
Daily briefing on the government's response to COVID-19 - Wednesday 8 April 2020

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Introduction and up-to-date Public Health Guidance

Good Morning Everyone.

As usual, I'm going to begin this morning with the most important, most effective measures you can take, to slow the spread of this virus. You all know at this stage that we have been asked to stay at home unless we need to go about essential business.

What each of us does individually benefits us all. We are in this together. We know from what we have seen so far that the majority of people are playing their part, making that sacrifice for everyone's benefit.

New regulations to widen the power of the Gardai have been signed by the Minister for Health. The Gardai have been given these powers on an exceptional basis. They are to be used for exceptional cases. The Gardai will continue what they have been doing to date, where the approach has been to engage, educate and encourage. Enforcement has and will continue to be a last resort and used sparingly.

We need to be fair to everybody who is making an effort, especially those who are cocooned. The impact of what we all do together is greater than the sum of what we do individually. We need to stick to the CMO's advice.

I know that with a long weekend approaching and the weather improving this might be difficult, you might be tempted to travel beyond the 2 kilometre limit to a park, a beach or even to a holiday home in another part of the country.

It is really important that you don't do that. If we don't stay the course, all of the sacrifices already made, and all of the work you have put in so far, and all of the work done by our frontline workers, to try and suppress this virus won't be enough.

The only way to slow the spread of COVID-19 is to stay at home, to stick to the guidelines. It's hard but we need to continue what we are doing to protect ourselves, to protect the lives of our families and our most vulnerable and all of those working on the front line.

Our essential workers have to go to work, everyone else's job is to stay at home. That is how we will save lives.

And just a reminder of the most effective personal actions you can take to help slow the spread of the virus.

For everyone else, we still need you to:

- wash your hands regularly and thoroughly
- use good cough and sneeze etiquette

- observe social distancing measures
- perhaps now, more than ever, as we are all tired of the limits on our daily routines, we have to remind ourselves – We are the frontline

Business Supports

Take-up of The Temporary Wage Subsidy Scheme introduced by Government is continuing to grow.

Over 39,000 employers are now registered with Revenue for the scheme.

Today (8 April), Revenue has generated further refunds under the scheme worth €17.6 million.

These payments will be in the bank accounts of the majority of the respective employers by tomorrow (9 April).

The cumulative value of payments made under the scheme is €121 million.

Workplace Protection and Improvement Guide

We know that many workers who are in the essential services have worries about going to work. To help companies to get it right in managing their response to COVID-19, the National Standards Authority of Ireland has developed a new [Workplace Protection and Improvement Guide](#).

The purpose of the guide is to provide practical advice in the following areas:

- defending against the spread of COVID-19
- management and reduction of on-site cases
- recovery of processes and business functions

This new guide is now available in addition to the [Retail Protection and Improvement Guide](#) published by the NSAI earlier this month.

There are lots of practical tips and checklists to help businesses during the crisis and as they plan for recovery.

See gov.ie for more information.

Transport

Yesterday the government approved the emergency provision of a maximum of €15 million towards the continued operation of passenger ferry services on five key strategic routes over the next three months. Measures to control the COVID-19 pandemic have now practically stopped passenger traffic on ferries, meaning operators have lost the essential revenue needed to stay viable.

The routes being supported are Dublin/Cherbourg and Rosslare/Fishguard, Pembroke, Cherbourg and Bilbao.

These five routes are of vital importance to sustaining Ireland's supply chain, keeping goods, including food and medical supplies, moving into and out of the country.

The operators currently providing these services who will be eligible for this support are Irish Ferries, Stena Line and Brittany Ferries.

Teagasc Helpline

A new Teagasc telephone helpline to assist farmers with queries in relation to the current COVID-19 challenge was launched yesterday.

The helpline is designed to give farmers advice on the range of issues that they may face as they continue to do their essential work in maintaining the food supply chain. It is open to all farmers and covers a range of farming issues that may be facing at this time.

