

# Speech by the Taoiseach Micheál Martin - COVID-19: Reframing the Challenge, Continuing our Recovery and Reconnecting

From [Department of the Taoiseach](#)

By: [Taoiseach](#); [Micheál Martin](#)

Published on 31 August 2021

Last updated on 31 August 2021

## Check against delivery

Good evening.

The journey through the COVID-19 pandemic up to this point has been one like no other.

We've had to accept restrictions on our personal freedoms that would have been unthinkable just a couple of years ago.

Never before have we confronted a public health and economic challenge of this scale, and which has continued to rapidly evolve.

The government has directly intervened in the economy and provided massive direct supports in a manner and on a scale that is simply unprecedented.

All of this, and much more, was necessary because our number one priority had to be the protection of people's lives and public health.

We were also determined to do whatever we had to do, to keep as much of our society and economy intact until we could safely emerge from restrictions.

But protecting lives and public health has demanded policies which have often been frustrating.

And I know that at different times, the different approaches of some other countries looked more attractive and debates about this led to some tensions.

But I also know this.

Despite these frustrations and tensions, and despite genuine concern for the disproportionate burden borne by some sectors, we kept our head as a country.

We stuck together, we followed the best advice, we did what we were asked and we looked out for each other.

As a result, we've managed to protect a greater proportion of our people than most other countries.

**The evidence is clear and incontrovertible – your effort and your sacrifice has saved lives.**

It has not been a straightforward journey.

We have had false dawns and crushing disappointments along the way.

The explosion of what was then called the UK variant last Winter and the emergence of the Delta variant earlier this year were particularly challenging.

But, we persisted.

Over the course of 2021, we've pursued a twin track strategy of a careful, steady reopening, together with periods of observation and examination after each change.

And alongside this, we have pushed forward with one of the most determined and comprehensive vaccination programmes in the world.

The strategy has worked:

Whole sectors of our economy and society have opened and stayed open, while successful and controlled reopening pilot events have taken place in others.

Our children and young people are back in education.

And our National Vaccination Programme has powered ahead. In every category, the rate of uptake and roll-out is the envy of much of the world.

Extraordinary scientific effort on a global scale has given us this tool against the virus.

But it is the Irish people's respect for and trust in science that has made it such a powerful tool in our country.

As of this morning, close to 90% of all citizens over the age of 18 have been fully vaccinated, and the rate of uptake in our citizens under the age of 18 is hugely encouraging also.

This vaccine roll out has been on a scale that has never been seen before. The entire vaccination team, operating in every corner of our country, deserves the nation's pride and thanks.

As I have said throughout this journey, a successful National Vaccination Programme changes the dynamic, utterly.

Because of the effort of our vaccination team and because you have stepped up to the mark and taken the vaccine when it was offered, we are now entering a whole new phase of the pandemic.

I've never believed that there would be a day when we were just able to announce that the pandemic was 'over'.

This would be entirely the wrong message to send and it would undermine our ability to respond properly to new developments.

We are very unlikely to ever be able to be rid of the virus completely. Indeed, we expect to see an increase in case numbers over the coming weeks.

But the combined strategy of careful reopening and energetic vaccination has brought us to a point where we can begin to do things differently.

Sectors that remain closed or are still subject to massive restrictions, can begin to hope again.

The government has consulted closely with our public health officials and has decided that in our management of COVID-19, the time is now right to begin the move from regulation and widespread restrictions on people's personal freedom, to an approach primarily defined by public health advice, personal behaviour, judgement and responsibility.

Obviously, we must remain vigilant and nimble, and if a new dangerous variant of concern emerges or if our hospitals come under unsustainable pressure again, we will move quickly to respond to the situation.

But what is very clear is the efficacy of our vaccines in protecting against severe illness, ICU admission and death.

Given this, a range of remaining restrictions will be gradually and carefully eased during September, with a view to achieving a significant change in approach towards the end of October.

Specifically, from 6 September, we will see an easing of restrictions on organised indoor and outdoor events and mass gatherings.

