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# Daily briefing on the government's response to COVID-19 - Friday 3 April 2020

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## Introduction and up-to-date Public Health Guidance

Good Morning, everyone.

As usual, I begin this morning with the most important, most effective measures you can take to slow the spread of this virus, so:

- wash your hands regularly and thoroughly
- use good cough and sneeze etiquette
- observe social distancing measures
- remember that you are the frontline

We have all been asked to stay at home unless we need to go about essential business. For others, those aged over 70, or with an underlying medical condition, this request goes further. You have been asked to stay at home. To cocoon yourself for your own safety.

The list of underlying conditions that put people in that vulnerable bracket are available via the HSE website or in the [COVID-19 information booklets](#) that are now arriving to every household in the country.

There has been some confusion around Diabetes and the level of risk it poses in terms of COVID-19. If you are diabetic and you're concerned you should seek advice from your GP. Please remember to call the GP - do not go the GP in person.

We thank the public for their ongoing support of these restrictions.

We know that 94% of the population have said they are confident in their ability to adhere to the new restrictions, 84% of people are social distancing in queues and 71% are sitting further apart from others.

This effort is greatly appreciated and will support us in slowing the spread of the virus.

Remember, while we may have to stay apart physically we are all in this together and it is also important to stay connected to friends, family and neighbours at this time.

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## **Business/Industry/Agriculture**

### **Business Supports**

The Temporary Wage Subsidy Scheme introduced by Government is continuing to have strong take-up.

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

Today (3 April), Revenue has generated further refunds under the scheme worth €18.9 million. These payments will be in the bank accounts of the majority of the respective employers next Monday (6 April).

The cumulative value of payments made under the scheme is almost €73 million.

Revenue has said it is unable to get reimbursements to 935 employers for payments worth €2.6 million made under the scheme.

It is essential that these employers go on to ROS and set up a nominated Refund Bank Account as soon as possible.

In addition, yesterday Revenue issued updated guidance to assist Small and Medium Enterprises experiencing cash flow and trading difficulties as a result of COVID-19.

- businesses should continue to send in tax returns on time, even where payment is not immediately possible
- the charging of interest on late payments is suspended for March/April VAT and April PAYE (Employers) liabilities
- Revenue have already suspended interest on late payments for January/February VAT and both February and March PAYE (Employers) liabilities
- all debt enforcement activity remains suspended until further notice
- the status of all current Tax Clearance will remain in place for all businesses over the coming months
- Revenue will continue to closely monitor the situation and will issue further updated guidance for businesses when required and in good time before return and payment due dates

As I have mentioned previously, there is a range of other supports available for business at this time, details of which are available on [gov.ie](http://gov.ie).

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## Supply Chain

It is essential that the work of the supply chain continues to the greatest extent possible throughout the COVID-19 crisis. Where practical, all goods should continue to be distributed (not just food and medical supplies) to warehouses, businesses and distribution centres around the country. Likewise, all activities necessary to allow essential services in the supply chain should continue.

Those working in the supply chain who cannot work remotely, such as cargo handlers, haulage drivers and warehouse staff should continue to go about their business while following public health advice to keep supply chains moving. Guidance for both employers of essential workers and essential workers themselves can be found at [www.gov.ie](http://www.gov.ie).

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## Employees

We have, over the past three weeks, faced unprecedented demand for our income supports. To date the Department of Employment Affairs and Social Protection has processed almost three hundred thousand applications for COVID-19 related income supports. This figure is increasing each day as we continue to receive applications from customers.

The vast majority of these applications are now being made through our easy to use online portal [MyWelfare](#) in line with public health advice, footfall into the public Intreo offices has reduced dramatically as a result of customers moving in large numbers to online and respecting public health advice.

Starting from today, all Department of Employment Affairs and Social Protection public offices will be open to the public from 10am to 1pm on Mondays, Wednesdays and Fridays and will be closed on Tuesdays and Thursdays. These are emergency temporary measures and these opening hours will be kept under review.

This decision has been taken to ensure that resources are focussed on processing the thousands of applications that are received as quickly as possible. This includes increasing the ability to engage directly with those customers whose applications contained incorrect information and can't currently be processed. This is a priority for the department. We would like to reassure customers that they can contact the department outside our Intreo Office opening hours. These reduced opening hours will enable the department to substantially increase capacity to process applications and the number of staff available to engage with customers directly through our dedicated contact centre (1890 800 024) by phone, email and online.

