ESC - SI response to the crisis relating to covid-19 in the socio-economic and labor sectors through social dialogue

SURVEY

The National Economic and Social Council (Ireland)

A) Measures with regard to workers in the formal and informal economy

A.1 Government Strategy for Addressing the COVID-19 Public Health Crisis

Following input from all relevant departments and key agencies the Cabinet Committee on COVID-19 published its National Action Plan on the 16 March. The main aims of this national plan are to:

- minimise the risk of people becoming unwell
- minimise the health, wellbeing and social impact for people who may be at greater risk; and to
- reduce the economic and social disruption associated with the COVID-19 outbreak

This plan has continued to be updated and adapted as the public health situation associated with the COVID-19 pandemic evolves. On 27 March 2020, the Irish Government instructed all citizens that they must stay at home in all circumstances except in the following circumstances:

- to travel to and from work where the work is considered an essential service;
- working in an essential shop, bank or post office;
- to buy food, medicines and other health products for yourself, your family or someone who is vulnerable;
- to attend medical appointments;
- for vital family reasons including caring for children, elderly or vulnerable people but excluding social family visits; and

- to exercise within 2 kilometres of your house. You cannot exercise with people from outside your household.

The Government has provided a full list of essential services and the full list of essential shops, post offices and banks.[1] On May 1 the Government published its Roadmap for Reopening Society and Business, setting out how the Covid-19 restrictions will be gradually lifted on phased basis. There are five phases within this plan.

A.2 COVID-19 Illness Benefit:

The waiting period for accessing state funded Illness Benefit has been abolished for workers who are absent from work because they have contracted the virus or they have been advised to self-isolate by a doctor or the Health Service Executive (HSE). Additionally the rate of payment has been increased to €350 per week to match that, which is available under the Pandemic Unemployment Payment (see section C.3.3). This Covid-19 enhanced illness benefit is available to both employees and the self-employed and there are no minimum threshold requirements that have to be met in order to qualify for this form of income support. This benefit will be paid for a maximum of ten weeks in cases where workers have been diagnosed with this illness while the maximum payment period in the case of self-isolation is two weeks. As with the Pandemic Unemployment Payment, the Government have striven to make the process of registering for this form of income support relatively quick and easy, including the option to register online.

A.3 Childcare for Healthcare Workers

Discussions are ongoing regarding putting in place childcare arrangements to meet the needs of employees working in the healthcare sector, given their importance in dealing with the health impacts of the pandemic.

B) Measures with regard to companies, in particular micro, small and medium-sized enterprises as the engine of employment

The extensive but necessary public health measures introduced to combat the COVID-19 pandemic have had an immediate and dramatic impact on economic activity within the state. In response to the sharp contraction in economic activity the government has provided additional funding to support the provision of a major programme of financial support for enterprises. This extensive policy package is comprised of both new initiatives and the adaption, repurposing and enhancement of specific existing business support schemes. This programme of action is designed to prevent short-term liquidity problems related to the suspension of economic activity morphing into longer-term solvency problems thereby mitigating potential longer-term economic damage (Department of Finance, 2020).

[1] https://www.gov.ie/en/publication/cf9b0d-new-public-health-measures-effective-now-to-prevent-further-spread-o/

B.1 The Strategic Banking Corporation of Ireland (SBCI)

The SBCI is a state-owned bank was established in 2015 to ensure that SMEs would have access to long-term patient capital. The SBCI provides funding through an on-lending model and its products are available through a range of both bank and non-bank financial institutions.

In seeking to respond to the serious liquidity challenges facing SMES the SBCI are to provide an additional €650m in loans for SMEs in all sectors of the economy who have been impacted by the pandemic. These products will be available from the following banks - AIB, the Bank of Ireland and the Ulster Bank.

- Firstly, €450m of essential liquidity support is to be provided through the SBCI COVID-19 Working Capital Loan Scheme. Under this scheme, SMEs can avail of loans of between €25,000 and €1.5m at a maximum interest rate of 4%. The loan terms on offer range from one to three years and loans can be unsecured for up to €500,000.

- Secondly, an additional €200m in COVID-19 funding has been allocated to the existing Future Growth Loan Scheme, to provide longer-term loans to COVID-19 impacted businesses. Loans of between €100,000 and €3 million are available with a term range of between 8 to 10 years. Loans of up to €500,000 can be unsecured and the maximum interest rate charged will be 4.5%.

