

**WRITTEN STATEMENT TO THE ASSEMBLY BY HEALTH MINISTER ROBIN SWANN –  
FRIDAY 30 OCTOBER 2020 AT 5PM – COVID 19- UPDATE**

While some welcome progress has been made in the past two weeks, it is essential that this is not only maintained but accelerated.

Over the last week, the number of cases has continued to plateau and has begun to decline slightly, however I would caution the rate of decline is slow and the trajectory remains uncertain.

R is now likely to be slightly below 1 for cases, around 1 for admissions and above 1 for hospital inpatients, but has fallen somewhat since last week. This is likely to reflect the initial impact of the Northern Ireland wide restrictions and the earlier restrictions in Derry City and Strabane, which is no longer the Local Government District with the highest 7 day incidence.

The extent to which our recent progress is maintained will be a central consideration when it comes to deciding what measures may need to be in place at the end of the current four week period of restrictions.

At this time, as we look around to the experience of our neighbours and those on mainland Europe, any expectation that we can return to any kind of normality from November 13 would be entirely misplaced.

What we cannot countenance is allowing case numbers to surge once again, through complacency, or poor levels of compliance with public health advice, or premature relaxation of **all** restrictions.

Further enhancements to the contact tracing service have an important role to play in the weeks and months ahead, but this must not be viewed as a panacea. Members will be aware that other jurisdictions, with contact tracing systems that have been compared favourably to ours, are now in even stricter lockdown situations.

Our health and social care system and its dedicated staff remain under intense and unprecedented pressure.

The welfare of patients – both Covid and non-Covid - and of staff will continue to be the overriding priority. I once again pay tribute to staff at all levels of health and social care.

I also want to underline the toll the current pressures are taking so many of them. Exhaustion – both physical and mental – is a very real concern.

There is only so much we can ask of staff and this will be to the forefront of my mind as we consider next steps after November 13.

The health service's staffing challenges are well documented and long-standing. They certainly long predate this pandemic. Northern Ireland is by no means unique in this regard.

Significant numbers of people are coming forward through the current workforce appeal, with over 9,000 expressions of interest so far resulting in almost 5,000 formal applications. Whilst the clinical applications are prioritised however I would thank each and every person who has come forward, as well as all those that remain in post or on call from the first appeal.

Putting our permanent workforce on a stable footing however is a long-term task. It takes years to train up specialist staff.

As things stand at present, an already overstretched workforce is being further depleted by Covid-related absences.

A health system that was already fragile has been further weakened and is now facing into winter with an additional 354 Covid patients to treat.

There has been a progressive rise in COVID hospital patients which we expect to plateau in the next week at levels significantly above wave 1. Any subsequent decline is likely to be slow and will depend on how cases fall.

While strenuous efforts are being made to maintain non-Covid services, this will not always be possible – especially when increasing numbers of ICU patients require the redeployment of specialist staff from other posts. There are herculean efforts being undertaken every single day by our clinicians to try to protect the most urgent services, including cancer surgeries, and in the event of cancellations I am assured every feasible option is being explored to reschedule them as quickly as possible.

The health and social care system needs ongoing support across society at this critical juncture.

That means all of us doing all we can to stop Covid spreading – cutting down our contacts with each other, maintaining social distancing, wearing a face covering and downloading the Stop Covid-19 app.