

THE NI ENGAGEMENT FORUM ON COVID-19

Key points from the Forum meeting held on 9 September 2021

Update by the Department for the Economy (DfE)

- Permanent Secretary **Mike Brennan** updated the Forum on key economic issues flowing from the pandemic.
- Economic recovery is progressing. However, it is patchy with some sectors (e.g. tourism, hospitality and retail) continuing to experience severe difficulties. Furthermore, only 12% of office-based staff have returned to their workplace, which is contributing to lower footfall in city centre hospitality and retail outlets. Nevertheless, consumer expenditure is now higher than pre-Covid levels, as a result of a shift from high street to online shopping; a trend that may persist.
- In terms of the labour market, approximately 36,000 employees remain on furlough and 17,000 self-employed continue on the income support scheme. There is a concern as to what will happen to these people when the schemes are discontinued at the end of September 2021. Furthermore, unemployment among younger people has increased.
- However, Forum members reported that skilled jobs in specific sectors are plentiful and order books are healthy in manufacturing. It was noted that skills shortages will have been exacerbated by the loss of 14,000 EU26 nationals who left NI between 2016 and 2020; some of this would have been due to EU Exit, and some due to economic growth in eastern European countries.
- The Forum noted that the Executive has not yet set a date for the removal of all public health restrictions.

Update by the Department for Communities (DfC)

- Permanent Secretary **Tracy Meharg** updated the Forum on the work of DfC to support people during the pandemic. This included additional financial support and food, and alleviating homelessness.
- While a substantial increase in unemployment is not expected when furlough ends, there are many people experiencing mental health issues and housing stress is increasing. Forum members were concerned about the impact of the pending removal of the temporary £20 Universal Credit uplift, sharp increases in fuel costs and recently announced increases to National Insurance contributions on those already experiencing economic hardship.

Guidance on Hybrid Working

- **Mark McAllister** reported that the Labour Relations Agency is preparing guidance on hybrid working. Engagement Forum members' comments on the readability and comprehensiveness of the guidance will be sought before it is finalised at the end of September 2021.

Review of the Forum's Terms of Reference

- Forum members' approved the appointment of **Richard Johnston**, Associate Director at Ulster University's Economic Policy Centre, to undertake a review of the Forum's terms of reference. This will include seeking the views of members and stakeholders.
- A reference group of Forum members will be established to support the review.

Other Matters

- The Labour Relations Agency is organising, in conjunction with the Employment Relations Roundtable, a conference on 24 February 2022.

Next Meeting

- The next Forum meeting will be scheduled around the availability of DfE's Permanent Secretary, avoiding the Irish Congress of Trade Unions' annual delegate conference at the end of October 2021.