

Infection prevention and control during the COVID-19 pandemic

One of the main roles of the PHA was a focus on infection prevention and control (IPC) as COVID-19 pandemic affected Northern Ireland. The Regional Infection Prevention Control (IPC) Cell has been established to oversee the co-ordination of IPC across the HSC system including primary care, community, voluntary and independent sector care providers. Communication has been key and regular meetings have taken place to discuss any IPC issues. These have included weekly Lead IPC Nurse Forum meetings and Regional IPC cell meetings in which a wide range of IPC issues from across the region are discussed and resolved.

This IPC Cell is part of the regional infrastructure that has been key in helping to tackle the COVID-19 pandemic. The Regional IPC Cell also has a link to the National IPC Cell which is made up of representatives from across the Four Nations and it provides an opportunity to help shape, influence and agree national guidance.

The Regional IPC Cell has a number of strategic tasks and actions which includes influencing, informing, translating and dissemination of National policy guidance into local practice. This can be demonstrated by the recent implementation of the 'COVID-19: Guidance for maintaining services within health and care settings' within Northern Ireland.

Effective regional cluster and outbreak management has been undertaken by PHA Health Protection and Trust IPC Teams with support from the IPC Cell. An outreach IPC programme for Care Homes was also established and facilitated through Trusts including the distribution of PPE.

A Product Review Protocol has been developed between IPC Leads (PHA and HSCTs), BSO and MOIC to assess all new PPE items to ensure they are suitable for use in healthcare settings and weekly meetings of the IPC Product Review Group take place.

In an effort to ensure regional consistency regarding the use and decontamination of reusable Respiratory Protection Equipment (RPE), a task and finish group has been established. The group includes representation from DoH, Trusts, PHA and BSO PaLS. The task and finish group is currently working on the development of a regional data specification with BSO.

The Chair of the IPC Cell also has responsibility for overseeing the development of a PPE Modelling Framework. This framework supports the effective procurement of PPE in response to COVID-19 and service rebuilding programme.

A number of engagement meetings have also been undertaken with Trade Union colleagues throughout the pandemic to discuss important issues such as the IPC Product Review Group, fit testing, decontamination of PPE and FFP3 masks.

The Covid-19 pandemic has highlighted the need to strengthen IPC across the region and therefore the IPC Cell is leading on the development of an IPC Framework which will promote standardisation.