

# Written Ministerial Statement

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## Department of Health

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

*Published at 2.00 pm on Wednesday 26 February 2020*

**Mr Swann (The Minister of Health):** Further to my written statements on novel Coronavirus COVID-19 to the Assembly in recent weeks I wish to give Members a further update on developments.

While the number of cases of COVID-19 has continued to rise the risk to the UK remains moderate on the advice of the UK Chief Medical Officers. There have been 13 confirmed cases in the UK to date. None of these has been in Northern Ireland. Tried and tested infection control procedures are being used to prevent further spread of the virus.

Any confirmed cases in Northern Ireland will be admitted to the Regional Infectious Disease Unit (RIDU) in the Royal Victoria Hospital, Belfast, if the patient is aged 16 years or over. If the patient is under 16 they will be admitted to the Royal Belfast Hospital for Sick Children. I personally assessed our resilience last week and visited the RIDU. I was extremely impressed by the facilities and the highly trained staff.

As Members will appreciate, this is a rapidly changing situation. In light of developments internationally the case definition was changed on 25<sup>th</sup> February with travel advice issued for people returning from countries and regions including Iran, South Korea and northern Italy.

Updated guidance was issued to health care professionals on the 25<sup>th</sup> February. Guidance for other Departments and their authorities, including schools, is being updated and will issue shortly. In the meantime my Department is emphasising that if anyone has any concerns they should check the Public Health Agency's website which will direct them to the most up-to-date information. The PHA is content to provide advice directly to any concerned head teachers who have school trips returning from affected areas, and will be working proactively on this issue.

It is important that we remain calm and focused on containment at this point. The risk to individuals in the UK has not changed at this stage but we should continue to plan and be ready for all eventualities.

I am continuing to work with other UK Ministers to ensure that we coordinate our planning. My Department is also working closely with the relevant authorities and public health organisations across the UK and the Republic of Ireland as the outbreak develops to ensure that we are ready to deal with the situation. My Chief Medical Officer remains in regular contact with his counterparts in the rest of the UK and in the Republic of Ireland.

My priority as Minister is to ensure that all effective measures are in place in Northern Ireland.

I will provide further statements to the Assembly to update Members on developments.