

Briefing on the government's response to COVID-19 - Wednesday 3 March 2021

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Introduction and up-to-date Public Health Guidance

Good morning,

This week marks one year since the first case of COVID-19 was confirmed in Ireland and what a year it has been.

Who could have imagined what we were facing into one year ago? These last months, in a way, have been hardest of all because we probably thought we were closer to the end than we were.

It's also worth saying that who could have imagined we would have several vaccines, approved, in production and being administered. We dared to hope that the collective effort of scientists around the world would yield an early result but it is fair to say, in that regard too, our expectations have been exceeded. Sometimes we forget that.

The last few months have been very difficult and we still have work to do, but what we do now will frame how the next few months go. Case numbers are still high – particularly in some counties and in some communities. The situation in the health service is much improved but some hospitals are still under pressure – and what we must not forget is how easily the trajectory can turn, especially with the new variant of the disease.

This is the moment when we have to have patience and keep remembering that this virus is not finished with us yet.

Key messages

Phased reopening of schools and childcare

This week sees the return to the classroom of final year Leaving Certificate students and children from junior infants to 2nd class. Special schools have also returned to 100% capacity. This is a very welcome step forward for the young people themselves but also their teachers, families and school communities who have been working so hard behind the scenes over the last number of months.

While it is certainly good news that we are now in a position to begin the reopening of our schools and childcare, we are being cautious and working step by step.

The government's plan for the safe return of in-school education and childcare services is set out in the revised plan for living with the virus – [COVID-19 Resilience and Recovery 2021: The Path Ahead](#) which was published last week.

From next Monday 8 March, we will see the resumption of Early Childhood Care and Education. One week later on 15 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 29 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 12 April, post the Easter break.

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

Data is showing us that the prevalent strain of the virus in the country is much more transmissible than the original strain, and this strain has played a very significant role in the country over the past six to eight weeks. This new variant now accounts for about 90% of cases here. On average, 1 in 3 household contacts of confirmed cases of the new B.1.1.7 variant are now testing positive. With earlier variants, less than 1 in 5 household contacts were testing positive.

This means that we have to work as hard, if not harder, to interrupt transmission. It means that any lapse in concentration and each decision we make that increases risk, can result in the virus spreading more easily than before. It is therefore very important that we don't see the gradual reopening of schools this month as a signal that other forms of interaction are appropriate.

I really want to emphasise that we are asking parents not to congregate around school gates and that playdates aren't arranged. Please wear a mask and keep your distance from others when dropping the children off and picking them up at the end of the day. Don't be tempted into stopping for chat or a coffee with other parents you may not have seen for a while. Remember – every contact counts, even more so now.

If we can manage these next few weeks carefully and safely – we will hopefully be in a position to look at reopening more aspects of society in the coming months.

Mobility and Compliance

I have spoken here over the past few weeks about how people are responding at the moment in the context of the virus, referencing the SAM study which we are working on with the ESRI. You may have heard Professor Pete Lunn refer to the outcome of this study at Monday's NPHET briefing.

The vast majority of us are following the guidelines, complying with restrictions and we can see that in the fall in cases, hospitalisations and so on. The fall though, is slow and steady rather than dramatic. That is ok so long as we keep going in the right direction. But for now, we have to continue to do as well as we have been and maybe even improve a little.

Most of us are doing our best – but even a small increase in people moving around, a small increase in contacts, a small increase in people returning to work, can cause a significant increase in the spread of the virus.

There has been a notable increase in workplace, retail and recreation mobility in the last while. Data for the week ending 26 February show that workplaces have seen a 14% increase in the last month while retail and recreation is up 4% in the month. Footfall in busy towns and cities is creeping up steadily with monthly volumes in Dublin up 17% on last month, an increase of 547,000 people moving around.

Overall traffic volumes are up 8% on last week and 9% since last month. Every county showed an increase in traffic week on week.

I cannot emphasise enough that we must all continue to work from home unless our work is deemed essential work which requires our physical presence. We are also asking employers to ensure they are facilitating this.

A return to school is not a signal to return to work. In fact, it could jeopardise our plans.

We also need to stay within our 5km radius – even though it is difficult. With the spring sunshine, it is very tempting to explore scenic spots that may be just outside our limit but we must hold firm. Straying beyond the 5km limit might seem like a minor, even inconsequential decision. It's not, because it's a chink in the collective approach we are relying on.

An Garda Siochana are continuing to carry out high visibility patrols at public amenities, parks and beauty spots as well as carrying out checkpoints on routes around the country.

They are continuing to find groups gathering in breach of regulations either at house parties, social gatherings and exercising in groups.

If you are found to be flouting the restrictions, you may be issued with a fixed penalty notice. To date, approximately 9,800 COVID-19 fines have been issued by Gardai across the range of all COVID-19 breaches.

While it's reassuring to some people that those who are not complying are being penalised, these increasing numbers are not a measure of success, less people moving around, more people staying at home is the outcome we want for now.

