
Daily briefing on the government's response to COVID-19 - Wednesday 1 April 2020

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From: [Department of the Taoiseach](#)

- [1. Cocooning](#)
- [2. Business Supports](#)
- [3. Employees](#)
- [4. Community Response Forum](#)
- [5. Libraries and Publisher Initiative](#)
- [6. Agricultural Supports](#)
- [7. Lottery Funds](#)
- [8. Redeployments](#)
- [9. Children and Young People](#)
- [10. Fuel allowance](#)
- [11. On the International front](#)
- [12. MS Zaandam cruise ship](#)

- [13. Measures in Courts](#)
- [14. Flights between Donegal and Dublin](#)
- [15. Testing Concerns](#)
- [16. Digs and Rent-a-room evictions](#)
- [17. Direct Provision](#)
- [18. Irish Prison Service](#)
- [19. Court decided visits](#)
- [20. Nurses Fees](#)
- [21. Blood Donations](#)
- [22. Fraud/Scams](#)
- [23. OGP Goods and services clarification](#)

Delivered by Elizabeth Canavan, Assistant Secretary General, Department of the Taoiseach

I am going to keep reminding you – the most important, most effective measures you can take to slow the spread of this virus are to:

- wash your hands regularly and thoroughly
- practice good coughing and sneezing etiquette
- and continue to observe social distancing
- remember you are the front line

We are really grateful to everyone abiding by the Public Health Advice. The measures may seem simple but we know that they aren't easy. We are fully aware of the potential for both cabin fever and loneliness these restrictions may cause for some people, but it is only through your efforts in sticking with these measures that we can protect each other, slow the spread of the virus, and support our Health Service.

We really encourage everyone to find other ways to connect socially and to be creative in reaching out to your friends, families and your neighbours during this time.

Cocooning

So, in relation to cocooning, we know many people over 70 are fit, well and active. Nevertheless, the CMO's advice is that you should stay at home. We appreciate how frustrating this is but the reason the CMO has made that recommendation is based on what we know about the spread and impact of the disease. So, we'd really ask the over 70s to think about that in terms of their own movements.

Business Supports

The [Temporary Wage Subsidy Scheme](#) introduced by Revenue is getting very good uptake and we hope the clarifications issued in recent days will encourage more employers to register for the scheme, which means they can keep on their employees and keep that important employer/employee relationship in place. That will help us to kick start business when we get through the current situation.

Today's update on uptake of the scheme:

- over 30,000 employers are now registered with Revenue for the [Temporary Wage Subsidy Scheme](#)
- today (1 April), Revenue has generated further refunds under the scheme worth €11.5 million
- these payments will be in the bank account of the majority of employers tomorrow (2 April)
- the cumulative value of payments made under the scheme is now €34 million
- Revenue has said it is unable to get reimbursements to some employers for payments worth about €1.3 million made under the scheme
- it is essential that these employers set up a nominated [Refund Bank Account](#) as soon as possible

Many employers will have existing Payment Bank Accounts set up under ROS, however, to receive payments from Revenue, including under the Temporary Wage Subsidy Scheme, employers will also need to set up a nominated Refund Bank Account. Details on how to set up a Refund Bank Account are available [here](#).

Employees

As outlined previously, if you are an employee who has been impacted by COVID-19, there are a range of income supports available to you. You can learn about all these supports and apply for them by visiting gov.ie and going to [COVID-19 Pandemic Unemployment Payment](#).

As stated previously, there are still a number of Pandemic Unemployment applications that have not progressed to payment because of incorrect or missing information.

The quickest and easiest way to rectify this is to apply again online through [MyWelfare.ie](#) or [MyGovID.ie](#). If a customer does so, the claim will progress to payment within minutes of completion of the transaction, once all the information is provided and the eligibility conditions are satisfied.

Community Response Forum

I've already mentioned that each local authority (council) has established a Community Response Forum to coordinate COVID-19 related community supports. As part of this, each local authority has now established a helpline that vulnerable people can phone if they are looking for basic services such as delivery of food or meals, or transport for essential trips.

A list of each local authority's helpline phone numbers is now on gov.ie.

It is also important to remind you that if you are feeling vulnerable at this time can contact the ALONE helpline at 0818 222024.

