
Daily briefing on the government's response to COVID-19 - Wednesday 22 April 2020

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Good Morning.

I want to begin today by reminding everyone of the vital public health advice helping us to slow the spread of the virus:

- wash hands regularly and thoroughly

- use good cough and sneeze etiquette
- observe physical distancing measures
- stay at home

We need to embrace this advice in every part of our lives. I know that can be difficult, we've all had to make changes to our routine to make sure that we are following the advice correctly and protecting ourselves and each other. We have all been playing our part over recent weeks and while we are being careful to stay apart, together we are having an impact. What we need to do now is see it through.

Easing of Restrictions

We understand that there is considerable interest and concern around the topic of easing of restrictions, what the exit strategy is, when these restrictions might end. The current advice extended all restrictions to 5 May. It is important to note that all of the current restrictions will remain in place until the National Public Health Emergency Team gives the government further advice.

As the Taoiseach has said, we are preparing a plan which we'll have ready to share in advance of any modifications to the current restrictions.

It is clear that any plan to ease some of the restrictions will be done hand in hand with continuing to follow public health advice, including physical distancing requirements.

Stability Programme Update

As some of you will already be aware yesterday the [Stability Programme Update for 2020](#) was published. It will come as no surprise that the economic landscape has changed dramatically in Ireland and across the globe as a result of COVID-19. The labour market has been badly impacted with 22% unemployment projected for the second quarter of this year, and we are looking at the possibility of a 10.5% reduction in Gross Domestic Product.

However, amidst this bad news it is important to remember that Ireland is facing into this crisis from a position of strength and we will put in place a recovery plan to plot a course through this challenging period. In the meantime, I want to ask everyone to remember that the priority now is saving lives by containing the virus and that for those who are facing hardship support and assistance is available to you. On Monday, we outlined that 584,000 people have received the pandemic Unemployment Payment.

Temporary Wage Subsidy Scheme

Take-up of the Temporary Wage Subsidy Scheme introduced by Government is continuing to grow. Over 47,400 employers are registered with Revenue for the scheme.

Today (22 April), Revenue has generated further payments to employers under the scheme of €28.1 million.

These payments will be in the bank accounts of the majority of the respective employers tomorrow (23 April).

The cumulative value of payments made to employers under the scheme is now approximately €378 million.

Further Guidance on TWSS

For most companies, eligibility for the scheme is clear. For companies with more complex structures, additional guidance on Revenue's approach to confirming an employer's eligibility for the Temporary Wage Subsidy Scheme have been published on [revenue.ie](https://www.revenue.ie). This includes worked examples for particular sectors.

Farming and Agri-Food Call for Action

The Department of Agriculture, Food and the Marine has, along with EU counterparts, submitted a statement to the Commissioner for Agriculture requesting that the economic impact of COVID-19 on farmers and the agri-food sector be acknowledged and addressed.

The focus has been to secure action under three broad headings, namely:

- a rapid deployment of the full range of support measures provided for under the Common Market Organisation Regulation
- increased flexibility in the implementation of direct payments under the Basic Payment Scheme
- similar increased flexibility in the implementation of Rural Development Programmes

This is an important step in our efforts to ensure that farmers and the agri-food sector - who are playing a vital role in the fight against COVID-19 by maintaining continuity of food supply in very difficult circumstances - are protected to the maximum possible extent from the economic impact of this crisis

I want also to take this opportunity to remind farmers of the supports that are in place to assist them in these difficult times, such as the [Calf Investment scheme](#) , which has seen a budget increase from €1.5 to €4 million to fully fund all eligible applications received.

I want to remind farmers that the Teagasc helpline is available to get advice on the range of issues that they may face as they continue to do their essential work at this time.

The helpline number is 076 1113533 and is open from 9.30am to 12.30pm and from 2pm to 5pm Monday to Friday.

Ireland Performs hits over 120K views in first week

A number of measures were announced earlier this month to support the arts sector, which has been badly impacted by the COVID-19 crisis. Ireland Performs is a grant scheme to support professional artists and enable the live presentation of their work on online platforms.

Since its launch on 3 April, Ireland Performs has attracted over 350 applicants with performances so far reaching audiences of more than 120,000 in the first week.

