

# Written Ministerial Statement

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## Department of Health

### COVID-19 UPDATE

*Published at 5.00 pm on Friday 8 January 2021.*

**Mr Swann (The Minister of Health):** This week, a number of our Health and Social Care Trusts have confirmed a downturn of elective surgery. This reflects the unprecedented pressures that the Covid-19 pandemic is creating in our hospitals.

I am assured that every attempt will continue to be made to protect the most urgent surgery where this is achievable, and that postponed operations will be rescheduled as quickly as possible.

I deeply regret any patient experiencing postponements of this nature. The unfortunate reality is that a health service that struggles to cope in normal times is not built to withstand a pandemic of this scale.

As a result of the prevailing Covid situation, an even greater number of staff will have to be redeployed in the days and weeks ahead to meet the urgent and immediate needs of extremely ill patients. That applies equally for both Covid and non-Covid patients needing critical care.

According to the most recent inpatient and ICU modelling, the peak of the third surge is expected in the third week of January 2021.

I can inform Members that I have approved the establishment of a new regional approach to ensure that any available theatre capacity across Northern Ireland is allocated for those patients most in need of surgery both during surge and as we come out of this surge. This will include seeking to fully maximise all available in-house HSC and Independent Sector capacity.

Whilst this may mean that patients will need to travel further for their surgery I would rather see the highest priority treatments delivered elsewhere in Northern Ireland than not at all.

As this new mechanism settles in it is also my firm expectation that inter-Trust transfers for the highest clinical priority cases will be facilitated.

I want to assure the public that hospitals are doing their absolute best to care for patients, and that includes treating the sickest quickest. This is not the case of prioritising one medical condition over another.

It is incredibly offensive for anyone to accuse frontline staff of doing that. I hope no Member will resort to making such claims. It is long past time that this falsehood was

nailed once and for all. Indeed, anyone making such an allegation is insulting health staff who are battling the most appalling pressures and facing decisions no one should have to grapple with.

Well before this pandemic, we were already short of the staff we needed to meet growing demand for health care in society. Important initiatives are in place to rectify that situation but it is a long-term challenge. It takes years to train up specialist nurses and doctors. There are no quick fixes here.

It remains the case that the best way to protect non Covid health services is to push down Covid infection rates as aggressively as possible. To that extent, it is essential that the current lockdown successfully and significantly reduces the R number.

I believe the majority of people are doing the right thing in terms of complying with the lockdown, adhering to Covid-19 regulations, and following the public health advice.

Let me again pay tribute to that collective spirit – and urge everyone to stay the course in this crucial and extremely difficult period. That includes sticking rigidly to the requirements on self-isolation for 10 days in relation to symptoms, confirmed or suspected cases, and travel.

I would remind Members that anyone arriving into Northern Ireland from within the Common Travel Area - Great Britain, Republic of Ireland, Isle of Man and Channel Islands – who plans to remain here for at least 24 hours, must self-isolate upon arrival for 10 days in the same way as international arrivals. People who routinely cross the border (from either Great Britain or the Republic of Ireland) for essential purposes are not subject to these requirements. Further information on travel regulations and guidance is available on NI Direct.

The scale of the threat posed to our citizens at this time from Covid-19 must not be underestimated. This is a time for maximum vigilance.

We have seen over recent times the largest daily figures for confirmed Covid-19 cases in Northern Ireland since the beginning of the pandemic. This level of new cases will inevitably lead to mounting and unparalleled pressures for our hospitals in the coming weeks. In particular, the increase in cases among the over 60 age bracket will drive escalating pressures on our health system.

Official figures for confirmed cases will always underestimate the actual total, given that many people can have Covid-19 without displaying symptoms or being aware of the infection.

It is estimated that in some parts of NI, where transmission is particularly high, as many as 1 in 40 people currently have Covid-19. For the province as a whole, the estimated figure is in the region of 1 in 60.

Colleagues across health and social care are extremely concerned about what is coming our way in the early part of this year. So whilst we are facing a very precarious few weeks ahead, as I informed the Assembly earlier in the week there is also real cause for optimism. Our vaccination programme continues apace and as of

today I am advised that in the region of 74k vaccinations have been administered in NI. Of these, some 65k are first doses and 9k second doses with 166 care homes having their 2nd dose.

Northern Ireland should be proud of its progress to date on Covid-19 vaccination. Members can be assured that the programme will be scaled up significantly and rapidly as more vaccines become available.