

Note for NPHEM meeting 27th August 2020 (updated)

Governance and oversight structures for supporting Vulnerable Groups during COVID-19

1. NPHEM Subgroup on Vulnerable People

The Subgroup on Vulnerable People was established under the auspices of *The National Public Health Emergency Team (NPHEM)* as part of the response to COVID-19. The purpose of the group is to provide oversight and assurance with regard to the specific preparedness measures and actions required to be taken to protect vulnerable groups and individuals in society as part of the response to COVID-19.

The work of the subgroup, including all minutes of meetings, is published on the Department's website at: <https://www.gov.ie/en/collection/301f5e-the-national-public-health-emergency-team-nphet-subgroup-vulnerable-/>

A large body of important work has been undertaken by the subgroup over the last number of months. As part of a process examining the work of all the subgroups of NPHEM, the subgroup on Vulnerable People undertook a review of its work and a paper was submitted to the NPHEM on 8th July, outlining the view that the Subgroup has met its objective in terms of preparedness plans being in place across government for vulnerable groups.

The NPHEM Paper 'Report of NPHEM Activity – 27 January to 30 July 2020' with regard to the NPHEM Vulnerable Subgroup identified that:

- The Subgroup had met its terms of reference and it is intended that a cross-Government mechanism will be established to coordinate supports for those that are vulnerable. Under this mechanism, the implementation of agreed actions to support vulnerable groups will remain with the Department/Agency with the relevant policy responsibility. Final arrangements to be put in place in the coming weeks.

Central to the evolution of NPHEM processes is the recognition that health and social care services and indeed the wider cross-Government COVID-19 response, have to become embedded and 'mainstreamed' in the usual operational response of organisations, as we adapt as a society to the reality of living for the foreseeable future in the context of this prevailing global pandemic.

It is proposed therefore that the work of this subgroup is realigned into the appropriate policy and operational functions of the relevant Departments, organisations or bodies, with a cross-government mechanism in place through the Department of the Taoiseach. It is also noted that the NPHEM may require the subgroup to reconvene, as needed, in the future.

2. Enhanced oversight framework for vulnerable groups

In order to ensure that the impact of COVID-19 on vulnerable groups continues to be pro-actively monitored and relevant measures brought forward across government the following monitoring and oversight framework is set out:

- **Cross Government mechanism**

It is recognised that vulnerable groups have been disproportionately affected by COVID-19 and will continue to need a cross-Government mechanism to coordinate sustained support for those that are vulnerable, and disproportionality impacted by the pandemic. The Department of the Taoiseach has established a cross-Government mechanism for higher risk groups which met on 13th August 2020.

Each Government Department with lead policy responsibility is represented on this oversight group. The Department of Health is represented on this group by Social Care Division (policy remit for Older People and people living with a disability) and the Assistant Secretary with responsibility for Mental Health and Social Inclusion.

- **Health Service Executive**

The National Standing Oversight Committee on Cases and Outbreaks of COVID-19 in High Risk Workplace Settings was established by the HSE on the 7th of August. This includes broad cross sectoral representation.

The HSE has established a national outbreak control team for vulnerable groups in congregated settings.

- **Interagency collaboration across health agencies**

The World Health Organisation (WHO) has identified that people living in Long-term Residential Care facilities are particularly vulnerable populations in the context of COVID-19 and are at a higher risk of being susceptible to infection from this disease and for subsequent adverse outcomes.

The Department, the HSE, HIQA and the Mental Health Commission will continue interagency collaboration working together to monitor the impact of COVID-19 on long-term residential care COVID-19 for Older People, those living with a disability and residential mental health facilities and mitigate against associated risks. In relation to nursing homes, this will be through the Oversight Implementation Team of the *Nursing Home Expert Panel Report*.

3. Proposed next steps

- i. As the Vulnerable People Subgroup has met its Terms of Reference, its work is now transitioning to align with 'usual' policy and operational functions. The Chair of the subgroup will write to all members of the subgroup to thank them for their contribution and close the NPHET subgroup formally.