

Ministers warned new Covid strain would mean likely return of restrictions

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MINISTERS have been warned of the potential reintroduction of public health restrictions beyond a new mask mandate if a new and more deadly variant of Covid-19 emerges this winter, the *Irish Independent* can reveal.

The Cabinet was told of contingency plans to reintroduce the types of public health restrictions that were in place for much of 2020 and 2021 with ministers told the pandemic is not over and that there is continued "uncertainty regarding the future trajectory of the disease".

As well as considering the reintroduction of the mask mandate for specific settings which was scrapped last April, the potential reintroduction of other public health restrictive measures also features in the plan.

The plan, outlined in a confidential memo given to ministers, states that in the event of restrictions being considered, due regard would be given to the ongoing Covid vaccination programme, the ethical decision-making framework, and the lessons learned to date with contingency legislation to support the implementation of restrictions if required.

Tánaiste Leo Varadkar said yesterday that the Government expects to manage the current rise in Covid-19 cases "without having to impose any new restrictions on people".

The Cabinet memo notes that the Government has transitioned away from the emergency response that focused on regulations and population-wide restrictions to focus on public health advice and personal judgement.

But the Government's emergency response plan for the coming months outlines contingency plans to escalate the State's response to the virus if, for example, a variant with "significant immune escape that increases disease severity" emerges.

As well as the possible reintroduction of public health restrictions, it would include standing up temporary testing centres to deliver up to 150,000



Tánaiste Leo Varadkar

PCR tests per week, a targeted contact-tracing model, and the deployment of rapid antigen tests.

Ministers were also told that in the event further vaccination is advised by the National Immunisation Advisory Committee (Niac), the HSE's vaccination programme will be capable of vaccinating and boosting up to 4.1 million people if it is deemed clinically appropriate and assuming continued security of vaccine supply.

A public information campaign led by public health experts along with increased advertising across traditional and social media and a rapid stand-up of cross-government emergency communication plans would also feature as part of the escalation of the State's management of the disease.

The Government's current level of Covid-19 management does not envisage new restriction or mandatory mask wearing, with a focus instead on encouraging the uptake of vaccines and booster shots if eligible, the importance of ventilation and air filtration, and a range of personal protective measures including hand washing and staying at home if symptomatic.

After the Cabinet meeting, Public Expenditure Minister Michael McGrath said any decision to make the wearing of masks mandatory would be guided by public health advice. "We're not in a position to rule out different scenarios that may arise over the months ahead," he said. Social Protection Minister Heather Humphreys encouraged people "who feel more comfortable wearing masks" to do so.

Frustration:

Jim O'Brien of Darraglynn Nursing Home in Cork and Dominika Lewicka of Marymount Care Centre in Dublin deliver letters to the Department of Health from staff at private and voluntary nursing homes who have yet to receive the Covid-19 pandemic payment.

PHOTO: COLIN KEEGAN / COLLINS DUBLIN



HSE braced for nightmare scenario if flu and Covid-19 cases surge at the same time

Eilish O'Regan



THE perfect storm of high levels of Covid-19 and flu could be Ireland's worst winter nightmare.

The most severe scenario set out in the HSE's €160m winter plan yesterday suggested 17,000 hospitalisations for Covid and 4,350 for flu through the winter, overwhelming hospitals. In that scenario, there would be 700 patients in intensive care with Covid and 225 with flu.

The most perilous scenario would be for both to surge together and officials yesterday indicated an early flu season might be preferable to a later one. Trolley gridlock and gruelling waits for a bed are inevitable this winter – it is all about mitigation.

Flu is on the rise, but so far

there are no indications it will present a threat beyond that of a typical winter.

A low flu season would still mean 2,900 hospitalisations and 150 in intensive care, according to HSE modelling.

There were 17 patients admitted to hospital with flu last week.

HSE chief clinical officer Dr Colm Henry said: "This coming winter – the third winter we have with Covid-19 – carries much uncertainty.

"The combination of Covid and seasonal viruses such as influenza has the potential to create much pressure on a healthcare system that has endured almost three years of pandemic pressures.

"Our response has been to create additional much-needed capacity and to diversify access to healthcare and reduce reliance on hospitals.

"While these measures are all necessary and helpful, we can all, at an individual level, reduce the impact of Covid-19 and influenza by getting our winter vaccines as soon as possible. Doing so not only protects us at an individual level, but also

helps protect our families and communities."

Last week, take-up of booster vaccines reached more than 78,000 as updated Omicron jabs become available.

The HSE plan for winter is much of the same formula as previous years, with an emphasis on reducing the numbers coming to hospital. But there are ongoing high levels of emergency department overcrowding, which left hospitals fighting "winter levels" during the summer.

There has been a 5.36pc increase in attendances at emergency departments this year and a rise of 8.2pc in admissions by those over 75, leading to longer stays.

On the plus side, community services are more advanced and 907 extra beds have been opened across acute hospitals in the last two years, with a further 300 due come on stream in the coming months.

However, those numbers are far from meeting demand.

Mary Day, who heads the acute hospital division of the HSE, said: "We know that there are further beds required and we are working

on plans to develop those additional beds in the short term. We know that we had a particular shortage of intensive care beds in the past and to address that we have opened an extra 68 beds in the last two years."

There are two key things patients need: hospital beds and hospital consultants.

Dr Rob Landers, president of the Irish Hospital Consultants Association, said: "Unfortunately, this winter plan is unlikely to make in-roads in delivering the significant numbers required of both of these resources."

Edward Matthews, deputy general secretary of the Irish Nurses and Midwives Organisation (INMO), said the inclusion of a hospital-by-hospital allocation is something the union has long called for.

"However, plans and reality are two very different things," Mr Matthews said.

"The reality is unless we have the staff, announcing additional capacity is futile. "To speed up the hiring of staff, each hospital should have a greater role in recruitment."