trade body for the hotel sector in Northern Ireland. There are currently 143 hotels with 9,580 bedrooms certified by Tourism Northern Ireland. Hotels were mandated to close on 26th March 2020, which was the start of three lockdowns that were implemented over the course of 2020. This pattern has continued into 2021 with the 26th of December lockdown still in place.

By 31st March 2021 hotels will have been closed for 96 continuous days with no indicative dates for reopening. This is the longest period of lockdown since the onset of the pandemic. Trading over the last year has been challenging with only 120 days of trading, 38 of these with a curfew in place.

As we move along the pathway to re-opening, albeit gradually, the pressures on the sector remain high. The Federation surveyed its members on their thoughts on re-opening. The biggest concern is staffing with the majority of properties indicating a need for recruitment. While not all were able to give definite numbers, the data collected indicates that the hotel sector will need to recruit over 2,500 staff prior to re-opening. This is not a short process as staff have to be selected, interviewed and trained.

Consumer sentiment indicates that there is considerable pent-up demand for staycations with hotels remaining the most popular option. Without an opening date it is difficult to commence this recruitment process and there is a real risk of opening under stress creating

the double whammy of not being able to satisfy customer needs and not realising the full potential of the window of demand for staycations.

The primary concern remains a re-opening date and with no sight of such, anxiety around the viability of a summer season has heightened. The average number of days' notice hotels feel that they will need to re-open is 17 with the majority coming in between 14 - 21 days.

The sector has invested around £10m to meet COVID-19 compliancy and is realistic about what measures will be in place once business resumes. These include risk assessments, face covering and the continuation of monitoring measures. Safety and health remain the primary concern of travellers and hotels

recognise the need to reassure guests for the foreseeable future. This, along with flexibility around booking, are the key factors contributing to successful hotel trading going forward.

Hotels in the main would like to open to serve residents and non-residents. For many urban businesses and smaller properties, the business mix is dominated by food and beverage spend. Without the ability to service the market beyond residents, 63% of hotel operations are unviable. It is a similar situation for those with spa and leisure facilities, with the majority feeling that opening without these options available to guests is not a viable proposition.

The one restriction that has had most impact on trading is the curfew. A 10.30pm closure has resulted in a fall of 30% in food and beverage revenue.

Other outcomes of this measure include:

- A reduction in the attractiveness of the hotel stay with guests cancelling or simply not making a booking upon enquiry, once they are advised that service will cease at 10.30pm.
- An increase in communal consumption of alcohol in bedrooms, which in effect increases the risk of infection as it is a smaller space and consumption is not monitored or measured in a controlled manner.
- There is anecdotal evidence that guests have been leaving hotels and heading to house parties or other unlicensed

settings after 10.30 pm which increases the risk of spread of COVID-19.

The issue of household mixing and maximum table size remains a challenge particularly as people wish to reconnect with their wider family circle and friends. Putting in place a risk assessed model or increasing the numbers of those who can mix would be a positive development.

The wedding market is a significant income stream for the hotel market often representing up to 35% of total turnover. There are currently 3,702 weddings booked in hotels up until the end of July 2021.

Many couples who were to marry last year have moved into summer 2021 and the concern is that with restricted attendance numbers they will cancel or simply move to a smaller venue. Hotels are currently prohibited from doing wedding show rounds which only exacerbates an already fraught situation. Weddings with receptions were allowed to take place from 3rd July 2020 with risk assessments in place. There was guidance in place which was the premise for the staging of weddings throughout any permitted opening. Currently receptions are not permitted.

The new pathway suggested that receptions will be slower to return with a restriction on numbers when their prohibition is lifted. Three quarters of those who stage weddings do not think that this is viable for them. A number have also indicated that without a restoration of the wedding

market under the risk assessed model, the viability of their entire operation is questionable.

The success of the vaccination programme has given great hope and, while it is not a silver bullet, it should allow us to move towards easement in a shorter time frame. The fear of another lockdown remains high, and the resilience of the sector has already been tested. The current “open and close” stance will need to be reassessed if the economy is to bounce back in a meaningful way.

Hotels are in the travel and tourism pathway and there has been much talk about the spending of capital in the unlocking of the economy. However, hotels are dependent on the opening up of the wider economy including visitor attractions, retail and hospitality. Hotels can offer a real opportunity to maximise the potential of staycations, create new employment and give much needed hope. The industry would like to see the sector included in the next review on 15th April, so that they can plan effectively and help restore the economy.

