



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

7th August 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).

It is just over five months since Ireland confirmed its first case of Covid-19. In March, as a country, we took unprecedented public health measures to control the spread of infection. The application of these measures through March, April and into May, led to a significant reduction in the spread of COVID-19, allowing for the safe easing of these restrictions on a phased basis across the country. This was only possible through the resilience, solidarity and resolve of the Irish people.

However, there has been a change in the progression of the disease since late June which led to the NPHE advising Government on the 14th July and again on the 4th August that the final phase of easing of restrictions should be paused. The NPHE has been monitoring the emerging epidemiological position very closely and with growing concern. There has been a sharp rise in cases over the last week, more than doubling over the period, and several significant and large clusters have developed in one region of the country, covering the counties of Kildare, Laois and Offaly.

The NPHE met again today specifically to consider the profile of the disease across the country and in particular in this region and to consider appropriate measures. As part of these considerations, the NPHE noted that:

Incidence and Newly Confirmed Cases

- The number of confirmed cases stands at 26,303.
- The five-day rolling average of cases was 52 cases.
- 1,768 deaths due to COVID-19 notified to date;
- The epidemiological incidence in **Ireland** for the past 14 days is **9.6 per 100,000 population** (11.5 per 100,000 population by notification date). **549** new cases have been notified to the HSE health Protection Surveillance Centre (HPSC) in the last 14 days.

- In **Kildare**, the epidemiological incidence in Ireland for the past 14 days is **61.6 per 100,000 population** (67.4 per 100,000 population by notification date). **150** new cases have been notified in the last 14 days.
- In **Laois**, the epidemiological incidence in Ireland for the past 14 days is **62.6 per 100,000 population** (64.9 per 100,000 population by notification date). **55** new cases have been notified in the last 14 days.
- In **Offaly**, the epidemiological incidence in Ireland for the past 14 days is **46.2 per 100,000 population** (46.2 per 100,000 population by notification date. This is expected as all cases notified in Offaly in the last 14 days are noted as having arisen in that time). **36** new cases have been notified in the last 14 days.
- The median age of cases notified in the last 14 days is 31 years. Over 75% of all cases were in those aged under 45 years. In Kildare, 75% of cases were in people aged under 45 years. In Laois, 93% of cases were in people aged under 45 years. And in Offaly, 65% of cases were in people aged under 45 years.

Mode of Transmission

- In Ireland in the last 14 days, 81% of the newly confirmed cases have had their mode of transmission confirmed and 52% of newly confirmed cases have been reported as having been associated with an outbreak.
- In Kildare, Laois and Offaly, multiple outbreaks associated with workplaces and residential institutions have been reported and cases associated with these continue to emerge.
- In Kildare, 94% of all cases notified in the last 14 days are confirmed as having been transmitted as a result of close contact with a confirmed case.
- In Laois, 91% of cases are confirmed as having been transmitted as a result of close contact with a confirmed case.
- In Offaly, 71% of cases are confirmed as having been transmitted as a result of close contact with a confirmed case.
- There are currently few cases in Kildare, Offaly and Laois attributed to community transmission.

Hospitalisations

- There were 11 confirmed cases in hospital yesterday.
- The number of confirmed COVID-19 patients requiring critical care yesterday was 5, with no new admissions in the previous 24 hours.

In light of above, the NPHET today expressed significant concerns in relation to the epidemiological situation in Kildare, Laois and Offaly with regard to a number of the indicators that it monitors on a collective basis, including: the existence of multiple clusters, with secondary spread, and the 14-day cumulative incidence and related indicators which are showing a significant and increasing level of disease. While indicators in relation to incidence of cases in residential healthcare settings, admissions to hospital and critical care, and number of deaths are not currently showing any worrying trends, it was noted that due to the age profile of the cases, there may be a delay before changes to these indicators would become apparent. Finally, as advised on Tuesday, community transmission is stable and low at present with the majority of cases accounted for within known outbreaks and close contacts of a confirmed case. However, given the scale of the current outbreaks, there is now a significant volume of infection in the region of Kildare, Laois, and Offaly and a real risk that this could spread much more widely in the community in the coming days and weeks.

