

# Briefing on the government's response to COVID-19 - Wednesday 17 February 2021

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## Introduction and up-to-date Public Health Guidance

Good morning,

As you will all be aware, COVID-19 numbers remain very high. While all of our hard work is certainly paying off, we are seeing downward trends, the number of hospitalisations is stabilising and the positivity rate is decreasing, but cases remain high – this week's daily rates have been on a par with those seen last April.

In the last few days we have seen case numbers in excess of 800 a day. It is worth remembering that per thousand cases you can expect somewhere between 35-50 people will need to be hospitalised, between 4-6 people will be admitted to ICU and most tragically, somewhere between 10-15 people will lose their lives. That is still a lot of people going to hospital, it is still a lot of people ending up in ICU, and it is still, most tragically, a lot of people dying of COVID-19.

Numbers in hospital are still more than double seen at the peak of the October wave and numbers in ICU are still at 158 yesterday.

The message that I want to emphasise is that we cannot let our guard down. The virus, and especially the new variant, which is now dominant here, spreads more easily than that which was circulating earlier in the pandemic.

The best way to protect ourselves from either getting the virus or passing it on to someone else is to stick with our own households and avoid meeting people outside of this.

Visits to others homes or a return to the office for those who can work from home are still off the agenda for now.

Minimising our contacts outside of our own households in every way we can will buy us time to keep the virus suppressed while giving a chance to more vulnerable people to get their vaccines.

## **Mobility**

Thankfully, an improvement in weather means exercising outside is more attractive. We should take every chance to exercise – it's good for both our physical and mental health but please stick within your 5km from home and keep that 2m distance from others.

With more people moving around the same 5km radius, it may get crowded – if it is crowded, consider changing the time you exercise. Try a different place or route that might be less crowded. If you are out and it is crowded, wear a face covering.

It's evident that people are beginning to move around again – we have seen a slight increase in the last week in traffic volumes which are up around 2%, retail and recreation numbers are up 7% and workplaces up nearly 3%.

So far, people have been incredibly compliant with what we are asking you to do but we need to be patient a little longer.

Staying at home is as important as ever.

## **Workplaces**

You should only be in work if you are an essential worker and have to be in the workplace. If that is the case it is vital to keep your guard up. Follow the guidance during work, remember that this includes breaktime – avoiding congregating over coffee and if you are with colleagues – stay two metres apart and wear a mask when you are not eating or drinking. If you can avoid travelling to and from work with colleagues you should do so and if you do, wear a mask and keep the windows open.

Most importantly, if you have any symptoms – isolate, and stay at home, contact your GP to get a test as soon as possible. Similarly, if you are a close contact, stay at home and come forward for a test.

## **Shop safely**

While visits to supermarkets are essential, it is important that retailers and customers remember to stick to all of the measures that have served us so well through the pandemic. Mask wearing, keeping physical distance, using the hand sanitiser, avoiding crowds - all apply in the shops and supermarkets.

If you own or manage a supermarket or shop remember to keep a close watch on the capacity of your store to minimise the numbers inside at any one time – ensure staff are wearing face coverings and wearing them correctly.

## Face coverings

Masks continue to be an important tool to mitigate against the spread of COVID-19. We have heard reports that we should now be double masking or wearing medical grade face coverings. Intuitively the more layers you have the better, but ultimately if you're not wearing the mask properly, you're not protecting yourself to any better extent. While double masking is certainly not discouraged, it is more important to wear a mask correctly and that it fits correctly. This means wearing your mask so that it covers your mouth and your nose snugly and there are no gaps.

Remember:

- do not touch a mask or face covering while wearing it - if you do, clean your hands properly
- do not use a damp or wet medical mask or reuse a medical mask
- obviously, do not share masks
- don't lower your mask to speak, eat and smoke or vape - if you need to uncover your nose or mouth, take the mask off and put it in a bag for used masks
- don't discard masks in public places

There is lots of information on correctly wearing and disposing of masks go to [gov.ie](https://www.gov.ie).

## The basics

We must keep the virus suppressed as the vaccines are rolled out in our community. New variants continue to be a cause for concern and we must not forget that this virus has not gone away. It will feed on our complacency so we have to stick with the habits we have learned over the last year.

## Announcements

Today we here in the Department of the Taoiseach have launched a new collaboration with the ESRI's Behavioural Research Unit called The Social Activity Measure, otherwise known as SAM. It is a behavioural study that records the public response to the risk of COVID-19 infection over time.

SAM is an anonymous, interactive, online study that surveys people about their recent activity. The study offers insight into where and how risks of transmission arise and will inform policy and communications regarding the opening of parts of the economy and society, while keeping COVID-19 under control.

The study will collect data from 1,000 respondents every two weeks. As well as informing policy and communications decisions relating to the government's response to COVID-19, the results from the research will be published on [gov.ie](https://www.gov.ie).

