

WRITTEN STATEMENT TO THE ASSEMBLY BY HEALTH MINISTER ROBIN SWANN – FRIDAY 13 NOVEMBER 2020 AT 5PM – COVID 19- UPDATE

This has not been a good week for the Executive. Whilst the pandemic has undoubtedly confronted us with many immensely difficult decisions, the people and businesses of Northern Ireland deserved so much better than the leadership and political stewardship they were given.

There is huge work required to repair the damage that has been caused but I would urge Ministers to look forward to the very real issues at hand rather than repeat the arguments that have been exhausted over recent days.

At the forefront of all our minds is that the pandemic remains an immediate and serious public health threat.

We must also remember why we decide to take the decisions we do. On the 16th October the Executive introduced a range of restrictions for two crucial reasons - firstly, to limit the transmission of Covid and secondly, to avoid an immediate risk to our Health and Social Care system and all the staff that work within it becoming overwhelmed.

There is clear evidence that the restrictions have proven effective in bringing down the value of R. As a result of the ongoing personal and collective sacrifices of so many of our people and businesses over the last week, the number of cases has continued to decline, albeit at a slower rate than during the previous week. R_t for confirmed cases has however started to increase and is now between 0.8-0.9. We should not underestimate the danger presented by that.

Worryingly it would appear that as a result of the relatively higher value of R_t in over 60's, hospital admissions remain at a higher than anticipated level.

The numbers of hospital inpatients are not falling, and instead have risen from 407 last Friday to 443 today. Whilst the number of ICU inpatients and deaths remain tragically high, but relatively stable, I remain concerned about the overall capacity of our hospital system.

So it was in the recognition that any relaxation this week would have likely put upward pressure on R, and starting from a high baseline of ongoing community transmission and significant numbers of hospital inpatients, the Executive extended the restrictions.

Whilst there are grounds to be optimistic for the future given the huge advancements that are being made in regards to a vaccine and improved treatments, I am becoming fearful of just how challenging the next number of weeks and months will be.

Whilst R has been brought down, it is now heading in the wrong direction and creeping up once again. I suspect the political wrangling this week has also caused untold damage to the public confidence and understanding of the current restrictions.

Moving forward there is very limited headroom without quickly reaching the point where the hospital system, which is already now operating at over capacity, struggles to cope. So as the Executive is already well aware, if I have to recommend further interventions to prevent vital services being overwhelmed, I will not hesitate to do so.

Of course, it must be underlined again, that everyone across society has a vital part to play in stopping the spread of the virus. That means following the public health advice by cutting down our contacts, keeping our distance, wearing a face covering and washing our hands.

There is a heavy burden on the public in terms of protecting each other and the health service. I hope and trust they will rise to the challenge better than the political class has managed this week.