Libraries and Publisher Initiative

Irish public libraries and Irish publishers have agreed a deal to facilitate online story time sessions for young people while libraries and schools remain closed during the COVID-19 pandemic.

This initiative, which will be announced later today, will provide another valuable resource for families alongside the online services already provided by libraries, and will be especially helpful to families without access to books in the home or new books at this time.

'Spring into Storytime' is libraries' annual celebration of families reading together and this year will celebrate the incredible work of Irish children's authors online instead of in the local branches.

Irish publisher partners and the Irish Writers Union are helping by waiving licence fees for the reading of selected books and the streaming or posting of videos, which will remain online while library buildings are shut. There'll be further details of all those publishers today, and details on local library service's social media channels and [Libraries Ireland's Twitter](#), [Instagram](#) and [Facebook](#) pages.

The Irish publishers who have signed up are:

- The O'Brien Press

- Mercier Press
- Little Island Books
- Gill Books
- Futa Fata
- Leabhar Breac
- An Gúm
- Cló Iar-Chonnacht
- Cois Life
- LeabhairCOMHAR

Agricultural Supports

The Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine announced that approvals will issue this week to applicants under the new [Calf Investment Scheme](#) in light of the COVID-19 pandemic, and the significant demand for this scheme.

The Minister confirmed that he has increased the scheme's budget from the original €1.5 million to €4 million, to fully fund all eligible applications received.

The scheme supports investments for calf rearing, welfare facilities and some 2,500 farmers will be directly funded under the scheme.

The Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine, Michael Creed, also announced today the opening of a new telephone information line to assist farmers with their queries in relation to current COVID-19 restrictions.

The dedicated line will assist farmers with practical queries that they may have as they continue to fulfil their essential role in maintaining the food supply chain.

The information line phone number is 076 106 4468 and will be open from 9.30am to 12.30pm and from 2pm to 5pm Monday to Friday.

In addition, the Department of Agriculture, Food and the Marine has published a set of Frequently Asked Questions on the [COVID-19 section of the website](#).

Lottery Funds

At the end of 2014, a figure of roughly €16 million was held on account in the National Lottery Fund which means there's a net of expired prizes and games which have been built up since An Post National Lottery Company began trading.

We are delighted to say that this fund is now being made available to support investments in health at this time of unprecedented national crisis.

Redeployments

Right across the public sector, Civil and Public Servants are being re-deployed to support the most essential areas of need including contact tracing and in helping the Department of Employment Affairs and Social Protection to meet demands for payments. As part of the effort to reassign available staff to where they may be of best use at this time, special needs assistants are being nominated for a new temporary assignment as part of the government's response to COVID-19.

It is not envisaged at this stage that there will be a temporary assignment opportunity for every SNA; a small number will be temporarily reassigned.

SNAs hugely enrich the experience of children in our schools and they have much need skills and experience that will be of huge benefit to other services, and of great support to the national effort.

Children and Young People

In recent weeks, understandably, the risks and reality of the global pandemic have probably been at the forefront of everyone's mind. For that reason, it is particularly important to take the necessary steps to look after our mental health at this time.

We are very conscious that parents, children and young people may be anxious about the disease and about the disruption to their normal routine, even school, and all the other activities they like to be involved in.

No age group is immune to the stress being caused by this crisis. In order to address this fear and anxiety in young people in particular, a podcast has been created with the assistance of the [National Educational Psychology Service](#) which offers a series of relaxation techniques specifically designed to help young people cope with that anxiety.

That's available via [Soundcloud](#).

Fuel allowance

During this period, we are also aware of concerns people have about bills, especially that might arise from being at home all the time.

To reflect the increased need to be in the home over the coming weeks, the [Fuel Allowance](#) payment, which was due to end on April 10th, will be extended a further four weeks until Friday 8 May.

This payment is made to over 370,000 of the most disadvantaged households in the country including pensioners and those with disabilities, who are most at risk of fuel poverty.

We hope this will give people one less thing to worry about and help ensure they are comfortable at home in this time of crisis.

On the International front

Yesterday, there was a video conference call to discuss the response to COVID-19 on the island of Ireland. The Tánaiste and the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland jointly chaired

the call with the First Minister, deputy First Minister, Northern Ireland Health Minister and Minister for Health Simon Harris all participating.

