

Meeting of Special Committee on Covid – 19 Response

Tuesday 19th May 2020

Opening Statement by Mr. Tom Parlon, Director General, Construction Industry Federation (CIF)

Thank you for the opportunity to talk to the committee today.

Yesterday, the construction industry reopened partially. Workers returned to sites and jobs that are utterly changed due to Covid - 19 and new measures that have been put in place to protect them, their families and our communities. They are literally building the 'new normal' the Government has said we will enter in the coming months.

Since the Government shut down our industry on the 28th of March, construction companies and workers have been preparing to return to work safely. In terms of safety, our industry is recognised as one that is well-developed. That other countries facing similar lock-downs did not include construction is a recognition of the safety culture baked into modern construction.

In Ireland, our preparation has involved extensive consultation with unions, government and international experts. The CIF's standard operating procedure translates the latest HSE, WHO and medical advice into a construction context. The SOP fits into the National Protocol agreed between Government, Industry and Unions and enforced by the HSA.

Over 130,000 out of 147,000 employees have completed the SOP's online safety induction in advance of returning to work. Not all of these are traditional on-site construction workers, it includes office-based professionals, engineers, design teams, architect etc.

I'd like to commend the industry's companies and its employees for their commitment to safety. These workers are rebuilding our economy while they are building. Homes, roads, hospitals schools and other essential construction has begun again. Our industry is also well placed to contribute to economic recovery as we enable other sectors operate, we are able to recommence work without significant state support and 100,000 of our employees can now gradually be taken off PUP/TWSS.

I want to assure people that companies are being sensible and practical in returning to work. There was no big bang return to work yesterday. Larger contractors allowed a reduced work force on site yesterday to assess sites, test new measures and embed new protocols in safety culture. It will take months for the industry to reach previous output levels.

Covid compliance officers have been appointed and are monitoring progress. Under the National Protocol agreed with the Government and ICTU, workers representatives are being appointed also. The important message we've all been sending to workers is that if they are unsure about safety they can inform these representatives so any issue can be addressed. All the SOPs and National protocols are important guidance and can help shape behaviours but I'm confident our workers will also step up and operate safely.

The SOP provides guidance, based on the HSE advice, not just on site but on the way to site and on the way home. For example, we've provided best in class guidance on travelling in

vans on the way to work. We're asking that PPE is taken off and left on site. Larger companies are putting in place one way walking systems and have reduced headcount on site. We have very clear isolation protocols for anyone reporting symptoms and we will now keep logs of work to assist contact tracing.

Those companies that have been able to operate over the past month working on essential services have been operating new safety measures. Reports are positive but implementation of the SOP is challenging and companies are reporting a significant drop in productivity.

It's understandable that the public is afraid. The pandemic has shut down our society but it has also paralysed us. We now know that we must restart our economy in a manner that prevents the spread of the virus or we face horrific long-term economic, social, and psychological consequences.

I want to assure the public that we are taking the responsibility that falls on the construction industry very seriously. Our workers want to work but want to contribute to stopping the spread.

They are also building a sustainable and safe future for Ireland; helping us recover from the impact of this pandemic. I would appeal to members of the public, the media and our politicians to support us and our workers as we take these first steps towards reopening our economy and society for everyone.