



Mr. Paul Reid,
Chief Executive Officer,
Health Service Executive,
Dr Steevens' Hospital,
Dublin 8,
D08 W2A8.

27 April 2020

Dear Paul,

I write further to your letter dated 19 April 2020 in relation to sampling, testing and contact tracing as a core part of Ireland's COVID-19 disease control strategy, and the NPHET's continued focus in this regard. We have had the subsequent benefit of a very useful discussion earlier this week on working arrangements.

With the benefit of an intensive review on the part of the HSE of the existing end-to-end coronavirus GP referral, community swabbing, laboratory testing and contact tracing process we have also achieved consensus on measures to be implemented over the coming weeks to move to a testing pathway with increased capacity levels, reduced turnaround times and one that enables active surveillance. This is a critical input to our national COVID-19 response and great credit is due to Niamh O'Beirne and HSE colleagues in rapidly putting this plan in place. It allows us to move forward with a clear and united perspective on this crucial area.

As you are aware, from early in this pandemic, guidance from the WHO and the ECDC and learning from those countries that have fared well in managing the progress of this disease, have emphasised the importance of public health responses based on effective case-finding measures, such as testing and contact tracing, as well as isolation of cases and close contacts. This was reflected in Ireland's National Action Plan for COVID-19 published in mid-March.

In recent weeks, the vital importance of sampling, testing, contact tracing and surveillance has been further underlined by these international organisations as a central strategy in how countries exit from social distancing restrictions, in order to identify, prevent and respond to the very likely resurgence in cases as measures are lifted.

Since the National Public Health Emergency Team (NPHET) for COVID-19 first met at the end of January, it recognised the need to maintain a strong and continued public health and health service focus on Ireland's sampling, testing, contact tracing and surveillance approach throughout this pandemic.

Over the last couple of weeks in particular, as NPHEM moves to consider how it advises Government on the safe and effective reduction of the current measures, the need for assurance in relation to sampling, testing and contact tracing capacity has become more pressing. As you can appreciate, the nature and speed of progression of this disease has meant that, in recent weeks, we have often had to act and respond in timeframes shorter than normally envisaged.

In relation to the NPHEM for COVID-19, the HSE is a core participant of the NPHEM, and is represented at Senior Leadership Team level by the National Directors for Acute Operations and Community Operations and the Chief Clinical Officer, in addition to other senior HSE staff members. In terms of the NPHEM's governance processes, I am advised that all actions arising during each NPHEM meeting are agreed at the end of the meeting by the members present, including the HSE senior operational representatives, prior to the issue of any letters of decision or action to the HSE or other parties. The HSE is a core and integral participant in the NPHEM process and the members are part of the collective decision-making process in line with the NPHEM's governance process.

On behalf of the Chair of the NPHEM, I wish to convey our thanks to you for the important contribution, particularly from various operational and clinical perspectives on behalf of the HSE that the HSE members bring to the work of the NPHEM. As advised at our meeting this week and previously, should you wish to make any additions or changes to the HSE's membership of NPHEM this will be readily accommodated. NPHEM will continue to keep its procedures under review and welcomes the input and suggestions of all members, particularly those from the HSE.

In conclusion, notwithstanding the extreme pressures and challenges that COVID-19 has brought to bear on both of our organisations over the last short few weeks, the HSE and the Department have worked effectively together for the benefit of the entire health and social care service during this health crisis. Our own constant communication has been further added to by the weekly meeting with the Minister, HSE Chair, CMO and COO bringing further collective understanding to our direction of travel and alignment. I and my Management Board colleagues, as the Government Department responsible for working with and overseeing the HSE, look forward to this continued engagement, and working closely with you and your team over the coming months in relation to the design and delivery of our health and social care services, in the context of the new and unprecedented challenges presented by COVID, so that we can meet the evolving needs of patients and protect the public.

Yours sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'Jim Breslin', written in a cursive style.

Jim Breslin
Secretary General