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## Queries on payments

I would like to clarify a few points that have been causing some confusion in relation to COVID-19 income supports.

Firstly, on the topic of apprentices. Apprenticeships are divided into two phases – on the job and off the job. Apprentices who are in a phase of off the job training will continue to receive their training allowance from the State. There will be no loss of income for these apprentices.

Apprentices who are on the job with their employers and who have subsequently lost employment are eligible for the COVID-19 Pandemic Unemployment Payment

Secondly, the situation for people aged over 66, in receipt of a State pension, who are employees and have lost employment. These people are eligible to be included in the Temporary Wage Subsidy scheme and can retain that pension payment if they lose employment income.

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. And I'm reminding you, that Fuel Allowance has been [extended](#) to four weeks this year until Friday 8 May.

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## **Community Measures and Supports**

### **Community Call recap**

Yesterday marked the launch of The Community Call – an unprecedented initiative designed to harness the energy of the voluntary and community bodies across Ireland and co-ordinate a shared response that will reach out into every community and offer support and assistance where it is needed most.

Under this initiative, the local authority Community Response Forum helplines are operating across the country. There were about 1,500 phone calls to the helplines yesterday.

If you need help with practical supports like food, fuel or medicines delivered to your home, you can call your local authority helpline or email it. These contact details are on [gov.ie](http://gov.ie).

If you need emotional support or someone to talk to, call the Alone Helpline on 0818 222 024. The local authority helplines and ALONE helpline are partnering. If you call either the local authority helpline or the ALONE helpline they will link you up with what you need. An Garda Síochána, Child Protection and medical emergency lines are all still in place. You should contact them if you need their services. The helpline is for anyone who needs help. If you know of someone who needs help please contact the helpline too.

It's important to remember that you shouldn't take help from anyone unless you trust the person. Look for Council Authorisation and Identification and ring your local authority to check if you are worried at all.

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## **Public transport**

I want to briefly draw attention to the fact that Public transport is still to be available for essential use.

Everyone needs to take a common-sense approach. It covers the transport to and from work for essential workers, and journeys for essential shopping where the use of public transport is required. It also covers individuals who are in emergency situations and require access to medical or legal support. When taking public transport, I suggest you ask yourself firstly, is it essential that I make this journey, and if so, is public transport is the only way you can do it.

We have previously clarified that if an essential service or supply is further than the 2 kilometre limit for travel then you may travel outside that limit and once again ask people to take a common-sense approach with this issue, always with the public health advice in mind.

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## **Changes to regulations on prescriptions**

A number of measures have been put in place to relieve some of the pressure on GPs and pharmacists while still ensuring continuity of care of patients during the crisis.

Among these are the ability for electronic transfer of prescriptions to a pharmacy, the extension of the maximum period of validity of a prescription from 6 months to 9 months and

also some temporary changes to the way in which prescriptions can be repeated. You don't need to worry about getting your medicines. Ring your usual pharmacy to find out more.

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## **Children and Young People**

### **Special Needs Assistants Allocation**

Yesterday it was announced that due to the impact of COVID-19 the new Special Needs Assistant allocation model, which would have changed the way Special Needs Assistants are assigned to schools, has been deferred for one year and will begin in September 2021.

It is acknowledged that COVID-19 has had a huge impact on everyone in the education sector. The deferral of the new allocation model will allow a degree of normality to return for the coming school year.

No school will have less Special Needs Assistant support in September 2020 than they currently have. Special Needs Assistants who are currently employed will still have their jobs in the next school year.

Schools can also apply by email for further SNAs if they are in need of additional support. Regional information sessions that had been planned for the coming weeks to explain what's happening will not now take place.

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### **State Exams**

To the 121,000 exam year students, we know this is a time of anxiety and uncertainty. We know it's not easy; we know remote learning is very challenging but we are asking you to keep studying; keep focused and keep working on the basis that the exams are going ahead.

The Minister for Education and Skills and the State Examinations Commission are working on contingency plans to allow the State Examinations to go ahead.

Any final decision will be based on the public health advice and on what the government decides in relation to current restrictions.

We will continue to keep you updated as the situation evolves.

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## **International**

### **Travel Advisory**

Just a reminder, the Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade has advised against all non-essential travel overseas until further notice. It includes all travel by cruise ship. Anyone coming into Ireland, apart from Northern Ireland, is required to restrict their movements on arrival for 14 days. This includes Irish residents. Exemptions are in place for providers of essential supply chain services such as hauliers, pilots and maritime staff.

