



Mr. Stephen Donnelly TD,
Minister for Health,
Department of Health,
Miesian Plaza,
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Dublin 2.

14th July 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 (NPHE).

As you are aware, in the short few months after the first cases of COVID-19 were reported in Ireland at the end of February 2020, it became necessary to take the unprecedented step of applying public health restrictive measures to control the spread of infection. The risks to human health and life caused by COVID-19 warranted the application of these public health measures during March, April and into May. It is important to acknowledge that the commitment and solidarity demonstrated by people across Ireland to new personal and collective hygiene behaviours and to the public health restrictive measures changed the trajectory of this pandemic in Ireland and protected many in our society from infection and illness.

However, it is imperative that, as a society we remain as vigilant now as ever. As previously outlined, the World Health Organization has advised that based on current evidence, the most plausible future scenario in the dynamic of COVID-19 is that it may involve recurring epidemic waves interspersed with periods of low-level transmission. As is currently being observed in many other countries, Ireland is very likely to experience periods of time when the numbers of people infected increases.

In light of the progression of the disease since late June, the NPHE has a growing concern, in particular, regarding the following:

- the increasing case numbers of this disease currently being reported in the community and a number of large clusters that have emerged in recent weeks;
- the R number is likely now to have exceeded 1, with the best estimate in range 1.2 to 1.8;
- the deteriorating international epidemiological situation and international experience which shows that effectiveness of disease suppression following the easing of public health measures by countries is precarious;
- the risk of imported cases due to the current ongoing increase in overseas travel.

Consequently, in light of the current national and epidemiological situation set out below, the NPHET considered today that a cautious approach must now be pursued and that the current public health measures in place, with some adjustments, should be extended until 10 August 2020 rather than progressing to Phase 4 of the *revised Roadmap for Reopening Society & Business*.

The NPHET noted the critical importance of low levels of community transmission of this disease in order to ensure the protection of the most vulnerable and to enable the recommencement of essential societal services, such as education and healthcare services for all.

The NPHET considered that adopting a cautious disease control strategy at this stage and targeting a small number of additional measures at known areas of infection risk (such as social gatherings and travel) will contribute to minimising the impending risk of an upsurge of infection, as is currently evident in other countries.

Current Epidemiological Situation

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

- (i) the number of confirmed cases stands at 25,638;
- (ii) the five-day rolling average of cases was 20 cases;
- (iii) the 14-day epidemiological incidence per 100,000 population was 3.47;
- (iv) there were 13 confirmed cases in hospital yesterday;
- (v) the number of confirmed COVID-19 patients requiring critical care yesterday was 10, with a further 8 patients suspected of having COVID-19 also in critical care;
- (vi) 8,284 cases (32% of all cases) were associated with healthcare workers;
- (vii) 1,746 deaths due to COVID-19 recorded to date, with 6 new deaths notified yesterday.

With regard to clusters and outbreaks specifically, NPHET noted—

- (viii) the total number of clusters in residential care facilities to date has been 463*,
- (ix) the number of confirmed cases in residential care facilities stands at 7,656 of which 5,834 have been in nursing homes,
- (x) that as of Saturday 11th July, there have been—
 - 4 COVID-19 outbreaks involving the Roma community involving 42 cases. One of these outbreaks remains open. No new cases were notified in the past week in this cohort,
 - 8 COVID-19 outbreaks involving the Irish Traveller Community, involving 65 cases. 2 of these outbreaks remain open. No new cases were notified in the past week in this cohort,
 - 4* COVID-19 outbreaks notified in residential facilities for the homeless involving 15* cases. All of these outbreaks have been closed. No new cases were notified in the past week in this cohort,
 - 16 outbreaks in Direct Provision Centres, involving 182 cases. All of these outbreaks have been closed. No new cases were notified in the past week in this cohort,
 - 38* clusters in workplaces including 22 in meat processing plants. 11 of these outbreaks remain open, including 5 in meat processing plants. 18 new cases were notified in the past week in this cohort, however none of these were in meat processing plants, 114 new outbreaks were notified in the previous week. 99 were in private households.

