



The
Executive Office

Menu

Search this site...



Full statements from First Minister Arlene Foster and deputy First Minister Michelle O'Neill on Covid-19 response 19 March 2020

Date published: 19 March 2020

The First Minister Arlene Foster and deputy First Minister Michelle O'Neill make statements in relation to Covid-19 19 March 2020 below:

First Minister Arlene Foster:

Good afternoon.

This is a sad day for Northern Ireland.

I'd like to express all of our sympathies to the family and friends of the patient who has died – please know that my thoughts and prayers are with you.

We knew that this pandemic would inevitably cost precious lives, but that knowledge does not dim the pain.

We are immeasurably grateful to our health service staff who cared for this person and I want to pay tribute again to the selfless work of all carers – whether at home or in medical settings.

News

Yesterday I said we should embrace a giant spirit – the spirit of Northern Ireland.

And every day we see humbling examples of kindness, compassion and consideration.

This is how we will get through this – and we will get through this – by caring for each other.

All of us have a role to play. We commend those stepping up and stepping forward across all areas of Government and the broader community.

I know that it is difficult to deal with an evolving situation.

We all like certainty, but in these unprecedented times we must exercise patience so that we can work through this for the benefit of all.

You can be assured that your Executive, supported by experts of world renown, are united in one objective – to keep people safe and maintain well-being.

In terms of the economic impact of this crisis, we need a huge injection of money to enable employers to retain their staff.

We have been working with the Government and want to see an Employee Support Package coming forward which at a bare minimum wipes out employer national insurance contributions, enables VAT deferment but ideally helps employers meet their wage commitments.

There are examples of this in other countries and we would like to see the Chancellor take similar decisive steps.

Employers do not want to have to go through recruitment and selection processes when we emerge out the other side of Covid-19.

They want to help their employees put bread on the table.

We are listening to employers and we are making the argument to Downing Street.

I know the cost to the public purse will be enormous but, without decisive and unprecedented action, the impact of piecemeal measures will also be enormous.

The Chancellor was absolutely right a few days ago when he said “this is not a time for ideology” and when he said he would do “whatever it takes” to support businesses, families and individuals.

The Covid-19 outbreak requires a united response.

It is a time for political unity in the interests of everyone and there has been agreement across a number of parties in Parliament for the Government to introduce a temporary Basic Income for those who need it, whether employed, self-employed or freelancing.

We support this call in Northern Ireland.

We are taking a robust approach to tackling Covid-19 to protect each person and also to help public life to continue as normal, as far as that is possible.

Time-limited legislation is being introduced in Westminster today. It reflects significant engagement from the Executive team to ensure it meets the needs of all our people.

It focuses on five key areas:

- The first of these will be to increase the available health and social care workforce. This includes removing barriers to allow recently retired staff return to work. Those who have retired both from health and other walks of life – will be of great assistance. We welcome volunteers in the days and weeks ahead.
- Secondly the legislation will ease the burden on frontline staff by reducing the administration and paperwork required.

- Thirdly – and importantly – it will assist us in containing and slowing the virus with new powers to deal with events and mass gatherings.
- The Bill will also have measures to ensure respect and dignity for the deceased.
- And finally there are a raft of measures aimed at supporting people and these include support to the food industry to guarantee food supplies.

Of course, not all of the measures may be used at any one time, they will be turned on and off according to need and informed by clinical and scientific advice.

But we want you to know that every possible eventuality is being anticipated and addressed to protect everyone, particularly the most vulnerable.

We also want to share with you today the very immediate plans we have in relation to our education and health services and I welcome our Education and Health Ministers here to outline this shortly.

But first I will pass to the deputy First Minister.

Deputy First Minister Michelle O'Neill:

Thank you everyone.

As of this afternoon we have 77 people who have tested positive with coronavirus.

Today a family has lost a loved one.

This is the first coronavirus – related death today in the North, and the third on this island.

We know that those over 70 are the highest risk of infection.

The gentleman who died had an underlying health condition and was being treated in hospital.

While we knew this day was coming, it doesn't make it any less devastating for our community or for the loved ones of that individual.

I want to offer my heartfelt sympathy to your family at this difficult time.

I know you will be anxious tonight.

But let me repeat we can help each other.

Please follow the advice.

Social distancing is not easy – I get that.

But, it is necessary.

We are our own best defence.

Hands washing sounds simple, but it kills the virus.

Staying apart will ultimately keep our society together.

These things work and bring down the peak and reduce deaths up to a third.

We are facing the greatest test of our community that any of us have ever known.

But it is only by everyone pulling together and doing their bit that we will come through this.

No one is in this for themselves.

We have a collective responsibility to look after each other; look out for each other; and protect each other.

For our part, we are committing everything we possibly can to deal with this pandemic.

Ministers have been working rapidly within departments and with agencies in Health, Communities, Education and so forth to take forward every measure possible to respond to this unfolding situation, including progress on free school meals, through direct payments.

We will do this every day until we get through it and out the other end.

Our priority is to save lives.

Public health and safety is of paramount concern.

The Ministers for Education and Health will now address you on key developments as this continues to unfold.

Notes to editors:

Media enquiries to TEO Press Office on 028 9037 8201. Out of office hours contact the Duty Press Officer on 028 9037 8110.

Share this page

[\(/#facebook\)](#)

[\(/#twitter\)](#)

[\(/#linkedin\)](#)

Latest news

- [Statement following the death of John Bruton](/news/statement-following-death-john-bruton) (/news/statement-following-death-john-bruton)
06 February 2024
- [Fair and just settlement needed for NI public sector workers and public services – O'Neill and Little-Pengelly](/news/fair-and-just-settlement-needed-ni-public-sector-workers-and-public-services-oneill-and-little-pengelly) (/news/fair-and-just-settlement-needed-ni-public-sector-workers-and-public-services-oneill-and-little)
06 February 2024
- [Executive to discuss financial stability with Prime Minister](/news/executive-discuss-financial-stability-prime-minister) (/news/executive-discuss-financial-stability-prime-minister)
05 February 2024
- [Statement on King Charles](/news/statement-king-charles) (/news/statement-king-charles)
05 February 2024

[More news ...](/news) (/news)