We're happy to see the work of Irish artists being received so well in Ireland and around the world. And while Ireland Performs was designed to support artists we are grateful to those

artists in return, as they use their skill and creativity to support thousands of people through these difficult times.

I want also to remind artists and those working in the arts sector that they are eligible to apply for a range of government supports that have been introduced in the wake of the crisis, including the COVID-19 Pandemic Unemployment Benefit and they can visit [here](#) for further information.

Community Fora

We want to take the time to remind anyone who may be struggling with basic necessities or support at this time that the Community Call Fora, run by the local authorities around the country can provide a much-needed lifeline. The fora are continuing to provide help to people around the country.

You may just need a little bit of help especially if you are cocooning for example; for the collection and delivery of groceries. We know for others, it's just nice to have someone to talk to. You may need specific help relating to medical or health services; or you might need a meal.

The Community Call can do all of those things for you. You shouldn't feel like you are asking for help – you are helping your community by staying at home.

Yesterday, the Community Call Fora received 1,114 calls nationally and 362 follow-up calls were made to people who contacted the helpline.

Nationally, since 31 March, the Community Call Fora have received 19,527 calls and have made 8,972 follow-up calls.

If you need help or as important, if you know someone who might need help, or if you want to volunteer to give help please contact your local forum.

You can find your local helpline number on [here](#).

The Fora helplines are partnering with ALONE. If someone needs information, reassurance, or just to talk they can call ALONE's national phone line on 0818 222 0245.

Remember, ALONE is there for anyone experiencing difficulties with physical and mental health, finance, loneliness and other challenges.

Irish Wheelchair Association - Transport to Tests

The Health Service Executive and Irish Wheelchair Association are working together to bring a new community-based testing service for COVID-19 to vulnerable adults using Irish Wheelchair Association's fleet of buses. The new service will transport COVID-19 testing personnel to vulnerable people who are unable to attend test centres. This includes people with disabilities and older people. The Irish Wheelchair Association has a network of 117 buses nationwide. This service will be of particular support to people living in rural and isolated areas of the country.

Anyone with COVID-19 symptoms should contact their GP by phone, who will advise if they need a test.

Transport – Road Safety Authority - New Regulations

As I have already mentioned, driver licenses and learner permits due to expire before 30 June 2020 will now be valid for a further four months.

Where a vehicle's NCT due date was on or after 28 March, the test date has been extended by 4 months also.

For commercial vehicles due a Commercial Vehicle Roadworthiness Test (CVRT) on or after 28 March, that test date has been extended by 3 months.

Also, in line with the arrangements previously in place for NCT certificates in relation to private cars, it will no longer be longer necessary to have a current Certificate of Roadworthiness (CRW) in order to tax a commercial vehicle.

You will now be able to renew your motor tax for a commercial vehicle without need of a Certificate of Roadworthiness.

Motor tax, whether for commercial vehicles or privately-owned cars can, in most cases, be renewed online at www.motortax.ie.

Motor tax offices are also continuing to process postal applications.

Grant Applications Open tomorrow

It can be easy to overlook deadlines and lose track of normal life in the current circumstances. In previous briefings I have mentioned that [SUSI grant applications](#) will be opening as normal this year and I want to very briefly issue a reminder now that that opening date is tomorrow 23 April.

Grant applications can be made online. See [here](#) for further information.

Schools ICT

The Department of Education and Skills is announcing a multi-million-euro package for schools to support the provision of IT equipment. Schools can use this funding to acquire school devices and lend out those devices to students who don't have access to technology. This will help to support students with continuity of learning during the period of school closure. It is part of a package of measures being provided to support students' learning and wellbeing.

Schools will also be provided today with guidance on continuity of learning for students with special educational needs and for students at risk of educational disadvantage.

Conference call of European Sports Ministers

Yesterday saw a video conference meeting of the Sports Ministers of Europe to exchange information and practices in relation to the impact the COVID-19 pandemic has had on sporting organisations.

The meeting was focused on the need for sport across the EU to come together and cooperate at this critical time as we all deal with the fallout of the crisis as sports across Europe and across the world have been stopped in their tracks.

