

Written Ministerial Statement

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Department of Health

COVID-19 — UPDATE

Published at 5.00 pm on Friday 25 September 2020.

Mr Swann (The Minister of Health): I am writing to update Members on the latest situation regarding the Coronavirus epidemic and the ongoing work by my Department and the Executive to protect the public.

Over the last week, there has been a marked increase in cases along with a progressive rise in COVID hospital patients, although the latter remains at a relatively low level at present.

The current estimate of R is around 1.5. There have been 1,236 laboratory confirmed positive cases in the last week and the 7 day incidence based on new positive tests, as can be found on the Department of Health dashboard at any time, is now 65.7 per 100,000 of our population. In addition, the average number of COVID occupied hospital beds has continued to increase.

The Executive this week extended localised restrictions which were in force in different areas to the whole of Northern Ireland. Mixing between households is not permitted, with exemptions in place for certain situations. Similarly, meetings in private gardens must involve no more than six people from no more than two households.

I believe Members may also receive an update on Monday from the First and deputy First Minister on updated regulations for the hospitality industry.

The Executive continues to prioritise public health, while also recognising the importance of keeping society and the economy as open as possible. As Health Minister, I recognise the consequences for population health and well-being of economic stagnation.

There is a tightrope to walk and, as I have told Members many times before, no easy or pain free solutions are available. I would urge Members to continue to promote widespread public compliance with the Coronavirus regulations.

The best way to avoid further restrictions on our lives is to follow the ones we now have in place now and strictly follow public health advice on social distancing, handwashing and face coverings.

As we look ahead, we have to plan for every eventuality.

There is early evidence to suggest that the household restrictions applied on a postcode basis, and now Northern Ireland wide, may have had some impact on reducing transmission. My Department and the Executive will continue to monitor the data on prevalence and be guided by expert medical and scientific advice.

I am advised that further interventions may be required to prevent an exponential rise in the virus.

In the coming days and weeks the Executive will continue to assess different potential options for returning incidence to low levels.

Members will be aware of media coverage of health and social care staff becoming infected with Covid-19 through social contacts.

I want to place on record once again my thanks and appreciation to staff for their dedication throughout this pandemic and the sacrifices they have made.

I also fully appreciate the feelings of exhaustion and anxiety within the workforce at this time. I would appeal to everyone across society to remain vigilant about the Covid-19 threat.

The Chief Medical Officer and Chief Scientific Adviser have recently written to HSC staff, underlining the importance of maintaining the recommended precautions in social interactions and settings across our health and care facilities.

Whilst many efforts will be rightly focussed on the pandemic, I remain acutely aware of the many priorities and challenges we are experiencing in non-Covid healthcare.

One area that I remain especially keen to see progress on is the rebuilding and stabilisation of our cancer services. Yesterday I was pleased that the Executive endorsed my Department's draft Policy Statement which sets out short and medium term plans to rebuild and stabilise cancer oncology and haematology services to address the serious detrimental impact of the Covid-19 pandemic on Health and Social Care's delivery of these services across Northern Ireland.

Even before the onset of Covid-19 a population health needs assessment prepared by the Public Health Agency in 2019 commented that recent pressures affecting oncology services in Northern Ireland had highlighted challenges in sustaining the appropriate level of high quality specialist care in all Health and Social Care Trusts.

I firmly believe that increased capacity is needed to address the underperformance in meeting cancer waiting time targets and to address the increasing demand for these services. The impact of Covid-19 has added a worrying new dimension to the HSC's underperformance in meeting waiting time targets. We have seen a significant fall in red flag referrals during the pandemic surge and it is anticipated that the service is likely to see a surge in referrals over the coming months, with the potential for an increase in late stage presentations of patients experiencing symptoms.

The immediate need is to rebuild services following the Covid-19 first wave and maintain service delivery for red-flag and urgent referrals for the year ahead.

The Rebuilding Plan for Cancer Services contains 17 actions to maximise available capacity across cancer services. The Oncology Stabilisation Plan includes 5 key elements, including funding to support development of new consultant posts in Northern Ireland Cancer Care (NICC) to address single handed / vulnerable practice and pressures within NICC. Funding to support development of new consultant posts in Northern Ireland Cancer Care (NICC) to address single handed / vulnerable practice and pressures within NICC.

The HSCB has also developed a Stabilisation Plan for Haematology Services given its close association with Oncology services to address the capacity pressures also faced by this service. All Trusts have brought forward individual plans which provide enhanced capacity to meet the increase in demand for services whilst simultaneously providing a more resilient service through the development of more sustainable teams.

Each of the Trusts have also developed surge plans to address operational resilience for winter pressures and for any subsequent waves of the Covid-19 pandemic in 2020/2021. These are in addition to Phase 3 Rebuilding Plans for 01 October to 31 December 2020.

These plans are to be submitted in the coming days for my consideration and shortly after I hope to share them with Members as well as making them publicly available.