B.2 Covid-19 Credit Guarantee Scheme

A new €2bn COVID-19 Credit Guarantee Scheme, which sees further development of the existing Credit Guarantee Scheme, has been announced. The key elements of this enhanced scheme are:

- The provision of an 80 per cent guarantee for loans to SMEs.
- The guarantee can be used for a wide range of lending products covering amounts of between €10,000 and €1m for terms of between 3 months and 6 years.
- Interest rates will be below current market rates.

It will be possible for non-bank financial institutions as well as the banks to participate in this scheme whereas the current Credit Guarantee scheme is limited to banks only. This scheme will be available to all SMEs in all sectors, including primary producers. Lenders will be subject to a portfolio cap of 50 per cent, which will reduce the contingent exposure to the Exchequer, meaning that the size of the scheme can be larger.

B.3 Microfinance Ireland COVID-19 Loans

Microfinance Ireland, have been allocated an additional €13m to bring its lending capacity up to €20m. The maximum amount that microenterprises can now borrow has been doubled from €25,000 to €50,000 and the interest rate for enterprises applying through the LEOS or the Local Development Companies has been substantially reduced from 7.8% to 4.5%. The rate for direct applications to MFI has also been reduced to 5.5%. Microenterprises can also avail of an initial six-month payment holiday and no interest will be charged in this period.

B.4 Restart Fund for Micro and Small Businesses

This new €250m Restart Fund is designed to provide targeted financial aid to micro and small enterprises that have been negatively impacted by the Covid-related economic contraction. In particular, this fund will provide direct financial aid to assist businesses in reconnecting with the market, employees and customers. Although the relevant government departments are still developing details of the Fund it is intended that it will operate through a system of rebates or waivers of commercial rates payments from 2019. Companies will be eligible to receive a total grant amount equivalent to no more than their 2019 rates bill and there will be a cap per business of €10,000.

B.5 Enterprise Development Agencies

In the first instance, it is important to note that the existing range of state supports for enterprises remain available to all eligible firms, and both Enterprise Ireland (EI) and the Local Enterprise Offices (LEOs) are actively promoting certain existing schemes as having the potential to assist SMEs respond to the particular challenges associated with the pandemic. Importantly, however, additional resources have also been provided to enable EI and the LEOs provide more tailored interventions through a combination of new schemes and the expansion and adaption of certain existing initiatives.[2]

B.5.1 Sustaining Enterprise Fund

Enterprise Ireland are to administer a new €180m Sustaining Enterprise Fund, approved under DG Competition's Temporary State Aid Framework and targeted at vulnerable but viable firms employing more than ten employees in the manufacturing and internationally traded services sectors.[3] Companies seeking to avail of this financial support must demonstrate that they have exhausted all other SBCI/bank options. Under this new fund, eligible companies can access a repayable advance of up to €800,000 that will assist them to stabilise and rebuild their business. In particular, the Sustaining Enterprise Fund will be used to support the implementation of a submitted and agreed Business Sustainment Project Plan, which will outline how the company will transition to stabilsation and then viability. A three-year grace period is available, with the funding to be repaid by the end of year five subject to the achievement of project objectives. An annual administration fee of 4 per cent will be charged.

A similar scheme has been introduced targeted at smaller firms in the manufacturing and internationally traded service sectors who have suffered, or be projected to suffer, a 15 per cent or more reduction in actual or projected turnover or profit as a result of the COVID-19

---

[2] See https://enterprise-ireland.com/en/About-Us/Services/Covid-19/Supports/Covid-19-Guide.pdf; https://www.localenterprise.ie/response/

[3] See https://www.enterprise-ireland.com/en/funding-supports/Company/Esetablish-SME-Funding/Sustaining-Enterprise-Fund.html

outbreak. The Sustaining Enterprise Fund for Small Enterprises aims to support eligible companies to implement a Business Continuity Project Plan. The main characteristics of this fund are:

- Repayable funding of up to €50,000 available for companies with annual turnover of €1.5m—€5m.
- Repayable funding of up to €25,000 available for companies with turnover of less than €1.5m.
- 3-year grace period and full repayment by end of year 5 on successful achievement of the project objectives.
- An annual administration fee of 4 per cent.

