

Briefing on the government's response to COVID-19 – Monday 30th November 2020

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- [1. Introduction](#)
- [2. So what is happening tomorrow:](#)
- [3. Places of Worship](#)
- [4. Gyms, Swimming Pools and Leisure Centres](#)
- [5. Museums, Cinemas and Cultural Institutions](#)
- [6. #SafeChristmas](#)
- [7. Plan Ahead](#)
- [8. Shopping Safely](#)
- [9. Dining Out Safely](#)
- [10. Christmas Bonus Payment](#)
- [11. Employment Wage Subsidy Scheme](#)
- [12. COVID Restrictions Support Scheme](#)
- [13. Community Supports/Wellbeing](#)
- [14. Community Fora](#)
- [15. #antiviral](#)
- [16. And finally](#)

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Check against Delivery

Introduction

Good morning everyone,

Tomorrow, as you know, we begin a phased move to Level 3 restrictions nationally, along with some exceptions for the Christmas period. I'll run through these shortly. However, before that, I want to thank everyone for what has been once again an amazing national effort to comply with the very difficult measures associated with Level 5.

Although we are still recording new cases and unfortunately new deaths, we are seeing much lower numbers, with some counties recording very low and sometimes no new cases. This is reflected in the 14-day incidence which has been below 100 for the last few days. Hospital and ICU numbers have also stabilised. I know that this has come at great cost to some - those who have not been able to see family, who have had to make those difficult decisions about who can attend a funeral, who haven't been able to access valued social outlets, or have access to normal every day services.

Of course, it has also been hard on many businesses, and we know even in Level 3, this continues to be the case for some.

So, it is important that we approach this move to Level 3 with the experience of Level 5 fresh in our minds – we know how difficult it is and we do not want to back there. It is vital that all of us continue to work to protect the more vulnerable in our communities. The way to do that is by keeping the numbers low – simple but also difficult. It requires vigilance. I will outline some of the guidance we have published to help make this as safe as possible but our main message, for everyone, no matter what age, whether vulnerable or not, in work or in social settings is that every contact counts.

We have included a graph in today's briefing today which clearly demonstrates how the trajectory of the disease follows closely the trajectory of our close contacts. This shows very clearly that as our close contacts are reduced (as has happened over the past number of weeks), the incidence of the virus also reduces.

Image: Covid-19 Close Contacts and Growth Rate

Therefore, if you are meeting people over this period, and indeed beyond that, there will always be an element of risk. What we are asking is that you actively manage that risk – outdoors is better than indoors; shorter interactions are better than longer. We've all become used to interacting online, so if you can meet up online rather than in person – do that.

Planning ahead is also really important, take a few minutes to call whoever you are meeting or inviting to your home and have a quick chat about how it will work to keep you all safe. Have a think about who is vulnerable in your family, and whether what you are about to organise is putting them at risk, and then take the steps to make sure you reduce or eliminate that risk.

It's also worth remembering that even though it may be permitted under Level 3, or under the Christmas exceptions, people may not feel comfortable going to someone's home, or meeting in a restaurant or meeting at all. We all need to be patient this year:

1. Don't get offended if someone refuses an invitation, none of us know who has a vulnerable relative, or may be vulnerable themselves.
2. If you would be more comfortable with a smaller group than normal at Christmas don't be afraid to say so.
3. If you and your extended family normally spend Christmas with a parent or parents, make sure you give them opportunities to say what they would prefer this year.

Christmas will be different for this year, but hopefully we will be out of this soon, so let's take that on board and celebrate it as safely as we can.

So what is happening tomorrow:

From tomorrow, under Level 3:

- Weddings with up to 25 guests are permitted (same as current provisions).
- Funerals with up to 25 mourners are permitted (same as current provisions).
- No organised indoor events should take place, other than as provided below.
- Gatherings of 15 people may take place outdoors.
- Non-contact training may take place outdoors in pods of 15.
- Only individual training should take place indoors and I'll mention more on that later
- No matches/events may take place except professional and elite sports, approved inter-county Gaelic games, horse-racing and approved equestrian events, all behind closed doors.
- Gyms, leisure centres and swimming pools may reopen for individual training only.
- Nightclubs, discos and casinos should remain closed.
- Hotels, guesthouses, B&Bs may open with services limited to residents only.
- Non-essential retail and personal services may reopen.
- People should continue to work from home unless absolutely necessary to attend in person.
- And remember public transport capacity is limited to 50% so walk or cycle if you can

Also from tomorrow:

- Households should not mix with any other households outside those within their bubble; You can of course meet with one other household outdoors.
- People should stay within their county apart from work, education and other essential purposes;

A number of exceptions to Level 3 also apply from tomorrow:

- Places of worship will reopen for services with restrictive measures, subject to review in January
- Museums, galleries, libraries and cinemas will reopen
- Wet pubs will remain closed except for takeaway/delivery

Then, from 18th of December to the 6th of January we will have extra measures:

- Households can mix with up to two other households
- Travel outside your county will be permitted

We are also now recommending that we all wear face coverings in crowded workplaces, places of worship and in busy or crowded outdoor spaces where there is significant congregation.

