

Briefing on Government measures in response to COVID-19 - Wednesday 24 February 2021

From [Department of the Taoiseach](#)

Published on 24 February 2021

Last updated on 24 February 2021

- [1. Introduction](#)
- [2. Announcements](#)
- [3. Mobility](#)
- [4. The basics](#)
- [5. Updates - Supports](#)
- [6. SAM](#)
- [7. National Vaccination Strategy](#)
- [8. And finally](#)

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

Introduction

Good morning,

I would like to start this morning by acknowledging the extraordinarily hard work being done to suppress the COVID-19 curve for the third time. While still high, case numbers, hospitalisations and ICU numbers are coming down. Vaccines are being administered. Our perseverance is paying off as we begin another chapter in our fight against this deadly virus.

Announcements

Yesterday Government announced an extension of current Level 5 restrictions until the 5th of April.

The Government also announced a safe return of in-school education and childcare services on a cautious and phased basis as set out in the revised plan for managing the virus – [COVID-19 Resilience & Recovery 2021: The Path Ahead](#).

While it will be good news that we are now in a position to look at re-opening our schools and childcare, albeit cautiously, the decision to extend restrictions is a difficult one and will have considerable impact on all parts of our economy and society.

We are not out of the woods yet.

- We continue to have an unacceptably high level of disease in the community.
- Our healthcare workers and our health system remain under considerable pressure.
- This new variant behaves differently – it is like a new virus, outbreak data is telling us it spreads more easily, faster and outbreaks are bigger. It will exploit every opportunity we give it.

So if we are going to keep making progress on suppression all other restrictions remain in place while these services reopen. This cautious, measured approach is being taken in order to:

- Make steady progress, starting with childcare and schools, while avoiding a further wave of disease and re-imposition of restrictions
- Protect the most vulnerable by an efficient rollout of the vaccination programme
- Remain vigilant and agile regarding the uncertainties in the face of new variants and to capitalise on emerging evidence on available vaccines
- Lay the foundations for the full recovery of social life, public services and the economy

Ultimately this is to keep us all safe. But as always, it is our collective effort that matters most. Keeping our guard up all the time and sticking tightly to the restrictions.

So a bit more about what it is happening in schools: We know families and students who have been really struggling trying to balance home-schooling and remote learning. But we have a pathway now for education and childcare.

From next Monday, junior and senior infant classes will return, along with first and second class. Special schools will move to 100% capacity and final year Leaving Certificate students will be back in the classroom.

Monday 8th March will see the resumption of Early Childhood Care and Education. One week later on the 15th March, it is planned that 3rd, 4th, 5th and 6th classes at primary level can get back to school along with 5th year students in post-primary schools.

From the 29th of March, it is envisaged to resume early learning and care and school age childcare.

It is then planned that remaining post-primary school students will return on 12th April, post the Easter break.

As our schools and childcare services are opened up, we want them to remain open.

That means that the opening of schools is not a signal for anything else, household visits, playdates, meeting more than one other household outdoors are all still out.

As I've said, data is showing us that the prevalent strain of the virus in the country is more transmissible than that which was in circulation during 2020.

Previously, one in five household contacts of a positive case contracted the virus. Now, it is one in three.

It will be more important than ever that we continue to observe the public health behaviours that have allowed us to manage the virus for almost 12 months now.

We must continue to work from home and we must continue to stick with our own households.

We will monitor the virus closely through the month of March and into April. If we can re-open our schools and childcare carefully and safely, we will then have options to re-open other areas of activity.

In order to manage the safe reopening a number of factors will be reviewed every week:

- Control of the virus – we must continue to reduce infection rates in our homes and communities.
- Decreasing hospitalisations – We must continue to reduce the pressure on our health system and front line workers.
- Securing vaccine supply – Vaccines will be our most powerful tool in fighting this virus in the coming months. Once supplied, vaccines are delivered swiftly and in accordance with a carefully planned schedule.
- Managing new variants - Surveillance and monitoring of emerging variants will continue during phased reopening.

If we can keep up the good work and indeed redouble efforts – more good news on reopening society and the economy will not be too far away.