B. 5.2 On-Line Trading

Government funding for two schemes that support on-line trading has been increased from €2.3m to €19.8m. Firstly there is the €2,500 Trading Online Voucher Scheme for microenterprises (< ten employees). Changes have also been introduced to allow businesses who have already successfully used a voucher to apply for a second one. Secondly, EI are to administer a new COVID-19 Retail Online Scheme that aims to support indigenous retail enterprises with a pre-existing online presence achieve a step change in their online capability to secure business continuity, and lay the foundations for future recovery and growth.

B.5.3 Business Planning

A number of supports have been introduced to assist businesses plan for the future in the context of the current pandemic namely;

- The €5000 COVID-19 Business Financial Planning Grant.
- The Lean Business Continuity Voucher.
- The Business Continuity Voucher, for enterprises employing up to 50 people who are not currently clients of EI or Údarás na Gaeltachta.

B.5.4 Training and Learning

The LEOs have moved their networking, mentoring and training programmes online and are covering issues such as cash management in a crisis and leading your business through COVID-19. Enterprise Ireland have also signalled that their digital learning platform eiLearn will include customised content to assist enterprises in the current environment.

B.5.5 Equity Funding

Enterprise Ireland are also rolling out a new €750,000 Competitive Start Fund to provide equity financing for start-ups and scaling firms in the manufacturing and internationally traded services sectors. The maximum support available is €50,000 for a 10% ordinary equity stake in a company. This new Fund is in addition to the new €30m Seed and Venture Capital call for scaling and early stage firms under the Government's €175m Seed and Venture Capital Initiative.

B.5.6 Promoting Existing Supports:

It is important to note that the existing range of state business and advisory supports – information sharing, advisory, guidance and mentoring services; financial support; training provision and research activity remain available to all eligible firms. Indeed as was the case in responding to the issues posed by Brexit both EI and the LEOs are actively promoting certain existing schemes as having the potential to assist SMEs respond to the particular challenges associated with the COVID-19 pandemic.

In their recently developed "*Coronavirus Business Response Plan; Enterprise Ireland supports for business"* EI have, in addition to the aforementioned new or enhanced supports, also identified a number of their existing schemes and supports which they consider could potentially be of assistance to companies dealing with the current crisis (see Box A).

BOX A: Dealing with COVID-19: Existing EI Business Supports

- **Strategic Consultancy Grant**: contribution to the hiring of a consultant to work on the planning or implementation of a new strategic development initiative

- **Key Manager / PT Key Manager**: Grant to support the hiring of a key manager critical to the company's future development.

- **Agile Innovation Funds:** provides small companies operating in sectors characterised by rapid design cycles with much quicker access to funding to develop new products, processes and/or services.

- **Business Process Improvement Grant**: grant to support short-term company projects that are designed to develop management capability and drive company efficiencies and business process improvements.

- **Operational Excellence Offer:** enables internationally trading companies to undertake a transformational project designed to enhance their competitiveness.

- **Enterprise Ireland's Market Research Centre:** provides EI client companies access to market intelligence in the form of company, sector, market and/or country information.

Similarly, the LEOs have also highlighted the potential assistance that a number of their existing supports could provide to COVID-19 impacted businesses (see Box B).

Box B: **Dealing with COVID-19: Existing LEO Business Supports**

- **Lean for micros**: consultancy support to develop a continuous improvement project.
- **Business Priming Grant**: financial support for start-ups.
- **Business Expansion Grant**: financial support for businesses entering their growth phase.
- **Feasibility Study Grants:** financial support to undertake market research for a product or service.
- **Technical Assistance for Micro-Exporters Grant**: financial support to explore and develop new market opportunities.

B.6 Ireland Strategic Investment Fund—Pandemic Stabilisation and Recovery Fund

The Ireland Strategic Investment Fund (ISIF) is revising its current investment strategy in order to establish a new €2bn sub-portfolio, the Pandemic Stabilisation and Recovery Fund. Investment under this fund will be targeted at companies with an annual revenue of more than €50m or more than 250 employees and it will mirror the core elements of ISIF's existing commercial investment strategy:

- The fund will act as an accelerator, investing on a commercial basis in businesses that have the capacity to return to long-term viability.
- Investments can be across a range of instruments from senior debt, hybrid instruments to equity, and can be tailored to take account of the particular circumstances of each investee.
- ISIF will seek to maximise the additional capital that the investee business can access from its existing shareholders and banks, new co-investors and from European funding sources. Within its current investment strategy this approach has led to overall investment levels of three times ISIF's initial investment.

