
Daily briefing on the government's response to COVID-19 - Monday 30 March 2020

Published: 30 March 2020

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Delivered by Elizabeth Canavan, Assistant Secretary General, Department of the Taoiseach

Good morning,

I'd like to begin by thanking you for continuing to abide by the Public Health Advice. I know that this is difficult and restrictive, but it is through your efforts in abiding by this advice that we can slow the spread of this virus.

- please continue to wash your hands regularly and thoroughly
- practice good coughing and sneezing etiquette
- and continue to observe social distancing

- remember you are the front line

I want to briefly re-state the new restrictive measures introduced last week to slow down the spread of COVID-19, because we know there is still a demand for information.

Essential Travel

The government has decided that everybody should stay at home until 12 April 2020, except for the following situations:

- to travel to and from work, or for purposes of work, only where the work is an essential health, social care or other essential service and cannot be done from home
- to shop for essential food, beverage and household goods
- to attend medical appointments and collect medicines and other health products
- for vital family reasons, such as providing care to children, older or vulnerable people
- to take brief individual physical exercise within 2 kilometres of your home
- you may take children from your household outdoors as long as you adhere to the strict 2 metre physical distancing rule with people outside of your household
- for farming purposes, that is food production or care of animals

Guidance on the various categories of essential work are available on [Gov.ie](https://www.gov.ie).

As stated in previous guidance, all employees should work from home if at all possible. Where it is not possible to work from home, please remember the relevant public health guidance at all times. To assist with those who will continue to work, a Workplace Protection and Improvement Guide has been put in place by the National Standards Authority of Ireland which provides practical business guidance on:

- physical distancing
- home working
- staggered work
- what to do if an employee is symptomatic

More information is available on [gov.ie](https://www.gov.ie)

Cocooning/Local Authorities

To slow the spread of COVID-19, vulnerable people are being asked to cocoon. This means they should stay at home at all times and avoid face-to-face contact.

Those at risk are:

- people aged 70 or over
- everyone living in a residential home or long term care
- people who have serious medical conditions that make them vulnerable.

Further information on which medical conditions this applies to is available on [gov.ie](https://www.gov.ie) and from the Health Service Executive.

To facilitate cocooning measures Local Authorities were advised by Minister Murphy to activate the Framework for Local Authority Community Support. Helplines and support structures were put in place over the weekend.

A Local Authority Community Response Forum will meet in each local authority area to coordinate and ramp up work to help ensure all vulnerable members of our communities affected by these new arrangements are appropriately supported to access food, medicines, and other needs you might have, including transport for medical appointments.

If a vulnerable person needs to make contact immediately they can contact the ALONE helpline at 0818 222024. We will shortly make available a complete list of your local helpline numbers for each local authority which will be operating from early morning to late evening.

It's important to say that we are keeping the rest of the health service going as well - cancer care, emergency departments, mental health services and all the rest of the acute care we provide will continue.

If you need urgent or emergency care, if you have for example heart attack or stroke symptoms, go to the emergency department or call an ambulance.

We also want to advise people that it is important to look after your mental health in these difficult times and insofar as possible remind people to stay connected with each other by telephone and other technology. But above all we need to stay at home as much as possible, and to remember that we are all in this together.

Financial Supports

We are aware that these restrictions will have significant impact on the economy. As such, the government has put in place an unprecedented level of financial support schemes to help people through this difficult and worrying time:

- last Tuesday the temporary Wage Subsidy Scheme was introduced to support employers impacted by COVID-19. This scheme will enable employers to keep staff on their payroll throughout the pandemic by refunding 70% of an employee's take-home pay up to a maximum of €410 per week per qualifying employee. This allows employers to retain links with employees for when business picks up after the crisis, and eases the burden on the Department of Employment Affairs and Social Protection
- Revenue has made additional resources available to support the increased number of employers who may now need to register for the Temporary Wage Subsidy Scheme following last Friday's announcement of additional restricted measures aimed at suppressing the transmission of COVID-19
- almost 20,500 employers are now registered with Revenue for the Temporary COVID-19 Wage Subsidy Scheme
- Revenue generated the first tranche of refunds to employers under the new scheme last Friday
- these payments, worth €5.1 million will be in the bank accounts of the majority of the respective employers today, the 30th of March
- today, Revenue has generated further refunds under the scheme worth €8.6 million
- these payments will be in the bank accounts of the majority of the respective employers tomorrow (31 March)
- Revenue will be updating their advice to businesses in relation to March/April VAT returns and April PAYE (Employers) returns shortly

Other Business Supports

A Business Support Call Centre is open to provide information on government supports for businesses and enterprises affected by COVID-19. More information is available on gov.ie.