The information line phone number is +353 76 1113533 and it's available to call between 9.30am to 12.30pm and from 2pm to 5pm Monday to Friday.

Employees

While the Department of Employment Affairs and Social Protection's Pandemic Unemployment Payment Scheme currently provides income support to 507,000 recipients, a number of these are closing their claim because their employer is availing of the Temporary Wage Subsidy Scheme, which is administered by the Revenue Commissioners.

To date, 19,000 people have closed their Pandemic Unemployment Payment because they are still employed. They did so by entering the details online at www.MyWelfare.ie.

In addition, a number of recipients of the COVID-19 Pandemic Unemployment Payment have contacted the department to say that they had claimed this payment of €350 in error. This may have occurred because they were not aware that their employer had also claimed the Temporary Wage Subsidy Scheme.

The department now has a facility in place for such recipients to refund the payment by bank payment, cheque or debit card. Full details are on the department's website www.gov.ie/DEASP.

The department is carrying out the necessary checks to ensure that claims are valid and that the payments are warranted. If anyone has claimed this payment in error and wishes to make a refund, they should do so at the earliest opportunity by accessing the refund facility on the department's website.

The department also wishes to inform its customers that the Post Office network will be open as normal on Good Friday 10 April and that any payments due may be collected that day.

Finally, the department wishes to re-iterate that the COVID-19 Pandemic Unemployment Payment is available to persons aged between 18 and 66 years of age who have been made unemployed since 13 March, as a result of the pandemic. While persons aged over 66 cannot

claim this payment, it is open to their employer to apply for the Temporary Wage Subsidy Scheme, which is administered by the Revenue Commissioners in respect of such persons.

I mentioned previously that people in receipt of State pension payments also have automatic access to a range of other income supports not available to unemployed people – including the Free Fuel Allowance, the Living Alone Allowance and the Free TV licence. That Fuel Allowance has been extended to four weeks this year until Friday 8 May.

Community Response Fora

A COVID-19 Community Call Forum is now operating in every local authority across the country.

In their first week of operation the Fora received thousands of calls, by yesterday 7,313 calls had been received and 4,423 follow up calls had been made.

The Fora helplines are partnering with [ALONE](#), the national charity for older people. A further 4331 calls to ALONE were received in the last week.

In their efforts to provide help and support to those in need in communities around the country so far, the Community Call fora have provided:

- 2,724 collection and deliveries of items like groceries, fuel or medicines
- nearly 1,000 actions relating to social outreach services, talking to people who need someone to talk to
- over 300 relating to meals
- over 400 relating to health requests

They will continue to offer support, particularly to those cocooning on public health advice or to those experiencing practical difficulties over the coming weeks.

This is a good time to applaud the level of community spirit we are encountering in these really difficult days and thank everyone who is volunteering all across the country.

A dedicated phone helpline is operational in every county as well as the national number 0818 222 024. You can find your local helpline number on gov.ie.

We encourage anyone who needs help or wants to volunteer to give help to contact their local forum.

If you need help or you know someone who needs help please don't hesitate to call the ALONE helpline or the local helpline number and someone will direct your call.

Banks Supporting Citizens Cocooning

Banking and Payments Federation Ireland (BPFI) has today announced that all five retail banks now have dedicated [freephone phonelines](#) to assist cocooning customers during the COVID-19 crisis.

An information guide has also been launched today which provides practical advice for cocooning customers on the various ways in which they can manage their day-to-day banking and finances in a safe way while they stay at home.

The guide also outlines a number of tips around how customers can keep their money safe.

This includes advice such as avoiding keeping large sums of cash at home and making and paying for orders such as medicines with a card over the phone where possible.

The Banking and Payments Federation Ireland is working with the charity ALONE and An Post to ensure the guide reaches as many impacted customers as possible.

For more information, see gov.ie.

Quality and Qualifications Ireland

Quality and Qualifications Ireland published some guidance yesterday around exams and assessments in relation to higher education and training courses.