From that date, theatre, music and live events can take place for vaccinated people at 60% capacity indoors and 75% capacity outdoors.

Religious services will be allowed to proceed at up to 50% capacity.

Then, from 20 September we will ease restrictions on indoor and outdoor group activities.

I am under no illusions about how personally difficult it has been for so many people, young and old, to have had to curtail their artistic, cultural and sporting lives for so long.

Return to work for those still working from home may also commence on a phased and staggered basis from 20 September.

And on 22 October, we then hope to be in a position to remove the following measures:

- the legal requirement to prove immunity in order to access indoor hospitality or other events
- all remaining restrictions on indoor and outdoor events and activities
- all remaining restrictions on religious or civil ceremonies
- the legal requirements for mask wearing outdoors and in indoor private settings

Ó thus na paindéime seo tá gaisce déanta ag muintir na hÉireann ag cabhrú le chéile le spiorad na meithle inár measc.

A bhuí le comhoibriú an phobail, táimid ag druidim anois go dtí tréimhse nua ag maireachtáil leis an gcoróinvíreas.

Caithfidimid go léir fós a bheith an-chúramach ar fad sna seachtainí amach romhainn agus sinn ag maolú agus ag laghdú na srianta go céimniúil cúramach.

Even with these very welcome changes, it is important to stress that **the pandemic is not over**.

With this Delta variant in particular, great uncertainties remain and we need to continue to be careful.

We will need to stick to the basics of hand hygiene, cough etiquette and keeping our distance.

Even after 22 October, there will still be a statutory requirement to wear masks in healthcare settings, indoor retail and on public transport. And each of us will continue to need to use our judgement and wear masks in other environments where we see a risk.

We need to be stringent in making sure that if we have any symptoms, we self isolate and get tested.

As employers, colleagues, friends and families, we have to drive home the point and embrace this cultural change that if you have a cough or feel unwell, you do not go to work and you do not mix with others.

We also face a very difficult winter in our healthcare settings.

The advice from public health officials is that other respiratory viruses including colds and flus may be more impactful this winter because we're more susceptible to them after the reduced exposure of last year.

We understand this and we will be ready for it.

Work is already underway on a new Winter Plan for the health service, including a comprehensive flu vaccination programme, and details of that will be published in the coming weeks.

As we move into this new phase, it will be a time of trepidation for some as they re-engage with activities and resume old habits after a long period of isolation. We will be bringing forward a health and well-being programme to help people reconnect.

Others will be nervous as they move to reopen long closed venues and projects.

It will be a time of anticipation and relief for others as they finally get back to doing what they do best, particularly in our arts and entertainment sectors.

As patrons and event goers, we will be delighted to enjoy them again.

For many others, it will be a time of reflection, and sadness.

For while we have come to this point in the pandemic with fewer deaths than many other countries, we have still paid a terrible price.

The pain of each death was compounded by the absence of the ancient traditions and rituals that we do so well as a people.

We did our best and found ways to safely comfort our bereaved.

The image of communities lining the routes of funerals is one that will stay with me forever.

I know the grief is deep and it will take a long time for us to come to terms with what has happened.

As a country we will find the right way to memorialise those who we have lost to this terrible virus, and we look forward to engaging with all of you, the Irish public, in this endeavour.

Today though, we are taking an important and very welcome step forward.

Over centuries we have demonstrated that as a nation, we have great resilience and ingenuity.

We have weathered many storms, we've borne many ordeals, we've faced down many threats and we have seized many opportunities.

Over the last 18 months, we have drawn on all of that, and we have endured.

Now, we will push on to complete our vaccination programme, including a winter booster programme that will commence in the coming weeks.

And we will play our full and active part in making vaccines available to vulnerable people all around the world.

We will rebuild our economy and renew our society.

We will do these and all the other things,  
with renewed energy and determination,  
with personal freedoms restored and our country, we hope, emerging from this  
most extraordinary period in our history.

Tá laethanta an dóchais tagtha.

Go raibh míle maith agaibh.