

26 April 2021

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

By email

Re: National Covid Framework must reflect current situation and business realities

Dear Taoiseach,

I am writing in relation to the key issues which business believes should be addressed as part of the upcoming Review of the Covid-19 Resilience and Recovery 2021: The Path Ahead process.

Ibec has received extensive input from our members on these issues over recent weeks. We believe that the priorities outlined here strike the correct balance between the ongoing public health risks and the need to address the escalating economic crisis along with other societal issues, such as the alarming rise in mental health concerns being observed by employers and associated with the lengthy lockdown.

It is clear that the understanding, and indeed credibility, of the Five Levels set out in the Covid Framework need to be reset to reflect the situation of summer 2021, not the conditions encountered last summer when originally devised. Keeping businesses in Level 5, when circumstances have considerably improved, is both undermining confidence and the sense of equity as society moves ahead of the guidance.

On the street, substantial social movement has returned and this is likely to grow as we move towards the summer period. It is vital that Government now adjusts the Framework significantly in order to reflect the risk reduction which the vaccine programme is delivering and also to provide safe and controlled environments for both social and economic activity.

The asks of business for this week's review are as follows:

1. Reopening of more businesses
2. Provide clarity for businesses on the reopening timetable for the coming months
3. Take material steps to address mental health risks for those working from home
4. Address the significant constraints emerging in relation to public transport.

Reopening of more businesses

Further sectors of the economy should be reopened fully from May 4th.

All construction activity should resume, which would support the return to work of about 50,000 employees. Personal services like hairdressing and gyms should be opened.

The retail sector has consistently demonstrated its capacity to support safe operating since the very start of the Covid crisis. Government has previously acknowledged the main reason for the closure of non-essential retail was to limit movement in public spaces. Given the trends of recent weeks, that logic no longer holds, and all non-essential retail and personal services should now be fully reopened. The change in season for clothing and footwear demand also requires that retailers should be given the opportunity to trade equally with other jurisdictions and retail channels.

Mass outdoor gatherings in public spaces are now commonplace. These are occurring in largely unregulated and unsupervised circumstances. In order to provide safer and properly controlled settings for social gatherings, the return of outdoor hospitality must be supported with preparation time begun immediately for opening up early May. Vague sentiments about the summer will be outdoors is not a plan. Businesses in the hospitality economy need dates and trigger points in moving to phased openings to plan and retain hope of saving their enterprises.

Provide clarity on the reopening timetable

The Experience Economy covers businesses across many sectors and industries, employing in excess of 330,000 people. These livelihoods and the businesses in which they operate now need clear milestones to both prepare for and begin reopening, not just in the short-term in outdoor settings but also fully operational in the context of increasing vaccination levels and competition from other jurisdictions. This includes a return to inter county travel by the start of June.

Take material steps to address mental health risks for those working at home

I also want to address the mental health impacts of the extended period of home working and isolation which large cohorts of workers have now experienced for over a year. Many of our members are reporting employee mental health issues as the single biggest challenge facing their organisations. Younger workers, in particular, are suffering significant mental health issues which will have long-term implications for society and the public health system. Government needs to recognise the scale of the mental health crisis now emerging and take concrete steps to support a partial and gradual return to office work in a way that enables employers to address cases of most acute isolation risk.

Address the significant public transport constraints

Following the successful full return of secondary schools and greater movement for social and economic reasons, pressures are emerging on public transport capacity. The next phase of reopening will see further increases in the demand for public transport and this reality should be reflected in the provision of additional services, where possible, and an increase in the capacity limit to 50% from the start of May.

Exemptions for subject matter expert workers from mandatory hotel quarantine

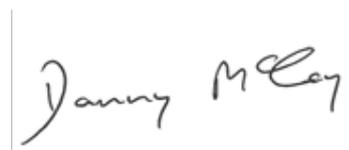
I again want to raise with you the concerns of many organisations which have been impacted by the extension of the mandatory hotel quarantine regime. Our members are reporting significant challenges in acquiring essential repair and maintenance skills from overseas. I have previously outlined the full range of challenges for essential business activity which the hotel quarantine regime is causing, and again request your urgent attention to this issue.

Clarity and communication

Finally, I would ask that Government considers further how it can ensure greater certainty and improved information and lead times surrounding the next phases of reopening. Clearer communication on the link between the vaccination milestones - supported by data and targets - and the reopening of the remaining sectors of the economy, would greatly help those businesses which require significant lead times to ensure a safe and well managed reopening.

I wish colleagues and you well with the important decisions ahead and trust that the feedback from business can help inform and guide these.

Yours sincerely



Danny McCoy
CEO

cc: Government Cabinet Ministers

Leo Varadkar	Tánaiste and Minister for Enterprise, Trade and Employment
Eamon Ryan	Minister for Transport and Minister for the Environment, Climate and Communications
Paschal Donohoe	Minister for Finance
Michael McGrath	Minister for Public Expenditure and Reform
Simon Coveney	Minister for Foreign Affairs and Defence
Norma Foley	Minister for Education
Roderic O'Gorman	Minister for Children, Disability, Equality and Integration
Charlie McConalogue	Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine
Helen McEntee	Minister for Justice
Heather Humphreys	Minister for Social Protection, Community and Rural Development and the Islands
Darragh O'Brien	Minister for Housing, Local Government and Heritage
Catherine Martin	Minister for Media, Tourism, Art, Culture, Sports and the Gaeltacht
Stephen Donnelly	Minister for Health
Simon Harris	Minister for Higher Education, Innovation and Science

Cc: Departmental Secretary Generals
Special Advisers.