Briefing on the government's response to COVID-19 – Friday 4th December 2020

From Department of the Taoiseach

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Introduction and up-to-date Public Health Guidance

Good morning everyone, So, it’s a big weekend ahead. So why do I say that?

Well for many of us we will have the opportunity to enjoy some of the things that we missed during Level 5 restrictions. I know that we are all eager to get out and do our shopping, sample the seasonal atmosphere, meet our friends for a meal, go to the cinema, visit a library, go to the gym etc. But it is a big weekend in another way as well. It’s the weekend where we need to prove to ourselves and one another that we can enjoy these things safely. I said it on Monday and I’ll be saying it from now on until Christmas, so sorry about that, but EVERY CONTACT COUNTS.

While there is a feeling around that finally we are getting a chance to kick up our heels this weekend, we really have to think ahead. Think about the people who are closest to you that you want to meet with in the coming weeks. Think particularly those you might want to be with on Christmas Day and who might be vulnerable. What you choose to do now, will make a difference.
Unfortunately, this is not a situation where we can say, well, I’ll just do my own thing… COVID doesn’t work like that. It exploits every single opportunity we give it to transmit. And every time we meet people, we open up that possibility.

So, whether you are thinking of a day in the shops; a night out with friends or family; or a small get together to watch a match. Please just think again about what you can do to make that a little bit safer.

1. Maybe, get together with a smaller group than you usually would.

2. If you plan on eating out, stick with the guidelines, keep household mixing to a minimum and remember – you are at risk even when you are in a controlled environment. Wear a mask if you can’t stay 2 metres apart.

3. Remember, outdoors is better than indoors – we have seen how easily this virus spreads in indoor settings and in particular when there is not enough ventilation in that area. A lot of households would fall into that category, especially in winter, with windows closed, and when people get together, when they relax and are comfortable. Disinfecting surfaces and sitting 2 metres apart just isn’t going to be enough to stop transmission.

Someone recently described the virus as being like cigarette smoke: if one person in the room is smoking, you’re likely to smell the smoke. It’s the same with COVID: if one person is infected, you could also become infected from when they breathe and talk.

So, if you are meeting people this weekend, and indeed over Christmas, try to do so outdoors, keep interactions short, plan ahead and remember that some people are understandably anxious about visiting busy places and other people’s homes. So, let’s respect that.

We want people to be able to enjoy Christmas with the people who are most important to them. And we believe it is possible, but it will take a bit more thought and planning than usual. The most important advice for right now is to think about that group you want to spend Christmas with this year, to plan ahead and limit your contacts as much as possible from now on.

We are not asking you not to do the things that you can now do, we are just asking you to plan them out and do them safely.

**Safe Christmas**

Our Safe Christmas campaign is very much underway. We’d like to recognise all of the work that has had to be put in by retailers and other business owners so that this week’s re-opening has been possible. We would also like to thank everyone for their patience with all of the procedures that we all have to follow now to do something as simple as going to the shops.

**Dining out safely**
As I mentioned, from today, restaurants and pubs operating as restaurants can open their doors to the public once again. We know the sector has been working hard and measures have been put in place to ensure that we can enjoy dining out safely:

• Staff have been trained in COVID requirements
• Tables will be to a maximum of 6 people
• Hand sanitiser will be provided
• Seating will be distanced
• Business will operate to certain hours – customers will know how long they have

In return we are asked to:

• Sanitise our hands when we enter and when we leave the premises
• Wear facemasks indoors and when moving around the building
• Maintain social distancing
• Provide details for contact tracing purposes

If we all do what is being asked of us, we can enjoy dining out while making sure everyone stays safe.

**Shopping Safely**

Similarly with shopping, when planning your Christmas shopping, please support your local retailers and businesses.

• At this busy time of year, you can still shop online or over the phone and collect your goods or have them delivered

• If you do go out shopping, wrap up warm in case you have to queue and if you feel unwell, please stay at home

• Try to shop at off-peak times and keep a 2-metre distance from other shoppers

• Remember you must wear your mask in store for your safety and for that of other shoppers and staff

• Try to keep your shopping time to a minimum and remember to use hand
sanitiser on entering and leaving the shop.

For more advise on measures we can take to enjoy a safe Christmas, please go to gove.ie/safechristmas.

