



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

24th September 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).

The epidemiological situation nationally remains concerning, with a further deterioration from last week and with the future trajectory difficult to predict (detailed epidemiological data in Appendix 1). In particular, the NPHE noted:

- The numbers of cases per day, the 7-day and 14-day incidence rates, and the numbers in hospital and ICU are all continuing to increase;
- The number of deaths is continuing to increase;
- The reproduction number is now estimated to be between 1.5 and 1.7. The growth rate in cases is between 5-6% per day, and the doubling time is 12-14 days;
- Close contact of a confirmed case remains the primary mode of transmission nationally. The proportion of cases linked to community transmission or possible community transmission remains relatively stable.
- The significant number of active clusters/outbreaks, the majority of which continue to be in private households;
- There continues to be an increase in the number of cases and incidence rate in older people.
- An increase in the influenza like illness (ILI) rate reported in the week to 19th September to 44.8 as compared to 35.8 as reported last week, with wide regional variation.

The situation in a number of other counties was considered. In particular the following was noted:

- The situation in Dublin remains concerning. Level 3 measures have only been in place since last Friday (18th September) and it will take more time to see the full impact of these measures.
- Cases in Kildare and Wicklow have started to increase in recent days, with particularly high incidence in areas adjacent to Dublin.
- The 14 day incidence for Louth is high at 108 cases per 100,000. However, the 7 day rate is 41 per 100,000 which would indicate that the situation is stabilizing or potentially improving. The NPHE stressed that if this improving trend does not continue, there may be a need for further measures and this will be monitored very closely in the coming days.



- The situation in Waterford is similar, with the 7 day incidence figures indicating an improving situation.
- While coming from a low base, there has been an increased number of cases in Cork and Galway in the last week, particularly in city areas. It will be vital that trends in more recent days are reversed to ensure that these counties avoid getting to a point where they require additional measures.

Overall, the NPHET concluded that further measures are not required nationally or in any of the counties noted above at this time over and above the current measures that are in place, but the situation across all counties will be kept under close review. However, the NPHET continues to stress that concerted efforts are required across every county to prevent a further deterioration in the profile of the disease and to bring the situation back under control nationally and specifically in the counties noted above.

In light of the most recent epidemiological data, the NPHET gave particular and significant consideration to the situation in Donegal. It noted:

- The 7 day and 14 day incidence rates continue to increase quickly and are now the highest in the country.
- The number of cases in the most recent 14 day period has increased by over 600% compared to the previous 14 day period.
- In the week to the 24th September, there have been 162 cases. This is double the number of cases in the previous week where there was 74 cases. In 10 of the last 14 days, there have been more than 10 cases reported each day in Donegal.
- While the cases are particularly concentrated in one Local Electoral Area (LEA) (Lifford/Stranorlar) which has a 14 day incidence of 336 per 100,000 (the highest in the country), there have been cases across all 7 LEAs in the last fortnight. 2 other LEAs have an incidence above 80. It should be noted that LEA data is only available up to Monday night (21st September 2020) and there has been a further 72 cases since then.
- 55% of cases in the last week have occurred in people in the 15-44 age cohort.
- The current situation in Derry, where the 7 day incidence for Derry City and Strabane is 141 per 100,000.
- Mobility data would appear to suggest that there is significant movement of people for work, education, recreation and social purposes within the county.

The NPHET concluded that the situation in Donegal has further deteriorated, in particular in the last number of days and it is of the view that further measures must now be taken. Therefore, the NPHET



advises that the Government now give consideration to, as a matter of urgency, the application of Level 3 measures¹ (as currently applying in Dublin²) in Donegal for a period of three weeks.

The NPHET is very cognisant of the impact of escalating measures to Level 3, and it is doing so only after detailed consideration and weighing of the different factors. In making these recommendations, the NPHET had regard to the following:

- the continuing key priorities of protecting the most vulnerable, resuming non-COVID health and social care services and maintaining educational activities must remain to the fore, and absolute priority must be given to ensuring these priorities are protected.
- While over half the cases are in the 16 - 44 age cohort, there is a growing risk that this will result in greater levels of transmission in more vulnerable populations in the community and spread into residential care settings, both of which are likely to lead to increased hospitalisations and mortality.
- higher education and further education institutions are currently recommencing programmes, resulting in significant additional movement of people into, out of, and across the county.
- the impact that these measures will have on the health and wellbeing of individuals, and society more broadly and the economy (with consequent knock-on implications for the resourcing of vital public health services);
- The need for a targeted and proportionate response, with measures focused on the areas that are of most concern and can have most impact.

In advising these measures, the NPHET is fully cognisant of the impact that these measures will have on people in Donegal and surrounding areas. However, the NPHET's strong advice is that these measures are necessary now to disrupt the current pattern of disease transmission, to protect the health and wellbeing of those living in the area, and to protect public health, the economy and society more broadly. The NPHET also appreciates that this most recent advice will be disappointing, concerning and challenging for the people of Donegal in particular. The national response to date has relied fully on the resilience, solidarity and resolve of the Irish people, and this will continue to be the bedrock of our response over the coming weeks.

More generally, **the NPHET again advised that public health restrictive measures can only have a substantial effect on the course of the disease if there is wholehearted widespread collective buy-in for and adherence to the measures.** The NPHET reiterated its appeal to everyone – as individuals, employers, organisations - to do everything that they can to follow public health advice and help prevent further transmission of the virus. This includes advice with respect to limiting social contacts and continuing to follow the basic measures of good hand hygiene, respiratory etiquette and physical distancing.

