ESRI

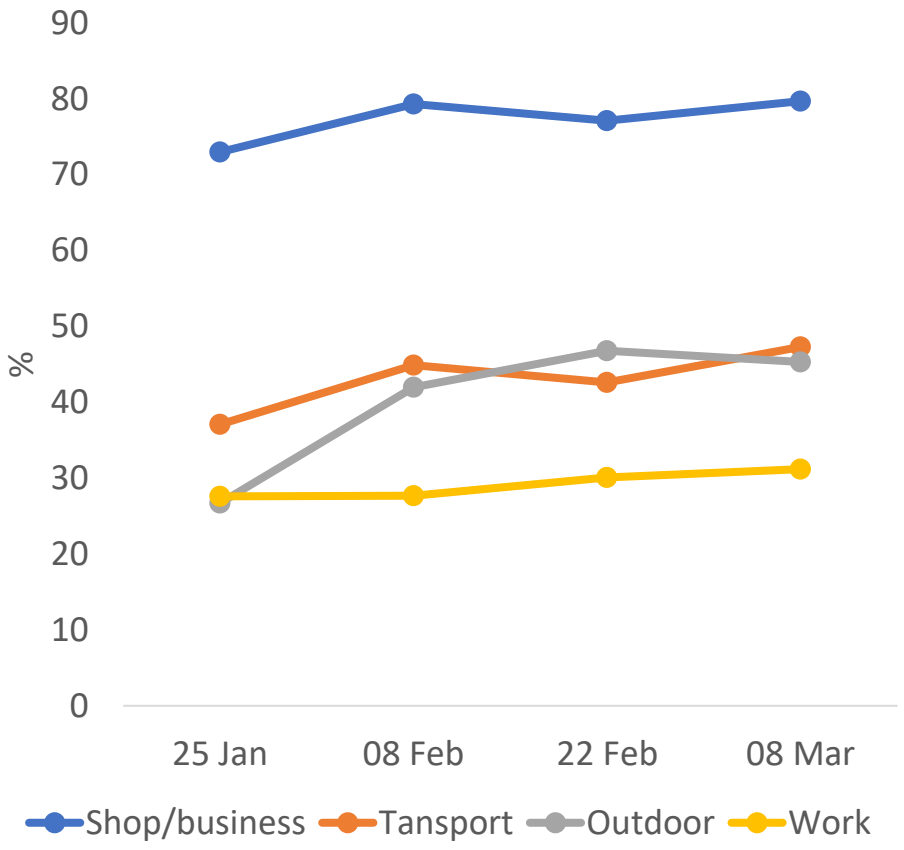
Rialtas na hÉireann
Government of Ireland

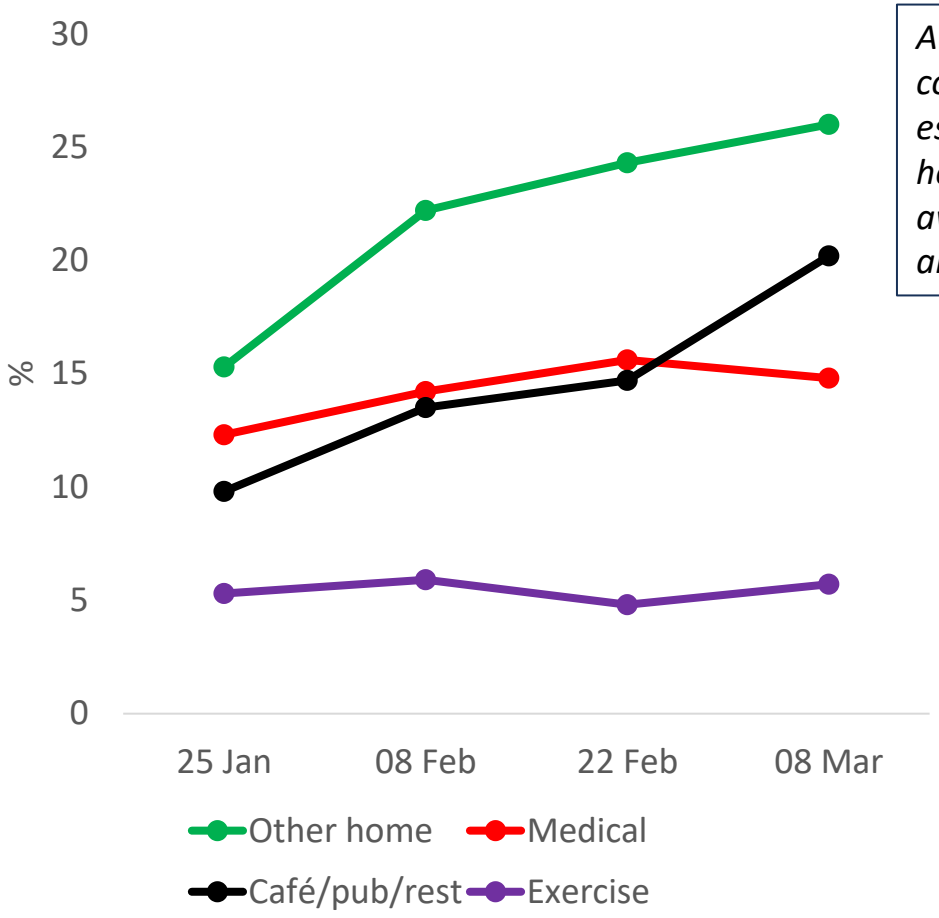
Social Activity Measure
Week Beginning: March 8th

ABOUT THE RESEARCH

The Social Activity Measure (SAM) is a behavioural study that records the public response to the risk of Covid-19 infection over time. Designed by the ESRI's Behavioural Research Unit (BRU), SAM is an anonymous, interactive, online study that surveys people about their recent activity. The study offers insight into where and how risks of Covid-19 transmission arise. SAM aims to inform policy regarding the opening of parts of the economy and society, while keeping Covid-19 under control. The research was designed by the BRU in consultation with the Department of the Taoiseach, and is funded by them. The survey is completely anonymous. This slide deck presents results from a nationally representative sample of 1,000 people aged 18 and over who participated in the study in the week beginning March 8th 2021. Where comparisons between survey rounds are highlighted, they are statistically significant.

Locations visited (past week)

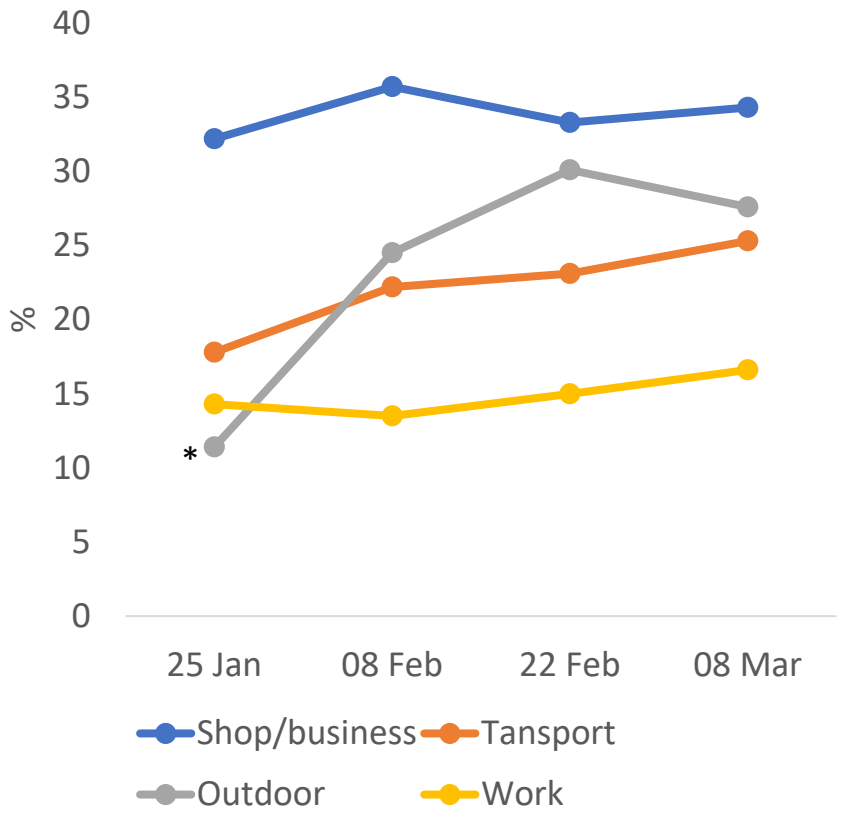


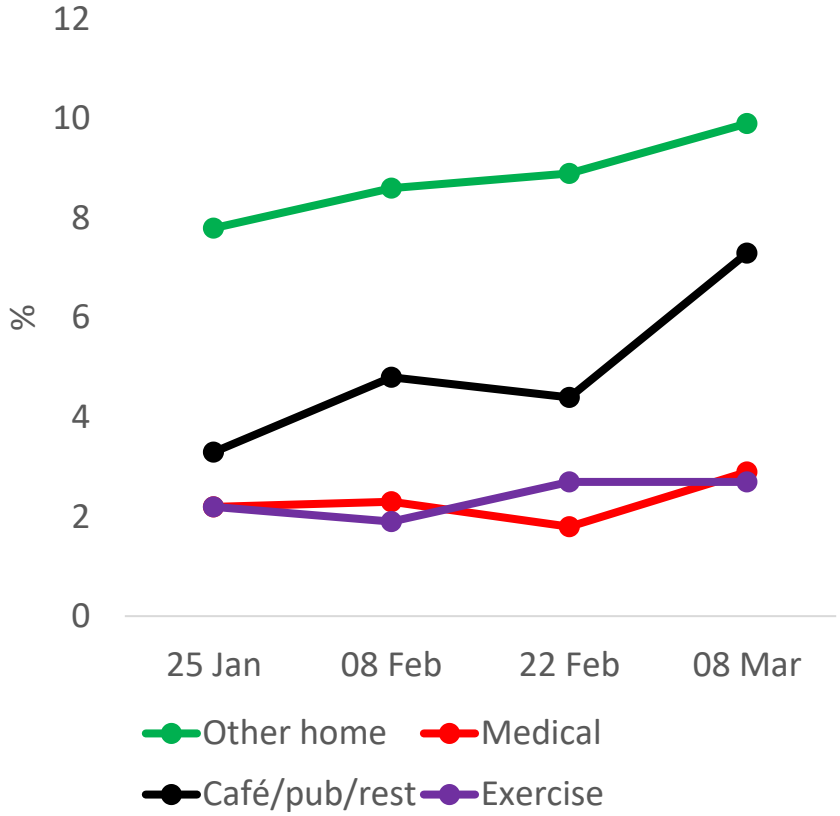


Activity outside the home continued to increase, especially visits to other homes and use of take-away restaurants, cafés and pubs.

