

FROM THE MINISTER OF HEALTH



Department of
Health

An Roinn Sláinte

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Dear all,

Thank you for taking part in the teleconference on 23 March at which I was able to advise you of my decision to allocate 100% of the remaining Department of Finance January monitoring allocation to make further one-off payments to the 83 infected beneficiaries on the NI Infected Blood Payment Scheme. When added to the payments I already announced in January, this addressed the disparity that had arisen in April 2019 by bringing the Northern Ireland scheme into line with the scheme in England for the 2019/20 financial year. These interim one-off payments were intended as an immediate measure to address the gap caused by the uplift in England and to alleviate the financial hardship endured by people infected and/or affected by contaminated blood.

I am very conscious that family members have also suffered greatly both emotionally and financially from the impact of their loved one being diagnosed with Hepatitis C or HIV following receipt of contaminated NHS blood or blood products. Sadly many have passed away and we have 17 non-infected widows and widowers on our payment scheme who do not have a collective voice representing their interests. I have been struck by correspondence I have received from individuals who have shared their stories and feel disappointed that they have been overlooked in the past while they have struggled financially as well as emotionally after losing their partner. Therefore, I was pleased that I was able to provide additional funding to make £5,000 one-off payments to each of the 17 non-infected widows and widowers on our scheme.

I appreciate that you are keen to maintain this momentum and secure a permanent uplift in funding for the future. In our meeting, I advised that there was £1m included in the draft 2020/21 budget but made clear that this had not yet been finalised at that point. I am pleased that the Finance Minister has since confirmed this in the budget announcement on 31 March. As the £1m has now been confirmed within the 2020/21 budget it will be in our baseline going forward and therefore I consider it to be recurrent.

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I can assure you that this £1m will be used in full, as intended, to provide support to those impacted by infected blood and I will make a further announcement of payments for 2020/21 once I have given full and proper consideration as to the most appropriate way to use this funding.

As you are aware, the Northern Ireland Infected Blood Payment Scheme is complex - as well as the regular annual payments to those infected individuals, there are a number of other areas I want to take into consideration in any future reform, such as the special category mechanism (SCM) which exists in England, income top-ups, discretionary support or payments to the bereaved. Provision of psychological support is also an extremely important consideration, as you have raised in meetings with me and previously with my Department. If other elements were to be introduced they would significantly increase the additional costs of the NI scheme on a recurrent basis.

As I have previously outlined I am taking a three-phase approach to reviewing financial support for those infected and/or affected in Northern Ireland. Phase 1 commenced with the announcement of interim payments to infected beneficiaries on the NI Scheme on 27 January 2020 and, following careful consideration, this phase concluded with my announcement on 23 March 2020 of additional payments to those beneficiaries, bringing Northern Ireland payment levels into line with those in England for 2019/20, and the one-off payments of £5,000 to the non-infected widows and widowers who are also part of the Northern Ireland Infected Blood Payment Scheme and who did not benefit from the January announcement, recognising the suffering they have endured.

Phase 2 of the review of the Infected Blood Payment Scheme (NI) will continue in 2020/21 and will address other aspects of the scheme with a view to working towards greater parity of support across the UK schemes, while taking account of local circumstances and beneficiaries' needs in Northern Ireland. Phase 3 will address recommendations from the Infected Blood Inquiry once it has concluded. This is expected to be in 2022.

With the global COVID-19 pandemic, the Department is obviously currently under significant pressure dealing with the biggest public health emergency that this country has faced in modern times. To this end, I have had to re-prioritise the work of the Department and significantly redeploy resources to best tackle the risks to public health and social care in Northern Ireland. However, I want to assure you that I have put in place dedicated resource to ensure that work will continue on both our response to the Infected Blood Inquiry and the review of the Infected Blood Payment Scheme. Unlike in many other policy areas across my Department, this work has not been paused.

As I said when I met with you in February and listened to your individual stories, I have complete sympathy for your situation. The use of infected blood by the NHS was a tragedy; there is no doubt this has caused you financial hardship and you have my full support in seeking to address this. In taking up post as Health Minister, one of my key priorities was to ensure that people in Northern Ireland who have been harmed by NHS blood or blood products would continue to have proper access to the financial assistance they need in order to mitigate the harms and afford the best means to live as normal a life as possible.

UK-wide discussions are continuing on greater parity of support across the different UK support schemes. Meanwhile, I am committed to the wider ongoing review of the support provided to those infected and affected in Northern Ireland, to make sure all aspects of our scheme best meet the needs of our beneficiaries here. Please be assured that I will do my utmost to achieve this and I will ensure that you and your organisations are involved in this work.

Yours sincerely

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Robin Swann MLA
Minister of Health

