Introduction and up-to-date Public Health Guidance

Good morning,

With the longest January finally behind us, we enter Spring, though still in Level 5, and still with high case numbers. Our health system continues to operate under intense pressure. Hospital numbers are still at peak levels of wave 2 and we are still using surge capacity. We still tested over 120,000 in the last 7 days.

While the numbers are falling we can’t plateau at this point. We haven’t come this far – to only come this far!

For now, the virus is still with us. With the new variant, it is potentially even more transmissible than ever and we must continue to keep our guard up. We owe it to everyone, especially our most vulnerable, to make sure they get the chance to stay healthy and to get the vaccine.

It is a good time for all of us to think about what we are doing and how we are doing it. Are we being careful enough, are we maintaining our focus, or are there times when we relax our guard a little bit too much.

Before you leave your home, I ask you again to think twice.

- is my journey for an essential purpose?
• who else have I been in contact with?
• who else could I be putting at risk?

There are still small mistakes many of us are making – we are human after all.

• let’s not focus on what’s allowed and instead focus on what is safe
• be wary of those you are in contact with. They might tell you they are being safe, they might even think they are but that may not always be the case
• ventilation is extremely important. Open windows and doors. Keep air flowing in and around indoor spaces
• while outdoors is safe, not everything outdoors can be deemed ‘safe’ – you still need to keep your distance, wear a mask and follow proper cough and sneeze etiquette
• remember that wearing a mask protects those around you and that it is important to wear your mask correctly – a mask that doesn’t cover your mouth and nose is not offering enough protection
• we are asking everyone to work from home unless essential
• if it is essential that you attend work, remember to follow the public health guidelines– keep your distance, wear a mask, follow cough and sneeze etiquette. This applies when you are traveling to work, when you are working and when you are on a break - it’s no good following the rules when working if you then forget them when you are having a break or in the canteen or in those social spaces in the workplace
• it is not recommended that you share a vehicle with colleagues – COVID-19 spreads very easily in confined spaces. We appreciate for some this is unavoidable, so make it as difficult as possible for the virus to spread – wear a facemask and ensure the windows are open and air is circulating through the car

Business Supports

All non-essential businesses have been asked to remain closed until at least 5 March. Some haven’t been able to open since this time last year and many others have had to change how they operate.

Yesterday, the government announced a further €160m for measures to help businesses during the pandemic.

This includes a new €60m Scheme, called the COVID-19 Business Aid Scheme (CBAS) which is being developed to provide grants to businesses who are ineligible for the government’s other existing schemes designed to help with fixed costs.

Wholesalers, suppliers, caterers and events companies down 75% or more in turnover will benefit.

It also includes an additional €10m which will be allocated to the COVID-19 Products Scheme to help in the fight against the virus. Firms researching or manufacturing PPE, sanitisers, tests, equipment or other medicinal products which are relevant to COVID-19 are eligible for funding of up to 50% of their capital costs.
The government also approved an additional €90m for the Sustaining Enterprise Fund, which offers funding to eligible manufacturing and internationally traded services companies. This Fund has protected 22,000 jobs across the country to date.

**Employment Wage Subsidy Scheme**

There are currently 48,200 employers registered with Revenue for the Employment Wage Subsidy Scheme. To date, a total of over €1.8 billion in subsidies has been paid to 46,400 employers. An additional €323 million in employer PRSI has been forgone due to the reduced rate of PRSI on wages paid which are eligible for EWSS.

**Covid Restrictions Support Scheme**

In addition, to date 19,700 businesses have registered for Covid Restrictions Support Scheme with Revenue.

**Tourism Business Continuity Scheme**

The government’s Tourism Business Continuity scheme is a €55m strategic funding scheme. Run by Failte Ireland, it is a targeted support for tourism businesses by providing a contribution to the fixed costs of tourism businesses not eligible for the COVID Restrictions Support Scheme (CRSS), that have experienced significant revenue loss and have not received support from other Fáilte Ireland continuity grant schemes. Phase 1 of the scheme opens on 11 February – full details on how to apply can be found on Failte Ireland’s website.

**Pandemic Unemployment Payment**

This week, weekly payments to approximately 481,000 people in receipt of Pandemic Unemployment Payment have issued. This payment is valued at €144.6 million and marks an increase of 1,698 on the number paid last week.

Since March 2020, around €5.8 billion has been paid out in total. These figures are in addition to the 188,543 people who were on the Live Register at the end of January.