Source: ESRI Social Activity Measure for the Department of the Taoiseach

Locations visited (yesterday)



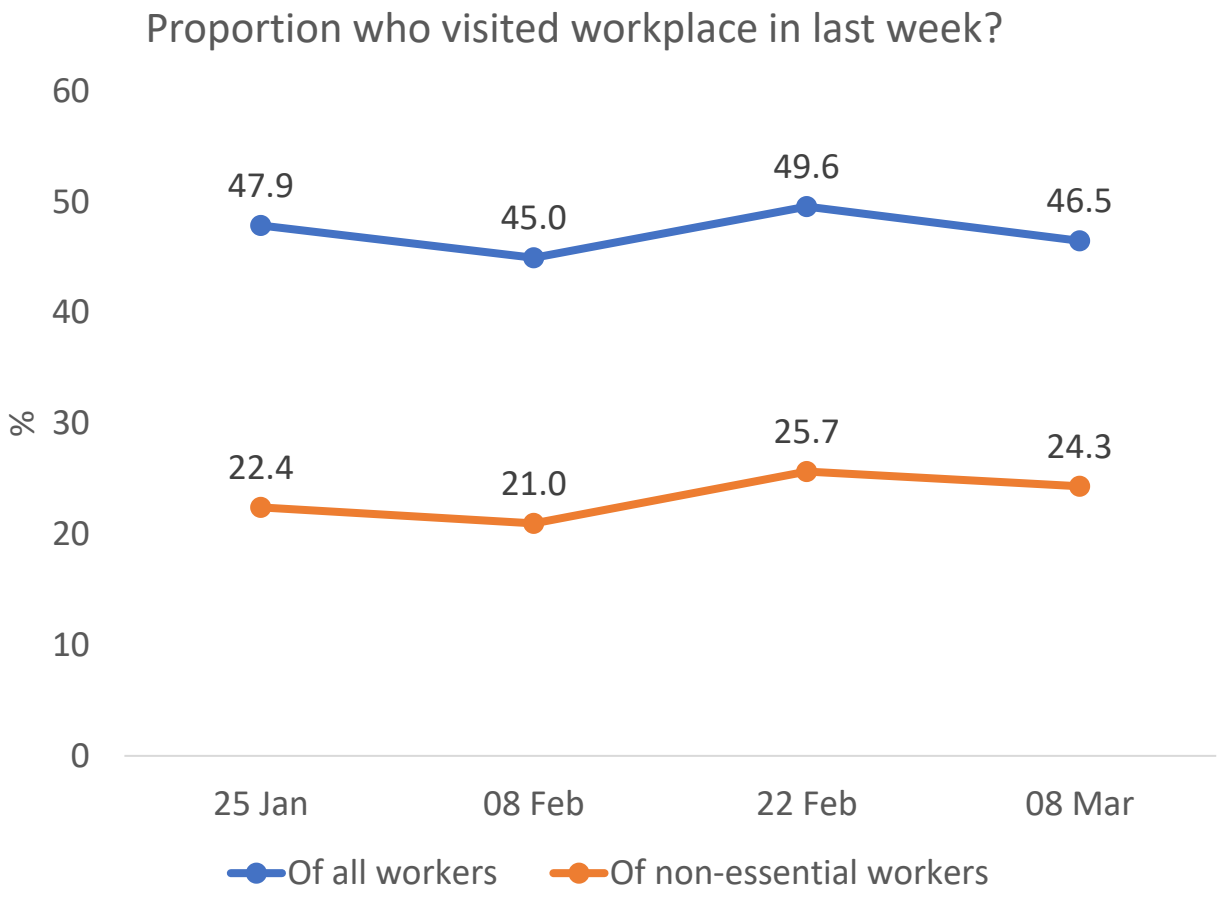


The proportion of the population going to the most popular locations was higher than 6 weeks ago in all 8 cases.

**Neighbourhood* was removed from SAM for the Feb 8th Wave, possibly inflating the percentage of people including their local area in *Outdoor.*

Source: ESRI Social Activity Measure for the Department of the Taoiseach

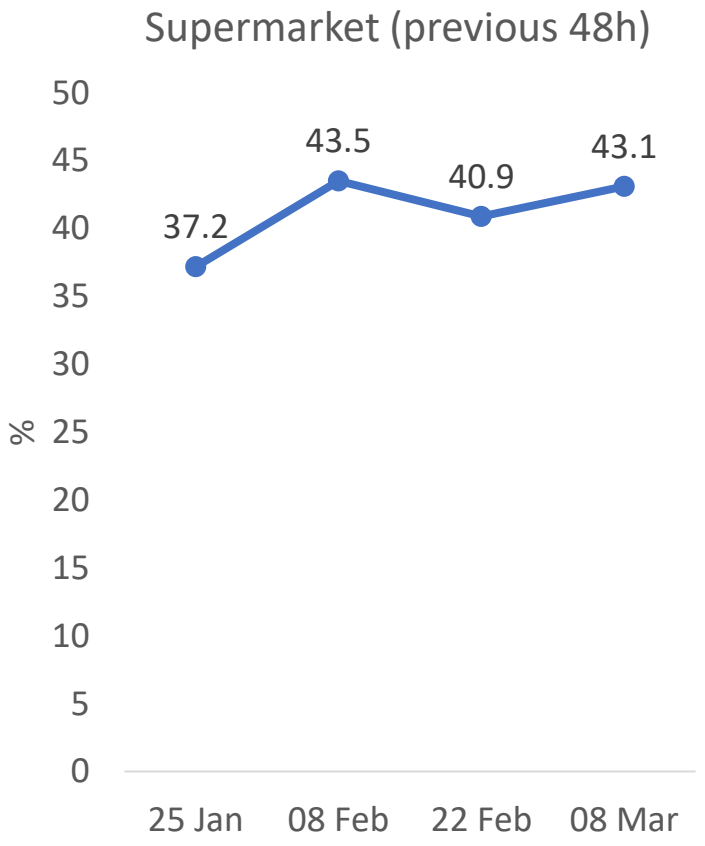
Working Outside the Home

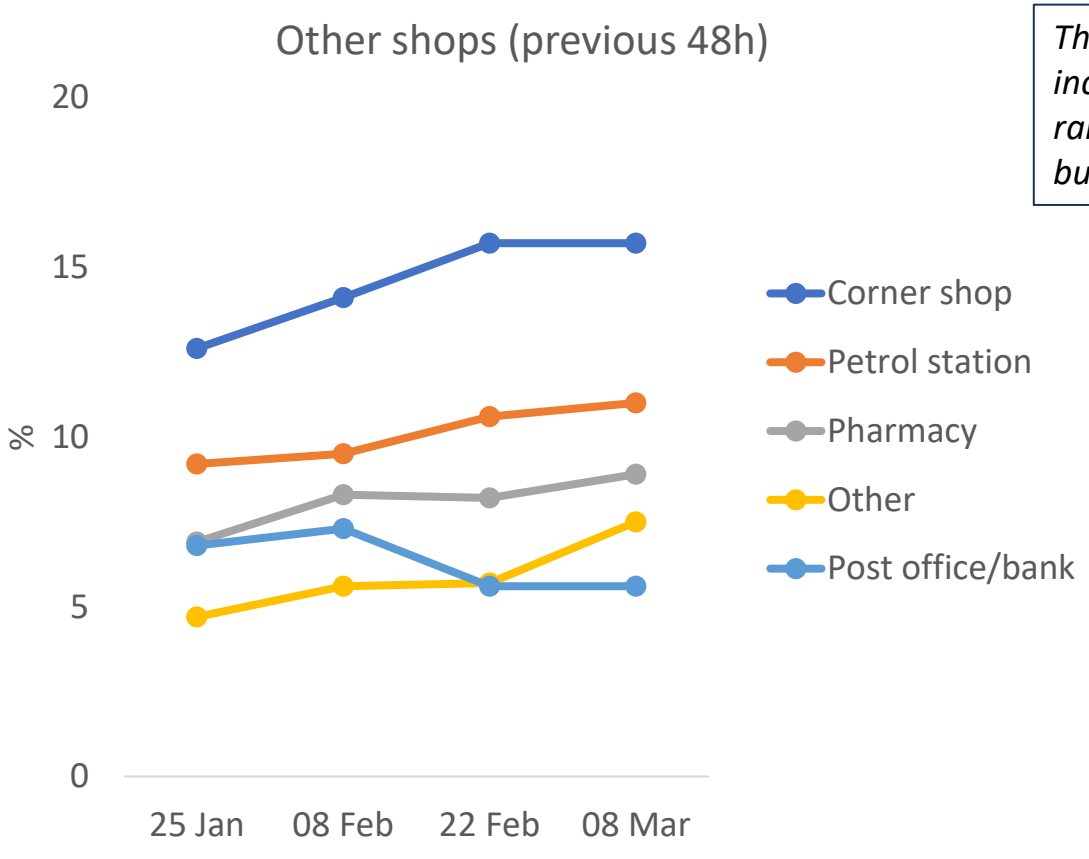


There was little change in the proportion of essential and non-essential workers visiting their workplace.

