

NPHET paper on advising Government in relation to the potential reintroduction of public health restrictive measures

17 August 2020

CONFIDENTIAL

DRAFT UNDER DELIBERATION

Action required

- For noting
- For discussion
- For decision

1. Introduction

In light of the epidemiological situation emerging since the last week in July, the NPHET advised on the 7th August that the Government give consideration to the application of a number of enhanced public health restrictive measures to apply to the counties of Kildare, Laois and Offaly for a period of two weeks, at which point the situation will be reviewed. The Government accepted these recommendations and they came into effect from midnight on the 7th August.

Since that meeting, the number of cases in that region has remained high and the number of cases in other parts of the country has also increased.

In light of this, this paper sets out a range of measures for discussion and consideration by NPHET. The measures proposed are drawn from the suite of possible public health measures set out in the Orange Phase response of the Framework, agreed by NPHET on the 23 July 2020.

The Orange Phase response is defined in the Framework as follows: For times when risk is greater, there is an increasing incidence of disease with multiple clusters and/or increased community transmission, and the pandemic is ongoing and escalating in Ireland and globally. The indicators specified in the Framework are set out below.

It is further noted in the Framework that for the Orange Phase, some or all of the measures may need to be applied, adjusted as the epidemiological and public health scenario requires, on a local, regional or national basis.

For the purposes of today's discussion, there are two main areas of focus:

- Review the situation in Kildare, Laois and Offaly, while noting that any further decision on the measures applying to the three counties will be taken later in the week.
- Consider the situation across the country and requirement for any additional public health measures.

2. Current Epidemiological Situation

The indicators identified for an orange phase response (to be considered collectively and in context to guide judgement and decision-making) are as follows:

- Multiple clusters, with secondary spread
- 14-day cumulative incidence and related indicators show significant or increasing level of disease
- Indicators of viral transmission (including the number of cases, positivity rate and reproduction number) indicate community transmission no longer effectively suppressed
- Incidence of cases in residential healthcare settings increasing
- Admissions to hospital and critical care increasing
- Number of deaths increasing
- Capacity to undertake testing and contact tracing constrained in the context of current demand

Recent updates provided at meetings of 4th, 6th, 7th, and 12th August refer. A further update will be provided at the meeting.

3. International Situation

The European Centre for Disease Control published its 11th Rapid Risk Assessment Update on 10th August. This update advises that Europe is seeing an increase in the number of cases and hospitalisations recently after a decline in those figures in May-June 2020 and subsequent relaxation of measures in many countries.

While the update reported that, as of the 2nd August, Ireland (7.3/100,000 population) had a relatively low incidence rate as compared to other countries in Europe and the European average (21.5/100,000 population), there has been a significant increase in cases in Ireland since that date.

The risk assessment advises that *“Countries that now observe an increase in cases after they have lifted their control measures following a temporary improvement of the epidemiological situation, should consider re-instating selected measures through a phased, step-wise and sustainable approach. Assessment of risk at local level is important, taking into consideration the epidemiological situation, local services and lessons learned regarding the impact of previous measures.”*

It further advises that *“In EU/EEA countries and the UK that have reported a recent increase in cases:*

*The risk of further escalation of COVID-19 is **high** in countries that have also had an increase in hospitalisations providing a strong indication that there is a genuine increase in transmission occurring. For these countries, the overall risk of escalation is **very high** if they do not implement or reinforce multiple measures including physical distancing measures and contact tracing and have sufficient testing capacity.*

*The risk of further escalation of COVID-19 is **high** for the countries reporting no increase in hospitalisations but have an increase in test positivity rates (if testing capacity is sufficient and intensity has remained stable), suggesting increasing levels of transmission. For these countries, the overall risk of escalation is **very high** if they do not implement or reinforce multiple measures including physical distancing measures and contact tracing.*

*The risk of further escalation of COVID-19 is **moderate-high** for the countries reporting no increase in hospitalisations or test positivity rates (if testing capacity is sufficient and intensity has remained stable). The countries that have multiple physical distancing measures in place should conduct local risk assessments to better understand the groups or settings driving the increase in cases and to determine which the measures should be in place or strengthened.*

It is further noted that internationally, in particular in countries which have seen significant increases in cases of COVID-19 infection, including outbreaks in some settings and regions following the easing of public health measures, there has been a re-imposition of public health restrictive measures in those countries and / or regions of those countries.

