

Briefing on the government's response to COVID-19 - Wednesday 27 January 2021

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27 January 2021

Introduction and up-to-date Public Health Guidance

Good morning,

Yesterday, as you know, the government announced that the current Level 5 restrictions have been extended until the 5th of March. We have seen record high numbers of cases, of people in hospital and tragically of people dying over the last month and while this extension of restrictions is extremely difficult for people, it is necessary to save lives and to protect our health service.

While we have seen a welcome decrease in the number of cases over the past few days, numbers remain very high, with community transmission still worryingly high. While the decrease in numbers is encouraging, it is important that we don't lose our bearings. The current rate of community transmission is many multiples higher than earlier in the year and still double what we saw at the peak of wave 2 at the end of October.

It's likely now that we all know someone who has tested positive and we may know someone who has lost their life to COVID or someone suffering the serious ill effects of this disease.

In many ways, it is these next few weeks that will be harder than the last, because we need to make at least the same improvement again, and as time goes on, that is harder and harder for

everyone. But it's more important than ever that we redouble our efforts. We must stay at home with very limited exceptions. We have shown our resilience in the last ten months and we can do this – but it takes all of us working together to beat back the disease.

It's also important to remember that there is no shame in being diagnosed with COVID-19. Testing positive doesn't mean we have done something wrong. When community transmission is high and with new, more transmissible strains of the virus, it is difficult to avoid. That's why the basic measures of handwashing, mask wearing and staying two metres apart remain our main defence. As well as that, we must continue to do the right thing if we test positive or become a close contact. That means self-isolating or restricting your movements.

Our health system is under significant pressure. More people have ended up in hospital and in ICU with COVID than at any time during the pandemic. If someone is in ICU with the virus, they will end up there for longer than for certain other illnesses – because of this, beds and resources are occupied for longer and our hospitals are under severe pressure. So, even though numbers of admissions may go down, even decreased numbers will create further build up in the system.

We have seen the strain this has placed on our frontline workers in these healthcare settings. Many of them are under almost unbearable strain. We must do it for them. We must do it for each other – for our families, our communities and the most vulnerable.

I'm going to remind you now of some of the supports that are available to you while we all navigate another 6 weeks of restrictions.

Business Supports

This is an extremely difficult time for businesses, many have been forced to close their doors or, at the very least, change their way of operating. Footfall on busy city streets is dramatically lower than this time last year, as you'd expect, Dublin footfall is down 68% on January 2020.

With so many businesses closed, hundreds of thousands now find themselves without work. There continues to be [a range of supports available](#) for employees and their employers.

Pandemic Unemployment Payment

This week, the Department of Social Protection has issued weekly payments to over 475,000 people in receipt of PUP. This payment is valued at €142.86 million and marks a 3% increase on last week. These figures are in addition to the 189,860 people who were on the Live Register at the end of December. The lowest number of people claiming the PUP was on the 21st December at 277,700. That's a 200,000 increase in one month.

All PUP payments issued were in recipients' bank accounts or at their post office yesterday, Tuesday, 26th January.

In the past seven days, some 10,000 people closed their PUP claim, with almost 7000 of these stating that they were doing so because they are returning to work.

The quickest way to make a claim for PUP or to close a claim is to do so online and to log on www.MyWelfare.ie.

Enhanced Illness Benefit Payment

When a worker is told to self-isolate or restrict movements by a doctor or the HSE due to being a probable source of infection or has been diagnosed with COVID-19 by a doctor, they can apply for an Enhanced Illness Benefit payment of €350 per week.

To be eligible for this payment a person must be confined to their home or a medical facility.

Since last March, around 120,000 people under the age of 66 have been medically certified for receipt of this benefit.

Social welfare scams

There have been reports also that some members of the public have received text messages from an unknown number, purporting to be from Revenue.

These text messages give a web link that the person is asked to click in order to claim a payment of €350.

People are advised not click on or reply to any link which appears to be suspicious.

We want to remind you that Bank account or other financial institution account details are never requested from customers via a text message or on social media.

Employment Wage Subsidy Scheme (EWSS)

There are currently 45,700 employers registered with Revenue for the Employment Wage Subsidy Scheme. To date, a total of over €1.7 billion in subsidies has been paid to 44,500 employers.

COVID Restrictions Support Scheme (CRSS)

The COVID Restrictions Support Scheme or CRSS 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.

To date, 18,900 businesses have registered for CRSS with Revenue.

For more information on these and other supports available to you - go to gov.ie.

Housing and Residential

For those who are currently renting, existing tenancy protections mean that a tenant cannot be evicted from their home during this period of travel restrictions.