*as part of normal data validation exercises, some numbers reported here are lower than previously reported.

The NPHET also took note of the following:

- the positivity rate for all tests processed nationally in the past week was 0.3%;
- the latest reported influenza like illness rate (ILI rate) is 4.0 per 100,000 (i.e. below threshold);
- the increased number of new cases and clusters within the last 14 days related to travel;
- the changing age profile of the recent cases reported, with 74% of cases that have occurred within the past 14 days occurring in those under 45 years.

Current international epidemiological assessment

The NPHET today noted that 12% of cases notified over the past fortnight have been associated with travel. Importantly, the NPHET also took note of cases where travel-related transmission has been linked to further clusters within private households or within extended family units. Furthermore, the NPHET continued to note with concern the acceleration and deterioration of the pandemic internationally, including that–

- 12.9 million cases and 570,000 deaths have been recorded globally to date; 4.9 million cases were recorded within the last month, with 1.4 million in the past 7 days,
- there has been an 11% increase in the number of cases reported globally in the past 7 days,
- the epidemiological profile of the disease remains uncertain in many countries due to limited testing and/or reporting.

The NPHET also took note of the ECDC's rapid risk assessment for the EU/EEA and the UK of 11 June–

- COVID 19 risk in the **general population** is currently assessed as:
 - **low** in areas where community transmission has been reduced and/or maintained at low levels and where there is extensive testing showing very low detection rates; and
 - **moderate** in areas where there is substantial ongoing community transmission and where appropriate physical distancing measures are not in place,
- COVID 19 risk in the **population with defined factors associated with severe disease outcome** is currently assessed as:
 - **moderate** in areas where community transmission has been reduced and/or maintained at low levels and where there is extensive testing showing very low detection rates; and
 - **very high** in areas where there is substantial ongoing community transmission and where appropriate physical distancing measures are not in place, and
- the risk of COVID-19 incidence rising to a level that may **require the re-introduction of stricter control measures** is currently assessed as:
 - **moderate** if measures are phased out gradually, when only sporadic or cluster transmission is reported, and when appropriate monitoring systems and capacities for extensive testing and contact tracing are in place; and
 - **high** if measures are phased out when there is still ongoing community transmission, and no appropriate monitoring systems and capacities for extensive testing and contact tracing are in place.

Advice regarding Public Health Measures to commence on 20 July 2020

Given the latest national and international data, as set out above and in the report to Government as provided for in the *Roadmap for Reopening Society & Business*, and the most recent ECDC risk assessment, the NPHET considered the public health measures currently in place.

Arising from the discussion at today's meeting, the NPHET advises Government that the current public health measures in place, with some adjustments as set out in the Appendix to this letter, should be extended until 10 August 2020 rather than progressing to Phase 4 of the *revised Roadmap for Reopening Society & Business*.

Furthermore, at today's meeting the NPHET agreed to recommend to Government that the wearing of face coverings should now become mandatory in indoor retail environments, where appropriate, in accordance with guidance issued by the Health Protection Surveillance Centre on the use of face coverings by the general public.

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

- the report to Government prepared by the Department of Health in accordance with the decision-making framework provided for in the *Roadmap for Reopening Society & Business* and in particular:
 - the latest data regarding the progression of the disease,
 - the capacity and resilience of the health service in terms of hospital and ICU occupancy, and
 - the capacity of the programme of sampling, testing and contact tracing;
- the experiences 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;
- the NPHET's *Advice to Government in relation to realigning the Public Health Framework Approach to reducing restrictive measures into two final Phases* of 18 June 2020;
- that there are other important considerations for Government with regard to the reduction of measures, such as social and economic considerations, while noting the potential effects of the current measures on the wider health and wellbeing of the population.

