

Support you can **count on**

A guide to managing your finances during difficult times



In times of financial difficulty, worrying about how you'll manage to cover costs like rent or mortgage repayments and bills can significantly impact your mental and physical wellbeing.

But there are things you can do that may help and if you have any questions about financial planning, get in touch with your Financial Broker.

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1 Review your budget

A useful first step can be to look at how much you've got coming in and going out.

As well as making sure you're claiming what you're entitled to – including benefits, sick pay and tax relief – you may need to see if you can cut back on your outgoings. Depending on your spending and needs, that might not be easy as it could mean seeing if you can do without things you'd normally buy.

Some banks offer spending breakdowns by category on their apps or websites. Using this resource can be a easy way to track your expenses when creating or reviewing your budget.

2 Look over your household bills

It can be a good idea to review all your utility bills and see if you could get a better deal if you switched energy or broadband suppliers.

The Commission for the Regulation of Utilities (CRU) provides a list of accredited price comparison websites which enable you to find the best utilities supplier and offer available. In some cases, you may be able to switch supplier through the price comparison website. Switching is easy and it's also free.

To view the list on the CRU website, visit www.cru.ie/home/switching-supplier/price-comparison-websites

If you're experiencing difficulties paying your utility bills, you should contact your provider directly.

3 Assess any debts or loans

Debts that may have been affordable a few weeks ago could now be causing you to worry if your income has dropped or if it might do so in the near future.

If you're having trouble with loan repayments, you should contact your provider directly to talk through what options are available to you.

Credit Unions make decisions at a local level, so if you have concerns about meeting your loan repayments to a Credit Union, you should contact them directly.

You can also talk to the Money Advice and Budgeting Service (MABS), which offers information, advice and assistance to borrowers in arrears. Plus, MABS supports the Abhaile service. Abhaile is a free mortgage arrears support service. It provides a range of services to help anyone facing this situation to deal with it, including financial advice, legal advice and insolvency advice.

To find out more information on the Abhaile scheme, including contact details, visit: www.mabs.ie/en/abhaile/



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4 See if you can claim any benefits

For anyone who is struggling to make ends meet, claiming all the benefits you're entitled to can make a big difference.

If you have recently lost your job, you could be entitled to claim Jobseeker's Allowance or Jobseeker's Benefit, depending on how many PRSI contributions you have made.

To make a claim or find out more about the range of government supports available, visit the Department of Employment Affairs and Social Protection website, www.welfare.ie

5 Check if you're entitled to sick pay

In Ireland, there's no legal obligation for your employer to pay you while you're on sick leave, so sick pay entitlement depends on your contract and/or your employer's sick pay policy.

If you're not entitled to sick pay from your employer, you may still be entitled to claim Illness Benefit, a weekly payment to support you if you can't work in the short term due to illness. The rate is currently €203 a week. You're not entitled to this if you are self-employed or don't have the required number of PRSI contributions.

To make a claim or find out more, visit the Department of Employment Affairs and Social Protection website, www.welfare.ie

6 Look into tax relief possibilities

Remote workers may be able to claim tax relief from Revenue to help cover expenses incurred while working from home, such as heating, broadband and electricity costs.

Typically, utilities are used for both personal and work use, so the refund will be based on the portion of your overall expenses which relate to your time working from home.

Tax relief on medical expenses

If you pay taxes in Ireland, you can claim tax relief on qualifying medical expenses that aren't covered by either the State or health insurance. This includes prescriptions from doctors or dentists, and doctor and consultant fees. These can be your own health expenses, those of a family member or any individual's, as long as you paid for them.

You generally receive tax relief for health expenses at your standard rate of tax (20%). Nursing home expenses are given at your highest rate of tax (up to 40%). There is a time limit of four years with regards to claiming tax relief, which means you can only request claim refunds on medical expenses from the last four years.

Top tip: Download Revenue's Receipts Tracker App to keep track of your receipts for medical and other expenses. It's a free mobile app that you can use to upload images and details of your receipts to Revenue on the go.



How to claim tax relief

At the end of the year, you can complete the Income Tax return through 'My Account' on the Revenue website.

Revenue recommend that “all documentation relating to a claim should be retained for a period of six years from the end of the tax year to which the claim relates, as a claim may be selected for future examination.”

For more information, visit the Revenue website, www.revenue.ie

7 Spend less, save more

It's worth reviewing regular subscriptions, like gym memberships, that you may be able to freeze or cancel if you're not going to use them for a while.

The Money Advice and Budgeting Service recommends going through your bank statements to try to identify any unnecessary spending that could be mounting up on a monthly basis, like subscriptions for websites and apps you may have forgotten about. Just remember to check any terms and conditions beforehand to see what your options are and when (or if) you can make changes.

For more information, visit the Money Advice and Budgeting Service website, www.mabs.ie

If you have a subscription to a TV service provider and you feel you're not getting value from it, you can compare the different packages from your current provider and see if there's a cheaper package that suits you. You could also research other TV service providers in your area and compare the prices they offer. If you decide to switch provider, make sure to check the contract you have with your current provider, as there may be a cost incurred for leaving the contract early.

You could consider getting a free-to-air satellite dish and/or a Saorview set-top box. Free-to-air satellites will let you watch some satellite channels from Europe and the UK, and Saorview gives you free digital Irish channels.