It should be said, though, that while face coverings will give us all extra protection in these circumstances they are not a panacea – if a place feels too crowded or unsafe trust your instincts and leave.

Places of Worship

Places of Worship will reopen from tomorrow. We understand that there are some concerns about capacity to meet the demand for services over the busy Christmas period within the current guidelines.

Additional measures will be put in place to address overcrowding, to include scheduling additional services, increased stewarding and an advance booking system, where necessary.

Gyms, Swimming Pools and Leisure Centres

Gyms, swimming pools and leisure centres will reopen from tomorrow for individual exercise only. One-to-one training is permitted, subject to strict compliance with social distancing and other relevant guidance, including on the wearing of face coverings. Pre-booking of training sessions will be required at all gyms.

Sport Ireland has distributed guidance to facilitate sports clubs and gyms to allow their members to train individually.

It is really important that these settings do not become an opportunity for groups to congregate.

International evidence shows that gyms have been associated with a significant number of clusters. For this reason, particular care must be taken by gym operators to assess and mitigate the risks to their members and the wider community.

Group exercise classes are not permitted. The scheduling of group classes would be a breach of public health regulations.

Museums, Cinemas and Cultural Institutions

We are very pleased to say that Government has agreed to amend the restrictions applying under Level 3 to allow Museums, Galleries, Cultural Attractions and Libraries reopen. This means that the National Cultural Institutions, apart from the National Concert Hall, may reopen on Tuesday December 1st.

These changes will provide safe controlled environments for people to socialise safely and to have cultural experiences which will benefit wellbeing.

In addition to the permanent exhibitions in these institutions, a number of new exhibitions will also open to the public. All of the details are available on gov.ie [here](#).

We know many of you have been looking forward to getting back to your favourite institutions.

Government has also decided to allow cinemas to reopen under this level 3. This will provide another important social and cultural outlet for people in towns across the country.

#SafeChristmas

As I mentioned, just because something is permitted does not mean that it is without risk.

I heard someone say think of it like a credit card limit - it's a limit not a target. Being at a lower level of restriction means there is a greater onus placed on all of us to manage that risk, to consider it and to do our best to mitigate it.

Although there is a lot of positive news at the moment about vaccines it will still take some time before these will be rolled out to the extent that we can begin to resume our 'old' normality.

We would like to spend that time at as low a level of restrictions as possible while protecting the more vulnerable in our families and our communities. The way to do that is to keep the numbers low.

We have been working with the various sectors – retail and hospitality – and have published guidance for them – we know that they want to succeed. For opening to be sustainable, it is for all business that can reopen to step up and put this guidance into place and rigorously apply and stick to it and for their customers to play their part too.

The gov.ie/SafeChristmas page is updated on an ongoing basis with guidance for specific scenarios, for example, shopping and dining out with tips to stay safe while going about these activities. A #SafeChristmas public information campaign to highlight this guidance began on Friday night and this will continue in various forms and through a variety of channels over the coming weeks.

Plan Ahead

In general, we are asking people to plan ahead in the run up to Christmas.

Shopping Safely

Today I want to talk specifically about Shopping Safely. Given that all shops will reopen from tomorrow, and this is normally a busy time of year in the shops, we need to be mindful of safety. When planning your Christmas shopping, please support your local retailers and businesses. Plan to shop as early in the month as possible. Respect priority plans in stores for vulnerable people who may need a little extra help when shopping.

For food shopping, plan to shop early, shop off peak and shop alone if you can. If you feel unwell you should stay home. Remember that you can still shop online or over the phone and collect your goods or have them delivered. If you do go out shopping, wrap up warm in case you have to queue. Try to shop at off peak times and remember to keep a 2m distance from other shoppers. You must wear your mask instore for your safety and for that of other shoppers and staff. Try to keep your shopping time to a minimum and remember to use hand sanitiser on entering and leaving the shop.

If you do need some extra help to get your shopping done, don't forget to contact the [Community Call](#) and they will be able to help you.

Dining Out Safely

Restaurants and pubs operating as restaurants will reopen from this Friday, 4th December. Tables will be to a maximum of 6 people. Restaurants will have measures in place to keep guests and staff safe:

- Teams will be fully trained in COVID requirements
- Hand sanitiser will be provided
- Seating will be distanced
- Businesses will close on time, customers will know how long they have

You are asked to:

- Sanitise our hands on entry and exit
- Wear facemasks indoors and when moving around the building
- Maintain social distancing
- Provide details for contact tracing purposes

If we all do what is being asked of us, we can enjoy dining out while making sure everyone stays safe.

Christmas Bonus Payment

This year, the Christmas Bonus will be paid to over 1.6 million people in the week beginning 7th December, at a rate of 100%.