4. Measures for Consideration by NPHET

Drawing on the Framework for Future COVID-19 Pandemic Response, and in light of the current epidemiological situation across the country, most recent ECDC advice, and the key priorities of protecting the most vulnerable, resuming non-COVID health and social care services and reopening the education sector, **the NPHET may wish to discuss and give consideration to advising Government as set out in Appendix 1 to this paper.**

In developing the public health advice to Government set out in Appendix 1, the NPHE's attention is drawn to:

- The epidemiological situation nationally with regard to a number of the indicators that it monitors on a collective basis, including: (1) the existence of multiple clusters in a number of regions, with secondary spread, (2) the 14-day cumulative incidence and related indicators which are showing a significant and increasing level of disease, (3) the (albeit small) increase in admissions to hospital and critical care, and (4) the level of community transmission may be increasing. It should also be noted that indicators in relation to incidence of cases in residential healthcare settings and number of deaths are not currently showing any worrying trends; however, due to the age profile of current cases, there may be a delay before changes to these indicators would become apparent;
- Given the above, some but not all orange phase measures are being proposed, in recognition that not all the specified indicators are currently a cause of concern, and that the epidemiological situation is not uniform across the country;
- The experience internationally, including in some countries, which have seen significant increases in cases of COVID-19 infection, including outbreaks in some settings and regions following the easing of public health measures, resulting in the requirement to reimpose public health restrictive measures in those countries and / or regions of those countries;
- Ongoing evidence and information regarding the experiences of members of the public, adherence to the public health personal behaviours and social distancing measures in place through regular quantitative and qualitative public opinion research and focus groups, analysis of non-health information sources such as transportation, mobility, and congregation data;
- That there are other important considerations for Government with regard to the reintroduction of measures, such as social and economic considerations, while noting the potential effects of the current proposed measures on the wider health and wellbeing of the population.

In providing this public health advice to Government, the NPHE:

- Noted that it considers the suite of measures being proposed as targeted, reasonable and proportionate at this stage, offering the potential to be effective in addressing those areas that are of most concern currently. The focus of these measures is threefold:
 - limit congregation and inter-household interactions;
 - enhance the application, inspection and enforcement of current measures; and
 - roll-out further targeted protection measures;
- Having due regard to ECDC and WHO advice and experiences internationally, cautioned that while the proposed measures have the potential to arrest the current trajectory of the disease, there is also the potential that the situation could deteriorate further with

significant negative implications for our key priorities of protecting the most vulnerable, resuming non-COVID health and social care services and reopening the education sector, and that it is not possible to provide assurance that stricter measures will not be required;

- Emphasised the importance of now redoubling efforts across Government and society to continue to adopt and enhance compliance with hand hygiene, respiratory etiquette, physical distancing, the wearing of face coverings and all public health measures to the greatest extent possible to protect each other, to minimise the risk of a resurgence of infection in Ireland, and to avoid the necessity to reintroduce stricter measures. While it is recognised that this does represent a change to how we are used to behaving, the measures at their core are reasonably straightforward. We will be able to do many of the things that we want to, we just need to do them differently;
- Expressed its concern regarding the continuing trend of increase in the number of cases in younger people and particularly those aged under 45 in recent weeks. While it is recognised that people will want to socialise and engage with friends again after the extended period of restrictive measures, it is important that people of all ages do so safely through maintaining good hygiene practices and physical distancing as well as limiting the number of people that we meet with, all to protect each other from infection spread;
- Committed to a clear, consistent and accessible risk communication strategy with the public and other key groups, to continually re-emphasise collective behaviours and solidarity in limiting the spread of infection for the foreseeable future and support the desired behavioural change through ongoing communication and education initiatives, and reiterated its advice of the 4th August 2020 that there is an intensification and refreshing of cross-Government communications in relation to COVID-19 with specific emphasis on communicating and engaging with those under the age of 45;
- While recognising that individuals must take responsibility for their own behaviour, emphasised that there is also a firm responsibility on employers and organisations to ensure that workplaces, venues, events and other activities adhere to public health advice and guidelines, and **on relevant authorities and regulatory bodies to ensure that the measures advised and agreed are then subsequently applied, monitored and enforced;**
- Expressed, in particular, increasing concern that some premises purporting to operate as restaurants are not always doing so which is having a significant detrimental effect on the solidarity and sense of fairness that has underpinned the national effort to date, and with this in mind reiterates the need for more urgent and stronger measures addressing these circumstances, including **the closure of premises that are clearly disregarding the clear guidance as it should apply to their sector;**
- Expressed further concern in relation to a number of clusters that have emerged linked to sporting activities, and called on all relevant organisations to ensure that current guidelines are strictly adhered to, and in particular in relation to physical distancing before and after events, during breaks in play and avoidance of team huddles. While it is proposed that sporting events can continue to take place, the NPHE will continue to monitor related clusters closely;
- Expressed again its concerns in relation to the vulnerability of high-risk populations and high-risk workplaces and **reiterated the urgency with which its recommendations of the 4th and 6th August should be implemented;**

