

Briefing on the government's response to COVID-19 - Wednesday 14 April 2021

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Introduction and up-to-date Public Health Guidance

Good morning.

This week sees us begin a new phase of our journey with COVID-19.

We have more reasons to be hopeful now than at any other time in the pandemic. Our national vaccine programme is well underway. Last week, Ireland reached the milestone of one million vaccines administered. As of last Saturday (10 April), 19.3% of Ireland's adult population (aged 16+) have had at least one dose of COVID-19 vaccine. The positive impact is already being felt – for example, the percentage of COVID-19 cases in healthcare workers has been decreasing significantly and is down from 10% of all cases notified at the start of December to less than 2% of cases in the latest 14-day report.

We are also seeing good progress in the trajectory of the disease. Case numbers reported on Sunday were the lowest reported since mid-December. This is further proof that our collective efforts continue to make a real difference. The average number of close contacts has held remarkably low and steady over the last month, and this is proving critical to preventing the spread of the virus. At the end of January 2021, the average number of deaths being reported over a seven day period was 49 per day, by the end of March it was 8 deaths per day.

This is the result of the extraordinary commitment and social solidarity shown by everyone. We may all have had times when we've been thoroughly fed up with the restrictions, but we have really stuck with it. And the benefits are real and tangible.

Our children have now all returned to school after a difficult time of home-schooling and remote learning. I would like to acknowledge the work of our teachers, parents and entire school communities to get to this point. It has not been easy, we know that.

Monday saw the easing of the 5km travel restriction which means that people can now move freely around their county or 20km from home if crossing county boundaries. We have seen people being able to get to the sea, and if they are brave, enough even swim in it... and many people are getting to explore the beauty spots they missed.

We can now meet one other household outdoors, although not in gardens. We must keep our outdoor meetings as low-risk as possible, with continued social distancing and other safe behaviours. Masks should be worn if in a busy outdoor setting such as a park or playgrounds.

This week also sees the return of residential construction meaning thousands of workers in the sector can get back to sites around the country. From next Monday, we will see a return of elite sport and training for adult inter county National Gaelic Games Leagues, not including minor or under 20 competitions.

All of these relaxations are the result of the hard work we have all put in over the past few months. If we can continue to keep the virus numbers under control, while rolling out the vaccine, we can look forward to further lifting of restrictions over the coming weeks and months. In order to progress, we must continue to stick with the plan and the basics which we know work: - handwashing, cough and sneeze etiquette, staying 2 metres apart, wearing masks in busy places, opting for outdoors over indoors and if you are indoors making sure the space you are in is well ventilated.

Workplaces/Remote Working

In particular for the coming weeks, we need to continue to work from home unless carrying out essential work which requires our physical presence. With daily new cases still in the mid-hundreds, there remains a real risk of new outbreaks occurring if large numbers of people return to the workplace.

There is clear evidence that some people are drifting back to the office or the workplace, and new data from the CSO this week shows that more people are moving beyond 10km of their homes.

It is important that nobody feels pressure to return to work. Remote working has played a huge part in containing COVID-19. It will be one of the most effective tools as we enter the next stage. We know a lot of people are tired of working from home and are keen to see colleagues again, but we have to stick with this for a few more months. When we go back to the office, we want it to be in a safe and sustainable way.

We are just not at that point yet.

Social Gatherings

What is quite concerning at this point in the amount of organised social gatherings being reported by An Garda Síochána. Over 3,300 fines have been issued to date for people attending or organising house parties. Such gatherings put at risk not only those attending, but everyone they come into contact with after including loved ones, neighbours, colleagues and the local community. This is a small minority of people -so please think twice before organising or attending such events.

Walk In Test Centres

Testing continues to be another important part of our toolkit when it comes to managing the pandemic. While vaccines are of course very important, testing too plays a role in helping us to recover and to reopen.

To further curb the spread of COVID-19 in our communities, walk in testing centres have been established in areas where case numbers are high. As part of the HSE's enhanced COVID-19 testing for local communities, two of the existing static test centres, will now also facilitate COVID-19 tests without requiring an advance appointment for those who are symptom-free on a pilot basis.

