

Briefing on Government measures in response to COVID-19 - Friday 7 May 2021

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Introduction and up-to-date Public Health Guidance

Good morning,

Last week, the government announced that we have moved to the early stages of recovery from the COVID-19 pandemic; finally, there is a real sense that we will get to those brighter days ahead.

Restrictions are being eased carefully, with a focus on finding the right balance between what is safe, what has the greatest social impact and what supports our economic recovery.

Our hospitals and health service are in a much better place to where they were back in January. Our vaccination programme is advancing really well.

This week saw the full resumption of construction. From Monday, a significant number of changes will take effect:

- retail will re-open on a phased basis starting with click and collect from with full reopening from 17 May
- outdoor gatherings of up to 15 will be permitted
- outdoor training for adults, in pods of up to 15 will be permitted
- reopening of personal services like hairdressers and barbers will be permitted
- reopening of galleries, museums, libraries and other cultural attractions
- religious services will recommence

- 50 mourners will be permitted at funeral services and 50 guests at wedding services. Wedding receptions can have 6 indoor or 15 outdoor

Restrictions on domestic travel will be lifted and we have an easing of restrictions on social gatherings, with meetings outdoors with up to 3 households or up to 6 adults now permitted.

This easing of restrictions is based on continuing to keep our risk low, by ensuring that the focus is on outdoor activities and a moderate increase in social interaction. We still have a high incidence of the virus in our communities. Public health advice is that what is contemplated next is low to medium risk, so we are not totally out of the woods yet although the path ahead is getting clearer.

We want to be in a position to further lift restrictions as planned in June. These measures will allow us all to enjoy our summer. The choices we make now in May are vital to ensure that the virus doesn't get out of control again and leave us in a position where we can't proceed as planned in June and beyond.

In order to maintain our recovery, therefore, it is just as important as it ever was to follow public health guidance. As the vaccination programme builds momentum, we need to make sure that we stay as safe as possible.

If the theme of the next few months is to "think safe, to think outdoors", we also need to think safe when outdoors:

- we still need to keep our distance when meeting others
- if somewhere is crowded, avoid it, leave and come back later
- if you are somewhere and find physical distancing difficult, put on your mask
- wear your mask in the appropriate indoor settings also, and of course keep washing your hands and practising all the familiar public health behaviours. Open windows and doors and keep air circulating
- we are also asking that unless it is necessary to attend workplaces, that you continue to work from home, and we ask employers to continue to facilitate this

And, of course, if you feel sick, have any symptoms, don't go to work, don't meet up with others, isolate and arrange a test. This is easier than ever, we have walk-in facilities in a number of communities if you are asymptomatic. Work is also currently underway to develop an online booking portal that will allow asymptomatic people book a slot at a testing centre for their free COVID-19 RT-PCR test. The system will be available later this month for pilot in selected areas. The option to book a free test in advance will initially be available in a number of our testing sites – this will be determined by Public Health advice and the prevalence of COVID-19 in a particular area. We will be working to expand the service to other testing sites in following the pilot. Individuals who have COVID-19 symptoms should continue to contact their GP for their COVID-19 test referral.

Sticking with these measures now give us all the best chance of a sustained and sustainable reopening and recovery.

We now go in to our last weekend where we are limited in how far we can travel within Ireland, the last weekend where our options are so-curtailed. We will see many welcome

changes from Monday, however, we know that the virus and its variants are still very much with us.

So, when making plans for this weekend:

- think safe, think outdoors
- think of others
- think of the public health guidance
- think of all we have endured to now

Be aware of how your county or local area is doing in terms of the disease – you can check that out on the HSE COVID-19 hub and plan accordingly.

There are brighter days not far away, we don't want to fall at the final hurdle. Make smart plans this weekend and we will be able to make safe plans for a positive summer.

Vaccination programme

The vaccination programme is a key enabler of the recovery and we are seeing that it is gaining significant momentum. Just over 1.7 million doses have been administered, with 33.5% of the eligible population having received a first dose and approximately 12.7% of the eligible population fully vaccinated. We had our best week ever last week with nearly 200,000 vaccines administered and our best day ever yesterday with over 46,000 doses.

Over 457,000 people over 70 have now received their first dose, with 59.7% of this age group now fully vaccinated having received both doses. Over 234,000 people at very high risk of severe COVID-19 due to an underlying condition have now received a first dose. Over 200,000 60 - 69s have now received their first dose.

This week, people aged 50 to 59 are being asked to register, on a staggered basis, with those aged 56 being called on today.

For more information on registering for a vaccine go to [HSE.ie](https://www.hse.ie).

Business supports

Over the coming weeks, we will see more businesses reopening after a very difficult period. Clear sectoral guidance will be provided at each step of the path ahead to support a safe reopening. We are urging businesses to check out any updated guidance from Government which will be available over the coming weeks as they finalise their re-opening plans.

It's important to emphasise that there will be no cliff edge in financial supports for businesses. Further economic recovery measures will be introduced to help business and to help people get back to work.

There are a number of supports that continue to be available to employees and their employers.

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 €3 billion in subsidies has been paid to 48,900 employers. An additional €484 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 22,300 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 385,000 people in receipt of Pandemic Unemployment Payment. This payment is valued at €114.1 million. This is down from a peak of 481,331 people who were in receipt of the payment on 9 February.

To date, over €7.4 billion has been paid out in PUP since March 2020. Some, 12600 people have closed their claim as they are now returning to work with approximately 3700 of these returning to the construction sector.

