

National Public Health Emergency Team

Options for consideration by NPHET in relation to advising Government regarding the reduction of public health social distancing measures in preparation for 18 May 2020

POST NPHET AMDTS

14 May 2020

Action required

- For noting
- For discussion
- For decision

Introduction

Within a very short few weeks after the first cases of COVID-19 were reported in Ireland at the end of February 2020, as with other EU countries, it became necessary to take unprecedented steps to control the disease. A tiered approach of public health social distancing measures was first advised by An Taoiseach on 13 March, and these measures were further strengthened on 24 March and again on 27 March. The measures were extended to 5 May and again to 18 May with some minor alterations to continue to suppress transmission of the virus.

Planning in relation to the lifting of restrictive measures

The risks to human health and life caused by COVID-19 warranted the public health measures that have had to be imposed here in Ireland. While there has been considerable success so far in controlling the spread of the virus in Ireland, the extraordinary measures cannot be continued indefinitely as they come at a significant cost in terms of the quality and meaning of people's lives. Nevertheless, it must be understood that their lifting carries great uncertainty and risk.

It is now essential to ensure that the level of transmission is kept as low as possible while balancing continuing restrictions proportionately with the social and economic benefits which will be brought about by lifting restrictions. The risk of a second wave of the virus is ever present. The WHO and ECDC are warning that the measures have to be lifted in a very slow, gradual and stepwise manner in phases separated by sufficient intervening time in order to avoid a rapid upsurge in infections. There will have to be close and continuous monitoring as measures are eased, to understand their impact on the disease and as far as possible to avoid a surge. If that happens, certain measures may have to be re-imposed. A number of countries have reported increases in the numbers of confirmed cases as restrictions have been lifted.

Reducing the restrictions in the Government Roadmap is set out over 5 stages, at three-week intervals. Each phase consists of a menu of options that will be considered by Government as it gradually opens up economic and social activities. There is no assurance that it is safe to reduce social distancing measures and it is clear that stricter measures will have to be reintroduced if there is strong upsurge of infection.

The World Health Organization predicts that the most plausible scenario is recurring epidemic waves interspersed with periods of low-level transmission. The purpose of this public health framework approach is to inform a slow, gradual, step-wise and incremental reduction of the current public health social distancing measures, in a risk-based, fair and proportionate way with a view to effectively suppressing COVID-19 while enabling the gradual return of social and economic activity.

Government decision-making framework in relation to the Lifting of Measures

The Government, in publishing the Roadmap for Reopening Society & Business, set out the decision-making framework to be applied in the relation to the lifting of public health social distancing restrictions as follows:

1. *Before each Government consideration of the easing of restrictions, the Department of Health will provide a report to the Government regarding the following on/off trigger criteria:*
 - a. *The latest data regarding the progression of the disease*
 - b. *The capacity and resilience of the health service in terms of hospital and ICU occupancy*
 - c. *The capacity of the programme of sampling, testing and contact tracing*
 - d. *The ability to shield and care for at risk groups*
 - e. *An assessment of the risk of secondary morbidity and mortality as a consequence of the restrictions.*

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2. *It will also provide risk-based public health advice on what measures could be modified in the next period.*
3. *The Government would then consider what restrictions could be lifted, having regard to the advice of the Department of Health as well as other social and economic considerations, e.g. the potential for increased employment, relative benefits for citizens and businesses, improving national morale and wellbeing etc.*
4. *It is acknowledged that there is also an ongoing possibility that restrictions could be re-imposed and this process will be carried out on an ongoing basis once every 3 weeks.*

The Government Roadmap emphasises that public health advice should always be clearly and transparently provided as part of the decision-making process to inform Government on the slow unwinding of the restrictions. It will be a risk-based approach, considering risk both from the perspective of protecting those most vulnerable to infection as well as protecting against causes, situations, circumstances, and behaviours that may lead to risk of spread of disease. The role of the National Public Health Emergency Team in assessing the public health risk has been critical and will continue to guide Government while we are living with this pandemic.

In relation to this decision-making framework and process set out above–

- the Department of Health will compile the Report sought at point 1 above, and
- the NPHET will provide the risk-based public health advice on what measures could be modified in the next period.

