

Briefing on the government's response to COVID-19 - Friday 18 December 2020

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Check against delivery

Introduction

Good morning,

We are now at the last weekend before Christmas. Many of us are now busy making final preparations and doing last minute shopping.

From today, a small number of restrictions are being eased for a limited period of time, which means we can mark Christmas with that small group that is closest to us. We are permitted to travel outside of our county and household are allowed.

However, this is happening against a backdrop of a worsening picture with the virus over the past number of days. We heard the reports last night that the R number or reproduction number of the virus is now between 1.1 and 1.3. We all know that this means that one infected person will spread the virus to more than one other.

From now on, every decision we take to meet someone could have consequences either for ourselves or for those whom we intend to mark Christmas with. Either disturbing their plans

because they become a close contact or worse for a small number of people those consequences will be much more serious.

We have worked so hard to get to this point. To say we are all tired of restrictions is an understatement. But we have seen what is happening with the virus around Europe, and even on this island, in the North. Your hard work here has so far meant we have kept the virus under control to a great extent but we want to make sure that remains the case. But the numbers we are seeing now indicate that we could be moving past the tipping point. We have to respond to that, as we have done previously.

Government will consider NPHET's latest advice and there will be decisions and announcements next week about what happens after Christmas.

We can still influence what happens with the disease by how we behave in our own lives and within our own social spheres before then. The everyday choices we can make over the next week will have the greatest impact on the speed of transmission.

Remember our overall priorities – to protect the vulnerable, to ensure our schools can reopen as planned and to ensure that we can continue non-COVID health services over the next period.

Schools are preparing to close for Christmas on Tuesday next, and school communities are all looking forward to a well-deserved break.

The return of our children to school and the sustaining of school reopening throughout the first term is a testament to the work of all school staff, voluntary boards of management, students and parents.

In addition to the significant investment that occurred to enable the safe return to schools, enhanced supportive measures have been put in place to support schools. Public health teams have engaged with schools all across the country and provided supports as required, that includes conducting public health risk assessments and advising schools of measures they need to take.

There has been a lot of commentary surrounding the closure of a small number of schools; it is important to remember that any decision to close will be made if necessary by Public Health to respond to specific situations and, on occasion, that has been warranted.

To date the public health evidence shows that schools are safe places and that the risk of COVID-19 has been managed very well within the school environment.

It is worth pointing out that the detection rate for COVID-19 when testing occurs in schools has averaged at 2.4 per cent since reopening. In the current week it is 3.5 per cent and while this shows an increase is still significantly lower in comparison to the community close contact positivity testing which is around 12.5 per cent.

The Department of Education is engaging regularly with education partners, including management bodies, trade unions, parent and student representatives and others on all matters relating to the safe operation of schools.

We want to thank all the school communities and them a very happy and safe break over Christmas.

In the days ahead, please remember that being able to come together is about a mutual trust that we have been avoiding risks in the run up to meeting. As we plan for next week, we need to make sure that everyone we plan to mark the day with is comfortable with the arrangements in place for Christmas Day. It's probably no harm to check in again, especially given the increasing rates of transmission.

Remember the advice for Christmas Day gatherings – keep it small, keep it as short as you can. Outdoors is safer than indoors. Make sure indoor spaces are well ventilated and wear your face covering to protect the vulnerable.

Remember the advice on staying safe if you are out doing last minute shopping

- Choose an off-peak time, many shopping centres and retail outlets have extending opening hours this week
- Wear a mask on busy outdoors shopping streets, while queueing for, and of course, in the shop itself
- Sanitise or wash your hands at every opportunity
- Have a respect for the staff and other shoppers and keep your distance

And just to remind you that Government has guidance for planning a safe Christmas which is available at [gov.ie/SafeChristmas](https://www.gov.ie/SafeChristmas).

National COVID-19 Vaccination Strategy

A signal of brighter days ahead, yesterday we heard the very positive news that towards the end of December, vaccination will begin across the EU.

Government now has a plan for the safe, effective and efficient vaccination of the population, while safeguarding our health and social care services.

The COVID-19 vaccine programme will be rolled-out nationally and vaccines will be available free of charge to everyone in Ireland. COVID-19 vaccines can only be approved and used if they comply with all the requirements of quality, safety and efficacy set out in the EU pharmaceutical legislation.

The [National COVID-19 Vaccination Strategy](#) is available to read on gov.ie.

Vaccine Certificate

There has been some discussion this week about vaccine certificates and I'd like to address this.

It is important to differentiate between a vaccine certificate, the purpose of which is to identify and monitor people who have been vaccinated, with the idea of an immunity passport which might exempt people from public health measures on the basis that the person is supposed to be immune to COVID-19.

Vaccine certificates are required in order to keep track of which vaccine (including which batch of a vaccine) has been given to a person and on which dates. The HSE is planning for the production of Vaccine certificates at part of its implementation planning for a COVID-19 programme.

There are a number of issues, however, in relation to the area of immunity passports.

We will still need to wear masks and practice social distancing until a large proportion of the population is vaccinated and we are sure the vaccine provides long-term protection. It will take time for everyone in our society to get vaccinated and meanwhile the virus will still be circulating.

