

FROM: Gerard Collins
Health Protection Branch

DATE: 28 February 2020

TO: 1. Dr Michael McBride
2. Minister Swann

Oral Statement to the Assembly on COVID-19 on Monday 2 March 2020

ISSUE: You have agreed to provide an oral statement to the Assembly on COVID-19 on Monday 2 March 2020

TIMING: Monday 2 March 2020

PRESENTATIONAL ISSUES Media interest in this issue remains high. Press Office is working closely with PHA on an agreed comms approach and media handling. Press Office will continue to monitor the situation closely. Cleared by Press Office. TS 28/2/20

FOI IMPLICATIONS Fully disclosable

FINANCIAL IMPLICATIONS Potential implications in terms of planning & preparation including: equipment costs, consumables and remedial capital works, training/overtime. By way of indication, the Department bid for £55m in 2009 to meet additional expected costs emerging from H1N1 (Swine Flu) in 2009/10. A similar cost (revenue and capital) in responding to COVID-19 may arise in the reasonable worst case scenario during the mitigation phase. To date £750k has been allocated to Emergency Planning Branch for any necessary expenditure.

LEGISLATION IMPLICATIONS None.

EQUALITY/HUMAN RIGHTS/RURAL NEEDS IMPLICATIONS None.

RECOMMENDATION:

You are invited to approve the speech (Tab A)
and note the Q&As at Tab B

Introduction

1. You have agreed to provide an oral statement to the Assembly on Coronavirus on Monday 2 March 2020

Recommendation

2. You are invited to approve the speech (Tab A) and note the Q&As at Tab B

Gerard Collins
Health Protection Branch

Copied to:

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**URGENT ORAL STATEMENT TO THE ASSEMBLY BY HEALTH
MINISTER ROBIN SWANN – MONDAY 2 MARCH 2020: UPDATE
REGARDING COVID 19 (CORONAVIRUS)**

Mr Speaker, further to my written statement on Friday on COVID-19, I wish to give Members a further update on recent local developments.

As of 1 March, 140 tests have been carried out – 139 of which were negative and 1 was positive. As Members may be aware, the Public Health Agency was publishing the number of tests on a weekly basis, however with recent developments and we are now moving to twice weekly updates. As such, further information on the number of tests carried out will be published again later this week.

The individual who had a confirmed positive result for COVID-19 on the 27th February is receiving appropriate specialist health care in keeping with expert advice and agreed procedures. I understand the individual followed the public health advice and had self-isolated before seeking medical attention. I am sure Members will join me in wishing them a speedy recovery.

Contact tracing of those who had come into close contact with the individual since their return from Italy was immediately undertaken by Public Health Agency personnel and I can confirm that this had been completed on the 28 February and those requiring appropriate advice have been provided with it. I would emphasise that members of the public who have travelled between Dublin and Belfast using public transport need not be concerned.

Once the details of the case were known, the PHA immediately contacted their counterparts in the Republic of Ireland to provide all relevant information regarding the person's movements while in Dublin.

This case relates to travel to an affected area of Italy. It was not linked to a school ski trip and at this stage we do not believe there are any wider implications for children or schools.

Across the UK public health professionals are continuing to carry out enhanced monitoring of direct flights from areas such as northern Italy and Iran.

Whilst the situation is no doubt serious, and whilst it is far from certain that it will happen, detailed plans are in place in case of the virus becoming a pandemic. Even with the recent cases we are very much still in the containment phase.

We have been planning for the first positive case in Northern Ireland and we have robust infection control measures in place which have enabled us to respond immediately to this type of situation. Our health service is used to managing infections and we are well prepared to deal with this.

I would like to reassure members of the public that we are taking all necessary measures to minimise the risk to them.

As I have previously stated it was not unexpected that at some point we would have a positive case in Northern Ireland. It is important however that we continue to remain calm and focused on containment at this point. The risk to individuals in Northern Ireland has not changed at this stage, and based on the advice of the UK Chief Medical Officers the risk to the UK remains at moderate.

We will however continue to plan and be ready for all eventualities as Members will no doubt be fully aware that the virus has continued to spread to many countries and regions.

