

Written Ministerial Statement

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Department of Health

COVID-19: UPDATE

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Mr Swann (The Minister of Health): In this update to Members I am pleased to be able to report that the rate of increase in Covid-19 cases has slowed from last week.

Testing has remained stable over that period, however there has been a progressive rise in COVID hospital patients, which today now stands at 296. We are now very close to peak levels experienced during wave 1 and indeed some individual Trusts have well exceeded the level experienced by them in April.

Unfortunately the spread of the virus has caused serious disruption to our Health and Social Care system. Whilst we know much more about treatment for Covid-19 now than we did in March, and detailed surge plans are in place across each of the local Trusts, with many staff either infected or being required to self-isolate there has been an unavoidable disruption to some front line services.

I am deeply concerned however that some cancer procedures have been postponed. I have always made clear that I expected to see red flag and cancer procedures protected as much as feasibly possible. From next Monday I have asked that all patients whose cancer surgery was cancelled in recent days to be provided with a new date.

The ability to protect these urgent services, and provide the appropriate post-operative care, however is very dependent on the number of Covid-19 hospital admissions, the demand for ICU beds and the availability of specialised staff. That is why stamping down on Covid-19 infection rates is now more critical than ever as reducing our rates helps us to protect those cancer and other vital services.

Whilst we are sadly reporting a number of deaths each day now, and R remains above 1 both for cases and hospital admissions, it does appear that Northern Ireland may be beginning to turn the corner on this wave. The R number has fallen slightly since last week. This is likely to reflect both the impact of the Northern Ireland wide household restrictions and the wider restrictions in Derry City and Strabane Local Government District area.

The percentage of positive tests has also begun to plateau, while remaining at a high level. Assuming that current restrictions reduce R to less than 1, Professor Young has advised that we expect some indication of an improvement in these measures in the next week.

There has been an increase in ICU occupancy which now sits at 34 and in the context of the increase in hospital admissions and inpatients, we have now moved beyond the lag period between increased case and pressure on the health and social care system. As a result of the recent strict measures taken and as long as public adherence remains high, my Department expects that admissions, bed occupancy and ICU admissions will peak in the next two weeks.

It is essential therefore that everyone takes all the necessary precautions to look after themselves and others.

Shielding for 'clinically extremely vulnerable' people has been paused since 31 July 2020. The Chief Medical Officer and his team have looked at this position again in light of the increased numbers of cases of Coronavirus in Northern Ireland.

Since shielding was first advised, a number of important changes have taken place in our approach to managing coronavirus and reducing its transmission. This includes a greater awareness of the importance of social distancing, the requirement to use face coverings, Covid secure workplaces and greater adherence to respiratory and hand hygiene.

After careful consideration, the Chief Medical Officer and his team has concluded that shielding should remain paused. This position will, however, be kept under review and my Department will not hesitate to update our shielding advice if we need to.