Good evening.

All across Europe and much of the rest of the world, COVID-19 infections are on the rise.

I want to speak to you tonight about our country’s ongoing battle against the virus, about where we are in that battle and about what is going to happen next.

2020 has been a hard year, and we’re not through it yet.

Families, individuals and front line workers have sacrificed so much.

So many of the things that cheer us, and that we took for granted, have been taken from us.

The reality of this terrible disease is that when we give it opportunities to spread, it spreads. And when it spreads, it consumes large parts of our daily lives and whole sections of the economy.

As I have said before, the Government cannot stop it on its own. There are no laws or powers that can change the nature of this virus.

Many people have done everything that has been asked of them. But some have not. As Taoiseach I am asking everyone again to take this threat seriously.

I want to be straight with people, lay out all the facts as I have them, and explain the rationale for the decisions that your Government is making.

The first thing that we need to talk about is our strategy. You will have heard many potential approaches mentioned and it’s important to be clear on what is, and what is not possible.

There are some who argue that the country should be taking a ‘Zero COVID ’ approach.

That we should lock down the country and seal the borders until the virus has been eliminated and then maintain the infection rate at zero.

The people who take this position are well motivated and serious people.
However, given our geographic location and proximity to Britain and mainland Europe, and with two jurisdictions on our island, the advice of NPHET is, and our view as a Government is that this is simply not a realistic option.

There are others who argue for a herd immunity approach; that we should let the virus run its course and that the economy is too important for any more restrictions.

This implies that we should accept higher levels of illness and death, and it ignores the deadly long term effects of the virus on many people.

The Government will not be taking this approach.

It is my firm belief that the core responsibility of your Government and your Taoiseach is to protect lives and to protect public health, while also protecting livelihoods and supporting the wider economy and society.

That is what we have done and it is what we will continue to do.

We work to suppress the virus when it is growing, and we work to reopen as much of our society and economy as possible when it is safe to do so.

Until we have a safe vaccine, we must continue in that pattern.

This is the reality in the rest of the world and it is unfortunately the reality here.

So where are we now in that cycle?

In the effort to suppress the virus we have already introduced what is probably Europe’s strictest regime.

As a result of this, we can see some evidence that these restrictions have been effective in slowing the growth and spread of the virus.

However, as the daily figures show, these restrictions, on their own, have not been enough to significantly reduce the levels of infection.

So, while we have slowed the spread of the virus, this has not been enough and further action is now required.

NPHET has been clear on what it believes is needed. I would like to thank Dr Tony Holohan, Dr Ronan Glynn and their colleagues for that clarity.

When their recommendations come to Government, we are obliged to consider them and also weigh up the wider societal impacts of very severe restrictions. Restrictions have very real impacts, including on mental well being, capacity to treat non-Covid illnesses, unemployment and loss of income for families, and very significant social impacts, such as increased domestic violence and fewer child welfare referrals.

These and the many other consequences of increased restrictions are hugely important and require careful thought.
Having given it that careful thought, the Government has decided that the evidence of a potentially grave situation arising in the weeks ahead is now too strong. Therefore, for a period of six weeks from midnight on Wednesday night, the whole country will move to Level 5 of the Framework for Living with COVID-19.

Before I talk about what this will mean, I want to speak for a moment about our schools and childcare providers. It is the view of Government, supported by the advice of NPHET, that our schools and childcare services should remain open.

This is necessary because we cannot and will not allow our children and young people’s futures to be another victim of this disease.

They need their education.

The fact that we have been able to open our schools and keep them open is because of the extraordinary efforts of our administrators, principals, teachers, Special Needs Assistants, parents, childcare providers, cleaners, caretakers, and entire school communities.

They too are on the frontline in this crisis and they deserve the gratitude of the entire nation.

As a Government we have invested heavily to support this effort and we will continue to work with school leaders to keep schools open.

Similarly, I want the whole country to know that we will be supporting this effort to suppress the virus again with enhanced financial supports for individuals and businesses.

We will be improving the Pandemic Unemployment Payment and the Employment Wage Subsidy Scheme to take account of the new restrictions.

We will be prioritising the roll-out of new supports in mental health services.

I understand that social isolation and anxiety is a very real issue for many people and especially those who live alone.

Therefore, we are including, as part of the ‘own household’ provisions, the concept of a “support bubble”.

This will allow persons living alone, parenting alone or similarly at risk of social isolation to pair with one other household as part of a “support bubble”.

A full list of Level 5 restrictions will be published here

- there should be no social or family gatherings in homes or gardens, but visits on compassionate grounds and for caring purposes can continue
- we have decided that attendance at weddings will be maintained at 25 guests
- restaurants, cafes and bars will be permitted to provide takeaway services only
- only essential retail may remain open
- everyone in the country is being asked to Stay at Home, with exercise permitted within a 5km radius of your home
only essential workers whose physical presence in the workplace are permitted to travel to work. Those who can work from home must do so

construction work is essential and will continue during this phase, as we work to tackle the country’s homelessness and housing crisis, while most manufacturing will also remain open

I understand, and I feel very personally and profoundly the sense of disappointment, the feelings of loneliness, perhaps even the despair that this announcement will bring for many.

The days are getting shorter and colder.

But I ask you to remember this.

Even as the winter comes in, there is hope. And there is light.

If we pull hard together over the next six weeks, we will have the opportunity to celebrate Christmas in a meaningful way.

Every Christmas is important, but this year it is particularly so. Each of us have our own rituals for Christmas, and they will take on extra poignancy this year as we remember those who didn’t survive 2020.

Not only those who have been taken by the virus, but also all those others who passed away this year and didn’t get the wakes and funerals and goodbyes that we as a people are so good at, and which they deserved.

It won’t be the same Christmas that we have enjoyed in years past, but if we all pull together and follow the spirit of these new rules, it will be a very special time and will give us all some respite from the hardship of the last seven months.

If each of us does what is asked of us for a period of just six weeks, we will suppress this virus and we will emerge from these restrictions on the 1st December.