

**WRITTEN STATEMENT TO THE ASSEMBLY BY HEALTH MINISTER ROBIN SWANN –
FRIDAY 6 NOVEMBER 2020 AT 5PM – COVID 19- UPDATE**

As I have emphasised before, our health and social care system is facing into its most challenging ever winter.

Let me once again publicly thank everyone who works within it. Our society will never be able to repay the debt we owe to health and social care staff.

We only have one workforce and they are battling against relentless daily pressures, while already exhausted. This has been a deeply distressing and difficult 9 months and we must never underestimate the physical and emotional strain it has placed on our staff.

In order to sustain sufficient ICU capacity to care for critically ill Covid and non Covid patients painstaking and complex work continues.

As of today there are 93 patients in critical care across Northern Ireland, of which 49 are Covid positive. The Trusts have capacity across their critical care units totalling 119 critical care beds. The Belfast Trust has a further 10 fully occupied cardiac surgical ICU beds, giving a total capacity across the region of 129 ICU beds.

This scaling up of ICU requirements inevitably and unavoidably comes at a cost. Even with revised staffing ratios, expanding the number of ICU beds requires the redeployment of experienced and specialist staff away from other parts of the health service.

ICU patient numbers are monitored on a daily basis in liaison with Critical Care Network Northern Ireland (CCaNNI). Should it be deemed possible to scale back ICU bed numbers in agreement with CCaNNI, this would allow further urgent or emergency surgery to be progressed.

Whilst some procedures are unfortunately being cancelled, in many cases they are being quickly rescheduled. Other elective services, many of which were cancelled in the first wave, are continuing.

Thankfully hospital admissions have begun to decline slowly over the last week, but remain much higher than the peak ever experienced in wave 1.

The best way to protect non-Covid services is to stop Covid spreading and thankfully over the last week, the number of cases has continued to decline. R is definitely below 1 for cases, around 1 for admissions and likely to be above one for hospital inpatients and ICU occupancy.

The fall in cases is undoubtedly as a result of the momentous efforts and sacrifices being made by you, the people of Northern Ireland. I do not underestimate for one moment the strains that the restrictions, as well as the continued prevalence of the virus, is having on the ordinary day to day lives of our citizens, and the economic damage this virus is inflicting.

For our health and social care workers, our older people, our other clinically vulnerable citizens and society as a whole we all have an obligation to do all that we can to push down infection rates and keep them low. That's a duty on us all as individuals in our daily lives and on those of us making decisions around the Executive table.

This week I submitted a paper to the Executive, informed by the latest medical and scientific advice, and I hope that early next week a decision can be made. If we do not take action we almost certainly will have to intervene more significantly if we are to avoid our health service being overwhelmed.

The best way to navigate through these dark days is to strictly follow public health advice – for the sake of ourselves and others and for the sake of the health service and its workforce.

That's how we build hope and optimism – by sticking together as a community and continuing to do the right thing.

There are grounds for wider hope on the horizon. Work is continuing on the development of mass testing with fast turnaround times; hugely important advances have been made towards a successful vaccine; treatments will continue to improve. We should be in a much better place by next Spring.

This winter will be undoubtedly a tough slog, I will not sugar-coat the situation nor offer false hope or assurance.

There are no quick fixes, easy solutions or overarching strategies that are going to make this virus go away. My priority will be to ensure that the health service is not overwhelmed, with all the consequences that will entail.

Let me emphasise once again that I share the concerns voiced by other Members about economic consequences of this pandemic. The Executive rightly has to consider all potential interventions in the round, taking into account the full societal implications. We are taking the most difficult and complex decisions of our political lives.

It is, of course, my duty to stand up for the health service – for staff, for all those who receive and need treatment and care.

It should always be remembered that an overwhelmed health service would be detrimental to our economy and society.

We can all play our part in avoiding that nightmare and I am confident that we will.