Our priority for this phase is getting our children back into education and the continuation of essential health services. Doing the right thing now – keeping our contacts to the absolute minimum, staying at home, working from home – will give more vulnerable people a chance to get their vaccines and for society to begin to be able to open up.

Mobility

There are a few things we are worried about:

We should take the chance to enjoy the Spring sunshine, however, remember to stick within your 5km from home and keep that 2m distance from others.

But you need to use your judgement, if a space feels too crowded and unsafe, it probably is. Although outdoors is safer, it's not risk free.

CSO figures this week show that as of the 12th of February nearly 67% of people were staying local. While many of the remaining 33% are likely of course to have been travelling for essential reasons, the concern is that all counties showed a decrease in the numbers staying local. This relaxation of mobility behaviour is quite worrying since there has been no relaxation in the restrictions.

Similarly, there has been a 10% increase in the amount of people in workplaces. The default is work from home and it's important to remember that. Your employer should be allowing you to work from home where possible. If you are an essential worker and have to be in a workplace, it is still important to keep your guard up – both for employees and employers.

In the coming weeks, with more people moving as a result of the re-opening of school and childcare, cannot be an excuse to “pop” into the office or go somewhere else, you don't need to. More than every, to counterbalance this movement we need to stay at home.

The basics

Nearly a year into this pandemic, Covid fatigue is becoming evident and it is understandable. I have said this is like a new virus but the simple steps will still work to keep it at bay, and enable the vaccination rollout programme take effect.

- As I mentioned, stay at home unless absolutely necessary
- If you need to go out for an essential purpose, wear a mask, both in indoor and busy outdoor settings
- Keep your distance – stay 2m away from others
- Wash your hands regularly with soap and water, use alcohol-based sanitiser where hand washing isn't possible
- Stay within your 5km unless it is for an essential purpose
- Avoid the office – continue to work from home where possible

Updates - Supports

Businesses around the country who are facing into another month of not being able to open or having to restrict the services they can offer. There continues to be a wide range of supports available to help employers and employees at this tough time and many of these are being extended to 30th June as was announced yesterday.

Employment Wage Subsidy Scheme

There are currently 48,700 employers registered with Revenue for the Employment Wage Subsidy Scheme. To date, a total of over €2 billion in subsidies has been paid to 47,100 employers. An additional €356 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 20,500 businesses have registered for Covid Restrictions Support Scheme with Revenue.

Pandemic Unemployment Payment

This week, the Department of Social Protection has issued weekly payments to approximately 473,400 people in receipt of Pandemic Unemployment Payment. This payment is valued at €141.88 million and marks a decrease of 4,252 on the number paid last week.

To date, around €6 billion has been paid out in total since March 2020. To put this into context, since last March, the total amount of PUP paid out is almost three times more than the total paid under the Jobseeker's Benefit and Allowance schemes for the whole of 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 10,900 people closed their claim, with approximately 9900 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.

Enhanced Illness Benefit Payment

I want to keep re-iterating that if you have had a positive test or are a close contact, you should not be worrying about income supports.

When a worker is told to self-isolate or restrict movements by a doctor or the HSE due to them being a probable source of infection or has been diagnosed with COVID-19 by a doctor, 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, so 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. This week, just under 4,000 people under the age of 66 have been medically certified for receipt of this benefit.

Still Here

I have often talked here about the challenges of the “stay at home” message for those who don't feel safe at home. Please be reassured – domestic and sexual violence support services from State agencies and the voluntary sector have been adapted and increased to ensure they remain available to support you. They will remain open throughout the restrictions, even at this most severe Level 5. I also want to remind you that restrictions on movement do not apply to a person escaping from a risk of harm or seeking to access essential services.

For more information on the supports available to you, go to [gov.ie/stillhere](https://www.gov.ie/stillhere)

Weekly Wellbeing Guide

The Culture and Arts sector remains a key resource for the public. Film, music, literature, theatre, dance and visual arts are things everyone in the country has leaned into during the pandemic. These sectors are fundamental to supporting wellbeing at a time when we need it. Every Friday, the Department of Tourism, Culture, Arts, Gaeltacht, Sport and Media publish a [Weekly Wellbeing Guide](#) on their social channels. You can find everything from virtual tours to online concerts and more. It's well worth checking out if you are in search of some escapism.

