Briefing on the government's response to COVID-19 - Wednesday 7 April 2021

From Department of the Taoiseach

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Check against delivery

Introduction and up-to-date Public Health Guidance

Good morning,

Since I last spoke to you we have entered a new month and the next stage in our journey with COVID-19. Our vaccine programme has entered a new phase with increased levels of supply. The programme is scaling up in line with that planned supply to reach as many people as possible as quickly as possible. In the meantime, we need to continue to hang on a little longer as the reach and impact of the vaccine begins to take hold.

Easter and Springtime are times of renewal and hope and we have a lot of reasons to be hopeful. This week will see the administration of the 1 millionth dose of the vaccine.

• we have already seen that infection rates in vaccinated groups have fallen dramatically, allowing nursing home visits to return in the last few weeks
• there has been a collapse of COVID-19 case numbers in frontline healthcare workers since the commencement of the vaccination programme
• there has been more than a 95% drop in hospital staff confirmed cases at the end of February, compared to the peak in January
• as of Good Friday, 17% of Ireland’s population have had at least one dose of the COVID-19 vaccine, that’s one in six adults, with 7% of our most vulnerable fully inoculated
We can see the very first small benefits of the vaccine bonus, it is now possible for people from two different households who have been fully vaccinated to meet indoors without wearing masks or social distancing once there are no non-vaccinated people present. For many people who have been staying home and avoiding all contact, they can now relax and don’t need to take special precautions.

Like everyone, fully vaccinated people should continue to take precautions, such as handwashing, social distancing and mask wearing in all other settings. This will help to keep others safe during the rollout of the vaccination programme. And remember, if a fully vaccinated person has any symptoms of COVID-19 they shouldn’t visit others, including other fully vaccinated people. They should self-isolate and seek medical assessment and testing for COVID-19.

**Announcements**

And we are getting there slowly in other ways too.

Last week, Government announced that restrictions will begin to ease from next Monday, 12 April.

Overall, we are being asked to stay local during this next phase.

- schools will fully return, with all students back in the classroom for the first time since December. Parents are asked to continue to be vigilant for the remainder of the Easter break and following the return to school. In particular, parents are requested to avoid play dates or sleepovers so that we can continue to keep case numbers as low as possible and continue with the next phase of the reopening of schools
- from Monday, people can meet one other household outdoors, but not in gardens. Any meetings outdoors should be safe, with continued practising of social distancing and other safe behaviours. Masks should be worn if in a busy outdoor setting
- we can travel within our county or within 20km of our homes if crossing county boundaries
- all residential construction can restart as well as early-learning and childcare projects

From 19 April, we will see a return of elite sport and training for and playing of adult inter county National Gaelic Games Leagues, not including minor or under 20 competitions.

Then, subject to the prevailing health situation, on 26 April:

- outdoor sports facilities can reopen - such as tennis courts and golf courses
- outdoor visitor attractions can reopen
- underage non-contact outdoor training in pods of 15 or fewer can restart
- maximum attendance at funerals will increase to 25

If we can hold firm for a little bit longer and if the health situation allows, further easing of restrictions will be considered from 4 May. Areas being considered are:

- full reopening of construction
- phased return of non-essential retail commencing with click and collect and outdoor retail, for example: garden centres/nurseries
- recommencement of personal services on a staggered basis
- reopening of museums, galleries and libraries
- recommencement of religious services on a staggered basis

**Pop Up Test Centres**

The COVID-19 walk-in test centres provide quicker and easier access to COVID-19 testing for asymptomatic people, and are part of a series of enhancements to the current test and trace service being rolled out.

Between 25 March and 5 April the HSE has set up twelve walk-in test centres where we saw a significant take-up of testing, with 22,644 people attending, of which 25 to 44 year-olds made up nearly half of the walk-ins. Additional testing centres are due to open later this week and will target where there is the greatest risk of disease.

The overall positivity rate for the walk-in test centres is 2.7%, with the highest rate in Finglas at 5%.

The selection of walk-in sites is led by public health and is targeted to areas with high rates of transmission and is considered to be the best use of resources ensuring a targeted approach where intervention is needed most.

We would really encourage you to take advantage of this facility if it’s in your local area.

**Social Activity Measure Study**

The results of Wave 5 of the Social Activity Measure or SAM study will be published later this week. The first thing to say is compliance is still very high and results show that almost half of people continue to meet no one from outside of their household.

However, there are changes, 1 in 5 people have at least one close contact interaction on any given day.

As we might expect, workplaces and household visits account for the majority of close contact interactions. And of course, many of these visits involve essential work and caring. However, social visits are also a part of that.

What is more concerning is that the minority having social visits in households are taking fewer precautions than they were in early February. 1 in 10 people report hosting visitors or visiting another household for social reasons on any given day. Most of these visits take place indoors, with poor ventilation and no masks worn. While a majority reported maintaining social distancing during household visits in early February, less than a quarter did in late March.

