

FROM THE MINISTER OF HEALTH



Department of
Health

An Roinn Sláinte

Mánnystrie O Poustie

www.health-ni.gov.uk

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Dear *Deirdre,*

COVID-19 SELF ISOLATION - FINANCIAL SUPPORT MEASURES

I welcome the various measures your Department has in place to make support available in Northern Ireland for people dealing with the impacts of COVID-19, and your commitment to keep the current range of measures under review.

I have updated Executive colleagues regarding recent expansions to my Department's asymptomatic testing programme and on the introduction of the testing of close contacts of confirmed COVID-19 cases by the Public Health Agency. These additional measures are aimed at identifying those positive cases who do not have symptoms but who could potentially be carrying the SARS-CoV-2 virus. Together these developments in testing will likely lead to an increase in identification of the number of positive cases, and in the requirement for more people to self-isolate in order to continue to curtail the spread of the virus.

There remains therefore a continued and pressing need that adequate financial support measures are in place to help ensure optimal adherence to self-isolation requirements. This need is particularly acute as restrictions are expected to be eased in the coming weeks which is likely to result in changes in behaviour and again in an increased risk of transmission of the virus. The emergence of new variants of concern also has potential to compound these challenges that we must all collectively make every effort to address in responding to the evolving pandemic.

It remains of critical importance that adequate and easily accessible financial support is provided for the most economically vulnerable who are less likely to seek testing, engage with the Contact Tracing Service or to self-isolate, or to take time off work to get vaccinated, if these actions have potential to threaten their financial stability.

On this specific point I would be grateful for an update on the financial support measures that are currently in place and also for your consideration of any and all further enhancements that could be made at this time. The importance of adherence to self-isolation, which will continue to be a key part of our response to the pandemic in the time ahead, cannot be overstated and in particular there is a continuing need to ensure high levels of compliance with self-isolation.

Could I also seek your confirmation that easy access to information and ease of the application process in relation to the Discretionary Support self-isolation grant has been tested and validated with end users in Northern Ireland? I understand that some recent work has involved sharing information on the grant across a number of platforms, including NI Direct and the Public Health Agency website, but it appears that access to this support may remain unnecessarily complex for the applicant. A clear and simple application process is critical to enable appropriate access to financial support particularly for those people who may not be familiar with IT systems.

There may also be merit in exploring the feasibility of employers continuing to pay employees who are self-isolating; with employers subsequently reimbursed appropriate costs. I'm not sure if such an approach has been considered by your Department? I would welcome your views on the relative merits of this approach and whether this might be a more straightforward process for applicants, which could in turn assist compliance with self-isolation.

I would be grateful for confirmation of whether your officials have linked with the TEO Adherence Group to determine awareness of financial support(s) available and barriers to accessing same as part of the Adherence Group's survey work?

Can you also please provide an update on how many people have successfully accessed financial support in Northern Ireland; whether this activity meets with your targets and expectations; and how it compares to the situation in other UK nations?

I will look forward to hearing from you and also to ensuring that our Departments continue to work collaboratively to maintain the best possible cross-departmental response to the pandemic.

[Redacted signature line]

Yours sincerely

Personal Data

Robin Swann MLA
Minister of Health

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