

# Briefing on the government's response to COVID-19 - Friday 11 December 2020

From [Department of the Taoiseach](#)

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**Check against delivery**

## Introduction

Good morning everyone,

As we head into another weekend, many of us will have Christmas shopping and socialising on our minds. It is good to see many parts of our society and economy up and running again and to see the great work being done to ensure this happens in the safest possible way. A great collective effort is behind all of this - from businesses, customers and all of you, from city and county councils, An Garda Síochána and a host of other agencies.

It's now two weeks to Christmas Day and, while I'm sure you are already preparing, if you haven't already, it really is time now to make a plan to think about how you want to spend the holidays. This is especially the case because it has implications for how you spend the next two weeks.

We are trying to get to 2021 safely. We want to avoid another spike in the virus. We know a vaccine is on the way for us. But the vaccine is not here yet and just because it's on the way doesn't mean we have any kind of immunity over the Christmas season. This means we must keep the virus numbers at the levels we have achieved over the last number of weeks, or lower.

To do this, we must limit the number of people we spend time with to a very small circle.

With 2 weeks to go from today, remember that if you plan spending time with people who are vulnerable to COVID-19 over Christmas, you should be restricting your movements from now. It won't be sufficient to start reducing your contacts in the couple of days before Christmas. This means that you might have to postpone that meal with friends until after Christmas, and it will mean avoiding crowds.

My main message, for everyone, is to really think about the contacts you have – prioritise your activities around a small close group.

Choose only those that are really important to you.

And remember, the way to keep the virus numbers down, to sustain this level of freedom and economic activity is to keep the size of our social spheres to a minimum. I've said it many times now, but that's because it is true - every contact counts.

We have seen in other countries, in Canada over Thanksgiving for example, and the fear now in the US, that with so many people moving around gathering and celebrating, the case numbers are spiking, further restrictive measures are required and pressure is put on health systems.

There are reports this morning of a 30% increase in cases on COVID-19 in Chicago after people travelled and gathered to celebrate Thanksgiving.

We don't want to do that here – lets learn the lessons from other countries and be determined not to repeat what happened there.

What we have to remind ourselves is, just because someone is a member of your family, does not mean that they can't transmit the virus to you. The key thing is not how close you are but how many contacts you have had. We believe that we can have a meaningful Christmas, we can do it by keeping things small and by familiarising ourselves with all of the advice – you'll get it on [gov.ie/safechristmas](http://gov.ie/safechristmas) and through the campaigns we are running and will run, on TV, on social media, on the radio and in print.

Some restrictions have eased and some more will ease this day week, but because certain things are permitted doesn't mean you have to do them. It's all about choice, what we are saying is – choose wisely and with the benefit all of the advice and information that we have.

If you are out shopping or socialising, please remember the basics.

- Wear a mask in crowded places, this includes busy outdoor spaces such as shopping streets and in queues
- Keep your distance from others
- Use sanitiser when hand washing isn't possible
- And, if you feel unwell, please stay at home.

If this weekend you are meeting up with friends:

- Do so outdoors, if possible
- If indoors, make sure the space is ventilated
- Avoid hugs and handshakes
- Before visiting someone's home, make sure they are ok with it and feel comfortable

Our actions and decisions in these weeks in the run-up to Christmas are crucial in ensuring that we can all have a meaningful and safe festive period with family and friends.

Every Contact Counts.

## **Vaccine**

It has been a very encouraging week, seeing a 90-year old grandmother from Fermanagh becoming the first person in the world to receive the COVID-19 vaccine, outside of a trial, at her local hospital in England.

There is a lot of work going on and we have promised to keep you updated and informed at every stage of the process. I want to remind you that in the weeks and months ahead we will see lots of discussion, there will be different viewpoints shared, so I would ask that you to make you sure you are getting your information from reliable sources.

We want to assure people that the approval processes to ensure these vaccines are safe are thorough and rigorous – no shortcuts are being taken.

Government will only permit the rollout of a vaccine if it meets the required standards of safety and effectiveness.

All of the recommended vaccines used in Ireland are licensed by the Health Products Regulatory Authority (HPRA). They are licensed for use only when they have been shown to be both safe and effective.

Due to the urgency posed by the pandemic, unprecedented efforts are ongoing to develop COVID-19 vaccines and make them available as soon as possible. Unprecedented levels of scientific research and collaboration, investment and early and proactive engagement between vaccine developers and regulators have all helped speed up development and ensured that quality, safety and effectiveness are not compromised.

Certain priority groups will be vaccinated first. For example, frontline healthcare workers and people who are most at risk from serious infection if they catch COVID-19. Once these priority groups have been vaccinated, the vaccine will be available to the rest of the population. This priority list is available on gov.ie and will be kept under review as more products become available in higher volumes and as we get more information and feedback from our own programme and from our colleagues around the world.

The vaccines will be delivered in stages so it will take time to vaccinate everyone. This means we will need to continue, individually and collectively to take those actions which help to stop the spread of COVID-19.

As I explained last week, a high-level Taskforce has been set up to support and oversee the development and implementation of the programme.

