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# Daily briefing on the government's response to COVID-19 - Friday 17 April 2020

Published: 17 April 2020

From: [Department of the Taoiseach](#)

- [1. Introduction and Up-to-date Public Health Advice](#)
- [2. Temporary Wage Subsidy Scheme](#)
- [3. Agri Sector](#)
- [4. Screen Ireland Funding](#)
- [5. Circulation of Bogus Emails Seeking a Refund of Payments Made](#)
- [6. Community Fora](#)
- [7. Library Online Services](#)
- [8. SOLAS Supports](#)
- [9. New Regulations from the Road Safety Authority](#)
  
- [10. TG4 Educational Programming](#)
- [11. Childcare Sector](#)
- [12. International](#)
- [13. Support for the international response to COVID-19](#)
- [14. P&O Ferries](#)
- [15. Protecting People in Emergency Accommodation](#)
- [16. Funerals and loss of a loved one at this time](#)
- [17. Finally](#)

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## Introduction and Up-to-date Public Health Advice

Good Morning.

As we navigate daily life during this crisis, it is important that we continue to follow public health guidelines and do not become complacent. As we have been hearing over the past 24

hours, the reproduction rate of this virus has been brought down. That means the number of people being infected by another person has reduced. It also means the sacrifices you are making are having an impact in slowing the virus. But we still aren't there yet. We must keep it up until the Chief Medical Officer and the National Public Health Emergency Team tell us what we need to do next. We need to keep going in order to protect ourselves, our friends, our families and our community.

This is a difficult time for everyone so it is important to take time away from thinking about the virus and look after your wellbeing and the wellbeing of those around you and remember that support is available if you need it. It can be hard to ask for help, especially if you are used to being independent but help is there for everyone especially those who are cocooning at this time. By cocooning you are helping yourself and you are helping those around you. So you should not hesitate to ask for a bit of help if you need it. We are all in this together.

While we need to stay apart we can still look after each other. Look for creative ways to stay in touch with the people in your lives and remember that we are all in this together. As always I cannot stress enough the vital public health advice, the most effective personal actions we can take to help slow the spread of COVID-19.

That is to:

- wash hands regularly and thoroughly
- use good cough and sneeze etiquette
- observe social distancing measures
- stay at home

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## **Temporary Wage Subsidy Scheme**

As you know, as a key element in our economic response, the [Temporary Wage Subsidy Scheme](#) has been a landmark intervention introduced to support business and employees at this time of national emergency due to the COVID-19 pandemic.

45,150 employers are now registered with Revenue for the Temporary Wage Subsidy Scheme.

The cumulative value of payments made under the scheme is now €267 million.

Further refunds will be generated by [Revenue](#) today which will be in the bank accounts of the majority of the respective employers on Monday (20 April).

As you know, further changes were announced on Wednesday:

- for employees earning less than €412 per week the subsidy will be increased from 70% to 85% of their previous net weekly income
- for employees earning between €412 and €500 per week, the subsidy will be €350 per week
- stronger employee retention incentives have been put in place
- the Wage Subsidy will also now be available to support employees where the pre-COVID salary was greater than €76,000, and their post-COVID salary has fallen below €76,000, subject to certain tiered arrangements and tapering

Further information is available on the Revenue Commissioner's website – [www.revenue.ie](http://www.revenue.ie).

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## **Agri Sector**

As part of the response to the impact that COVID-19 is having on Irish farm incomes, payments for the Green, Low-Carbon, Agri-Environment Scheme (GLAS) will commence a month ahead of schedule. Bringing forward this payment should significantly improve cashflow on Irish farms in these challenging times. The GLAS Scheme incentivises farmers to promote biodiversity, protect water quality, and also to help combat climate change on their farms.

Over €26 million in GLAS balancing payments will start issuing to over 42,300 farmers who are participating in the Scheme and will reach bank accounts early next week.

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## **Screen Ireland Funding**

We recognise the serious impact the COVID-19 pandemic is having on our audio-visual industry, as it continues to create unprecedented levels of disruption across the Irish and international creative sector.

Building on a number of support measures, an additional €4 million in funding was announced yesterday to support production companies and creative talent in developing a strong slate of quality projects, so that the industry can emerge from the current situation in a position to immediately begin producing work. The funding will be assigned to support production companies, screenwriters, directors, animators and others across feature film, TV and animation.

