

URGENT ORAL STATEMENT TO THE ASSEMBLY BY HEALTH MINISTER ROBIN SWANN – MONDAY 9 MARCH 2020 – UPDATE REGARDING COVID 19 (CORONAVIRUS)

Mr Speaker, further to my oral statement of Monday 2 March on COVID-19, I wish to give Members a further update on recent local developments.

Firstly, I can confirm that as of 9am today, 9 March, 222 tests have been completed in Northern Ireland. While the vast majority have been negative we now have 12 positive cases in Northern Ireland.

I can update the House and the general public regarding the 5 presumptive positive cases announced yesterday evening.

The Public Health Agency advises that 2 of these cases were travel related involving individuals who had recently been in Northern Italy.

The remaining 3 cases can be traced to previously reported cases that involved recent travel to Northern Italy. One of the 3 is a young person. The individual attends a school which is co-located with a primary school. Both schools have received Public Health advice from PHA Health Protection consultants.

PHA is content that there is no public health risk to anyone attending either of the schools, however it understands as a precautionary measure both schools will be closing today to undertake an enhanced clean.

I would also like to reassure the house that contact tracing for all 5 cases is at an advanced stage.

All individuals who have tested positive are receiving appropriate specialist health care in keeping with expert advice and agreed procedures. The Public Health Agency have put in place robust infection control measures to help prevent further spread while contact-tracing of those who have come into close contact with the individuals has been undertaken immediately. Those requiring appropriate advice will be provided with it.

In addition, in light of the increasing number of cases and in wanting to keep the House and members of the public fully informed of what is clearly an evolving situation, I can advise that the Department will be moving to daily reporting of cases, as currently happens in England. The intention will be to release the figures each afternoon.

As I have outlined previously, the increase in positive cases is not unexpected and I would advise members of the public not to be unduly alarmed by these developments. I cannot discuss individual cases but I am fully aware of the press reports linking one of the cases to some football teams and I can assure Members and everyone listening that all appropriate actions are being taken in relation to all the confirmed cases.

The overall 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 still remains at moderate. This will be kept under review. I would echo the calls of the Prime Minister and advise people against panic-buying of food or other products at the supermarkets.

We remain focused on the containment phase at this point, which is aimed at preventing the disease from taking hold in the UK. We have been clear that we will communicate any move to the delay phase, but I would remind Members that this will not be a sharp transition and we will continue with many of the current actions in the containment phase.

The First Minister & Deputy First Minister and I have been in discussion with our counterparts across the UK at a COBR Ministerial meeting this morning to consider the scientific evidence which will guide us in our steps: to flattening the peak of the outbreak in the UK; to delay and spread the impact on our health service; to push the peak away from this time of year and to protect those most at risk.

Members will also be aware of the rise in cases in the Republic of Ireland which currently stand at 21, including two cases of community transmission'. Urgent contact-tracing for the latest cases is now underway. There are no known implications for Northern Ireland at this stage and the relevant Public Health bodies remain in close contact.

Whilst the situation is serious, I would like to reassure Members that detailed plans are in place in the event of an outbreak spreading across the UK and the Republic of Ireland with sustained community transmission. Our health service is used to managing infections and we are well prepared to deal with this.

I again would like to reassure members of the public that we are taking all necessary measures to minimise the risk to them. We are continuing to plan and we will be ready for all eventualities. Extensive work has been undertaken to ensure all Trusts have Covid-19 PODS in place which will enable patients suspected of having Covid-19 to be assessed and treated away from routine hospital work. We continue to review the best use of testing and current clinical pathways so that individuals receive the appropriate care recognising that many patients will have a mild illness.

My Department has established a new Directorate which is dedicated to surge planning. At operational level a Regional Surge Planning Sub-group has been established by the PHA and the HSCB to ensure that there is an appropriate and proportionate level of HSC preparedness across the sector in response to Covid-19. Twice-weekly meetings are held and a Covid-19 Surge Planning workshop was held on 5 March. The purpose of the workshop was to consider Trust surge plans and self-assessment checklists in order to share actions and ensure regional consistency where possible.

Across the NICS, planning has been stepped up to ensure a coordinated response from all sectors of Government. TEO is leading the work on assessing essential services and key sectors' readiness and have convened weekly C3 meetings. C3 means command, control and coordination. TEO led a workshop on 6 March to discuss Departmental risks and priorities.

