

Good afternoon.

This morning, the Cabinet met to decide on the next steps that the Government will take to respond to the Coronavirus Emergency.

These are unprecedented actions to respond to an unprecedented emergency.

We agreed action in three areas.

(1) New measures to slow the spread of the virus as recommended by the CMO and the NPHET - an expert team of public health doctors, virologists and scientists.

(2) New measures to assist those who have lost or will lose their jobs as a consequence of the Emergency and a scheme to ensure that many others do not and remain on the payroll rather than being laid off.

(3) New emergency legislation that we are asking the Dáil and Seanad to enact before the end of the week.

Before I go through them in detail, I want to once again thank all of you contributing to this Great National Effort. Thank you to:

our health service and civil service;
our local authorities;
our volunteers and NGOs,
our Defence Forces;
our Gardai;
our retailers, farmers and transport workers;
carers and care workers;
our postal workers; and
those working in industry like pharma, food production and food service, and medical devices.

Thanks also to everyone helping others in a million different ways. All those in religious life, our journalists and broadcasters, and everyone doing their best to raise the spirits of our country.

You are rising to this challenge and the nation is grateful.

This morning the NPHET met and has recommended some new actions to help us slow the virus. We have accepted its advice and it will be published today in accordance with standard practice.

Above all, today I want to thank the people of Ireland for listening to our advice when it comes to physical distancing, regular handwashing, taking care when sneezing and

coughing, and reducing the number of social events and gatherings you attend. It's too early to know for sure, but we believe it is making a difference.

However, we now believe we need to do more. We need to flatten the curve and suppress this virus.

So, I am asking you to stay home if at all possible. That is the best way to slow the virus, ensure our hospitals are not overwhelmed and buy us the time we need to build more capacity - testing, contact tracing, beds, ventilators.

So, you should only leave home to go to work if you can't work from home and your attendance is essential. You should only go to the shops for essential supplies, out for medical or dental appointments, to care for others or to take physical exercise.

Non-essential indoor visits to other people's homes should be avoided. Social gatherings of individuals outdoors should be of no more than 4, unless you are all from same household.

We are in this for long haul.

This could go on for weeks or months and we need to maintain our humanity, we need to see our families and loved ones and look after our mental and physical health. And we can do it if we maintain a physical distance of 2 metres or more.

No unnecessary travel should take place within the country or overseas, now or over the Easter break.

In order to assist all of this, the restrictions I announced in Washington DC are being extended until Sunday 19th April.

And, the following new actions are being taken:

All theatres, clubs, gyms/leisure centres, hairdressers, betting shops, marts, markets, casinos, bingo halls, libraries and other similar outlets are to shut;

All hotels to limit occupancy to essential non-social and non-tourist reasons;

All non-essential retail outlets are to close to members of the public and all other retail outlets are to implement physical distancing; [a list of essential stores is provided]

All cafes and restaurants are to limit supply to take away food or delivery;

All sporting events are cancelled, including those behind closed doors;

All playgrounds and holiday/caravan parks will close;

All places of worship are to restrict numbers entering at any one time to ensure adequate physical distancing;

All organised social indoor and outdoor events of any size are not to take place.

Gardai will increase interventions where venues are not in compliance with, or where groups of people are not adhering to recommended physical distancing.

All household contacts of a suspect case (i.e. a person who is awaiting a test or test result) should restrict movements until the test is reported negative or for 14 days since the onset of symptoms, whichever is shorter.

As I mentioned earlier, individuals should work from home unless attendance at workplace is absolutely essential.

Social gatherings of individuals outdoors should be no more than four persons, unless all are from the same household.

All non-essential indoor visits to other persons' homes should be avoided.

All crowded places, including public amenities, should be avoided.

All scheduled cruise ship travel will cease.

Any setting that should close has been specifically identified.

The requirement that workers work from home, unless attendance is absolutely essential, is not to be read as meaning that factories or construction sites have to shut. The authorities are available to work with employers and unions on how to make physical distancing effective.

There will be an increased presence of park rangers and Gardaí in parks and public places to ensure physical distancing is being observed. In Ireland, since independence, we have always had policing by consent rather than coercion. I don't intend for that to change now. That's not our way. The new powers afforded to the Gardaí will be used sparingly and only when necessary.

Let's all play our part and ensure they are not used at all.

I believe a liberal democracy can do this without the need for authoritarian or draconian actions.

The impact of COVID-19 on our economy and employment has been sudden and will be enormous.

I believe we need to maintain social solidarity, unity and a sense of community in this time of trial.

In recognition of the fact that so many fellow citizens have lost their jobs so suddenly, we are raising the COVID Unemployment Payment to €350 a week. This is approximately 75% of average earnings in the sectors most affected, and compares favourably to what is being done in other countries. The first payments will be made on Friday.

The COVID Illness Benefit will also increase to €350 per week and can be topped up by employers. This will be paid to people self-isolating.

In order to encourage employers and companies badly affected by the Emergency to keep staff on the payroll, a wage subsidy scheme will be introduced to co-fund 70% of the cost of salaries up to a maximum of €38,000 a year. At a salary of €38,000 the subsidy will equate to €410 a week in take-home pay.

The cost of this will be great. Many billions of euro in the coming months. But we can bear it and we will be able to pay it back as a nation. We do so willingly because it is the right thing to do and because we owe it to our fellow citizens.

I believe that maintaining the link between employees and employers and companies will make it easier for us to bounce back when this is all over. We will keep our economic infrastructure intact. We will give businesses the best chance of making it through this.

The self-employed will also be covered. I know the sacrifices so many of our self-employed have made to build up their businesses and practices and I know how worried they are now.

The Government will do everything it can to help sustain you and bring you through this Emergency.

Ministers Donohoe, Humphreys and Doherty will set out in detail how all these measures will apply.

Finally, Cabinet this morning approved the 'Emergency Measures in the Public Interest COVID Bill'. This legislation, for the duration of the Emergency, will: freeze rents, prevent evictions, make it easier for health care professionals to re-register and return to work, and enable former members of our Defence Forces to rejoin at the rank they left. We need you to serve your country once again.

We also approved a framework agreement with the private hospitals. They will operate effectively as public hospitals under Section 38 of the Health Act for the duration of the Emergency thus adding over two thousand beds, 9 laboratories, critical care capacity and thousands of staff to our health service.

Private and public patients will be treated equally and the private hospitals have agreed to do this on a not-for-profit basis. I want to thank them for their co-operation.

I briefed the leaders of the other parties yesterday and we will be briefing spokespeople today and during the week. In contrast to what we have seen in some other countries, our political parties have united against a common foe and I want to thank them for their understanding, goodwill and co-operation to date.

Finally another reminder to everyone to follow the public health advice and to keep following the five key steps. They might seem simple, but they are vital to protect us all: regular hand washing, coughing etiquette, not touching your face, physical distance, and staying at home if feeling unwell.

We cannot yet stop this virus but working together we can slow it in its tracks and push it back. These are extraordinarily difficult times for everyone in Ireland and around the world. But no matter what happens, we will always put your life and your health ahead of any other concern.

All our resources are being deployed in this great national effort. And I know that the Irish people will continue to face this head-on, to make the changes that are required, and will pull through to the other side.

Four years ago we commemorated the 1916 Rising and we celebrated the men and women who helped us win our freedom and our independence.

I never believed that we would be called upon to match their courage, or their example.

Today we are.

Working together our country will come through this Emergency. We will be tested but will succeed.

Our greatest generation was not in the past.

Better times are yet to come.

Thank you.