I also want to give a big “shout out” to all the businesses out there who are working incredibly hard to make their places safe for you and safe for their employees. If you are asked to wait patiently in a queue, wear a mask, use sanitiser, take your seat and stay in it, finish up when your time is up, please do it. Please help those businesses that have opened, stay open. You do that by complying with what they are asking you to do. And to those businesses, I know the whole country understand what a welcome relief this to you and your employees.

**Sporting Occasions**

With the weekend that’s in it I wanted to mention sporting occasions. We know this a difficult time for everyone and there are so many occasions that we haven’t been able to celebrate the way we normally would from birthdays to graduations and also sporting events.

This coming weekend and in the weekends ahead, we will see a number of big matches taking place behind closed doors. These events will provide a welcome distraction in a very difficult time and so many of us would love to be in a crowd cheering on our counties or celebrating homecomings if they are victorious, unfortunately that is not possible this year. We will be forced to enjoy these big occasions in a very different way. It’s important to remember that these events can take place because of the adherence to public health advice by all involved. The players and management will be on the pitch but we too must play our part as spectators!

**What we are doing to keep you safe**

For most of us, adhering to the guidance won’t be a problem. Most of us have been doing what was asked of us since day one. With the loosening of restrictions, it would be easy to veer off course but we ask you to stick with it. Remember the 5 weeks at Level 5. We don’t want to go back there. We must all work together to ensure everyone is safe and our businesses can stay open.

Across Government, we have worked to put a number of measures in place to keep you safe:

**Garda Presence**

An Garda Síochana will continue Operation Fanacht over the weeks ahead with over 100 checkpoints being conducted on a daily basis. There will be patrols in key cities and busy retail locations in the run up to Christmas too. The focus of the Gardaí is to keep people safe by using the 3 E’s – engage, explain, encourage and only as a last resort to enforce.

**Fáilte Ireland – Take Care Together**
To reassure customers and make it easier for businesses to communicate key safety messages, Fáilte Ireland along with Government have developed the Take Care Together campaign to remind everyone of simple steps to help us keep safe when visiting tourism and hospitality businesses this Christmas. 13,000 businesses have received the toolkit advising of steps that can be taken to keep everyone safe. To summarise all of that, collectively, this weekend, we have the opportunity to showcase how we can do this well but it means everyone has to step up: at an individual level, think what you can do.

If you are a business, you know what to do. If you are having difficulty controlling the situation, do the brave thing, look for help or close your business if the congregation is getting too much. Work with other local businesses. And let’s all work together to make this re-opening sustainable.

**Keep Well Campaign**

I also wanted to remind you of the Keep Well campaign. The campaign has been developed to support us through the winter months ahead. €7 million has been provided to deliver of a range of initiatives and support services, which are being rolled out at the moment.

The campaign is encouraging us all to do something that is good for us each day or week, like going for a walk, connecting safely with friends or family, engaging in a hobby or reaching out for the supports that we may need. By doing so, we can create balance, routine and resilience.

The campaign is focused on five main themes.

- Keeping active
- Staying connected
- Switching off and being creative
- Eating well
- Minding your mood

For more information on the campaign and to find out what is happening in your area go to [gov.ie](http://gov.ie)

**Public Libraries**

I wanted to mention our public libraries. They are continuing to adapt and react to the needs of our communities since the crisis began in March.

Established health and safety systems are in place within the library sector, governed by an agreed Standard Operating Guidance document, to provide a controlled and safe environment for users.
Remember that e-library services have remained available throughout the pandemic and new members can join their local library online by visiting librariesireland.ie.

**Local Authorities**

Community Response Forums and helplines have coordinated and delivered support to those needing help during Covid-19. Community Call Helplines received more than 58,000 calls from those in need of practical or social supports.

Local Authorities are mounting an agile and appropriate response to business and community needs at a local level. The management of the external spaces which are accessible to the public in our city centres, towns and villages is critically important to ensuring businesses can continue to trade safely and that the public and consumers feel assured they can enjoy amenity, recreation and hospitality facilities and shop locally in a safe way.

Extensive work has been underway across the local authorities to develop, re-imagine and accommodate new ways of utilising these public spaces, including facilitating outdoor dining and other uses of public space, ensuring additional space is allocated to pedestrians and shoppers to allow for social distancing.

More information on all we are doing to help keep you safe is available on gov.ie.

