

**FROM THE MINISTER OF HEALTH**



Department of  
**Health**

An Roinn Sláinte

Máinystrie O Poustle

[www.health-ni.gov.uk](http://www.health-ni.gov.uk)

Ms Maria Morgan  
Assistant Secretary, NIPSA

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Your Ref:  
Our Ref: COR/1444/2020  
Date: 14<sup>th</sup> April 2020

Dear *Maria,*

### **COVID-19 – SUPPLIES AND TESTING**

Thank you for your letter of 3 April 2020 to the First Minister, deputy First Minister and myself, raising very real concerns you have and those of your members who are working in the healthcare sector in Northern Ireland. You also wrote separately to me on 27 March 2020. The First and deputy First Ministers have both asked me to acknowledge the letter to them and, along with myself, to reassure you that we are very much taking these matters very seriously and that we are working hard to ensure the health service in Northern Ireland gets the support it deserves at this time.

Your letter focuses on particular issues relating to PPE supply and testing of health workers and their families. I welcome the opportunity to update you on the work which is being done to ensure the equipment and testing are available at the right time for those priority people. I hope you were somewhat reassured last week with the substantial deliveries from England as part of a more coordinated national approach to PPE Supplies. 5 million plus items were delivered and are being delivered to the Trusts for distribution to all relevant organisations in their catchment areas. This is a welcome boost and ensure that we have sufficient stocks in the system. I can reassure you also that my officials in Business Services Organisation are working on new contracts and supplies to ensure the stock levels are managed throughout the pandemic for the benefit of all in Northern Ireland. BSO has the support of Construction and Procurement Delivery in Department of Finance, which is coordinating all offers of help and triaging them to ensure BSO can focus on those which will deliver the best result for our PPE supply management.



The latest PPE guidance was issued by the UK Government on 2 April 2020 and this was based on the very best international guidance available and endorsed by all leading clinicians in the 4 nations before being released. I would encourage you to ask your members to familiarise themselves with this guidance which is available on [www.health-ni.gov.uk/coronavirus](http://www.health-ni.gov.uk/coronavirus).

You also mentioned the ship which was reportedly turned back, on its way from Norway. I can assure you that firstly no person in my Department or indeed the Executive had any involvement in this and as we understand this incident happened with the ship on its way to Norway before it travelled on to Ireland. The ship has since delivered supplies and BSO were delivered over 14,000 masks. There were not 60,000 masks on the container as reported. Further supplies of masks are continuing to arrive with BSO for onward distribution to Trusts.

Turning to testing, I am pleased that there is now extensive testing of health care workers or symptomatic members of the family household.

I have established an Expert Advisory Group on testing, and it has already published a Testing Strategy for Northern Ireland. The Testing Strategy sets out the priority groups for testing (based on the Interim Protocol for Testing) which was first circulated by the Department on 17 March (note the latest iteration was circulated 28 March). Clearly the overall priority for testing remains those patients admitted to hospitals who are clinically unwell. However we are now also very focussed on providing testing to key health and care workers (HCWs) who are symptomatic and those who are currently isolating as a member of their household.

The Testing Strategy also sets out plans for significant scale up testing of HCWs, which will be achieved through a national initiative involving a number of large commercial companies which is being led by the Department of Health and Social Care (DHSC). The first testing centre arising from this national initiative was opened at the SSE Arena, Belfast on 4 April, and there are plans to open a further centre in the northwest in the coming days.

We will continue to increase the number of HCWs tested as capacity increases. This will allow us to continue to support our essential health and care staff and to focus our resources effectively as we work together to address the challenges this pandemic presents.

Clearly these are challenging and worrying times for everyone, particularly families of patients currently in care and for those selfless staff whose vocation is to help throughout the health care sector in Northern Ireland. The First and deputy First Ministers join me in expressing our sincere thanks to all NIPSA members working tirelessly in the healthcare sector, along with everyone else to deliver a confident service to all in Northern Ireland through this pandemic. I can assure you that the priority is safety and ensuring that the infrastructure is in place to provide the support and equipment needed.

Thank you again for raising these concerns as it is important that I get a real sense of issues on the front line, but I hope I have given you comfort in that every effort is being made by my officials and the Executive to support the NI health service respond to Covid-19.

Yours sincerely

A handwritten signature in blue ink, appearing to read 'Robin Swann', with a stylized flourish at the end.

**Robin Swann MLA**  
**Minister of Health**