Currently, because the virus is so new, there is not enough knowledge on how long the immunity conferred by the vaccines will last after vaccination, or whether there will be a need for periodic booster doses. Vaccinated people, while protected against severe symptoms could still transmit infection to others- we don't know any of this yet.

Because of this, it is premature to discuss immunity passports due to the uncertainties that still exist regarding immunity against the novel coronavirus.

The WHO has cautioned governments against introducing immunity passports at this time and has advised that the focus should be on vaccine certificates.

Compliance

It's important to emphasise that the majority of us and the majority of businesses are doing as asked to make sure we can spend a safe and meaningful Christmas and keep the transmission of the virus low.

An Garda Siochana continues to see high compliance with public health guidelines. In particular, the Gardai would like to thank the people of Limerick and Waterford for their high level of compliance during and in the aftermath of last week's All Ireland Hurling Final.

A number of high visibility patrols were carried out last weekend and you will continue to see members of the Gardai on the streets over the coming days. You will also continue to see checkpoints on main routes and checks on licensed premises under Operation Navigation will also be carried out. On top of this, An Garda Siochana are continuing a high level of community engagement, focussing on those who are vulnerable and feel isolated at this difficult time.

We can see from statistics that traffic volumes are up 3% this week compared to last week and in particular around shopping centres, traffic volumes rose by 2%. This was expected in the run up to Christmas.

However, we can also see that the 14-day incidence rate per 100,000 has started to trend upwards. Also, the number of close contacts of COVID-positive cases is rising again. Each case diagnosed over the past week has had 3.8 contacts.

We need to remember this while socialising. Remember if you are dining out and someone offers you a multiple table booking or extra drinks after your meal, they are not doing you a favour. They are simply increasing the chances that you will end up being a close contact of someone who tests positive for the virus.

Face coverings

I want to remind everyone that face coverings are mandatory in retail outlets, in taxis, in bus and rail stations, on public transport and for workers in customer facing roles in cafés, bars and restaurants. They also need to be worn in places of worship, busy outdoor settings and busy workplaces.

Face coverings are recommended in many other circumstances too, for example if you are visiting the homes of those who are over 70 years of age or who are medically vulnerable and if you are travelling in a vehicle with someone you don't live with

Please remember also that face coverings must cover your nose and mouth without leaving a visible gap. This means people should not wear face visors or face shields, unless they have a reasonable excuse, like a disability. Cloth face coverings are a better way to protect yourself and those around you from COVID-19.

It is an offence for someone not to wear a face covering when required to without reasonable excuse and a fixed penalty notice may be issued by An Garda Síochána.

Look for Local

It has been a year like no other for many small local businesses who employ over one million people in Ireland. This Christmas, we are being encouraged to shop locally and support these businesses who are working hard to stay afloat in these difficult times.

The 'Look for Local' campaign by Enterprise Ireland and the Local Enterprise Offices aims to highlight local businesses in your area and encourages people to support them.

[LocalEnterprise.ie/LookforLocal](https://www.localenterprise.ie/lookforlocal) page now has over 4,200 businesses listed from a range of sectors that enables consumers and businesses to search for goods and services within their areas.

Research carried out as part of the campaign shows that 82% of people are now more likely to shop locally compared to last year and 83% plan to continue to do so in 2021. For more information on the campaign go to the website and agencies, businesses and consumers are encouraged to use #LookforLocal on social media to help support the campaign.

Business Supports

Social Protection Christmas Payment Arrangements

If you receive a weekly social welfare payment, you will get your payment as usual next week commencing Monday 21st December but you will also receive an advance payment for the following week. This applies to payments at post offices, by cheque or directly into your bank account.

For example, the Pandemic Unemployment Payment or PUP payment that will be made next Tuesday, 22nd December, and this will also include the payment due on 29th December.

Normal weekly payment arrangements will resume on the week beginning 4th January 2021.

Pandemic Unemployment Payment

Last Tuesday 15th December, approximately 306,000 people received the Pandemic Unemployment Payment (PUP), which is down 42,000 on last week's figures.

Many of these people have returned to work in sectors such as accommodation and food, wholesale and retail or hairdressing. This reflects the easing of the Level 5 restrictions and the re-opening of many businesses.

If you are returning to work, you should close your claim on the day you start working by logging on to www.MyWelfare.ie

PUP Recipients Can Take up Short-Term Work

Already, we have seen thousands of people returning to work but we are aware that some people may fear that they may encounter a problem if they go back to work only to find themselves unemployed in the New Year.

I want to reassure such people that if they have to reapply for PUP, that they will be able to do so, should they become unemployed again.

Applications may be made for PUP up to and including 31 March 2021.

The quickest way to make a claim for PUP is to do so online and to log on www.MyWelfare.ie.

Employment Wage Subsidy Scheme

There are currently 41,000 employers registered with Revenue for EWSS. To date, a total of over €1 billion in subsidies has been paid to 39,500 employers.

