Introduction

Good morning,

I had intended this morning’s briefing to be a short reflection on the year we’ve all experienced and a reminder of how we can enjoy a safe Christmas. However, and as I have come to learn over this last year, Covid-19 tends to ignore intentions, and best laid plans.

Throughout December, the message has consistently been that we are looking forward to a different Christmas this year. Nonetheless, we had hoped that we could mark Christmas in a meaningful way, with that small circle who mean the most to us. We were planning ahead, keeping gatherings small, short, and meeting friends outdoors and well ventilated if indoors.

Unfortunately, due to the alarming scale of the growth in incidence of the virus in recent days, many of us are now being asked to rethink our plans for Christmas.

In particular, if our plans included seeing older or vulnerable people over the holidays, we really need to consider that very carefully, assess where we have been and especially how many people either ourselves or our household members have come into contact with in the lead up.
While reducing time with loved ones runs completely counter to our normal Christmas in Ireland, we need to remember that it’s just this Christmas, that we have hope - vaccines are on the way and these sacrifices now will pay off in 2021.

Yesterday’s announcement of new restrictions wasn’t the kind of news anyone wanted at Christmas, it will have a very real impact on plans that many of you had made and were looking forward to.

These decisions were not taken lightly – the increase in cases we are now seeing is of grave concern and couldn’t be ignored.

From tomorrow, close of business, Christmas Eve, the country will move to Level 5, with certain adjustments.

### Household Visits

Up to and including St. Stephen’s Day, you may have visitors to your home from a maximum of two other households. After that, from 27th December up to and including New Year’s Eve, you may have visitors from one other household to your home. From 1st January, no visitors are permitted to your home except for essential family reasons, such as providing care to children, elderly or vulnerable people, or as part of a support bubble.

### Intercounty Travel

You may travel outside of your county up to and including St. Stephen’s Day. You will be permitted to travel home after this point, but after that, you should stay in the county you live in except for certain essential purposes.

### Christmas Services

Places of worship are open for service up to and including Christmas Day with a maximum of 50 gathered. After this, places of worship will be open only for private worship, with services moving online.

### Weddings

Weddings planned now up to and including 2nd of January may take place with a maximum of 25 guests. After 2nd January, wedding guests will be limited to 6.

### Hospitality

From Christmas Eve at 3pm, restaurants and pubs operating as restaurants will close. From this point, hotels may serve food only to residents. From 27th December, hotels may be used for essential non-social purposes only. If you currently have a reservation for a hotel and you were already planning to check in on or before St. Stephen’s Day, that booking will be honoured.
In addition,

- Retail remains open but we are asking retailers not to run their usual January sales
- People are being asked to work from home unless for work which is an essential health, social care or other essential service and cannot be done from home
- Gyms, pools and leisure centres will all remain open for individual training only
- Cultural attractions such as museums and galleries will be closed
- Hairdressers and other personal services will be closed
- No sports training or matches should take place
- Non-contact training in pods of up to 15 may take place outdoors only
- professional, elite sports, horse-racing, greyhound racing and approved equestrian events are permitted to continue behind closed doors
- Outdoor golf and tennis are permitted
- Funerals are limited to 10 mourners

If you are aged over 70 or medically vulnerable you need to be especially careful so exercise personal judgement. Be aware of the risks, limit your engagements, keep up all the protective measures, and remember your own home is the safest place.

More information on the latest restrictions and your guide to level 5 is available on gov.ie here.

I know the measures will once again come as a great disappointment to so many businesses, and I know some are impacted more than others. There are supports available to help with this incredibly difficult time, such as the Covid Restrictions Support Scheme (CRSS) which supports businesses significantly impacted by public health restrictions.

As previously announced by the Government, businesses benefiting from CRSS for the weeks of 28 December and 4 January will receive a double payment up to a maximum of €5000 and should restrictions last for three weeks or more, businesses in receipt of CRSS will be eligible for payment of an additional week’s restart payment on reopening at the end of the period of restrictions.

Commercial rates relief will apply for affected sectors for the first three months of 2021.

