

URGENT WRITTEN STATEMENT TO THE ASSEMBLY BY HEALTH MINISTER ROBIN SWANN – FRIDAY 9 OCTOBER 2020 AT 4.30PM – COVID 19- UPDATE

This statement summarises the current situation regarding the ongoing and rapid increase of positive Coronavirus cases in Northern Ireland.

Today, my Department's daily Covid-19 dashboard reports for the first time that more than 1,000 additional positive tests have been recorded. The number of additional tests undertaken in a day has passed the 10,000 mark, also for the first time.

In his weekly R number report to the Executive, the Chief Scientific Advisor Professor Ian Young informed Minister that R remains clearly above 1, both for new positive tests and hospital inpatients.

He stated that the current estimate of R for both these categories is between 1.3 and 1.8.

Over the last week, there has been a further marked 100% increase in cases in the context of a moderate 15% increase in testing.

There has been a progressive rise in COVID hospital patients, which are now around 33% of peak levels during wave 1. This trend is expected to become more pronounced in the very near future in the light of the sustained spike in new cases.

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 7 days and hospital admissions every 9 days, both reduced from last week; if current trends remain unabated hospital inpatients will exceed those of wave 1 in only 2 to 3 weeks.

The situation is grave and getting more so, on a daily if not hourly basis.

Significant restrictions on household contacts remain in place across Northern Ireland, while more stringent limits currently in the Derry City and Strabane Local Government District.

I am advised that further restrictions for Northern Ireland are likely to be required in the very near future, in the event of positive cases continuing their current upward trajectory. This will be necessary to reduce hospitalisations and loss of life and to protect our health and social care system from being overwhelmed.

Unfortunately, as has been stated, the seasons are not in our favour, as winter leaves health and social care at its most fragile every year.

Like other Members, I wish that our health and social care services had greater in-built resilience and additional capacity.

It is without doubt that ten years of budgetary pressures have taken a toll on the system and its capacity. We cannot roll the clock back however – we have to deal with the situation now staring us in the face.

The Executive is taking a major stocktake of the options at its disposal, quite properly taking into account the wider societal and economic consequences of any further restrictions.

The Executive is in effect in a double bind – wanting to protect our citizens and hospitals from the virus while seeking to prevent lasting and widespread economic damage, with all the implications that will bring for the well-being of individuals and communities.

It is my view that this is the single biggest challenge facing our Executive and Assembly in the modern era of devolution.

This week I announced that the Workforce Appeal to boost Health and Social care staff numbers to assist in the battle against Covid-19 has resumed.

The initial appeal in March saw 1,702 doctors, nurses and other staff successful in their application to work for the health service.

I commend all those who came forward and continue to come forward, and once again thank everyone working across the system for their dedication at this time.

I know Members will agree with me that every one of us across society owes it to our health service and its staff to do everything in power to break the chains of transmission of Covid-19.

Keeping our distance, reducing our contacts as much as possible, wearing a mask and washing our hands – is still our best collective defence mechanism against this silent enemy.