COVID-19 Nursing Homes Expert Panel

Examination of measures to 2021

Interim Report to the Minister for Health

30th June 2020
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1 Introduction

COVID-19 is a new disease, which can present atypically in frail older people, and new evidence and best practice in its management are constantly emerging. As a society, as communities and as families, throughout most of 2020, we have all been living with the unprecedented impacts resulting from the COVID-19 pandemic. Those impacts have been felt in many different ways in homes including nursing homes, workplaces, sports and social clubs and in the heart of Irish and global community life.

Internationally, the European Centre for Disease Control (ECDC) has reported that since 31 December 2019 and as of 30 June 2020, 10,273,001 cases of COVID-19 have been reported, including 505,295 deaths.¹ At the time of writing, the Health Protection and Surveillance Centre (HPSC) public health data indicates that as of midnight Monday 29 June there were 25,473 confirmed cases of COVID-19 in Ireland and tragically there has been a total of 1,736 COVID-19 related deaths².

The impacts have been particularly felt by the residents, their families, staff and operators of nursing homes across the country. Residents in nursing homes are vulnerable populations and are at a higher risk of being susceptible to infection from COVID-19, and for subsequent adverse outcomes.

On foot of a NPHET recommendation, on 23rd May the COVID-19 Expert Panel on Nursing Homes was established by the then Minister for Health, Mr. Simon Harris TD, to examine the complex issues surrounding the management of COVID-19 among this particularly vulnerable cohort.

The purpose of the Panel is to examine the national and international responses to the COVID-19 crisis, and to examine the emerging best practice with a view to providing immediate real-time learnings and recommendations in light of the expected ongoing impact of COVID-19 over the next 12-18 months.

The members of the COVID-19 Expert Panel appreciate the Minister’s invitation to join the COVID-19 Expert Panel and welcome the opportunity it has presented to contribute to and support the ongoing national response to this viral pandemic, particularly as it relates to nursing homes.

The purpose of this interim report is to provide a short update to the Minister for Health on the work of the Panel so far, its approach and next steps.

2 Approach and Progress

As well as capturing the lessons from the recent national and international experiences, the Panel is particularly focused on a forward-facing examination of the measures required with regard to the optimum management of COVID-19 in nursing homes over the next 6 – 18 months.

Under its terms of reference, the COVID-19 Nursing Homes Expert Panel has been tasked with 3 core actions:

1. Provide assurance that the national protective public health and other measures adopted to safeguard residents in nursing homes, in light of COVID-19, are appropriate, comprehensive and in line with international guidelines and any lessons learned from Ireland’s response to COVID-19 in nursing homes to date;
2. Provide an overview of the international response to COVID-19 in nursing homes utilising a systematic research process;
3. Report to the Minister for Health by end June 2020 in order to provide immediate real-time learnings and recommendations in light of the expected ongoing impact of COVID-19 over the next 12-18 months.

In line with public health measures, the Expert Panel conducts its primary business through video calls. At the Panel’s first formal meeting on the 29th May 2020, a terms of engagement document was agreed setting out the manner in which the Panel conducts its business. The Panel is assisted in organising its business by a Department of Health support team. It is an independent entity, is responsible for the decisions and direction of its work as well as how this work is organised.

To progress its work, the Expert Panel has a scheduled core business meeting once per week where all Panel members attend along with the Panel’s Support Team. The Panel also has a weekly scheduled deliberative meeting where the four members of the Panel meet in “closed door” sessions. Over the past number of weeks, the Panel has also convened daily meetings with stakeholders and other ad hoc meetings to advance particular areas of work.

To date, the Panel has convened 6 core business meetings, has held 12 stakeholder engagement meetings and convened a number of ad hoc meetings to progress areas of work. The Panel has also met with the Minister for Health to provide an overview of our work to date. The Department of Health has facilitated a dedicated webpage for the Panel on its website. The minutes of the Panel’s core business meetings are published on this webpage along with details of the consultation process undertaken. Other key documents may be published here from time to time.

