

Dear Taoiseach,

I am writing to you on behalf of the members of ISME throughout the country, to express our grave concern at the recent turn of events, resulting in the latest national 'lockdown' as Covid-19 numbers rise; and requesting that you use your position in Government to ensure a better response to the pandemic than has been the case to date.

There are more effective, evidence-based, successful ways to respond to Covid-19 than an arbitrary national lockdown.

Because it was important to afford the public health effort time to respond to the pandemic, ISME has been very reluctant to engage in criticism. However, it is no longer a sustainable position for us to remain silent. We set out some of our concerns hereunder:

Retail and Grooming Businesses and Staff

ISME is particularly concerned to see "non-essential" retail and personal grooming forced to close once more, although the HSE's [epidemiological data](#) showed that they are responsible for only 0.3% respectively of the cases of Covid-19 transmission. Behaviours across other elements of society have caused a resurgence of Covid-19 in Ireland; not the retail and grooming sectors, which have been arbitrarily penalised. Each county and electoral constituency in Ireland has hundreds of workers in these sectors, and nationally there are tens of thousands.

Public Health Response

We understand that the lockdown is a natural public health response to rapidly increasing infection rates, but it is not the appropriate solution to the pandemic. In those countries that have successfully tackled Covid-19, lockdown is used to create breathing space for public health services, while control measures are put in place. This successful model has not been replicated in Ireland.

The period following our spring lockdown has been wasted. We have not instituted a robust testing, tracing, isolation and control (TTIC) system. Without this, we suffer the pain of lockdown without the reward of a controlled virus. We are not managing Covid-19. Covid-19 is managing us.

Testing Regime

NPHEA appears exclusively wedded to PCR testing as the methodology of testing. While PCR is regarded as the gold-standard of Covid-19 testing, it is expensive and slow. Other countries have introduced significantly less costly testing methods with much faster results such as antigen testing, albeit with lower levels (still in excess of 90%) of accuracy.

Despite our National Virus Reference Laboratory at UCD strongly advocating for the retention of PCR testing as our main testing methodology, they announced the inability of staff to test over two consecutive recent weekends. This is simply unacceptable in the midst of a national crisis, when people are having their livelihoods swept from under them. We need a rapid and robust testing regime consistent with the seriousness of the place we are in. There appears to be no sense of urgency in instituting a rapid testing regime.

International Best Practice Examples

What has worked in Australia, New Zealand and those Pacific Rim countries which have controlled Covid-19, is not just a lockdown of society. It is a lockdown to reduce the R0 below 1.0, accompanied by border quarantine measures; strong public health infrastructure; good testing infrastructure; and crucially, a solid legal framework for quarantine and isolation. Ireland is running with lockdown as the

only shot in its gun. This approach is a recipe for failure and it will cause untold misery, ill-health, and recession throughout society.

NPHET

NPHET is composed of some 30+ public servants; highly qualified, well-meaning, devoted and intelligent, but completely unaware of the ruin resulting from successive lockdowns. Most of them earn over €150,000 per annum, and none are exposed to the financial and psychological shock of being forced onto the PUP. We consider their advice to you the Government to be fundamentally flawed and ill-informed in this respect.

This lockdown is the last chance for NPHET and the HSE to put in place a robust plan for living with Covid-19. If this is not done by the end of this lockdown in early December, the Government must take action: reduce and reconstitute NPHET, and ensure it has access to expert, peer-reviewed, external advisors. We can no longer tolerate a situation where the State's only response to Covid-19 is to repeatedly furlough tens of thousands of workers.

Thank You

Thank you for reading this email from ISME and on behalf of our 10,000 + members - or in excess of 256 businesses across each Dáil constituency - we appreciate your time. We hope that you can take some of these points and consider them when deciding upon Ireland's response to Covid-19.

If you have any questions or need any more information, please do not hesitate to contact me directly.

Kind regards

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'Niall Ó Sé', followed by a long horizontal line and a circular flourish.