Further information on these supports can be found [here](#).

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## **Circulation of Bogus Emails Seeking a Refund of Payments Made**

The [Department of Employment Affairs and Social Protection](#) has become aware that a bogus email is in circulation, which is seeking a refund of unemployment payments made to customers, to a nominated bank account. These emails generally issue from a Gmail or Hotmail email address.

The department has said categorically that it does not use Gmail or Hotmail addresses when issuing notifications to customers.

These incidents are treated with the utmost seriousness and the Gardaí have been notified.

Should any person receive such an email and be in doubt as to its authenticity, please contact the department at 01 704 3082.

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## **Community Fora**

We want to take the time to remind anyone who needs support at this time that the [Community Call Fora](#) run by the Local Authorities around the country can provide a much-needed lifeline. They are continuing to provide help to people around the country.

The Community Call Fora, run by the local authorities, continue to provide help and support to those in need in communities around the country. Yesterday, they received 1,000 calls nationally. They made just over 500 follow-up calls to people who have contacted them.

Nationally, since 31 March, the Community Call Fora have received over 14,600 calls and have made 7,400 follow-up calls.

If someone needs information, reassurance, or just someone to talk to, they can call [ALONE's national phone line](#) on 0818 222 0245.

Remember, ALONE is there for anyone experiencing difficulties with physical and mental health, finance, loneliness and other challenges.

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## Library Online Services

Additional resources were announced several weeks ago to [Library Online Services](#). It was hoped that these additional resources would allow people to continue to engage with their local library services online while they remain closed to limit the spread of the virus. We are really pleased to see that there has been a dramatic increase in the usage of library online services in recent weeks.

There has been a 106% increase in e-book loans and a 66% increase in e-audio book loans since the beginning of March.

In addition, there has been an over 300% increase in new library users between the week commencing 1 March to the week commencing 29 March.

It is heartening to know that people are taking advantage of the community services that remain available to support them at this difficult time. Reading is a great way not only to entertain ourselves during this crisis but also to look after our mental health.

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## SOLAS Supports

The further education and training sector is doing all it can to help frontline staff, learners, and employers throughout the COVID-19 crisis.

Education and Training Boards (ETBs) around the country are looking at where there are urgent skills gaps as a result of COVID-19 and providing vital online training in areas such as infection prevention and control.

As I have mentioned previously, [SOLAS](#) has also made its eCollege platform available free of charge, meaning people doing a Further Education Training course who would like to take advantage of this time to enhance their learning, and those who have recently become unemployed, can upskill in a range of digital skills.

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## **New Regulations from the Road Safety Authority**

In response to the COVID-19 crisis driver licenses and learner permits due to expire before 30 June 2020 will now be valid for a further four months.

The same extensions apply to certificates of competency – received on passing a driving test, driver theory test certificates, Motorcycle Initial Basic Training certificates and to National Car Tests and Commercial Vehicle Roadworthiness Tests.

This will ensure that people will not lose out due to the temporary closure of Road Safety Authority facilities, and will in particular help to keep vital health and supply chain workers on our roads.

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## **TG4 Educational Programming**

We know it is an ongoing challenge for parents with children to keep a focus on education and learning during this necessary schools' closure.

TG4 are announcing a new educational initiative to further support the effort teachers and families are making across the country.

From next Monday (20 April), TG4 will be airing their new programme, [Cúla4](#) ar Scoil which will cater for primary school children who attend Gaelscoileanna and Gaeltacht schools.

The half-hour programme will be broadcast on weekday mornings from the Connemara Gaeltacht. It will be presented by primary school teachers, with contributions from teachers and facilitators from other communities and Gaeltacht regions, incorporating a range of dialects.

The programme will have a weekly theme with lessons and learning drawn from the primary school curriculum. Core curriculum subjects such as Irish, Mathematics, History and Geography will be included, and there will also be an emphasis on creativity, the arts, oral traditions, health and wellbeing.

There will be a level of interactivity, with children watching being invited to participate at home and asked to send in pictures or videos of their work to the programme. The content will also be available online on [Cula4.com](#) and on [YouTube Cúla4](#).

