

**URGENT ORAL STATEMENT TO THE
ASSEMBLY BY HEALTH MINISTER ROBIN SWANN – MONDAY 2 MARCH 2020
– RESPONSE TO THE EMERGENCE OF CORONAVIRUS (2019 NCoV) - UPDATE**

Mr Speaker, further to my written statement on Friday on COVID-19, I wish to give Members a further update on recent local developments.

As of today, 150 tests have been carried out – 149 of which were negative and 1 was positive. As Members may be aware, the Public Health Agency have been publishing the number of tests on a weekly basis. However with recent developments we are now moving to twice weekly updates. As such, further information on the number of tests carried out will be published again later this week.

The individual who had a confirmed positive result for COVID-19 on the 27th February is receiving appropriate specialist health care in keeping with expert advice and agreed procedures. I understand the individual followed the public health advice and had self-isolated before seeking medical attention. I am sure Members will join me in wishing them a speedy recovery.

Contact tracing of those who had come into close contact with the individual since their return from Italy was immediately undertaken by Public Health Agency personnel. I can confirm that this was completed on the 28 February. Those requiring appropriate advice have been provided with it. I would emphasise that members of the public who have travelled between Dublin and Belfast using public transport need not be concerned.

Once the details of the case were known, the PHA immediately contacted their counterparts in the Republic of Ireland to provide all relevant information regarding the person's movements while in Dublin.

This case relates to travel to an affected area of Italy. It was not linked to a school ski trip and at this stage we do not believe there are any wider implications for children or schools.

Across the UK public health professionals are continuing to carry out enhanced monitoring of direct flights from areas such as northern Italy and Iran.

Whilst the situation is no doubt serious, and whilst it is far from certain that it will happen, detailed plans are in place in case of the virus becoming a pandemic. Even with the recent case I would stress that we are very much still in the containment phase.

We have been planning for the first positive case in Northern Ireland and we have robust infection control measures in place which have enabled us to respond

immediately to this type of situation. Our health service is used to managing infections and we are well prepared to deal with this.

I would like to reassure members of the public that we are taking all necessary measures to minimise the risk to them.

As I have previously stated it was not unexpected that at some point we would have a positive case in Northern Ireland. However, it is important that we continue to remain calm and focused on containment at this point. The risk to individuals in Northern Ireland has not changed at this stage. Based on the advice of the UK Chief Medical Officers the risk to the UK remains at moderate.

However we will continue to plan and be ready for all eventualities as Members will no doubt be fully aware that the virus has continued to spread to many countries and regions.

The Public Health Act (Northern Ireland) 1967 has been amended by my Department to make coronavirus disease (COVID-19) a notifiable disease. The changes came into effect on 29th February 2020.

On Friday I updated the First Minister and deputy First Minister and on Saturday along with the First and deputy First Ministers, I spoke with the Taoiseach and the Republic's Health Minister, Simon Harris, in relation to the case. We were all in full agreement that the relevant authorities north and south should continue to work closely with each other and ensure any necessary actions in relation to this case have been fully completed.

Members will be aware that the first case was confirmed in ROI on Saturday. I understand that contact tracing of those who may have been in close contact with the individual is ongoing. There are not believed to be any implications for Northern Ireland.

The Health and Social Care Board have been liaising with their counterparts in the Health Service Executive in ROI to ensure that where possible, both jurisdictions can make the best use of our collective resources when responding to Covid-19.

My advice to the public remains the same. To those members of the public who have symptoms and are concerned they may have COVID-19 I would urge them not to turn up at GP clinics or hospital Emergency Departments. They should instead contact their GP or GP out of hours. Advice will then be given on next steps, including testing if required.

I would like to remind Members and the public that everyone can play their part. I would encourage everyone to take sensible precautions of washing their hands regularly and to especially heed the advice recommend for similar illnesses such as cold and flu – catch it, bin it and kill it.

Northern Ireland now has full access to the NHS 111 helpline on coronavirus. This is available 24/7 to provide advice. More general advice about coronavirus is available at the Public Health Agency website and NI Direct.

