

An Taoiseach, Micheál Martin TD,
Government Buildings,
Merrion Street,
Dublin 2

Wednesday, 24th March 2021

Re: From April 5th Business requires clarity and momentum

Dear Taoiseach,

I write to you in advance of the Government's deliberations on reviewing the restrictions under the National Covid Plan. The current measures impact upon a large swathe of businesses through ongoing restrictions on construction, the experience economy including retail deemed to be non-essential, food and drink services, hospitality, international travel and office-based work.

Ibec represents over 70% of the private sector workforce and we continue to see the dire consequences the prolonged shut down is causing business owners and their workforce, as well as the cost and effort many of them have undertaken to adapt to ensure the safety of their communities. This situation, that has mainly impacted our indigenous sectors, must now be addressed by Government beyond financial supports.

The business community has stood foursquare behind the Government and the health system since the end of December with the onset of the pervasive nature of the UK variant of the virus. The caution shown to bring the virus under control from this third wave has been shared across our society. We are now however at a point where there is a need to reconstitute the Government's default philosophy of "an abundance of caution". This must be replaced with "appropriate caution" in restoring critical economic activity that has been suppressed for a full quarter.

Opening businesses in a controlled manner is a shared objective. Given the vaccination rollout, the seasonal change and the capacity utilisation of the State's critical care, testing and quarantine systems, it is an imperative to continue the momentum of reopening activities like construction and click & collect retailing from April 5th.

There is ample empirical evidence from other countries to draw upon as we progress and, as a globalised, open economy, we need to be able to provide more clarity as to when critical international business travel might be allowed. The coordination of efforts to restore free movement of people at an EU level to begin with along with the introduction of a Digital Green Certificate is crucial. A framework for travel related and workplace testing is important. Evidence internationally shows that antigen testing is an important element in national testing strategies and the absence of its widespread provision in Ireland is a serious concern for businesses.

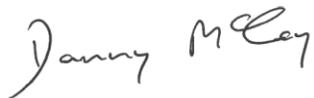
The curtailment of construction activity since the start of the year has severely hindered delivery of housing and other key investments which will have significant long-term social consequences. Momentum must be recovered as quickly as possible. Commitment and clarity on what reopening will be facilitated as the vaccination milestones are reached in a concentrated timeframe, is the expectation of businesses. It is an expectation that aligns with appropriate caution and one that is necessary. The scale of unemployment, the pressure on the fiscal budget and the wellbeing of the workforce requires these concerns to be given greater weight and due attention than understandably has been the case in the first quarter of this year.

Ibec calls on Government to take the following approach:

- Provide clarity as to what vaccination progress means for greater economic activity including a sequential easing of restrictions from April 5th.
- Provide business advance notice of being allowed re-open to allow adequate lead time for them to activate supply chains and set up properly e.g. large scale construction sites.
- Communicate the Government economic strategy with the same frequency as the weekly NPHET communications.
- Prioritise the reopening of construction and click & collect for non-essential retail.
- Commit to a phased reopening of society and the economy at intervals of no longer than three weeks.
- Implement a regional approach where COVID numbers are low to allow for economic activity to take place in those areas.
- Address international business travel needs particularly distinguishing the essential nature of the commercial related travel.
- Introduce a Digital Green Certificate for travel showing Covid related status.
- Undertake widespread national antigen testing, which along with PCR testing be part of the toolkit to tackle who is infectious as opposed to just determining who has been infected.
- Ensure the importance of the Return to Office ambition is not lost given the scale of the workforce involved and milestones for reopening explicitly integrated into the vaccination progress plan.

Business now requires focus, clarity, and above all momentum from Government on the economic crisis to match its commendable public health focus. Government must prioritise economic survival and lay a pathway to a stable business environment within a Covid world for the benefit of Irish business and society at large and this needs to be accomplished in the coming days.

Yours sincerely,



Danny McCoy
CEO
Ibec

CC: Leo Varadkar TD, Tánaiste and Minister for Enterprise, Trade and Employment
Eamon Ryan TD, Minister for Climate Action, Communications, Environment and Transport
Stephen Donnelly TD, Minister for Health
Paschal Donohoe TD, Minister for Finance
Michael McGrath TD, Minister for Public Expenditure and Reform
Martin Fraser, Secretary General, Department of An Taoiseach
Orlaigh Quinn, Secretary General, Department of Enterprise, Trade and Employment
Mark Griffin, Secretary General, Department of Climate Action, Communications & Environment
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Robert Watt, Secretary General, Department of Health
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