

NPHET paper on review of remaining Phase 4 public health measures

27th August 2020

DRAFT UNDER DELIBERATION

Action required

- For noting
- For discussion
- For decision

1. Introduction

The Government's Roadmap for Reopening Society & Business, published on 1 May 2020, set out an indicative path to the easing of COVID-19 restrictions and other actions in order to facilitate the reopening of Ireland's society and economy in a phased manner. Phase 1 and 2 measures began on the 18th of May and 8th of June, respectively. The three remaining phases of the Roadmap were reconfigured into two phases, and Phase 3 measures began on the 29th of June. Phase 4 measures in relation to the reopening of pubs/bars and nightclubs/discos/casinos and increasing the limits for indoor and outdoor mass gatherings were due to begin on the 20th of July. NPHET considered these issues on the 14th July and 4th August and on both occasions recommended that the current restrictions on progressing to phase remain in place based on the epidemiological position at the time. Current restrictions are in place until the 31st August, and it was indicated that resumption after that point would be considered, subject to the profile of the disease.

Since the end of July, there has been a deterioration in the epidemiological situation. As a result, on the 18th August, the Government agreed a number of enhanced public health restrictive measures to apply nationwide until Sunday, 13th September, following NPHET advice. This is in addition to the more restrictive measures introduced originally in Kildare, Laois and Offaly and currently remaining in place for Kildare until 6th September and subject to ongoing review by NPHET.

As part of the suite of measures introduced on the 18th August, the number of people permitted to attend indoor and outdoor social gatherings was reduced to six and fifteen respectively. This will be reviewed in advance of the 13th September and does not need to be considered further at that point.

The remaining Phase 4 measures to be considered today are the reopening of (1) pubs, bars and hotel bars, and (2) nightclubs, discotheques and casinos.

In developing this public health advice to Government, the NPHET has regard to the following:

- The epidemiological situation nationally with regard to a number of the indicators that it monitors on a collective basis, including: (1) the existence of many clusters in a number of regions and setting types, with secondary spread particularly to household and social contacts, (2) the 14-day cumulative incidence and related indicators which are showing a significant and increasing level of disease, (3) the increase in admissions to hospital and critical care, and (4) the level of community transmission, which 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.
- The experience internationally, countries 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 public health 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.
- The precedence of reopening schools, the resumption of non-COVID health services and the protection of vulnerable individuals and groups in our communities.

2. Reopening pubs/bars

The particular risks associated with pubs/bars have been considered previously by NPHET. Pubs/bars pose a particular risk to the spread of COVID-19 as alcohol can have a disinhibiting effect on people and impair judgement, and however well-intentioned people are, it can impair their awareness of and ability to comply with social distancing and hygiene/respiratory advice. The physical characteristics and typical atmosphere in pubs also contribute to risk, in that, loud atmospheres can increase respiratory particles emitted as people must raise their voices to be heard and many pubs/bars can be small spaces with poor ventilation.

Internationally, there have been a number of examples of outbreaks of COVID-19 in bars and there has also been a number of outbreaks associated with pubs/bars recently in Ireland (as of Wednesday 19th August, 26 cases linked to a pub in Co Kildare).

However, it is also the case that pubs/bars can form part of the social fabric of many communities and provide an important social outlet for many people. The delay in reopening pubs has implications including impacts on people who rely on them for their livelihoods as well as on those for whom pubs play a role in their social lives.

Where pubs/bars have re-opened in other countries, various conditions have been imposed including reduced opening hours, social distancing, mandatory seating, table service only, booking required, limited number per table, mandatory wearing of masks by staff, and capacity limits.

Recommendation for NPHET's consideration:

It is proposed that the current epidemiological position does not make it possible to reopen pubs/bars at this point. This will be kept under review by NPHET.

3. Reopening of Nightclubs, Discos Casinos etc

As per letter of the 4th August, given the heightened risk of infection associated with nightclub type environments, which by their nature are not intended to be seated venues where patrons can maintain physical distancing, it is proposed that nightclubs, discos and casinos remain closed at this point in time.

4. Mass gatherings

Given the current measures in place this does not require to be considered at this time.