

Briefing on Government measures in response to COVID-19 - 10 March 2021

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Check against Delivery

Introduction and up-to-date Public Health Guidance

Good morning,

As we have been hearing over the past week, we have reasons to be positive and to start to see brighter days ahead.

We are seeing sustained progress in suppressing transmission of the virus. Cases are decreasing across all age groups, but we would particularly like to acknowledge those aged 19 to 24. The incidence of the virus in this age group is this week half of what it was in mid-February, which is a great testament to the sacrifices this group has been making to suppress the virus.

We are seeing gradual and careful progress towards re-opening our society. This week saw the Early Childhood Care and Education Programme resume and next week, another large group of students will be back in the classroom.

The vaccination programme, whose objective is to prevent serious illness, hospitalisation and death from Covid-19 is already providing protection to nearly 400,000 of the most vulnerable. The vaccines are highly effective. The impact is evident already in reductions in infection in long term residential care and healthcare settings, for the first time allowing public health experts the scope to consider what options might be possible in those areas most important to us all. Thanks to the vaccination programme, we are on the way to a safer and

more positive situation for our society. However, we must also note that we remain in a precarious position and that we do not yet have sufficient vaccines rolled out to allow us to drop our guard.

While overall numbers are falling, cases and deaths remain high. 13 counties still have a positivity rate which is over 10%. The number of people in hospital this morning – while vastly improved, is still in excess of the numbers at the peak of the second wave. In the past, patterns here have followed those in Europe and across the world. There are many countries in Europe who are currently experiencing rising incidence of the virus – the majority of countries are in a worsening situation.

We must also keep in mind that the variant of the virus which is now the most prevalent in the country is significantly more transmissible than the previous strain. We have to imagine that it is a brand-new disease. The fact that we are making such steady progress is a testament to the effort you are making. However, we must make sure that we don't experience a 4th surge of the virus before the benefits of the vaccine can be experienced. We don't ever want to return to the scenes we had in January, the pressure on our health service and the very sad outcomes for many families.

Overall, compliance with public health guidance remains strong.

This is evident from results of Wave 3 of the Social Activity Measure study. However, both the SAM results and other data show upticks in both mobility and social contact. We must, therefore, continue to abide by the measures which are in place and to follow the public health guidelines. The more progress we make in the coming weeks, the more options that will be available to Government in deciding on further easing of restrictions.

Mobility and Compliance

Data shows that there has been a big jump in people moving around in the last month. Retail and recreation mobility are up 16%, workplace mobility is up 7% and footfall in Dublin city is up 29% - nearly 900,000 thousand people. Travel volumes increased in every county.

It's understandable that numbers would increase with our children returning to schools and creches but it's very important that we continue to stay at home unless it is for an essential purpose. People should continue to work from home unless your physical presence in the workplace is essential. We should only be exercising within 5km of our homes -although with the weather it is sometimes tempting to go further.

An Garda Síochána are continuing to carry out nationwide high visibility patrols at public amenities, parks and beauty spots and checkpoints on routes around the country. There are doing so to keep us all safe.

To date, they have issued around 12,000 fines across the range of all COVID-19 breaches. You should also be aware that if a driver is found to be in breach of the non-essential travel regulations that not only can the driver be fined, but their adult passengers can also be fined. We are all longing for some relief and to move forward but what we need to keep in mind is if we don't stick with the rules for now we are putting people at risk but also, we are also potentially slowing down our recovery.

Social Activity Measure (SAM) Wave 3

Preliminary results from our social activity measure Wave 3 – which is based on data collected during the week beginning 22nd February suggest that mobility and social activity have increased modestly over recent weeks.

There has been a small increase in the proportion of the population undertaking journeys outside of the home. The largest increases relate to trips to outdoor locations (parks, beaches, countryside) and visits to other households.

These increases have occurred in the context of improved weather since the last week of January, when the baseline data were collected. So that doesn't necessarily mean there has been much more social activity. Approximately half the adult population continued to meet up with no individuals from outside their household in a given 48-hour period.

There has also been a modest increase in the number of close contacts between people, mostly due to a rise in the number of close contacts at outdoor locations.

Most close contacts are happening in workplaces, outdoor locations and in homes. The largest increase was at outdoor locations, up from 1.1% to 6.2%. It is worth remembering that while outdoors is safer than indoors, it is not risk-free. Try to stick to the 2-metre rule and wear a mask if you can't do that and it is very crowded.

What we are a little more concerned about is a smaller but still significant increase in the number of close contacts associated with visiting homes. Although more close contacts happen in workplaces, most of these occur with at least one person wearing a mask. In contrast, when people are in someone's home, very few people who have a close contact wear a mask at the time. This is a very important point and a trend which gives us cause for concern, given the heightened risk of infection in indoor spaces – especially with the new variant.

There is more information in the study which will be published on Friday.

One final thing I wanted to mention is the small increase in the proportion of non-essential workers going to their workplace. This comes out in the SAM study but is also shown by mobility data and was something we were concerned about once children and young people started returning to school.

I'm appealing to people again to continue to work from home where you are not required to be physically present in the workplace.

Updates - Supports

There continues to be a wide range of supports available to help employers and employees at this difficult time and many have been extended to the 30th June.

Employment Wage Subsidy Scheme

There are currently 49,000 employers registered with Revenue for the Employment Wage Subsidy Scheme. To date, a total of over €2.2 billion in subsidies has been paid to 47,800 employers.