Source: ESRI Social Activity Measure for the Department of the Taoiseach

Shops and businesses

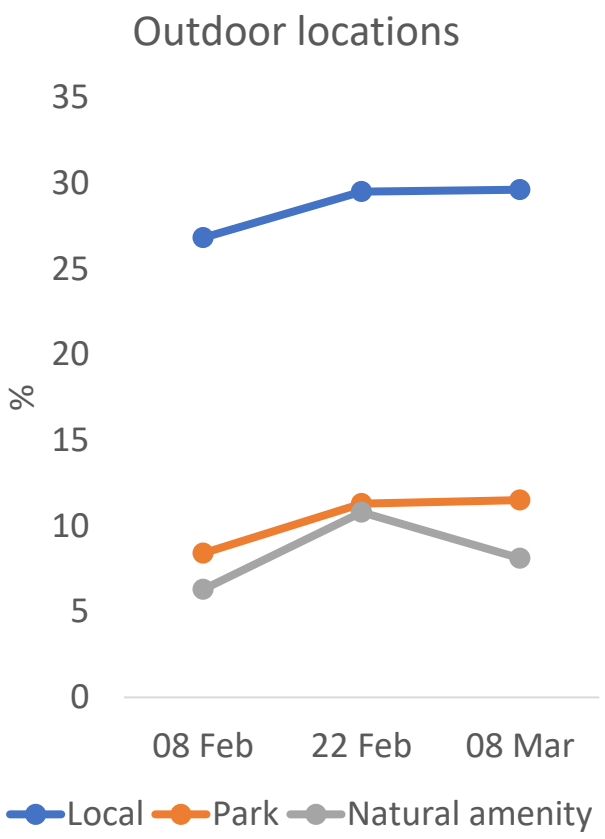


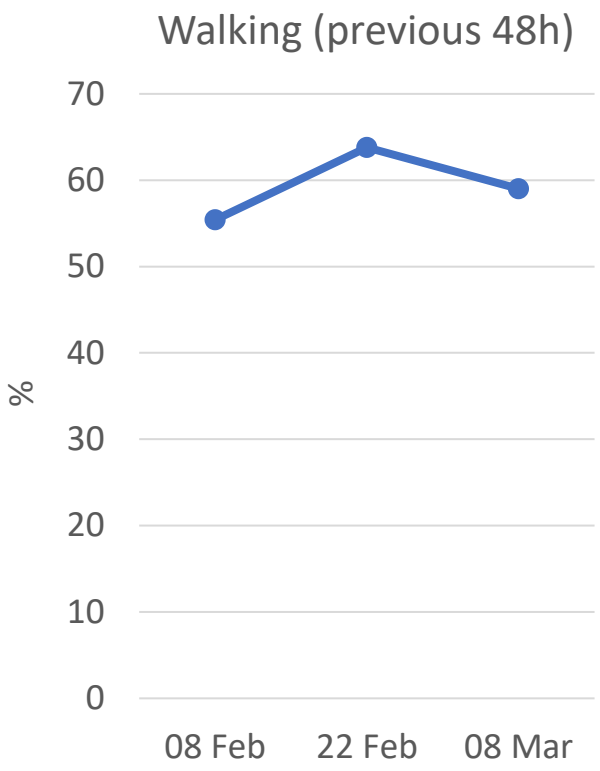


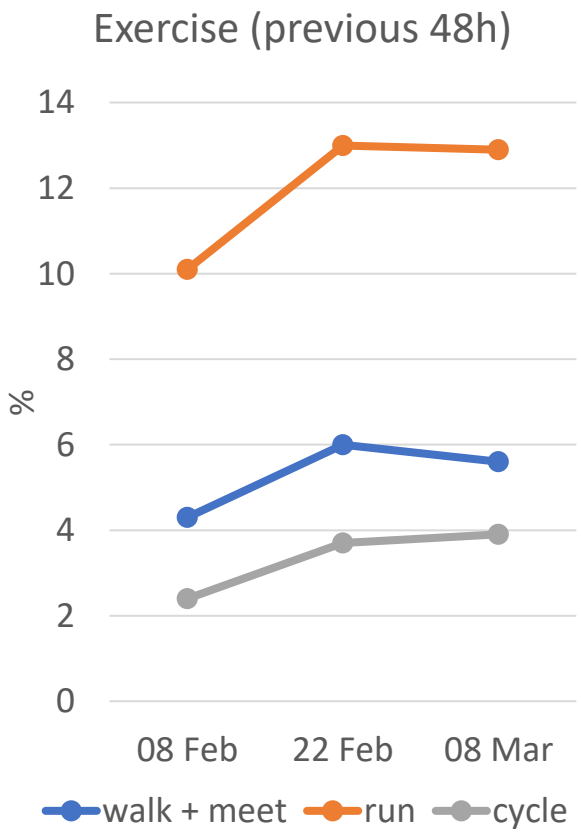
There has been a modest increase in visits to a range of shops and business.

Source: ESRI Social Activity Measure for the Department of the Taoiseach

Outdoor locations and activities



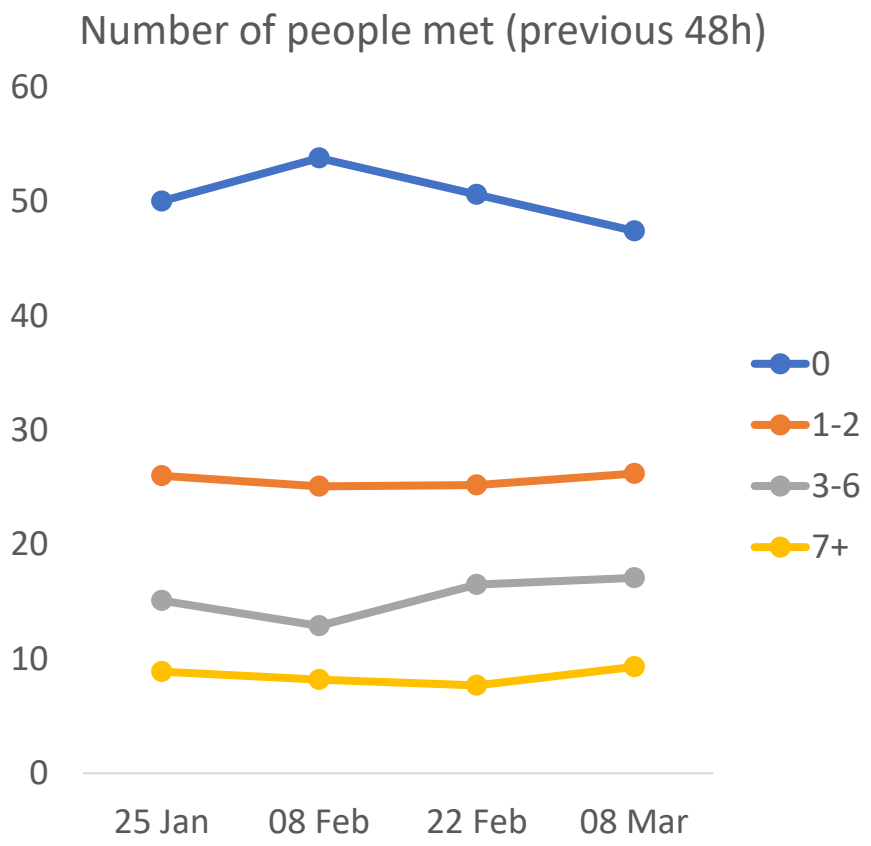


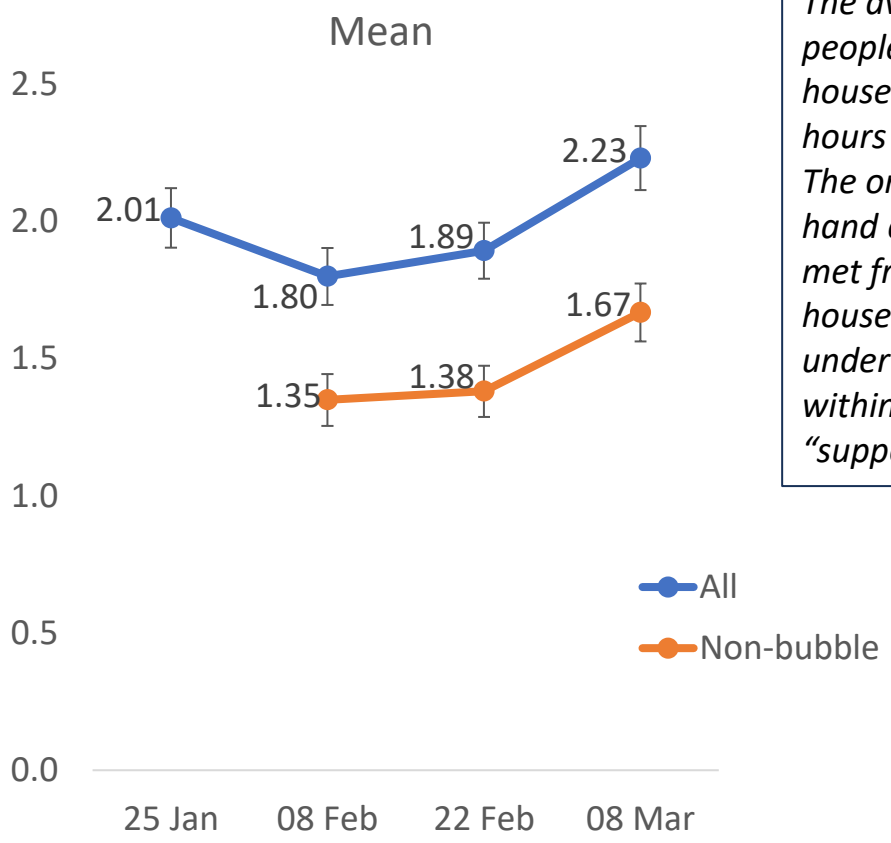


Following steep increases in outdoor activity in February, there have been no further rises in outdoor activity over the most recent two-week period.

Source: ESRI Social Activity Measure for the Department of the Taoiseach

Meeting people outside the household

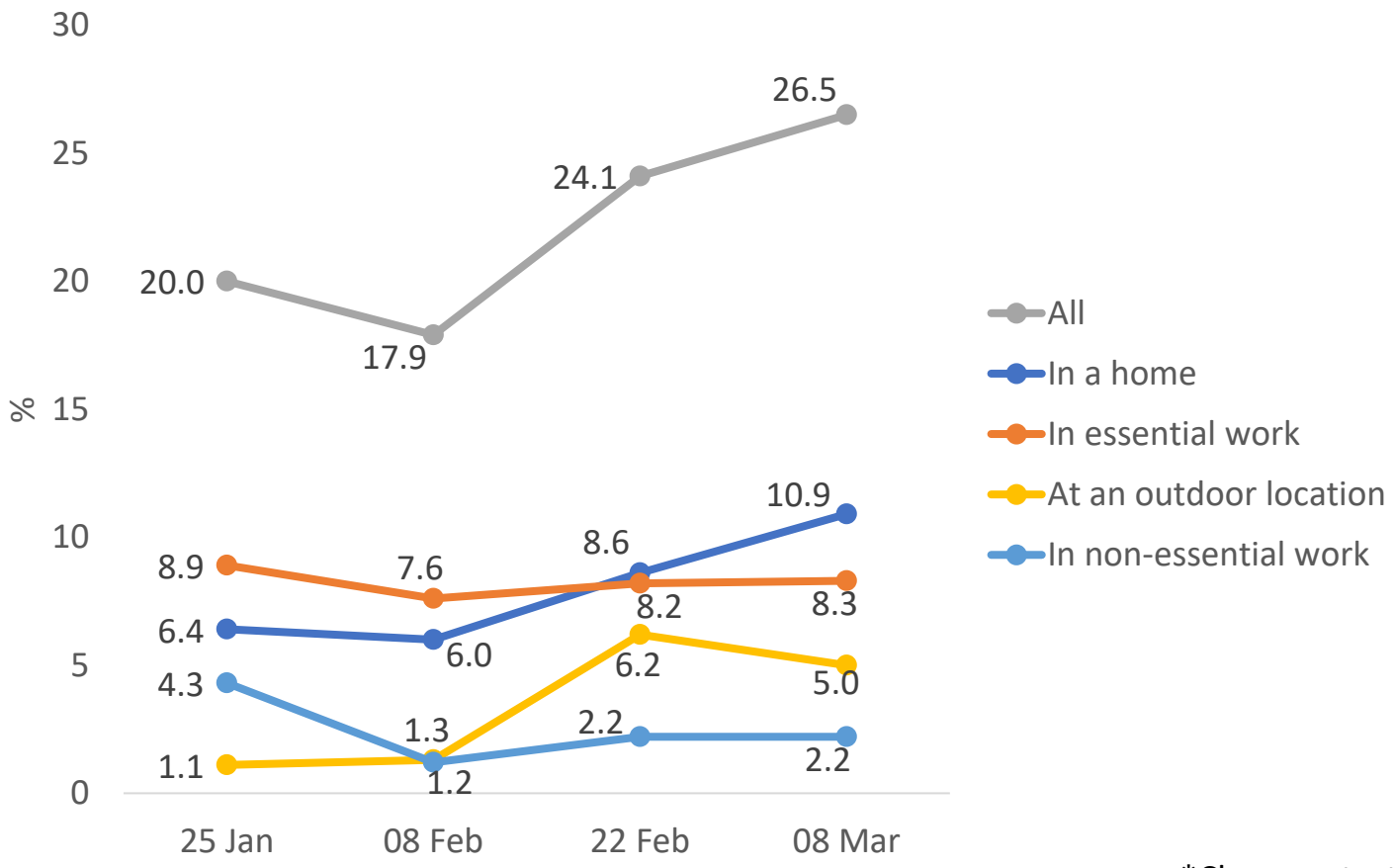




The average number of people met from outside the household in the previous 48 hours increased fairly sharply. The orange line in the right-hand chart refers to people met from outside the household who do not fall under the definition of people within the individual's "support bubble".

