

Protecting Lives, Protecting Livelihoods:

Finding a Balance to Protect our Community and our Economy

COVID-19 has created an interlinked health and economic emergency. This pandemic has cost lives and already has driven numerous businesses to closure causing a huge number of job losses which are reflected in the latest labour market statistics which show the second highest number of redundancies ever during a period when the furlough scheme was meant to protect jobs.

We understand that action is needed to suppress the spread of the coronavirus and businesses and social enterprises have innovated and showed real leadership in the response to protect workers, consumers and the wider public. Collegiate work by employers, Unions and public bodies in the Spring has ensured that the workplace is safe for staff and safe for customers.

Businesses have invested millions of pounds in making their stores, their restaurants, their pubs, their hotels and their factories safe for staff and safe for customers. Those who have been open throughout the pandemic have been a lifeline to ensure that our people get the essentials that they need. Without the willing cooperation of our businesses and workers, our society simply could not have coped over the past 7 months.

Business has endured a once in a lifetime impact on trading since March. It has been an unprecedented period of uncertainty and challenge. After finding the fortitude to keep going after months of lockdown, restrictions and closure earlier this year, many believed that they were starting to see light at the end of the tunnel only for that to now be extinguished. But still they stand ready to work with the Executive to protect lives and livelihoods, but we need support.

Workers have suffered either being locked down on furlough or seeing their jobs at risk. Sadly, many redundancies have already been confirmed. Many of the self-employed have seen their businesses destroyed and without any financial support. Those employed and self-employed now face a period of increased uncertainty, less support from Government or being forcibly closed without any safety net.

The Executive's decision to place large parts of the local economy into another lockdown will, quite simply, result in another round of job losses. Those who have had to shut their doors are deeply concerned by the decision after following the Executive's own guidance and investing money they didn't have in making their businesses safe. They are understandably anxious about the viability of their businesses and the jobs they have created and so too are the many companies who are in their supply chain or rely on them for footfall – the food and drink producers, the laundry service, the taxi drivers and many others. **Our economy is an ecosystem and closing down one part isn't a limited intervention – it harms us all.**

When we talk about the economy, we aren't talking about something abstract or theoretical. We are talking about real people's lives. Entrepreneurs who have followed their dream and started their own business. Folk working in retail, hospitality, leisure, tourism, manufacturing, construction, social enterprises. Every single sector and in every corner of our region. People across all of our society are hurting with an extra burden faced by women due to the sectors hit hardest and issues like

childcare. Closing down businesses is a blunt instrument that will struggle to retain the support of people who see it diluting their household incomes each and every time it is deployed. **Lockdown after lockdown is simply not sustainable.**

What is most concerning is that the Executive appears to be on a course to repeat their lockdown strategy again and again and again. We cannot stress strongly enough how deeply, deeply damaging this would be to the Northern Ireland economy. Fewer and fewer firms will survive each lockdown and more and more jobs will be lost, easily sending 100,000 people as estimated by the Department for the Economy to the dole queues with poor prospects of being reemployed in the short to medium term. The effect of long-term unemployment on people's physical and mental health is well known and will also plunge families into poverty. Surely that is a scenario that none of us want to see and should be avoided at all costs. **That is why we need to strike a balance to protect lives and livelihoods.**

Pursuing a path of lockdown, release and repeat will undo all of the good work we have done to build a strong and diverse economy and protect workers and their families. If a vaccine for COVID-19 is still months away from being available, then we must genuinely learn to live with the virus if we want to preserve our economy and have jobs for people to return to. A DIFFERENT WAY MUST BE FOUND.

The Executive will find a willing partner in business in seeking to design an alternative strategy. One that doesn't choose between health and the economy but instead seriously strengthens the Executive's response to the pandemic whilst allowing all parts of the region's economy to remain open and trading in the safest way possible. And most of all we need clarity from the Executive and a timely communication of the responsibilities of business and the public under any new regulations. The Executive's advice must, at all times, be consistent, coherent and easy to comprehend.

On behalf of the thousands of businesses and social enterprises we represent and the tens of thousands of people they employ whose livelihoods depend on the decision that the Executive make in the weeks ahead, we propose this OUR 3 POINT PLAN TO PROTECT LIVES AND PROTECT LIVELIHOODS

1. COMMUNICATION

Clarity is key. The Executive must sharpen up its overall public health message to both the public and the business community. Clear and consistent communication is an absolute imperative, making what is permitted and what isn't much easier to understand. The Executive needs to stop the constantly changing guidance and advice which is challenging to comprehend. We also urge far better coordination of messaging across key stakeholders both region wide and at a local level, utilising all tools at our disposal including the local press and social media.

2. COMPLIANCE

Instilling confidence is crucial. The Executive must work better to encourage greater compliance and, where appropriate, enforcement. They should quickly establish a "COVID Secure" quality framework including requirements for social distancing, face coverings, PPE etc to make it crystal clear how businesses, public service providers and others can ensure their premises are safe for staff and customers. It must also be made abundantly clear who is responsible for ensuring compliance and enforcing any regulations. An effective test and trace system is absolutely key to successfully fighting COVID-19 and the evidence gained from the system should be used to assist businesses to boost compliance. Financially assisting local Councils to invest in measures like hand sanitising stations and 'COVID marshals' in our town and city centres that compliments the extensive interventions implemented inside business premises will help to create a culture of compliance across society.

All of this, coupled with a combination of close cooperation with business and local government and clear support and advice for firms will create an environment where greater compliance from the public can be achieved and where, if necessary, enforcement can occur. This needs to be simple to understand and simple to implement.

3. COMPENSATION AND SUPPORT

It is critical to give business and their staff certainty. The Executive must make resources available as a matter of utmost urgency to enable people and businesses to better comply with the measures needed to fight COVID-19. For example, a fund such as that available in England for those told to self-isolate is long overdue. Additional support for businesses to install and implement more measures to ensure they are COVID secure is necessary. The Executive also need to assist all businesses and staff impacted by their latest lockdown including those in the supply chain, the self-employed, those not paying rates and those whose trade has been affected. In an absence of a change of policy from the Chancellor, a top up of the furlough scheme (as in Scotland) should be provided. No one, least of all those in lower wage industries, saves 1/3rd of their wages each week.

The purpose of our 3 Point Plan is to keep the Northern Ireland economy open and give businesses the best possible chance to survive and keep employing people whilst simultaneously investing in better communication, compliance and support so that all businesses and social enterprises are as safe as they can be and that we continue to play an important role in combating COVID-19. The coronavirus pandemic is posing a massive threat to people's health, but the strategy currently being pursued is posing as big a threat to jobs and livelihoods. A 'rinse and repeat' plan just won't work.

Let's work together – business and government – to suppress the spread of COVID-19 across our community and ensure that our people have jobs to support their families.

This plan is supported by the following organisations:

Ballymena Area Chamber of Commerce and Industry

Banbridge Chamber of Commerce

Bangor Chamber of Commerce

Belfast Chamber

Causeway Chamber of Commerce and Industry

Construction Employers Federation

Derry Chamber of Commerce

Federation of Master Builders

Hollywood Chamber of Commerce

Hospitality Ulster

Lisburn Chamber of Commerce

Manufacturing NI

Mineral Products Association

Newry Chamber of Commerce and Trade

Newtownards Chamber of Trade

Northern Ireland Hotels Federation

NI Retail Consortium

NI Tourism Alliance

Omagh Chamber of Commerce and Industry

Portadown Chamber of Commerce

Retail NI

Social Enterprise NI

Women in Business NI