As the situation develops my Department and the Public Health Agency will continue to provide updated guidance to health care professionals and other Departments and their authorities, including schools, as and when necessary.

I remain in close contact with the other UK Health Ministers and I will continue to take part in the weekly COBR Ministerial meetings to ensure our joined up approach to tackling this disease continues. I can also advise that I along with the First and deputy First Ministers participated in a COBR Ministerial meeting this morning which was chaired by the Prime Minister Boris Johnston.

My Department including the health and social care system, have planned extensively over the years for an event like this, and therefore is well prepared to respond in a way that offers substantial protection to the public. My Department has also contributed to the UK wide Coronavirus Action Plan which is due to be published by the UK government tomorrow.

The document sets out what the UK as a whole has already done - and plans to do further - to tackle the current coronavirus outbreak, based on our wealth of experience dealing with other infectious diseases and our influenza pandemic preparedness work. The exact response to COVID-19 will be tailored to the nature, scale and location of the threat in the UK, as our understanding of this develops.

This document sets out:

- what we know about the virus and the disease it causes
- how we have planned for an infectious disease outbreak, such as the current coronavirus outbreak
- the actions we have taken so far in response to the current coronavirus outbreak
- what we are planning to do next, depending upon the course the current coronavirus outbreak takes.
- the role the public can play in supporting this response, now and in the future.

Locally the HSCB are leading on surge planning working with our Health and Social Care Trusts. This will be informed by our existing pandemic flu plans which are in place across the Health & Social Care sector. As I have previously advised the House the Regional Virology Lab, Belfast, is now set up for testing of COVID-19 since mid-February. All positive tests are sent to PHE labs for confirmation.

My Department, the Public Health Agency and the Health and Social Care Board will continue to work closely with the relevant authorities and public health organisations across the UK and the Republic of Ireland to deal with the situation as events unfold.

Across the NICS planning has been stepped up to ensure a coordinated response from all sectors of Government. I am aware TEO is leading the work on assessing essential services and key sectors' readiness and that they convened a cross departmental meeting on 20 February where information on the all possible eventualities was shared and all Departments were asked to review business continuity plans. A tabletop exercise is planned in coming day where our planning and preparation across government will be discussed.

Internationally, and in the UK and the Republic of Ireland, we remain in the Containment phase of our response as we seek to prevent sustained community transmission.

Lastly I want to thank all the staff who have been involved in dealing with the first confirmed case in Northern Ireland. Their professionalism and dedication is very reassuring.

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

In conclusion, let me direct my comments beyond this House – to the people watching at home, and indeed to the media reporting on these proceedings.

It is vital that we keep taking a balanced, proportionate approach at all times – with our actions based on the best scientific advice.

Complacency is our enemy – but so too are panic and hysteria.

As we've said, we will continue to prepare for all eventualities.

When the UK Government issues its action plan tomorrow, there will inevitably be intense interest in what kind of emergency measures may form part of our collective planning. These are measures that we will have in our toolkits to deploy only if required. "If required" are important words in that sentence

The emergency measures in the forthcoming UK Government action plan will apply to Northern Ireland, if needed.

It is normal practice to plan for worst case scenarios. This does not mean these outcomes are expected or likely. This is a really important point to underline.

Our primary focus remains on containment at this time and then to delay and mitigate.

There are risks for society in taking premature actions - actions not grounded in scientific advice.

We have already heard fears being voiced about our economy and jobs; including in the tourism and hospitality sectors.

Obviously, public health protection must come first. I'm sure all members would agree on that.

However, premature actions in the current situation could also have impacts on our health. I'm thinking of the risks from undue panic or hysteria, and also of social isolation as a result of social distancing.

Let me finish by saying this, Mr Speaker.

The people of Northern Ireland are a resilient people. I believe they are well used to keeping calm during challenging circumstances.

I believe they will not be unduly influenced by rumour or fake news on the internet; that they will rely on the advice and guidance of our public health experts.

That's what I am doing and believe the Executive is 100% behind me in that approach.

Mr Speaker, I believe we should remain both vigilant and determined to tackle this virus with our well-developed plans in place.