

WRITTEN STATEMENT TO THE ASSEMBLY BY HEALTH MINISTER ROBIN SWANN – FRIDAY 27 NOVEMBER 2020 AT 5PM – COVID-19- UPDATE

The revelation that 100 covid-related deaths were registered in the week to Friday 20 November is a chilling illustration of the seriousness of the invisible threat of Covid-19 that Northern Ireland, like virtually every other county in the world, is facing.

From my last written update to Members I am able to report that the number of new coronavirus cases has continued to decline overall, however it should be noted there still remains concerns in regards to the number of cases in the over 60s.

Hospital admissions have continued to decline, albeit slowly, over the last week but remain at a relatively high level. Whilst today there remains 425 covid confirmed inpatients, thankfully the number of patients in critical care has stabilised.

That continued high number of inpatients however, combined with the fact that our HSC system is still endeavouring to deliver as much non-covid care as possible, is resulting in ongoing pressure across our hospitals in terms of capacity and bed occupancy.

Given the further restrictions that we have entered into today, we should expect that the numbers of new cases, the subsequent pressures on our health service will decline until shortly before Christmas when they may begin to rise again. The rate of increase will of course depend on how much Rt increases above 1 following the 11th December.

So whilst the situation remains serious, I would advise Members that the correct mood to adopt right now is one of cautious optimism. While nothing is guaranteed, the progress on a vaccine does offer us hope for 2021.

Yesterday I issued an encouraging public update on the roll-out of a Covid-19 vaccination programme from next month. Members should also know that I have appointed Patricia Donnelly – an experienced and adept HSC leader - head of my Department's Covid-19 Vaccine Programme. I will continue to keep Members informed on this important issue over the coming weeks.

Whilst there is much to be optimistic about this must not be the cause of any complacency, or any weakening of our resolve to keep the spread of the virus to a minimum.

Progress has been made in reducing new cases, with restrictions in place in recent weeks having a discernible impact. That progress must not just be maintained but accelerated.

The virus is still spreading in our community, is still making too many of our fellow citizens desperately ill, and tragically is still claiming lives.

For the sake of ourselves and our health workers we have to redouble our efforts to get through this winter. All our focus now should be on maximising the benefits of the lockdown that has just begun. That is why I sincerely hope we as a society make the most of these two weeks, that we follow the public health guidance and that we stay at home. Our actions today will determine what position our health and social care system will be in as we approach the crucial Christmas period.

There are conflicting views among Members and across society on how best to respond to this pandemic. We must find unity of purpose in making these next two weeks deliver in terms of pushing down infection rates. That is our duty.

We owe it to our frontline staff, to care home residents and to other vulnerable members of our community. We owe it to people who can be spared the devastating effects of the virus. We owe it to their families.

Let's all of us across Northern Ireland carry each other through this winter, doing all we can to ensure as many people as possible get to enjoy Christmas and live to see a better New Year.