As you know, there are also educational supports available through RTE as I mentioned previously. They launched their Home School Hub last month. Short curriculum based lessons are aired on RTE2 and RTE Player with project work and activities available on [rte.ie/learn](#).

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## **Childcare Sector**

The Wage Subsidy Childcare Scheme will provide funding towards a portion of staff wages and services overhead costs to the Early Learning and Care and School Age Childcare sector.

This scheme the Temporary Wage Subsidy Scheme and is aimed at ensuring that the sector is in a position to re-open after this crisis.

These measures should also provide parents with a reassurance that they are not required to pay fees during this COVID-19 crisis, while confirming that they will maintain places for their children in childcare arrangements; In addition, it will give Early Learning and Care Educators security and therefore retain vital Educators in the sector.

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## International

The Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade has assisted over 5,000 Irish citizens to return to Ireland in the past month through both commercial flights and repatriation flights.

Over the Easter weekend, the department assisted citizens returning from Vietnam and Cambodia, New Zealand, Nigeria and South Africa.

We are continuing to provide consular advice and assistance to over 1,000 citizens who have indicated an interest in returning to Ireland from abroad.

Our consular team is working closely with our 86 Embassies and Consulates to assist these citizens and to notify them of remaining commercial options and repatriation flights, including flights arranged by our EU partners and the UK.

Irish citizens who are abroad and have concerns about COVID-19 related measures can contact the Department of Foreign Affairs on country code 353 - 1 613 1733, or on WebChat at [dfa.ie](https://www.dfa.ie).

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## Support for the international response to COVID-19

As the Tanaiste [announced](#), yesterday Ireland made an additional €1 million available for the World Health Organization's programme of assistance to combat COVID-19 in Ethiopia, building on our long term support for the healthcare system in the country. This brings to €11.5 million, Ireland's support for the UN COVID-19 Global Humanitarian Response Plan.

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## P&O Ferries

It is understood that a dispute has arisen between the owners of Liverpool Port, Peel Ports and P&O Ferries.

This resulted in a P&O ferry ("The Norbay") being prevented from sailing from Liverpool to Dublin yesterday.

While this is primarily a contractual matter between the two companies, any protracted dispute would have implications for the supply chain into Ireland.

The Department of Transport, Tourism and Sport is engaging with P&O and Dublin Port Company to try to resolve the issue.

It is important to note that P&O Ferries account for less than 20% of the freight between Ireland and the UK.

More generally, there are a number of companies and a variety of shipping services operating between Ireland and the UK. It is understood that supply chains won't be materially impact.

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## **Protecting People in Emergency Accommodation**

As part of the response to COVID-19, Government is working closely with the Dublin Regional Homelessness Executive (DRHE), Local Authorities and the Health Service Executive to ensure the necessary arrangements are in place to protect individuals and families accessing emergency accommodation.

In Dublin 500 new beds have been introduced to facilitate greater social distancing for individuals in homeless accommodation. In addition to these 500 beds, the Dublin Regional Homelessness Executive (DRHE) has additional facilities to allow for the self-isolation of suspected and confirmed cases of COVID-19 in emergency accommodation in the Dublin Region.

On a national level, Local Authorities are also working to put in place additional accommodation to allow for the isolation of confirmed or suspected cases of COVID-19 and have also secured additional space to support the appropriate levels of social distancing in emergency accommodation.

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## **Funerals and loss of a loved one at this time**

I have spoken before about the new temporary restrictions around how funerals are conducted because of COVID-19, and how difficult this is for people, especially here in Ireland where

funerals are such an important part of the grieving process. In order to try and provide some help for people, we have produced a guide for the bereaved during the pandemic.

This guide is available [here](#). It provides clear advice for bereaved families and what to expect as they make funeral arrangements.

People dealing with loss during this period will need the same emotional support that they would need in normal times - perhaps even more so. Everyone should be encouraged to help one another. There are other resources on the grieving process available on gov.ie.

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## **Finally**

Thank you for all you are doing. It is working.

So, this weekend, continue to stay home unless it is for an essential journey for food or medical supplies or to assist those who are most vulnerable. Enjoy the spell of good weather by exercising within 2 kilometres of your house.