Consequently, in light of the current epidemiological status of COVID-19 in those counties, and cognisant of ECDC advice, the **NPHET advises that the Government give consideration to the application of a number of enhanced public health measures as set out in the Appendix to this letter to apply to the counties of Kildare, Laois and Offaly.** The NPHET further recommends that these measures are applied for two weeks, at which point the situation will be reviewed.

The NPHET believes that this suite of measures represents a proactive and proportionate response to the current situation. In advising these measures, the NPHET is fully cognisant of the impact that these measures will have on people, not only in these counties, but across the country. However, the NPHET's strong advice is that these measures are necessary now to disrupt the current pattern of disease transmission and contain ongoing outbreaks, to protect the health and wellbeing of those living in these and surrounding areas, and to protect public health, the economy and society more broadly. The NPHET also reiterated the critical importance of maintaining 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 health and social care services for all.

While acknowledging the disruption and disappointment these measures will bring, the NPHET noted the strong position we are now in compared to when restrictions were first introduced in March. We have significant learnings and experience, both nationally and internationally, in how to control this disease, both at an individual level and at a broader societal level. National solidarity has been at the core of the response to date, and it is vital that this is maintained across the country. Furthermore, the NPHET emphasised that the measures being put in place today, could apply to any other region in the future. The NPHET therefore reiterated its strong message to individuals **across the country** to continue to adopt the behaviours that will protect them and others and will interrupt the transmission of the virus. This includes:

- Frequent handwashing; cough and sneeze etiquette, avoid touching eyes, nose and mouth, regularly cleaning and disinfecting surfaces
- Keep a safe distance of 2 metres from other people, especially those not among your close contacts
- Minimise your number of close contacts as much as possible and keep a record of your daily contacts in order to facilitate rapid contact tracing if you are diagnosed with COVID-19
- Wear a face covering when using public transport, in retail settings or any other indoor setting where physical distancing cannot be maintained
- Know and self-monitor for the symptoms of COVID-19, if you have symptoms, self-isolate and contact your GP without delay
- Download the COVID Tracker App
- Stay informed through trusted information sources and follow official public health advice

The NPHET also acknowledged the important role that our testing, contact tracing and case management system is playing, enabling a rapid and robust public health response to cases and outbreaks. The HSE has confirmed that it will ensure that there continues to be sufficient and

enhanced, where necessary, testing and contact tracing capacity for the region and across the country over the coming weekend and over the coming weeks to support the proactive and effective management of the current situation.

The NPHET also emphasised the importance of proactive testing in high risk population groups and high risk workplace settings and noted that the serial programme of testing in nursing homes will recommence next week and that the HSE's newly established National Oversight Group for the food processing industry is considering the most appropriate and proactive approach to surveillance and testing within that industry.


The NPHET also noted the need for immediate activation by all State agencies and other bodies (including transport companies) of all necessary processes, plans, supports and measures to ensure the necessary services are available to the population of these counties, including health and social care services. It was noted that the HSE's National Crisis Management Team was meeting today and it was asked to consider and implement the actions that need to be taken across the health delivery system over the period, and in particular in relation to public health.

Finally, the NPHET again reiterated its concerns in relation to the vulnerability of high-risk populations and high-risk workplaces and reiterated the urgency with which its recommendations of the 4th and 6th August should be implemented.

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 1: NPHET Advice to Government in relation to the reintroduction of public health restrictive measures for certain counties

The NPHET, taking note of the current epidemiological situation, and cognisant of ECDC advice, advises that the Government give consideration to the application of a number of enhanced public health restrictive measures as set out below to apply to the counties of Kildare, Laois and Offaly. The NPHET further advises that these measures are applied for two weeks, at which point the situation will be reviewed.