Source: ESRI Social Activity Measure for the Department of the Taoiseach

Close contacts*



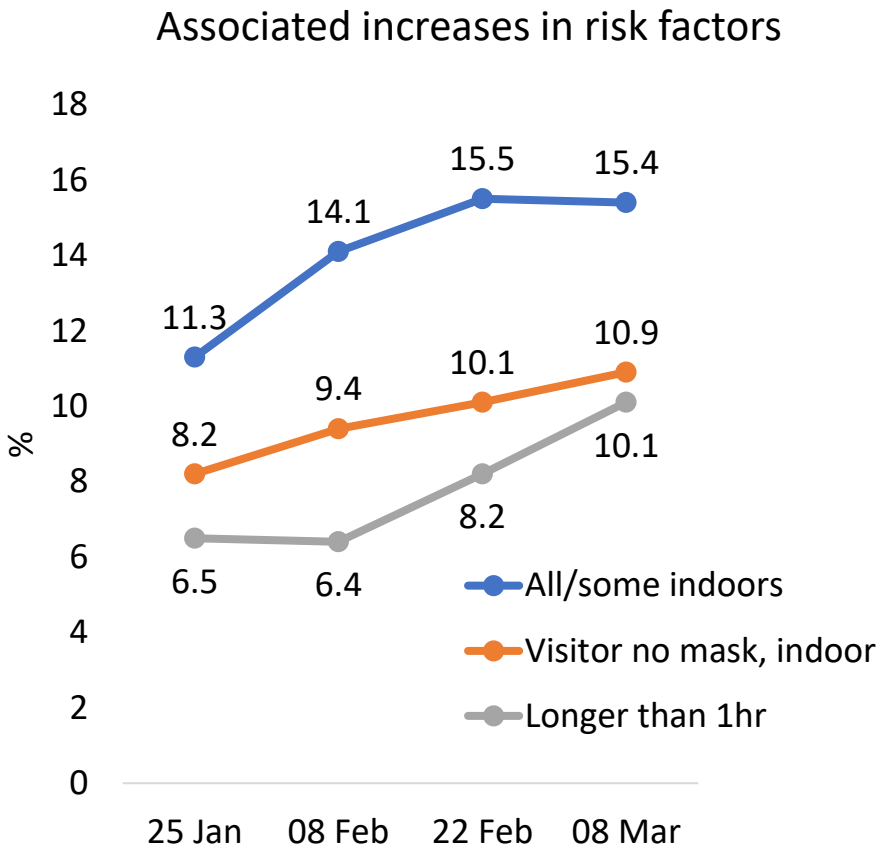
There was a further increase in close contacts, with more than one quarter of the adult population having a close contact the previous day.

The increase was mainly driven by a rise in the number of close contacts in homes, which surpassed the number of close contacts in workplaces.

*Close contact interactions are defined as those that lasted for longer than 15 minutes in which 2m distance was not maintained at all times or that took place indoors for longer than 2 hours in a space that was not well ventilated (hse.ie)

Source: ESRI Social Activity Measure for the Department of the Taoiseach

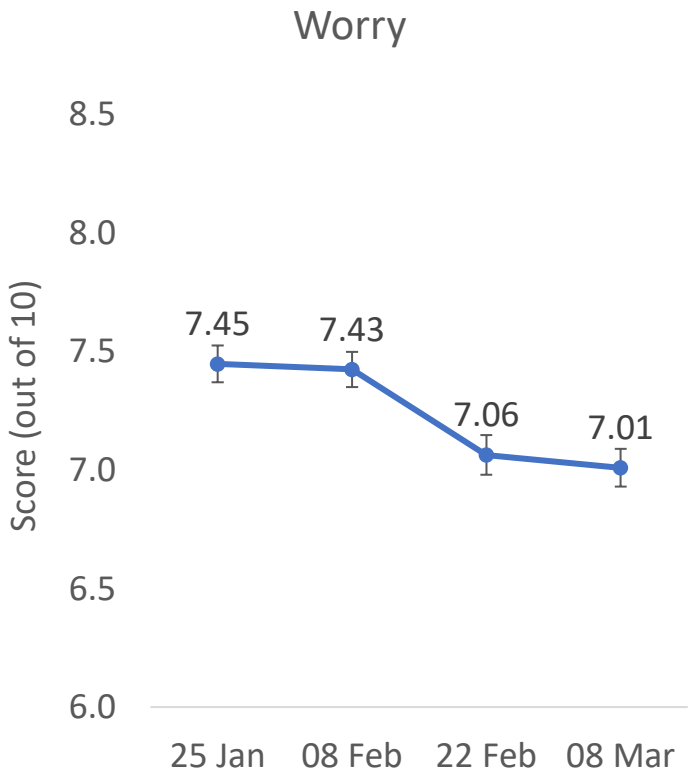
Visits to homes

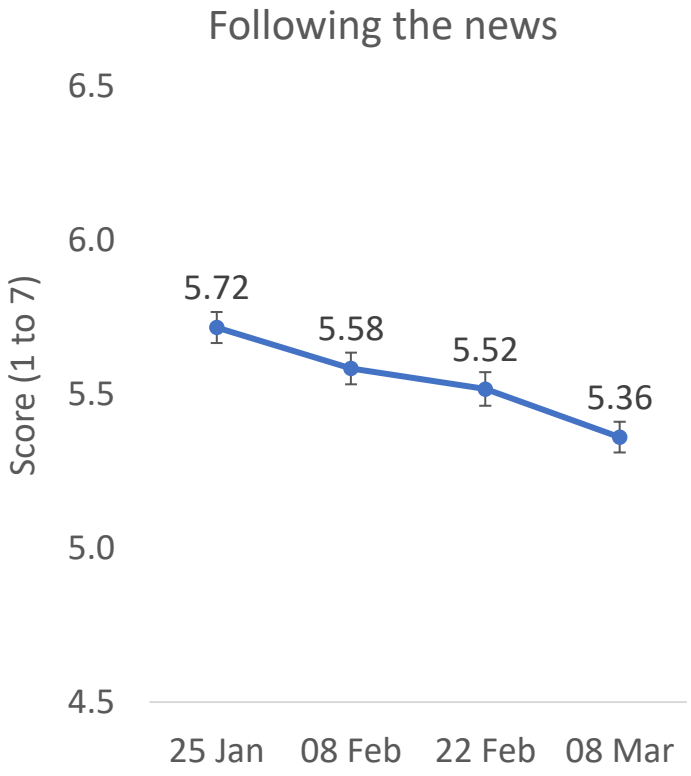


The increase in visits to homes was driven by social visits. The majority involved at least some time spent indoors, generally with the visitor not wearing a mask. Many visits lasted over one hour.