All expressed their deep gratitude for the remarkable dedication and efforts of health workers, officials and everyone working in essential services to respond to COVID-19.

They emphasised that the protection of the lives and welfare of everyone on the island is paramount, and no effort will be spared in that objective.

The ongoing contact and cooperation between the respective Health Ministers, working in close conjunction with the Chief Medical Officers, will continue to support this shared objective.

MS Zaandam cruise ship

The Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade is aware of the situation on the cruise ship, MS Zaandam which is expected to dock in Fort Lauderdale in the coming days. We are in regular contact with the Irish citizens on board and are providing all possible consular assistance.

Measures in Courts

Every effort is being made across all levels of the state to comply with the public health measures around social distancing and restricting face-to-face work to what is essential. The administration of justice in urgent matters is essential work. Criminality and the arrest of suspects has not ceased; urgent family and childcare issues continue; and there has been an increase in urgent corporate insolvency matters.

However, yesterday it was announced that the Courts Service will be introducing new measures to further reduce the need for people to appear in court in person.

Remote court hearings will be facilitated in the new legal term, starting on April 20th. Also, those not in custody need not attend court. Remand custody hearings can be conducted by video-link.

Other measures have already been introduced; huge levels of court administration will continue to be dealt with electronically, and social distancing measures are in play at every court sitting.

There is an obligation to administer justice in public, and to cater to this while continuing to comply with Public Health measures, judges will allow bona fide members of the press to be present in court.

This will not impact vital court hearings, which will remain in place as courts scale back the vast majority of cases.

Flights between Donegal and Dublin

The flights between Donegal and Dublin operated by Stobart Air currently run twice daily. While there has been a significant reduction in the demand for the flight since the introduction of travel restrictions, the flight continues to provide an essential service for some who are traveling for medical appointments or being repatriated home.

This flight will therefore be retained but service will be limited to just one flight per day on a temporary basis from next Sunday (5 April).

Public health advice will be followed at all times in operation of the flight.

Testing Concerns

Not all test centres are open today.

However, the HSE have assured us that sufficient test centres are open to meet the current level of testing demand and lab processing capacity.

The HSE now has a plentiful supply of swabbing kits, and patient volumes being referred for swabbing can be processed by existing testing centres.

As indicated previously, the HSE have been regularly briefing on procurement challenges in a range of areas including materials required for testing and they will continue to update the public on this.

The procurement issue is a global problem.

This week the HSE Public Analyst Laboratory at Cherry Orchard and a Department of Agriculture laboratory have also come online bringing additional capacity in the laboratory space.

The HSE has asked us to apologise on their behalf to all those waiting for test results and to assure the public that they are making every endeavour to improve turnaround times with the current international constraints.

Testing is being performed for public health as opposed to clinical reasons and patients waiting for results should continue to self-isolate for 14 days.

The HSE continues to prioritise testing of healthcare workers and in-patients in acute hospitals.

Acknowledging the delay in testing, the HSE are beginning direct contact tracing of high-risk groups in advance of test results.

Digs and Rent-a-room evictions

Concerns have also been raised in relation to “Rent-a-Room” or “Digs” accommodation being exempt from recent measures prohibiting evictions at this time. We are looking into this further and I will update you when I have more information on that.

However, in the meantime, Government would ask landlords and tenants in more informal accommodation arrangements such as these to show allegiance and support for each other during this critical emergency period, and, where possible, with regard to the precautions necessary to tackle COVID-19, to avoid ending their current accommodation arrangements.

Direct Provision

To follow on from what I said yesterday, over 650 new beds have been procured to supply international protection applicants during the COVID-19 crisis.

These additional beds will provide valuable increased accommodation to support the measures required for existing vulnerable residents; the provision of offsite accommodation for self-isolation; and will keep social distancing measures by reducing overall numbers in some of the existing centres.

This is a critical part of the overall strategy to protect residents.

At all times, the service is guided by the Health Service Executive and the National Public Health Emergency Team and are continuing to do everything possible to ensure the safety and wellbeing of all applicants.

The new accommodation will, in the main, be located in hotels in Dublin, Galway and Cork. These facilities will supplement new mainstream centres which have opened recently which I mentioned yesterday, in Tullamore, Rosslare Harbour and Caherciveen following tendering processes.

