

STAYING SAFE

Restarting the Northern Ireland
Economy Post-Covid 19

Introduction

The measures that have been taken to date have changed our economy beyond recognition. In order to tackle the Covid-19 pandemic in a sustainable way, we need to have in place a framework for adjusting our economic activity to meet the challenges entailed in controlling the spread of the virus. This will be an on-going process and we need to ensure that our businesses and our workers are well informed about how we intend to manage these developments and the implications they have for public policy.

The COVID-19 pandemic is primarily a public health crisis and in responding to it, the **number one priority should also be the protection of lives** and responding to it will require everyone taking action to protect lives and prevent a second wave of the pandemic.

We all acknowledge that we want to get people back to work in a safe and sustainable way. On that basis, the sub-group of the Engagement Forum has devised some advisory principles and the basis for an indicative roadmap to restarting our economy.

The paper establishes agreed general provisions and principles which build on existing work of the Engagement Forum on both a workplace safety guide and good practice and a list of priority sectors. The work also draws from good practice in the UK, Ireland and elsewhere but made relevant to our unique local environment. The paper is not intended to provide the full detail, that will require the input of government here and in the UK.

The paper also establishes some 'asks' of both the Executive and the UK Government depending on who has the devolved or retained responsibility.

Different sectors of the economy, employers working in collaboration with their workers and unions can and should be invited to work with Government to develop a bespoke plan for their sector and populate the table below. Their intimate knowledge and understanding of real life issues and processes is a valuable source of information for policy makers which should be used to ensure they successfully and safe exit from this public health and economic emergency.

Overall we feel that any restart should be grounded in the following approach.

Action should be gradual, as measures will be lifted in different steps and sufficient time should be left between the steps, as the effect of their lifting can only be measured against criteria derived from health and science as we learn more over time.

Safe alternatives should replace existing general prohibitive measures, this will enable targeting risk sources while facilitating the gradual return of necessary economic activities (e.g. intensified and regular cleaning and disinfection of transport hubs and vehicles, shops and workplaces, instead of entirely prohibiting services, and provision of adequate measures or equipment to protect workers or customers).

The re-start of the economic activity should be **signposted and phased in**, thus ensuring that authorities and businesses can adequately adjust to increasing activities in a safe way. There are several models (jobs with low interpersonal contact, jobs suitable for teleworking, economic importance, shifts of workers, etc.), but not all the population should go back to the workplace at the same time, with an initial focus on less endangered groups and sectors that are essential to facilitate economic activity (e.g. transport).

As **social distancing** will likely remain largely in place, teleworking should continue to be encouraged. At the work place, safety rules imposed by the pandemic continue to be observed as per the Advisory Guide (A Practical Guide to Making Workplaces Safer)

Guiding Principles to restarting our economy

Scheduled – The employer will work to an indicative timetable regarding the phased approach to providing goods and services and what that will look like in the interim as an initial phased return with an eventual view to business as normal but not to a date based timetable but rather to a criteria compliance based approach. (See phasing and table below)

Compassion – Employers should be fully aware of the concerns of staff being asked to return to work and will deal with questions, concerns, perceptions and so on in an understanding and compassionate manner.

Communication – The process (the why and the how) of getting back to work will be communicated, discussed and consulted over with staff and/or their trade union or other employee representatives. General measures should progressively be replaced by targeted ones. This would allow the business community to gradually go back to normality, while continuing to protect the population from the virus.

Continuity – Employers will strive to maintain continuity of provision of products and services having due regard for things such as phased return, incremental increasing of production, greater levels of footfall, greater levels of public interaction and adhering to health and safety in a Covid 19 context and continue engagement to ensure input, identify supply and value chain disruptions and short lines of communication.

Safe – The employer will give all necessary assurances to staff that the business complies with the requirements of health and safety legislation and the NI Executive's Advisory Guide – Coronavirus – Working Through This Together (A Practical Guide to Making Workplaces Safer)

Staggered – The employer will operate in a manner that will allow for core principles on matters such as: appropriate PPE, screening, hand hygiene and social distancing to be addressed via a staggered approach to work/production methods.

Shared – Employees and customers alike share a responsibility along with employers to ensure that the work environment and customer experience is a not simply a matter of policy but also responsible practice in adhering to the requirements of the advisory guide as a baseline minimum and anything over and above that the employer requires as a work safety measure.