This new fund will complement ISIF's extensive work to date within its existing portfolio of over 100 investments of €2.7bn invested capital.

.

B.7 Tax-Related Support Measures

B.7.1 Tax Deferrals

The Revenue Commissioners are currently providing extensive guidance and advice to assist SMEs experiencing cash flow and trading difficulties arising from the Covid-19 pandemic. Additionally a number of specific tax measures have been introduced to directly support SMES in particular;

- the charging of interest on late payments is suspended for VAT and PAYE (Employers) liabilities for the period January to April;
- all debt enforcement activity has been suspended (dating back to 13/03/20); and
- current Tax Clearance status will remain in place for all businesses over the coming months.

These various tax deferrals have enabled businesses to retain 'cash' and serve as a direct and immediate form of liquidity support during the current crisis. Revenue are also prioritising the approval and processing of repayments and refunds due and have also indicated that they will be expediting payment of any instalment of excess R&D tax credit that is due to be paid in 2020. At the same time Revenue have stressed those businesses experiencing temporary cash flow difficulties should continue to send in tax returns on time, even where payment is not immediately possible.

B. 7.2 Revenue Warehousing of Tax Forbearance

Normally in instances where tax debt has accrued Revenue would work closely with a business to put in place arrangements, appropriate to the viability of the particular enterprise, to enable repayment over a reasonable timeframe. In the current circumstances it is recognised that many companies will not have the capacity to enter into such arrangements while also paying other creditors, and/or undertaking any necessary restructuring, building up stock etc. In this context Revenue have agreed to put in place arrangements to allow debt that cannot be paid during the COVID-related period, to be warehoused interest-free for a year from recommencement of trading, during which time there will be no debt enforcement action taken by Revenue in respect of the debt. Moreover, there will be no interest charge accruing in respect of the warehoused debt.

Prior to the expiry of the warehousing period, the business will be expected to engage with Revenue to reach an agreement on an exit strategy more suited to the specific business needs including continued viability. Businesses will qualify for a significantly reduced rate of interest of 3 per cent on outstanding debts on agreement of such arrangements. For continued qualification by businesses for these arrangements, it will be a prerequisite that the businesses remain compliant with all their return filing and tax payment obligations in respect of tax periods that postdate the periods covered by the warehoused debt.

B.8 Central Bank Prudential Policies:

In addition to the policy measures provided directly by the Government to support enterprises and individuals the Central Bank have reduced their Countercyclical Capital Buffer from 1% to 0%. This decision will free up bank capital that can be used to provide credit and restructure and/or extend the loans of bank customers (individuals and SMEs). It is estimated that this decision will free up in excess of €1 billion of bank capital. This capital amount has the potential to support approximately €13 billion of restructured lending to bank customers that need assistance.

B.9 Retail Banking

Following engagement with Ireland's five retail banks, the Government has announced a range of measures designed to provide support for bank customers (individuals and SMEs) affected by the fallout from COVID-19. These measures are:

- Flexible arrangements, including a payment break of up to six months for mortgages and other loans.
- Banks are adopting a customer-focused approach to businesses who are trying to manage the pressures arising from COVID-19 and are working to provide a range of supports including extension of credit lines, risk guarantees and trade finance.
- A deferral of up to six-months on loan repayments is also available.

Customers with rental property in which the tenants are adversely impacted by COVID-19 will also be provided with flexibility including an opportunity to seek a payment break of up to 3 months, which will allow them to exercise due levels of forbearance to their tenants

B.10 Commercial Rates Payment Break

From 27 March, commercial rates are being waived for a three-month period for businesses that have been forced to close due to public health requirements. The Government have committed to meeting the estimated €260m cost of this waiver in order to prevent reductions in local authority income.