To enable a limited functioning of the housing and residential tenancy market, it has also been agreed that online viewings will be the default approach to viewing property for rental or sale and physical viewing only permissible at the point where a tenancy agreement is being entered into or where a contract for sale has been drawn up.

This approach balances the need to avoid social interaction with the need to provide a pathway to tenancy and home ownership for those who need it.

A moratorium on evictions taking place came into operation throughout the country on 31st December 2020 and will remain in operation until 15th March 2021 or later if necessary, with limited exceptions.

In addition, subject to certain conditions, where a tenant is in rent arrears due to COVID-19 and is at risk of losing their tenancy during the period from 11th January to 12th April 2021, a 90-day termination notice period applies, rather than the usual 28 days, where the tenancy cannot be sustained. The earliest termination date allowed in such circumstances is 13th April 2021 and rent increases are prohibited.

Other/Community Supports

Community Call

The continued restrictions are particularly challenging for those who are most isolated and vulnerable.

The Community Call Fora, run by the local authorities, were set up back in March of last year to support those feeling isolated during this pandemic. They are providing an invaluable service to those who need them. They continue to be available to deal with calls on topics from financial worries to requests for help with groceries and medications.

Should you need them, the Fora helpline numbers are available on [gov.ie](https://www.gov.ie).

And 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.

If you know someone who may need some assistance at this time, we encourage you to contact the support lines on their behalf. Check in with those who may be living alone, in isolated areas or are medically vulnerable. A simple phone call or offer of help can go a long way.

Still Here

We are also very conscious of those for whom home is not a safe place. For those who experience domestic abuse, it is important that you know you are not alone – domestic and sexual violence support services from State agencies and the voluntary sector have been adapted and increased to ensure they remain open to you.

They remain open at each of the different stages of restrictions, even at this Level 5 most severe stage.

It is important to remember that restrictions on movement do not apply to a person escaping from a risk of harm or seeking to access essential services. The ‘Still Here’ campaign was developed by Government and frontline services to reassure victims that support is ‘still here’.

You can find out how to access these services at stillhere.ie.

Schools and Education

We know that this is a very difficult time for those who are involved in the home-schooling process. The National Educational Psychological Service of the Department of Education, NEPS, have developed an updated series of animation videos for parents and students during this period of school closures.

These build on materials, that proved popular with parents previously.

The videos feature important updated wellbeing advice and guidance, and include tips on how students can stay positive, active and connected, and how parents can support their child’s daily routine.

Irish language and sign language interpretation versions will also be available.

The videos will be posted on the Department of Education’s Twitter account over the coming days and uploaded on gov.ie and the schools website.

The National Council for Special Education has a range of resources for parents of children with special educational needs, including useful material on a broad list of supportive topics, and short focused video materials designed to provide advice and guidance to parents. These are available on ncse.ie and disseminated through their twitter feed [@ncseirl](https://twitter.com/ncseirl).

The NCSE is also operating a dedicated phone line for parents of children with special educational needs during this period of school closure, offering support and guidance; the number is 01 603 3456 and it is open during office hours.

Keep Well

We know the next few weeks will be hard for all of us. But there are ways we can make it a little better for ourselves. Keeping active, getting outside within your 5km and staying connected with other people can make a positive difference. Some days, some weeks will be harder than others.

The “Keep Well” campaign is aimed at showing 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. It provides guidelines, information, and tips on things that will help us keep well through the coming months.

As part of the Keep Well campaign, activities and supports are available through your local authority. For example, Dun Laoghaire-Rathdown County Council are running ‘Men on the Move’ for January. A free 12-week physical activity programme for adult men to help them become more active, while in Galway, an initiative by Milltown and Belmont National Schools encourages people to cook with food leftovers in the ‘loving leftovers’ programme. These are just two examples of the wonderful work going on in all of our communities around the country.

All of this is available on gov.ie/healthyireland.

Weekly Guide to Cultural and Online Highlights

At the moment, the days can feel very long. We are looking for new ways to keep ourselves amused and busy. We miss concerts, theatre shows and events - but the good news is that these are still available – just in a different way.

Every Friday, a handy guide to online cultural and entertainment activities is available to view online. Live theatrical and music performances, curated tours of national collections, online art demonstrations and events are all available, and readily accessible from the comfort of your own home.

You can find this great resource at gov.ie and on Government social media channels.

While I know this is no substitution for live events, it might help you to stay connected and perhaps allow you to rekindle cultural interests you haven’t had time or facility to engage with before, so I would really encourage you to check it out.