How do we restart our economy?

The COVID-19 pandemic is primarily a public health crisis and in responding to it, the **number one priority should also be the protection of lives** and responding to it will require everyone taking action to protect lives and prevent a second wave of the pandemic.

Across the globe, COVID-19 pandemic has had a significant impact on economic and community life, and this is likely to be sustained for a prolonged period. The government has

a critical role in restarting our economy and providing much needed confidence to the general public. Other jurisdictions can provide valuable lessons on “what works well and why” in a variety of contexts such as contact tracing. The Republic of Ireland has recently published its Roadmap for Reopening Society and Business and addresses issues such as – over-riding principles, public health framework and sequence of actions to re-open the economy.

As government begin the process of restarting our economy in line with public health guidelines it is critical that we have clear messaging and a coherent plan which businesses, workers and the general public can have confidence in. If we are to see a phased and gradual restart, then these phases must be clearly explained and effectively communicated by government. Honest dialogue between government, social partners and the general public is vital to building confidence in this process. There must clarity regarding the timings of phases and obligations that will apply to everyone. A clear roadmap will provide the necessary cohesion to ensure that as we begin to restart our economy, we do not undo the gains that we have so far made in the fight against Covid-19.

We believe some of the key actions that are required by government to continue to protect lives and in order to release parts of our economy in a staged approach include:

- Decentralised and expansive mass testing (frontline outwards), and isolation and systematic contact tracing of cases while protecting privacy
- Assistance for vulnerable groups will may need to remain shielded for an extended period
- Clarity on required PPE. We know that there are statutory obligations regarding PPE already in place in many sectors across the economy. Government must be clear in its advice regarding the use of PPE where it relates to statutory obligations and where it relates to discretionary recommendations. There must be a level playing field across sectors with regard to any additional obligations.
- Timely messaging on PPE. If, for example, it will be a requirement for staff to wear any sort of PPE to work, it will be necessary to make businesses aware of this ideally several weeks in advance so that orders can be placed, and enough stock acquired.
- Possible use of app based tracing systems which could augment manual tracing and potentially scale up existing processes.
- Clear and consistent messaging to public that reflect the “stage” of the pandemic and “nudge” marketing to ensure mass discipline of social distancing and use of PPE.
- Build resilience and stress test for the potential risk of a second wave of COVID-19. Ensure emergency protocols are robust and PPE is available
- Ensure sufficient notice is given of the intention to ease restrictions so that businesses can start to place orders with their suppliers and ramp up their production, complete deep cleaning of work areas etc.

With the above mitigations in place, then we can begin to ease some of the restrictions of the hard lockdown and move to a phase of a “Soft lockdown”. The below table articulates the phased stages to re-opening our economy and in the event of a second wave of the pandemic, we can upgrade or downgrade to the 3 stages depending on the severity of the outbreak.

Stage	COMMUNICATION	INDIVIDUALS	HOSPITALITY/ ENTERTAINMENT	TRANSPORT	RETAIL	OTHER BUSINESS
Hard Lockdown (current state)	Stay Home Protect Lives Save the NHS	Only leave home for frontline, key or priority sector workers, exercise, medical need or essential supplies	Closed except for takeaway service	Essential transport	Food & other essential retailers are the only stores that remain open.	Only priority business to be done on-site. All businesses comply with the Emergency Health & Safety protocol All other businesses encouraged to work remotely or access the JRS
Soft Lockdown	Stay Home or Work Safely to Protect Lives and Save the NHS	Work if workplace complies with emergency H&S protocol, contact tracing, use of appropriate PPE, otherwise only leave home as for Hard Lockdown. Over-70's as those in "shielded" group continue per Hard Lockdown	Partially open with capacity limits to ensure social distancing. Patrons and staff encouraged to use appropriate PPE	Private transport, public transport with social distancing for passengers and appropriate PPE for staff	Social distancing enabled, entry to shops limited, patrons and staff to have access PPE as appropriate	Remote working or JRS strongly encouraged to continue for all businesses who are not currently on the priority list. Where remote working is not viable: Business can open if they can fully comply with H&S emergency protocol, PPE for staff.

