



Oireachtas Special Committee on Covid-19 Response

Reopening the economy: The State's response and support for businesses

Written submission from Fórsa

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CONTENTS

Executive summary	2
Introduction	5
The national response	6
Supporting incomes and demand	6
Business supports	7
The European response	8
A safe reopening	9
Public transport	10
Childcare issues	10
Remote working and the organisation of working time	11
Social dialogue	12
Brexit	14
The health sector	14
Other challenges that require public investment	15
Further information	15

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The national response to Covid-19

1. A largely effective State-led response to the challenges arising from Covid-19 has been achieved by the State mobilisation of financial, organisational and human resources for the common good, collective effort, and universal access to essential goods, services and supports. These principles should shape our economic, social and business model on the other side of the emergency.
2. The spirit of social solidarity that's been generated will only sustain if citizens have confidence that policy (including State support to business) addresses the economic and social concerns of all.

Tools of recovery

3. The strongest available tools of recovery are income supports and State investment in infrastructure, which will together boost economic activity in the immediate and medium-term by sustaining demand.
4. A three-stage approach is required to achieve recovery: (1) Maintaining income supports at levels that can sustain individuals and families in the immediate term. (2) State investment in health provision and other public services and infrastructure in the medium term, with (3) debt reduction managed as a long-term project to avoid undermining consumer confidence and the demand-boosting impact of the first two phases.

Business supports

5. Many recent proposals for business supports have merit, but each should be considered in the context of broader objectives, particularly that of rebuilding, maintaining and expanding employment that is capable of supporting a decent standard of living.

The European response

6. The EU fiscal and policy response to the crisis has been significantly better than its response to the banking crisis of 2008.
7. Recommendations for Ireland, set out in the European Commission's 'European Semester Spring Package,' support investment in public services, infrastructure and workforce upskilling, as well as the provision of liquidity to businesses and households.

8. Business opportunities also exist for Ireland in sectors like pharmaceuticals, biotechnology and medical devices.

A safe return to workplaces

9. There are tensions between public health imperatives and the desire for a rapid return to commerce, trade and work. If unsupported by public health expertise, a bias towards the latter would be self-defeating in terms of jobs and business.
10. The consistent implementation of the 'Return to Work Safety Protocol,' agreed between the Government, unions, and employer representatives through the Labour Employer Economic Forum (LEEF), must underpin the safe return to work, and ongoing workplace safety, in all sectors.

Public transport

11. Continued restrictions on the availability of public transport may be necessary on public health grounds but, together with health concerns related to commuting, they could inhibit the reopening of the economy.

Childcare

12. A misalignment of the return to workplaces and the reopening of childcare facilities could present a serious impediment to the effective reopening of the economy.

Remote working

13. The recent shift from office-based to remote working holds huge potential for productivity, public services, regional balance, quality of life, and the environment. But it also presents challenges.
14. Employers have a responsibility to engage with staff representatives to foster an agreed approach to the organisation of working time and remote working, and there may emerge a need for stronger statutory and regulatory safeguards in this area.
15. State agencies, such as the Health and Safety Authority, the Data Protection Commissioner and the National Cyber Security Centre, may need to strengthen their advice and enforcement practices to reflect more prevalent remote working.

Social dialogue

16. A return to standard sectoral and workplace industrial relations will be necessary as we pass the peak of the public health crisis and a degree of normality returns to working life.
17. A high degree of successful national-level social dialogue was evident from the outset of the crisis. This was evidence in the negotiation of the 'Return to Work Safety Protocol,' and union and employer input into the establishment of the Pandemic Unemployment Payment and the Temporary Wage Subsidy Scheme.
18. Improved formal social dialogue would help address the economic and social crises now facing Ireland.

Brexit

19. A 'no-deal' Brexit would have a devastating impact on the employment-rich food sector and other industries. Dealing with this threat will require supports at a domestic and European level, and measures to deal with Brexit should be coordinated with measures to reopen the economy post-Covid-19.

The health sector

20. The historical underfunding of our public health system, coupled with a convoluted model of public, private and voluntary health provision, impaired Ireland's ability to maximise a fully coherent and integrated response to the pandemic. The funding and advancement of Sláintecare should, therefore, be seen as a major pillar of public policy in the context of our response to Covid-19 and its economic impact.

