

27th July 2020

Dear all,

Thank you for your letter of 3rd July, concerning the impact of Covid-19 on people living with dementia and their family carers.

The Department of Health is aware of the report referred to by the Deputy, which will contribute to our learning on the impact of Covid-19 on people living with dementia and help to inform how the State will meet their needs as we plan for the resumption of services.

I would like to assure you that there has been a continued focus on meeting the needs of people living with dementia throughout the Covid-19 pandemic. Through the Dementia Understand Together Campaign, led by the HSE, and collaboration with other key stakeholders, a range of initiatives and resources have been developed to ensure that people living with dementia stay safe, well and connected, during this time of crisis. The Department of Health is also aware of the work being done by national and regional voluntary organisations to support people living with dementia in the home through measures such as social and activity engagement calls, telephone support and family carer training. The Minister is impressed by the agility of service providers in their approach to the continuation of supports, and is grateful to them for this work.

The HSE has adapted its community services in order to provide a flexible response so that the needs of people with dementia continue to be met during the Covid-19 crisis. Primary care team support is operating nationwide, with referrals being made to community supports, including the Alzheimer Society of Ireland's dementia adviser service and the local authority community response forums. While home visits have been necessarily restricted, the HSE uses prioritisation and screening measures to identify clients needing home visits.

As you will be aware, people with dementia living in residential settings experience specific challenges. 23 Covid response teams have been established across the HSE's network of Community Health Care Organisations and these teams have geriatrician input, ensuring that the needs of the person living with dementia are incorporated into the overall plan for each nursing home.

As part of the public health follow-up of confirmed cases of Covid-19, information is routinely collected by the Health Protection and Surveillance Centre (HPSC) on whether a case has certain medical conditions, including chronic neurological disease. While I appreciate that many health professionals and organisations working with people with dementia would like to have dementia explicitly included as an underlying condition, the HPSC has to limit the number of conditions on its surveillance forms for the sake of brevity, as the people being interviewed are either caring for a very ill person or are very ill themselves.

The HSE is currently engaged in detailed operational planning across the primary and community sector that will underpin the phased resumption of community services, including supports for people with dementia, over the period ahead. This work will align with the recently published document "Service Continuity in a COVID Environment – A Strategic Framework for Delivery" which is available on the HSE's website.

I hope this is of some assistance to you.

Yours sincerely,

Matthew O'Gorman

Private Secretary to the Minister for Health