Covid Restrictions Support Scheme

In addition, to date 21,000 businesses have registered for Covid Restrictions Support Scheme with Revenue.

Pandemic Unemployment Payment

This week, the Department of Social Protection has issued weekly payments to approximately 465,000 people in receipt of the Pandemic Unemployment Payment. This payment is valued at €139 million and marks a decrease of 3,987 on the number paid last week. A further €2 million in PUP arrears were made this week to approximately 6500 people. The quickest way to make a claim for PUP or to close a claim is to do so online and to log on [MyWelfare.ie](https://www.mywelfare.ie).

Enhanced Illness Benefit Payment

I've mentioned the enhanced Illness benefit payment previously. If you are an employer or an employee, please make sure your workers or your colleagues are aware that they can apply for an Enhanced Illness Benefit payment of €350 per week if they are told to self-isolate or restrict movements by a doctor or the HSE. It's in their interests and yours that they abide by the public health guidance if they test positive or are a close contact of a positive case.

This week, just over 2,900 people under the age of 66 have been medically certified for receipt of this benefit.

Supports for Live Performance Sector

Yesterday, Government also announced a €50 million suite of measures to support the commercial live performance sector to assist producers, promoters, venues and musicians.

Included in the suite announced is a significantly enhanced Live Performance Support Scheme (LPSS); a new support for sole traders and music businesses to pay fixed costs; a new capital fund to install recording facilities for live streaming; and a new local performance scheme this summer for villages and town centres.

The Live Performance Support Scheme 2021 will be open for applications from 19th March until 14th April.

Further information can be found on [gov.ie](https://www.gov.ie)

Leaving Certificate Candidate Portal

The Leaving Certificate 2021 Candidate Portal opens today where students should indicate whether they wish to sit the Leaving Certificate Examinations or receive State Examinations Commission Accredited Grades, or both.

The portal is open from midday today and will close on Tuesday 16 March at 6pm at gov.ie/LeavingCertificate.

All students who are entered for the 2021 Leaving Certificate must create an account on the candidate self-service portal, to register for examinations and/or SEC Accredited Grades. All students are required to confirm their choice for each subject, and confirm their subjects and levels.

It is important to note that students who opt for both the Examination and SEC Accredited Grades options will automatically receive the better grade in each of their subjects. A clear guide for students on how to use the portal and the choices that they need to make is available on gov.ie/LeavingCertificate.

National Vaccination Strategy

As previously mentioned, the vaccination programme's key objective is to prevent serious illness, hospitalisation and death from Covid-19 in Ireland.

The programme is highly efficient – approximately 95% of available doses are administered within seven days of arrival into the country.

People aged over 70 should have their first dose within the next six weeks or so.

The vaccine is already providing protection to nearly 400,000 of the most vulnerable with at least one dose delivered to:

- 100,000 long term residential care residents
- 175,000 public and private frontline health care workers
- 98,000 in the over 70 cohort

And over 525,000 doses delivered in total.

This week, we are starting to vaccinate people aged 16-69 at high risk from Covid-19 infection – approximately 150,000 people.

We are in what is probably the most challenging logistical phase of the programme, delivering mRNA vaccine in different volumes the length and breadth of the country.

There was a lot of focus, understandably, on those aged 85 and over who will be vaccinated this week, not having been vaccinated by last week.

72,000 had already been vaccinated, with about 800 remaining to be done in GP surgeries, about 1%. A decision from the European Medicines Agency on the Janssen single dose vaccine is due tomorrow. For more information on The National Vaccination Strategy and the updated prioritisation list go to gov.ie

St Patrick's Day

This day next week, we will mark St Patrick's Day, albeit in a very different way than we hoped we would. It won't be possible to gather with friends and there will be no parades but that doesn't mean there will be no spectacle to enjoy.

Organising parties, gatherings and flouting the guidance would be a blatant disregard for all we have endured to this point. It puts lives at risk, it puts the rollout of our vaccination programme at risk and ultimately, it puts our progress on the path to recovery at risk. We are hearing reports of house parties; street parties and other parties being arranged but we want to remind you that no organised activity is permitted under the current level of restrictions. Anyone found to be in breach, may face a fine and or prosecution.

A huge amount of work is going on behind the scenes to ensure that we can celebrate and enjoy all there is to, when it comes to being Irish. There will be a wonderful St Patrick's Festival – but we will have to enjoy it safely and responsibly from our homes. The St Patrick's Festival will be taking over Oireachtas TV for 6 days and nights which will mean over 1 million homes can access over 100 events from the comfort and safety of their kitchens and living rooms. We'd encourage families, friends, guardians and carers to help their loved ones find the Oireachtas TV channel and to download the TV Guides for ease. There are over 100 programmes to enjoy safely from your home - there really is something for everyone from traditional music sessions and theatre to storytelling and virtual tours.

Explore new ways to celebrate – decorate your house, connect with family abroad, enjoy an online event. Whatever you choose to do, please plan for a safe and compliant St Patrick's Day.

And finally

It has not been easy, and we are still a way from where we want to be. But we are getting there. We are continuing to make good progress and are seeing all the key indicators of disease fall. We have learned a lot about COVID-19 and will continue to do so. The emerging data on vaccines is really promising.

In the meantime, our best protection against this disease remains the trusted public health tools that we have been using effectively since last Spring. We know what works, we know how to do it and we know we can do it well. Maintain a social distance at all times, wear a face covering, do not mix with other households other than for essential reasons, wash your hands. Stay at home and stay safe.

Thank you