The Public Health Act (Northern Ireland) 1967 has been amended by my Department to make coronavirus disease (COVID-19) a notifiable disease. The changes came into effect on 29 February 2020.

On Friday I updated the First Minister and deputy First Minister and on Saturday along with First and deputy First Minister, I spoke with the Taoiseach and the Republic's Health Minister, Simon Harris, in relation to the case. We were all in full agreement that the relevant authorities north and south should continue to work closely with each other and ensure any necessary actions in relation to this case have been fully completed.

Members will be aware that the first case was confirmed in ROI on Saturday and I understand that contact tracing of those who may have been in close contact with the individual is ongoing. There are not believed to be any implications for NI.

The Health and Social Care Board in NI have been liaising with their counterparts in the Health Service Executive in the south to ensure that where possible, both jurisdictions can make the best use of our collective resources when responding to Covid-19.

My advice to the public remains the same, to those members of the public who have symptoms and are concerned they may have COVID-19 I would urge them not to turn up at GP clinics or hospital Emergency Departments. They should instead contact their GP or GP out of hours and advice will then be given on next steps, including testing if required.

I would like to remind Members and the public that everyone can play their part. I would encourage everyone to take sensible precautions of washing their hands regularly and to especially heed the advice recommend for similar illnesses such as cold and flu – catch it, bin it and kill it.

Northern Ireland now has full access to the 111 helpline on coronavirus. This is available 24/7 to provide advice. More general advice about coronavirus is available at the Public Health Agency website and NI Direct.

As the situation develops my Department and the Public Health Agency will continue to provide updated guidance to health care professionals and other Departments and their authorities, including schools, as and when necessary.

I remain in close contact with the other UK Health Ministers and I will continue to take part in the weekly COBR Ministerial meetings to ensure our joined up approach to tackling this disease continues. I can also advise that I along with the First and deputy First Ministers participated in a COBR Ministerial meeting this morning which was chaired by the Prime Minister Boris Johnston.

My Department including the health and social care system, have planned extensively over the years for an event like this, and therefore is well prepared to respond in a way that offers substantial protection to the public. My Department has also contributed to the UK wide Coronavirus Action Plan which is due to be published by the UK government tomorrow.

The document sets out what the UK as a whole has already done - and plans to do further - to tackle the current coronavirus outbreak, based on our wealth of experience dealing with other infectious diseases and our

influenza pandemic preparedness work. The exact response to COVID-19 will be tailored to the nature, scale and location of the threat in the UK, as our understanding of this develops.

This document sets out:

- what we know about the virus and the disease it causes
- how we have planned for an infectious disease outbreak, such as the current coronavirus outbreak
- the actions we have taken so far in response to the current coronavirus outbreak
- what we are planning to do next, depending upon the course the current coronavirus outbreak takes.
- the role the public can play in supporting this response, now and in the future.

Locally the HSCB are leading on surge planning working with our Health and Social Care Trusts. This will be informed by our existing pandemic flu plans which are in place across the Health & Social Care sector. As I have previously advised the House the Regional Virology Lab, Belfast, is now set up for testing of COVID-19 since mid-February. All positive tests are sent to PHE labs for confirmation.

My Department, the Public Health Agency and the Health and Social Care Board will continue to work closely with the relevant authorities and public health organisations across the UK and the Republic of Ireland to deal with the situation as events unfold.

Across the NICS planning has been stepped up to ensure a coordinated response from all sectors of Government. I am aware TEO is leading the work on assessing essential services and key sectors' readiness and that they convened a cross departmental meeting on 20 February where information on the all possible eventualities was shared and all Departments were asked to review business continuity plans. A table-top exercise is planned in coming day where our planning and preparation across government will be discussed.

Internationally, and in the UK and the Republic of Ireland, we remain in the Containment phase of our response as we seek to prevent sustained community transmission.

Lastly I want to thank all the staff who have been involved in dealing with the first confirmed case in Northern Ireland. Their professionalism and dedication is very reassuring.

My priority as Minister is to ensure that all effective measures continue to be put in place in Northern Ireland.

In conclusion, let me direct my comments beyond this House – to the people watching at home, and indeed to the media reporting on these proceedings.