Source: ESRI Social Activity Measure for the Department of the Taoiseach

Levels of worry and media engagement

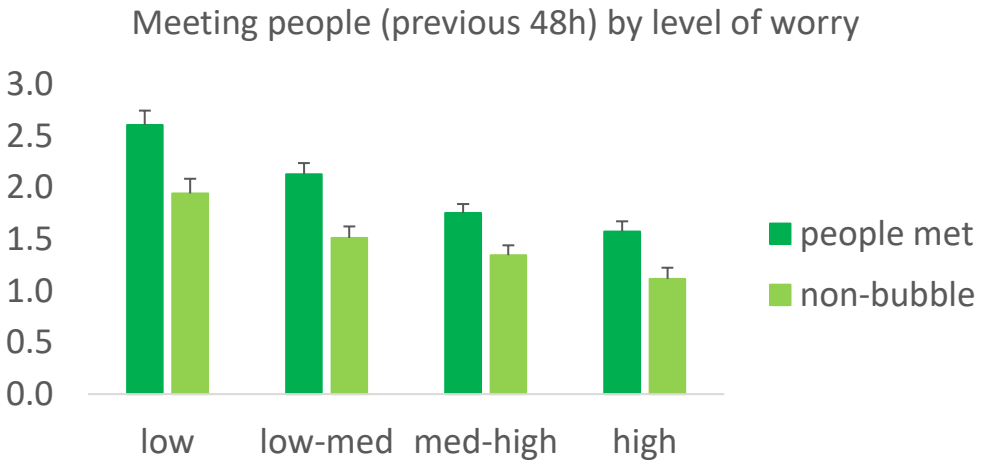


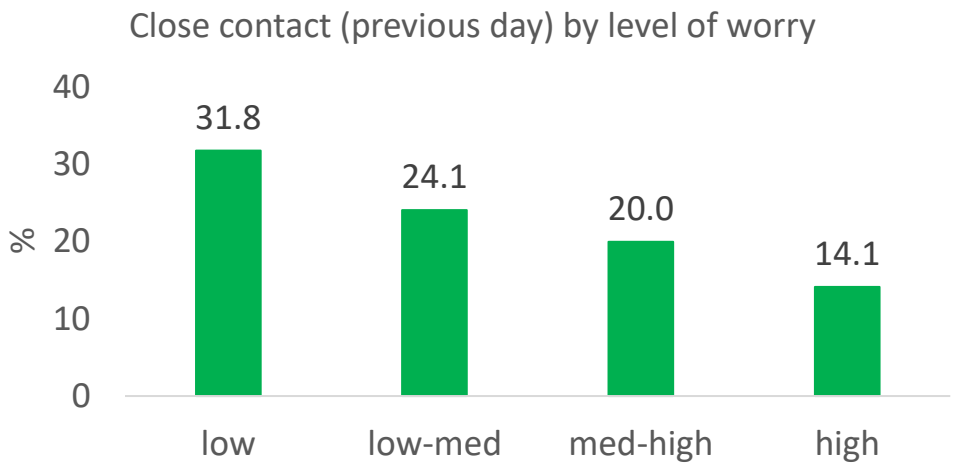


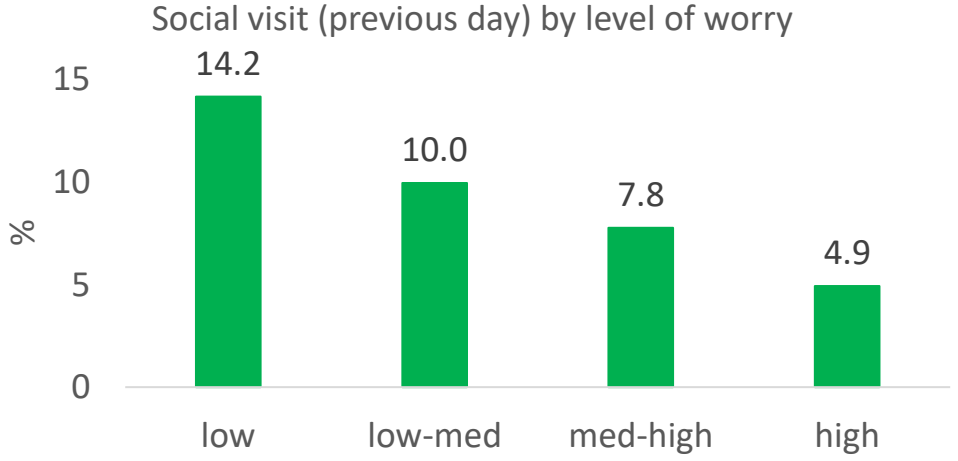
The level of worry about Covid-19 in general has fallen as case numbers have fallen. (Daily case numbers were still falling up until approximately March 9th.) This is also reflected in a drop in how closely people are following the news about Covid-19.

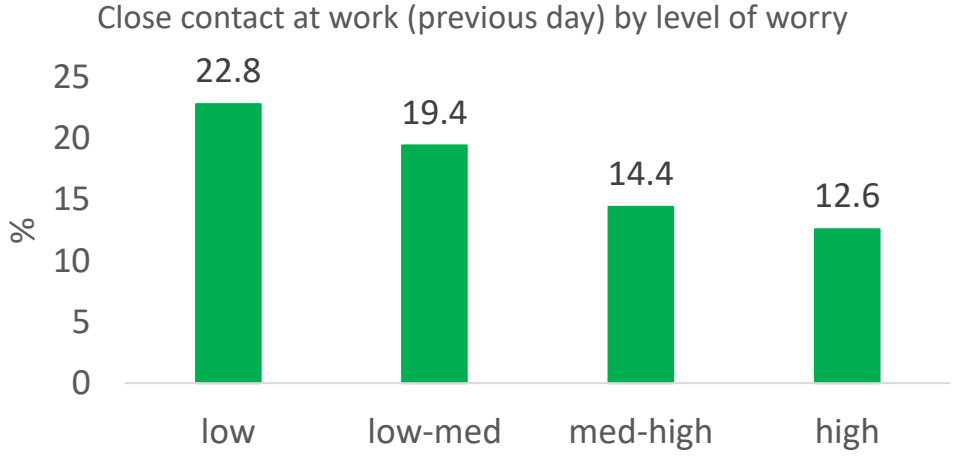
Source: ESRI Social Activity Measure for the Department of the Taoiseach

Worry and behaviour





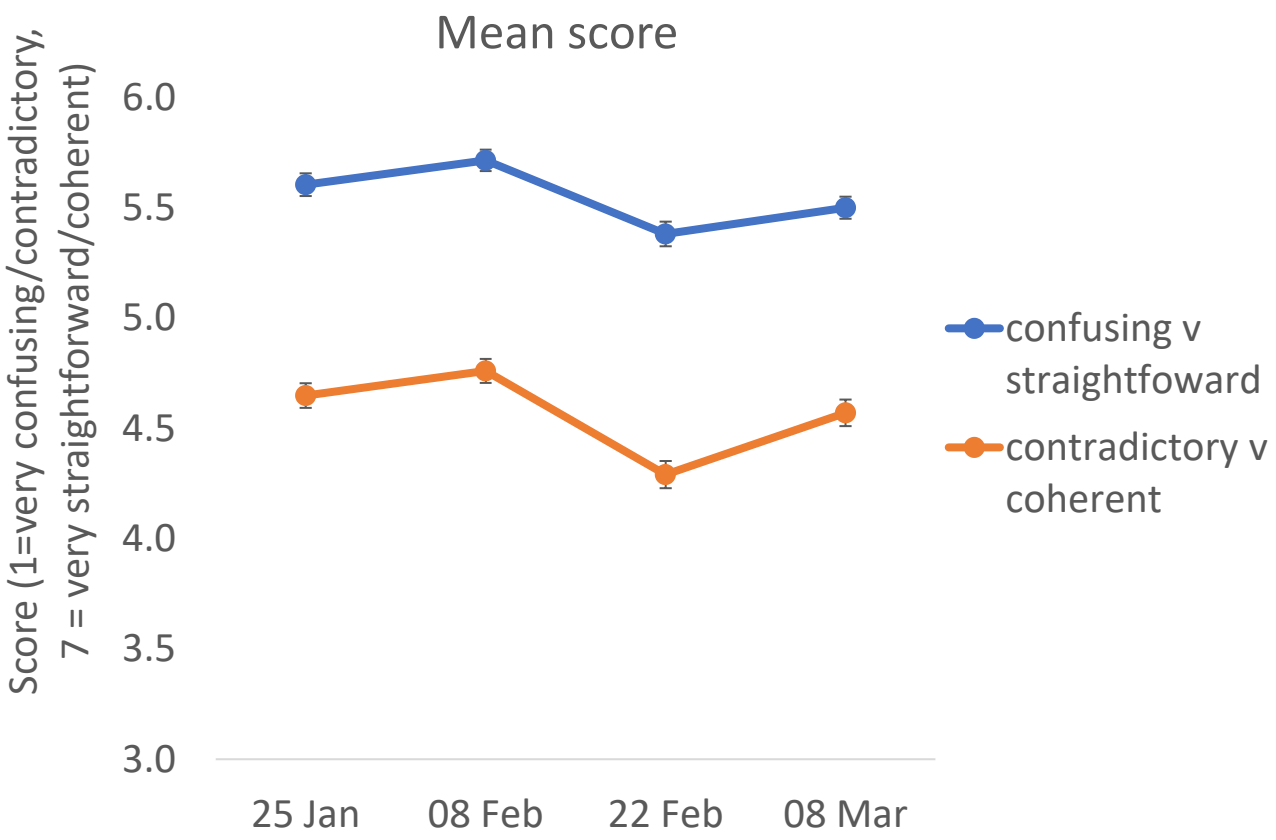




In statistical models that control for socio-demographic background and a range of psychological variables collected by SAM, an individual's level of worry in general about Covid-19 is the single strongest predictor of their behaviour. These charts categorise worry into four levels, which displays the strength of the effect.

Source: ESRI Social Activity Measure for the Department of the Taoiseach

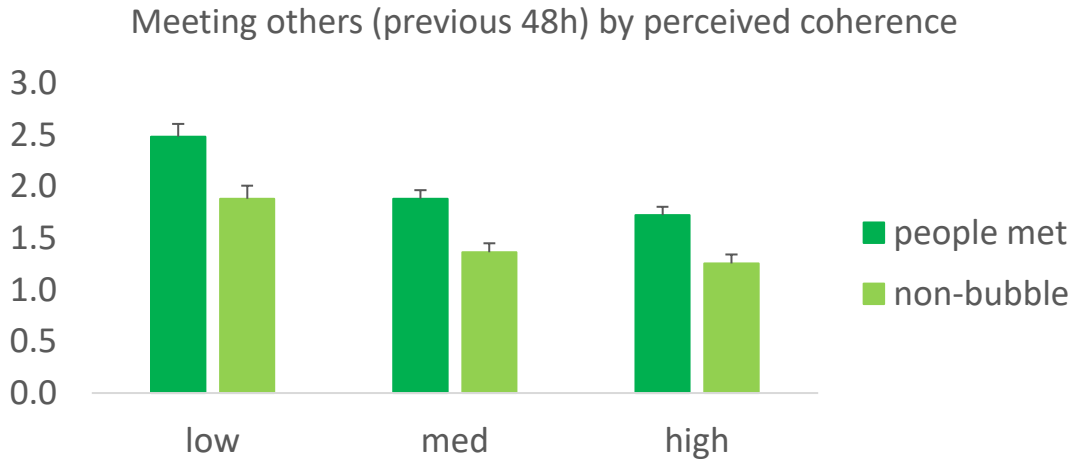
Perceptions of restrictions

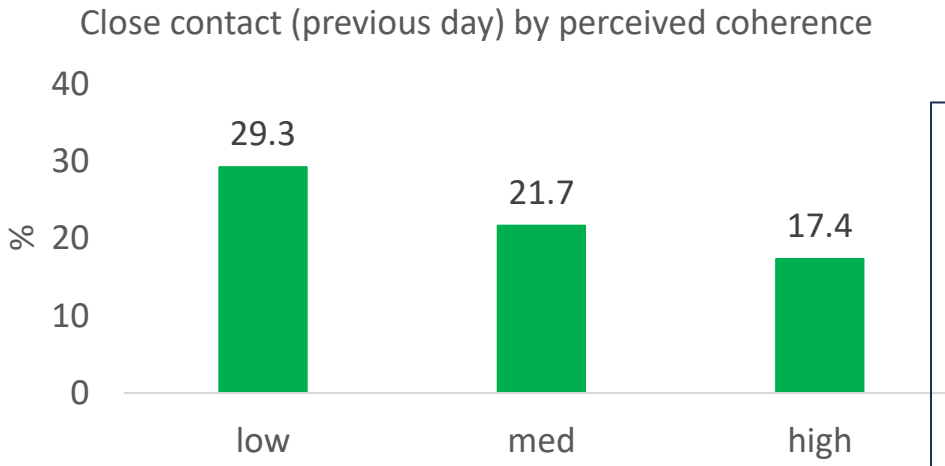


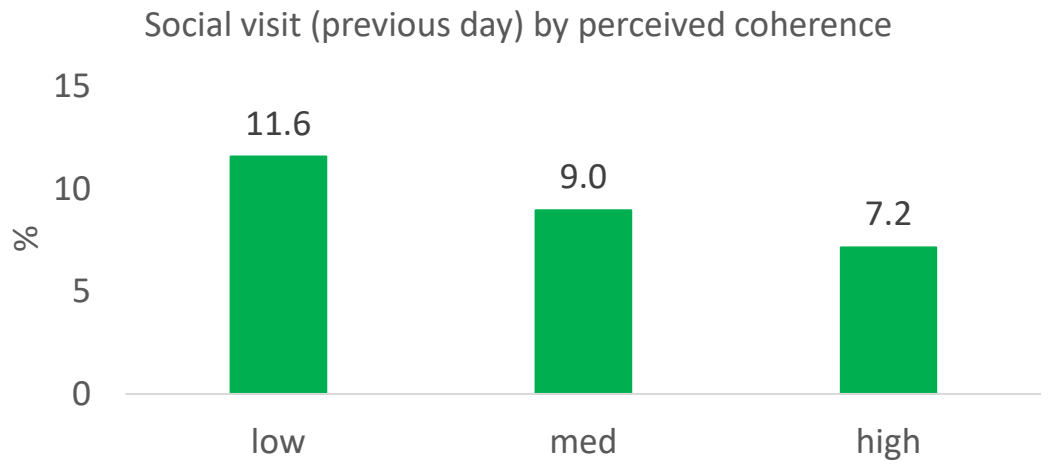
Respondents are asked to place the current restrictions on two scales. First, they rate how easy it is to understand what is allowed, from 1 (very straightforward) to 7 (very confusing). Second , they rate how much what is and is not allowed makes sense, as a set of restrictions, from 1 (contradictory) to 7 (coherent). Both scales produce average scores above the midpoint of 4. Scores fell at the time of the extension of Level 5 but have since mostly recovered.