From today, 14 April for one week (9am to 5pm) the static testing centres in St Loman's Hospital Campus in Mullingar and in the Randal Óg GAA Club in Dunmanway will offer COVID-19 testing to asymptomatic people in these communities.

There are five other walk-in/no appointment necessary temporary COVID-19 testing centres open until 17 April. They are in Finglas, Mulhuddart, Ballyfermot Sports Complex, Crumlin GAA club, Limerick City and Waterford City.

These centres open every day from 11am-7pm for those over the age of 16, who have no symptoms and who haven't had COVID-19 in the last 6 months. You will only need to provide photo ID and a mobile phone number.

By the end of last week, we had identified over 600 positive COVID-19 cases through these centres and identified new outbreaks. This has enabled those positive cases take the necessary actions to protect those around them. If you live near one of these centres, please do avail of them. They have been established to keep communities safe.

A list of current centres operating is available on [hse.ie](https://www.hse.ie).

Updates - Supports

Employment Wage Subsidy Scheme

There are currently 49,000 employers registered with Revenue for the Employment Wage Subsidy Scheme. To date, a total of over €2.7 billion in subsidies has been paid to 48,500 employers. An additional €453 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 22,000 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 over 421,000 people in receipt of Pandemic Unemployment Payment. This payment is valued at €125.52 million.

Since last week's payment, some 7,300 people closed their PUP claim, with almost 6,000 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 [here](#).

Enhanced Illness Benefit Payment

A reminder again not to forget the Enhanced Illness Benefit Payment is available if you need to self-isolate or restrict your movements. This week, just over 2,000 people under the age of 66 have been medically certified for receipt of this benefit.

Scam Phone Calls and Texts

The Department of Social Protection wishes to alert people to scam phone calls and scam mobile phone text messages they may receive.

The latest scam text messages contain a link for the recipient to claim a payment of €350. The fraudsters rely on the fact that some people may click on the link and then provide their confidential social welfare information. Please do not click on or reply to links which appear suspicious.

In addition, scam phone calls continue to be made claiming to be from an official of the Department of Social Protection and can come from a wide range of phone numbers, one of which is the department's helpline number 1890 800 024.

The department is currently not engaged in contacting customers or members of the public through its helpline number. The number is available for customers to contact the department for assistance. Please do not engage with these calls or share any personal information with the callers.

If you have received such a call from this number please report it to the Gardaí immediately. The Department of Social Protection's staff will never ask you for your Bank details if they should have reason to call you over the phone.

These are sophisticated scams. We urge you to be extremely cautious if you receive a call or a text message and always ensure that you are using official departmental websites.

Updates – Education

Then just a reminder for Out of School Learners in respect of the Leaving Certificate Accredited Grades.

Leaving Certificate 2021 students studying one or more subjects outside of school, must submit evidence in order to receive Accredited Grades.

Students must find a host school or centre to oversee the submission of estimated marks on their behalf. It must be the school or centre where they have arranged to sit the written examinations.

These students are required to complete and return an Initial Information Form to their chosen host school or centre- the deadline has been extended by one week to Thursday 22nd April 2021. This form is available at gov.ie/leavingcertificate.

An Accredited Grades aide from the relevant host school or centre will then follow up with students in early May.

And finally

Today, as I said, we have many reasons to be hopeful. However, while significant progress is being made in controlling the disease and in rolling out vaccines, we still have a high level of infection, we are dealing with a much more transmissible virus than last year, and the absolute number of people fully protected through vaccination remains low.

This means that the risk that COVID-19 poses is still with us. Ireland could experience a further wave of infection if public health restrictions are eased too quickly or if we don't stick with the plan. The priority must, for the coming weeks, remain on maintaining control over the disease, as vaccination offers a widespread population level of protection.

Thank you again for all your hard work and perseverance to this point. We have a lot done and still some more to do. As I said these few weeks are crucial – so far, the careful approach is working, we are still on track, which means even brighter days and further easing restrictions won't be too far away.

We will get there. Stay safe.

Thank you.