B.11 Sectoral Supports

Bord Bía, the Irish Food Board, have also just announced a new package of supports to assist the food, drinks and horticulture sector deal with the challenges posed by the COVID-19 pandemic. This suite of resources will be multi-disciplinary in nature and includes a Covid Response Marketing Support Package; promotional activities; regular and tailored market intelligence reports; customised training; bespoke business mentoring and supply chain management and business planning services. Some of these supports will be offered within existing programmes such as Origin Green and the Quality Assurance Schemes. Others such at the €1m Covid Response Marketing Package and the bi-weekly market reports detailing supply and demand trends are new specialised services that have been put in place to address the specific challenges posed by the global pandemic.

B.12 Childcare Sector

Following the closure of all crèche facilities as part of the government measures to restrict the spread of the COVID 19 virus the Government have introduced a series of measures to support the childcare sector. These emergency measures, which will last for a period of 12 weeks from March 25, include:

- Revenue will reimburse childcare employers by 70% of their pre COVID-19 staff costs
- The Department of Children and Youth Affairs (DCYA) will reimburse childcare employers by 30% of their pre COVID-19 staff costs
- The DCYA will also provide funding equivalent to 15 per cent of staff costs towards childcare provider's overheads.

This targeted scheme is designed to ensure that childcare staff are retained during the pandemic and then are available to work immediately once restrictions in the sector are lifted or eased. Childcare providers availing of this enhanced support scheme have to agree to forego the payment of parental fees for the twelve weeks of this scheme.

C) Measures with regard to the economy to mitigate the bad impacts on employment

The Government have responded swiftly in seeking to mitigate the negative employment impacts of the pandemic through the introduction of:

- The Temporary COVID 19 Wage Subsidy Scheme (TWSS) and
- The COVID-19 Pandemic Unemployment Payment (PUP)

C.1 Temporary COVID 19 Wage Subsidy Scheme (TWSS)

The Temporary COVID-19 Wage Subsidy Scheme, established by *The Emergency Measures in the Public Interest (COVID-19) Act (27/03/20),* seeks to protect employment and support enterprise and employees by providing a wage subsidy that will allow employers to continue to pay their employees during the current pandemic.

When it was first introduced eligible employers could avail of a refund of up to 70% of an employee's wages (to a maximum of €410 per week). A lower subsidy of €350 per week was to be paid to anyone whose average net pay was more than €586 per week, while those whose average net pay was more than €960 per week receive no subsidy.

Subsequently on 15 April 2020, the Government introduced a number of changes to the TWSS.[4] In introducing the aforementioned changes to the TWSS, the Minister for Finance recognised that given the speed with which the initiative was developed it was not surprising that anomalies had emerged as it was rolled out. The main changes to the scheme are

- The subsidy for employees with a previous average take home pay below €412 per week has been increased from 70% to 85%.
- The subsidy for employees with a previous average take home pay between €412 and €500 will be €350 per week.
- The subsidy for employees with a previous take home pay between €500 and €568 per week will remain the same.
- A tiered subsidy system has been introduced for employees with a previous take home pay of over €568 per week, and
- Employees who were taking home more than €960 per week previously will now be able to avail of the scheme under this tiered system.

This wage subsidy scheme was originally due to run for 12 weeks from the 26 March 2020, however it has now been extended to the end of August. During this period, employers are encouraged to provide a top-up to this subsidy to maintain as close to 100 per cent of an employee's normal income as possible. This payment replaces the Department of Employment Affairs and Social Protection's Employer Refund Scheme announced on 15 March, and any business that received refunds under the current scheme do not need to reapply.

The scheme is available to employers from all sectors (excluding the public service and non-commercial semi-state sector) provided they meet the following qualifying criteria:

- Employees must remain on the payroll;
- The enterprise must be experiencing significant negative economic disruption due to COVID-19 and must be able to demonstrate a minimum of a 25% decline in turnover; and
- be unable to pay normal wages and normal outgoings fully

The development and implementation of this temporary wage subsidy scheme represents an unprecedented level of state intervention in the labour market to support enterprises and protect employment. Although such schemes are a feature of other member states, for example Germany and the Netherlands this is an innovative departure in an Irish context.