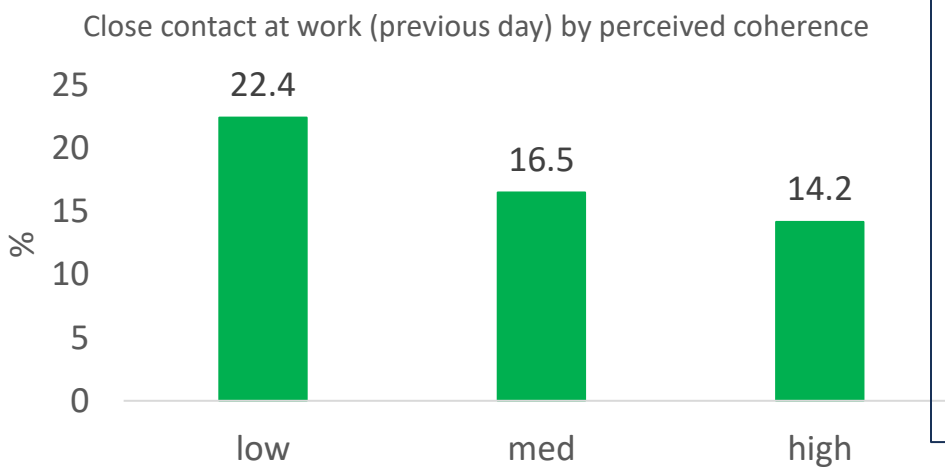
Source: ESRI Social Activity Measure for the Department of the Taoiseach

Perceptions of restrictions and behaviour





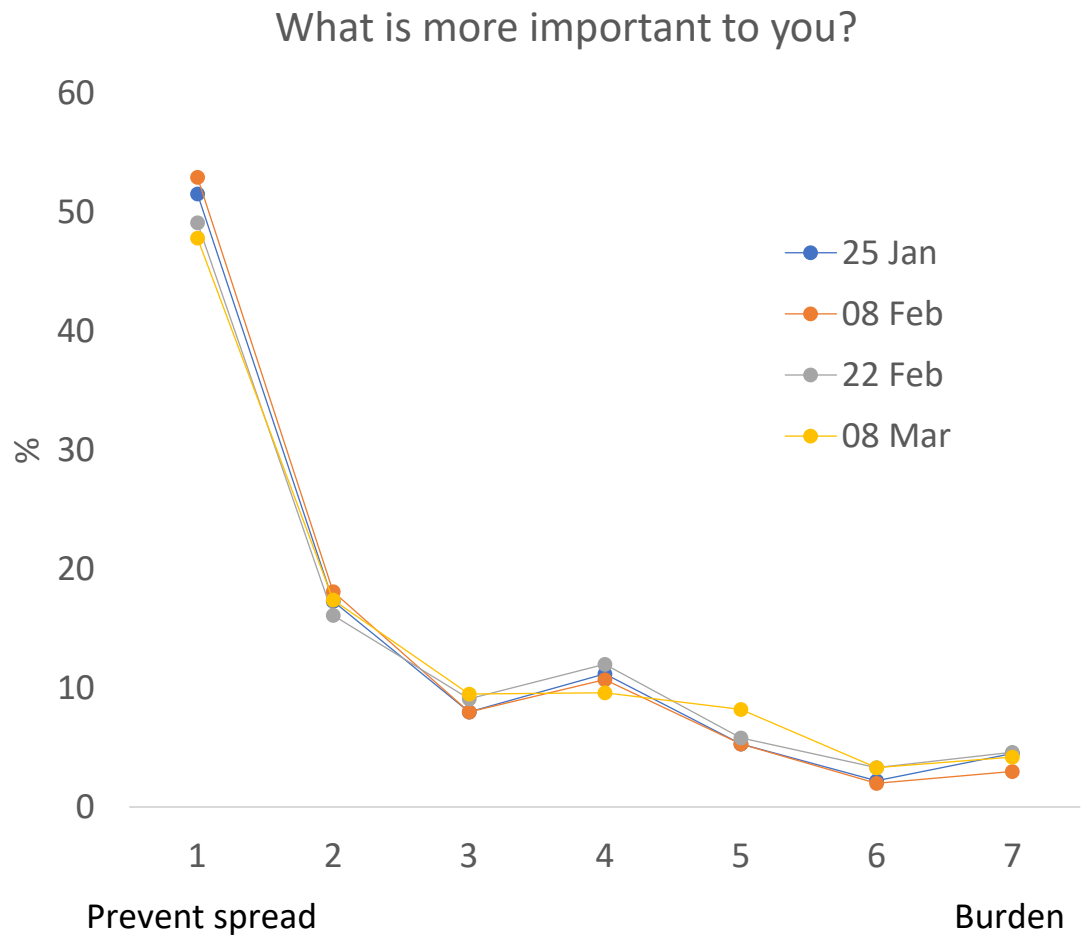


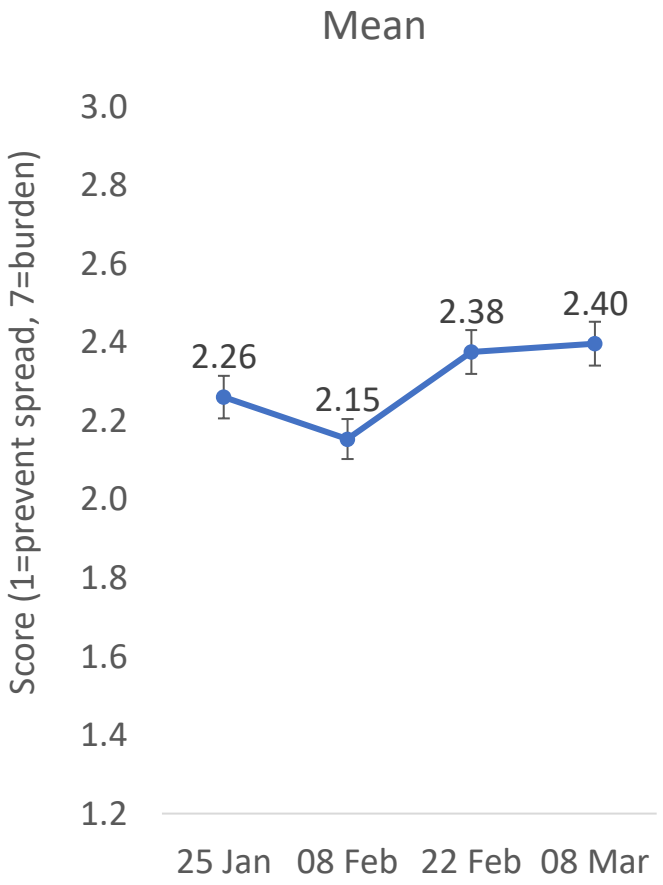


In statistical models that control for socio-demographic background and a range of psychological variables collected by SAM, whether an individual views current restrictions as coherent (versus contradictory) is a predictor of their behaviour. The charts categorise perceived coherence into three levels, which displays the strength of the effect.