Provision of advice by NPHET in relation to Phase 1 reduction of public health social distancing measures

In developing this risk-based public health advice to Government in relation to the reduction of the public health social distancing measures which are currently in place, the NPHET has had regard to the following:

- the report to Government prepared by the Department of Health in accordance with the decision-making framework provided for in the Roadmap for Reopening Society & Business and in particular–
 - the latest data regarding the progression of the disease,
 - the capacity and resilience of the health service in terms of hospital and ICU occupancy, and
 - the capacity of the programme of sampling, testing and contact tracing;
- the most recent ECDC Rapid Risk Assessment: Coronavirus disease 2019 (COVID-19) in the EU/EEA and the UK– ninth update (23 April 2020) in which it is stated that the risk of resurgence of COVID-19 remains moderate, even if public health measures are phased out gradually and accompanied by appropriate monitoring systems and capacities;
- the Government of Ireland *Roadmap for Reopening Society & Business* published on 1 May 2020 and the NPHET's *Public Health Framework Approach in providing advice to Government in relation to reducing social distancing measures introduced in response to COVID-19*;
- the experiences in some countries internationally, including South Korea, Germany and China, where easing of public health measures has been associated with an increase in cases of COVID-19 infection.

In providing this risk-based public health advice to Government in relation to the reduction of the public health social distancing measures, the NPHET–

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- emphasised that it is impossible to predict with certainty what the future trajectory of the COVID-19 disease will be in Ireland. Consequently, it is not possible to provide assurance that it is safe to reduce the public health social distancing measures and stricter measures may have to be reintroduced if a strong upsurge of infection were to occur at some point in the future;
- reiterated the importance of the continued enhancement of the HSE's sampling, testing, contact tracing, surveillance and reporting processes, with a particular focus on reinforcing the public health management of complex cases and clusters, especially among vulnerable populations;
- highlighted the concern that workplaces have the potential to become foci for new clusters of infection as public health measures are eased and emphasised the need for employers, workers and relevant stakeholders to work together to promote adherence to public health guidance and advice appropriate to the relevant sector;
- recommended the slow, gradual, stepwise and incremental easing of some restrictions, as set out, on the proviso that there is a continued strong emphasis on the risks associated with same, the need for robust communication regarding the ongoing presence of the virus within the community and the consequent importance of individual and societal collective behaviours in preventing its resurgence;
- acknowledges that there are other important considerations for Government with regard to the reduction of measures, such as social and economic considerations, while noting the potential effects of the current measures on the wider health and wellbeing of the population.

The epidemiologic trends and health system impact of COVID-19 will continue to be reviewed on an ongoing basis such that any changes in the overall situation will be detected rapidly. As such, future recommendations and the timing of same will be subject to change based on the transmission patterns of the disease, the trajectory and velocity of change, and the evolving analysis of the impact of COVID-19 on health system capacity.

Public Health Framework Approach to advising on reducing social distancing measures – Phase 1 measures for consideration by NPHET

The NPHET advises that Government may wish to consider the following measures as part of the Public Health Framework Approach to reducing the current public health social distancing measures:

1. Community Health Measures

General advice

The general advice that people should take action to protect themselves and others remains broadly the same. Some important updates are being made to the general advice for everyone to take account of the changes now proposed, as the public health measures are lifted in line with Phase 1 of the Public Health Framework Approach. These changes are intended to provide additional guidance to the public.

