



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

17th 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).

As you are aware, the NPHE has been monitoring the progression of COVID-19 in Ireland in recent weeks closely and with growing concern. As advised on the 7th August, there had been a sharp rise in cases that week, more than doubling over the period, and several significant and large clusters had developed in one region of the country, covering the counties of Kildare, Laois and Offaly. This led to the recommendation and subsequently implementation of a range of public health measures for these counties.

Over the last ten days, the number of cases in that region has remained high and the number of cases in other parts of the country has also increased. The NPHE met again today specifically to review and discuss the current profile of the disease and the evolving situation across the country and to consider appropriate measures. As part of these considerations, the NPHE noted:

- the increasing case numbers of this disease currently being reported each day, and the increasing incidence observed nationally;
- the primary mode of transmission of the virus is close contact with a confirmed case (including those cases associated with outbreaks);
- the changing profile of contacts identified. More household, workplace, and social contacts have been identified including those associated with sporting activities;
- multiple significant outbreaks associated with workplaces, households, social and sporting activities;
- as of the 12th August, the latest estimate of R is 1.6, this number is updated weekly;
- Ireland's rate of growth in new cases over the past 14 days is the 4th highest among European member states.

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

Cases and Deaths

- The number of confirmed cases stands at 27,257;
- The five-day rolling average of cases was 96 cases;
- The 14-day epidemiological incidence per 100,000 population was 23.3;
- 8,495 cases (31% of all cases) were associated with healthcare workers;
- 1,774 deaths due to COVID-19 notified to date;
- The positivity rate for all tests processed nationally in the past week was 1.2%;
- Over the past eight weeks, the total number of cases weekly has increased from a low of 61 cases per week to 533 cases in the week ending 15th August.

Demographic and Location Trends

- 71% of cases notified in the past 14 days have occurred in people under age 45 years, with some evidence of an increase in disease incidence in those over 65 years;
- The median age for cases notified in the past 14 days is 31 years;
- Kildare continues to have the highest 14-day incidence based (190.1) with Laois (55.5) and Offaly (133.4) next;
- 11 counties have incidence rates higher than 15 cases per 100,000 population.

Hospitalisations

- There were 21 confirmed cases in hospital yesterday with 4 admissions in the previous 24 hours;
- The number of confirmed COVID-19 patients requiring critical care yesterday was 8, with no new admissions in the previous 24 hours.

Clusters and Modes of Transmission

- The number of clusters are increasing and spreading in geography beyond Kildare, Laois and Offaly;
- More clusters related to social and family engagements, sporting activities and workplaces are being identified;
- 161 new outbreaks in total were notified in the previous week (9th-15th August). The total number of outbreaks notified to date was 2,497 with 290 of these remaining open;
- The majority of open outbreaks are located in private households (172 of the 290 open);
- As of the previous week (3rd-9th August), the average number of close contacts per case was 5 and the median was 3;
- The total number of households, social, sporting and workplace contacts identified via contact tracing have been increasing over the past two weeks.

Mode of Transmission

- "Close contact with a confirmed case" is now the most frequently cited mode of transmission for cases that have occurred in the past 14 days (62% of cases);

- The proportion of cases that are noted as being attributable to community transmission may be increasing; this is being monitored closely;
- 16% were still under investigation.

Consequently, in light of the current epidemiological status of COVID-19 as set out above, and cognisant of ECDC advice, the **NPHET considered today that a cautious approach must be pursued and 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 across the country¹ until midnight on Sunday, 13th September** at which point the situation will be reviewed.

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

- The epidemiological situation nationally with regard to a number of the indicators that it monitors on a collective basis, including: (1) the existence of many clusters in a number of regions and setting types, with secondary spread particularly to household and social contacts, (2) the 14-day cumulative incidence and related indicators which are showing a significant and increasing level of disease, (3) the (albeit small) increase in admissions to hospital and critical care, and (4) the level of community transmission may be increasing. It should also be noted that indicators in relation to incidence of cases in residential healthcare settings and number of deaths are not currently showing any worrying trends; however, due to the age profile of current cases, there may be a delay before changes to these indicators would become apparent.
- The experience 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;
- That there are other important considerations for Government with regard to the reintroduction of measures, such as social and economic considerations, while noting the potential effects of the current proposed measures on the wider health and wellbeing of the population.