Source: ESRI Social Activity Measure for the Department of the Taoiseach

Prevention-burden trade-off

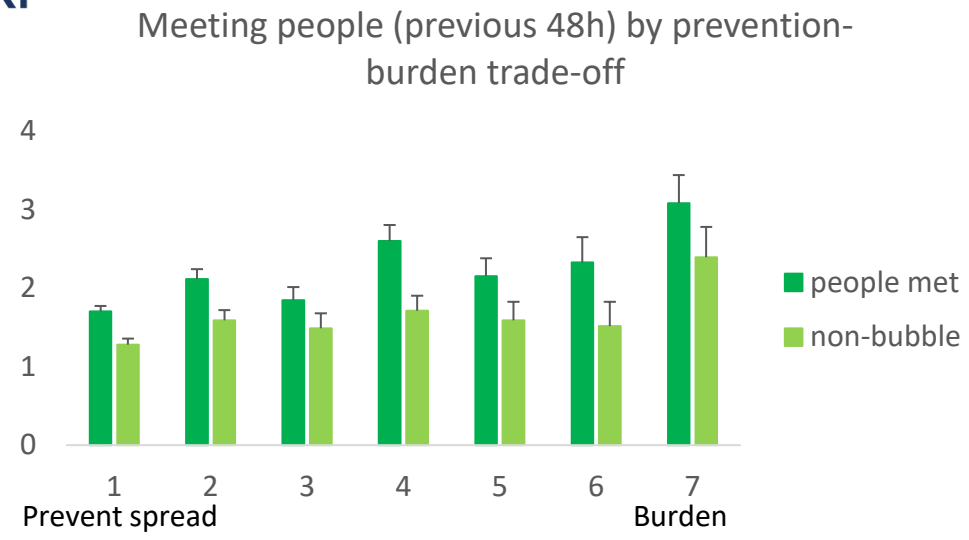


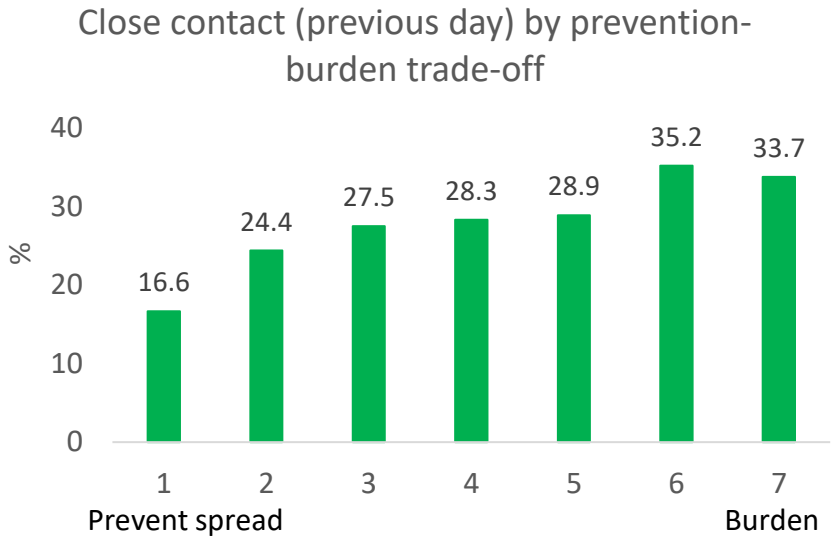


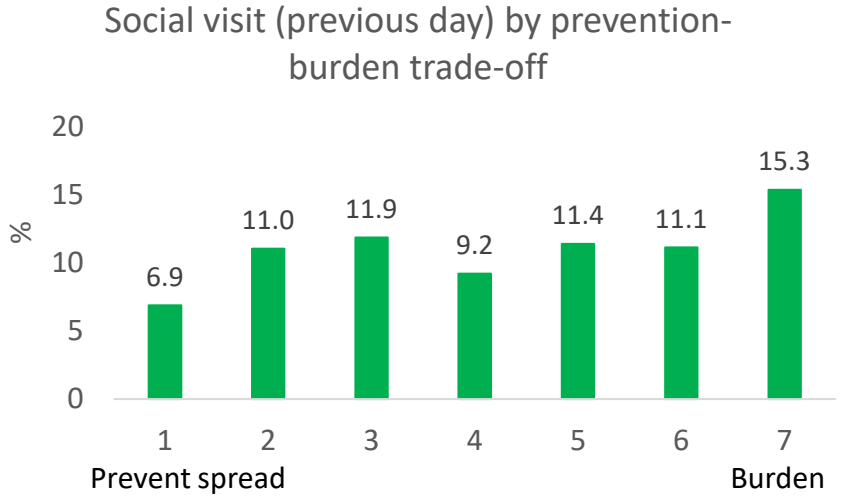
When asked directly which is more important, preventing the spread of Covid-19 or the burden of restrictions, at least 75% opt for the former in all four rounds of SAM. However, there has been a small but significant rightward shift in the distribution (yellow and grey lines) reflected in the higher mean.

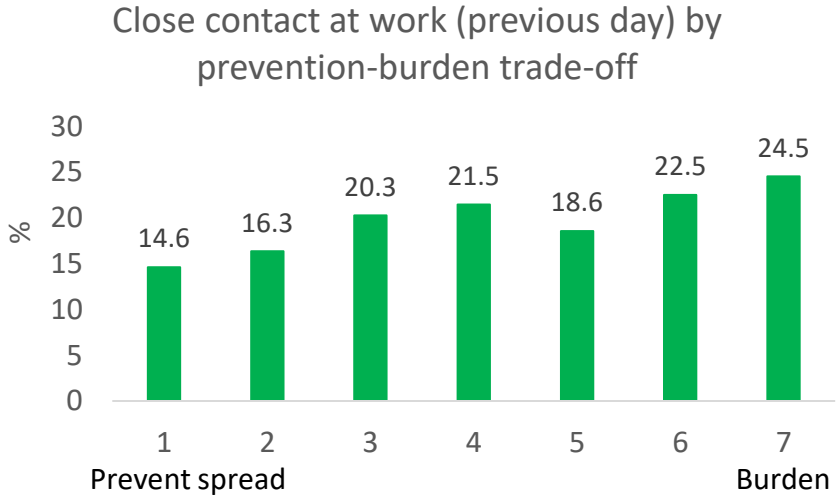
Source: ESRI Social Activity Measure for the Department of the Taoiseach

Prevention-burden trade-off and behaviour









In statistical models that control for socio-demographic background and a range of psychological variables collected by SAM, whether an individual views preventing the spread of Covid-19 or the burden of restrictions as more important is a predictor of their behaviour.

Source: ESRI Social Activity Measure for the Department of the Taoiseach

Other psychological variables tested

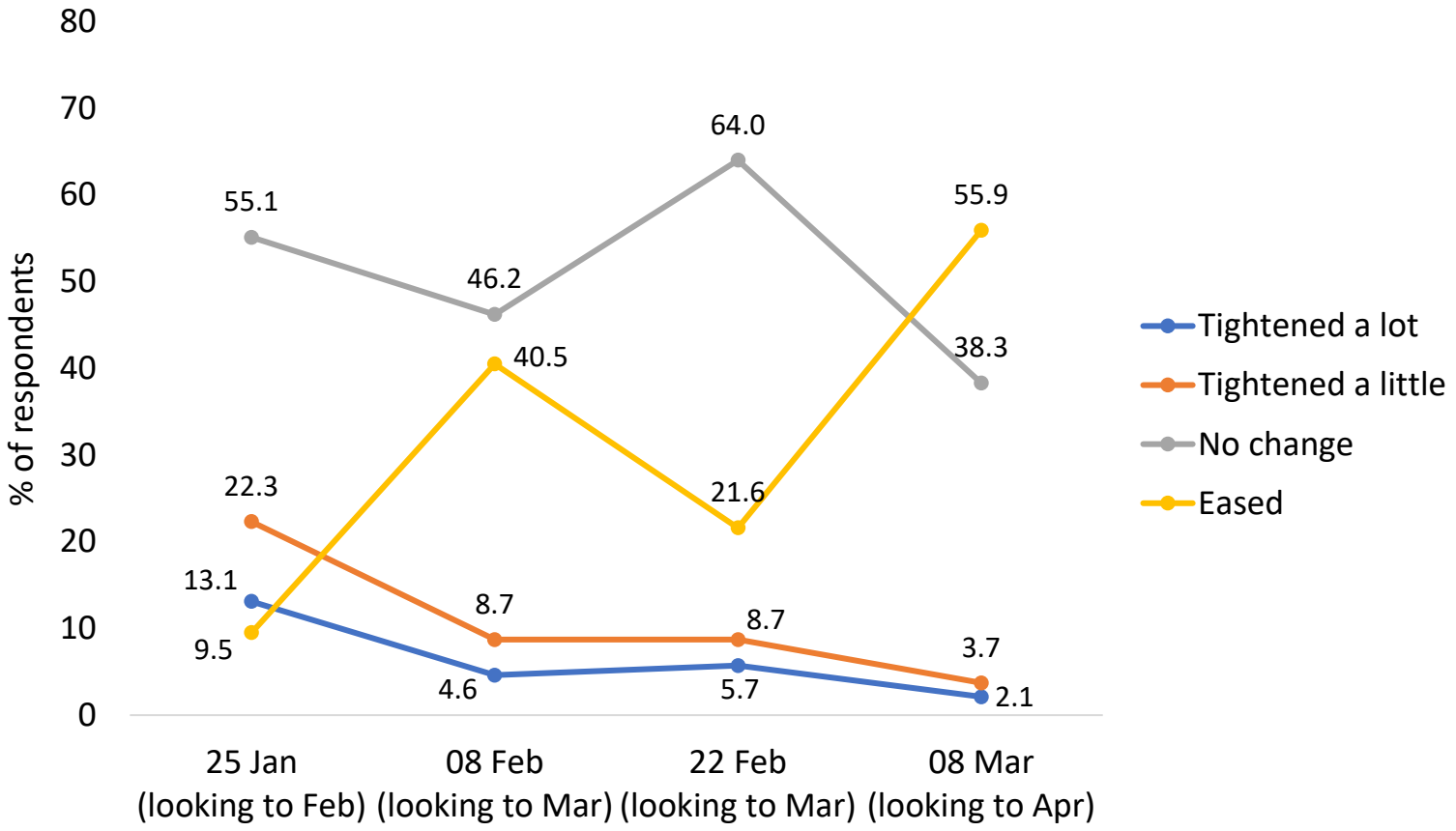
Variable	How measured?
Deterrence	Perceived likelihood of being caught and fined if breaking restrictions
Media coverage	How closely people say they are following the news
Confidence in Government	How confident people say they are in the Government's handling of the pandemic
Fatigue	How tiresome people say they find it to stick to restrictions
Ease of following restrictions	How straightforward v confusing people say they find the restrictions
Subjective understanding	How well people think they understand the risk associated with their behaviour
Objective understanding	The number of correct responses to 5 multiple choice questions about how Covid-19 spreads
Low subjective wellbeing	Based on how people rate their recent mental health and wellbeing

We tested the hypothesis that each of the variables listed determined: (i) how many people from other households an individual met, (ii) the likelihood they had a close contact (in general, at work, and in a home), (iii) the likelihood they engaged in a social visit. Once we control for people's level of worry, perceived coherence of restrictions, and prevention-burden trade-off, these other variables do not have clear statistically significant relationships with these behaviours.

NB. This does not mean that there is no relationship between these variables and behaviour, but it does imply that they are not strongly linked to behaviour once the three consistently predictive psychological variables are taken into account. Moreover, some effect may still emerge for larger samples.