All PUP payments issued were in recipients’ bank accounts or at their post office yesterday, Tuesday, 9th February.

Since the last payment, almost 11,000 people closed their PUP claim, with approximately 8,000 of these stating that they were doing so because they are returning to work.

I also want to remind you that self-employed people in receipt of the Pandemic Unemployment Payment (PUP) who are looking to maintain their business can earn up to €960 over an eight-week period, while retaining their full PUP entitlement.

There is no formal application process and a self-employed person simply needs to inform the Department of Social Protection if they earn over €960 in any eight-week period.

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**

One of the things we are still hearing is that people are either ‘waiting to see’ or are worried about having no income if they can’t attend work. Please remember, 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.

Unlike the general Illness benefit, there are no waiting days attached to this payment, so it is paid from day one of illness or self-isolation. It is not necessary for a person with symptoms to leave their home to get a medical certificate from their doctor as all of the application process can be completed online via [www.MyWelfare.ie](http://www.MyWelfare.ie).

This week, approx. 7,150 people under the age of 66 have been medically certified for receipt of this benefit.

We know that some people may feel they are letting the side down by staying out of work if their symptoms are mild or if they have no symptoms but have tested positive. The reality is you are letting the side down by turning up, so try to keep that in mind.

**Other/Community Supports**

**Community Call**

The Community Call fora continue to be available to deal with calls on topics from financial worries to requests for help with groceries and medications. To date they have dealt with over 62,430 calls. So, remember, they can help if you have been asked to self-isolate or restrict your movements. They are there for everyone.

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

Remember also that you can also contact ALONE. If someone needs information, reassurance, or just to talk to someone they can call ALONE’s national phone line on 0818 222 024.

If you know someone who may need some assistance at this time but might not want to ask, 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. In addition to everything else we are dealing with we are now experiencing this spell of cold weather and a simple phone call or offer of help can be reassuring and may encourage people to avoid risks.

**‘Supporting Children’ campaign**

We are all struggling at the moment, but this time is particularly difficult for children and young people. They are sacrificing so much from school, activities and meeting up with their friends. It is important that we acknowledge children and look out for those who may be more vulnerable due to these current restrictions.
The government last week launched the ‘Supporting Children’ campaign, encouraging everyone to be mindful of our young people in these challenging times. The ‘Supporting Children’ portal provides access to information and supports that are available for children, young people and their families.

You can access this portal at [gov.ie/supportingchildren](http://gov.ie/supportingchildren).

**Anti-Viral campaign**

The government’s #AntiViral campaign continues to provide a platform for young people to share their experiences of living in Level 5 and showing how they are taking the lead when it comes to sticking with the guidelines and being #antiviral. You may have seen the videos doing the rounds online.

It has highlighted the good that our young people are doing in order to keep everyone safe, even when sticking to government guidelines is tough. To date, the hashtag has had over 5.2 million views.

Why not go online and see how you can be #antiviral.

**Ireland Reads**

As part of the Keep Well campaign, ‘Ireland Reads’ has been launched.

Ireland Reads is a new campaign from Irish libraries aiming to get the whole country reading this month in the lead up to a national day of reading on Thursday, February 25th. Taking some time to relax and do the things we enjoy has never been more important and reading is a great way to get a sense of escape and boost wellbeing.

Libraries all over the country will be running events and initiatives as part of Ireland Reads and the website [IrelandReads.ie](http://IrelandReads.ie) will be offering some reading inspiration – simply enter the type of book you like best, how long you have available to read each day and the website will suggest a book and tell you how long it will take to finish it.

Some people might tell you that books are no longer necessary now that we have the Internet. Don’t believe them. I want to remind you of a quote I first mentioned very early on in this pandemic– ‘reading takes you places when you have to stay where you are’.

More information is available on [IrelandReads.ie](http://IrelandReads.ie) or from your local library.

**‘Spring on Your Doorstep’ initiative**

While we face many challenges connecting to each other at present the ever-changing natural world provides much to enjoy and celebrate.

The OPW in support of the ‘Keep Well’ campaign is running an initiative throughout February on its social media platforms celebrating the coming of spring. You’ll find tips on gardening, spring imagery and much more on their social channels throughout the month.
International Travel

Non-essential overseas travel is a breach of level 5 regulations and it is important that everyone understands and respects that.

In the past week, a very significant range of measures have been taken on travel.

