



31 March 2020

Daily briefing on Government measures in response to Covid 19

Delivered by Elizabeth Canavan

Assistant Secretary General

Department of the Taoiseach

Good morning,

Let's begin as usual by restating the public health advice we must follow to protect ourselves and others from this virus:

- Wash your hands regularly and thoroughly.
- Practice good coughing and sneezing etiquette.
- And continue to observe social distancing.
- Remember you are part of the front line.

And again, I want to thank you for continuing to abide by the public health advice. I know that this is difficult and restrictive, but it is only through our collective efforts in sticking with these measures that we can slow the spread of this virus.

Addressing Concerns around Health

I would like to confirm that we are aware of public health concerns being raised in relation to areas such as testing, clusters and masks. These matters are covered by the Chief Medical Officer and the Health Service Executive and are being addressed on an ongoing basis in their briefings.

Continuation of Health Services

I mentioned this yesterday, but want to reiterate that other parts of the health service continue to operate. You should check in with your doctor or hospital if you have an appointment unless it has been specifically cancelled.

Most importantly, if you need urgent or emergency care, if you have for example heart attack or stroke symptoms, don't hesitate go to the Emergency Department or call an ambulance.

Community Response Forum

I mentioned yesterday plans to establish in each local authority a Covid-19 Community Response Forum. These fora are now up and running and are co-ordinating Covid-19 community supports to ensure vulnerable members of the community are reached and helped at this time.

The fora comprise the local authority, Health Service Executive, County Champions, An Post, Community Welfare Service, An Garda Síochána, other State organisations, charities and other stakeholders.

Each forum has set up a helpline for people to contact. The helplines, when fully ramped up, will operate from 8am to 8pm seven days a week. This is in addition to out-of-hours answering of calls by local authorities. The helplines which are already operating each received, on average, between 50-100 calls yesterday.

Individual support networks and organisations are continuing to provide support to vulnerable people who contact them.

Business Supports

I want to remind you, as I have mentioned at these briefings previously, that the Government has put in place an unprecedented level of financial support schemes to help people through this difficult and worrying time:

Uptake of Temporary COVID-19 Wage Subsidy Scheme

- Almost 26,000 employers are now registered with Revenue for the scheme.
- Today, Revenue has generated further refunds under the scheme worth €9.1m.
- These payments will be in the bank accounts of the majority of the respective employers tomorrow (1 April).
- The cumulative value of payments made under the scheme is now €22.8m.
- Full details of the scheme are available on gov.ie.

Other Business Supports

I mentioned yesterday the Strategic Banking Organisation Working Capital Scheme.

- I would also like to remind small businesses impacted by COVID19 that they can apply for loans of up to €50,000 from Micro Finance Ireland.
- You can also reach out to your Local Enterprise Office for advice on how you can help your business to respond to COVID-19.
- A Business Support Call Centre is open to provide information on Government supports for businesses and enterprises affected by COVID-19. More information on all of these schemes is available on Gov.ie.

Irish Water Deferral of new tariff framework

Also, of interest to business, Irish Water has informed us that they have decided to postpone the introduction of a new tariff framework for business, industry, agriculture, charities and public bodies.

Irish Water will publish further updates in due course.

Employees

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 more about those supports and apply for them by visiting gov.ie and going to COVID-19 Pandemic Unemployment Payment.

The quickest way to submit an application for payment, in terms of both the Pandemic Unemployment Payment and Enhanced Illness Benefit is online. Information on how to apply is available on Gov.ie

If you have already applied but have been reemployed, you should close your application now.

Pension Payments and Cocooning

We are aware that there are over 460,000 persons aged over 70 who are in receipt of a pension. Those aged over 70 are required to cocoon, but we understand that many are attending Post Offices to collect their pension, pay utility bills etc.

There are alternatives available, such as the ability to nominate an agent to collect their pension, which is now paid fortnightly.

It is also important to note that the payment will remain valid for collection in the post office for 90 days after the date of issue and therefore a number of payments may be collected at the same time. Government has been working on a High-Level Framework for Community Support during the current crisis. We are hopeful that there will be an opportunity here to use these supports/volunteers to assist pensioners who are not in position to avail of the temporary agent facility to access their cash.