- In light of the deteriorating pandemic situation globally, reiterated its previous public health advice regarding travel, noting that the travel-related introduction of the disease continues to be a significant and growing concern in terms of increasing the risk of a potential second-wave of the disease in Ireland. Consequently, it is important that, at this time, people in Ireland are encouraged to continue to follow public health advice against non-essential travel outside of Ireland and that all measures are utilised to discourage travel from overseas to Ireland;
- Emphasised the continued importance of ongoing monitoring and review of epidemiological trends and health system impact of COVID-19 such that any changes in the overall situation will be detected rapidly, in order that future advice to Government, and health service measures and responses can be implemented 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 the population and health system capacity;
- Reiterated its recommendations to the HSE of the 30th July in relation to the criticality of robust processes of sampling, testing, contact tracing, surveillance and reporting, and noted that notwithstanding the significant efforts already made, the urgent need for a continued process of enhancements and the introduction of any necessary measures and resources to support Departments of Public Health and testing and contact tracing operations to respond comprehensively to cases and clusters over the coming weeks and to enable the comprehensive completion of all relevant surveillance data and the timely notification of cases so as to ensure continued accurate understanding of the current epidemiological position. In tandem, there should be continued proactive engagement between the Department of Health and the HSE in relation to the implementation of a sustainable plan for the future of public health. All of the above should be focused on achieving the following key targets:
 - For referrals made by GPs before 1pm, 90% would receive appointments that same day. For referrals made after 1pm, 90% would receive appointments that same day or before 1pm the following day.
 - For swab to lab result communicated to the individual, 90% to complete with 24 hours. This should apply to both positive and negative results, and both should be reported separately. This aligns with the ECDC's advice that there should be *"sufficient laboratory capacity to be able to deliver results in a timely manner, ideally within 24 hours of sample collection."*
 - The time from lab result to completion of enhanced data on CIDR should be less than 24 hours in 90% cases.

Appendix 1 – NPHE paper on advising Government in relation to public health restrictive measures on 17 August 2020

The NPHE, taking note of the epidemiological situation emerging since the last week in July 2020 and in particular in recent days, the deteriorating pandemic situation globally, most recent ECDC advice, and the key priorities of protecting the most vulnerable, resuming non-COVID health and social care services and reopening the education sector, advises that the Government give consideration to implementing the following measures across the country¹ until midnight on Sunday, 13th September at which point the situation will be further reviewed.

