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Daily briefing on the government's response to COVID-19 - Tuesday 14 April 2020

Item Type	report
Citation	Ireland. Department of the Taoiseach, 'Daily briefing on the government's response to COVID-19 - Tuesday 14 April 2020', [report], Department of the Taoiseach, 2020-04-14
Publisher	Department of the Taoiseach
Rights	Y
Download date	2026-03-14 19:46:24
Link to Item	https://hdl.handle.net/20.500.14765/101609

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Published: 14 April 2020

From: [Department of the Taoiseach](#)

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

Introduction and up-to-date Public Health Guidance

Good Morning Everyone.

Firstly, I want to thank everyone for the efforts so far and especially over what was a difficult Easter weekend for many. As has been said over the weekend, it is really important to redouble those efforts to slow the spread of the virus.

The Taoiseach has said the restrictions will be extended until 5 May - your actions are having an impact so do keep going, stay apart but do connect with your loved ones remotely, to protect them and to protect yourself and remember if you need assistance it's there for you.

As you know the National Public Health Emergency Team met on Friday. They said that there are encouraging signs that the measures have had a positive effect on the slowing of the spread of the disease in Ireland. That means that what we are doing is working.

However, they also underline the challenges that the health and social care systems continue to face because of COVID-19. They particularly emphasised the fact that we have 66% rate of community transmission – that means the people who are getting the disease are doing so just going about their daily business. That's what makes this disease so challenging to manage.

They also focused on the increasing number of clusters we are seeing in the most vulnerable in our communities.

The Team also review the European Centre for Disease Control advice. They too have emphasised the ongoing risk of the disease to the general population; the importance of the community and physical distancing measures in terms of mitigating the impact of the disease; and their view that it is too early to start lifting those measures.

We need to wait and watch a bit longer. We are at a delicate and critical point in trying to figure out how to proceed. Whatever we decide to do next will have to be done carefully and cautiously.

In the meantime, we have to keep up the effort we have been making so far and remember, the most effective personal actions you can take to help slow the spread of the virus:

- wash your hands regularly and thoroughly
- use good cough and sneeze etiquette
- observe social distancing measures

As you know, there was a major operation to ensure public compliance since last Wednesday.

There was a very high level of compliance with the public health guidelines over the Easter weekend. An Garda Síochána want to thank the public for that. We now need people to continue that high level of compliance over the coming weeks. Working together we can flatten curve and reduce the spread of COVID-19.

Everything you are doing is saving lives.

Temporary Wage Subsidy Scheme

Take-up of the [Temporary Wage Subsidy Scheme](#) introduced by Government is continuing to grow.

Over 42,100 employers are registered with Revenue for the scheme.

Today (14 April), Revenue has generated further refunds under the scheme of over €44 million.

These payments will be in the bank accounts of the majority of the respective employers by tomorrow (15 April).

The cumulative value of payments made under the scheme is now €199 million.

Agri Food Sector

Bord Bia has introduced a range of new supports and tailored existing programmes to support the Agri Food sector businesses. The Navigating Change programme addresses issues under 3 areas; Understanding, Supports and Futureproofing.

The programme includes bespoke supports for producers and food and drink manufacturers, alongside the supports offered by the Department of Agriculture, Food and the Marine and Government Supports for Business.

The range of services and supports includes the introduction of the €1 million COVID-19 Response Marketing Package for businesses to accelerate eCommerce and expand marketing activities, and also training and mentoring programmes.

For further information, please see [here](#).

Employees

Today, approximately 532,000 people will receive their weekly payment of €350 under the [COVID-19 Pandemic Unemployment Payment](#) scheme.

These payments will have been lodged into their nominated bank account or post office.

There are still a small number of people who entered an incorrect PPS Number or IBAN number and the Department of Employment Affairs and Social Protection are contacting these people to obtain the correct information so that the payment can be made.

The number of applications submitted online through www.mywelfare.ie is increasing and this is the easiest and most efficient way of submitting an application.

Email Issued in Error

The Department of Employment Affairs and Social Protection notifies those customers who apply for the COVID-19 Pandemic Unemployment Payment, but who have been deemed not entitled to payment.

This allows such customers to understand why this is the case and provide the department with further information, which may lead to an award of their application.

The department mistakenly issued an email to a number (1,753 or 0.25%) of individuals who had applied for the COVID-19 pandemic unemployment payment. The email suggested that the individuals were not entitled to receive the payment and that they would not be receiving a further payment.

As soon as the department became aware of the issue, it carried out an investigation and it has determined the source of the error.

