

Ms Olive MacLeod
Interim Chief Executive
Public Health Agency
Linenhall Street Unit
12-22 Linenhall Street
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23rd July 2020

Dear Ms MacLeod

I am writing to you on behalf of the Irish Congress of Trade Unions (NIC ICTU), the Community Intercultural Programme (CIP) and the Migrant Rights Centre Ireland (MRCI) to discuss the impact of Covid-19 on the Black, Asian and Minority Ethnic (BAME) communities in Northern Ireland.

NIC ICTU, CIP and MRCI have joined together to work with people from a migrant and local background through the *Crossing Borders Breaking Boundaries* (CBBB) project looking at exploitation, sectarianism, racism and discrimination in the labour market. The project is funded by the PEACE IV Programme.

We have noted with great concern the widely publicised findings in England and Wales, including those in the Public Health England reports, that BAME communities are disproportionately contracting and dying from the Covid-19 disease, and we welcome the recent announcement that an expert group is to be established by the Scottish Parliament to study the effects of Covid-19 on minority ethnic communities in Scotland.

We are also aware through our work on the project, and anecdotally from health staff, that BAME and migrant worker communities have been heavily affected by the disease in certain geographical areas and particularly amongst those working in the food processing sector here. However, we have been unable to find any specific data or comment on the actual impact of Covid-19 on BAME and migrant worker communities in Northern Ireland.

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As there is clear evidence that COVID-19 does not affect all population groups equally could you please advise if ethnicity and occupation are recorded in the Covid-19 data collection systems for Health and Social Care in Northern Ireland?

Such data would indicate whether there is a requirement for further initiatives aimed specifically at the protection of BAME and migrant worker communities here, starting with culturally competent, community participatory research to examine social, economic, structural and other determinants of Covid-19 in BAME and migrant worker communities and to identify ways to reduce risk and improve health outcomes.

Also, could you please advise if the PHA has taken, or plans to take, any specific action aimed at protecting BAME and migrant worker communities here from Covid-19?

It was with great concern that we have learned of the latest outbreak in the Moy Park plant in Ballymena. As there is now a wealth of evidence exposing that the conditions in which workers in meat processing have to work leaves them vulnerable to Covid-19 is the PHA engaging with the Health and Safety Executive and other relevant authorities, particularly as part of the contact tracing programme, when such clusters occur?

Further to this, as you are no doubt aware from the media coverage, some employers in the food processing sector only put measures in place to protect their workers from the spread of Covid-19 once pressure was put upon them. From our work on the project we are concerned that some employers appear not to be disclosing when workers from BAME and migrant communities become with ill with Covid-19 like symptoms. The situation is compounded by the fact that many of these workers are vulnerable and need to continue to work to support their families, as the Statutory Sick Pay is insufficient to cover their basic cost of living.

We firmly believe that halting the spread of this virus in workplaces requires a transparent and joined-up multi-agency approach. Trade unions, as the independent representatives of the workforce, should be a central part of such an initiative.

We would welcome the opportunity to meet with you to discuss the issues raised in this letter.

We look forward to your early response on this urgent matter. If you wish to discuss further you can contact me at kevin.doherty@ictuni.org

Yours sincerely

PD

Kevin Doherty
ICTU