Introduction

1. Fórsa welcomes the opportunity to make this written submission to the Oireachtas Special Committee on Covid-19 Response. The union is an active affiliate of the Irish Congress of Trade Unions (ICTU) and supports the submission that ICTU is also making to the Committee. Fórsa is available to make an oral presentation to the Committee if required.
2. Fórsa has over 80,000 members in the Republic of Ireland. Although the largest number work in the civil and public service, the trade union also represents workers in the semi-state sector (commercial and non-commercial), private companies (predominantly in aviation and communications) and section 39-funded organisations in the community and voluntary sector.
3. Fórsa members work in extremely diverse professions, occupations, grades and work settings, and their employment-related experience of the Covid-19 public health crisis has varied accordingly. Many thousands have continued to attend workplaces to maintain essential services. These include health workers and health and social care professionals, staff in social protection and other civil service departments, many local authority workers, and staff in telecoms and postal services. Many more have quickly adjusted to working remotely. Others (predominantly in aviation) have depended on State income supports, and have experienced wage reductions and/or reductions in working time. Some are facing the prospect of lay-offs and redundancy.
4. The union's elected national officers met on Friday 13th March and agreed the following policy regarding the coronavirus:
 - a. *“Fórsa and its members across the civil, public, private, voluntary and semi-state sectors are committed to co-operating fully with emergency measures necessary to contain the Covid-19 coronavirus, protect the health and safety of citizens and workers, and maintain essential services during this unprecedented public health emergency.*
 - b. *“The union will continue to advise its members to co-operate with all necessary measures, including some that might not be acceptable in normal times, so long as employers consult with the appropriate unions, respect existing collective agreements, and reach agreement with the union if they feel it necessary to waive aspects of collective agreements in the short-term.”*
5. The union has consistently and strongly advised its members to co-operate with Government agencies and public service management in their efforts to contain the Covid-19 coronavirus, protect the health and safety of citizens and workers and maintain essential services, including when this meant doing different things, in different ways, and at different times.

The national response

6. Driven by public health imperatives, and accompanied by an inspiring spirit of social solidarity, there has been strong support for what has been a generally effective State-led response to the massive public health crisis and related challenges arising from Covid-19. This can be characterised as a coordinated ‘one public service’ approach, where all roles were valued and mobilised collectively. We have witnessed what can be achieved when the State mobilises financial, organisational and human resources for the common good, when people work together collectively, and when citizens have universal, rapid and uncomplicated access to essential goods, services and supports.
7. Fórsa believes that the next challenges will be to embed these principles into our economic, social and business model on the other side of the immediate health emergency, to mitigate and overcome the damage that arises from the long interruption to commerce, trade and employment, and to embed the positives that have emerged from the crisis into our society and economy. All this while sustaining the public health measures necessary to contain the coronavirus and build the confidence necessary to sustain an economic recovery.
8. The spirit of social solidarity can only sustain in an environment where citizens have confidence that policy (including State support to business) supports the public good, and that outcomes will be fair and focused on addressing the economic and social concerns of all. An incoming Irish Government must avoid poor choices that hurt ordinary workers and their families, and place the concerns of citizens down the agenda.
9. The strongest available tools of recovery are income supports and State investment in infrastructure, which will together boost economic activity in the immediate and medium-term by sustaining demand.
10. Critical public services like health, education and childcare will need to recoup. Jobs permanently lost in the immediate crisis will have to be replaced. Incomes must be supported in the meantime. These imperatives come on top of pre-pandemic challenges like responding to the climate crisis, tackling pre-coronavirus shortcomings in housing and other public services, and addressing the vulnerabilities of people in low-paid and insecure employment, which the crisis has put in sharp relief.

Supporting incomes and demand

11. The European Commission’s recent country-specific recommendations, published in its ‘European Semester Spring Package’ in mid-May (see

paragraphs 20-22 below), included the provision of liquidity to both businesses and households struggling from the impact of the coronavirus,

12. There are three important reasons for continuing to adequately support the incomes of employees whose jobs have been undermined by the Covid-19 response in the immediate or medium-term. The first is to help them to provide for themselves and their families. The second (in the case of the Temporary Wage Subsidy Scheme) is to maintain the relationship between employers and employed, which will ease the rapid resumption of economic activity when the circumstances allow. The third is to sustain a level of confidence that can support the demand needed to maintain economic activity in the short term, and boost it as the economy begins to reopen.
13. The importance of stimulating demand in the short and medium-term has been acknowledged by a number of prominent experts including former Central Bank Governor Patrick Honohan and the Chair of the Irish Fiscal Advisory Council (IFAC) Sebastian Barnes.
14. A successful and sustainable reopening of the economy and society will not be possible without policies that rebuild consumer confidence and demand. A three-stage approach is most likely to achieve this. In the immediate term, it will necessitate the maintenance of substantial Government spending on income supports at levels that can sustain individuals and families. In the medium term, it will require badly-needed and job-creating State investment in health provision, and other public services and infrastructure, at a time when EU support will be available and the price of borrowing is at historic lows. Only in the longer-term should policy focus on addressing the public debt that has arisen from the public health emergency and its economic impact.
15. Unless the third phase – of debt reduction – is managed as a long-term project, it will undermine the confidence and demand-boosting first and second phases, and risk a return to the mistakes of the last economic and fiscal crisis.

Business supports

16. A large number of proposals for loans and grants to support various business sectors has emerged in recent weeks. Many of these proposals have merit and are worthy of support. However, each should be considered, on a case-by-case basis in the overall context of broader objectives, particularly that of rebuilding, maintaining and expanding employment that is capable of supporting a decent standard of living. In time, the public will be asked to repay substantial debt incurred during the crisis. It is, therefore, reasonable to expect that public expenditure on supports to business be linked to conditions and oversight that underpin societal objectives, including decently-paid and secure employment.