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

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, they can apply for an Enhanced Illness Benefit payment of €350 per week. And we are advising people to remember that and to avoid turning up for work if they have symptoms. There are no waiting days attached, the payment is paid from Day 1 of illness or self-isolation.

This week, approximately 1653 people under the age of 66 have been medically certified for receipt of this benefit.

Guidance for visiting Nursing Homes and Residential Care Facilities

One of the most welcome changes in restrictions is being able to visit our loved ones in nursing homes and residential care facilities again after a very difficult period. Being able to have visitations is very important to the health and wellbeing of residents and their families and friends. When someone is fully vaccinated the chance of getting serious COVID-19 disease and of dying from COVID-19 is much lower. This means it is safer to have more visiting. But there is still a need to be careful and follow public health guidelines.

If you are a resident, and most people in your nursing home (8 out of 10) have been vaccinated you can now expect to have up to 4 visits per week with up to 2 people per visit. If you are visiting, arrange your visit in advance with the facility and be aware of the steps you will need to follow while you are there, aimed at keeping all safe.

More information on visiting these facilities at this time is available at [HSE.ie](https://www.hse.ie).

Education

We are in the final school term of the year, and the Department of Education has issued guidance to schools that graduation ceremonies, school tours, sports days and other key milestones can occur in line with schools' COVID-19 Response plans. These cannot be public events with parents in attendance, but schools can work within their plan to provide a safe and memorable occasion for primary and post-primary students.

The department has provided further video messaging for students and parents, reinforcing key public health messages, including a reminder that children should not attend school with symptoms and to avoid social gatherings.

Leaving Certificate examinations

Certain Leaving Certificate examinations are starting over the coming days and into the coming weeks, with the main schedule of written examinations commencing on Wednesday 9 June.

It is really important that students continue to follow the public health guidance, and limit their contacts over the coming weeks. We ask them to avoid social gatherings, and to consider their own opportunities and the opportunities of their friends and classmates who intend to sit the examinations.

In the coming days, the State Examinations Commission will be issuing Guidance for the Conduct of the Written Examinations to schools that is in line with public health advice.

It is of the utmost importance that examination candidates, parents and schools should note in respect of sustaining public health measures in schools until the end of the year, that in the Leaving Certificate examinations, candidates will not be allowed to present for their examinations if:

- they been diagnosed with COVID-19
- have any symptoms of COVID-19; or develop these symptoms at any stage over the course of the examinations
- are a close contact of a confirmed case
- are self-isolating
- have been advised to self-isolate, or to restrict their movements

There will be no alternative sitting of the Leaving Certificate Examination. Students who are unable to sit an examination for these reasons, or for any other reasons, including medically certified illness or a bereavement, will receive an Accredited Grade, provided they are eligible for the scheme.

Nobody wants to see anyone's chance to sit the examinations taken away because they become a close contact or contract COVID-19 – so please, follow the guidance and stay safe.

Keeping well

As we reopen, and recover as a society, minding our physical and mental wellbeing remains important. The government's Keep Well campaign continues to contain a wealth of supports for all of us, and has focused on five main themes; Keeping Active, Staying Connected, Switching off and Being Creative, Eating Well and Minding Your Mood.

Keep Well encouraged us all to do something that is good for us each day or week, such as exercising, alone or with household members, within the COVID-19 guidelines, connecting virtually with friends or family, engaging in a hobby or reaching out for the supports that may have been needed, creating balance, routine and resilience. This advice is just as important as we readjust to reopening and to the resumption of many activities.

We are aware that people who have been at high risk may experience some hesitation in changing habits that have been imposed by the need for safety during the pandemic, for over a year. The vaccines provide a high degree of protection and we would encourage people to take advantage of the freedoms offered under current COVID-19 guidelines.

However, we're very aware of the need to reach out and support those of you, deemed very high or high risk, that have experienced, for your safety, particularly significant restrictions to your lives since the pandemic began.

Sport Ireland, Healthy Ireland and our other partners, will be working on further campaigns and resources, which will include a focus on those of you that may need support the most, as we are able to slowly move closer to what we used to regard as "normal".

Social Activity Measure (SAM) Study

Today, we will also publish the findings from the latest wave of our SAM study. SAM is a behavioural study that records the public response to the risk of COVID-19 infection and COVID-19 guidelines over time.

The main findings from this wave, which was conducted during the week of 20 April are that there were increases in mobility and social activity – specifically more people attending their workplace, visiting another person's home or using transport than had been seen since the survey started in January.

Additional activity led to a corresponding increase in close contact, with just over 22% of the population having had a close contact the previous day, surpassing the previous high of 18%. The largest rise occurred in the workplace, but close contacts in homes also went up, while close contacts without face coverings increased in both settings. The oldest adults had the largest increase, mainly due to vaccinated individuals engaging in social home visits, followed by the youngest, mainly at work. The study also finds that individuals met up with more people from more households, and substantial increase in social visits to homes – driven mostly by those who are vaccinated.

The study also reports a sustained improvement in self-reported wellbeing, following low levels reported in February/March.

Full details of SAM are available on [gov.ie](https://www.gov.ie).

Finally

Through our collective efforts we are keeping the virus under control and the vaccine programme is gaining momentum. We are continuing to make progress, we must stick with it.

So this weekend:

- think safe, think outdoors
- avoid crowds
- think of others
- remember the public health advice

Thank you.