There are examples of state schemes that have been used previously to assist viable but vulnerable firms, and in particular support the maintenance of employment. The Enterprise Stabilisation Fund (ESF) was introduced in 2009 to assist vulnerable but viable internationally trading companies to survive the economic downturn associated with the global financial crisis. By the time of is closure in 2015, the fund had supported 9,500 jobs and the majority of the companies that were assisted are still trading. Secondly, there is also the Department

[4] https://www.gov.ie/en/news/c3e1eb-minister-donohoe-announces-update-to-the-temporary-wage-subsidy-sche/

of Employment and Social Protection's existing Short-Time Work Support Scheme (STWSS).[5] The potential scale of state intervention and support associated with the TWSS however is unparalleled in an Irish context. As of the 25 May 56,300 employers had signed up to the TWSS and approximately 482,800 employees were receiving a state subsidy.[6]

The introduction of this wage subsidy scheme has been strongly endorsed by both the major labour market representative bodies. IBEC have described the TWSS as a critical component to ensure the sustainability of our business model during the crisis and for our reboot and recovery.[7] Similarly, the ICTU see the scheme as an essential intervention and have strongly endorsed both the measure and swiftness with which it was introduced.[8] Both IBEC and the ICTU have also welcomed the recent changes that were made to the scheme.

C.2 COVID-19 Pandemic Unemployment Payment (PUP)

The Government has also introduced the COVID-19 Pandemic Unemployment Payment, a non-means tested social welfare payment of €350 per week for employees and self-employed people who have lost all of their employment due to the COVID-19 pandemic. When this income support scheme was first introduced in mid-march, the rate of payment was €203, which is equal to the standard jobseekers allowance. A later government decision subsequently increased the payment available to the current level of €350. When it was first introduced this initiative was due to last for just twelve weeks, however the Government have recently extended this to the middle of August 2020.

Aside from being non-means tested there are also no minimum threshold requirements related to earnings or social insurance contributions that have to be met in order to secure this payment. Rather the primary qualifying criteria is that the individual was in employment or self-employment prior to the 13th of March and that they lost their job (permanently or temporarily) or trading income because of the COVID-19 public health emergency. The use of an on-line application facility and user-friendly documentation has made the registration process relatively quick and easy for individuals. Additional staff have also been redeployed to the task of processing claims and payments to ensure that eligible individuals receive their payments quickly. In part, the recent changes to the TWSS outlined above were introduced to address situations where employees may be financially better off becoming unemployed rather than remaining in employment. Although it was important to address this potential anomaly, it should be noted that there was no evidence that this was a widespread problem. The DEASP have indicated that since the 16th of March they have processed 625,000 applications for the PUP or a jobseekers payment which is

[5] See https://www.gov.ie/en/service/c20e1b-short-time-work-support/

[6] https://www.irishtimes.com/news/ireland/irish-news/numbers-getting-covid-19-jobless-payment-down-to-589-000-1.4250362

[7] https://www.ibec.ie/connect-and-learn/media/2020/03/27/all-stakeholders-must-show-leadership-to-help-limit-wave-of-redundancy

[8] https://www.ictu.ie/press/2020/03/24/congress-welcomes-temporary-wage-subsidy-scheme-an/

the equivalent of three years of claims in the space of a month. As of May 25, approximately 579,400 people were receiving the pandemic unemployment payment.

As was discussed in section A) the Government have also introduced an enhanced COVID-19 Illness benefit. Initial modelling work undertaken by Beirne et al., (2020) indicates that the Government's measures should significantly cushion incomes from COVID-19 related job losses.[9]

C.3 Teleworking:

Since 27 March 2020, the Irish Government has instructed all citizens that they must stay at home in all circumstances unless they meet certain criteria, which includes;

- to travel to and from work where the work is considered an essential service.
- working in an essential shop, bank or post office.

Under the Roadmap for Reopening Society and Economy the Government have adopted a risk-based approach with regards to economic activity (work) in which they emphasis that remote working should continue to be maintained for all workers and businesses that can do as we move through the different phases of the lockdown.

Although there are no official statistics available, it is evident that there has been an increased recourse to teleworking and/or remote working as a means of maintaining public services and business activity.[10] For the civil and public service the Department of Public Expenditure and Reform have produced a guidance document in relation to working arrangements and temporary assignments across the public service during the crisis.[11] This document provides information on the flexible working arrangements that can be adopted to facilitate a continuation of work in the civil and public service during the crisis.

C.4 Political Proposals for the Revival of Economic Activity

On May 1 the Government published its Roadmap for Reopening Society and Business, settting out how the Covid-19 restrictions will be gradually lifted on phased basis. There are five phases within this plan and Ireland is currently in phase 2.