Travel and transport

- Travel to be restricted to within county, other than for the following reasons¹:
 - to travel to and from work, or for purposes of work and where that work cannot be done from home;
 - to attend medical appointments and collect medicines and other health products;
 - for vital family reasons, such as providing care to children, elderly or vulnerable people, but excluding social family visits;
 - for farming purposes i.e. food production and/or care of animal.
- No travel into the specified counties, other than for exemptions (as above), and unless travel through these counties is for the purpose of reaching a destination outside of these specified counties (in this regard, people should not stop in the specified counties, unless for essential purposes);
- People should not use public transport unless it is absolutely necessary to do so, and where possible should not share private vehicles with others from outside their household;
- Where possible, all businesses to ensure that employees are working from home and are not required to enter or leave the specified regions.

Indoor and outdoor gatherings

- All indoor gatherings including all types of household, private, family or social indoor gatherings of people to be restricted to a maximum of 6 people from no more than 3 households in total, while maintaining physical distancing;
- Outdoor gatherings to be limited to a maximum of 15 people, while maintaining physical distancing.

Sporting and social activities

- No sporting events or matches to take place, with the following exemptions:

¹ People will also be able to undertake one initial journey either into or out of the counties specified for the purposes of returning home from vacation

- non-contact training outdoors in a maximum group of 15 people may continue
- professional and elite sports and horse-racing may continue behind closed doors
- inter-county training (max 15 people) and fixtures may continue behind closed doors;
- All cafes and restaurants (including bars operating as restaurants) will be required to limit supply to take-away food or delivery and/or outdoor dining (max. 15 people with strict physical distancing);
- All cinemas, theatres, casinos, betting shops, bingo halls, gyms, leisure centres, swimming pools, exercise and dance studios will be required to close;
- Hotels can remain open but must limit occupancy to essential non-social and non-tourist reasons. Existing guests can remain for the duration of their booking.

Funerals and places of worship

- Attendance at a funeral service and burial /cremation ceremony to be limited to 25 (indoor events connected to the funeral will be limited to a maximum of 6 people);
- Places of worship to remain open for private prayer, while services will move online.

Over 70s and medically vulnerable

- The over 70s and medically vulnerable will be advised to exercise individual judgement, and to stay at home as much as possible, and limit interactions to a very small network for short periods of time, while remaining physically distanced. They will also be advised to:
 - If taking exercise outdoors, maintain 2 metre distance from others and wash hands on returning home;
 - avoid public transport;
 - In relation to shopping, they should shop during designated hours and wear a face covering. Family, friends and neighbours may be able to provide assistance with shopping once they adhere to physical distancing guidelines, alternatively, online services may be considered;
 - Shops should ensure that there are designated hours for over 70s and medically vulnerable;
 - For those for whom these options are not available, Government should put in place assistance through Local Authorities, working with the voluntary sector services, to ensure that people have access to food, essential household supplies and medicines.

Residential and healthcare facilities

- Visiting in long-term residential care facilities, acute settings and prisons will generally be suspended in the first instance with the exception of the most critical and compassionate circumstances (for example end of life). The impact of COVID-19 on society in general and

especially those living in nursing homes has been considerable. We recognise that the proposed social distancing measures and restrictions on visiting, while introduced for the overarching public health good and for the protection of people, including those most at-risk, have an unprecedented impact on people's daily lives, and recommending them is on foot of considered reflection of the potential risk at this time;

- As previously planned, the serial testing programme in nursing homes will recommence next week on a fortnightly basis, with a focus on ensuring that facilities in the specified counties are tested early in the programme.

Services to remain open

- It is advised that the following services should remain open with appropriate protective measures in place:
 - Education and childcare
 - Outdoor playgrounds, play areas, parks
 - All retail and personal services.