In providing this public health advice to Government the NPHET–

- having due regard to the recent ECDC statement that “*the pandemic is not over, and hypothetical forecasting indicates a rise in cases is likely in the coming weeks*” and the NPHET's concerns

regarding the current trend of increasing incidence of COVID-19 in the community, emphasised the importance of now redoubling efforts across Government and society to enhance compliance with hand hygiene, respiratory etiquette, physical distancing, the wearing of face coverings, the need to minimise direct contacts with people outside our households and all public health measures to the greatest extent possible to minimise the risk of a resurgence of infection in Ireland, so as to avoid the necessity to reintroduce stricter measures,

- 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 is now 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 minimise and discourage non-essential travel from overseas to Ireland,
- expressed its concern regarding the 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 family and 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 the need to minimise direct contacts with people outside our households, all to protect each other from infection spread,
- noted the significant impact of COVID-19 on nursing homes, the gravity of the outcomes of COVID-19 on this older vulnerable population, the high intensity and pace of transmission within nursing homes, the asymptomatic transmission of COVID-19, the atypical presentation of COVID-19 in older people, the ongoing open clusters within nursing homes, that community disease suppression protects vulnerable nursing home residents and staff and the pending significant recommendations for protective actions for nursing home residents from the Nursing Home Expert Panel,
- reiterated the need for continued enhancement of the HSE's sampling, testing, contact tracing, surveillance and reporting processes, with a particular focus on reinforcing the public health management of complex cases and clusters, especially among vulnerable populations, higher risk populations, including healthcare workers,
- committed to a clear consistent sustained 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,
- to ensure the effectiveness of the HSE's sampling, testing, contact tracing and surveillance processes, emphasised the need for continued communication efforts and commitment across the health service and Government to continually conveying the importance to the public of engaging fully with testing and contact tracing as key societal public health measures in order to limit the spread of infection,

- underlined that it is impossible to predict what the future trajectory of the COVID-19 disease will be in Ireland or provide assurance that it is safe to reduce the public health measures,
- noted the emerging evidence regarding the longer-term health impacts and outcomes of this disease for some people who become infected,
- 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,
- emphasised a continued focus on ongoing public health responses, infection prevention and control, surveillance including the prevention and management of outbreaks in different settings including workplaces, residential and other settings, as well as ongoing implementation, monitoring, review and re-calibration of public health measures including regionalised, localised or sector-specific responses, bearing in mind the associated public health risks.

The NPHET of course remains available to provide any further advice and recommendations that may be of assistance to you and Government in relation to ongoing decision-making processes in respect of the COVID-19 pandemic.

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

Yours sincerely,



Dr Ronan Glynn

A/Chief Medical Officer

Chair of the COVID-19 National Public Health Emergency Team

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

Appendix – NPHET Advice to Government in relation to public health restrictive measures in advance of 20 July 2020

The NPHET, taking note of the current status of the COVID-19 disease in Ireland in the early weeks of July 2020, the pandemic situation globally and the current overall public health risk, advises that the Government give consideration to implementing with effect from the 20th July 2020 the following measures:

Section 1: General advice & Public Health Checklist

Public health messages

It is recommended that the following updated general public health messages continue to be communicated:

- wash your hands frequently with soap and water or use an alcohol-based hand rub even if your hands are not visibly dirty;
- practise good respiratory hygiene, that is, when coughing and sneezing, cover your mouth and nose with flexed elbow or tissue – discard tissue immediately into a closed bin and clean your hands with alcohol-based hand rub or soap and water;
- maintain physical distancing, that is, leave at least 2 metres (6 feet) distance between yourself and other people, particularly those who are coughing, sneezing and have a fever;
- reduce the number of people you come into direct contact with from outside your household. Where you do come into direct contact with people outside of your close contacts, you should try to limit the amount of time spent with them;
- avoid touching your eyes, nose and mouth – if you touch your eyes, nose or mouth with your contaminated hands, you can transfer the virus from the surface to yourself;
- remember that this disease spreads easily in crowded environments, therefore avoid crowded places as much as possible, leave if a location becomes overcrowded and physical distancing becomes difficult;
- everyone should be vigilant of the symptoms of the virus and should self-isolate and seek medical care as quickly as possible if they have even mild symptoms, including flu-like symptoms. When self-isolating, stay at home and do not go to work or school and the household contacts of a confirmed or suspected case, should follow public health advice and restrict their movements until advised otherwise;
- Everybody in society should exercise their own judgement and take personal responsibility for decisions that they make about the risk of infection to themselves and to others in different situations. The Public Health Checklist (*distance, activity, time and environment*) is intended to provide assistance to individuals and families, as well as organisations, business etc in making decisions about how to assess the risk of different activities and take actions to lower the risk of spreading infection.