**Business Supports**

**Pandemic Unemployment Payment**

This week, just over 351,000 people received the pandemic unemployment payment. This is a reduction on last week, as many make a very welcome return to work. In the 7 days to 1st December, 6800 people closed their claim, 4500 of them said they did so because they were getting back to employment. Those who are returning to work are reminded that they must close their claim for the Pandemic Unemployment Payment (PUP) on the actual date that they start back at work, in order to ensure that their claim is processed correctly. For more information on applying for the scheme or closing your claim, go to gov.ie.

**Arrears Payment**

In addition to the normal weekly PUP payment, this week 286,000 people received an arrears payment.

People were due an arrears payment for two main reasons:

- Firstly, although most claims were paid within a week, there was, due to the large number of claims, an initial time lag in the commencement of payments in some cases.

- Secondly, arrears also arose in individual weeks where claims could not be processed due to incomplete applications or application errors by the claimant. Overall, 1.4 million applications
were examined to determine if arrears were due. The vast majority of arrears cases (more than 280,000) were paid on Tuesday of this week.

The Department continues to examine records for a small number of cases and any arrears that may be due in these cases will be paid later this month.

**Covid-19 Enhanced Illness Benefit Payment**

Since March, a total of 91,175 people under the age of 65 have been medically certified for receipt of the Covid-19 Enhanced Illness Benefit.

**Employment Wage Subsidy Scheme**

There are currently 41,200 employers registered with Revenue for the Employment wage subsidy scheme.

To date, over a billion euro in subsidies has been paid to 39,000 employers in respect of 420,800 employees under the scheme COVID Restrictions Support Scheme.

Also, up and running is the COVID Restrictions Support Scheme. Almost 13,000 businesses have registered for the scheme. The scheme applies to businesses that are impacted by COVID-19 restrictions such that the business is required to prohibit or considerably restrict customers from accessing its premises.

Eligible businesses can still register and make a claim for this significant cash flow support. There are time limits to making a claim for each period of restrictions. You can find more information on applying on [gov.ie](http://gov.ie)

Businesses will also be able to claim the additional CRSS ‘restart week’ to assist them in reopening from next week.

**International travel**

Since November, Ireland has been implementing the EU ‘traffic light’ system on travel for regions in the European Union. This approach provides for regions across the European Union being classified as green, orange, red or grey, on the basis of the risk levels associated with COVID-19.

As of yesterday, 3rd December, the vast majority of these regions are at status red. This means that anyone arriving from these regions must restrict their movements for 14 days on arrival into the country.

Having a system in place does not mean that the right thing to do this Christmas is book flights or plan trips. Overseas travel poses a risk to the work that we have all done to date when it comes to slowing the spread of COVID-19.

That’s why our best advice is that this is not the year to travel home for Christmas. We understand that this is particularly difficult at this time of year. But, we all need to play our
part in ensuring that when, hopefully soon, everyone can visit and be together again, that everyone is there.

If you have to travel, and we know someone people do, please make sure you know what the requirements are to keep you and your family and loved ones safe.

**Issues, Concerns & Clarification**

**Vaccines**

Ireland is currently involved in an exercise being operated by the European Commission on to procure suitable, safe and effective vaccines, in sufficient quantities, to combat COVID-19.

Vaccine can only be approved and used if they comply with all the requirements of quality and safety.

The Government is committed to the timely implementation of a COVID-19 immunisation programme, as soon as one or more vaccines in the EU portfolio are approved for use.

As you know, a High-Level Taskforce has been established to support and oversee the development and implementation of the programme. The Taskforce will report to the Taoiseach on Friday, December 11. The Strategy and Implementation Plan will then be considered by Cabinet.

**And finally**

As we go into this weekend I want to highlight again that every contact counts. So, although, we can see glimpses of the normal we knew as the country begins to reopen, we must remain vigilant.

A word to remember this weekend is respect.

- Respect each other when out and about including those working in shops, restaurants and in other services

- Respect that some people don’t feel comfortable in certain situations and think about this before visiting other people or making arrangements

- Respect the Gardai and those trying to keep us all safe

- Respect the public health guidance! You may have heard, this week, we were asked to also have respect for the deer in the Phoenix Park, not to feed them and go too close. But don’t worry – our friends in

the OPW have told us that it is ok to still leave out a little something for Santa’s reindeer on Christmas Eve.
Remember, being safe and sensible this month will mean a safe and meaningful Christmas for us all.

Thank you