In addition a €200 million [Strategic Banking Corporation of Ireland Working Capital scheme](#) for eligible businesses impacted by COVID-19 is now open. Loans of up to €1.5 million will be available at reduced rates, with up to the first €500,000 unsecured. Please go to gov.ie for more information.

Employees

If you are an employee who has been impacted by COVID-19, there are a range of income supports available to you. You can learn more about those supports and apply for them by visiting gov.ie and going to [COVID-19 Pandemic Unemployment Payment](#)

Employees whose employers have re-employed them on foot of the Temporary Wage Subsidy Payment and who now wish to close their application for the COVID-19 Pandemic Unemployment Payment, can find helpful links on gov.ie.

Over 283,000 COVID-19 related unemployment payments are being made this week. Unemployment payments have issued and will be in bank or post office accounts tomorrow.

This represents 90% of the applications received by Thursday 26 March.

15,000 applications were deemed ineligible for a variety of reasons, for example because individuals were not fully unemployed, aged under 18 years of age or were not previously in employment.

In addition, some 15,000 customers incorrectly completed their applications, for example by providing an incorrect PPSN number or IBAN number. These customers will be contacted over the next few days to resolve matters.

The quickest way to submit an application for payment is online. Information on how to apply is available on gov.ie.

Shorter Working Week

For employees who have been temporarily placed on shorter working week, they may avail of the [Short Time Work Support](#).

The payment is made for the days that you are no longer working. For example, if your working week has been reduced from a 5 day work pattern to a 3 day work pattern, you can receive income support for the other 2 days based on the Jobseeker's Benefit rate of pay. Further information is available on [gov.ie](#).

Education

Under new public health measures all schools will be closed to staff until 12 April except in special limited circumstances.

Teachers and staff have until 6pm today to access buildings and prepare what they need for remote lessons. Travel and personal interaction should be minimised.

An exception is in place for the schools in the [School Meals Programme](#). This essential service should continue.

Details will be made available of local networks that can support distribution if schools need help.

Supporting Citizens Abroad

Over 130 Irish passengers and their families departed Lima safely yesterday.

As part of our shared global commitment to respond to the COVID-19 crisis, the flight also carried a number of British and EU citizens.

This has been a complex undertaking, given tight restrictions across the country and in airports and airspace. Our embassy arranged for the transfer by road of many of our citizens from remote parts of Peru to the airport in Lima, journeys which in some cases took over 24 hours.

The Tánaiste spoke with Peru's Foreign Minister on Thursday 26 March, and Ireland is very grateful to the Peruvian authorities for facilitating the departure of our citizens.

Sincere thanks is also due to our EU and British partners for their close cooperation on this work.

Our embassy is in ongoing contact with a small number of Irish citizens who remain in Peru, and continues to provide all possible consular assistance.

An update on the provision of Passport Services

The public office of the Passport Office will be closed from today. You can still apply for your passport using Passport Online, although as you will understand we cannot guarantee the usual turnaround times on passport service delivery.

Some staff from the Passport Service have been redeployed to assist public service delivery and to provide consular assistance to Irish citizens abroad during this public health emergency and so we ask for your understanding during this period.

More information on accessing services is available on [Gov.ie](https://www.gov.ie).

Update on Homeless Services in light of new restrictions

For the duration of the current crisis staff working in homeless NGOs providing emergency accommodation to homeless households are deemed essential personnel. Staff involved in the provision of private emergency accommodation (Hotels and B&Bs) are also categorised as providing essential services to our most vulnerable.

The local authorities are working closely with the Health Service Executive and NGO service operators to maintain services and to keep the movement of individuals in emergency accommodation to a minimum.

Over 560 beds have been introduced in the Dublin region and significant space has been secured in Cork and Galway, all to ensure we can meet any isolation needs that may arise and

to comply with social distancing requirements. The Minister for Housing, Planning and Local Government said that he and his department continue to work with the Health Service Executive in order to cater for the needs of those in emergency accommodation. They will continue to closely monitor the situation as it evolves and offer support as needed.

