

Address to the Nation by the Taoiseach Micheál Martin, Friday 3 December

From [Department of the Taoiseach](#)

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Dia dhaoibh

My message this evening is a difficult one.

It is difficult because even though Ireland has done very well as a country and you have done everything that has been asked of you, we have received some very stark advice from our Chief Medical Officer and our Public Health Experts that requires the reintroduction of a number of restrictions.

I understand and I share the disappointment and frustration that this will cause for many of you, but I want to take the next few minutes to explain where we are, what we need to do next and what it is we are trying to avoid.

Just over two weeks ago, I spoke to you about the fourth wave that was emerging here and across Europe.

I explained what it meant and what was required to pull it back.

I asked you to reduce your social interactions, get your vaccine, take your booster when it was offered, and to reinstate the basics around mask wearing and personal behaviour.

You did all that, and as a country we pulled it back.

With enormous effort, our hospitals held, we are among the best in the world in terms of vaccination rates and our third dose and booster programme is powering ahead also.

By tonight, close to 950,000 of our most vulnerable people will have received their third dose – a rate of distribution that puts us in the top four countries in Europe.

We have stabilised the surge.

However, just as we were getting a handle on it, reports began to emerge of a new and potentially more dangerous variant of this virus.

And last week, the World Health Organisation announced that Omicron was, indeed, a Variant of Concern.

While scientists across the world are working around the clock to fully understand the nature and potential extra threat posed by Omicron, the initial information about transmissibility coming from South Africa, which did great work in identifying the variant, is a cause for concern.

Just a few weeks ago South Africa was reporting approximately 300 cases per day. Yesterday it reported 11,500 new cases, on Wednesday it was 8,500, up on 4,500 the day before and 2,200 on Monday.

We will do whatever we reasonably can to stop this new variant from circulating in the country, but we have already confirmed one case and all of our experience to date shows that while restrictions on travel are useful to delay the entry of new variants, it is impossible to stop them.

Indeed, on an hourly basis we are now hearing reports from all across the world of new cases of Omicron being confirmed.

The challenge we face is that while we have stabilised the surge of cases in the country, the daily case numbers are still very high.

Case numbers tonight sit at over 5,000.

The increased social mixing that normally comes with Christmas would put that under pressure in any case, but if Omicron takes hold and if it is more transmissible, the potential for a very serious crisis is obvious.

The CMO and our Public Health Experts have been exceptionally clear in their advice to Government. The risks associated with proceeding into the Christmas period without some restrictions to reduce the volume of personal contacts is just too high.

I've always been straight with you as Taoiseach, that the protection of public health is the government's primary responsibility and that we will do whatever is needed to discharge that duty. This is not about going back to the days of lockdowns.

It's about adjusting the guidelines to meet the threat we face today and protecting the progress achieved to date.

That is why the government, earlier today, accepted NPHE's recommendations and guidance, and agreed to introduce the following restrictions:

From 7 December until 9 January,

Nightclubs will close.

Strict social distancing will be required in all bars and restaurants, including hotels and they must all revert to the situation that was in place before 22 October.

That means:

- table service only
- 1 metre between tables
- a maximum of six adults per table
- there can be no multiple table bookings
- masks must be worn when not at the table
- closing time remains at midnight

There will be a maximum of 50% capacity at entertainment, cultural, community and sporting events, which must all be fully seated. Face masks must be worn at all times unless eating or drinking.

Requirement for the COVID pass will be required for gyms and leisure centres and hotel bars and restaurants.

In addition, NPHET have advised that visits to private homes over the coming weeks should be kept to a maximum of three other households (that's four households in total) at any one time.

However, they do acknowledge the need for flexibility.

Across the country, very many people in the hospitality and entertainment industries will be bitterly disappointed by this news.

Many of them will be fearing for their livelihoods.

I want to reassure them that just as we have done since the beginning of the pandemic, the government will stand by them and ensure that they have the financial supports necessary to weather this latest storm and to stay intact until we are out of it.

We have demonstrated, through interventions and supports unprecedented in their scale and scope, that we will do whatever we need to do to safely steer our society and economy through this.

And that has worked, in sectors all across the economy, with many hundreds of thousands of people back in work in industries that relied on government support during the pandemic.

We will continue this approach for those employers and workers affected by tonight's developments.

I am also conscious that over the last week we have talked a lot about our children and young people and I know that they carry a lot of worry on their shoulders.

I want to take a moment to speak directly to you.

A lot has been asked of you in the last year and a half.

You've had to spend less time with your friends, miss out on special occasions and you've been unable just to enjoy normality. Now we're asking you to wear masks in school and soon we may be asking you to get vaccinated.

Through it all, you have been extraordinary.

You have done what you've been asked without complaint. And you have done it not for yourselves, but for your parents, your grandparents, your community and your country.

You are a very special generation.

Thank you for what you've done and what you continue to do.

To everyone else, I say this:

At every stage of this awful COVID journey, as a country and as a people we have trusted the science and we have done our best.

We haven't always got it right, and there have been times of great frustration.

But,

Every time we have faced a new challenge we have pulled together as a nation and done what was needed.

I'm asking us all to do that again.

Further study and examination in the weeks ahead may discover that Omicron does not represent a more deadly threat.

And if that is the case, it will come as a great relief to us all, but we simply cannot take that risk with people's lives and health.

Throughout this COVID journey there have been many twists and turns. This latest twist is disappointing, but we are nowhere near back where we were.

Large sections of our society and economy are open and thriving.

We will get through this latest twist by drawing on the same spirit of resilience that has got us to this point,

the same spirit of solidarity and trust in science that has given us the most vaccinated population in Europe,

and the same spirit of community, that defines us a nation.

We will get through it together.

Stay safe and look after each other.

Go raibh maith agaibh.