A number of key action areas have been identified for development in order to meet the Panel’s terms of reference:

1. **Stakeholder engagement and consultation**
   The Expert Panel fully recognises the need to engage on a range of topics with the many stakeholders with an interest in and responsibility for the care of nursing home residents. To this end, the Panel has prioritised the establishment of a number of stakeholder engagement processes aimed at consulting and engaging with key stakeholders, including the wider public through various means. The following chapter provides an overview of these engagements to date which have been substantial.

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2. **Data Collation and Analysis**

To fully understand COVID-19, its transmission and evolution in Ireland and internationally, along with the profound impacts it has had across society, it is important to reflect on and consider the available data, epidemiological trends, case demographics and mortality. It is in the reflection on and the analysis of this data that we can learn further about COVID-19 presentation, particularly in nursing homes, to inform recommendations for the continued response to the virus to safeguard nursing homes residents over the next 12 to 18 months.

The Expert Panel is collating and examining relevant public health data and has requested data holders to provide a range of data inputs and analysis to inform the Panel’s deliberations and consideration of the learnings arising from the COVID-19 experience in Ireland and globally, to date.

3. **Evidence Review**

In line with the Panel’s second term of reference, a rapid systematic review is being undertaken to investigate measures implemented in long-term care facilities to reduce transmission of, morbidity and mortality resulting from, SARS-CoV-2. Economic issues associated with the virus (cost issues, cost effectiveness, procurement) are also being investigated.

Three databases (PubMed, EMBASE, Cinahl) are being searched using key terms related to coronavirus, infection control, and nursing homes, from inception to present. Peer reviewed literature with no restrictions on language are considered eligible for inclusion. All study types are considered, and the inclusion criteria related to interventions and policies that were implemented in nursing homes, long stay facilities, and which aimed to reduce mortality, morbidity rates, and transmission, of COVID 19. The population considered include residents, staff, and visitors. The HIQA evidence synthesis protocol 2020 informed the search strategy to capture the population, intervention, and outcomes of interest. The evidence review is being supported by a research team at UCD and is at an advanced stage of development.

4. **Analysis and Deliberation**

The collection and collation of a broad range of data, evidence and inputs is critical to a robust analysis and deliberative process, and to inform robust findings, conclusions and recommendations. The Expert Panel is undertaking focused analysis of all of these key inputs and this work is progressing well. As the analysis is concluding, the Panel is actively considering the findings deriving from this process and will be undertaking focused panel meetings to conclude deliberations and compose its final report for the Minister.

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3 Stakeholder Engagement

At its first meeting, the Expert Panel agreed on the importance of engaging with a wide range of stakeholders relating to nursing homes and the response to COVID-19, to seek the views and learnings of those stakeholders. A significant input from an extensive range of stakeholders is further assisting the Panel to obtain a range of views, experiences and ideas from a variety of people and organisations.

To facilitate this engagement, the Panel is undertaking rapid consultative processes to engage with a range of stakeholders. A multi-strand approach to engagement and consultation is being taken.

3.1 Public Consultation/Open call for Submissions

On the 11th June the Expert Panel invited interested parties to participate in a concise, focused engagement process through an open call for submissions. The purpose of this engagement is to receive input, perspective and experiences in relation to the COVID-19 pandemic and its effects on nursing homes, with a particular focus on having appropriate responses in place in the event of further COVID-19 outbreaks in nursing homes over the next 18 months. Submissions are a vital source of information, and are helping inform the Panel’s deliberations. Communication on the open call for submissions was facilitated via a press release from the Department of Health’s press office and a dedicated webpage for consultation was included on the Department’s website. The closing date for submissions was the 18th June.

3.2 Request for Written Submissions – Organisations

In addition to the open call for submissions that Expert Panel wrote to over 30 identified organisations and individuals inviting them to make a written a submission for the consideration of the Panel. A range of organisations, including any that had proactively sent correspondence to the Panel, were invited to engage with this process.