Additional Guidance re: open places

Parks, gardens and other open spaces remain open to people to continue to look after their physical health by taking exercise as individuals or with their children.

However, please remember the following:

- stay local, No more than 2 kilometres from home – outdoor amenities are only open to local visitors and carparks at these sites are closed
- keep your distance – remember to stay 2 metres away from others at all times, unless they are in your household
- stay within your own household group

The OPW have reopened the following sites which were closed over the weekend:

- St. Enda's Park
- Doneraile Park
- Castletown
- Kilkenny Castle Park
- War Memorial
- Derrynane
- Oldbridge

Locals who live within a 2 kilometre radius can continue to avail of daily exercise in these sites.

Public participation period in the planning system extended

As a result of a government decision yesterday, the Minister for Housing, Planning and Local Government, Eoghan Murphy, announced that in light of measures taken restricting the movement of people it is important to extend the public participation periods in the planning system.

Government will add 23 days to the statutory time periods for processing planning applications within the Planning Acts. This is to reflect the period up to Easter Sunday, during which time people have been asked to stay at home.

This is to ensure that the integrity of decision making is upheld, and that planning for new development can continue. Work will continue through these new restrictions so that the planning system will be well placed to play its vital role in supporting the recovery when the time comes.

Planning applications can continue to be made by post, and authorities can engage with applicants by electronic means, accepting submissions by post and electronic means. Most authorities have on-line systems for inspecting planning applications. The extended time will also apply to planning appeals, which An Bord Pleanála will continue to receive by post. More information is available [here](#).

Response to Concerns

Nursing Homes

Minister Harris and the Secretary General of the Department of Health will today meet with representatives of Nursing Homes Ireland.

There have been 17 clusters of COVID-19 in Nursing Homes.

The minister has asked the National Public Health Emergency team to examine the issues in Nursing Homes when they meet tomorrow.

This virus does not discriminate on the basis of age.

It can impact any of us.

However, doctors say you are most likely to get sicker with it if you are over the age of 70.

This is why we are asking people over the age of 70 to stay at home.

Essential Workers over 70

First of all we are grateful to and lucky to have our older citizens who are anxious to play their part and keep working.

Generally speaking, we want everyone over 70 to stay at home and not leave.

However, some common sense applies here.

If you are over 70 working in an essential area and you can do that remotely, without coming in face to face contact with other people, or without touching surfaces that other people may have sneezed on, then you can continue to work - for example a healthcare professional doing teleconsultation from their home.

This would also include the older farming community but again - they must be very careful about not coming into close contact with others. Older farmers should ring family members if they need help.

If that's not possible and the job is essential, please ring your local community support helpline (one in each local authority area) or the local Garda station.

Children and Families

Tusla - Child and Family Agency continues to provide key services across core areas that support children and families at risk during COVID-19.

Tusla staff around the country are continuing to provide essential frontline services that cannot be delivered remotely.

Anyone with a concern about a child's safety or welfare should contact their local duty social work office.

If you are experiencing domestic, sexual or gender-based violence, an Garda Siochana want you to dial 999. They have assured us that their protective services units are fully staffed.

Warning against any Illegal Burning of land

On Friday appeals were sent out by various councils to all landowners to cease-and-desist all controlled burning immediately in order to conserve the resources of emergency services during the COVID-19 pandemic.

Last night three units of firefighters in Kerry spent four hours battling a blaze in Killarney National Park. We want to emphasise the current pressure on the Emergency services across the country and once again appeal to everyone to be mindful of that strain and avoid any further demands on their resources.

Extension of General Driver Licence Renewals

The Minister of Transport, Tourism and Sport and the Road Safety Authority confirmed on Saturday last that the National Driver Licence Service (NDLS), the National Car Testing Service (NCT), as well as the Commercial Vehicle Testing System were being suspended until further notice.

This suspension was to comply with the new public restrictions, announced by Government on Friday.

The department and the Road Safety Authority are now working on measures to address the implications of suspending these services. Specifically, the new measures will extend the period of validity of the relevant official documents.

These measures are expected to be finalised in the coming days and full details will be publicised at that stage.

HSA Social Distancing in Essential Workplaces

The Health and Safety Authority is currently discussing with Public Health officials what further guidance may be required to support essential businesses to continue to work while

implementing the DoH/HSE public health recommendations to prevent the spread of COVID-19.