Covid Restrictions Support Scheme

As you know, the Covid Restrictions Support Scheme, or CRSS applies to businesses that are impacted by COVID-19 restrictions such that the business is required to prohibit or considerably restrict customers from accessing its premises.

To date, 15,700 businesses have registered 18,100 premises for CRSS with Revenue.

The value of CRSS claims submitted to date is over €115 million in respect of 15,600 premises and €114 million of this has already been processed by Revenue for payment.

There are a wide range of supports available for businesses and their employees during this difficult time. For more information go to gov.ie.

Community Supports

Community Call

The Community Call Fora, run by the local authorities, are continuing to provide an invaluable service to those feeling isolated during this pandemic. The Fora helpline numbers are available on gov.ie.

Remember that you can also contact ALONE, the national charity for older people on 0818 222 024.

These services have remained in place since March and will continue in place to respond to any increase in demand. Don't hesitate to look for help or a friendly ear if you need it and if there's someone you are concerned about, please contact these services too.

Still Here Campaign

This time of year, is difficult for many and this past year when we were being asked to stay at home in response to COVID-19, for those who experience domestic abuse, home was not a safe place.

The Still Here Campaign aims to tackle the serious issue of domestic violence in the context of COVID-19. It seeks to reassure victims that services are 'still here', and that victims have been prioritised throughout the pandemic.

The campaign was developed in response to the increased risk and incidence of domestic abuse associated with the restrictions as well as the stresses and strains everyone is under.

The campaign continues to run through various media to spread the message that support services from State agencies and the voluntary sector are still available to anyone at risk of, or experiencing domestic abuse and sexual violence regardless of the level of restrictions.

This campaign has been recognised by the platform 'Apolitical' as innovative and ground-breaking and has been nominated for Global Public Service Team of the Year 2020.

If you would like more information on #StillHere or require support, you can check out

stillhere.ie.

International Travel

This time of year, is normally extremely busy for travel but nothing this year is as 'normal'. Total passengers for Dublin Cork and Shannon Airports recorded in November 2020 have

fallen significantly, by over 90% from the same time last year. We acknowledge that it has been a devastating year for the aviation industry.

While we are advising that this is not the year to travel home for Christmas, we do recognise that some people will have to make that journey. If you are going to travel, make sure you know the rules; note what's expected of you and note what airlines are doing to keep people safe. We have heard the reporting that planes will be crammed and airports will be bustling this coming week but we know that is not the case.

Testing at Airports

Testing provision has been established at the three airport locations – Dublin, Cork and Shannon. There has been a total of over 5,000 bookings for COVID-19 tests since testing facilities opened at Cork and at Dublin Airports in November.

These figures relate to bookings for pre-departures, post-arrivals tests and other non-travel tests. However, many other commercial providers outside of the airport's testing facilities are also providing testing for travel purposes, adding to these numbers.

Dublin Airport Authority currently have lab access for 12,000 tests a day and capability of doing up to 3,000 tests onsite at Dublin Airport. In the period running up the Christmas, DAA envisages testing is likely to be in the region of 665 tests per day with almost 1,700 tests envisaged for 23 December.

Traffic Light Approach

As you all know, Government is following the EU traffic lights approach to travel, which applies to countries in the European Union/European Economic Area and to the UK. The government's current advice for travel to the 30 countries within the traffic light system is to "exercise a high degree of caution". The general advice for any other overseas travel remains to "avoid non-essential travel". More information on international travel is available on gov.ie.

Shine Your Light – Solstice

The shortest day of the year can represent a new beginning – the days will get longer and hopefully brighter too, in more ways than one. This Sunday, we are being invited to mark that with this year's Winter Solstice.

Creative Ireland are working with RTE to create a unique celebration. Artists and communities will come together, and buildings around Ireland and around the world will light up. Six spectacular projection installations by Irish artists will be unveiled.

You can watch on RTE One at 8.30 on Sunday night with performances from Christy Moore, Damian Dempsey and The RTE National Symphony Orchestra among others.

And, you are being invited to join with civic buildings and light your own lights or candles in a shared moment of community, solidarity, and hope.

And finally

So, ahead of a what is sure to be a busy weekend, remember where we all hope to be this day next week. We might be gathered around opening presents at this time, or we might be getting ready to take part in a religious service, or visiting grandparents we haven't been able to see in months. But there is still a week to go. In the meantime, stay safe and protect each other.

It's another high-profile weekend of sport with the men's and women's All Ireland Football finals and the importance of supporting your team in a safe way has been highlighted continuously. Fans and the hospitality sector are being urged to continue their good work and to fully respect the public health guidance- just as the teams and management have played their part, we must aswell!

Where possible shop at off peak times, and shop alone if you can. Maybe nominate one person from your household to pick up the last-minute bits and pieces. Wear a mask in public areas, even outdoors and in places of worship.

Remember what Dr Mike Ryan of the WHO has said – it's all about decisions. Our decisions now, will frame our Christmas.

- We decide how close we get to others
- We decide on the intensity of our social engagement
- We decide how long we spend in certain environments

And although we can be advised by science and by officials, it all comes down to personal motivation and personal decisions.

Remember that this weekend and make the best decisions you can.

Thank you.