It is vital that we keep taking a balanced, proportionate approach at all times – with our actions based on the best scientific advice.

Complacency is our enemy – but so too are panic and hysteria.

As we've said, we will continue to prepare for all eventualities.

When the UK Government issues its action plan tomorrow, there will inevitably be intense interest in what kind of emergency measures may form part of our collective planning. These are measures that we will have in our toolkits to deploy only if required. "If required" are important words in that sentence

The emergency measures in the forthcoming UK Government action plan will apply to Northern Ireland, if needed.

It is normal practice to plan for worst case scenarios. This does not mean these outcomes are expected or likely. This is a really important point to underline.

Our primary focus remains on containment at this time and then to delay and mitigate.

There are risks for society in taking premature actions - actions not grounded in scientific advice.

We have already heard fears being voiced about our economy and jobs; including in the tourism and hospitality sectors.

Obviously, public health protection must come first. I'm sure all members would agree on that.

However, premature actions in the current situation could also have impacts on our health. I'm thinking of the risks from undue panic or hysteria, and also of social isolation as a result of social distancing.

Let me finish by saying this, Mr Speaker.

The people of Northern Ireland are a resilient people. I believe they are well used to keeping calm during challenging circumstances.

I believe they will not be unduly influenced by rumour or fake news on the internet; that they will rely on the advice and guidance of our public health experts.

That's what I am doing and believe the Executive is 100% behind me in that approach.

Mr Speaker, I believe we should remain both vigilant and determined to tackle this virus with our well-developed plans in place.

Q&As

Q Can you advise what is being done to trace the individual's contacts?

Ans - Contact tracing is an effective and efficient method carried out by the PHA to help prevent the further spread of infections such as COVID-19. When a patient tests positive for an infectious disease, an interview is carried out with the patient to help identify those who they may have come into closest contact with, then a process begins by public health professionals to trace and communicate with those individuals.

Once contact has been made, the appropriate advice can be given to these individuals based on whether they are at high risk, low risk or there is no risk. Regular contact is kept with those in the higher risk categories and if they experience any symptoms, appropriate medical intervention will take place. If there are any links to another country, the PHA works with its counterparts in those jurisdictions to enable appropriate investigations into potential contacts and actions to be undertaken.

Q Should the public be concerned now that there is a positive case in NI?

ANS - It is important that we continue to remain calm and focused on containment at this point. The risk to individuals in Northern Ireland has not changed at this stage. The public should continue to practice good personal hygiene. Washing your hands regularly will help prevent viruses spreading.

Q- What is the advice to the public if they feel unwell?

ANS- If someone is concerned that they may have been exposed to coronavirus and has symptoms such as a cough, they should stay indoors, telephone their GP or the GP Out-of-hours for advice. They should not attend their GP or A&E without ringing first. In the case of a medical emergency, they should ring 999 and inform the call handler of their recent travel or potential exposure to COVID-19.

Q- As the individual travelled from ROI, what contact have you had with your counterpart?

ANS- I, along with the First Minister and deputy First Minister, spoke with the Taoiseach & the Republic's Health Minister, Simon Harris, on Saturday in relation to the case. We were all in full agreement that the relevant authorities north and south should continue to work closely with each other and ensure any necessary actions in relation to this case have been fully completed.

Q- Can the Health Service cope with Covid-19?

ANS- I firmly believe that it will. Our health service is used to managing infections and we are well prepared to deal with Covid-19. We have been planning for the first positive case in Northern Ireland and we have robust infection control measures in place which have enabled us to respond immediately to this type of situation. We all however, have a part to play in helping the health service cope with this disease by ensuring that we follow the public health advice and by practising good

personal hygiene which is very effective in preventing the spread of viruses.

Q- Why was the helpline stood down and replaced with 111?

ANS-The service has been put in place by the Department of Health in consultation with the Public Health Agency.

I was keen to enhance local helpline provision in light of the increased level of public queries about coronavirus, and had asked officials to explore the option of Northern Ireland having access to 111 for this purpose. I am pleased that this has been achieved so quickly, and would like to thank the staff who have worked to bring this about in a short space of time.

This means people in Northern Ireland will have access to the same level of advice as citizens in England