

For discussion of the NPHET
“Micro-communities” as part of social distancing measures in the context of COVID-19

The Public health framework approach to advising on reducing social distancing measures of the NPHET refers to the concept of micro-communities as a way of simply conveying to the public the need to maintain very limited close contacts but recognising that this may need to be wider than a person’s immediate household.

The ECDC Rapid Risk Assessment: Coronavirus disease 2019 (COVID-19) in the EU/EEA and the UK–9th update states that “as the stringency of physical distancing measures is reduced, members of the public should be encouraged to carefully consider with whom they come into contact. Consistently meeting with the same colleagues and small group of friends will lead to lower rates of transmission than meeting with a diverse and changing group. The promotion of ‘micro-communities’ will allow for work to be conducted and for social interaction to promote wellbeing, while still limiting the spread of infection. In summary, if control measures are to be lifted, conscious efforts to protect the vulnerable and careful choices by all in their interactions with others will help to moderate the increased risk of transmission”¹.

The effectiveness of containment and mitigation depends on limiting the number of social contacts, but also the duration of each contact². The continued protection of people aged over 70 and those with underlying health conditions in line with recommendations of WHO, ECDC and EU Commission is a priority when reducing physical distancing measures.

Lifting of restrictions in other countries and use of the “micro-community” concept

Ireland’s social distancing measures are in close alignment with other countries. While a number of countries in the EU/EEA have indicated or announced the lifting of restrictions, information on those countries’ exit strategies is somewhat limited.

On 27 April, **New Zealand** moved from ‘level 4’ lockdown to ‘level 3’. This means that people must continue to stay within their immediate household ‘bubble’, but can expand this to reconnect with close family, or bring in caregivers, or support isolated people. This extended ‘bubble’ should remain exclusive. (D/FAT Note 23.04.20).

Media reports (29 April) state that **Belgium** has unveiled a step by step plan to lift lockdown restrictions. From May, people will be able to meet up with a maximum of two others who do not live with them, but they must also keep a distance and remain outside. It is also reported that people will be able to host small gatherings at home from 18 May.

In **Austria**, no more than five people can meet at once, while maintaining social distancing.

Easing of restrictive social distancing measures in Ireland

The micro-community concept, as described by the ECDC, *will allow for work to be conducted and for social interaction to promote wellbeing, while still limiting the spread of infection.*

¹ ECDC Rapid Risk Assessment Coronavirus disease 2019 (Covid-19) in the EU/EEA and the UK – Ninth update 23 April 2020

² OECD: Flattening the covid-19 peak: Containment and mitigation policies, Updated 24 March 2020

Currently, persons are limited to contact within their households. Recommending and guiding people to create micro-communities enables them to enlarge their circle of contacts while acting as a strong reminder of the need to limit that number. Importantly, it provides an opportunity for those living alone, without family close by, to create a community with a friend or a neighbour.

If Ireland is to adopt an approach to guidance on micro-communities, it is not intended to be a precise and strict rule-set which alienates people, but instead a guidance which is fair and flexible to accommodate the diverse household and personal living circumstances of people. Ideally, a micro-community would be seen as something inclusive, which enables us to safely bring the people who need us most into our community.

One initial approach is to encourage people to extend their contacts in a safe way, to a suggested indicative number of people (for example 5 as per the New Zealand model) outside their immediate household thereby increasing social interactions in a controlled and proportionate manner. People would be asked to identify a small group of key people they wish to engage with in a safe way, while maintaining social distancing.

Suggested key principles for a micro-community might be:

- Each household (rather than the individuals in the household) should identify the key people with whom they wish to engage i.e. their micro-community.
- In the first instance, people should consider vulnerable family, friends, neighbours etc e.g. those living alone or those who do not have a network of social support etc. (In other words, people would prioritise others in most need / who would most benefit from being in the micro-community rather than a family member or friend who has a full family network and micro-community of their own)
- Micro-communities may also be made up of small groups of individuals who may live in different individual households. In these people will need to be extra vigilant about maintaining strict social distancing and hygiene practices, for the protection of all in their community.
- An extended group or circle of contacts would ideally remain exclusive.
- Everyone should be encouraged to continue to use social media as much as possible to maintain contacts with their wider circle of friends.
- It is key that people engage in a safe way, maintain strict social distancing and good hygiene practices.

Key messages

- In order to keep ourselves and others safe, it is essential to keep to a small number of core contacts and maintain strict social distancing.
- People need to be responsible. Containing the spread of the virus depends on limiting the number of contacts each person/household has - it is important to adhere to the guidance around expanded contact groups, social distancing and cough and sneeze etiquette.
- You can slightly extend your household contacts, but keep it local, small and exclusive.
- It is important that the concept can be conveyed to people in a way that they understand and buy into. New Zealand has used the term “bubble”. No other term has emerged in use

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to describe this concept (that we have seen as yet) and therefore it is open to us to use something specific and meaningful in Ireland. Some initial suggested Irish language terms that could be explored for use in messaging are: nead (nest), líonra (network), foireann (team), scáth (shadow), mol (huddle).

In conclusion, the Behavioural Change Subgroup will give consideration to the concept of micro-communities.

Subject to NPHE's view, it is suggested that draft guidance and communications be developed together in relation to the concept of micro-communities and how they might be conveyed and recommended in Ireland.