



Mr. Simon Harris TD,
Minister for Health,
Department of Health,
Miesian Plaza,
50-58 Lower Baggot Street,
Dublin 2.

10th April 2020

Via email to Private Secretary to the Minister for Health

Dear Minister,

I write further to today's meeting of the COVID-19 National Public Health Emergency Team (NPHET).

The NPHET has previously, and continues, to acknowledge the profound impact on the trajectory of COVID-19 in Ireland which has been achieved by the immense collective solidarity and responsibility of the people in Ireland in complying with the range of public health measures put in place since 13th March last.

While there is a time differential between the implementation of these public health measures and the observing their outcome in terms of disease progression, there are now encouraging signs that the measures implemented to date have positively impacted the progression of COVID-19 in the Irish population. In the early days of the epidemic, the day-on-day increase in growth rate of confirmed cases was 33%. Last week, this rate had reduced to 15% and this week it has further reduced to 9%. In addition, the number of people in critical care units is now relatively stable.

Importantly however, the health and social care services continue to face unprecedented challenges as a consequence of COVID-19.

Ireland's situation at the time of consideration by NPHET was:

- i. the number of confirmed cases is in excess of 7,000;
- ii. the number of confirmed COVID-19 patients requiring critical care today is 149, with a further 28 patients suspected of having COVID-19 are also in critical care;
- iii. community transmission accounts for 66% of cases;
- iv. there continues to be an increasing number of clusters with 317 clusters reported in total as of midnight 7th April, many of which are in residential healthcare settings;
- v. there have been 263 deaths recorded to date, with 28 notified yesterday.

Furthermore, the ECDC published an updated risk assessment for the EU/EEA and the UK on 8th April last and the NPHET noted their assessment that:

- The risk of severe disease associated with COVID-19 in the EU/EEA and UK is currently considered **moderate** for the general population and **very high** for populations with defined risk factors associated with elevated risk;
- The risk of increasing community transmission of COVID-19 in the EU/EEA and the UK in the coming weeks is **moderate** if mitigation measures are in place, and **very high** if insufficient mitigation measures are in place;
- It is currently too early to start lifting all community and physical distancing measures in the EU/EEA and the UK;
- The de-escalation of measures in any EU/EEA Member State needs to be carefully planned and conducted, in order to avoid a swift return to high levels of transmission;
- A strong focus should remain on comprehensive testing and surveillance strategies (including contact tracing), community measures (including physical distancing), strengthening of healthcare systems and informing the public and health community.

Given the latest national data and the updated ECDC risk assessment, the NPHET today considered the public health measures currently in place (letters of 12th, 24th and 27th March refer). Arising from the discussion at the meeting, the NPHET recommends the extension of the current public health measures; with this extension effective until midnight on Monday 4th May 2020. The NPHET will keep this under review during the intervening period.

In light of the extension date for the public health measures, the NPHET considered that the powers contained in the Health Act 1947 (Section 31A – Temporary Restrictions) (COVID-19) Regulations, 2020 should continue to be available for use by the Gardaí in the coming weeks.

The NPHET will continue to maintain a strong public health and health service focus on areas of particular risk. Working closely with the HSE and related agencies, the NPHET will continue to oversee the deployment of public health measures to address outbreaks and clusters in residential health care and hospital settings, in line with the international experiences of the vulnerability of people in these settings.

The NPHET emphasised the importance of a harmonised national approach to the continued implementation of the measures. It also recognised the need for the duration, nature and intensity of specific interventions across regions to continue to be reviewed, as more information about the COVID-19 outbreak and contact patterns within those regions become available. This may allow for a reduction in the intensity of measures over time.

As COVID-19 still remains a very new disease, the NPHET is aware of the significant uncertainties that still exist regarding its nature and transmission. Consequently, a further period of observation is needed to determine whether the response to date has achieved the required public health impact.

Ireland is at a delicate and critical point in determining how to proceed in terms of the national response to the pandemic. Any reduction of existing measures requires careful deliberation, planning and in order to avoid a swift return to high levels of transmission and an increase in the number of cases upon stepping down of measures. The NPHE has been and will continue to be provided with advanced modelling advice by the Irish Epidemiological Modelling Advisory Group (IEMAG), in addition to other expert advice, which can inform this process. Detailed cross-Government engagement on the wider social, economic and societal impacts will also be required. I understand that the Secretary General is writing directly to the Secretary General to the Government on this matter.

Officials from this Department have been and will continue to be available to work with relevant HSE staff, other health agency staff and staff across Government on the implementation of these actions.

I would be happy to discuss further, should you wish.

Yours sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'Tony Holohan', written over a horizontal line.

Dr Tony Holohan

Chief Medical Officer

Chair of the COVID-19 National Public Health Emergency Team

c.c. Ms Elizabeth Canavan, Department of the Taoiseach and Chair of the Senior Officials Group for COVID-19