Results from the first wave will be published this week. Initial findings indicate that the vast majority of us are keeping our contacts low, but there are still some people with a lot of discretionary contacts. Interestingly, some of those people think they are doing better than most people in complying. They are not. If you are one of these people and you think what you are doing is the “norm”, maybe think again. We might be tempted to let our guard down and visit or meet someone you haven’t seen in a while. We should take heart from the fact that this initial data would suggest that most people are keeping their contacts very low and if this continues, we will continue to suppress the virus.

We will keep you informed with further insights from SAM over the coming weeks.

## **Updates - Supports**

### **Employment Wage Subsidy Scheme**

There are currently 48,500 employers registered with Revenue for the Employment Wage Subsidy Scheme. To date, a total of over €1.9 billion in subsidies has been paid to 46,700 employers. An additional €335 million in employer PRSI has been forgone due to the reduced rate of PRSI on wages paid which are eligible for EWSS.

### **Covid Restrictions Support Scheme**

In addition, to date 20,100 businesses have registered for the Covid Restrictions Support Scheme with Revenue.

### **Pandemic Unemployment Payment**

This week, the Department of Social Protection has issued weekly payments to approximately 477,700 people in receipt of Pandemic Unemployment Payment. This payment is valued at €143.3 million and marks a decrease of 3,666 on the number paid last week.

This is the first time the numbers on the register have decreased since the introduction of the Level 5 restrictions in December. To date, around €5.9 billion has been paid out in total since March 2020.

These figures are in addition to the 188,543 people who were on the Live Register at the end of January. Since the last payment, almost 12,900 people closed their PUP claim, with approximately 10,200 of these stating that they were doing so because they are returning to work.

The quickest way to make a claim for PUP or to close a claim is to do so online and to log on [www.MyWelfare.ie](http://www.MyWelfare.ie).

### **Enhanced Illness Benefit Payment**

I mentioned it last week but I really want to emphasise the importance of self-isolating or restricting your movements if you are asked to.

The government have tried ensure people are not concerned about a loss of income if they do so. When a worker is told to self-isolate or restrict movements by a doctor or the HSE due to being a probable source of infection or having been diagnosed with COVID-19, they can apply for an Enhanced Illness Benefit payment of €350 per week. To be eligible for this payment, a person must be confined to their home or a medical facility. Unlike the general Illness Benefit, there are no waiting days attached to this payment, it is paid from day one of illness or self-isolation.

It is not necessary for a person with symptoms to leave their home to get a medical certificate from their doctor as all of the application process can be completed online via [www.MyWelfare.ie](http://www.MyWelfare.ie). This week, approximately 4,700 people have been medically certified for receipt of this benefit. This reflects a 34% decrease on the numbers paid last week, which was 7,149.

### **Tourism Business Continuity Scheme**

The recently announced €55 million Tourism Business Continuity Scheme is intended to help tourism businesses offset fixed costs incurred in 2020 and support them to continue operating through 2021.

Two new skills programmes also recently announced will assist the tourism sector to retain key talent and develop leadership capacity to rejuvenate businesses for recovery and growth - one programme is to develop team leaders and the second to develop supervisory management capability.

For more information on the Tourism Business Continuity Scheme go to [gov.ie](http://gov.ie).

### **Keep Well**

We have been in Level 5 for quite a while now and I'm sure boredom and general weariness, not to mention worry and anxiety are affecting all of us at times. It is worth checking out our Keep Well campaign which provides guidelines, information, and tips on how we can plan to do things that will help us keep well and help us to mind our mental and physical well-being. There are a lot of great initiatives being run locally so check out [gov.ie/healthyireland](http://gov.ie/healthyireland).

There really is something for everyone.

## **National Vaccination Strategy**

This week marks the very welcome start of the vaccination programme for those aged 85 or older living in the community. GPs will commence inviting those in this group to come forward for vaccination.

We have already delivered over 270,000 doses. We have delivered 5.3 vaccine doses per hundred people and 1.7% of the population is now fully vaccinated. Ireland is progressing well with our programme compared to EU states and is well above the EU average.

We are building the appropriate capability, processes and systems to quickly distribute all vaccines as supply increases. The vaccination programme is already involving national

partnerships with GPs, Pharmacists, and other Healthcare Professionals across Ireland as well as through specialist vaccination hubs.

Our approach is safe, effective, and fair. Most people in Ireland want to receive the COVID-19 vaccine, with 85% saying they will definitely or probably will seek it. This demand and confidence is growing and is a very positive statistic.

For more information on the Vaccination Strategy and prioritisation list go to [gov.ie](https://www.gov.ie).

## **And finally**

Thank you as always for your attention. Government is closely monitoring all of the data and is being advised on an ongoing basis regarding the disease. As you know, restrictions are due to end for this phase on the 5th of March. The government has said it will make an announcement of its plans for the next phase in the management of the pandemic next week.

Please stay the course, and keep doing the right thing.

Thank you