

# Speech by the Taoiseach Micheál Martin - COVID-19 Resilience and Recovery 2021: The Path Ahead

From [Department of the Taoiseach](#)

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## Check against delivery

Dia dhaoibh

As I speak to you this evening, I am very conscious that I am speaking to a country that has endured almost 12 months of COVID-related restrictions.

Almost 6,200 of our families, friends and neighbours across the island have lost their lives to the disease.

I know that people are physically and emotionally exhausted by this pandemic. It has placed enormous pressure on each of us individually and as a society.

Businesses and workers are deeply worried about the future and we are all completely fed up with the impositions on our lives.

What I want to do this evening is set out in clear, straightforward terms where we are, what is going to happen over the next six weeks, and where we would like to go from there.

Firstly, it is important to pay tribute to your efforts to suppress the virus since the New Year. The sacrifices you have made have had a very positive impact.

Steadily and surely, we are driving down the levels of infection. Indeed, our progress in response to the latest wave is among the best in Europe. And I want to thank you for your effort.

However, the situation that we and indeed all of Europe find ourselves in today is very different to where we were just a few short months ago.

The difference, of course, is the emergence of the so-called UK or B-117 variant.

It is equivalent to a new virus almost, and it is a major problem.

In a very short period, it has spread to at least 75 countries around the world and it is up to 70% more contagious than the original virus.

Up to 90% of new infections in this country are from this new variant.

The truth is that it has changed the dynamic significantly and we need to be very careful as we take the next steps forward.

Today, the government has published our updated plan for managing our way through the pandemic – The Path Ahead.

Within this document we set out what we have learned over the course of the last year and explain where we go from here.

Essentially, to open up our country safely, we need to keep the numbers of new infections low, and accelerate the vaccination programme in line with improving supply.

The way forward is broadly split into two phases – the situation up to 5 April, and the period after 5 April.

Between now and 5 April, Ireland will remain within Level 5 restrictions.

However, there will be three very important differences between the coming 6 weeks and the Level 5 period we have just been through.

- firstly, we will start the phased and safe return of in-school education. From 1 March, we will re-open our schools for junior infants to second class, and Leaving Certificate students. This will involve the return of over 320,000 pupils. This reopening will be monitored, and the plan then will be for all outstanding classes in Primary Schools and 5th years in Secondary Schools to return on 15 March. The aim then is for all outstanding classes to return after the Easter break
- secondly, we will expand the reopening of childcare. From 8 March, the early childhood pre-school programme will reopen for all participating children, and from 29 March, subject to public health advice, other restrictions will be lifted so that all other children can return to early learning and childcare services
- thirdly, we will resume non-COVID health and social care services over the coming weeks

In advance of 5 April, we will then review the situation.

It is critically important that we do not let our guard down.

We are carefully and gradually reopening schools because we need to get our children back into education. This will represent a major relief for both pupils and hard pressed parents.

When we open things, we want them to stay open.

That is why I cannot over emphasise the importance of continued observance of Level 5 restrictions. It is why, if you are currently working from home, you must continue to do so.

The key concern is the potential impact of increased mobility of the population on the disease, particularly with the new variant and how easily it spreads.

Maintaining restrictions is not a commentary on any one sector – increased mobility is the issue and that is why we must monitor the situation very carefully and keep it under constant review.

We want to reopen Society as soon and as safely as possible.

So, if we can maintain downward pressure on the disease and keep our numbers low, we will then move into the next phase.

There are a number of areas where we will be assessing progress when considering what changes may be possible.

The government will examine whether it will be safe to begin easing the restrictions on outdoor gatherings; some sporting activities; we will look at the gradual reopening of construction and we would like to move on the 5km limit on non-essential journeys.

The areas which will influence how we progress are as follows:

The first is community transmission of the disease – we need to use the month of March to really drive down case numbers and get them as low as possible.

Next, we will look at hospital and ICU occupancy – our health service has been under truly extraordinary pressure, as have the men and women who make it work. We remain deeply grateful for their heroic effort.

We need to continue to reduce the numbers of people in hospital because of COVID, so that we can protect our health service and allow for non-COVID healthcare to restart safely.

And finally, the all-important vaccine programme.

Our commitment is to deliver as fast and as comprehensive a vaccination programme as possible. So far, our only limit has been supply.

The first of our people being vaccinated are those who are most vulnerable to the disease, and those who we rely on to make our health system work.

We are making steady progress – over 350,000 vaccine doses have already been administered, but we are now in a position to implement a major ramping up of the programme.

Ranging from small local GP surgeries and pharmacists, up to a nationwide network of community and regional vaccination centres, we are implementing a programme of vaccination on a scale that is unprecedented in the country's history.

By the end of March, we will have administered 1.25 million doses.

Then, depending on vaccines arriving as scheduled, we will administer, on average, more than 1 million doses per month during April, May and June.

What that means in practical terms is that by the end of April, up to 47% of people over 18 will have had their first dose.

By the end of May, up to 64% will have had their first dose.

And by the end of June, up to 82% of adults who can be vaccinated will have received at least one dose and 55% - 60% will be fully vaccinated.

We will get through this.

But I want to make sure that when we ease each particular restriction, we take a careful approach to ensure that when we open something – it stays open.

We want to protect as many people as possible in the coming months, until we achieve a critical mass of vaccinations.

That is why we will continue to proceed carefully and cautiously, keeping the situation under constant review and being informed at all stages by public health advice.

I understand that some people will feel frustrated as you wait for your vaccine, but I ask you to be patient. There will be vaccines for everyone in the country who can be vaccinated.

The vaccination programme will completely change the landscape and transform the options available to us as a society for reopening and renewing our country.

## **Economy**

The breadth, depth, and agility of our economy means that we will be in a position to recover. The challenge has always been, and remains, to ensure that we maintain as many of our businesses as possible until they are in a position to get back to work.

That is why we will be maintaining all of the various support schemes for businesses and individuals, which were scheduled to close on 31 March, until the end of June.

A new National Economic Recovery Plan to reboot the economy in the aftermath of the pandemic is already in the advanced stages of development within Government.

€20 million in new funding has also been agreed today for mental health supports and investment in communities.

We will get through this.

We just need to stay focussed, and get through these next few months, safely, together.

I know how hard this is.

I know the toll that it is having on so many people's mental health and well being.

I know the devastation it has brought to so many businesses and livelihoods.

But I also know that the end is now truly in sight.

We have already shown what a remarkably resilient people we are. We have drawn on a deep innate sense of community and solidarity to get us this far.

That's why, I know, that we will get through this.