Community Health Measures/Non-household gatherings

- All visits to homes will be limited to 6 people from no more than 3 households (including indoors and outdoors).
- All other gatherings/events indoors will be limited to 6 people from no more than 3 households; this will also apply to individual groups/tables in restaurants.
- All other gatherings/events outdoors will be limited to 15 people.
- The following are the only exceptions to this:
 - Up to 50 people can attend a wedding service and celebration
 - Up to 50 people can attend a funeral service
- Gardai should be given any powers necessary to interrupt and prevent house parties or other gatherings that do not adhere to the above guidance

Cultural and Social Activities

Restaurants and Cafes

- Remain open but **with legally binding conditions introduced in Regulations**, including:
 - Early closing time as already advised by NPHE on the 4th August
 - Wearing of masks by staff mandatory for customer facing roles (no partition, closer than 2 meters), as advised by NPHE on the 4th August
 - Requirement to keep contact details to support contact tracing
 - All customers to be seated at a table, with no seating allowed at the bar
 - Maximum of 6 seated at table from no more than 3 households
- Greater inspection and enforcement arrangements to be put in place immediately to ensure that premises are operating safely and within Regulations and guidelines.

Hotels

- Remain open, with protective measures applying
- Gatherings restricted to 6 indoors and 15 outdoors (exception for weddings)
- Legally binding conditions as set out above for restaurants to apply to hotel restaurants and hotel bars serving food.

¹ Measures agreed by Government for Kildare, Laois and Offaly to remain in place until the 23rd August or pending a further Government decision

Sports

- Sporting events and matches can continue to take place but behind closed doors with;
 - Strict avoidance of gatherings, including social gatherings, before or after events
 - Strict adherence to 2 metre physical distancing before and after events, during breaks in play and avoidance of team huddles
- Gyms/leisure centres/swimming pools/exercise and dance studios will remain open with strict distancing and other appropriate protective measures in place.

Services to Remain open:

- It is advised that the following services should remain open with appropriate protective measures in place:
 - Education and childcare
 - Outdoor playgrounds, play areas, parks, sports amenities
 - All retail and personal services to remain open, with strict distancing and other appropriate protective measures in place,
 - Museums, theatres galleries etc to remain open with strict distancing and other appropriate protective measures in place and with no ancillary events involving gatherings of more than 6 people indoors or 15 people outdoors

Workplaces

- Unless it is **absolutely essential** for an employee to attend work in person, they should not do so and they should be facilitated to work from home
- Greater inspection and enforcement arrangements to be put in place immediately to ensure that premises are operating safely and within Regulations and guidelines.
- NPHET recommendations of the 4th of August in relation high risk workplace should be implemented with urgency.

Travel/Transport

- No limits on movement outside of restrictions currently in place
- People should not use public transport unless it is absolutely necessary to do so
- People should not share private vehicles with others from outside their household. Where this is not possible, the wearing of masks should be made mandatory.
- For secondary school students on public or school transport, strict distancing of at least 1 metre should be ensured along with the wearing of masks.

Funerals and places of worship

- Attendance at a funeral service and burial /cremation ceremony to be limited to 50 (any events before/after the funeral will be limited to a maximum of 6 people).
- Places of worship to remain open for religious services with maximum attendance as per current guidance and with strict distancing and other appropriate protective measures in place.

Over 70s and medically vulnerable

- The over 70s and medically vulnerable will be advised to exercise individual judgement, and to stay at home as much as possible, and limit interactions to a very small network for short periods of time, while remaining physically distanced. They will also be advised to:
 - If taking exercise outdoors, maintain 2 metre distance from others and wash hands on returning home;
 - avoid public transport;
 - In relation to shopping, they should shop during designated hours and wear a face covering. Family, friends and neighbours may be able to provide assistance with shopping once they adhere to physical distancing guidelines, alternatively, online services may be considered;
 - Shops should ensure that there are designated hours for over 70s and medically vulnerable;
 - For those for whom these options are not available, Government should put in place assistance through Local Authorities, working with the voluntary sector services, to ensure that people have access to food, essential household supplies and medicines.

Residential and healthcare facilities

- All current protective measures in relation to long-term residential care facilities, acute settings and prisons to remain in place. NPHET will keep this under close review.

Overseas travel

- Given the deteriorating epidemiological situation in Ireland and internationally and the rapidly evolving nature of that situation, NPHET recommends against any additions to the Government's 'green list' at this time.
- NPHET reiterates its prior recommendations with regard to mandatory quarantine and/or the imposition of a ban on non-essential travel from countries with a high disease incidence.