The Right Course

If you are temporarily unemployed due to COVID-19, you may wish to visit <https://www.gov.ie/therightcourse> to find out more information about short courses on offer.

The Right Course is a one-stop shop which outlines the range of further education and training places and the courses in higher education on offer as well as information for those on a social welfare payment. It gives information on upskilling options, free online training courses and virtual job placements.

These are available to everyone, and you can keep your social welfare payments while undertaking the course.

International Travel

Under the current restrictions, no non-essential travel should be undertaken. This includes any non-essential international travel.

Yesterday, the government introduced a number of measures aimed at reducing travel in and out of the country.

This includes an increase in the fixed penalty fine relating to breaches of the non-essential international travel restriction, a range of mandatory quarantine measures, and the restriction of travel from South Africa, Brazil and other South American countries. It is already the case that those arriving into the country must produce evidence of a negative PCR test taken in the previous 3 days.

Many of the people arriving at our ports or airports are Irish residents returning from trips abroad. Under current Level 5 rules, nobody should be travelling abroad unless it is for a genuinely essential need – that does not include holidays, visiting relatives and friends, or staying at a second home.

The Garda Síochána have already started checkpoints on routes near the airport and ports, and will also start checking people arriving at the airport to see if they left the country in breach of the regulations.

Where people are determined to ignore the regulations on travel, they will face increased penalties.

Compliance

With vaccines on the way and signs of improvement in case numbers, it could be tempting to get complacent. But we simply cannot. The virus is widespread in our communities and it is clear that the new variants have had an impact on the transmissibility of the disease. Staying at home is more important than ever. An Garda Síochána continues to see high compliance with public health guidelines and regulations. You will see more high visibility checkpoints on the roads in both urban and rural locations.

Please remember our Gardai are frontline staff who are playing their part to keep us all safe. Gardai can prosecute for breaches of the travel restrictions through a fixed charge notice. We must respect our frontline workers and the public health guidance by staying safely at home unless absolutely necessary. So, if you are asked to return home, please do so.

An Garda Síochána will always engage, explain and encourage and only as a last resort, enforce!

Masks

As I mentioned earlier, the majority of people are following the guidelines and correctly wearing face masks. By law, you must wear a face covering on public transport, in shops and other indoor settings, it is also recommended that you wear your mask outdoors, particularly in busy settings such as parks and playgrounds. From this week, the legal requirement to wear a mask now extends to banks, credit union offices and post offices.

Also remember to wear a mask:

- when staying 2 metres apart from people is difficult

- in healthcare settings - this includes hospitals, GP surgeries, care settings, nursing homes and dental practices
- when visiting or caring for anyone who is more at risk from COVID-19 - such as people aged 70 or over or people who are medically vulnerable

Visors are not recommended as they do not provide sufficient protection against the spread of COVID-19.

Remember to wear your face covering correctly, it should cover your nose, go under your chin and:

- fit snugly but comfortably against the side of the face
- be secured with ties or ear loops
- include at least 2 layers of fabric
- allow for breathing without restriction

Wash your hands before putting on and after removing the mask.

More guidance on face coverings and information on exemptions is available on [gov.ie](https://www.gov.uk).

Many people find masks uncomfortable and awkward to wear but they are another tool in mitigating the risk of infection.

Shopping Safely

Only essential businesses are open at the moment. If a retailer sells both essential and non-essential items they are reminded to use their discretion and remember the guidance. You can order non-essential items online for delivery only, click and collect has been suspended for now. If you need to go to the shops for essential items, please remember:

- face coverings are mandatory in retail outlets
- try to shop alone if you can – have one member of the household do the shopping
- respect staff in the shop and other shoppers by keeping your distance

All the advice is available on [gov.ie](https://www.gov.uk).

Issues, Concerns & Clarification

Funerals and Bereavements

Everyone is finding the restrictions difficult and they become even more difficult when they interrupt our ability to say goodbye to those we love. We aren't able to give people the send-off they deserve.

At the moment, funerals are limited to 10 mourners. Priority has to be given to families themselves in attending funerals, whether this is in the homes of the deceased or in the Funeral Home. Likewise, attendance in churches and graveyards is restricted to families.

In this third wave we now sadly see a significant increase in the numbers of funerals. Concerns are being raised regarding the dangers of dropping our guard at funerals when we are at this critical time. Reports of significant numbers of people congregating in homes of bereaved persons and in funeral homes, or at churches and graveyards before or after services, are concerning.

The inclement weather we have at this time of year can result in those lining funeral routes at times congregating in doorways of churches and other areas along the route to seek shelter. Every contact increases the risk of transmission of this highly contagious virus. Those wishing to express their condolence should do so through social media, online websites, text or card.