Today, the Taskforce will report to the Taoiseach. Their recommendations will be considered by cabinet on Tuesday.

We are getting closer to a point where we will be able to receive a vaccine and get back to some kind of normality. But until then, we must stay the course. We are not quite there yet and we don't want to undo all we have achieved in managing this second wave. Remember we are among the very best in Europe but the coming weeks are the next big challenge.

## **Planning for a Safe Christmas**

As we know, Christmas will be a very different experience this year. We can still do many of the Christmas traditions we expect, like attending a religious service, calling into the neighbours or enjoying a Christmas dinner with family and friends but we must do all of these things with COVID-19 in our minds.

The main thing is to plan ahead

- Decide on the small grouping you will celebrate with.
- Start reducing contacts if you haven't done so already.
- Make sure everyone in your family is comfortable with the arrangements in place and check in again.
- Remember coming together is about a mutual trust that we have all been taking precautions and avoiding risks.

The work we put in now and the sacrifices we make now will ensure everyone can have a safe Christmas, whatever way they choose to celebrate it.

If you are out shopping this weekend, we recommend thinking about the time of the day you go. We know from the data we have collected in the Dublin area that Dublin City Centre had its busiest weekend since March last weekend. 2-3 pm was the busiest time of the day, with 9-10 in the morning the quietest time.

Traffic volumes around some of the big Dublin shopping centres saw a 40% increase last weekend, with a similar pattern repeated – 8-11am being the quietest times. So try and plan your trip earlier or later in the day, and as always, try and shop local to support those local businesses.

The same could apply when planning to socialise – Dublin City Centre was 80% busier last Saturday night than the previous Saturday night. Always try and avoid crowds – so think about planning that meal out on a weeknight for example.

There are no surprises in these increases in people moving around and nothing we didn't expect in terms of pent up demand. But it is important to emphasise that compliance within businesses was very good and everyone is doing their very best to keep us all safe.

Government has developed guidance for dining out safely, shopping safely and planning for a safe Christmas. This guidance is available at [gov.ie/SafeChristmas](https://gov.ie/SafeChristmas).

## **Business Supports**

While large numbers of people have returned to work following the easing of restrictions last week, we acknowledge that there are some businesses which are still unable to reopen.

Supports such as the Pandemic Unemployment Payment (PUP) and the Covid Restrictions Support Scheme (CRSS) remain available for those who need them.

Details on the supports available on gov.ie [here](#).

## **Pandemic Unemployment Payment**

Since the easing of the Level 5 restrictions, the number of people availing of PUP has begun its downward trend again with approximately 25,000 people closing their claim to return to work last week.

Earlier this week, additional flexibility for self-employed workers on the scheme was announced. Self-employed people in receipt of the PUP who are looking to restart their business can now earn up to €960 over an 8 week period, while retaining their full PUP entitlement. This is an increase from the €480 previously allowed over a 4 week period and comes following engagement across a number of sectors.

This new measure allows a self-employed person to take on intermittent jobs or “one-off gigs” without losing their entitlement to PUP.

There is no formal application process and a self-employed person simply needs to inform the Department of Social Protection if they earn over €960 in any 8 week period.

## **Christmas Bonus**

1.6 million people received the Christmas bonus payment on Tuesday of this week. This payment equates to an extra weeks' pay. Anyone who was in receipt of a social welfare payment would have received the bonus. This includes PUP recipients who were registered as unemployed on 1 or more days between 27th November and 3rd December and were in receipt of PUP for at least 17 weeks.

We hope this will go some way towards helping everyone celebrate a safe and meaningful Christmas after the tough and challenging year we have all had.

## **Employment Wage Subsidy Scheme**

There are currently 41,000 employers are registered with Revenue for the Employment Wage Subsidy Scheme. To date, a total of over €1 billion in subsidies has been paid to 39,300 under the scheme.

## **Covid Restrictions Support Scheme**

To date, 14,600 businesses have registered 16,700 premises for CRSS with Revenue. The value of claims submitted to date is just over €100 million.

## **Community Supports**

### **Community Call**

The Community Call Fora, run by the local authorities, have continued to operate and will do so as long as they are needed during this pandemic. The Fora helpline numbers are available on gov.ie [here](#). Remember that you can also contact ALONE, the national charity for older people. If someone needs information, reassurance, or just to talk they can call ALONE's national phone line on 0818 222 024.

### **Give a helping hand campaign**

You might have seen Alone's 'Give a helping hand' Christmas campaign which is encouraging us to give a helping hand to older friends, neighbours and relatives who may be struggling at Christmas. To GiveaHelpingHand this Christmas you could:

- Check in with older neighbours, friends and relatives to ensure they are warm and have enough supplies to keep the house at a comfortable temperature
- Ensure on very cold winter days that older people in your life have enough supplies so that they don't have to venture out
- On these dark evenings give an older person a call to make sure they're ok
- Consider checking on an older person near Christmas Day to make sure they have everything they need and if they don't link them with Alone

## **Transport**

With more people out and about now, we will see more people using public transport to get around. You must wear a face covering on any mode of public transport - bus, rail or tram.