Bank services

Bank of Ireland has also advised us of a new 'Cocooning support' service in place to help customers who are self-isolating to access cash.

Customers who are self-isolating or cocooning can nominate another person to make in-branch cash withdrawals and lodgements on their behalf.

The new facility has built-in safeguards such as limits on withdrawals and daily monitoring by Bank of Ireland's dedicated Vulnerable Customer Unit.

Customers who wish to avail of this service are advised to complete the "Cocooning Support" form which is available on the Covid-19 Customer Hub on www.bankofireland.com.

If a person who is cocooning does not have access to the internet, their nominated person can print off this form and bring to the person self-isolating for them to fill out. The nominated person will then bring the form to the branch to avail of the service

You shouldn't feel under any pressure to nominate anyone if you don't want to. If you have any concerns, contact ALONE, your local authority forum or your local Garda Station.

Continuation of Certain Mart Services

As per restrictions put in place early last week, all marts must be cancelled and normal mart auction activity cannot resume until further notice.

However, some mart services are considered to be essential and therefore can operate a reduced service to meet essential requirements.

Where employers are in a position to fully respect Health Service Executive guidelines in relation to physical distancing and other measures, it may be possible for mart owners to use their systems and facilities to assist with trade that would support the orderly sale of animals necessary to support the essential business of farming.

This includes where the movement of animals is essential, in particular to maintain the food supply chain and protect the health and welfare of animals.

In this context, two types of activities are considered possible, provided they are essential and minimise the potential for contact between people:

- For calves, a service whereby a farmer can deliver calves to the mart, by appointment, so that orders for purchase can be matched and facilitated via the mart.
- For older livestock, a weighing service for lots of cattle/sheep, by appointment, with the mart facilitating the transaction between a buyer and a seller.

Further information on how to engage in these activities and the operational requirements to do so are available on gov.ie

Agriculture 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 €1.5m to €4m, to fully fund all eligible applications received.

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

Bike-Share Schemes

Following consultation with the NTA, it has been confirmed that shared bike schemes such as Bike Share in Dublin, Galway, Limerick and Cork will continue to operate.

An analysis of usage suggested that the bikes in question are regularly used by hospital and other essential workers.

Assurances have also been given in relation to the cleaning and maintenance of the bikes. The NTA is happy that the service should remain operational.

Businesses Donating goods/services

Since the beginning of this public health emergency, many businesses have contacted Government bodies to offer support through the supply or donation of goods and services. The Office of Government Procurement has created a central database of these offers on behalf of the whole of the public service, including the Health Service Executive.

For those businesses who would like to donate, offers can now be made through an online form on gov.ie

It may not be possible to match all offers with current needs, but we are very grateful for each and every offer of support.

Charities

The Government is aware of the challenges faced by charities, social enterprises and other community and voluntary organisations and is committed to working closely with the sector in managing through these.

Assurances have been provided in relation to the continuation of exchequer funding supports for organisations in the sector.

The Temporary COVID-19 Wage Subsidy Scheme announced last week will also support employers in the sector to retain staff who are employed under non-exchequer funding sources. We are continuing to liaise with representatives of the sector in relation to the challenges faced at this time.

Supporting Citizens Abroad

Over 130 Irish passengers and their families departed Lima safely on Sunday 29 March, the majority on the flight organised by the Irish Government. We can confirm that most of these arrived safely back in Dublin yesterday

Likewise, some US chartered airlines landed in Shannon yesterday carrying Irish citizens and residents from Algeria and Ghana.

The Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade has been working in close cooperation with airlines and travel agencies to ensure that those who want to return to Ireland from Australia, are able to do so.

Our Embassy in Canberra and Consulate in Sydney has directly contacted hundreds of Irish citizens.

In addition to the group who returned from Perth last week, we have arranged for seats on a number of flights departing Australia over recent days, and we are confident that most of these will be taken up by Irish citizens or residents.

For the moment, Qatar Airways is continuing to operate out of Australia. We would encourage Irish citizens to book with them, in the hopes of keeping those flights operating.