These risks have resulted in a doubling in the proportion of the population who are having close contact encounters during social visits (from 3.1% to 6.7%). Each of these visits typically involve 2 to 3 people from another household.
Many months back we were saying “every contact counts”. If anything, this is even more the case with the variant which is now dominant in Ireland. Limiting our social contacts is a key defence in stopping the virus taking hold again, as it has done in a number of European countries.

The SAM study also tells us that workplace attendance increased in March compared to February. The increase in workplace attendance appears to be driven by more non-essential workers attending their workplace. More than a quarter of non-essential workers visited their workplace in a given week during the month of March. A minority of non-essential workers who have visited their workplace report that they could work home but prefer not to. A smaller number feel under pressure to go to work.

These results gel with other data we have been looking at. Over the last few weeks we have seen a lot more people out and about. Traffic volumes are up 11% week on week, and 15% in the month. What is quite concerning is that HSE reported average close contacts last week saw a 3% increase over the previous week and 8% on the previous month.

It is important for employers and employees to note that we are all still being asked to work from home unless we are carrying out essential work, which cannot be done without our physical presence at work. We understand that this is difficult for both employers and employees, but the goal is to allow the roll out of vaccines so that we can all look forward to the easing of restrictions and a better summer.

Compliance

Workplace Safety

While we continue to ask those who can work from home to do so, the Department of Enterprise, Trade and Employment is running a Work Safely campaign over the coming weeks. The campaign will target messaging directly to employers and employees highlighting specific risks and behaviours that need to be avoided in workplaces to prevent outbreaks.

While a high level of compliance has been reported by the inspectorates carrying out COVID-19 Work Safely Inspections, concerns have been raised by Public Health around some workplace social contacts where employees are more likely to drop their guard. Specifically, these are around the following issues:

- wearing a face mask
- maintaining physical distancing
- hand hygiene
- cleaning common touch areas
- having visible public health messaging around the workplace
- gathering at lunch breaks

We would ask all employers to review the Work Safely Protocol, to ensure that they are fully adhering to its recommendations. We would also encourage them to re-engage with staff to ensure they are reminded not to attend work if they have COVID-19 symptoms.

Shopping Safely
When you need to pick up essentials such as groceries or medicines there are guidelines you should adhere to:

- wear a mask, even in outdoor queues and even if you are fully vaccinated
- respect fellow shoppers and staff that are working to keep you safe
- sanitise your hands on entry to the shop and as you leave
- there are dedicated shopping times available for vulnerable people, please respect these

**The basics**

We understand that everyone is frustrated, bored maybe anxious about the ongoing restrictions. But we have a goal which is to keep the situation steady while the vaccine kicks in. The simple things still work.

- you know about handwashing, keeping your distance and mask wearing by now
- but what you really need to think about is minding your own air space. That’s why outdoors is better than indoors
- you should only be in an indoor setting with someone from outside their household for an essential care purpose unless you are fully vaccinated
- if you are not fully vaccinated, to make that interaction as safe as possible, make sure the space is well-ventilated, keep windows open and try to refresh the air regularly, keep your distance and wear your mask – all of these actions together will help reduce the risk
- but even outdoors, think about your air space and surface contact points. 2 metres is still important and be mindful of the contact points you might be sharing with 100s of other hands
- we don’t recommend you share a car journey with someone outside your household, but if you can’t avoid it, wear a mask and keep the windows open sufficiently to allow fresh air to circulate
- and of course, please stay local and continue to work from home where possible

**Updates - Supports**

On business and related supports:

**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 €2.6 billion in subsidies has been paid to 48,400 employers. An additional €445 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 21,800 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 437,000 people in receipt of Pandemic Unemployment Payment. This payment is valued at €130.3 million and marks a decrease of over 6000 on the number paid last week.

Since the last payment, almost 7,100 people closed their claim, with approximately 5500 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**

I’m reminding employees again about the enhanced illness benefit payment if you are confined to your home or a medical facility due to COVID-19. 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. This week, just over 2,000 people under the age of 66 have been medically certified for receipt of this benefit.

**Leaving Certificate Accredited Grades - Reminder to Out of School Learners**

Leaving Certificate 2021 students studying one or more subjects outside of school, must submit evidence in order to receive Accredited Grades.

Students must find a host school or centre to oversee the submission of estimated marks on their behalf. It must be the school or centre where they have arranged to sit the written examinations.

These students are required to complete and return an Initial Information Form to their chosen host school or centre no later than Thursday 15 April 2021. This form is available at gov.ie/leavingcertificate.

An Accredited Grades aide from the relevant host school or centre will then follow up with students in early May.

**And, finally**

There is an old saying ‘No winter lasts forever’, thankfully we are through winter now. It also says ‘No spring skips its turn’ and we are well into Spring.

As I said earlier, it’s a time of renewal, and we must now renew our determination to beat this disease and get back to normality. The next days and weeks are crucial in our fight and as we escalate our vaccination programme we must trust in the measures we have followed to this point. Thank you for all you are doing, it’s because of your adherence to the tough measures
in place that we can now begin to look at reopening the country but we still have some distance to go. Every step we take, we must take carefully, but there are brighter days ahead.

We will get there.

Stay safe.

Thank you.