This guidance clarified that no written, oral or practical assessments will be held in examination or assessment centers until COVID-19 restrictions have been lifted.

Alternative arrangements will be made, including online exams or rescheduling where necessary. Students who are not able to participate in alternative assessment arrangements will not be penalised. They will have opportunities to complete their studies at a later time.

Education and training will continue for all students but students expecting to graduate this year are a top priority. It's expected that, while some students may not complete their studies in the original timescale, as many as possible will graduate this year as planned.

Quality and Qualifications Ireland have asked us to emphasise that all standards will be upheld, and the integrity of awards will be maintained. Qualifications achieved this year will be valued and regarded exactly as in any other year.

State Exams

As the Taoiseach and the Minister for Education have said, Government is focused on running both sets of state exams.

The Minister has also said that he would prefer to see students get at least two weeks class time in school before they have to sit any exams.

We know students and their families need clarity on this. We know you are feeling a lot of pressure.

We are asking you to keep studying and to keep focused. We are working on providing you with answers in relation to the exams as soon as possible.

Contingency plans are under consideration and all decisions will be based on the public health advice and on what happens in relation to current restrictions.

The National Public Health Emergency Team will meet again at the end of this week and the Minister would hope to be in a position to provide clarity on the Junior Cycle and Leaving Cert in the coming days.

School Transport

On the subject of primary and post primary education we just want to issue a reminder. We're aware that it may be easy to lose sight of some everyday deadlines in the changed routines of this time. We want to highlight to anyone planning to arrange school transport for the upcoming school year. The closing date for School Transport Applications is Friday, 24 April 2020. Anyone wishing to apply for the primary or post-primary school transport schemes should visit [BusÉireann.ie](https://www.buseireann.ie) for more information.

North-South co-operation

As you know there, there has been regular contact between the Minister for Health and the CMO and their counterparts in Northern Ireland since the COVID-19 situation began to develop. Yesterday, a Memorandum of Understanding was formally agreed between the Departments of Health for the Republic of Ireland and Northern Ireland to underpin and strengthen North-South co-operation on the public health response to the COVID-19 pandemic.

The agreement focuses on facilitating greater co-operation on areas such as: public health messaging, research, programmes of behavioural change, ethics, evidence base/modelling, and public health and non-pharmaceutical measures.

International Help

We are continuing with what is the biggest repatriation effort ever in the history of the State. So far, we have helped about 4,600 people to come home. The DFAT helpline has taken over 16,000 calls from people looking for assistance in recent weeks.

That effort will carry on as we continue to work with Irish people across the world in need of advice and assistance. Irish citizens abroad looking to return home should contact their local embassy or consulate or contact the Department of Foreign Affairs helpline on +353 16131733.

PAYE Tax

Employees and Tax on the Temporary Wage Subsidy Scheme

Some questions have been raised about the Temporary Wage Subsidy Scheme and PAYE tax. Today, we want to provide clarity on the issue.

In order to ensure speedy payments and minimise hardship on households in the short term, the Temporary Wage Subsidy Scheme is not taxed at the time you receive it.

However, as is the case with most income, the payment is liable to income tax, Universal Social Charge and Pay Related Social Insurance.

The amount of tax you pay depends on the amount of the income you earn and on your personal circumstances. Not everyone in receipt of the Temporary Wage Subsidy will end up owing tax.

If you end up owing tax, it will generally be collected in manageable amounts over the course of the next tax year.

Before I go, I want to just echo what Dr. Holohan has been saying about staying on track.

Two thirds of the cases recorded so far were caused by community transmission. To you and me, that means you caught the disease going about your daily business.

While social distancing measures have made a difference, what Dr. Holohan is telling us is that we are not there yet.

This weekend, we want all of you, the vast majority who are already making sacrifices, to be confident that we are working together to get everyone to comply so that we can make the impact on this disease that we need to.

I want to thank you again on behalf of the government and all our essential service workers for the massive efforts you are making just by staying at home.