

24 January 2020

URGENT WRITTEN STATEMENT TO THE ASSEMBLY BY HEALTH MINISTER ROBIN SWANN – FRIDAY 24 JANUARY 2020 – RESPONSE TO THE EMERGENCE OF CORONAVIRUS (2019 NCoV)

Members will be very well aware of the emergence and subsequent spread of Coronavirus emanating from Wuhan in China. I believe it is of the utmost importance to provide a timely update to the Assembly on the global impact and the response to date, as well as informing you of the range of measures that my Department and the Public Health Agency have initiated in order to protect the health of the people of Northern Ireland.

I participated in the COBR meeting today with my counterparts from across the UK supported by the Chief Medical Officer to discuss the situation in Wuhan, China, and elsewhere in Asia. I provided an updated on the planning and preparation in Northern Ireland. This is a rapidly changing picture. However as of noon today there were approximately 830 confirmed cases and 25 deaths in China. A number of cases have also been confirmed in other countries in South East Asia as well as one in the United States. There are no confirmed cases in the UK at this time. It is anticipated that there will be increasing numbers of people across the UK being tested, given the transport links to China, the fact that this is the peak time for respiratory illness and the need for a precautionary approach to be taken in all potential cases. Due to patient confidentiality, Trusts will not comment on individual cases but the public can be assured that there are well established protocols for dealing with infectious diseases.

In respect of measures to protect the health of the public in Northern Ireland. I can inform members that my Department along with the PHA are in contact with the relevant authorities across the UK to ensure that we have a fully coordinated and effective response to the management of Coronavirus. I have also been in contact with my fellow Health Ministers to discuss our approach. Moreover, my officials have been in contact with their counterparts in the Republic of Ireland in order to ensure that there is appropriate coordination and cooperation between the two jurisdictions.

The PHA are working with the HSCB primary care and Trusts to ensure the appropriate testing, clinical pathways and communication lines are in place for dealing with any suspected cases in Northern Ireland. We will continue to ensure they have access to the most up to date scientific and medical evidence and guidance on these issues. I will be liaising with Executive colleagues to ensure advice is provided to other organisations as is required.

Finally, it is important to stress that we have faced similar situations in Northern Ireland before. Members will be aware of SARS in 2003, Pandemic Influenza in 2009 and Ebola in 2014. In each case, robust health protection measures as well as our highly skilled professionals in health and social care have ensured that our population has been protected against global public health threats. We have tried and tested measures in place to respond

The risk to the UK public remains low, however there can be no room for complacency. There may well be cases in the UK at some stage. I have been assured that we are well prepared for these types of incidents. I am confident that my colleagues in the Executive and across the Assembly will understand that while it is important that we remain vigilant, we need to take a proportionate response to what is an emerging issue. My priority as Minister is to ensure effective measures are in place within Northern Ireland, and that our communications with the people are informed. I will provide further statements to the Assembly in due course.