Everybody should–

- wash hands frequently with soap and water or use an alcohol-based hand rub even if hands are not visibly dirty,
- practice good respiratory hygiene, that is, when coughing and sneezing, cover your mouth and nose with flexed elbow or tissue – discard tissue immediately into a closed bin and clean your hands with alcohol-based hand rub or soap and water,
- maintain social distancing, that is, leave at least 2 metres (6 feet) distance between yourself and other people, particularly those who are coughing, sneezing and have a fever,
- avoid touching your eyes, nose and mouth – if you touch your eyes, nose or mouth with your contaminated hands, you can transfer the virus from the surface to yourself,
- continue to restrict your close contacts to people in your household, but if do meet people from outside your household, keep the number of contacts as small as possible and duration of contact as short as possible, while also maintaining strict social distancing, 2 metres distance, and good personal and respiratory hygiene,
- know, and be very vigilant of, the symptoms of COVID-19. If you think you have symptoms, including flu-like symptoms, self-isolate at home. Do not go to work, meet other people or go out,
- avoid crowded places, assess the risk in the different situations and environments that you are in and respond accordingly,
- as an additional hygiene measure, when using busy public transport or when in enclosed indoor public areas such as retail outlets, people should use a face covering (i.e. a non-medical face covering) where possible,
- people who are aged 70 years of age and over and the medically vulnerable are advised to continue cocooning for their safety, bearing in mind the updated guidance to them from 1 May 2020 that if they wish to leave their homes to engage in exercise and activities outdoors that they should continue to adhere to strict social distancing, keep 2 metre from other people, comply with appropriate guidance regarding maintaining a ‘no touch’ approach and hand hygiene on returning home.

Stay at Home advice

People should continue to stay at home except in the following circumstances:

- to travel to and from work, or for purposes of work;
- to shop for essential food and household goods;
- to attend medical appointments and collect medicines and other health products;
- for vital family reasons, such as providing care to children, elderly or vulnerable people, but excluding social family visits;
- for farming purposes i.e. food production and/or care of animals;
- to avail of the expanded list of essential retail services as set out under the *Retail, Personal Services and Commercial Activities* heading below;
- to engage in physical exercise within 5km of the home, while adhering to strict 2 metre social distancing.

Small groups meeting outdoors

- Up to 4 people who are not from the same household may meet outdoors (for example a group of individuals from different households, a family group meeting an individual friend or neighbour etc.) In these circumstances it is advised that people maintain 2 metres distance, good personal and respiratory hygiene as well as continuing to apply the general advice of keeping the number of contacts as small as possible and duration of contact as short as possible.

2. **Cultural & Social Measures**

Culture & social

- Outdoor public amenities (e.g. parks, beaches, walks, etc.) may be reopened. These may be accessed by people where they are located within 5 km of the person's home. People should continue to maintain strict social distancing and avoid these locations if crowded. People are encouraged to avoid congregating at these locations and this should be enforced if necessary.

Sport

- Outdoor public sports amenities (e.g. sports pitches, tennis courts, golf courses etc) may be reopened. These may be accessed by people where they are located within 5 km of the person's home. Strict social distancing and personal hygiene should be maintained while using these sports amenities.
- People may engage in outdoor sporting and fitness activities, either individually or in groups of up to 4 where strict personal hygiene is practiced and social distancing can be maintained, In addition, contact should be minimised and the sharing of sports equipment should be minimised and where shared, regularly and effectively cleaned before, during and after use.

3. **Education & Childcare Measures**

- School and college buildings may be reopened for access by teachers and staff for organisation and distribution of learning materials, related activities and essential administration.

4. **Economic Activity (Work)**

- Over and above all of the existing permitted work arrangements, a risk-based and phased approach should be applied to commencing the return to onsite working. On that basis, a phased return to work of outdoor workers (e.g. construction workers, gardeners etc.) should commence.
- Those employers whose workers are returning to work on a phased basis in Phase 1 should consider a range of approaches to manage the total number of workers interacting with each other onsite at work at any one time, such as: having a proportion of workers return initially and increasing over time, shift work, staggered hours etc.
- Anyone who can work from home should continue to do so. This includes essential workers also, whether they work in essential Government, utilities or other services.
- Businesses and organisations reopening should apply the Return to Work Safely Protocol - COVID-19 Specific National Protocol for Employers and Workers published by the Department of Business, Enterprise and Innovation on 8 May 2020, including having a COVID-19 Response Plan in place.
- Additionally, it is important that employers, workers, employment and labour agencies and all stakeholders work together so that workplaces are prepared for the return of workers, and good communication mechanisms are in place on how workers can protect themselves, other colleagues, customers and everyone around them from infection and how to reduce the risks of workplace outbreaks. Actions may include:
 - establishing cleaning stations and making hand sanitisers available for use, implementing appropriate cleaning schedules, waste disposal arrangements, arrangements to encourage social distancing between workers and alternative arrangements where social distancing is not always possible etc.