Section 2: Community Health

The following are recommended:

Face Coverings

Face coverings are an important preventative measure, in addition to hand hygiene, respiratory etiquette and physical distancing to reduce the risk of transmission of SARS-CoV-2. The wearing of a

non-medical face covering has previously been specifically recommended in the following circumstances:

- when using busy public transport;
- when in indoor public areas including retail outlets;
- when visiting healthcare facilities;
- by people visiting the homes of those who are cocooning;
- by people who are being visited in their homes by those who are cocooning;
- all visitors to residential care facilities;
- in indoor work environments where it is difficult to maintain 2 metre distance.

On 10 July 2020, by virtue of the Health Act 1947 (Section 31A – Temporary Restrictions) (Covid-19) (Face Coverings on Public Transport) Regulations 2020 the wearing of face coverings became mandatory on public transport in specified circumstances.

- It is now recommended that the wearing of face coverings should be mandatory by members of the public in indoor retail environments, including shopping centres, malls etc. in line with the guidance issued by the Health Protection Surveillance Centre on the use of face coverings by the general public. Retail staff should also be required to wear face coverings unless there is a partition between the person or employee and members of the public, or a distance of at least 2 metres is maintained between the person or employee and members of the public.

Cocooning

- Cocooning for those aged 70 years and over and the medically vulnerable continues to be recommended for their safety. It is important that people who are cocooning feel empowered to exercise their own judgement and autonomy regarding the extent to which they consider the cocooning guidance is appropriate to their individual circumstances.
- For people aged 70 years and over and the medically vulnerable who wish to visit others, receive visitors in their home, attend shops, and engage in other activities, it continues to be recommended that they:
 - (and their visitors) maintain strict hand hygiene and respiratory etiquette,
 - continue to strictly adhere to the physical distancing guidance of 2m,
 - avoiding touching surfaces and cleaning surfaces touched by visitors,
 - use face coverings when attending shops or other busy public areas.
- Those cocooning who are planning to travel within and outside their region should acquaint themselves with the level of transmission of the virus in the relevant area, and consider how best to protect themselves.
- See HPSC's *Guidance on cocooning to protect people over 70 years and those extremely medically vulnerable from COVID-19* for useful practical guidance.

Family and non-family social visits

In light of the current status of the COVID-19 disease in Ireland since late June 2020, the significant risk of infection spread associated with social gatherings and recent evidence of outbreaks in Ireland associated with groups meeting indoors especially in private homes which are uncontrolled environments, and the current overall public health risk, public health guidance is as follows:

- social gatherings in private homes should be limited to visitors from no more than 4 other households and up to a maximum of 10 visitors to the home in total. However, the number of visitors to a home should be restricted so that adequate physical distancing and ventilation of the home can be maintained, bearing in mind the size of the home.

Overseas travel to and from Ireland

In light of the deteriorating pandemic situation globally, the significant risk of imported COVID-19 cases to Ireland from overseas and the current overall public health risk, the NPHET has significant and growing concerns regarding the potential for travel-related introduction of the disease to increase the risk of a potential second-wave of the disease in Ireland. Consequently–

- the NPHET reiterated its previous public health advice regarding travel;
- the NPHET continues to advise Irish residents against non-essential travel outside of Ireland at this time;
- the NPHET recommends that all measures be utilised to minimise and discourage non-essential travel from overseas to Ireland at this time.

Section 3: Mass Gatherings of People

In the context of the COVID-19 pandemic, it is widely recognised that mass gatherings of people can amplify the transmission of the virus and have the potential to significantly impact on the health service and wider COVID-19 response.

Mass gatherings are events organised in advance where there is a concentration of people at a specific location for a specific purpose over a set period of time and constitute a diverse range of gatherings such as sports, music/entertainment, family events (e.g. weddings), large conferences and exhibitions, as well as community, charity events and other types of events and gatherings.