¹ Measures agreed by Government for Kildare, Laois and Offaly to remain in place until the 23rd August or pending a further Government decision

In providing this public health advice to Government the NPHE –

- Noted that it considers **the suite of measures being proposed as targeted, reasonable and proportionate at this stage**, offering the potential to be effective in addressing those areas that are of most concern currently. The focus of these measures is threefold:
 - limit congregation and inter-household interactions;
 - enhance the application, inspection and enforcement of current measures; and
 - roll-out further targeted protection measures;
- Having due regard to ECDC and WHO advice and experiences internationally, **cautioned that while the proposed measures have the potential to arrest the current trajectory of the disease, there is also the potential that the situation could deteriorate further** with significant negative implications for our key priorities of protecting the most vulnerable, resuming non-COVID health and social care services and reopening the education sector, and that it is not possible to provide assurance that stricter measures will not be required;
- Emphasised the importance of now redoubling efforts across Government and society to continue to adopt and enhance compliance with hand hygiene, respiratory etiquette, physical distancing, the wearing of face coverings and all public health measures to the greatest extent possible to protect each other, to minimise the risk of a resurgence of infection in Ireland, and to avoid the necessity to reintroduce stricter measures. While it is recognised that this does represent a change to how we are used to behaving, the measures at their core are reasonably straightforward. We will be able to do many of the things that we want to, we just need to do them differently and in a safer way to ensure that the economy and society can remain as open as possible;
- Expressed its concern regarding the continuing trend of 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 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 limiting the number of people that we meet with, all to protect each other from infection spread;
- Committed to a clear, consistent and 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, and reiterated its advice of the 4th August 2020 that there is an intensification and refreshing of cross-Government communications in relation to COVID-19 with specific emphasis on communicating and engaging with those under the age of 45;
- While recognising that individuals must take responsibility for their own behaviour, emphasised that there is also **a firm responsibility on employers and organisations to ensure that workplaces, venues, events and other activities adhere to public health advice and guidelines, and on relevant authorities and regulatory bodies to ensure that the measures advised and agreed are then subsequently applied, monitored and enforced**;
- Expressed, in particular, increasing concern that some premises purporting to operate as restaurants are not always doing so which is having a significant detrimental effect on the solidarity and sense of fairness that has underpinned the national effort to date, and with this in mind reiterates the need for more urgent and stronger measures addressing these

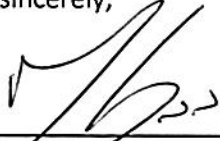
circumstances, including **the closure of premises that are clearly disregarding the clear guidance as it should apply to their sector;**

- Expressed further concern in relation to a number of clusters that have emerged linked to sporting activities, and **called on all relevant organisations to ensure that current guidelines are strictly adhered to**, and in particular in relation to physical distancing before and after events, during breaks in play and avoidance of team huddles. While it is proposed that sporting events can continue to take place, the NPHET will continue to monitor related clusters closely;
- Expressed again 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;**
- 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 continues to be a significant 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 discourage travel from overseas to Ireland;
- 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;
- Reiterated its recommendations to the HSE of the 30th July (see Appendix 2) in relation to the criticality of robust processes of sampling, testing, contact tracing, surveillance and reporting, and noted that notwithstanding the significant efforts already made, the urgent need for a continued process of enhancements and the introduction of any necessary measures and resources to support Departments of Public Health and testing and contact tracing operations to respond comprehensively to cases and clusters over the coming weeks and to enable the comprehensive completion of all relevant surveillance data and the timely notification of cases so as to ensure continued accurate understanding of the current epidemiological position. In tandem, there should be continued proactive engagement between the Department of Health and the HSE in relation to the implementation of a sustainable plan for the future of public health.

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,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to be 'R. Glynn', written over a horizontal line.

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 public health restrictive measures on 17 August 2020

The NPHET, taking note of the epidemiological situation emerging since the last week in July 2020 and in particular in recent days, the deteriorating pandemic situation globally, most recent ECDC advice, and the key priorities of protecting the most vulnerable, resuming non-COVID health and social care services and reopening the education sector, advises that the Government give consideration to implementing the following measures across the country² until midnight on Sunday, 13th September at which point the situation will be further reviewed.

Indoor and Outdoor gatherings

- All visits to homes will be limited to 6 people from no more than 3 households (including indoors and outdoors).
- Other gatherings/events indoors will be limited to 6 people from no more than 3 households.³
- Other gatherings/events outdoors will be limited to 15 people (see footnote 3).
- Gardaí should be given any powers necessary to interrupt and prevent house parties.
- Gardaí should be given any powers necessary to interrupt other social gatherings that do not adhere to the above guidance.

