As we progress through this pre-recovery phase of the pandemic, we are seeing a welcome reduction in COVID-19 cases, hospitalisations, ICU admissions and deaths.

We have one million children back in the classroom and residential construction is underway.

The vaccine programme is a key enabler to the reopening of society and the economy. Even with the advices on AstraZeneca and the pausing of Janssen the vaccine programme is well underway.

Last week we passed the milestone of 1m doses administered, with over 19% of those over 16 having received at least one dose of the vaccine. The benefits of the programme are already being seen, with, for example, significant decreases in cases in healthcare workers and with people living in Nursing Homes.

The programme is agile and responsive to any EU or global changes and this supports rapid reaction to developments in relation to the vaccine. Over the past few days, we have had a number of developments:

- a very welcome announcement today by the European Commission of the significant acceleration of the delivery of the BioNTech-Pfizer vaccine, with a large supply for Ireland now being brought forward
- decision on Tuesday of Johnson and Johnson to delay the roll out of its vaccine in Europe
- updated recommendations on Monday from the National Immunisation Advisory Council (NIAC) and the Deputy CMO on the use of the AZ vaccine

The programme is currently recalibrating its approach in order to react to these developments.

Key upcoming milestones include the substantial completion of Dose 2 for residents and staff of Long-Term Residential Care Facilities, continued administration of Dose 2 for Front Line Healthcare workers, substantial completion of Dose 1 for the over 70s and those over 70 who are housebound.

The programme continues to maximise the deployment of vaccines within public health advice.

The following actions are being taken:
• those aged 59 and under in very high risk and high-risk categories who have yet to be vaccinated will receive an alternative vaccine to the AZ vaccine. The roll out to these groups will continue now on this basis
• to meet the increasing supply there is an online portal to allow people to book their vaccination. Mass vaccination centres will be used across the country to effectively administer the vaccine at scale
• the online portal opens tomorrow for those aged 65-69 to register on a staggered basis. Those aged 60-64 will be next. This is available at www.hse.ie

The immediate focus of the vaccine plan is on those at higher risk and those aged 60 and over and that roll out is continuing. The remainder of the population, in order of age will follow.

The government will continue to make every effort to ensure that the vaccine roll out is a successful one so that we can all look forward to the restrictions being lifted over the next while as we look forward to the Summer.