- The fixed penalty for non-essential overseas travel has been increased from €100 to €500 and the Gardaí are detecting and fining people
- Visa-free travel from Brazil and South Africa has been suspended and issuing of visas, other than in exceptional circumstances, has been suspended
- Regulations requiring a pre-departure negative PCR test for all passengers arriving into Ireland from overseas have been extended – anyone who arrives without a PCR test is obliged to take one on arrival

Regulations have been amended so that the same rules and obligations when it comes to testing and quarantine apply to those who arrive into Ireland from overseas via Northern Ireland.

While overall passenger numbers are a tiny fraction of normal levels—below 3% for this time of year, over half of the passengers arriving into the country are Irish residents and two thirds of those are returning from holidays. This is a very concerning statistic. While we all would love and need a holiday, now is not the time for travel. Unless you are travelling for a specific essential purpose, please stay at home and follow the guidance.

If you have travelled, remember under new regulations you must quarantine at home with very limited exceptions. There are penalties for non-compliance. You can end the period of quarantine if you take a PCR test after 5 days.

If you have travelled, these precautions are keeping you, your family, your colleagues and your community safe. Please abide by them.

For more information on international travel go to [gov.ie](http://gov.ie).

Compliance

An Garda Síochána continues to see high compliance with public health guidelines and regulations. You will continue to see high visibility checkpoints on the roads in both urban and rural locations. If you are stopped at one of these checkpoints please be respectful to the Gardai, frontline staff, who are just doing their part to keep us all safe. They can prosecute breaches of the travel restrictions through a fixed charge notice if needed. The work the Gardai are doing is on all of our behalf and for those frontline workers who have no choice to provide us with essential services. Please respect that.

Staying at home is more important than ever. If you could work from home last week, you can work from home this week. It might be tempting as numbers improve to anticipate some easing of restrictions but we are simply not there yet.
Issues, Concerns & Clarification

Funerals and Bereavements

I again want to mention funerals. At the moment, funerals are limited to 10 mourners.

It’s in our nature to want to express condolences and share affection at this most difficult time but we cannot drop our guard. Concerns continue to be raised regarding the dangers of being complacent at funerals. It is a very emotional situation when naturally we want to reach out to people and show our support but we must avoid congregating in churchyards, graveyards, and funeral homes. Priority has to be given to families. Express your condolences in other ways such as text, card and social media. Families understand and finding other ways to convey sympathies can be equally, if not more important, in the time of COVID-19.

Local Authorities have launched an initiative encouraging people to follow the guidance when it comes to funerals and ways to sympathise safely which you will see across social media channels.

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

We are now 50 days into the rollout of the largest vaccination programme in the history of the State. We have delivered 4.9 vaccine doses per hundred people and 1.7% of the population is fully vaccinated. Ireland is progressing well with our programme compared to EU states. Vaccines are being administered very quickly after their arrival in country.

We are building the appropriate capability, processes and systems to quickly distribute all vaccines as supply increases. The vaccination programme is already involving national partnerships with GPs, Pharmacists, and other Healthcare Professionals across Ireland as well as specialist vaccination hubs. We are mobilising an initial team of around 1,700 vaccinators across the country. More than 5,800 people have now completed the training programme.

Phase 3 of the Vaccination programme will start from next Monday (15 February) which will see GPs inviting those over the age of 85 to come forward for vaccination.

And finally

This weekend we will mark Valentine’s Day. And we would love to be able to go out for a nice meal, go to the theatre or go to the cinema. But, more importantly, we would love to be able to see a return to normality soon. The virus feeds on our lapses in concentration so if you are out for an essential purpose:

- remember to keep your 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 – it may feel uncomfortable and restrictive but masks continue to be effective in mitigating the risk of infection
• there are shopping times designated for more vulnerable members of our community. Please respect them

If you are exercising, stay within 5km. Although tempting, avoid beauty spots, beaches and parks that are outside the limit, even if only by a kilometre or two.

We are beginning to see that the latest restrictions are working in curbing the spread of the virus but we must persevere and continue to achieve the week on week improvements if we are going to stay on target. That means continuing to do all we have been doing.

In the first few months of the pandemic, a year ago, the Director General of the WHO asked people to ‘be safe, be smart, be kind’. And today that’s what I’m asking of you: ‘be safe, be smart and be kind’

• follow the guidance
• do what is you know is right
• think of others

Together we will get there.

Thank you.