Since the start of the year, over 1,350 beds have been procured, enabling older centres to close and to move residents from emergency accommodation to dedicated centres, where cross-agency service to residents can more effectively be provided.

Irish Prison Service

We've also had some issues raised about staffing in the Prison Service. Like all organisations across the Civil and Public service, the Irish Prison Service currently has a number of staff on leave owing to the need to self-isolate. The Prison Service at all times ensures that up-to-date public health advice is followed by all of their staff, ensuring the need to self-isolate where appropriate, and on foot of medical or public health advice.

The Prison Service is an organisation of 3,500 employees. So, it can be expected that out of a staffing cohort of that size, there will be a certain number of staff who have been asked to

self-isolate at any given time. To assure you, the vast majority of staff continue to report for duty as normal.

Court decided visits

Questions have been raised about access to children for court decided visits and so on, in light of the latest restrictions announced on Friday.

COVID-19 cannot be used as an excuse to ignore a court order. We really encourage everyone to try to remember that, and to work together to try to keep orders in place.

We also are conscious that there may be some issues or concerns about travelling for visits.

The President of the District Court [last week](#) clarified that parents could come to arrangements for alternative contact which could involve phone calls, or Skype.

Mediation services are still available and should be used if needed. Parties should remember that the welfare of the child is paramount.

Nurses Fees

Qualified health professionals not working in the Irish health service are invited to apply for a role through registering on the Health Service Executive's ['Be on Call for Ireland'](#) campaign.

For those successful applicants that have lapsed registration in Ireland, their professional registration fees are being waived by the professional regulator, who is also facilitating the fast-tracking of applications.

As a result, 432 nurses and midwives have been restored to the register since the fee waiver was introduced earlier this month.

Nurses and midwives who trained in the EU (including the UK) can seek no-fee registration in Ireland on a temporary basis if they are currently registered with the regulator in their own country.

Any nurse or midwife who holds an Electronic Professional Card will have their registration processed in 2-3 days by the Nursing Midwifery Board of Ireland.

Blood Donations

The [Irish Blood Transfusion Board](#) have informed us that they are implementing social distancing at their clinics to maintain the blood supply. 3,000 blood donations are needed every week to meet demand and the ready availability of this blood for transfusion is vital to the daily treatment of patients in our hospitals. If you're normally a blood donor, and you're not in the cocooned group, you should certainly check out your local clinic to see if you can be facilitated.

Fraud/Scams

The [Banking and Payments Federation of Ireland](#) have issued some advice to us on behalf of the banking industry - [FraudSMART](#) is a fraud awareness initiative that they have developed.

It is warning consumers and businesses to be very alert to an expected rise in COVID-19 related frauds and scams as criminals may try to take advantage of the current crisis.

In the coming weeks and months, we want you to be really careful of significant attempts at fraudulent activities as people may seek to capitalise on the anxieties of the public during the crisis.

We have a range of financial supports now available for impacted customers and businesses, and we are anticipating that fraudsters may attempt by email, text, phone or social media, to pose as some of these genuine organisations including government, banks or health care providers in an attempt to get victims to disclose personal or financial information.

If you're worried about any of these, we have already issued warnings in relation to social welfare payments with fraudsters posing as officials asking for financial details to process payments. So, we can expect this type of impersonation fraud.

To get ahead of this, and prevent it, we are asking consumers and business to be really vigilant. While the scams may have been adapted for the current crisis, it's the same advice as we always have in terms of protecting yourself: don't be rushed, take you time to do the relevant checks and always immediately report any suspicious activity to your bank or local Garda Station.

If you want to visit [FraudSMART](#) there's lot of tips and advice on how to protect yourself from scams.

OGP Goods and services clarification

I spoke yesterday on the creation of a portal which would allow us to create a centralised database of offers to donate goods and services at this time. I want to clarify that this applies to any body, group or organisation, including those outside the commercial area, that have a service or goods that they feel could be of use to us in these unprecedented times.

All offers are helpful, and while not everyone will be matched with a suitable need we are nevertheless grateful for every one and encouraged by the great willingness and enthusiasm of the public to lend a hand in our time of crisis.

Finally, we know today is April Fool's Day and we are aware of lots of hoax stories floating around out there. Just remember, if it's true, you'll hear it here.

Thank you.