It is vital, despite our natural emotions and desire to be close to and hug other people, to respect the situation we find ourselves in as we try to convey our sympathies to bereaved families. It is important to remember our objective – to reduce the spread of the virus - and that we should all do what is right, even if it is different and difficult.

It is also important to know that there is help out there if you are coping with loss at this time.

The HSE and Irish Hospice Foundation have established a bereavement free support line on 1800 80 70 77. This service is available Monday to Friday from 10am to 1pm.

For assistance and guidance in grieving and planning a funeral in these exceptional times there is helpful information available on gov.ie.

National Vaccination Strategy

While the current phase of restrictions is challenging for everyone, and it can seem endless, there is some light at the end of the tunnel. Since our last briefing, the roll out of vaccinations has begun and people are being vaccinated every day.

Everyone involved understands the importance of this programme to the country. Everything that can be done is being done, and will be done, to deliver it. Our approach will be safe, effective, and secure.

In this initial phase of limited supply our first priority is to protect those who are most vulnerable to COVID-19 infection in line with Government's initial Allocation Strategy.

Where possible to do so, all residents and staff in our Nursing Homes have already received one dose and some have received second doses. Healthcare workers are also a priority. Second doses will be administered over the coming weeks to 77,000 healthcare workers.

Up to Sunday 24th January, we have seen 143,000 cumulative vaccine doses administered.

We will continue to roll out first and second doses to our remaining long term care facilities, including nursing homes and congregated disability and mental health settings for the over 65s and frontline healthcare workers during February.

We will also begin Community vaccination as planned in mid-February.

This will see people aged 70 and older vaccinated in the following order: 85 and older, 80-84, 75-79, 70-74, in line with Government's Allocation Strategy.

For the moment, people do not need to take any specific action. Those aged 85 years and older and will be administered the vaccine initially through GPs in their surgeries. The HSE is preparing a public information campaign that will provide all necessary details in advance and ensure that everyone knows when, where and how to access their vaccine.

On the AstraZeneca vaccine, we will know more later this week as the European Medicines Agency are considering approval of the product this Friday 29 January.

Approvals and confirmation of supply are the factors which are somewhat outside of our direct control but the programme has been built to be flexible and agile so that we can respond quickly to new developments and new information.

The priority list of groups for vaccination is available to read along with the National COVID-19 Vaccination Strategy on [gov.ie](https://www.gov.ie).

Vaccine Scams

I would like to draw your attention to potential scams relating to the COVID-19 vaccine.

In recent days, An Garda Siochana has been made aware of members of the public receiving fraudulent text messages and calls regarding vaccinations – requesting people to confirm private information such as PPS number, date of birth and address.

The HSE will never text or call individuals requesting personal information and they will never request payment for a COVID-19 test or vaccine. Your local GP will be the first point of contact about vaccination or COVID-19 testing. The COVID-19 vaccine is free and it is not available privately.

We would ask that members of the public contact any vulnerable friends or family to make them aware of these calls and text messages.

Finally

I had hoped for my first briefing in January to be very different. As we have seen many times now however, this virus has no respect for plans. One in 76 people in this country have now received a positive diagnosis of COVID-19 and our hospitals are under significant pressure. Before you decide to make an unnecessary journey or to exercise or explore a beauty spot outside of your 5km, think twice. Remember those who have lost their lives to this virus. Think of the families that are suffering. Think of our incredible frontline workers who wish that they could stay at home. Think of our families overseas who we haven't seen in ages. Think of those in Nursing Homes who haven't had proper visits from family members in nearly a year. Think of grandparents who are staying at home and have yet to meet their new grandchildren. Think of each other. The virus is all around us.

If you are out for an essential purpose:

- social distance. Respect the 2 metre guidance
- wash your hands. If handwashing isn't possible, use an alcohol-based hand sanitiser
- respect that people are anxious
- wear your mask
- there are shopping times designated for more vulnerable members of our community. Please respect them

We are at a crucial point yet again in the fight against COVID-19. We are beginning to see that the latest restrictions are working in curbing the spread of the virus. But Dr Mike Ryan of the WHO says this new wave is like bringing on a substitute in the second half of a football match. He said 'it doesn't change the rules of the game, it doesn't change what you do, but it gives the virus some new energy. It adds to the challenge you face but it doesn't change what we need to do to win'. We can't control many aspects of life but we can control is how to protect ourselves and our communities if we all play our part.

None of us are alone in our feelings right now. We are all in this situation together and together we will get through it.

Thank you.