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Daily briefing on the government's response to COVID-19 - Thursday 2 April 2020

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- [1. Business Supports](#)
- [2. Employees](#)
- [3. March Exchequer Figures](#)
- [4. Bord Bia COVID-19 Response Marketing Support Package](#)
- [5. Agriculture](#)
- [6. Horse Racing Industry](#)
- [7. Humanitarian](#)

- [8. Irish Citizens Abroad](#)
- [9. Cross Border Co-operation](#)
- [10. Rent increases](#)
- [11. Fraud Warning from An Garda Siochana](#)
- [12. Do Not Drink Notice in Clare](#)
- [13. Introduction of Community Briefing](#)

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

Good Morning Everyone.

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

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

Thanks again for everything that everyone doing. If we can stick with these measures we know that we can protect each other, slow the spread of the virus, and support our health service.

Remember, while we may have to stay apart physically we are all in this together. By staying at home, you can play your part in this crisis.

Keep up with your friends, family and neighbours as best you can in different ways because that is important too.

And later on, we will brief you on measures and supports available through your community for those who are cocooning or particularly vulnerable during this time.

Business Supports

The [Temporary Wage Subsidy Scheme](#) introduced by Government is going well and again we encourage employers to register for the scheme, which means their employees stay in a job and employers will be ready to get back to business when we get through the current situation.

There are almost 36,000 employers now registered with Revenue for the scheme. Registration increased by over 10,000 in the 48 hours between Monday morning and Wednesday morning. Revenue is reimbursing payments made under the scheme to the relevant employers within 2 working days.

Today, Revenue has generated further refunds under the scheme worth €20.3 million. These payments will be in the bank accounts of the majority of the respective employers tomorrow (3 April). The cumulative value of payments made under the scheme is now €54 million.

As I have mentioned previously, there are a range of other supports in terms of guidance available for business at this time, details of which are available [here](#).

Employees

An information notice and revised Frequently Asked Questions document for employers and employees on the COVID-19 related income supports can be accessed [here](#).

You'll get the basic information on the income supports now available, together with answers to the most commonly asked questions and they have just been updated.

We wish to thank customers who submitted their application for the COVID-19 Pandemic Unemployment Payment online [here](#).

Between 12 and 31 March, over 225,000 applications were submitted [online](#). This remains the most effective and efficient way of submitting an application for income support.

We are aware of issues with a number of applications for the payment. The impacted applicants have been contacted and the issues are being addressed. We encourage the completion of [online applications](#) as this will reduce the chance of error.

March Exchequer Figures

The Minister for Finance, Public Expenditure and Reform Paschal Donohoe will hold a press conference today at 1.45pm. In this, the Minister will outline the end of Quarter 1 Exchequer Statement or the March Exchequer Figures.

Bord Bia COVID-19 Response Marketing Support Package

Bord Bia is widening its marketing grants schemes, which is targeted at food, drink and horticulture producers, in response to difficulties companies are facing as a result of the COVID-19 crisis.

Further details are available [here](#).

Agriculture

A number of flexibilities to schemes run by the Department of Agriculture, Food and the Marine have been put in place in response to the COVID-19 crisis.

These flexibilities are being introduced to make it easier for farmers and their agents to continue to participate in these important schemes where difficulties arise due to the current public health restrictions.

For inspections, routine on-farm visits have generally been paused for two weeks. However, some essential inspections may be necessary and will take place.

Revised arrangements have been put in place for submitting applications for transferring basic pay entitlements where witnessed signatures are required.

Additional flexibilities have been introduced in the area of TB testing arrangements and we wish to facilitate farmers in continuing efforts to eradicate TB and undertake testing as required. We also wish to continue to facilitate animal movements and the continuity of all elements of the food supply chain.

The overriding principle in all situations is that the health and safety of farmers, vets, service providers, contractors and other staff and their families is paramount.

Horse Racing Industry

The [Horse Racing Ireland Board](#) yesterday announced the closure of the 2019/20 National Hunt season and cancellation of Fairyhouse and Punchestown Festivals.

