

# Briefing on the government's response to COVID-19 - Monday 21 September 2020

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

Good Morning,

Thank you for tuning in again today.

A lot has happened in the last week. So, I'm going to recap on both what has been happening and some of the reasons why.

Firstly, everyone knows at this stage the extraordinary demands COVID-19 has placed on every one of us as individuals, as parents, as families, as workers and as business owners. We have never before had to deal with such a range of challenges and all the complexities it brings to every area of our lives.

## The Plan - A New Approach

Unfortunately, COVID-19 isn't finished with the world yet. For now and for the medium term, we have to find ways to live with it. Last Tuesday 15 September, the government launched 'Resilience and Recovery 2020-2021: Plan for Living with COVID-19', framing the approach to how we will do that for the next 6-9 months. The original "Roadmap" envisaged a scenario where we would slowly and carefully re-emerge from the restrictions of COVID-19 after we had "flattened the curve".

But of course, we all know now, that the virus is a challenge to contain. It is highly infectious, so, as long as there are cases out there, if we don't know about them, it will begin to "seed" again. As the CMO has said, it won't get tired, even though we are tired.

The thinking behind the Plan is to set out how we will respond to keep the disease transmission low and stable. That's what we are aiming for. A situation where we are living with the disease with the least possible number of restrictions - but always remaining vigilant with protective measures in our workplaces, our businesses and with the personal behaviours we all need to have as habits.

The idea is that we have a framework for restrictions so that everyone knows what we might have to ask you do in the coming months, depending on a number of factors including the incidence of the disease at any given moment in time.

Naturally the need to Stay Healthy is first and foremost in all concerns. A huge part of staying healthy in the context of COVID-19 is staying safe.

Last week, Dr. Mike Ryan of the WHO pointed out a very simple fact. COVID doesn't have a brain, all it wants to do is make more virus and transmit on. It is brutal in its simplicity, but it doesn't have a brain. We're the ones with the brains, we are the ones who can break the chains of transmission. So, the plan emphasises that the greatest impact that can be had on the disease is individually and collectively, through our behaviours by following the Public Health Guidance.

## **The Framework**

But the plan also recognises, that every time we ease restrictions we have to be ready to respond if the disease trajectory changes. The plan includes a Framework for Restrictive measures. Essentially, this is a risk management strategy which has been designed to allow individuals, families, businesses and services to better understand, anticipate and prepare for the measures Government might introduce to stop escalation of the transmission of the disease.

The Framework sets out five levels of response, each designed to help us all lower COVID-19 transmission while aiming to allow society and businesses to be able to operate as normally as possible.

These measured responses are aimed at ensuring that the impact of restrictive measures on the lives of our people will be kept to the minimum necessary. In particular, keeping schools and early learning and childcare services open are a top priority. We want to keep as many people in work as possible, and as many businesses operating, as we need a functioning economy to maintain our public services.

Those measures, and indeed the wider Plan itself, have been carefully considered and informed by everything we have learned over the past six months.

There has been a lot of discussion comparing one restriction with another, comparing different places as being as safe, safer or indeed not as safe. The framework is a more complex consideration than that.

Each level or set of restrictions is a “basket” of measures aimed at limiting or actively reducing where people can congregate in response to an assessment that risk is increasing. There are priorities, there are choices. They are really hard choices. They don’t set out to penalise or suggest some groups, businesses or settings are to “blame” for transmission. It is simply that some things, by their nature, create ideal conditions for the virus. And some things are more important than others. So, if we want to slow the virus in its tracks we have to eliminate some of the situations where it will seek out new hosts. It is as complicated and as simple as that.

The priorities are set out in the plan. Education and care for our children and young people, health and social care services and basic needs for our most vulnerable. Many of these groups have suffered most and a second period of restrictions has to be avoided or the challenges will accrue in ways that would be intolerable.

After that, we want to protect as many businesses as possible and as many jobs as possible. We also want to protect and promote those things which are critical to our personal resilience - access to sports, arts, physical activity and other activities which are part of who we are and how we sustain ourselves mentally when times are hard. We are giving priority to organised events over social events which are more discretionary and we are recognising that outdoors is safer than indoors.

We have learned that no single preventive measure will control the virus, we need to ensure a combination of measures are in place and are working together. Likewise, no section or sector of society can contain the disease, or is responsible for spreading the disease, we need co-operation and solidarity across all aspects of society.

We have built a system that we know from experience can help us contain the virus through rapid identification of new cases and dedicated contact tracing as well as decisive responses to threats of clusters/outbreaks.

Working right across society we have prepared and implemented guidance for the workplace generally. Colleagues across government departments and agencies have prepared bespoke sectoral guidance to take account of the different nature of activities and environments to make things as safe as possible. The plan also calls out what we now understand about settings where really focused prevention and outbreak management measures are needed. This includes higher risk work environments, industries and services; as well as vulnerable groups and settings. This work will continue to evolve in line with our knowledge of the disease and will be supported by the monitoring and enforcement regime which is being consolidated and strengthened.