Sporting bodies in Ireland, while badly hit have been putting the disruption to good work by providing much needed support the health service and to vulnerable people in communities.

The road to return for sports needs to be gradual and will at all times be guided by the public health experts but it is important to know that we can share learning and experience with our European and international partners through that process.

Supermarket physical distancing policies

I know that supermarkets and grocers have been working hard to implement physical distancing while continuing to ensure that shelves are stocked and none of our normal supply chains are disrupted. All the essential workers involved in this effort deserve our thanks. However, I am concerned that some measures implemented with the best of intentions have been making it difficult for some families to safely access supermarkets

The guidance in relation to physical distancing measures that essential retail outlets must implement is to:

- ensure adequate distancing between customers and shop assistants
- only let people into the store in small groups and ensure spaces are not crowded
- manage queue control inside and outside the door to maintain necessary physical distance
- to provide online services where that is possible and appropriate

I want to be clear that the advice does allow for small family groups, including children to shop together as needed. I would urge all retailers to be conscious of the different circumstances of all kinds of families and to use a common-sense approach when it comes to admitting access into shops.

Cancellation of Tidy Towns

I want to take a moment to confirm that unfortunately it has been necessary to cancel this year's Tidy Towns Competition. We are aware this competition is a highlight in the calendar for many people and communities all across Ireland. This decision was made bearing in mind current public health guidance and the reality that it would not be safe for Tidy Towns groups to work during this phase of the COVID-19 crisis. We hope that this will bring certainty and clarity to all the groups involved.

Illegal Dumping

The Anti-Dumping Initiative, which was established in 2017 aims to reduce incidents of illegal dumping nationally by providing funding for projects to tackle the problem using a collaborative approach involving local authorities, communities and other State Agencies.

On this topic, there have been concerning reports of an increase in illegal dumping during the COVID-19 crisis. Now more than ever, we need to protect our communities and manage our waste responsibly. Illegal dumping is committed by a minority, has a negative effect on many local communities and results in fines or prosecution.

It is announced today that €1 million of funds from the Anti-Dumping Initiative will be ring-fenced to support efforts to tackle this reported increase. By providing local authorities with advance funding we will ensure they can respond quickly and decisively. Waste removal and the installation of CCTV or other monitoring and surveillance equipment will be among the activities supported.

Illegal dumping is first and foremost a matter of individual responsibility and compliance with the law. While enforcement action in this area is a matter in the first instance for local authorities, the continued support of government funding for this initiative facilitates a multi-faceted approach in tackling the issue. Household waste services are operating normally. Please use an authorised waste collector or your local civic amenity.

For information on managing your waste go to [mywaste.ie](https://www.mywaste.ie).

World Curlew Day 2020

As some of you may already have noticed, Iconic Irish artist and presenter Don Conroy agreed to lend his help to us with this years' World Curlew Day.

Children around the country were asked to create their own drawings and paintings of the cherished Curlew based on Don's creation and send them to the World Curlew Day Ireland Facebook page, which features a host of Curlew-inspired fun.

Since the late 1980s there has been a 97% decline in Curlew numbers in Ireland and in the past decade alone there has been a 34% decline. World Curlew Day unites environmentalists and the public in our goal to keep the Curlew in our skies for generations to come.

For more information, see [here](#).

Ramadan

Before I finish I want to take a minute to acknowledge that for many people out there who will begin observing Ramadan this week, now in particular is a difficult time to be separated from our family, friends and religious services. I want to thank everyone who is making that difficult sacrifice to protect our communities.

Licensed Events

As of now all mass gatherings are banned based on the most recent public health advice. This has led to disruption to some of the fixtures in our calendar.

Separately, but related to this, there are a number of large-scale events planned for the summer which are subject to a licensing process. This licensing process can be a lengthy process, requiring consultation with An Garda Síochána, the Health Service Executive and the public.

While the issue of restrictions on future mass gatherings is a decision to be taken by the NPHET, in the case of these particular events, Local Authorities have been advised by

Government that event promoters should be informed that events requiring licences with an expected attendance in excess of 5,000 will not be considered for the period up to the end of August.

This will be kept under review in line with NPHET advice on mass gatherings more generally.