Individual behaviour

- Individuals across the country should continue to adopt the behaviours that will protect themselves and others and will interrupt the transmission of the virus:
 - Frequent handwashing; cough and sneeze etiquette, avoid touching eyes, nose and mouth, regularly cleaning and disinfecting surfaces
 - Keep a safe distance of 2 metres from other people, especially those not among your close contacts
 - Minimise your number of close contacts as much as possible and keep a record of your daily contacts in order to facilitate rapid contact tracing if you are diagnosed with COVID-19
 - Wear a face covering when using public transport, in retail settings or any other indoor setting where physical distancing cannot be maintained
 - Know and self-monitor for the symptoms of COVID-19, if you have symptoms, self-isolate and contact your GP without delay
 - Download the COVID Tracker App
 - Stay informed through trusted information sources and follow official public health advice.

Other Supports

- The immediate activation by all State agencies and other bodies (including transport services) of all necessary processes, plans, supports and measures to ensure the necessary services are available to the population of these counties;

- The HSE to consider and implement as a matter of urgency actions that need to be taken across the health delivery system over the period, and in particular in relation to public health;
- Regarding specific measures targeted at economic activity and vulnerable groups, NPHET reiterates its recommendations of the 4th & 6th of August 2020 as follows:

Specific Measures targeted at Vulnerable Groups

- The immediate establishment of a cross-Government mechanism to coordinate sustained support for those that are vulnerable and others disproportionately impacted by the pandemic.
- Using experience to date, the development and/or enhancement of multi-agency, multi-disciplinary plans to protect the most vulnerable from the disease across health and other settings.
- Fully reinstitute the set of cross-Government protective measures previously employed for those in vulnerable groups.
- Subject to completion of preparatory planning at a national level, the HSE to implement a programme of fortnightly serial testing, on a voluntary basis, in conjunction with representative groups and SafetyNet where appropriate, for persons living in Direct Provision centers, and homeless and Roma living in congregated settings.
- Measures should be put in place to ensure that economic considerations and insecurity of employment are not a deterrent for people coming forward for testing in these groups.
- In recognition of the high risk of congregated settings and recent pattern of cases in particular in Direct Provision, the NPHET recommends that relevant State bodies take appropriate immediate actions to further mitigate risks associated with congregation. This should be specifically expedited for healthcare workers, those over the age of 65 years and those that are medically vulnerable.

Specific Measures targeted at Economic Activity

- The advice remains that all workers and businesses that can work remotely from home should continue to do so to the maximum extent possible.
- Employers should strictly adhere to the Return to Work Safely Protocol — COVID-19 Specific National Protocol for Employers and Workers published by the Department of Business, Enterprise and Innovation on 8 May 2020, including having a COVID-19 Response Plan in place.
- Public health teams should adopt a rapid, robust and comprehensive public health response to cases in high risk settings such as food processing and construction sectors in particular, and should apply a very low threshold for mass testing of employees in such settings once an initial case is identified (subject to public health risk assessment).
- Regulatory bodies across all sectors should utilise their legal standards, assurance and enforcement powers to support comprehensive national and local responses where cases/clusters occur.
- In line with the recommendations of the National Outbreak Control Team (NOCT), the establishment by the HSE of a National Standing Oversight Committee on COVID-19 for food processing plants to maintain an ongoing review of the impact of COVID-19 on this industry,

to be available to update guidelines and to oversee the establishment of a follow-up NOCT in the event of any resurgence of outbreaks.

- Employers should keep under review the sharing of transport to and from work by staff and should communicate clear guidance to all employees in relation to physical distancing being maintained on transport while travelling to work.
- The NPHET agreed the interim recommendations of the “Investigation into a Series of Outbreaks of COVID-19 in Meat Processing Plants in Ireland” and further recommended that the HSE’s newly established National Standing Oversight Committee for such facilities considers, as an immediate action, the development of the most appropriate and proactive approach to surveillance and testing within the food processing industry.