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- communicating the importance of hand and respiratory hygiene, complying with social distancing and maintaining 2m distance while at work and travelling to and from work, as well as avoiding congregating during break times, and while waiting to go “on-site” at work or leaving work etc.
- It is important that employers work proactively, including with authorities and health authorities where necessary, to limit the spread of disease within or connected with the workplace and to mitigate the effects of workplace outbreaks should such occur.
- For workers, it is important that they do not come to work if they have symptoms, including flu-like symptoms, and workers who are contacts of a confirmed or suspected case, should follow public health advice and not come to work until advised otherwise.
- It is also important that employers work with authorities and stakeholders across the sector to share good practices to protect all in society from the risks of infection.

5. **Retail, Personal Services and Commercial Activities**

- Over and above all of the existing permitted retail arrangements, a risk-based and phased approach should be applied to commencing the return of retail, personal services and commercial activities. On that basis, a phased return of retail activities should commence as follows:
 - Retail outlets that are primarily outdoor (e.g. garden centres, farmer’s markets, hardware stores etc) may reopen.
 - The following retail outlets listed as essential in the Health Act 1947 (Section 31A – Temporary Restrictions) (COVID-19) Regulations 2020, but which are currently restricted to offering services on an emergency basis, may now open on a fulltime basis:
 - *opticians and optometrists, outlets providing hearing test services, selling hearing aids and appliances;*
 - *retailers involved in the sale, supply and repair of motor vehicles, motorcycles and bicycles and related facilities;*
 - *hardware stores, builders’ merchants and stores that provide hardware products necessary for home and business maintenance, sanitation and farm equipment, supplies and tools essential for gardening / farming /agriculture;*
 - *retail sale of office products and services for individuals working from home and for businesses;*
 - *retailers providing electrical, IT and phone sales, repair and maintenance services for home and businesses¹.*
- Similarly, retailers should apply the Return to Work Safely Protocol - COVID-19 Specific National Protocol for Employers and Workers published by the Department of Business, Enterprise and Innovation on 8 May 2020, including having a COVID-19 Response Plan in place.
- In addition, retailers should consider a range of approaches to ensure the safe operation of their outlet for their staff and customers and minimise the spread of infection such as:
 - providing cleaning stations and hand sanitiser for use by staff and customers,
 - implementing protective screens and barriers,
 - operating new queueing approaches,
 - limiting the number of customers and staff per store at any one time,
 - increasing store cleaning and hygiene,
 - considering store layout to facilitate social distancing,
 - extending opening hours to reduce crowding,
 - implementing carpark restrictions, etc.
- Retailers, workers and all sector stakeholders should work together so that retail workplaces are prepared for the return of workers and customers and good communications are in place on how workers can protect themselves, other colleagues, customers and everyone around them from infection and how to reduce the risks of workplace outbreaks. Actions may include:

¹ D/Taoiseach website 24 March 2020 <https://www.gov.ie/en/publication/a7e66d-latest-guidance-on-public-health-measures/>

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- implementing appropriate cleaning schedules, waste disposal arrangements, arrangements to encourage social distancing between workers, customers and alternative arrangements where social distancing is not always possible etc.
- communicating the importance of hand and respiratory hygiene, complying with social distancing and maintaining 2m distance while at work and travelling to and from work, as well as avoiding congregating during break times, and while waiting to enter the retail premises at work etc.
- It is important that retailers, as employers, work proactively, including with authorities and health authorities where necessary, to limit the spread of disease within or connected with the workplace and to mitigate the effects of workplace outbreaks should such occur.
- For workers in retail outlets, it is important that they do not come to work if they have symptoms, including flu-like symptoms, and workers who are contacts of a confirmed or suspected case, should follow public health advice and not come to work until advised otherwise.
- It is also important that retailers work with authorities and other stakeholders across the sector to share good practices to protect all in society from the risks of infection.

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