*For more information on the survey, please contact the Northern Ireland Hotels Federation on 028 9077 6635.*

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NORTHERN IRELAND HOTELS FEDERATION

**17**  
Days needed to Reopen

**2,565**  
Staff to Recruit

## What impacts re-opening?

### Least Impact to Re-opening

Risk Assessments  
Person of Responsibility  
Face Coverings

### Greatest Impact to Re-opening

Curfew at 10.30 pm  
Maximum 2 Households  
Maximum Table of 6

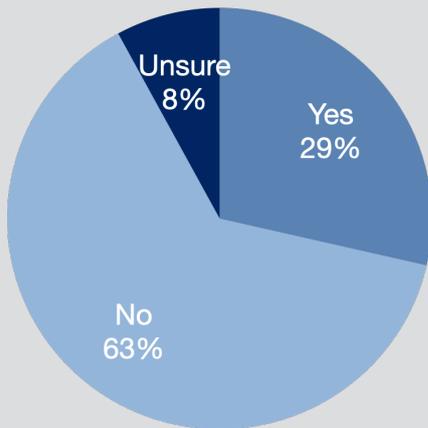
## Weddings booked in hotels

**822**  
Weddings  
In May

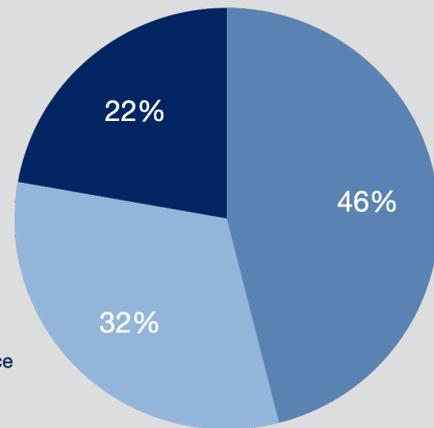
**1195**  
Weddings  
In June

**1685**  
Weddings  
In July

## Is it viable to open to residents only?

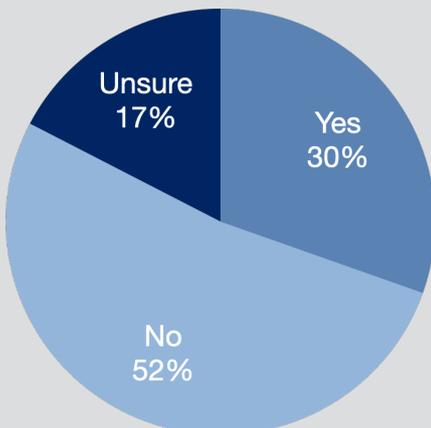


## How would you like to re-open?

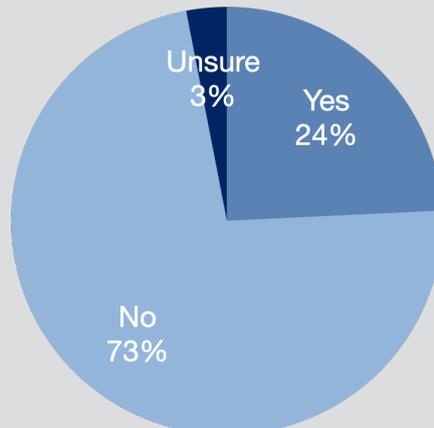


- Most restrictions in place
- Most restrictions lifted
- Combination of the two

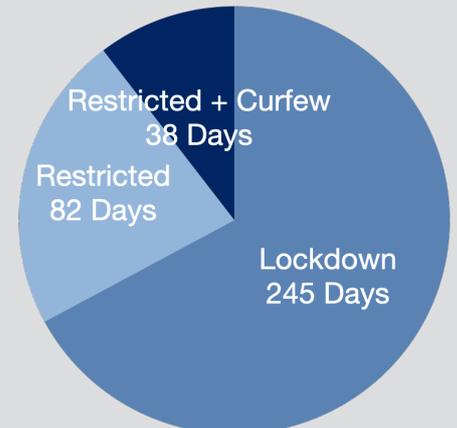
## Is it viable to re-open without your spa/leisure facility?



## Is it viable to host wedding receptions with restricted numbers?



## Hotel Trading Days April 2020 - March 2021



Data is based on a survey of 63 hotels by the Northern Ireland Hotels Federation from 23rd to 25th March 2021.