## **Health System Resilience and Responsiveness**

Public services have been vital throughout the pandemic. Our Health Service in particular will play a crucial role in our response to COVID-19. As part of the planning process, Cabinet agreed last week to allocate a further €600 million for the 2020 Winter Initiative, to ensure that our health service has the capacity and resources needed to deal with what is forecast to be a particularly challenging few months.

An enhanced flu vaccination programme, a building up of the public health workforce to ensure ongoing effective outbreak management, testing and tracing; the development of alternative pathways of care to allow non-COVID healthcare to continue safely, alongside COVID care are all part of the Plan.

The HSE is currently finalising its plan for the delivery of services during the COVID-19 pandemic including the Winter period.

The plan includes the following types of initiatives; increasing acute and community bed capacity, supporting moves from acute to community settings, GP access to diagnostics and alternative acute care pathways but there are other parts of the public service which we also need to protect and prioritise.

Public services have resumed in the majority of areas, albeit with new safety protocols and a shift to on-line and digital where that is possible and appropriate. The Plan sets out a structured approach to ensuring all existing resumption and contingency plans are now fully aligned with the priorities and principles. There is a set of governance arrangements in place to ensure ongoing synchronisation of the public service response to any changes in the level of restrictions. The priority is to protect the most vulnerable.

The supports provided by local authorities such as the “Community Call” initiative will continue and will be ready to meet and manage changes in demand if restrictions have to be ramped up.

## **Keeping our Businesses Strong**

As has been made clear many times, public health and public safety are at the forefront of the government’s concern. However, without a functioning economy we cannot maintain delivery of public services or support businesses to keep people in employment. We need to keep our people in work and businesses operating, while living with the pandemic.

Within the Plan for Living with COVID-19 there are two strands to keeping our businesses strong.

### **Extended business supports**

A number of key measures already in place to assist businesses have been extended to ensure that business owners and employees can be confident that they will be supported throughout the coming months:

- the Employment Wage Subsidy Scheme will now be in place until 31 March 2021
- the Pandemic Unemployment Payment (PUP) has been extended until April 2021. The payment was to be closed to new entrants from 17 September 2020 but that date has now been moved out to the end of 2020
- the COVID-19 Illness Benefit will now stay in place until the end of March 2021
- the emergency suspension of section 12 of the Redundancy Payments Act is further extended until the end of November 2020
- a wide range of loans, grants, vouchers and other support schemes to support businesses throughout the pandemic are in place

More information on all of these supports is available on gov.ie [here](#).

## **Local activation of business supports**

The pandemic has shown us that local action is highly effective both because it is driven by locally identified need and because it is delivered by people with a high level of commitment to their communities. Under the Plan for Living with COVID-19 additional locally generated initiatives will be supported.

The local authorities working with local partners and agencies will develop recovery initiatives including town centre / public realm alterations, incentive schemes and advisory assistance.

Government departments will work collaboratively with the City and County Managers to devise a process and an accelerated timeline for implementing local economic and community plans (LECPs).

Work will be carried out to explore and harness local enterprise structures and substantial business support resources to underpin and drive local community recovery plans.

## **Keeping Our Communities Resilient**

As a nation, we are weary. There is no point in saying otherwise.

For many people, the last six months have been a real challenge to their mental health and their personal resilience. Whether that is simply that you are fearful and isolated because you are more vulnerable to the disease, perhaps you have lost a loved one, perhaps you are working in a frontline service where you see no end in sight, maybe you have lost your job and have real money worries, perhaps you have a business which is barely making it from week to week, maybe you have been working at home, sitting at the end of your bed for months not seeing colleagues and trying to stay motivated and in touch. Maybe you simply miss your family and friends. There is no one who is not tired of it all.

We know we have to help everyone to somehow dig deeper into our individual and collective resilience so that we can get through the months ahead. Resilience comes from a confidence in our ability to support each other, to respond to the stresses and difficulties, and to keep a sense of connectedness and hope in our communities.

It is important to recognise that feelings of stress and worry are normal in the face of the exceptional challenges of this time, but also to know that there are supports available within our own communities.

The Plan for Living with COVID-19 identifies a number of specific initiatives and supports which we hope will support well-being, whatever your interests and wherever you live.

There will be a National Wellbeing Campaign, but we also know that it is locally where you will be most creative and tailor things to what you know best about your own communities. Much of the work will also be at local authority level building on the structures, amenities

and services locally, celebrating and further harnessing the role of volunteerism which has been so essential across Ireland throughout the pandemic.

While the Plan recognises need for measures to support mental health for everyone, particular attention will be paid in the coming months to the mental wellbeing of young people and in particular the impact of restrictions on their mental health. Responses to those issues will be put in place across Government as well as through Youth Services.