There are other supports such as the Employment Wage Subsidy Scheme (EWSS) which provides support to help maintain people in jobs, extensive tax warehousing arrangements, reduced VAT rates, and a range of reduced cost loans, grants and voucher schemes.

In addition, the COVID-19 Pandemic Unemployment Payment of up to €350 per week will continue to be available to all employees and the self-employed who have lost their job due to the pandemic.

2020

I have said this before, but I do find it surreal, standing here talking about so many businesses and activities closed, not being able to make casual arrangements to meet and numbers for significant life events curtailed to an absolute minimum. I found it surreal in March, when I started these briefings, and it is no less so now.
I think it’s fair to say that this year has been anything but normal. Looking back on 2020, we have had to overcome obstacles like never before. Human interaction was lost to social distancing and ‘stay safe’ became the new ‘goodbye’. If this year has given us one thing, it has given us time. Time to reflect on what matters most – our family, our friends, our community!

Now, it’s Christmas time and we want to celebrate, however Covid refuses to be ignored, even for Christmas.

As we look to another period of time under Level 5 restrictions it is worth thinking about all we have been through. Remember all we all we have done, and endured – we have done it before, many times now, and we can do it again.

Everyone bar a small number of essential worked at home, our children couldn’t go to school, non-essential retail was closed, pubs shut their doors, we couldn’t dine in our favourite restaurants and all our sporting events were cancelled.

Hundreds of thousands were forced to avail of the emergency financial supports the Government had put in place.

We did not know how long it would last.

And although this Christmas isn’t how we would want it to be, we truly have come a long way since then.

Those difficult and foreign tasks such as social distancing have now become part of our everyday routine.

Face coverings are not just a piece of protective equipment, they are fast becoming a fashion accessory!

We should be so proud of ourselves in what we have achieved. However, this virus has not gone away. It will not pause because it’s Christmas, but we should remember how far we have come, how resilient we can be and most importantly that working together as a team is the only way to beat this virus.

**Safe Christmas Day**

On Friday, we will celebrate a Christmas Day like no other.

Our extended families can’t be gathered around the tree or the table as normal. Our families living abroad haven’t been able to travel home, and we can’t head to our local and catch up with friends. The Christmas Swim, the walk or run – won’t be as normal.

We can celebrate, though, however small that celebration might be.

It might be different, but that doesn’t mean it can’t be special

- Try to connect via zoom, or facetime
• Play family games virtually
• Open presents on screen

Whatever innovative ways you come up with to celebrate traditions, make it memorable. For more information on how to keep yourself and others safe this Christmas, and every day, see gov.ie here.

Vaccination

I know the news this week has not been good. The big difference now, though, is that we enter a period of Level 5 restrictions with light at the end of the tunnel. We know now that we are making this effort with the prospect of mass vaccination ahead, with the real prospect of returning to some normality. Later this month, vaccination will begin across the EU.

The Irish Government has developed a high-level plan for the safe, effective and efficient vaccination of the population, while safeguarding our health and social care services. It will be rolled-out nationally and vaccines will be available free of charge to everyone in the country. It will take time but it is beginning.

The National COVID-19 Vaccination Strategy is available to read on gov.ie here.

And finally

It’s important to remember all of those who have lost their lives to COVID-19 this year, their families and the many who are still feeling the effects after contracting COVID-19. We should also remember those in nursing homes and care homes and our incredible health care workers who prove that not all heroes wear capes. I also want to acknowledge all of the workers on the frontline, of whatever kind, who have worked tirelessly to keep the country going this year. We owe them a huge debt of gratitude.

I’d also like to acknowledge the Irish overseas this Christmas who can’t be at home. We are already looking forward to a time when we can all be gathered together again. And that’s why we must do this – so that when we are all gathered around the table again – that nobody is missing.

I also want to mention too that the Government has given the green light to Santa to enter Irish airspace as an essential worker on Christmas Eve and he will deliver presents to all the good boys and girls this year. Make sure as well as the usual cookies and mince pies that you also remember to leave out some hand sanitiser for him too!

I would like to thank you again for your hard work, resilience and compliance. I wish you and your families a very happy and safe Christmas and a happy and healthy new year.

Thank you.