Social distancing means capacity is reduced to 50%, so we are reminded to only use public transport for necessary journeys.

Also, this week the wearing of a face covering was made a legal requirement if travelling in a taxi, hackney etc.– for both passengers and drivers. This will ensure safe journeys for everyone.

If you need to use such methods of transport, plan ahead.

Think of how you will get to and from your destination this weekend.

We did hear concerns being expressed but the National Transport Authority has confirmed to us that there were no real issues last weekend (5th/6th Dec) with capacity in taxis and that additional public transport services were added and worked well.

New Dublin Bus services are becoming operational, including a new 24-hour ‘39’ service for the Dublin area.

Similarly, for Bus Eireann, there are new and improved services in Navan, Drogheda, Limerick, Cork and Galway.

Iarnród Éireann will have some additional services on commuter routes, particularly for the evening peak.

DART will remain at 10-minute frequency during the day, and 15 in the evening.

Anyone intending to travel outside their county from 18th of December is asked to book tickets online in advance of travel. Irish Rail intercity services will be operate on a pre-booked only basis from Friday 18th December until 6 January 2021.

Use your judgement, if a method of transport is too busy and you don’t feel entirely comfortable. Just wait for the next service or try an alternative method. Extra services are being provided to ensure everyone can get to where they need to be and home again and can do so safely, within the guidance. You should think about cycling or walking if you can.

Yesterday ‘Get Ireland Walking’ launched their new app. There are 20 days left of 2020 so let’s get together and walk into 2021. You can join the keep well walking challenge by downloading the ‘Get Ireland Walking’ app. It’s a good way to clear your head too.  
#KeepWell, #GetIreland #21Walks

## **Issues, Concerns & Clarification**

### **On campus testing**

Students have had a hard time this year and I want to acknowledge this. Most classes have been online, with some essential on-campus learning taking place. It hasn’t been easy for anyone involved. There has been ongoing compliance with the public health guidelines from students and it’s important that we are clear on this.

As those students who are living on or near campus make plans to head home for Christmas, we ask that they take the same precautions as everyone else, and follow the guidelines as they have to date. Guidance on having a safe Christmas, as I said is, is available on gov.ie [here](#).

We have undertaken serial testing programmes where NPHE has indicated they are necessary, in residential centres and in some industries. To date, serial testing at third level campuses has not been needed, thanks to everyone's hard work, and there is no indication that it is necessary. Of course, if that changes, we will take action.

## **Passenger Numbers at Dublin Airport**

Christmas time at Dublin Airport this year will be the quietest it has been in decades. Passenger numbers are expected to be down by 88% compared to the same period last year. COVID-19 is having a devastating impact on traffic levels at airports and we understand that.

Government is following the EU traffic lights approach to travel, which applies to countries in the European Union/European Economic Area and to the UK. The government's current advice for travel to the 30 countries within the traffic light system is to "exercise a high degree of caution". The general advice for all overseas travel remains to "avoid non-essential travel".

## **Childcare Sector**

This year, our early learning and school age childcare practitioners adapted with speed in a very challenging situation, creating protective play-pods and enabling many of our youngest citizens to return safely and happily to early learning. For all their hard work and commitment this year, we want to say thank you to them. A social media campaign is running to spread this message of appreciation and thanks to the sector, starting today. The campaign also links to further guidance during COVID-19 for Parents and Practitioners. More information is available on gov.ie [here](#).

## **Retail**

There has been very positive feedback on how retail has operated around the country since non-essential retail reopened and no compliance issues have been raised. The retail sector has engaged with government in creating the shop safely messaging and have been pushing it out in stores and on social media. Their priority is to keep their staff and customers safe and we encourage customers and shoppers to continue to follow advice and shop safely. We want to encourage people to shop individually when grocery shopping - particularly for fresh produce in grocery stores in the lead up to Christmas Day.

## **And finally**

This day two weeks we will be Christmas Day. We will all be marking it in different ways but we will all be thinking of the difficult year gone by, remembering those who we lost and thinking of those who cannot be with us because of restrictions. Between now and then, we need to ensure that day can happen as we hope it will by limiting our contacts and adhering to the public health guidance.

In the next two weeks we must make more sacrifices, knowing that we are doing it for each other.



The All Ireland Hurling Final between Waterford and Limerick will take place behind closed doors this weekend, the usual 82,000 people won't be crammed into Croke Park. We would love to be celebrating in the way we normally would but for this year unfortunately we can't.

However, by not gathering to watch and celebrate or commiserate we are playing our part just as the teams have played theirs. It is because of the adherence to the guidance by the players and management that these occasions can still take place. And we want to thank them for their cooperation and for providing us with a very welcome distraction. Maybe think of different ways to celebrate this year – put flags up around your house or wear your county colours around the place!

Maybe you have no interest in sport and will spend a quiet weekend at home, maybe you will squeeze in some Christmas shopping or a coffee date with a friend, whatever the activity is, do it safely and remember the guidance.

A safe and sensible weekend will go a long way towards ensuring a safe Christmas. Let's not drop our guard. Let's keep up the good work.

Thank you