Here are some tips which can help to save money when shopping for groceries:

- Shopping around is a good way to find out where has the lowest prices.
- Always check the unit price of whatever you're buying to work out what's the best value. Buying a different size may be better value, though it only makes sense to buy in bulk if you're going to use it up before the item goes off.
- Check what fruit and vegetables are in season, as they're usually cheaper. You can find information on what's in season on Bord Bia's website www.bordbia.ie/whats-in-season/
- Check the websites of supermarkets and shops to see what special offers are available. This way you can compare the deals of shops in your area, and choose what to buy and where, before you even leave the house.
- Signing up to supermarket loyalty programmes, where you build up points based on the money you spend and which can offer you discounts and vouchers, may help you to save money on your grocery shopping.

You might not be able to save much if your income has dropped, but if you're able to, it may be useful to try and build up a cash buffer for emergencies. If you're working from home rather than commuting to work, you'll be spending less on travel and possibly things like lunches and coffees – you could consider putting this money into a savings account so that it can add up over time.

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8 Don't panic about your investments

If you have a pension (or an investment product), try to not panic if you see the value going down.

It's important to remember that pensions are long-term investments – and it's normal for the value of investments to go up and down. While it might be tempting to move investments now, it could be worth taking more of a long-term view, depending on what stage of life you're at.

If you're thinking about switching anything or taking money out of your pension, you should speak to your Financial Broker who can help you consider your options.

9 Watch out for scams

Try to make sure you're aware of the different types of scams out there, how to recognise and report them, how to protect yourself and what to do if you think you've been the victim of a scam.

Recently, fraudsters claiming to be from the Department of Employment Affairs and Social Protection were calling people who lost their jobs to ask for bank details to process unemployment payments. However, the Department never requests bank details from its customers by phone or on social media, only accepting them as part of a written application.

Other recent scams asked people to click on links in emails purporting to contain public health information. However, when people clicked on those links, malware was released onto laptops or other devices to extract usernames and passwords for email accounts and bank accounts.

The Central Bank of Ireland and the Competition and Consumer Protection Commission had the following advice to bear in mind in order to protect yourself from scams:

- Scammers are sophisticated, opportunistic and will use many forms of media, for example, phone calls, SMS, emails, websites, social media and more.
- Never provide personal information about yourself, never provide your bank details and never agree to send money until you are satisfied that the company you are dealing with is authorised and genuine. Before giving any personal information, stop and think. Contact your service provider using the phone number on the official website. If in doubt, don't reply to SMS or emails.
- You should also be wary of unsolicited emails or messages claiming to come from your service provider asking you to update your payment information or to click a link to update your financial information. For example, you may get an email or text that claims to be from your bank, asking you to update your information or telling you there has been some unusual activity on your account. You may be asked for personal information relating to your account. This is a scam: your bank will never ask you for your details in this way.
- Always act carefully when engaging with websites, companies or individuals you're unfamiliar with. Research any website or company before buying anything and don't just rely on reviews from one website or forum, as they could be fake.
- Be aware of firms offering any financial services or products that appear too good to be true, like cash loans, money transfers, insurance products, pension products, investment opportunities and more.

10 Review your protection policies

Life insurance providers have measures in place to help customers during challenging times. Royal London's initiatives are:

100-day Reinstatement Period

Royal London offers a reinstatement period of up to 100 days on all policies except Multi-Claim Protection Cover (which has a 30-day period). This means that, in difficult times, customers can reinstate their policy within 100 days of missing a premium, without having to provide new medical evidence. This has been available on all new policies sold since September 2019. When the policy is reinstated, the outstanding premiums must be paid, and the policy will continue. If you have missed a premium and wish to discuss reinstatement options, get in touch.

Income Protection and Essential Activities Benefit

Royal London's Income Protection pays out in the event that you're unable to work due to illness or injury for a continuous period longer than your deferred period. It does not provide cover for redundancy but does include an Essential Activities Benefit. This is an annual benefit payable if you suffer from personal incapacity, in line with the policy conditions, while unemployed. The benefit amount is the lower of €15,000 a year and your Income Protection benefit amount. Your premiums will be reduced during this time to reflect any reduction to your full cover, as long as you let us know about your change in circumstance. If you return to work within 12 months of switching to our Essential Activities Benefit, you can reinstate your full cover without having to provide any new medical evidence.

Future savings to be made on life cover

Talking to a Financial Broker about which life cover policy best suits your needs can be a great way to make sure you're not overspending on insurance, as they have access to a variety of policies and providers. It's important to make sure that adequate financial protection is in place to cover you and your family, especially if your financial or personal circumstances have changed.

If you were a smoker when you took out your policy, and it's been more than a year since you last smoked or used nicotine replacement products, you may be able to avail of a reduction in your premiums.

Get in touch with your Financial Broker who can give you more information.



For anyone looking to reassess their finances and cut costs, having some tips on hand and knowing what you're entitled to can make a big difference.

It's important in difficult times to look after your physical and mental wellbeing, so being proactive about your finances if they're causing you any stress is an important part of keeping yourself safe and well. For more information on how to protect your finances, contact your Financial Broker.

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