The Panel, facilitated by the Health Information and Quality Authority (HIQA), also wrote to all (584) designated centres for older people (nursing homes) inviting their input through the written submission process.

3.3 Meetings with organisations

As well as the open call and the invitations to organisations for written submissions, the Panel has established an intensive programme of engagement with key national stakeholders through a programme of virtual meetings. These meetings have been convened on almost daily basis over the past two weeks. Invited participants are asked to provide a written submission in advance as well as up to three key additional documents that they think the Panel should consider in its work.
3.4 Direct engagements with Nursing Homes including residents

The final strand in the Expert Panel’s stakeholder engagement approach is to meet with a small number of nursing homes. The Panel is particularly keen to engage with and hear from those who:

- a) have been managing the response to COVID-19 on the nursing homes frontline;
- b) have been providing care in nursing homes throughout the pandemic; and, most importantly, nursing home residents with lived experience of the impact of the pandemic for them. The voices, experience and learnings from these vital stakeholders will provide a key input to the Panel’s deliberations.

The Panel, fully conscious of the public health advice and measures currently in place, hopes to undertake these engagements by both virtual meetings and in some cases via a direct site visit, following all of the necessary public health precautions. Through these engagements the Panel aims to meet with and hear from:

1. The Person in Charge;
2. A small number of frontline staff providing care and other services;
3. A small number of residents;

These engagements are currently being planned and the Expert Panel, through its support team, is communicating with relevant representatives from each of the nursing homes. The selection of nursing homes was facilitated by HIQA to include a mix of public and privately operated facilities and those who experienced COVID-19 cases and those that didn’t.

3.5 Engagements to date

To date the Nursing Home Expert Panel has completed 12 separate meeting engagements with stakeholders consisting of engagements with a total of 21 representative organisations or other bodies.

About 40 written submissions were received through the public consultation, approximately 50 submissions received from nursing homes through the direct invite pathway and about 25 written submissions received via the direct written invitation pathway from other bodies.

The Expert Panel has a small number of further engagements scheduled in the coming week, including with nursing homes directly. All of the written submissions received are being collated and analysed and along with the various meeting engagements will form part of the active deliberations of the Panel.

In addition to the above, arrangements have been made to engage with a number of residents/relatives, identified from independent advocacy sources, and who have expressed the desire to share their thoughts and experiences with the Expert Panel – these engagements are being scheduled for the week ahead.

The Panel would like to acknowledge the high level of commitment and engagement from organisations and individuals in responding to invitations and, greatly appreciates all of those who have shared their experiences, expertise, insights and ideas with the Panel, which are most valuable inputs.
4  Next Steps and Final Report

The necessary data and evidence gathering work packages are now at an advanced stage of completion with a requirement for final focus on the completion of the evidence review and its findings and epidemiological data analysis with regard to COVID-19 and its progression in Ireland, especially in the context of nursing homes.

The extensive stakeholder engagement process is now also close to finalisation. The Panel has a number of engagements scheduled for the week ahead. Included in these are direct engagements, virtually or via site visit, with some nursing homes, their staff and their residents. The Panel is particularly anxious to hear from and understand the lived experience in nursing homes throughout the pandemic and these planned engagements will provide a substantial and important input into the Panel’s deliberations with regard to its final report.

It is the intention of the Panel that on finalisation of the evidence review, data analysis and stakeholder engagement analysis, the Panel will undertake a focused and dedicated deliberative process having regard to all of the key data, evidence and views collected, with a view to completing a final report.

The various inputs described will ensure that a comprehensive, evidence-based report is completed that supports the delivery of the terms of reference. In doing so the Expert Panel will be carefully considering its findings, the types of measures and recommendations that will further support the ongoing response to COVID-19 in nursing homes, over the next 12 to 18 months.

The COVID-19 Nursing Homes Expert Panel therefore recommends that its final report will be submitted to the Minister by mid-July.