

**Dáil Éireann Special Committee  
on COVID-19 Response**

**26<sup>th</sup> August 2020**

**Opening Statement**

**Dr. Ronan Glynn, Acting Chief Medical Officer**

**Department of Health**

## **Approach to COVID response**

The public health response to COVID-19 to date has been guided by public health data and expertise, and international best practice, and has been underpinned by ethical principles including the minimisation of harm, proportionality, solidarity, fairness and privacy.

The central focus of our response has been to control the spread of the virus in so far as possible to protect those who are most vulnerable from infection, as well as protecting against causes, situations, circumstances, and behaviours that may lead to the spread of COVID-19.

In the absence of a vaccine or treatment at present, the key to controlling COVID-19 is to adopt a proportionate, dynamic and stepwise response tailored to the evolving epidemiological situation and wider public health and health service context.

The foundation underpinning this approach has been the wide acceptance of, and buy in to, the basic, but essential, public health protective measures including hand hygiene, respiratory etiquette, social distancing, avoiding crowds, and the use of face coverings where appropriate by the Irish public.

People in Ireland have shown that they are **willing to follow public health advice** to protect themselves and others.

We had seen tremendous **solidarity and cooperation** across society and across sectors in response to the pandemic to keep the most vulnerable safe including across local authorities, the community and sporting organisations and the private sector.

## **Current Situation**

It has now been nearly eight months since the world first became aware of this new Coronavirus.

Worldwide, there has been 23.5 million cases reported, and 810,000 people have sadly died as a result of this virus.

In Europe, while the situation had stabilised in early summer, many countries are now seeing an increase in cases and have had to reintroduce public health measures.

Here, our own public health approach proved effective and by the 24th June our 5-day average was just 6 new cases per day.

However, since the beginning of July there has been a gradual change in our epidemiological situation and, at the end of July, a large number of cases emerged rapidly in Kildare, Laois and Offaly. These cases were initially predominantly linked to a number of large clusters in food processing plants in the region. There

was also a number of linked clusters in direction provision centres.

As the Committee is aware, NPHECT was monitoring the situation in this region closely and made related recommendations on the 30<sup>th</sup> July, and the 4<sup>th</sup> and 6<sup>th</sup> of August with regard to

1. The protection of vulnerable groups living in congregated settings
2. The mitigation of risk in high risk workplaces including the food processing and construction industries and,
3. The continued enhancement and strengthening of the public health, testing and contact tracing functions in the HSE.

and, on the 7th August, it recommended to Government that a series of enhanced public health measures should be introduced in the three counties for a two-week period to bring the situation under control and prevent widespread community transmission.

The NPHEC reviewed the situation on the 20th August and advised Government that the position in Laois and Offaly had improved and the measures did not need to be extended.

The situation in Kildare was different. While there was a certain level of stabilisation, high number of cases continued to be reported daily, with cases widely distributed across the county, with incidence rates at several multiples of the national averages. There was also a significant number of open clusters, some with secondary spread. A number of facilities were still undergoing mass testing as a result of recent cases and there was evidence of some increasing community transmission in the county. For that reason, NPHEC recommended that the measures in Kildare should be extended for a further until 6<sup>th</sup> September.

Separately, on 17<sup>th</sup> August, the NPHE considered the deteriorating epidemiological situation across the country and recommended several public health measures to apply nationwide, until 13<sup>th</sup> September, to mitigate against any further increase in cases.

### **Our three priorities**

I am fully aware of how disappointing and frustrating recent events have been. As a country, we have demonstrated so much resilience, solidarity and resolve throughout this pandemic. We set aside our plans and put our lives on hold for many months to suppress this virus. And, as a society, we did that incredibly effectively.

While we have taken a step backwards, this is not irreversible. With the continued support and collective effort of people in Ireland, we can stop the rise in cases and protect what must be our three priorities over the coming months;

- The protection of the most vulnerable in our society
- The resumption of healthcare services, and
- The return to education for our children and young people.

This is a marathon and I know people are tired. I want to acknowledge the enormous, and ongoing, effort and sacrifice by people in Ireland to help protect each other during this pandemic and to ask them to continue to stay the course with us. By continuing to work together, by building on the individual and collective action which has characterised our response to date and by supporting each other, we will navigate our way together through the months ahead.