Why do these things matter? They matter because we are asking people to stay at home while we open in a step by step and safe way. They matter because everyone that breaches restrictions puts our steady progress at risk. They matter because the majority of people are complying, because they believe it is the right thing. They are just as fed up as everyone else, they too have missed important life events, cancelled celebrations, are missing seeing their friends and loved ones or perhaps parents in long term care.

They are doing it to show solidarity, knowing that where there are weak links, the virus will exploit the opportunity and it has become even more clever in doing so.

The basics

Sorry for saying it all again, but the basics still matter.

- stay at home ... work from home unless you must be physically present to do your job in an essential business or service
- if you need to go out wear a mask, both in indoor and in busy outdoor settings
- keep your distance – stay 2m away from others
- wash your hands

Announcements

A year on, we have all become used to the daily numbers. Behind the number there is a person, indeed a network of people and each of these people have unique, real stories to tell. Stories that describe what this virus does, how it moves, spreads and what it leaves in its wake. We say we need to keep the numbers down, but it's not about keeping numbers down, those numbers are people, it is about keeping people well.

When faced with those decisions we need to think not about the numbers but about the stories, who are the people.

Young people know all about the impact of restrictions, they also have shown that they can lead the way in adhering to them. Antiviral has given young people a platform to share their experiences, to create a movement, to provide the inspiration to be #antiviral. A new phase of the antiviral campaign begins today and sees 3 young people share their stories – stories that describe how COVID-19 has affected them, stories that will remind all of us why we are doing this, and why we must continue to do this. Check out antiviralireland.com, meet Alex, Jack and Susie, discover their stories, follow antiviral on YouTube, Facebook, Instagram, Snapchat or TikTok, and hear the stories behind the numbers.

You might be surprised and you might find it a bit hard to watch. But what it tells us is that no group is invincible.

You will have seen some scenes last night from Limerick. It would be easy to generalise but it wouldn't be fair or accurate. The first thing I want to say is that the majority of young people are doing great and they have missed out on a lot. If you have slipped up and you were part of last night's events, the best thing you can do now is come forward for testing if you have any concerns.

Updates - Supports

A critical part of Government's response to managing the pandemic has been the supports available to help employers and employees at this tough time. Many have now been extended to 30 June.

Employment Wage Subsidy Scheme

There are currently 48,900 employers registered with Revenue for the Employment Wage Subsidy Scheme. To date, a total of over €2.2 billion in subsidies has been paid to 47,600 employers. An additional €375 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 20,800 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 469,000 people in receipt of Pandemic Unemployment Payment. This payment is valued at €140.3 million and marks a decrease of 4,566 on the number paid last week.

To date, around €6 billion has been paid out in total since March 2020.

Since the last payment, almost 10,500 people closed their claim, with approximately 9,000 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.

Applying for a PPS Number at this time

If you need a PPS Number to avail of social welfare benefits at this time, public services and information in Ireland, the application service to apply for a PPS Number is available at www.MyWelfare.ie.

In the interests of the public health advice and observing social distancing people are asked, if possible, not to attend their local Intreo Centre. Instead, they should avail of the online services.

Tourism Supports – Fáilte Ireland Hub

It's a very difficult time in particular for the tourism sector, which is undoubtedly amongst Ireland's most important indigenous economic sectors. It is a significant employer, supporting 260,000 jobs prior to the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic. It is estimated that 180,000 of those jobs are either lost or vulnerable. Fáilte Ireland estimate that some 40% of

tourism businesses have closed. At this time of the year, people would normally be booking and planning trips for the year ahead but unfortunately – that is not the case at the moment. To help businesses in the industry understand and adjust to the extreme challenges they are facing, Failte Ireland has created the COVID-19 support hub which is regularly updated. Here you can find out how to apply for a range of supports the government has in place from the COVID-19 Business Aid Scheme to the COVID-19 loan scheme amongst many others.

You can access the support hub at covid19.failteireland.ie.

Throughout the pandemic the government has continued to review supports in place for business and respond further as necessary. Enterprise supports alone have amounted to €9.9 billion over the course of the last year. This is exclusive of the expenditure on the Pandemic unemployment payment, temporary wage subsidy scheme and employment wage subsidy scheme.

National Vaccination Strategy

So far, over 435,000 doses of the vaccine have been delivered. As of the end of last week, 141,345 people were fully vaccinated, having received two doses.

Ireland is currently above the EU average with about 2.8% of our population fully vaccinated and 8.6 doses administered per 100 of our population. Almost 5% of the population have had their first dose of the vaccine. Our most vulnerable to COVID-19 infection and those who care for them come first in the priority list for vaccination.

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

And finally

We need to stick together as we navigate our way through the month of March and return our children to school and resume childcare services. We want schools to remain open, we want our childcare services to continue to operate.

We also want to ensure that in the coming months we see the reopening of more aspects of society and we want to continue to ease the burden on our health service.

We can all see the benefit of vaccines coming through from the evidence both here and abroad, particularly as regards older people and those at risk of serious disease.

We all want options and choices as we move into May and June. Things are definitely improving but, in the meantime, we need to get numbers much lower over the coming weeks if we want to realise those options.

What we need now is more patience... and to avoid rushing the last of the fences. Please stay the course. There are better days ahead.

Thank you.