Source: ESRI Social Activity Measure for the Department of the Taoiseach

Expectation for changes to restrictions in the following month

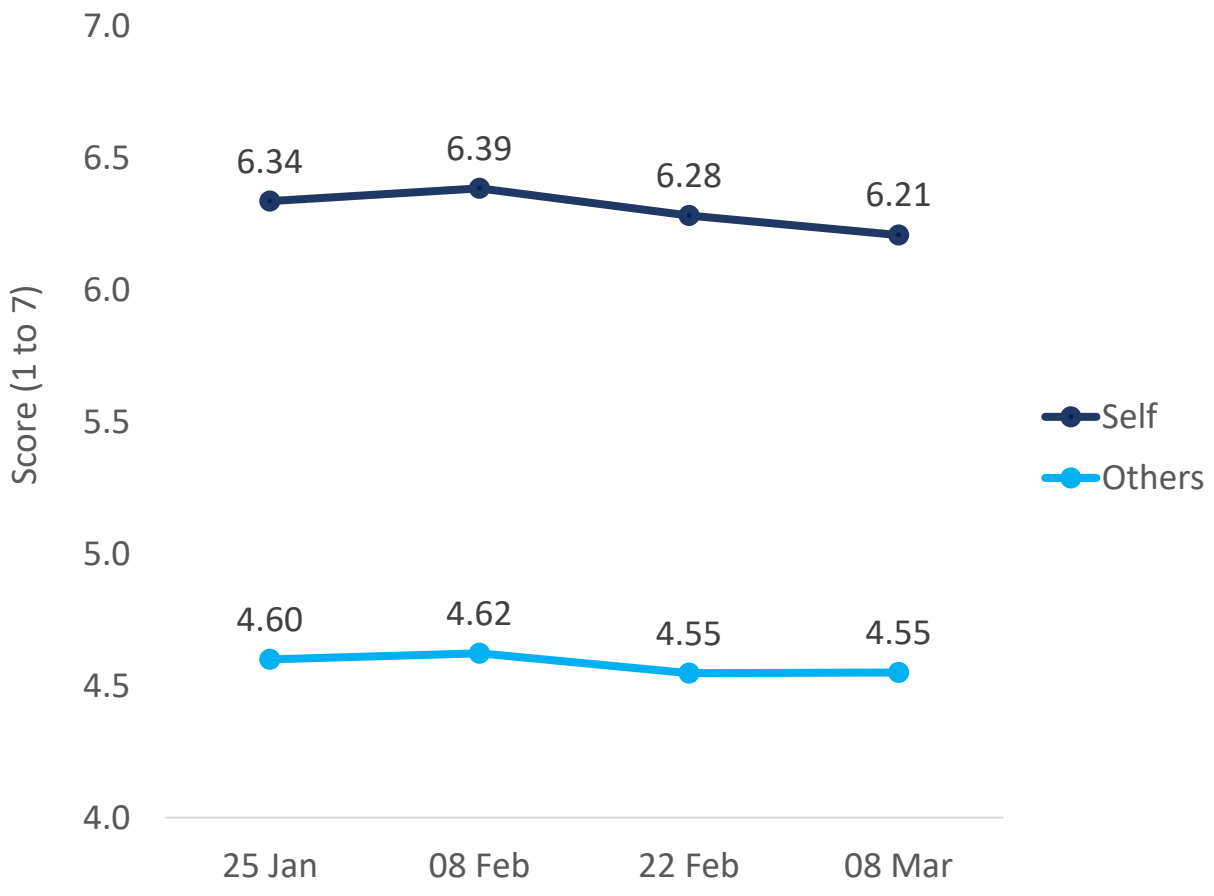


This chart needs to be read carefully, as the question changes slightly from round to round. The question relates to expectations for restrictions the following month.

During February, initial expectations among many that restrictions would be eased in March had fallen away by later in the month, as it became clear that Level 5 would be extended. In the 08 March wave, a majority expected restrictions to be eased in April.

Source: ESRI Social Activity Measure for the Department of the Taoiseach

Self-reported compliance

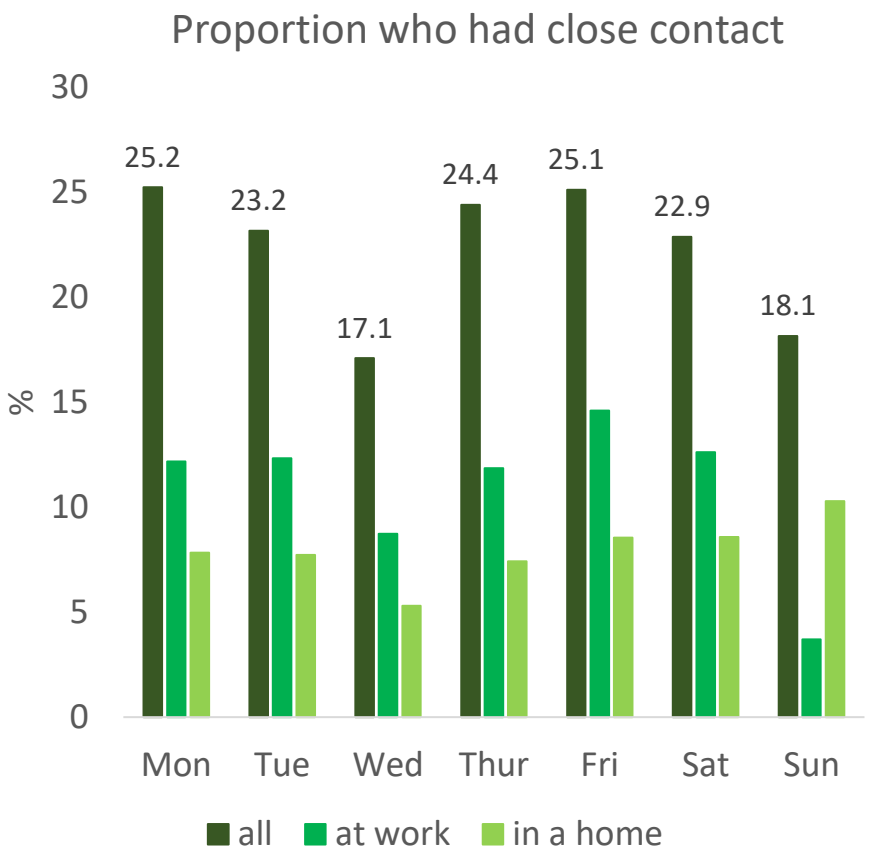


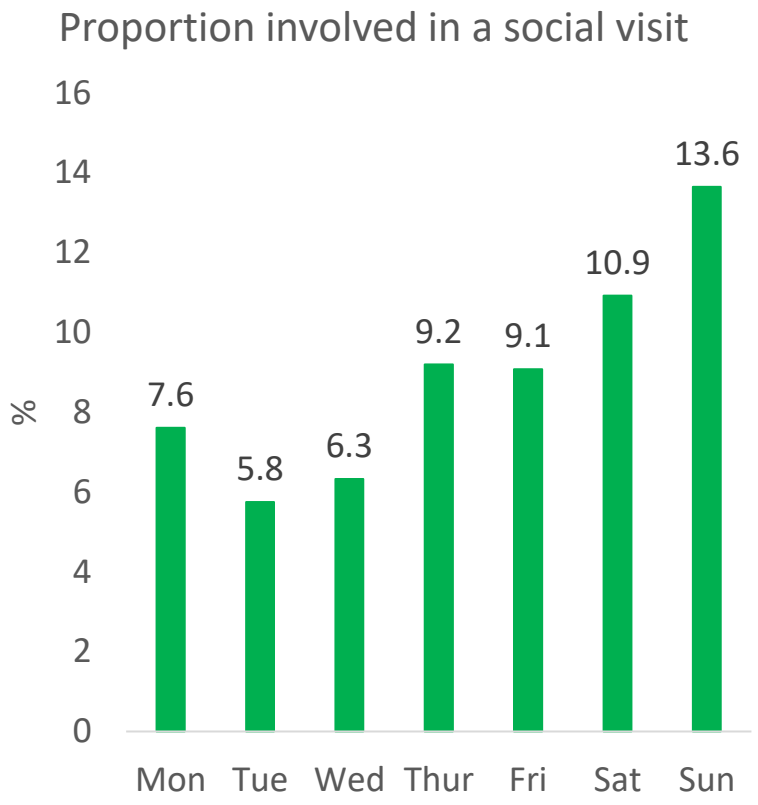
There was a further small decline in average self-reported compliance with Government recommendations to prevent the spread of Covid-19, although it remains high (>6 out of 7).

The very large majority of people believe that their own behaviour is more cautious and compliant than the behaviour of other people.

Source: ESRI Social Activity Measure for the Department of the Taoiseach

Behaviour by day of the week

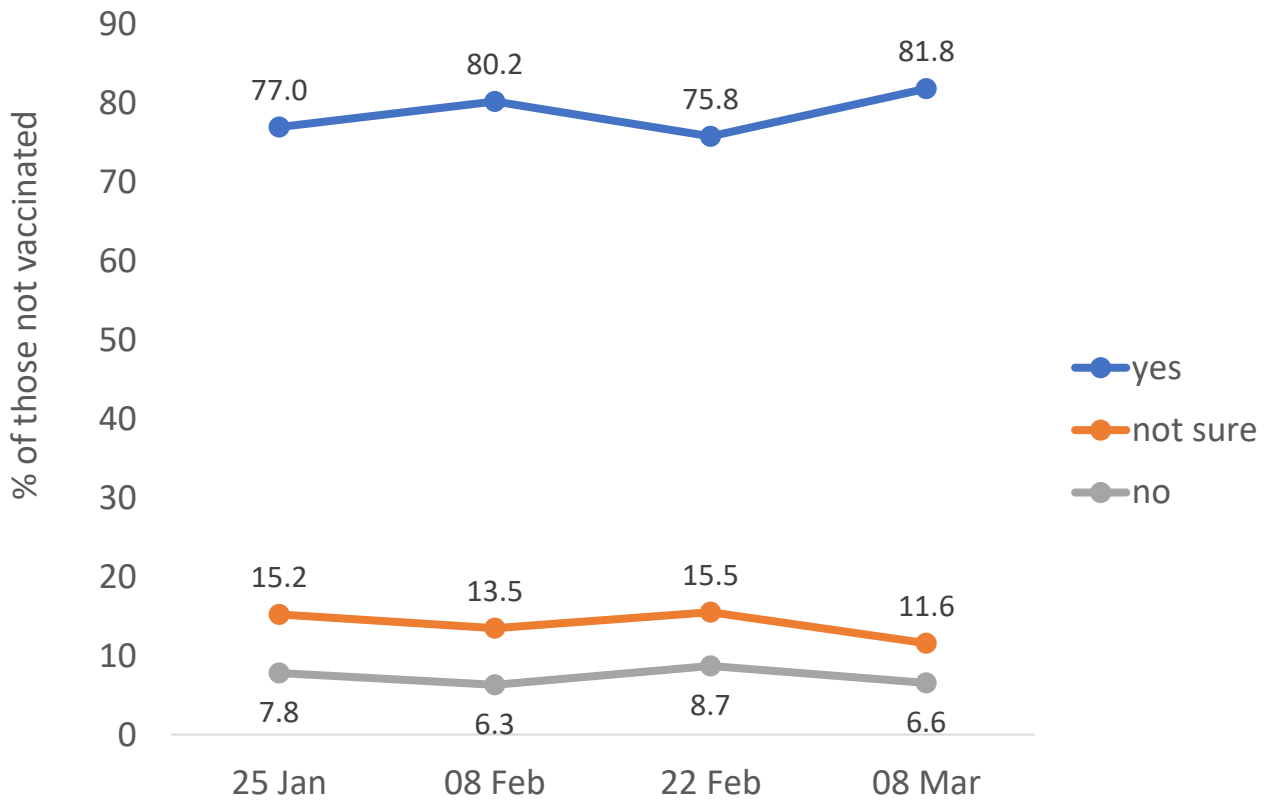




The likelihood of close contacts follows a pattern across the days of the week, reflecting a combination of work patterns and social activity.

Source: ESRI Social Activity Measure for the Department of the Taoiseach

Vaccine intention



Intention to take the vaccine when offered it reached its highest level recorded in the four rounds.

(Note: The large majority of data collection preceded media reports of worries that blood clots might be potentially linked to the Oxford-AstraZeneca vaccine.)

Source: ESRI Social Activity Measure for the Department of the Taoiseach