

Written Ministerial Statement

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Department of Health

RESPONSE TO THE EMERGENCE OF CORONAVIRUS (2019 NCOV) — UPDATE

Published at 9.00 pm on Wednesday 29 January 2020

Mr Swann (The Minister of Health): Further to my written statement to the Assembly of the 24 January I gave members a commitment to provide further statements in due course. As members will be aware the novel Coronavirus emanating from Wuhan in China has continued to spread globally and we have now seen the first confirmed cases in Europe with a small number of cases in France and Germany. This remains a rapidly evolving situation, with numbers of cases changing very frequently.

There are currently no confirmed cases in the UK, and the risk to the UK public remains low. As of 2pm today, there are 130 confirmed negative results in the UK. Given the relatively small numbers at this time, we will continue to provide aggregated UK numbers to protect individual patient confidentiality. I have agreed with my UK counterparts that any confirmed UK positive result will be announced by the CMO of the region concerned, followed by a statement by the CMO for England and a Ministerial statement. It is not unreasonable to assume at some point we will have a positive case in Northern Ireland.

While the current risk is assessed as low for the UK, members will appreciate this is a rapidly evolving situation. Hence this risk assessment is under constant review. Therefore there can be no room for complacency and my priority as Minister is still to ensure effective measures are in place within Northern Ireland. To this end I have also participated in a COBRA meeting this evening which comprised of UK Government Ministers and Ministers from the Devolved Administrations. We have given our firm commitment to a coordinated approach to this extremely important issue.

The number of confirmed cases in China is increasing, not only because of new infections but also as a result of the active case identification which is part of the public health response. Clearly this is a very rapidly developing situation, with a range of figures being quoted in the worldwide press and social media. As of 2pm today, the official PHE data show 6,064 cases have been confirmed, of which 5,794 are in Mainland China. 132 people have died, and all of the deaths have been within China.

The Foreign and Commonwealth Office (FCO) has updated their travel advice, advising against all travel to Hubei Province, and all but essential travel to Mainland China. Any Northern Ireland residents currently in China should follow the advice of the local authorities and leave if they are able to do so. The FCO is preparing to repatriate British and EU Nationals from Wuhan to the UK.

I want to reassure members that my Department and the Public Health Agency continue to work closely with the relevant authorities and public health organisations across the UK and Ireland to ensure Northern Ireland is well prepared to deal with the situation as events unfold.

My Department has issued a letter from the Chief Medical Officer providing guidance to clinical staff on what to do if they encounter patients with respiratory infections arriving from overseas, has set up an Emergency Operations Centre and has updated relevant websites.

The PHA and HSCB has also activated its Emergency Operations Centre and continues to closely monitor the situation and risk in Northern Ireland. PHA/HSCB are working closely with the Trusts, Port Health and primary care to make them aware of the incident and potential symptoms of the virus. The PHA is also working with Universities and Educational Establishments, and with the Chinese community. We will work with our colleagues in the PHA to ensure materials are updated as nationally agreed guidance evolves.

I will continue to provide further statements to the Assembly in due course.