

National Public Health Emergency Team - Coronavirus

Covid -19 Subgroup – Behavioural Change

Meeting 12

Note of Meeting

Meeting Date: Friday 29th of May 2020

Time: 12:00

Location: Video Conference

In attendance:

Department of Health:

Kate O’Flaherty (Chair), Health and Wellbeing

Robert Mooney, Communications

Greg Straton, Health and Wellbeing (Secretariat)

ESRI: Pete Lunn

NUIG: Molly Byrne

Safefood: Aileen McGloin

SEAI: Karl Purcell

UCD: Liam Delaney

UL: Orla Muldoon

Apologies:

DoH: Robert Murphy

Deirdre Watters, Head of Communications, Department of Health was also in attendance for the meeting.

1. Welcome

The Chairperson welcomed the members to the Subgroup meeting; the apologies of Robert Murphy were noted.

2. Conflict of Interest Declarations

None declared

3. Meeting Note – Meeting 21st of May 2020

It was agreed to redistribute the meeting note of the 21st of May to members of the subgroup for further review.

4. Update from NPHET – Kate O’Flaherty

The review of the next phase of easing restrictions for phase 2 will be a focus of the upcoming NPHET meetings. It was noted that the case definition for Covid-19 was likely to be updated in coming days, in line with expected guidance from the European Centre for Disease Prevention and Control.

5. Insights from the Week -Rob Mooney

A report was circulated to the Subgroup prior to the meeting for consideration. The Quantitative results from the week included:

- Continued adherence to measures with an increase in the wearing of face coverings.
- Significant improvement in mood, with a marked decrease in overall levels of worry, people are most concerned about the economy.
- In terms of risk perception, 49% of respondents think this is behind us with 18% believing this still lies ahead, 63% expect a second wave, 56% believe that Ireland is returning to normal at about the right pace, 24% believe it is too quick and 21% believe it is too slow.
- There is still a difference in risk perception between males and females, with males perceiving risk lower than females.

The Subgroup discussed risk perception and that, anecdotally, there may be regional variations, with some areas perceiving that there is low/no Covid in their community and that this is a Dublin based issue. It was noted that there aren’t regional variations in worry.

It was noted that children and young people may be less compliant with measures and that they face very specific challenges. Some communications tailored for children has been done but that a focus on this may need to occur as measures are eased, and it was noted that different sub-groups in the population will have differing perceptions, behave differently and may need more tailored communications. The Chair advised that issues around children and young people were being actively considered by NPHET in context of planning for easing of restrictions.

6. Risk Perception – Kate O’Flaherty

A short paper on ‘understanding current perception of Covid-19 risk among the general public’ from Department Head of Communications Deirdre Watters was circulated to the group. The feedback from focus groups suggests that people’s perception of risk remains high, both for now and for the future, and the degree of risk perception is driven by age and closeness to a vulnerable person. The feeling of collective responsibility remains high, as is social disapproval for blatant ignoring of guidance, but people are balancing their need for reconnection with their sense of individual responsibility, and perception that ‘others’ are less vigilant. There is a sense that people would prefer a set of ‘rules’ to help them understand how to apply them in different scenarios, while they develop a better understanding and confidence around risks.

The Subgroup discussed how to educate and empower individuals to perceive risks and select appropriate mitigation strategies. It was felt that the communication of ‘portable principles’ that can be applied to different scenarios rather than reliance on rules-based cognition would be most effective.

The behaviours to mitigate risk are essentially the same, what is required is to give people the ability to assess risk in a proportionate manner and apply mitigation correctly. There was a discussion about the need to get people to a point of personal responsibility or empowerment to correctly assess risk and know the appropriate response.

This also needs to consider that some sectors of society are less able to mitigate risk and that they may disengage if this is not acknowledged, therefore there is a need to be cautious about the communication around individual responsibility as this may result in social disapproval and potential stigma. The importance of continuing to communicate openly and on the facts was emphasised, to help people make informed choices and judgements, as well as communicating to certain groups that they are at higher risk.

Department Communications will take the Subgroup's feedback into account in planning communications messages and materials for Phase 2 and further easing of restrictions.

7. Micro-communities/pods for cocooners – Kate O'Flaherty

The Chair raised that the issue of guidance on micro-communities, in particular for cocooners and for children, was again being considered by NPHET in context of guidance to support easing of restrictions, The previous feedback from the Subgroup was noted by NPHET, but further views from the group for these cohorts would be welcome.

In considering the concept of micro-communities/pods for cocooners as we move towards further easing of restrictions, the Subgroup advised that it was important that the key messages (as set out in the core principles of public health guidance) are not lost in any communication, and noted that the evidence/research around the concept isn't fully available. They advised that an appropriate approach might be to suggest that 'creating a pod' might be one way that people will find helpful to help them stick to the key principles, more of a 'tool' to action the principles rather than a 'ruleset' to be followed, and with flexibility for people to choose it, or another way, of comprehending and managing their interactions with others. The point about language was also raised, to see if a word like 'pod' would be liked/understood by many older/cocooners; also emphasis on 'consistency' in who you interact with was a better message than talking about selecting/exclusivity (because of negative connotations advised previously).

In terms of using the concept for families with small children, it was acknowledged that this would have a positive impact for children (as with cocooners) and that to a limited extent is probably already a reality. Again, the Subgroup felt that the idea of creating a pod with another family would be most usefully communicated as a 'tool' or one way to help achieve the principles, rather than a fixed rule set that everyone would be asked to follow.

The group's feedback will be fed into the ongoing work by NPHET in preparing advice for easing of restrictions and associated communications planning.

8. Updates on Ongoing Work

The Behavioural Research Unit (BRU) in the ESRI is developing proposals for further behavioural studies on risk perceptions to further inform the communication strategy, and also a further study to explore comprehension and implementation of guidance on symptom recognition and self-isolation. Further consideration of the latter was agreed to be delayed pending any new case definition to include further symptoms, and it was agreed that the study on risk perceptions would be most useful to conduct next. A paper arising from the first study on self-isolation was recently published by the ESRI. The BRU have also been requested to do a behavioural study linked to the testing of the Covid Tracing App in development.

In terms of other important issues going forward, the Subgroup discussed the impact the pandemic is having on younger people in particular, from a broad social and economic viewpoint and referencing the previous surveys that showed this cohort had the lowest level of wellbeing/life satisfaction in the population, and potential behavioural implications of this. As well as factors influencing their adherence to current guidance, concern was expressed that longer-term consequences may also affect their capability to manage and mitigate risks and look after their overall health and wellbeing. Government and Health strategies to address these potential consequences will be important over the medium to longer term.

9. A.O.B

The Subgroup discussed the recent presentation by members of the group to the OECD Behavioural Insights Forum, it was noted that the presentation was very well received and attracted a wide audience. It was noted that the work of the Subgroup seems to be an example of leading practice internationally and that the OECD intend to produce a paper arising from the sessions.

10. Date and Time of Next Meeting

Next meeting:

10:30 Friday the 5th of June 2020