Detailed information on the framework and each level of response is available [here](#).

## **Status of the Disease**

I want to talk a little now about the status of the virus nationally. It is clear that the virus figures are increasing rapidly across the country. Of particular concern is the fact that community transmission is on the increase. This means that the source of the infection is not clear, that people are picking up the virus as they go about their daily lives, meeting socially, interacting in their communities and in their workplaces, and they are bringing it back to their homes where it then spreads within and between households. When levels of community transmission are high, any gathering can become an event which causes wider infection.

## **Dublin**

I'll talk first about Dublin. The government took the decision on Friday to place the entire county of Dublin on Level 3 of the Framework. This action was taken based on a review of the public health advice and in response to the deteriorating situation with the virus in Dublin. If the current progress of the virus remains unchanged, based on the modelling available to us, we believe there will be between 500 - 1,000 cases per day in a month's time, 50-60% of which will be in Dublin.

The profile of the disease in Dublin is at an extremely critical juncture.

This decision has been taken in an effort to protect our priorities. We must protect the most vulnerable, resume non-COVID health and social care services and maintain educational activities.

The measures in Level 3 are targeted specifically at limiting social contacts and reducing congregation. Of course, that is impacting on some sectors more than others, we all wish that was not the case. These choices are incredibly difficult to make. All the time, it is a balancing act. But the situation is such that we have to be decisive. We appreciate that these measures will have an impact on the people of Dublin and many small business owners. Public health would not recommend these measures and Government would not implement them if they did not truly believe that they are necessary now to try to stop the spread of the disease, to protect the health and wellbeing of those living in Dublin and surrounding areas, and to protect public health, the wider economy and society more broadly.

Dublin will be at Level 3 for a period of 3 weeks, until Friday 9 October, at which point the situation will be reviewed by the government, based on the status of the virus and public health advice.

The government has also announced a package of measures to assist Dublin businesses, with a 30% top-up to the Restart Plus grant and other measures at an estimated additional cost of €30 million.

The restrictions in Level 3 are aimed at reducing congregation so that the spread of the virus can be reduced. They involve limits on visitors to homes, limits on numbers who can meet outside, limits on social activities and closure of some indoor premises. You are asked to work from home unless absolutely necessary and not to leave or come into the county except for work, education and other essential purposes. For further information on the Level 3 restrictions, please see [gov.ie/dublin](http://gov.ie/dublin) [here](#).

## National Status

While Dublin made a lot of headlines over the last few days, it is important to point out that the situation nationally is also a cause for concern.

As of Friday, the rate of incidence of the virus per 100,000 population was showing increasing trends in all but 6 counties.

While there has been significant focus on Dublin, the counties of Louth, Waterford, Limerick, Kildare, Leitrim, Donegal and Offaly are now all showing concerning trends:

- County Louth has seen 121 cases in the last 2 weeks compared to 18 in the previous 2 week period
- there has also been a rise in Donegal with 102 cases in the last fortnight from 18 in previous fortnight
- Counties like Wicklow, Limerick and Waterford have also seen concerning increases. In Wicklow, over the last number of weeks, cases have jumped from 19 to 99

Outside of these counties, there are worrying trends in most areas. We are currently at Level 2 of the Framework nationally and we would like to either stay there or improve to Level 1, as opposed to going backwards.

To keep all of the businesses we care about open, we must all work together to stop the spread of the virus by:

- meeting fewer people inside your home
- limiting the number of people you meet outside your home as much as possible
- avoiding crowds
- prioritising the people you need to see, keeping groups small, and seeing them regularly, rather than meeting lots of different people from different households. Concentrate on your core circle in the coming weeks
- with those you do meet, be particularly attentive to safe practices - keep your distance, wear a face covering where appropriate, cough into a tissue and bin it, wash your hands

We all know the core messages, and it's time to double our efforts to stay safe.

Remember this disease can spread even if you have no symptoms. Act as though you have the virus to protect the friends and family and colleagues and others you meet going about your day. Keeping that little bit of extra distance from others is really important as we try to work safely while living with the threat of this virus.

Know the symptoms and come forward quickly for testing if you have any concerns. Isolate yourself from others and phone your GP if you feel unwell - remember that a referral and test for COVID-19 are free.

## **Finally**

Every individual action we take to interrupt the transmission of this disease keeps ourselves and our families safe.

For those of you in Dublin, we ask you to abide by the restrictions. A short sharp action now to arrest the spread of the virus means we can get Dublin back to Level 2 in as short a time as possible.

For those outside of Dublin, I would like to remind you of the Acting Chief Medical Officer's advice - we ask you to plan to see half the number of people this week that you saw last week. When you do meet, do so safely – keep your distance, wear a face covering if appropriate and wash your hands.

Thank you for listening and thank you for all you are doing.