

National Public Health Emergency Team (NPHE) on COVID-19

NPHE for COVID-19 Process - Proposal for NPHE to carry out a “Take Stock” process to prepare for moving into the next phase of COVID-19 disease management

Action required

- For noting
- For discussion
- For decision

This paper for the meeting of 8th May 2020 – to inform the discussion under item 7 on NPHE processes

1. Background to NPHET for COVID-19 to date

The National Public Health Emergency Team (NPHET) for COVID-19 was established on 27th January 2020 and is chaired by the Chief Medical Officer. The NPHET oversees and provides national direction, guidance, support and expert advice on the development and implementation of a strategy to contain COVID-19 in Ireland. It advises Government on the public health aspects of what is a cross-Government response to COVID-19 as informed by *Ireland's National Action Plan in response to COVID-19 (Coronavirus)*ⁱ, published on 16th March last.

The NPHET's membership is multi-disciplinary and multi-sectoral in line with best international practice. Initial membership comprised representatives from across the health and social care service including the Department of Health (DOH), Health Service Executive (HSE), Health Protection Surveillance Centre (HPSC), Health Information and Quality Authority (HIQA), Health Products Regulatory Authority (HPRA) and others with relevant expertise in health and/or other related matters; as would be required in a Public Health Emergency. Given the nature of the work involved, the need for a timely assessment and response and the flexibility in terms of the disease progression, the membership of the NPHET has evolved since its establishment to encompass additional expertise and may change further over time in line with the expertise required across the response.

The Chief Clinical Officer, National Director of Acute Operations and National Director for Community Operations are among the representatives of the HSE. The NPHET also communicates directly and regularly with the HSE National Crisis Management Team which leads and manages the HSE's response.

In light of the seriousness of the COVID-19 pandemic and the pace of the health service response required, the NPHET currently holds two scheduled standing meetings each week and may meet more frequently if needed. The NPHET applies high standards of governance in the conduct of its business. Actions, decisions and recommendations arising from NPHET meetings are made by consensus and on a collective basis. The specific actions, decisions and recommendations arising from each meeting are reviewed by the members present at the end of each meeting prior to adoption by the NPHET.

Details on the NPHET governance structures are outlined in the paper published on 28th Marchⁱⁱ.

2. Timeliness and timeframe for a process of taking stock by NPHET

The NPHET for COVID-19 was established very quickly, at the end of January, within a month of reports appearing in the global media of this disease emerging out of China. Between the end of January and the end of February when the first case was reported in Ireland, the NPHET had already met on seven occasions (i.e. four of its weekly one standings meeting and an additional three *ad hoc* meetings) to monitor the evolving global situation, deploy plans and prepare for the disease's likely public health impact in Ireland.

During March 2020, the NPHET met a total of 12 times, involving a combination of its standing weekly meeting and *ad hoc* meetings. This frequency of meeting was necessitated by the rate of transmission of this virus, the escalating response that was necessary and the need to advise Government regarding the tiered public health measures. Measures were first announced on 13 March, strengthened on 24 March and then further strengthened again on 27 March.

At the end of March, in order to respond to the volume and pace of the work required, the NPHET moved to a twice weekly standing meeting. The NPHET, on behalf of the health service, supported by the HPSC and the IEMAG utilised epidemiological data and modelling capability to continuously monitor the evolving impact of

the disease on the Irish population. This enabled the NPHEt to advise Government in relation to progress regarding the suppression of transmission and the continued necessity for public health measures. The data and analysis showed the continuing necessity for the public health measures to be extended on 12 April, and on 5 May to 18 May.

On Friday 1 May, Government published its *Roadmap for Reopening Society & Business*ⁱⁱⁱ, incorporating NPHEt's public health framework approach to reducing public health social distancing measures. As part of that Roadmap, Government announced the process for commencement of lifting of restrictions from 18 May. The NPHEt will have a critical role in continuing the close and continuous monitoring of the disease's progress as well as the health service's capacity, performance and response, as the public health social distancing measures are eased over the coming months.

As the COVID-19 disease control strategy moves into a new phase in May, it is timely for NPHEt to take stock, review its own operation, pattern of meetings, subgroups and processes so that by the end of May it is ready to continue to deliver on its terms of reference and adapt to the changing profile of this disease in Ireland over the medium term.

3. Overview of proposed process of taking stock by NPHEt

In consultation with the Chair and the Minister for Health, the NPHEt Secretariat will engage with key stakeholders in a process to inform changes or recommendations that may be made. This process will look to identify any necessary steps that need to be taken, to ensure a sustainable and robust framework is in place to continue the support of NPHEt's public health led response to COVID-19. This process will include:

- A survey of all NPHEt Subgroups, building on work previously undertaken for the Governance paper, collating information and identifying any need for change to; terms of reference, memberships structures, work practices, accountability and reporting arrangements, document and information management and staffing.
- Engagement with the members of the NPHEt to receive feedback on how NPHEt might evolve in its operational capacity as it moves into the medium term.
- A review of administrative processes to include management of meeting timelines and document submissions, supports in place to enable the NPHEt to carry out role as effectively as possible and, processes to support the delivery of recommendations.
- A look to the future and how the NPHEt will continue to contribute to the response to COVID-19 as it moves into the next phases, with a focus on the evolution of the NPHEt's role within the cross-sectorial, cross-Government approach.

It is intended to submit a paper to the NPHEt on the 22nd May with the results of the stock taking exercise and any next steps that have been identified.

ⁱ <https://www.gov.ie/en/publication/47b727-government-publishes-national-action-plan-on-covid-19/>

ⁱⁱ <https://www.gov.ie/en/publication/de1c30-national-public-health-emergency-team-nphet-for-covid-19-governance-/>

ⁱⁱⁱ <https://www.gov.ie/en/news/58bc8b-taoiseach-announces-roadmap-for-reopening-society-and-business-and-u/>