As announced yesterday, the Government's plan for living with COVID: The Path Ahead consolidates all the wellbeing and mental health supports that are available to people. You will find contact details and material to help you get through the next period of restrictions.

Ireland Reads Day

We are all in search of distractions from the world these days – and reading can provide that outlet.

Tomorrow marks 'Ireland Reads Day' where we are encouraged to pick up a book and enjoy all that reading can offer.

Ireland Reads is a public libraries initiative, in partnership with publishers, booksellers, authors and others under the Government's 'Keep Well' campaign.

More information on ways to keep well and look after your wellbeing during the pandemic are available on [gov.ie/healthyireland](https://www.gov.ie/healthyireland)

SAM

I spoke last week about SAM, the Social Activity Measure collaboration between ourselves in the Department of the Taoiseach and the ESRI. The results from the first survey were published on Gov.ie last Friday, with the results from the second due for publication this week. Already SAM is yielding interesting data which will be incorporated into our decision-making and communications.

Notable so far is the level of compliance with public health measures - contact with other people is low. When surveyed last week, around 50% of the population had not met anyone at all outside their household in the past 2 days. A large majority have no close contacts outside their household on any given day.

Another finding of interest - people overestimate how much others are socialising. Almost everyone believed their behaviour was as or more careful than average (97%). Despite low overall rates of socialising, people have a misperception others are socialising more than they are.

Although people find the restrictions tiresome, most remain very worried about the virus. Fatigue with restrictions is not presently linked to engaging in more social activity. A large majority believe that preventing the spread of the virus is more important than the burden of lockdown and few expect an early easing of restrictions.

A minority of people have had close contacts with others. Of the small number of close contact interactions that are occurring, most take place in workplaces with a minority occurring during home visits. Essential workers were more likely to have had a close contact at work than non-essential workers. Most were wearing masks at the time which is good but more concerning is that 14% were in non-essential workplaces. In contrast, masks were seldom worn during the small number of close contact interactions at home.

National Vaccination Strategy

So far, over 280,000 doses of the vaccine have been delivered. As of the end of last week, 98,388 people were fully vaccinated, receiving two doses.

This week, it is planned to vaccinate a further 11,900 long term residential care residents, 62,000 frontline health care workers, and 36,000 aged 70 or over – totalling a further 109,900 vaccines to be given by the end of this week.

The locations of 37 HSE vaccination centres were announced last week. These are in addition to hospital, GP and other networks which will be providing vaccinations to the community. Capacity is being built to administer 250,000 Covid-19 vaccine doses per week going forward. Ireland is above the EU average with 5.7 doses administered per hundred of our population.

Yesterday, there was an update to the COVID-19 vaccine allocation strategy following recommendations from the National Immunisation Advisory Council (NIAC). The proposed changes to the Vaccination Allocation Strategy are consistent with the overall aim of the vaccination programme which is to reduce morbidity and mortality, thereby protecting the healthcare system.

- Those aged 16-69 with a medical condition that puts them at very-high risk of severe disease and death will be in Cohort 4 and will be vaccinated directly after those aged over 70 and living in the community.
- Cohort 5 will consist of those aged between 65 and 69 whose underlying condition puts them at a high risk of severe disease and death.
- Cohort 6 will comprise those aged 65-69. They will be vaccinated alongside healthcare workers who are not in a patient facing role. Key workers essential to the vaccine programme will also be included in this cohort.
- Cohort 7 will consist of those aged 16-64 who have an underlying condition that puts them at high risk of severe disease and death.

Our approach is safe, effective, and fair.

For more information on The National Vaccination Strategy and the updated prioritisation list go to gov.ie

And finally

Last week Dr Mike Ryan said:

"The last eight months have shown us that unity, not singularity, defeats pandemics."

We must all pull together and see this through. The collective sum of our all individual efforts is what will work and what will pay off.

We have until next Monday to get the numbers as low as we can before we begin our cautious first steps towards re-opening. The lower the baseline by March 1st, the better our chance of success. So, keep it up, trust your judgement and continue to do the right thing.

Thank you.