Any citizens in Australia who have not already done so should contact the Irish Embassy in Canberra or Consulate General in Sydney by email to share any concerns they may have.

We are also exploring a number of options to help our citizens in New Zealand who want to return to Ireland, to do so.

Concerns and Issues

Concerns re: Domestic Violence

An Garda Síochána has recorded a year on year increase in the reporting of Domestic Abuse and related offences.

The Gardai continue to work closely with victims, NGOs and Government in this area, particularly given the current circumstances following public health measures.

This crime type is being closely monitored on a daily basis.

The Garda National Protective Service Bureau and Divisional Protective Service Units remain fully resourced at this time. All domestic abuse incidents reported to An Garda Síochána are investigated and that will continue.

An Garda Síochána policy is that any current victim of Domestic Abuse receives a personal call back, which can be via phone, within 7 days or sooner.

If you are a victim of crime or, a witness to one, you should report this to An Garda Síochána as soon as possible. In an Emergency always call 999/112.

By sharing any information about a crime, you can help An Garda Síochána solve crimes and potentially prevent future crimes from taking place.

Courts – Child Visitation

We are aware of issues some people are facing in terms of Court Appointed Child Visitation. The President of the District Court gave guidance last week in relation to parents making alternative arrangements for children to maintain contact during access hours, where they cannot travel as usual.

The Taoiseach's statement last Friday clarified that at this time the best way to minimise the impact of COVID-19 is for people to stay at home.

We are now getting queries as to what parents should do in terms of visitation in light of these new restrictions.

While the Courts Service cannot comment on individual situations they are urging people to follow this guidance unless one of the below exceptions applies to their situation

- to attend medical appointments and collect medicines and other health products for yourself, your family or someone who is vulnerable or cocooning
- for vital family reasons including caring for children, older people or vulnerable people but excluding social family visits

- to take brief individual physical exercise within your locality, which may include children from your household within 2 kilometres of your home and adhering to strict 2 metre social distancing measures”

Concerns re: Direct Provision Centres

Government is working tirelessly, in particular through the International Protection Accommodation Service to ensure Direct Provision centres are well prepared and able to respond to any issues relating to COVID-19. There is more work to do, but this a rapidly evolving national emergency and we are following all advice from our Health Service Executive and National Public Health Emergency Team colleagues.

300 new beds were recently announced in new centres in Tullamore, Rosslare Harbour and Caherciveen. Further beds are actively being sourced for international protection applicants to better support social distancing measures in centres. Good progress is also being made on establishing an offsite self-isolation facility if required.

We will continue to do everything we can in this area in line with the best public health advice available.

COVID-19 App

As part of the national response to Covid-19, work is underway to develop a new mobile COVID-19 App for real-time symptom tracking and digital contact tracing.

Intensive work is underway in the Department of Health and the Health SE, with direct support from the Office of Government Chief Information Officer and other technical expertise across the public service.

The implementation timeline will be determined by the technical progress and results from intensive testing that is currently taking place.

Funeral Services

Another sensitive issue that has arisen, and caused concern for people, over the course of this emergency is that of funeral services. The Government’s critical services list issued on Saturday included funerals as one of those services.

The Government wants to ensure that families are able to bury their loved ones in a respectful manner while ensuring that all involved - mourners, funeral directors, celebrants and all involved in these services are protected from COVID-19.

The HSE has already provided guidance in this regard and further guidance is now being developed and will be published shortly.

In the meantime, I can confirm that immediate family members can still attend funeral services, burials and cremations, provided that social distancing rules are respected. This relates to all funerals, including those arising out of COVID-19 deaths.

While we know this is difficult, in general, numbers attending should not exceed 10 persons in places of worship and at the graveside but this may be restricted further in smaller enclosed places. Individual churches may also put in place restrictions which respond to specific local circumstances.

We are continuing to liaise with all stakeholders to protect the dignity of Irish funerals as we navigate this difficult period and we will review practices as necessary

We would encourage anybody effected by these issues to contact the range of bereavement and other support services that are available.

Thank you.