Cultural and Social Activities

Restaurants and Cafes (including pubs that serve food and hotel restaurants)

- Remain open but **with legally binding conditions introduced in Regulations⁴**, including:
 - Early closing time as already advised by NPHET on the 4th August
 - Wearing of face coverings by staff mandatory for customer facing roles, as advised by NPHET on the 4th August. In addition, customers should be required to wear a face coverings on arrival (until shown to the table) and again on departure.
 - Requirement to keep contact details to support contact tracing
 - All customers to be seated at a table, with no seating allowed at the bar and table service only
 - Maximum of 6 seated at table from no more than 3 households
 - No formal or informal events of parties greater than 6 indoors and 15 outdoors should be organised in these settings (see footnote 3)
- Guidelines should emphasise the importance of appropriate ventilation, the provision of hand sanitiser on each table and the importance of restricting unnecessary movement around the premises by customers.
- These measures are aimed at preventing transmission between parties, or to or between staff. There is an obligation on proprietors, managers, staff and patrons to take all reasonable precautions to prevent contact and cross-contamination between different groups.
- Greater inspection and enforcement arrangements to be put in place as soon as possible to ensure that premises are operating safely and within Regulations and guidelines.

² Measures agreed by Government for Kildare, Laois and Offaly to remain in place until the 23rd August or pending a further Government decision

³ For weddings it is proposed that measures only commence on Monday 24th August.

⁴ The first four measures to apply on an ongoing basis.

Sports

- Sporting events and matches can continue to take place but behind closed doors⁵ with;
 - Strict avoidance of gatherings, including social gatherings, before or after events.
 - Strict adherence to 2 metre physical distancing before and after events, during breaks in play, on the sidelines and avoidance of team huddles.
- Gyms/leisure centres/swimming pools/exercise and dance studios will remain open with strict distancing and other appropriate protective measures in place.
- Limits of 6 apply to exercise and dance classes with appropriate physical distancing. Limits of 15 apply to groups outside including training sessions. There should be no mixing between groups⁶.

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, sports amenities
 - All retail and personal services to remain open, with strict distancing and other appropriate protective measures in place,
 - Museums, theatres galleries etc to remain open with strict distancing and other appropriate protective measures in place and with no ancillary events involving gatherings of more than 6 people indoors or 15 people outdoors
 - Hotels

Workplaces

- Unless it is absolutely essential for an employee to attend in person, they should not do so and they should be facilitated to work from home.
- Greater inspection and enforcement arrangements to be put in place immediately to ensure that premises are operating safely and within Regulations and guidelines.
- NPHET recommendations of the 4th of August and 6th August in relation high risk workplace should be implemented with urgency. See Appendix 2.

Travel/Transport

- No limits on movement outside of restrictions currently in place
- People should avoid using public transport where possible
- People should not share private vehicles with others from outside their household. Where this is not possible, the wearing of face coverings is advised and should be made mandatory.
- For secondary school students on school transport, strict distancing should be ensured in line with that on public transport along with the wearing of face coverings. Primary school students should distance where possible.
- Transport companies should ensure hand sanitiser is provided at transport hubs.

⁵ Given the importance of sporting activities to communities, videographers/those providing streaming services may attend

⁶ These measures do not apply to elite and professional sports and horse racing

Funerals and places of worship

- Places of worship to remain open for religious services with maximum attendance as per current guidance and with strict distancing and other appropriate protective measures in place.

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

- All current protective measures in relation to long-term residential care facilities, acute settings and prisons to remain in place. This will keep this under close review and with particular reference to forthcoming recommendations from the Covid-19 Nursing Home Expert Panel.
- Ensure effective multiagency communications and interventions are in place with residential care facilities and implement agreed escalation pathways, where appropriate.

Overseas travel

- Given the deteriorating epidemiological situation in Ireland and internationally and the rapidly evolving nature of that situation, NPHET continues to recommend against non-essential travel and recommends against any further relaxation of the current travel measures.
- NPHET reiterates its prior recommendations with regard to mandatory quarantine and/or the imposition of a ban on non-essential travel from countries with a high disease incidence.

Appendix 2: Measures Previously Recommended by NPHET on 30th July, 4th and 6th August

Measures in relation to COVID-19 Testing and Contact Tracing

- Considering the current epidemiological status of the disease and, while recognising the HSE's significant work in developing a Public Health Pandemic Workforce Plan and in particular its work to augment the Department of Public Health in the East, the NPHET recommended the HSE take all necessary measures to support Departments of Public Health in continuing to respond comprehensively to cases and clusters over the coming weeks.
- While considering the future, longer term responses to COVID-19, the NPHET recommended that the Department of Health and the HSE engage proactively in relation to the implementation of the HSE Public Health Pandemic Workforce Plan and relevant priority recommendations in the Report on the Role, Training and Career Structures of Public Health Physicians in Ireland with a view to the implementation of a sustainable plan for the future of public health.
- In light of the apparent weekend effect in the pattern of reporting of cases which appears to have emerged over recent weeks, the NPHET recommended that all aspects of the testing, tracing and reporting pathway are sufficiently resourced over the coming bank-holiday weekend and future weekends to enable as close to real-time reporting and follow-up of cases as possible, so as to ensure continued accurate understanding of the current epidemiological position.

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.