

No. 138 /2020

19 March 2020

Our Ref: E1/20

**To: All Branches**

Dear Colleagues,

## **Coronavirus COVID-19 Outbreak declared 'Pandemic' by the World Health Organisation (WHO) – What Does it Mean?**

The coronavirus *outbreak* has now been labelled a *pandemic* by the World Health Organization (WHO). Declaring a pandemic has nothing to do with changes to the characteristics of a disease, but is instead associated with concerns over its geographic spread. According to the WHO, a pandemic is declared when a new disease for which people do not have immunity spreads around the world beyond expectations.

Cases that involve travellers who have been infected in a foreign country and have then returned to their home country, or who have been infected by that traveller, known as the "index case", do not count towards declaring a pandemic. There needs to be a second wave of infection from person to person throughout the community.

**Once a pandemic is declared, it becomes more likely that community spread will eventually happen, and governments and health systems need to ensure they are prepared for that.**

An 'epidemic', on the other hand, is a sudden increase in cases of an illness or disease that can be unique to one country or community.

Ultimately, the WHO gets the final say when a pandemic is declared. There is no threshold, such as a certain number of deaths or infections, or number of countries affected, that needs to be met. For example, the 'SARS coronavirus', identified in 2003, was not declared a pandemic by the WHO despite affecting 26 countries. However, its spread was contained quickly, and only a handful of nations were significantly affected, including China, Hong Kong, Taiwan, Singapore and Canada.

'Pandemic' is not a word to use lightly or carelessly the WHO have stated clearly. It's a word that, if misused, can cause unreasonable fear, or unjustified acceptance that the fight is over. The last pandemic was in 2009 with the 'Swine Flu H1N1 Virus'. That pandemic, which was first detected in Mexico, killed an estimated 200,000 people and hit young adults and children hardest. The 'Coronavirus-COVID-19 Virus' pandemic on the other hand is killing mostly older adults with underlying health conditions.

If declaring a pandemic triggers global panic, this can defeat the purpose of trying to raise awareness stated the WHO. Much has been written about whether the declaration of 'Swine Flu (H1N1)' as a pandemic in 2009, caused unnecessary panic, overwhelming emergency departments and causing governments to overspend on antiviral medications. **Medical experts state "It should be remembered that Coronavirus symptoms are generally mild and most people recover within six days."**

**Now the WHO has declared Covid-19 a pandemic, what will it mean for the way the outbreak is treated and prepared for?**

The WHO has stressed that using the word "pandemic" **does not signal a change in its advice.** It is still urging countries to **"detect, test, treat, isolate, trace and mobilise their people"**. **The change of term does not alter anything practically** as the world has been advised for the last few weeks to prepare for a potential pandemic, which has hopefully been taken seriously by all countries.

The use of this term however highlights the importance of countries throughout the world working cooperatively and openly with one another and coming together as a united front in our efforts to bring this situation under control.

**See attached Links:** (updated daily):-

- **UK Government Policy Paper** - Coronavirus action plan: a guide to what you can expect across the UK  
<https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/coronavirus-action-plan>
- **Public Health England Paper** - Coronavirus (COVID-19) – 5 things you can do to protect yourself and your community  
<https://publichealthmatters.blog.gov.uk/2020/03/04/coronavirus-covid-19-5-things-you-can-do-to-protect-yourself-and-your-community/>
- **Department of Health and Social Care and Public Health England** - Number of coronavirus (COVID-19) cases and risk in the  
<https://www.gov.uk/guidance/coronavirus-covid-19-information-for-the-public>

Yours sincerely



**Dave Joyce**  
**National Health, Safety & Environment Officer**