

Written Ministerial Statement

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Department of Health

COVID-19 — UPDATE

Published at 4.30 pm on Friday 2 October 2020.

Mr Swann (The Minister of Health): This written statement provides an update to Members on the escalating situation regarding the prevalence of the Coronavirus in Northern Ireland and the measures being taken by my Department and the Executive to protect the public.

Over the past week, the scale of the unfolding challenges we are facing have been graphically underlined by the figures published daily on my Department's Covid-19 dashboard. The figures today are particularly concerning.

Unfortunately, the warnings about the resurgent Covid-19 threat are coming true in the starkest of terms.

Over the last week, there has been an unprecedented increase in cases in the context of stable testing along with a progressive rise in COVID hospital patients.

There has been an increase in ICU occupancy and in the context of the increase in hospital admissions and inpatients, it is the clear opinion of the Chief Scientific Advisor that we have now moved beyond the lag period between increased case and pressure on the health and social care system. Cases are currently doubling every 9 days and hospital admissions every 13 days.

As I said in the media briefing on Wednesday and I as told the Health Committee on Thursday, if the current trends do not change in 3-6 weeks' time hospital inpatient numbers will exceed those witnessed during the first wave. Some of our hospitals are already having to switch on their surge plans.

The Executive has agreed a number of interventions to disrupt the spread of the virus.

Strict restrictions are in place across Northern Ireland on household gatherings, and a new province wide 11pm curfew for licensed premises has been introduced.

In response to a rapid and sustained increase in cases in the Derry City and Strabane Council area, the Executive yesterday announced far-reaching localised restrictions for that local government district.

My Department continues to assess further potential interventions should they be required.

Public compliance with public health guidance is critical at this point.

Regulations and enforcement alone will not halt this developing crisis. I would ask every Member to do everything in their power to ensure their constituents follow the advice and guidance from my Department.

Earlier today I attended a sectoral meeting of the North South Ministerial Council and along with our Chief Medical Officer met with Ireland's Minister of Health Stephen Donnelly and Acting Chief Medical Officer Dr Ronan Glynn. The meeting provided a useful opportunity to once again confirm our ongoing commitment close cooperation, especially as the transmission of this virus recognises no border.

Similarly, yesterday evening I attended a 4 UK Nation Covid-O meeting during which further decisions were taken on international travel regulations.

Members should note that further amendments will now be made to the Regulations to give effect to new changes to the Travel Corridor list. I am removing Bonaire, Sint Eustatius and Saba, Poland and Turkey from the exemption list following an increase in risk rating.

All changes will come into force at 4am on Saturday 3rd October 2020 in line with agreed changes to the Travel Corridor exemption list.

Yesterday, I was pleased to announce that a new version of the StopCovid NI app has gone live and can now be downloaded by 11-17 year olds.

This is an important enhancement to an already vital initiative.

The StopCovid NI app was launched at the end of July and the number of downloads has now surpassed the 400,000 mark.

The first version of the app was for the 18 plus age group. Since then, meetings have been held with the Commissioner for Children & Young People, the Information Commissioner's Office and representatives from the Children's Law Centre, in order to ensure appropriate and safe access to the app for younger people, within the legal constraints of GDPR and safeguarding.

This has now been successfully achieved, meaning Northern Ireland now has what is believed to be the first proximity app in the world of this kind.