



Mr. Ciarán Devane,
Chair,
Health Service Executive,
Dr. Steeven's Hospital,
Dublin 8,
D08 W2A8.

27th April 2020

Dear Ciarán,

Thank you for your letter of 20 April 2020. We also had a very useful discussion at our weekly meeting on Wednesday with shared consensus on the tremendous achievements to date in responding to COVID-19 and commitment to continued, effective working.

As I said at the meeting, COVID-19 has resulted in one of the single greatest periods of challenge that our health and social care services have ever faced. While the scale of the challenge remains daunting the health service continues to rise to this challenge. This is attributable to the dedication and commitment to patients shown by frontline healthcare workers across our health service over the last number of weeks in responding to this public health crisis. But it has also in no small way been contributed to by the quality of the leadership demonstrated by the Department of Health and the HSE, working effectively together.

As you are aware, because of the unique and unprecedented threat posed by COVID-19, as a health service and as a country, we have had to take steps to limit the spread of this infection, that we would never have previously contemplated in ordinary times, such as the current restrictive social distancing measures. While these measures are showing positive effects in terms of limiting COVID-19 spread, protecting many people from the potentially serious effects of infection, and containing the impact on our health and social care system, there is no doubt that these measures are having a significant impact on the daily lives of people across Ireland.

It is important therefore that, across Government and as a health service, we work effectively together to safely and gradually step-down these restrictive measures in a way that protects people from unnecessary illness, and especially those at most risk, while minimising the impact on their social and working lives. In doing this very difficult task I understand that the WHO and the European Centre for Disease Prevention and Control guidance continues to emphasise the critical importance of countries' sampling, testing and contact tracing strategies as a key mechanism to quickly identify and respond to the likely increase in cases, as the social distancing measures are lifted.

I know from the work of the National Public Health Emergency Team (NPHE) for COVID-19 that, from the outset, it has recognised the ongoing need for a strong public health and health service focus on Ireland's sampling, testing and contact tracing approach throughout this pandemic and I particularly want to commend the significant efforts of the HSE in recent weeks to build this testing and contact tracing capacity in the very short time since COVID emerged.

As you may know, the National Public Health Emergency Team (NPHE) is a long-standing national structure, and many NPHEs have been convened over the years in response to a wide range of public health emergencies (e.g. swine flu (H1N1), CPE, etc). The HSE is, and has always been since its establishment, a core and integral participant, rather than a stakeholder, in every NPHE process.

In relation to the work of the NPHE for COVID-19, I am happy to say that the HSE is represented at every meeting at the highest operational levels, namely by the National Directors for Acute Operations and Community Operations and the Chief Clinical Officer in addition to other senior staff members of the HSE and these HSE staff members engage in the collective decision-making process, in line with the high standards of governance applied by the NPHE.

Regarding your first proposal, I am informed that this process is already in place and that the actions from each NPHE meeting are agreed at the end of each meeting by the members present, including the HSE representatives, prior to the issue of any letters of decision. NPHE will continue to keep its procedures under review and welcomes the input and suggestions of all members, particularly those from the HSE.

More broadly, as we have agreed, as part of our collective leadership the Secretary General, the CMO and I will meet weekly with you and the CEO to ensure continued alignment and support the response to this unprecedented public health crisis.

Finally, as we also agreed, I understand that a very worthwhile briefing was provided on Wednesday by the Secretary General, the Chief Medical Officer and the Chair of NPHE's Irish Epidemiological Modelling Advisory Group to the HSE Board regarding the epidemiological and evolving profile of the disease in Ireland.

Sincere thanks for your commitment and that of the HSE Board to the public health and wider health service response to this pandemic.

Yours sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'Simon Harris', with a stylized flourish at the beginning.

Simon Harris TD
Minister for Health