Briefing on the government's response to COVID-19 - Monday 7 December 2020

From Department of the Taoiseach

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Introduction

Good morning everyone and thanks for tuning in again.

Over the coming weeks, we have a real challenge individually and collectively. While society and the economy are re-opening, we have choices to make which will have a significant impact on how we manage Covid-19 into the New Year.

We won’t know this impact for sure – we won’t see it in daily case numbers or hospitalisations, numbers in ICU or in people dying – not for a number of weeks.

As you all know, this was a big weekend for many business owners and their staff as cafes, restaurants and pubs operating as restaurants opened up, joining retail and other business and a number of cultural institutions which reopened earlier in the week.

What we are trying to do here is quite simple

(i) we are trying to keep the numbers to a level that will allow us to live our lives as fully, as normally, as possible and
(ii) sustain as high a level of economic activity as possible, and

(iii) keep schools open and non-Covid healthcare up and running.

A lot of hard work has gone on for months now, across public services including in particular, education and healthcare, across business (both owners and employees). We have held our own until now but we need to be aware of the plateau we have reached and the challenge in keeping the balance right as we move around and socialise in ways we have not done for many weeks.

The main goal is to keep transmission low so we can sustain this for the Christmas period and beyond. And how we do this is primarily and very simply by keeping our contacts low. There is a direct correlation between the number of contacts people have and the rate of transmission of the disease. That’s why we keep saying Every Contact Counts.

So, just because you can move around and do more things, doesn’t mean you have to.

Socialising is discretionary, so use your discretion.

Government is balancing considerations about what to reopen, about travel, about that intersection between public health and the economy, about the impact of restrictions on mental wellbeing versus the impact of a rapidly spreading virus.

However, no Government action can influence this disease more than you can.

So think about what your choices are. For example, if you want to spend time with someone you love over Christmas and that person is more vulnerable to Covid-19, then don’t meet up with friends for a meal – maybe meet up outdoors for a walk and a coffee instead. Sure, we are all sick of zoom meetings, quizzes, rehearsals and book clubs but they are still a way to connect, if you have to make choices.

Most of all, think about the social circle, the bubble, you operate in, really think about it, chances are it is bigger and more populated than you think. Let’s try and keep this as small as possible.

More interaction is now permissible, but don’t set this as a target – identify your key priorities for this year and stick to them.

I know it’s not a very Christmassy message, but if everyone does that it will see us through to the end of this year, and allow us to start what will hopefully be a much better year in better shape, retaining those freedoms and economic activity as we prepare to roll out a vaccination programme. We have seen that the virus only needs the smallest opportunity. It only needs a few of us to drop our guard, to allow ourselves get lulled into a false sense of security and let the distance close between ourselves and others. To allow more people in the shop than we should because the queue is getting long. To allow customers stay a little longer at the table than they should because they are happy to stay there and keep buying rounds.

Each decision in isolation might not seem like it would make much of a difference but these are the openings the virus thrives on – we have seen how quickly it can start spreading. And the end of a chain that might start in a restaurant among close friends or family can end up
with a family member or friend in hospital. Someone who has been careful and has trusted those around them. So, for the next few weeks try and keep these things in mind:

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 and remember all of the other basics.

3. Outdoors is better than indoors – keep interactions short, plan ahead and remember that some people are understandably anxious about visiting busy places and other people’s homes. Be patient and respectful of others’ choices and concerns.

**Safe Christmas**

I just want to remind you all of the guidance for Dining out safely, shopping safely and having a safe Christmas dinner are available on [gov.ie/SafeChristmas](http://gov.ie/SafeChristmas).

And, over the weekend, An Garda Síochána have reported a high level of compliance with public health guidelines and regulations. They continue patrols in cities and towns around the country, and to conduct checks on licensed premises. Their community engagement activity continues to focus on the vulnerable and those who feel isolated, particularly during this period.

**Restaurants**

Restaurants and pubs operating as restaurants have reported a positive first weekend of reopening. Fáilte Ireland carried out spot checks over the weekend and had no reports of non-compliance. People are reminded to play their part and follow the guidelines and do remember that if you can’t make a booking, please call. It has been a difficult year for restaurants so let’s not add to the pressure and lost income by becoming a ‘no-show’.

**Testing**

We will all have our own reasons for wanting to mark Christmas this year, whether to get a break, visit someone you haven’t seen in a long time or get back to work after a period of being closed.

Getting a call to say you are a close contact of a positive case will not be welcome but it is really important to follow the public health guidance you will receive. You may feel absolutely fine and feel that you do not need to attend for your test, or to skip the second test. We have seen how this can lead to outbreaks that affect so many more people than yourself. The nature of this virus means you can have it, and transmit it while being asymptomatic — so please, follow the guidance around restricting movements, attend for your tests, resist the temptation to go to work, or to keep going with whatever plans you had made.

It’s another great reason to keep your contacts low – the more you have, the greater the chance of ending up as a close contact.
Vaccine

We know there is huge and understandable interest in vaccines and their rollout – here and around the world. There is a lot of work going on at the moment and we will keep you informed and updated at every stage of the process. With this interest there will be a lot of information and a lot of discussion in the public sphere – and especially on social media.

There will be different viewpoints and different theories – I would just ask that you get your information from reliable sources.

I will say that the approval processes for these things are exacting and rigorous. Shortcuts will not, and have not been taken. This has happened so quickly purely because of the intense focus of the medical and scientific community, the significant funding that has been committed and the considerable collaboration – all of which has been at a level that is unparalleled, certainly in recent history.