Soft Open	Safety Measures (work, shopping, travelling via transport or going to restaurants) will protect lives and the NHS	Public gatherings < 50 allowed, travel to low-risk countries allowed	Open, patrons encouraged to continue social distancing practices	Private transport, public transport with social distancing for passengers and appropriate PPE for staff	Social distancing enabled, entry to shops limited, patrons and staff to have access to PPE as appropriate	<p>Businesses with staff over 50 people should consider a staggered open with 50% of workers continuing to work remotely and 50% on-site. The workplace environment should comply with the emergency Health & Safety protocol</p> <p>Where remote working is not viable: Business can open if they can fully comply with H&S emergency protocol, PPE for staff.</p>

How do we support a restart of our economy?

It will be some time before businesses are able to trade anywhere near normally – supply chains will take time to gear up, and consumer demand is likely to return slowly and unpredictably according to evidence from businesses with operations in markets that are ahead of the UK in terms of easing restrictions.

We must ensure that, as we reopen sectors of our economy, we are cognisant of the supply chains that operate at the heart of our economy. This interdependence must be reflected in both constructing phases and in their sequencing. This is equally important for workers especially where the closure of schools and childcare facilities may limit the ability to return to work.

It is vital that while businesses' income remains weak, their costs do not spike overnight once restrictions are eased. Both the NI and UK governments have put in place very encouraging and welcome business assistance measures during the crisis, and our additional recommendations include:

1. Allow for 'tapering' of financial support measures so that costs can continue to be partially covered while businesses ramp up to full capacity. For example, while the decision to extend the UK Government's Covid Job Retention Scheme to the end of June was welcome, given that the speed and extent of the recovery in consumer demand will be uncertain for some time to come, government should remain open to further extension or flexibility to ensure redundancies do not result.
2. Financial supports also need to give firms the flexibility to bring their workforce back in phases and to short-time work schemes that may be necessary to allow firms to return to production without compromising worker or public safety.
3. Supports need to be put in place to allow workers to self-isolate without experiencing lost income. We must ensure that there is no financial penalty to workers and firms that act decisively to contain infection.
4. Grants should be available to sectors that are disproportionately impacted by the lockdown measures and are experiencing dramatic reductions in revenues (support scheme to this effect currently in place in Wales).
5. It would be unfair to tax businesses compelled to close so interventions such as business rates holidays should continue.
6. Publicly funded clients should continue established Departments of Finance practices regarding the timely payment of suppliers.
7. As well as support for restart, there is a need to ensure significant resources are available to rebuild.

Concerns and Disputes

Communication and consultation with employees and their trade union or other representatives can pre-empt difficulties. Employers and employees have the common interests of staying safe and remaining in business and as such there should be open, calm and constructive dialogue on how to resolve problems in a calm and structured way.

Sometimes this will be owner to a small number of staff directly or it may involve forming a dedicated workplace forum, for addressing issues before they become a problem.

Dialogue should be structured around shared interests and mutual benefit for employers and employees alike and be underpinned by core principles as safety first, ideas for improvement, and resolving conflict by dialogue first.

Working in this uncertain environment is uncharted territory for everyone but concerns or disputes are reasonably foreseeable especially around matters such as –

- PPE provision/perceptions of PPE requirements. Potential for safety related “walk-outs” and the complexities of unlawful industrial action versus the rights of workers not to have to work in a working environment that presents a serious / imminent danger.
- Grievances regarding if, how and which staff are selected to come back in from furlough to working full time.
- Covid 19 Job Retention Scheme (CJRS) related grievances that employers may soon face in areas such as – maternity rights, TUPE, holiday entitlement and pay and so on.

The Labour Relations Agency stands ready to provide dispute resolution services such as: facilitation, assisted bargaining and collective conciliation to assist in resolving these and other matters.

Conclusion

We recognise there is no off-the-shelf roadmap to recovery, both in the health and economic sense, but the Engagement Forum believes the approach contained within this document represents a generic framework upon which to build and rebuild upon. We recognise the huge difficulties and uncertainties faced with this unprecedented situation but we believe as social partners in this time of emergency that this document represents the basis of joint advice to assist the NI Executive in making key decisions leading to the appropriate balance between keeping our people safe and getting our economy re-started.