A record €390 million will be paid to Social Welfare recipients.

As in previous years, the 100% Christmas Bonus will be paid to long term social welfare recipients such as pensioners, people with disabilities, carers and lone parents.

This year, we are urging people to spend their Christmas Bonus locally to support businesses as they re-open

It's estimated that over 310,000 people who have been on the PUP will receive the Christmas Bonus, totalling over €93 million. This means that approximately 90% of PUP recipients (currently 350,000) are in line to receive a Christmas Bonus.

People in receipt of the Pandemic Unemployment Payment (PUP) and equivalent Jobseeker's payments for at least 17 weeks (4 months) - continuously or otherwise - are eligible to receive the Bonus on an exceptional basis this year.

As the PUP Payment Week runs from Friday to Thursday, any person in receipt of PUP for any one day of the period Friday, 27th November to Thursday, 3rd December, will receive the Christmas Bonus payment on Tuesday, 8th December as long as they have accrued their 17 weeks. This is important to know for anyone who is concerned about returning to work.

For example, people who go back to work any day from now on will still receive the Christmas Bonus.

Remember the Government decision to lift restrictions will, we hope, get many people back to work.

Employment Wage Subsidy Scheme

There are currently 41,300 employers registered with Revenue for Employment Wage Subsidy Scheme. To date, a total of €885.5 million has been paid to employers

COVID Restrictions Support Scheme

In addition, almost 11,000 businesses have registered for the COVID Restrictions Support Scheme. The value of CRSS claims submitted to date is €56.1 million.

The scheme applies to businesses that are impacted by COVID-19 where the business had to prohibit or reduce the number of people accessing the premises.

If you are one of the affected businesses you can still register and make a claim for this significant cashflow support.

Information on how to make a claim is available on gov.ie [here](#).

Community Supports/Wellbeing

For the moment, we are asking that no visits to people's homes take place, other than those involving your support bubble. You can visit the home of those in your support bubble and they can visit your home. You can also meet outdoors and in places other than home.

Advice on support bubbles is available on gov.ie [here](#).

Community Fora

The Community Call Fora, run by the local authorities, have continued to operate and will do so as long as they are needed.

The helpline numbers are available on gov.ie [here](#) and they will be able to help you.

ALONE, the national charity for older people is also available if someone needs information, reassurance, or just to talk. ALONE's national phone line is 0818 222 024.

There are many resources available locally to support our wellbeing. See [gov.ie](#) for more details on our KeepWell campaign.

#antiviral

This pandemic has had an enormous impact on everyone – no one has been unaffected. We have become used to behaviours and restrictions that would have been unthinkable previously. One group that has been affected badly has been young people – from school closures to restrictions on meeting their friends. From not being able to attend college in person, not being able to get a job to missing out on so many rites of passage and formative experiences. Experiences we have all taken for granted, experiences that we probably didn't realise were so important until they are no longer possible.

We are working with a number of Departments and a variety of groups to understand what this has all meant for young people and to explore how we can acknowledge the sacrifices they have made and to give them a forum to share their experiences.

As a group, they have been unfairly highlighted for images of non-compliance that appear from time to time on social media. We don't believe this represents the behaviour of the majority – we have seen the incidence rates among young people fall, we know the enormous effort and sacrifice this takes. To change this imbalance – to emphasise the positive behaviours of the majority, to give this 'silent majority' a forum to make their voices heard – a new campaign, a new movement is beginning today.

#antiviral gives young people a chance to share their stories of life during the pandemic, stories of how they have been living their best lives possible within the restrictions – you will find #antiviral on Facebook, on Instagram, on Tiktok and on Youtube and you can visit [antiviralireland.com](#).

In fact if you are on TikTok or Instagram you might already have heard of #antiviral– a number of content creators who are working with us on the campaign have been engaging with their followers, gathering questions young people want to ask and had the opportunity to put these questions to Dr Ronan Glynn, the deputy CMO. You can watch what was a great and engaging conversation on the website. So keep an eye out for the campaign, join the movement and be #antiviral.

And finally

Vaccines

We have all heard the positive reports on various vaccines. We have been working very hard here, and with our European partners to make sure we are prepared to get this to as many people as possible as quickly as we can. And while the news is positive it will take time, so while it gives us cause for hope, it doesn't lessen the need to stick to the safe behaviours that I have spoken about and that have served us well so far.

We will keep you informed as soon as we have more information. We know how important communication will be for everyone as we know how keenly people are waiting for the hope that a vaccine might bring.

To finish, I did want first to reiterate our thanks to everyone for getting us to the point where we can celebrate Christmas in a meaningful way. Anyone who has tuned into these briefings since March will know that I always repeat the basic simple steps that we are all so used to but that remain so important – you all know what they are. The message today is Every Contact Counts, don't take any risks if you feel you have symptoms and let's all plan for a safe Christmas. Go to gov.ie/safechristmas for guidance and more information.

Thank you.