[9] https://www.esri.ie/publications/the-potential-costs-and-distributional-effect-of-covid-19-related-unemployment-in

[10] See A. Prendergast "Will the Covid-19 crisis alter the landscape of remote working" https://www.irn.ie/article/25654

[11] https://www.gov.ie/en/news/092fff-update-on-working-arrangements-and-leave-associated-with-covid-19-fo/

D) Advocacy for the optimal use of social dialogue in response to the Covid-19 crisis: transparency, share information and data, inclusion, consultation, mutual trust

The National Economic and Social Council are not currently formally working on the formulation of responses to the COVID-19 crisis. The NESC secretariat are however continuing to provide analytical support to the policy system as required.

In designing and implementing both the Temporary COVID 19 Wage Subsidy Scheme (TWSS) and COVID 19 Illness benefit the Government engaged in intensive peak level discussions with both IBEC and the ICTU. Both IBEC and the ICTU have been supportive of these measures and have actively encouraged employers and employees to participate in the TWSS in particular.[12] Policy makers have continued to engage with the social partners on relevant labour market issues and indeed input from them would appear to have been influential in bringing about the changes to the TWSS that were designed to improve its effectiveness. [13] The social partners separately continue to advocate for the adoption of various economic and social measures to address both the short and medium term consequences of this public health crisis.

The Return to Work Safely Protocol, which as published on 9 May is the result of a collaborative effort by the Health and Safety Authority (HSA), the Health Services Executive (HSE), the Department of Health and the Department of Business, Enterprise and Innovation.[14] This protocol was developed following discussion and agreement with the social partners – ICTU, IBEC and the CIF –in the context of Labour and Employer Economic Forum (LEEF). This protocol is designed to support employers and workers to adapt their workplace procedures and practices to comply fully with the COVID-19 related public health protection measures identified as necessary by the HSE. A high-level consultative forum comprised of representatives from various bodies with responsibility for health and safety at work and public health is to be established under the aegis of the LEEF, to facilitate ongoing national level engagement on implementation issues in the light of evolving public health advice and other factors. The national protocol envisages the development of sector-specific protocols that will build on rather than replace the national protocol, while outlining specific arrangements for the sector in question. A Return to Work protocol for the construction sector has been agreed between the Construction Industry Federation and three unions that comprise the Trade Union Federation.

In seeking to respond to the current national public health crisis the Health Service Executive (HSE) have introduced changes to policies and procedures covered by existing sectoral

---

[12] https://www.ibec.ie/connect-and-learn/media/2020/03/27/all-stakeholders-must-show-leadership-to-help-limit-wave-of-redundancy; https://www.ictu.ie/press/2020/03/24/congress-welcomes-temporary-wage-subsidy-scheme-an/

[13] https://www.ictu.ie/press/2020/04/15/removing-wage-subsidy-anomalies-for-low-and-middle/; https://www.ibec.ie/connect-and-learn/media/2020/04/15/business-welcomes-announcement-on-wage-subsidy-scheme

[14] https://www.gov.ie/en/publication/22829a-return-to-work-safely-protocol/

agreements. This process has been premised on ongoing consultation with the relevant trade unions over critical staffing and other industrial relations issues.[15] The trades union while articulating the importance of cooperating with such changes given the seriousness of the public health crisis have also stated that there should be sustained engagement particularly in relation to operational issues. An example of this engagement was the agreement of a Revised Redeployment Policy covering workers in the health sector.

E) Ensure the continuity of the work of the ESC-SIs: planning and implementation of internal activities (health, safety at work, working conditions, IT services, teleworking, job protection, etc.) to covid-19 and its consequences.

Prior to the formal announcement by the Government of restrictions on individuals, outside of essential services, going to their places of work the NESC had developed and began to implement key elements of a business contingency plan that was designed to enable it to continue to undertake its work if and when such measures were introduced. The NESC had continued to carry out its work during this crisis including publishing agreed Council Reports and secretariat papers.

Practically all of the NESC staff are now working remotely from home in accordance with current public health measures. To facilitate this staff, as part of the aforementioned contingency plan, were provided with the appropriate IT equipment, training and administrative and technical support to enable them to continue carrying out their work in an effective and safe manner. Staff remain in regular contact with each other on work issues and there is ongoing administrative and technical support available.

---

[15] See https://www.irn.ie/article/25634