¹ Framework for Restrictive Measures in Response to COVID-19, Plan for Living with COVID-19

² As wet bars are currently open in Donegal, it is proposed that they should remain open for outdoor services only with a maximum of 15 patrons with strict physical distancing.



The NPHET emphasised the particular importance of people not attending work if symptomatic. It further emphasised the importance of all those identified as a close contact to restrict their movements for 14 days and to attend for testing. This is essential in breaking chains of transmission.

The NPHET also gave consideration to a number of other matters today. The NPHET endorsed guidance on visiting to long-term residential care facilities, which has been informed by significant stakeholder engagement. This guidance aims to provide clarity to residents, their families and those operating such facilities, on the management of visitation at each of the 5-levels within the *"Plan for Living with COVID-19"* framework, with due consideration given to visitation on compassionate grounds. NPHET recognises the significant importance of visiting loved ones to residents and their families. This guidance provides clarity and outlines proportionate protective measures to be taken in line with the level of the virus in a given location or at a point in time.

In the context of increasing numbers of admissions to intensive care units and the potential for additional pressure on the system during the winter months, the NPHET reaffirms its support for a strategic, planned multi-year increase in critical care capacity to support ongoing COVID-19 preparedness and to ensure that Ireland's critical care capacity is sufficient to meet the needs of the population into the future.

To ensure the contact tracing system is as robust as possible the NPHET also endorsed a proposal on enhanced retrospective contact tracing of confirmed COVID-19 cases. The aim of enhanced retrospective contact tracing is to identify potential sources of COVID-19 infection and additional individuals at risk of acquiring infection by gathering supplementary information from recent COVID-19 cases whose transmission source has been documented as 'community transmission'. Such an approach will allow the environments and activities associated with the greatest levels of transmission be more accurately and quickly identified.

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, ICM: 343404

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: Epidemiological Data

Ireland's current epidemiological situation is as follows:

Cases and Deaths

- The number of confirmed cases stands at 33,994;
- The 5-day rolling average of cases was 293 cases;
- The 14-day incidence per 100,000 population is 76.5; the 7-day incidence is 41.7 cases per 100,000 population, indicating that in recent days, there has been an increasing upward trend of new cases identified;
- 9,069 cases (27% of all cases) were associated with healthcare workers; 233 cases were reported in healthcare workers in the fortnight to 23rd September 2020;
- 1,797 deaths due to COVID-19 notified to date; 22 of these have been in the month of September;
- The positivity rate for all tests processed nationally in the past week was 2.2%.

Demographic and Location Trends

- 67% of cases notified in the past 14 days have occurred in people under 45 years of age;
- The median age for all cases remains stable; the median age for cases notified in the past 14 days is 33 years;
- Only three counties have an incidence rate lower than 20 cases per 100,000 population.

Hospitalisations

- There were 90 confirmed cases in hospital today with 11 admissions in the previous 24 hours yesterday.
- The number of confirmed COVID-19 patients requiring critical care yesterday was 17, with 1 new admission in the previous 24 hours.

Clusters and Modes of Transmission

- 470 additional new clusters were notified in the past week to 19th September 2020. There are 1,241 open clusters nationally;
- The vast majority of open clusters are associated with private households (920 of the 1,241 clusters);
- In the fortnight to 19th September, 58% of all cases in recent days have arisen as a result of close contact with a confirmed case. A further 36% of cases are linked with community or possible community transmission.



Donegal

The detailed epidemiological situation for Donegal is as follows:

Case Numbers

- The rolling 5-day average as of 24th September is 26 cases per day.
- 236 cases were notified to HPSC (6% of all cases) during the 14-day period to 24th September. Of those, 162 have been identified in the last 7 days.
- Currently, the HSE has advised that the positivity rate for tests completed within Donegal over the last 7 days is 6%*. This is three times the national positivity rate for the same period. This figure has increased as compared to the 14-day positivity rate.
- So far this week (September 20th- 23rd), there have been 111 cases identified in Donegal. This is significantly more than has been seen in previous days. In the full week to 22nd September, there were 136 cases notified and 59 cases in the previous week (to 15th September).

Geographic Spread of Cases

- The spread of cases is widely distributed across the county. Of the 7 local election areas in Donegal, the 14-day incidence rates range from 23.6 to 336.1 cases per 100,000 population. Three of the 7 local election areas have 14-day incidence rates above 80.
- While confirmed cases may reside in a particular area, based upon data from the CSO and other mobility data, it appears that the movement of people for commuting education, recreation and socialisation purposes around the county and into and out of urban centres within the county is significant.

Incidence Rates

- Both 7 and 14 incidences in Donegal have been increasing since the beginning of September and there has been a sharp increase in incidence in recent days.
- The rolling 14-day incidence rate is 148.2 cases per 100,000 population, which is the highest in the country and is nearly double the national incidence rate (76.5).
- The 7-day incidence rate is 101.8 cases per 100,000 population. This rate is also the highest in the country and has been increasing sharply in recent days. It is more than double the national 7-day incidence rate (41.7).

Clusters and Modes of Transmission

- The primary mode of transmission in the last fortnight to 19th September has been close contact with confirmed case (76% of cases). A further 20% of cases were recorded as having arisen through community transmission;
- The majority of cases in the fortnight to the 19th September (39%) that were linked with outbreaks in Donegal have been tied to private household outbreaks. This is followed closely by those cases linked with workplace clusters (33%).
- There are 19 open outbreaks in Donegal currently, the majority of which are linked with private households/families and socialisation and workplace interaction between different households.

*Data validation of county positivity rates is ongoing.