Like many other sectors, the racing and breeding industry in Ireland will take an economic blow from the fallout of COVID-19. Government are working with Horse Racing Ireland to limit the long-term impact of this pandemic. We know that jobs will be lost in a key rural industry and that the viability of some industry institutions will come under serious threat.

A strategy that would allow Irish racing to return as quickly as possible once it is appropriate to do so and within government guidelines was also discussed.

A significantly enhanced National Hunt programme has been planned for October to December with the 2020 Irish Grand National also to be rearranged in this winter period.

We are aware that the cancellation of key horse racing events, along with the cancellation of other sporting and cultural events will be significant disappointments for a variety of enthusiasts out there who will see beloved annual fixtures in their lives disrupted. We want to remind you that at this time that these measures are unfortunate necessities in the fight to protect our communities and to save lives.

Humanitarian

While our focus at the moment is very much on our local communities and support of the most vulnerable, it is important to note that we are also continuing to contribute to global humanitarian causes and in particular global efforts to address the COVID-19 pandemic.

Yesterday, the [Irish Government provided €10 million in funding to the United Nations' Global Humanitarian Response Plan](#). This plan will help particularly vulnerable countries in their responses to the virus.

Ireland's allocation to the UN appeal is part of our support for the work of all those across the world who are saving lives in these most challenging of circumstances.

This donation of aid should serve as a reminder that we are united on a global scale in the fight against COVID-19 and, in practical terms, the World Health Organization have been clear that 'none of us are safe until everyone is safe'.

Irish Citizens Abroad

Irish citizens who are abroad and have concerns about COVID-19 related measures can contact the Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade on our dedicated phone line at + 353 1 613 1733.

This helpline has fielded nearly 14,000 calls over the month of March. Currently, we 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.

Cross Border Co-operation

At 2.30 pm today Minister Ross will hold a teleconference with the Minister for Infrastructure in Northern Ireland and the Minister for Infrastructure in Wales. The meeting will provide an opportunity to discuss issues of common interest in the transport field and specifically the response to the COVID-19 crisis and this will have a particular focus on critical supply chain issues which remain one of Government's highest priorities at this time.

Rent increases

Emergency measures mean there should be no rent increases for three months from Thursday 27 March. Once again, we ask landlords are asked to show forbearance with their tenants at this time.

Fraud Warning from An Garda Síochána

I have already mentioned concerns we have about fraudsters that may try to take advantage of the very unusual situation we all find ourselves in.

An Garda Síochána have asked us to remind you to be careful of COVID-19 related fraud and scams. There are those out there who will attempt to take advantage of people's fear at this time and the Gardaí are urging that people be cautious in the following circumstances:

Beware of anyone calling to your house offering services in relation to COVID-19, this includes services for COVID-19 tests. Health Service Executive staff (Ambulance, Nurses, Paramedics, Doctors) will not call to your house unless you have been in touch with them first.

Beware of bogus charity collectors. There should not be anyone carrying out street or door to door collections at this time. If you are approached, please report it to An Garda Síochána.

Also, beware of emails, online requests and online advertisements offering COVID-19 related tests, products.

Do not click on unsolicited links.

Always double check before transferring any money or buying any product. This includes Businesses making online payments.

Always report any activity you think might be unusual or fraudulent. It is never too late to report a fraud but timely reporting makes it more likely that there is an opportunity to try and step in and save you your money.

Do Not Drink Notice in Clare

The “do not drink” notice on the Inagh group water scheme was lifted yesterday afternoon.

And a final note for today, the CMO is back at his desk.

Introduction of Community Briefing

Finally this morning, I would like to introduce a briefing on Ireland’s community response to the COVID-19 crisis. I have mentioned in previous briefings the Local Authority Fora which have been set up to mobilise communities at local levels to support those who are most vulnerable during this time. To brief us further on that, I would like to welcome, Tánaiste and Minister for Foreign Affairs and Trade, Simon Coveney TD, Minister for Rural and Community Development, Michael Ring, TD, Minister of State for Local Government, John Paul Phelan TD and Ann Marie Farrelly, Chief Executive of Fingal County Council.