It is important to emphasise that social gatherings of large groups of people which are not structured and organised have the potential to increase the risk of transmission of infection because they are not adequately planned by the organisers so that prevention and control measures can be implemented, and physical distancing can be maintained. People organising social gatherings should comply with public health guidance in relation to mass gatherings.

- In light of the current status of the COVID-19 disease in Ireland since late June 2020, the deteriorating pandemic situation globally and the current overall public health risk, it is recommended that the current restrictions of 50 persons at indoor mass gatherings and of 200 persons at outdoor mass gatherings be retained until 10 August 2020.

With regard to mass gatherings, the following should be borne in mind:

- Mass gatherings should be organised in advance to enable adequate planning by organisers so that prevention and control measures can be implemented, and physical distancing can be maintained so as to reduce the risk of transmission and avoid strain on health services;
- The mass gathering numbers listed above are total numbers of people at mass gathering events including organisers, participants and attendees;

- Mass gatherings operating in line with the limits above should comply with the Public Health Checklist and physical distancing, having regard to the size of the venue;
- Marquees, tents, circuses etc. should be considered indoor venues for the purposes of these mass gatherings restrictions.

Section 4: Restrictive public health measures:

Education, Childcare and Children's Measures:

Consistent evidence from the first wave of COVID-19 appears to indicate that children are not as susceptible to COVID-19 infection as adults and a recent review of available international evidence indicates that children do not appear to play a major role in disease transmission. Consequently, the following is recommended:

- Full services of crèches, childminders and pre-schools for children of all workers, with physical distancing and other requirements applying as per the HPSC Guidance.

Retail Activities - Fashion retail outlets changing rooms:

Following on from the reopening of all remaining retail outlets on 8 June 2020, the following is now recommended:

- Re-open changing rooms in fashion retail outlets, subject to appropriate storage and cleaning of clothing returned or handled extensively, in light of the lifespan of the virus on materials and fabrics.

Pubs, bars, hotel bars, casinos, nightclubs & discotheques etc.

In light of the current status of the COVID-19 disease in Ireland since late June 2020, the significant risk of infection spread associated with social gatherings, the evidence of outbreaks associated with pubs and bars in other countries and the current overall public health risk, the following is recommended:

- Pubs, bars, hotel bars, casinos are to remain closed until 10 August. Resumption after this time will be considered;
- Those existing pubs, bars and similar premises currently operating as restaurants should comply strictly with public health guidance and operate strictly as restaurants;
- Nightclubs and discotheques are to remain closed until 10 August. Resumption after this time will be considered.

Economic Activity (Work):

- All workers and businesses that can work remotely from home should continue to do so to the maximum extent possible.
- Organisations should continue to deploy their own plans for prioritising onsite working arrangements by those workers that are required to work onsite utilising all options to limit the number of workers interacting with each other at any one time e.g. shift work, staggered hours, designated teams working always together, defined break times, etc.

- Employers should work proactively, including with authorities and health authorities where necessary, to limit the spread of disease within or connected with the workplace and to mitigate the effects of workplace outbreaks should such occur.
- Businesses and organisations should apply the Return to Work Safely Protocol - COVID-19 Specific National Protocol for Employers and Workers published by the Department of Business, Enterprise and Innovation, including having a COVID-19 Response Plan in place.
- Workers should not come to work, should self-isolate and should seek medical care if they have even mild symptoms, including flu-like symptoms, and workers who are contacts of a confirmed or suspected case, should follow public health advice and not come to work until advised otherwise.

Transport Measures:

Those providing transport services, whether commercially or in a private capacity, or where vehicle sharing is a normal feature of work or activity, should–

- to facilitate contact tracing, put arrangements in place to record or be in a position to gain access to the contact details of passengers that spend two hours or more on a conveyance,
- to reduce the risk for those using public transport, provide hand sanitizer for use by passengers in light of the importance of communal handrails for those using such transport,
- maintain arrangements to ensure that passengers on public and other communal transportation wear face coverings where appropriate, for the protection of other travellers,
- continue to encourage the public to stagger travelling times on public transport in order to maintain physical distancing on public transport.