The department apologises to these individuals for the error and the distress it has caused them. It has emailed all individuals affected to advise them of the error and to re-assure them that their COVID-19 payment will continue.

Community Call Fora

The Community Call Fora, run by the local authorities, continue to provide help and support to those in need in communities around the country. Yesterday, they received 401 calls nationally on issues such as the collection and delivery of items like groceries; people needing someone to talk to; medical or health services; and the delivery of meals. We encourage anyone who needs help, knows someone who needs help, or wants to volunteer to give help to contact their local forum.

The Fora helplines are partnering with [ALONE](#). Last week, ALONE received 3,782 calls to its national support line. In addition to the 5,864 telephone and befriending support calls they made, the charity delivered 619 practical supports to those in need.

A dedicated phone helpline is operational in every county as well as the national number 0818 222 024. You can find your local helpline number [here](#). If you need help or you know someone who needs help please don't hesitate to call the ALONE helpline or the local helpline number and someone will direct your call.

Local authority borrowers

The Department of Housing, Planning and Local Government has confirmed that forbearance arrangements have been put in place for local authority mortgage products.

These measures will ensure that a mortgage payment break of up to three months will be made available to local authority borrowers who are in need of it.

No additional costs to the original home loan balance will arise for the borrower who avails of these measures, as borrowers are not charged interest for the period of the break.

This break is available to those who have already faced mortgage difficulties due to the COVID-19 emergency and those who may encounter difficulties in the near future.

Local authority borrowers facing difficulties due to COVID-19 should contact their local authority as soon as possible.

Education

On Friday, a series of changes to the 2020 State Examinations were [announced](#) as part of measures to respond to COVID-19, including postponement of the Leaving Certificate examinations.

The decisions have been taken on foot of updated advice from the National Public Health Emergency Team (NPHE).

Plans are being put in place for the postponed Leaving Certificate examinations to begin in the last week of July or early August, subject to public health advice.

Junior Cycle final examinations due to take place in June will be replaced by school-based exams and assessments held early in the new school year.

A series of other decisions has also been taken:

- as part of the wider public health measures, schools are closed until further notice
- practical examinations for Leaving Certificate students which were due to have been held in May are deferred. They will be rescheduled for late July/early August
- the new Leaving Certificate exam timetable will be confirmed in early June

The admissions process for higher education, managed by the Central Applications Office (CAO), will operate as closely as possible to the usual timeframe for offers and the entry date for first year students will be delayed.

The department has asked the Higher Education Authority and the higher education sector to explore ways of assisting access to higher education for students from under-represented groups.

Tusla Services

Tusla would like to reassure people that all referrals or concerns about children are being screened and assessed in line with normal practice and where a child is at immediate risk, they receive an immediate protective response. Tusla are seeing indications that the number

of referrals to child protection and welfare services are lower than usual at this time. The closure of schools who account for about a quarter of referrals, is a factor in this. However, Tusla's child protection and welfare teams are here, and are working to keep children as safe as possible in every community around the country.

We would ask anyone with a concern about the wellbeing or safety of a child during this time to contact the local duty social work office where the child lives. Details are available on the Tusla website at www.tusla.ie or contact them via the Tusla online portal at portal.tusla.ie.

There are currently 5,971 children in care and staff around the country are continuing to work to ensure the continuity of supports and services. They are providing their services, balancing the needs and best interests of the child with public health advice to keep children, families and frontline staff as safe as possible during this time.

Mobile Masts

Continuity of telecommunications networks services – fixed and mobile – are vital to society, especially at a time when we are advised to stay at home due to COVID-19.

Vandalising mobile phone mast infrastructure will stop masts from carrying mobile call and data services at a time when people are relying on these critical services. Some people will be unable to contact emergency services and the Gardaí. It will also make it harder for people to make contact with their families, friends and work colleagues.

There is absolutely no truth in the rumours of a link between COVID-19 and 5G. This has been confirmed by the European Commission and World Health Organization, among others.

You are urged to ignore misinformation circulating on social media and not to spread it further. Reputable information about COVID-19 can be found from official sources such as the Health Service Executive.

Finally

We would like to sincerely thank all of you who shone your light over the weekend. This provided an opportunity to come together virtually and to show our support for all of those impacted and all of our front-line staff. We'd like to acknowledge people all over the country, local authorities, public buildings, community groups and also those around the world such as our embassies and our peace keepers all of whom took part. We would like to particularly acknowledge RTE and other media organisations who enabled this initiative.

A reminder that we are all in this together.

Thank you.