I remain in close contact with the other UK Health Ministers as well as Executive colleagues on all recent developments at the Executive meeting tomorrow. Twice weekly COBR Ministerial meetings are now planned to ensure that our joined up approach to tackling this disease continues. This will be more frequent as required.

My Department will continue to work closely with the relevant departments across the UK and the Republic of Ireland to ensure Northern Ireland is well prepared to deal with the situation as events unfold. While the Health and Social Care Board will continue to liaise with their counterparts in the Health Service Executive in the Republic of Ireland to ensure that where possible, both jurisdictions can make the best use of our collective resources when responding to Covid-19.

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.

There were differences on travel advice to Italy provided by the FCO and the Department of Foreign Affairs in the Republic of Ireland. Following discussion with FMdFM and their representation to the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland and in light of decisions taken by the authorities in Italy I am advised this variation has now been addressed.

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; they will get advice on next steps, including testing if required. Northern Ireland now has full access to the 111 Covid-19 helpline which is available 24/7 to provide advice. More general advice about Covid-19 is available at the Public Health Agency website and NI Direct. For those who are advised to self-isolate at home they have a responsibility to follow that advice. We all have a responsibility to take steps to protect each other. In the time ahead we will also need to consider how best to protect those at most risk. In all of this we will be guided by the evidence of what is most effective.

I would like to remind Members and the public that good personal hygiene is key to helping stop the spread of flu and similar infectious viruses.

As such, everyone can help to prevent the spread of Covid-19 and other viruses by ensuring we all take sensible precautions such as washing our hands – thoroughly and often – and to heed the standard advice recommended for similar illnesses such as cold and flu – by ensuring that when we sneeze we catch it, bin it and kill it.

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. As Members will be aware, the UK-wide Coronavirus Action Plan – published on the 3 March – sets out what the UK as a whole has already done, and plans to do further, to tackle the current coronavirus outbreak.

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.

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

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

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

Mr Speaker, let me underline some key points that should offer a level of reassurance.

We need to walk a fine line and be alert but not alarmed.

The current evidence is that the vast majority of cases appear to be mild and make a speedy recovery. That is a crucial point that we have to keep reminding people of at every opportunity. Yes, some of our citizens are more vulnerable than others and we have to work hard to ensure they get the protection and support they need – not just from the health service but from across society.

We are working intensively with public health colleagues in Great Britain and the Republic of Ireland to do all we conceivably can to protect our citizens. The challenges, problems and

dilemmas we are grappling with are mirrored right across these islands. Decisions will be based on the most up to date scientific and medical advice.

It's at times like these, we really see the value of our national health service. It's been preparing for a pandemic. We have some of the top experts in the world advising us on what to do. We have staff across the system working night and day on this. And no one who falls sick is going to have to worry about how much treatment is going to cost.

I also have to be frank with people. This is not going to get any easier anytime soon. The indications are that it is likely to get much more challenging before we are through the worst of the situation.

We can expect significant ongoing increases in the numbers of people testing positive for Covid-19 in Northern Ireland. The same can be said in England, Scotland, Wales and the Republic of Ireland

Health systems across the globe are coming under extreme and increasing pressure as this virus spreads. Ours will be no different. This is bound to take its toll.

Normal business in health and social care may not be possible. Some activities may unfortunately have to be scaled back, but such decisions would not be lightly taken.

But let's not sit back passively and wait for the worst to happen. As I have said, guided by the evidence we will act to delay and push the peak to lessen the pressures on our health service.

We can all make a difference.

Washing our hands properly is not a well-meaning but trivial piece of advice. It can really help us slow the spread of Covid 19, help us even out as much as possible the impact on our health service, push us into a period where flu and other winter illnesses aren't around to add to the burdens.

That's why containment is so important. It won't have been a failure if or when we move into the delay phase.

So let's recognise and appreciate the work our Public Health Agency has been doing, let's understand the vital importance of self-isolation and contact-tracing that has been done so far. Without that work, our total today would be much higher.

Let me assure Members that we are in no way being passive or defeatist.

It is by no means inevitable that the surge in positive cases in other parts of the world will be replicated here.

We all need to rise to this challenge.

That includes every single one of us following the simple advice on washing our hands. This is not an optional add-on.

We owe it ourselves and our families to keep doing the right things.

And Mr Speaker we owe to it the sick, the elderly and vulnerable in our society. We cannot let them down.