

Written Ministerial Statement

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Department of Health

COVID 19- LOCALISED RESTRICTIONS

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Mr Swann (The Minister of Health): I am writing to provide Members with an update on the course of the Coronavirus epidemic and recent decisions that I as Minister for Health, along with the Northern Ireland Executive, have taken to limit its spread.

As Members will already be aware when R is above 1, the transmission of the epidemic will increase, resulting in more cases, hospital admissions and deaths. The greater the value of R above 1, the more rapid the increase.

Our 7 day incidence based on new positive tests is now 33.3 per 100,000 people. Our 14 day incidence is 64.9. Our incidence rates remain higher than both the United Kingdom average and that of the Republic of Ireland. We should also be mindful that Northern Ireland's case rate is significantly higher than the level where the UK currently imposes quarantine requirements on overseas countries.

We are also worryingly beginning to see an upturn in hospital admissions. Sadly we are now also seeing an increase in the number of reported deaths.

R is currently likely to be above 1, both for new positive cases and hospital admissions. The proportion of cases in individuals aged >60 yrs has risen from under 10% to just under 16%, however still thankfully significantly below the first wave of the epidemic where around 50% of cases were in this age group.

The current increase in cases should be viewed as the precursor of increasing cases in the over sixties with resulting pressure on the hospital system and increasing deaths.

Community transmission remains widespread, associated with multiple small clusters rather than a small number of larger outbreaks.

Unfortunately from the evidence coming from the contact tracing team it is still the case that much of the transmission is occurring between small social or family gatherings and casual mixing between households.

However, as I have said before, the spread is not even. There is marked variation in COVID cases across Local Government Districts.

Further insight is only possible from looking at a postcode level. In response to particularly high incidence of COVID-19 in certain parts of Northern Ireland the Executive agreed on 10 September that local restrictions should be introduced in order to interrupt community transmission occurring through indoor social gatherings in households, and using postcode areas as the basis for determining the geographical extent of the restrictions.

The case for localised restrictions is well-established, given the marked variation in the incidence of Covid-19 cases in different localities.

Members of the public can now check online at any time to see if their postcodes are included.

Anyone living in these protected areas is required to abide by two restrictions:

- * No mixing of households in private dwellings, with exemptions for: bubbling with one other household; caring responsibilities including childcare; essential maintenance, supported living arrangements; visits required for legal or medical purposes; marriage or civil partnerships where one partner is terminally ill;

- * No more than six people to gather in a private garden from no more than two households;

In addition, everyone living in these areas is asked to be extremely careful in all aspects of their life. That particularly applies to medical vulnerable members of our community. Reflecting that requirement, visits to care homes and hospitals in the protected areas are being significantly curtailed.

Detailed advice is available on the NI Direct website.

Last Thursday, the Executive announced it was establishing a new Ministerial-led group on enforcement of Covid-19 regulations. The Executive Office agreed to lead on this work. Yesterday evening I attended the first meeting of the group, which addressed the dangerous anti-social behaviour in recent days in the Holyland area of Belfast. It is important that they now move to take swift action – the scenes witnessed this week demand it.

It is vital that action on the ground is coordinated and effective. The message must go out loud and clear that dangerous anti-social behaviour will not be tolerated.

A localised approach however inevitably presents logistical and presentational challenges. That would equally be the case if council districts, wards or parliamentary constituencies were used.

The new restrictions were introduced at pace last week due to the urgency of the public health situation. Other jurisdictions have faced similar challenges with localised restrictions. However it was the right thing to do.

I also said last week that the restrictions will be kept under constant review and areas will be added or removed from the list as required.

I can confirm that the newly introduced regulations introducing localised restrictions for the greater Belfast area extend beyond the Belfast City district to include certain co-terminus districts within the Lisburn and Castlereagh Council area. This reflects

the population flows and public transport linkages and Belfast identity of these specific districts. The issue of the co-terminus districts was raised with me during discussions with Executive colleagues last week.

This was always going to be a complex and fast moving situation and I will make no apology for seeking to do the right thing.

There are lessons to be learned going forward, including on the need for engagement with the public and stakeholders.

The regulations themselves are not confusing and can make an important contribution to keeping people safe.

As I have stated previously, I will not step back from wider or stronger restrictions, should they be required.

Today I informed Executive colleagues that the postcode BT60 is now significantly above the previously agreed threshold of 80 positive cases per 100,000 for imposing localised restrictions, and all cases at this time appear due to household or community transmission. My Department will therefore be adding BT60 to the areas under local restriction. It is my intention that the restrictions for this postcode will be underpinned in regulation and be effective from 5pm Friday 18th September.

It is expected that the impact of these restrictions on transmission will take around two weeks to become apparent.

These restrictions will be retained only as long as they are deemed necessary and proportionate.

However I would remind Members that local restrictions may need to be introduced urgently in further areas in response to spikes in incidence. I will endeavour to try to keep the House informed of those decisions, even through regular short written statements.