Vulnerable groups

Christmas can often be a difficult and lonely time for people. This may be magnified by the year that we have all experienced and the constraints this virus places on the lives of some people, especially those more vulnerable.

We saw data published last week by the CSO where one in three people surveyed in November rated their overall life satisfaction as ‘low’. The amount of people who reported feeling downhearted and depressed doubled between April and November this year. We have to acknowledge that this has been a very tough year for people and there’s a bit to go yet.

I want to draw people’s attention to our #KeepWell campaign which aims to show people of all ages how we can mind our own physical and mental health and wellbeing by adding healthy and helpful habits to our daily and weekly routines.

Local authorities in your county are offering and promoting a range of services, initiatives and activities to enable you to stay connected, stay fit and active and look after your mental health and wellbeing. Activities range from having a go at Dun Laoghaire-Rathdown’s “Let’s Stay Active Together” challenges, starting a new hobby with Kildare libraries or taking part in Monaghan County Council’s Monaghan Age Friendly Programme, which helps people in nursing homes feel connected with the community. There are resources in your county to help you keep well this Christmas – check out full county listings on gov.ie/healthyireland

A range of other supports are also available, for example, The Community Call, and Alone - you can find their details on gov.ie here. There are also links to mental health supports that you might need at this time and those services are being delivered in innovative ways. As I mentioned earlier if you are planning on spending time with someone who is more vulnerable to Covid-19 take this into account when planning your activities and restrict your movements as appropriate.

Business Supports
It is worth remembering that not all businesses have been able to reopen. Business supports from the Pandemic Unemployment Payment and the Covid Restriction Support Scheme (CRSS) and more remain available – see [gov.ie](http://gov.ie) for all details.

**Pandemic Unemployment Payment**

**Christmas Bonus**

Tomorrow, the Christmas bonus payment will be made to approximately 1.6m people in receipt of a social welfare payment. This includes recipients of the PUP. If you were registered as unemployed for the PUP payment on 1 or more days between 27th November and 3rd December and you have been in receipt of PUP for at least 17 weeks, then you are eligible for the Christmas bonus payment. The bonus payment equates to an extra week’s payment.

**PUP Recipients Returning to Work**

Since the easing of the Level 5 restrictions, many businesses have re-opened, particularly in the retail and hospitality sectors. The Department will have an update later today on exact figures, but we know that we are already seeing thousands of people returning to work. Some people may fear that they will encounter a problem if they go back to work only to find themselves unemployed in the New Year. I want to reassure such people that if they have to reapply for PUP, that they will be able to do so. Applications may be made for PUP up to and including 31st March 2021. The quickest way to make a claim for PUP is to so online and to log on [www.mywelfare.ie](http://www.mywelfare.ie).

**International travel**

Ireland currently has the one of lowest incidence rates of Covid-19 in the EU. We have worked so hard to get our rates down, and we are not out of the woods yet. We are now operating the traffic light system to enable essential international travel to be undertaken safely.

I know this is a difficult message, visiting family for Christmas may be “genuinely important” for some people but please think if this is an essential journey this year, at this time. We understand completely there will be compassionate cases where this travel is essential, but we are asking most people who can, to skip a year this Christmas and come next year instead.

And we know most people are following this advice: looking at travel projections for the Christmas period, we expect air passenger numbers to be about 90% down on last year’s figures and ferry passenger numbers to be about 60% down. Most people who normally travel, aren’t coming home this Christmas. This is a great sacrifice, one we should all be grateful for - it is not an easy thing to have to forgo.

Our advice to people who do come from red countries is that they should continue to restrict movements on arrival. They can arrange for a PCR test to be taken at day 5, and if the result from this test is negative, they are no longer expected to restrict movements according to the public health guidance. However, if people travelling at Christmas are coming for less than a
week, to keep you and your family safe, you must restrict movements within this time frame. That means they should stay in the home where they are visiting – they shouldn’t meet people outside of the immediate household where they are staying, and they definitely shouldn’t be going out and about on house visits, or going into restaurants or pubs serving food. Going out for a walk-in fresh air with members of the immediate household is ok, but that’s it. So, it won’t be a normal visit and perhaps another time will be a better choice.

The same goes for people coming to Ireland during this period for an essential purpose such as work. They too should restrict their movements outside of that essential purpose according to the public health advice. So, if you are coming for work, you can work as required, but you should restrict your movements other than that.

This will be and needs to be a very different Christmas – however hopefully we can welcome everyone home with open arms next year.

**Issues, Concerns & Clarification**

#antiviral

This day last week, we launched our #antiviral campaign. This is a campaign which focusses on young people, specifically those aged 18 to 24. It is recognised that this group has been disproportionately impacted by the pandemic, missing out on milestones such as going to college, getting a job, and socialising with friends.

#antiviral gives young people a chance to share their stories of life during the pandemic, stories of how they have been living their best lives possible within the restrictions.

We are delighted to say that in its first week, over 350,000 people have engaged with the campaign on TikTok.

**And finally**

I want to repeat our thanks to everyone for playing their part so far. If I stand back and think about it, it really is hard to believe I am standing here ahead of Christmas, asking people to limit who they have to their homes, to avoid meeting too many people or not to travel home for Christmas.

It goes against everything that we have always done, and always taken for granted. I have said our message, what we are trying to do is simple, but we are am under no illusions about how difficult this is.

If we can do it this Christmas though, we can start off next year holding on to the freedoms we do have, and hopefully, next Christmas this will be a memory we can look back on and talk about as something we have overcome.

Thank you