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### **Current Situation**

Where commercial flights are still available, the Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade recommend that people who are away and wish to come home do so as soon as possible. The situation is fast-moving and volatile. What we have seen is not only countries, but entire regions, close off airspace and ground airlines at short notice.

This has led to people who had confirmed and booked flights having them cancelled suddenly or being refused at airports.

Currently the department are trying to help over 1,000 of our citizens in 86 countries who are seeking assistance to return to Ireland. Many are small groups but there are large numbers in Australia with a couple of hundred in New Zealand.

They are in close ongoing contact with airlines and aviation companies and are exploring all options.

The situation is not as simple as chartering flights, we need permission to enter airspace and regions on the way back to Ireland. We are therefore focused on getting every possible Irish citizen on the shrinking number of commercial flights.

The department is also working very closely with the EU and European countries, especially the UK, to get Irish groups on their flights. We have worked for example with the UK, Belgium, Germany, France, Netherlands and Spain in getting our citizens home.



We know this is very stressful for those abroad and their families here but we are leaving no stone unturned in trying to get people home.

Citizens should contact the nearest Embassy or Consulate to update them on their situation and they should closely follow information provided on the Embassy Twitter account. They are providing as much factual and practical information as possible.

Any Irish citizen who believes that an Embassy may not be aware of their presence should register online at [dfa.ie](https://dfa.ie) and email their contact information. Contact details for all our missions can also be found on [dfa.ie](https://dfa.ie).

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## Concerns and Issues

### Extending Restrictions

We are aware that people are anxious to know whether current restrictions will be extended beyond 12 April.

As the Taoiseach said last night, it will be towards the end of next week before we can give an update on restrictions. That will depend on how things are going in terms of new cases, ICU admissions and so on. It will be the National Public Health Emergency Team who advise us as to whether we should extend those restrictions or relax or refine them.

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### Home Help/Nursing Homes

Following public health advice and government decisions around physical distancing and cocooning, some home help hours have been stood down – this is only for people who are relatively well, and might have had a lower level of service, or have good family supports in place.

Physical distancing and cocooning, and the growing need in health facilities, have created circumstances where the Health Service Executive is moving some healthcare workers into supporting more urgent needs in residential facilities.

However, if you are concerned about changes to the service you are receiving, please contact your public health nurse at your local health centre and remember that the community call arrangements may also be able to help with some of your needs.

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### **Hospital Service Changes**

The Health Service Executive has had to change some patient's hospital appointments because of the COVID-19 outbreak. There have also been changes to visiting arrangements in hospitals to help protect patients.

However, you will have heard the CMO say last night that it's important to remember that other health services are continuing to operate and you should not put off any urgent appointments. If you feel unwell with symptoms such as those of heart attack or stroke, you should go to your emergency department or call an ambulance.

Details can be found on the [HSE website](#) for each hospital on changes to outpatient appointments, day case and inpatient appointments and visitor restrictions.

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### **Garda Vetting**

Since 12 March Garda National Vetting Bureau has expedited nearly 5,500 vetting applications for COVID-19 related workers as follows:

- 1976 for Health Service Executive (1,792 COVID-19 specifically labelled)
- 1635 for National Recruitment Federation (Medically related staff)
- 908 for Nursing Homes Ireland
- over 819 for Independent Hospitals, Healthcare Agencies and the Volunteer Sector

It is currently prioritising all of the above COVID-19 related / Medical Vetting Applications and as of today, they are fully up to date with all Vetting Applications received, with an average turnaround time of 1 to 2 working days, once the application is received at the Garda National Vetting Bureau.

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## **Oberstown query**

Concerns have been raised around the current approach to visitation in Oberstown Children Detention Campus. In line with the government announcement on Friday 27 March, all visits to the young people in Oberstown have temporarily ceased except in exceptional circumstances.

Measures had been put in place to support contact between young people and their families through the use of technology and this was increased following public health advice around the COVID-19 crisis.

Young people can have daily contact with family members as they wish and the usual visiting routines on the campus have moved from physical to virtual for now. The campus facilitates FaceTime, video conferencing, Skype and other platforms such as Zoom to support ongoing interactions with family members.

The staff of Oberstown are in regular contact with the family members of the young people in the campus, reassuring them and keeping them informed.

## **Finally**

We are coming to the weekend and the end of the first week of the new restrictions. Let's keep it going in terms of everything you are doing. It is making a difference and we need to keep it up until the CMO tells us otherwise.

Have a good weekend.

Thank you.