17. While business supports will continue to be required, public supports for business must be objectively assessed and clearly and transparently linked to employment maintenance and the provision of jobs capable of sustaining a decent living standard. They should be accompanied by measures to flatten wealth distribution and provide a 'social wage,' with the specific objective of providing many more essential public services on a universal basis. This should be supported by adequate taxation, social dialogue, collective bargaining, and legal rights to equality and civil and political freedoms.

The European response

18. Early decisions at EU level, specifically the activation of the Stability and Growth Pact escape clause, underpinned the Irish State's ability to respond to the coronavirus on the necessary scale and with the necessary speed. The Irish Government should continue to support such an approach in the European Union and its institutions.

19. More recently, and notwithstanding resistance from the so-called 'frugal four,' the proposed European Commission post-Covid recovery plan, which is worth €750 billion and would bring the total EU budget to €1.85 trillion over the next seven years, is evidence that EU leaders understand that the economic and fiscal fall-out of the coronavirus crisis requires a fundamentally different response to that displayed during the banking crisis of 2008 and beyond. This is a significant shift in political direction, which Ireland should support.

20. The Commission's proposed 'next generation' budget envisages the EU deploying a blend of spending, grants and borrowing. Support would be available to all EU member states, with most going to those worst affected by the pandemic. This would include a new recovery and resilience facility, worth €560 billion in financial supports for climate action, digital transition, and other projects. It also includes almost €10 billion to strengthen health security and prepare for future health crises.

21. In mid-May, the Commission also published its 'European Semester Spring Package,' which included country-specific recommendations (CSRs) that focus on the immediate fiscal, economic, employment and social responses to the crisis with an emphasis both on health and the medium-term reform and investment needed to return to sustainable growth.

22. The CSR for Ireland called for upskilling and reskilling, in cooperation with social partners, to prepare the workforce for the climate, energy and 'circular economy' transition. It added that the digitisation of education and work should not increase educational and social inequalities.

23. The CSR for Ireland also included recommendations aimed at improving infrastructure and social housing, providing liquidity to businesses and

households struggling because of the coronavirus, frontloading public investment projects, advancing climate action, improving productivity, rolling out publicly-supported broadband, broadening the tax base, and looking at combating aggressive tax planning.

24. The EU recovery plan will be linked to Europe's multi-annual financial framework, which will set the Union's budget between 2021 and 2027. There are also some challenges for Ireland, which will become a net contributor to the EU's budget. Corporate tax consolidation will remain on the European Commission's agenda. However, these were present regardless of the pandemic and, unlike in 2008-2013, there is a prospect of EU-level support to help Ireland address its infrastructure and labour market challenges.
25. Business opportunities exist too, as Europe seeks to protect supply chains and to assert its economic and industrial sovereignty. This may assist sectors like pharmaceuticals, biotechnology and medical devices, where Irish manufacturing is well established.
26. Meanwhile, we still depend on European solidarity as Brexit uncertainty and brinkmanship continue, with the real risk of a 'no-deal' Brexit, which would have a devastating impact on the employment-rich food sector and other industries (see paragraph 52 below).

A safe reopening

27. Tensions between public health imperatives and the desire for a rapid return to 'normal' commerce, trade and work are to be expected and must be managed in a way that avoids a polarising debate between advocates of 'safety' and advocates of 'work' or 'business.' If unsupported by public health expertise, a bias towards the latter would be self-defeating as it would risk undermining public confidence and/or a return to tighter restrictions on foot of a second wave of the virus.
28. Certain constraints on activity and behaviour will remain in place for some time to come, and these will continue to impact on the way we work and trade. The challenge will be to mitigate and circumvent the constraints to allow a safe reopening of the economy, while supporting jobs and incomes in sectors where this is not possible in the short to medium-term.
29. The consistent implementation of the 'Return to Work Safety Protocol,' agreed between the Government, unions, and employer representatives through the Labour Employer Economic Forum (LEEF), must underpin the safe return to work, and ongoing workplace safety, in all sectors.
30. One important aspect of the Protocol is its requirement that employers engage with staff representatives to implement a range of measures *in advance* of staff returning to workplaces. Adherence to this approach is

essential to maintaining confidence that work environments and places of consumption are safe. It is possible that comprehensive compliance, underpinned by adequate Health and Safety Authority inspections, could, in some cases, create the conditions for a swifter return to workplaces than earlier envisaged.

Public transport

31. Even in advance of a widespread return to normal working, Fórsa has received a substantial number of expressions of concern from workers who depend on public transport to travel to and from work. These concerns relate both to social distancing and to the availability of public transport as envisaged in the Government's 'roadmap for reopening society and business.' The roadmap envisages enhanced cleaning of public transport vehicles, as well as restrictions on the numbers using public transport from 8th June. It says the numbers travelling on public transport will continue to be limited into phase three (beginning 29th June), before being "progressively decreased" from phase four (beginning 20th July). It adds that restrictions on the numbers of private cars travelling to and from urban centres will be considered in phase three.
32. Fórsa is not qualified to comment on these measures in detail, but notes that restricted availability of public transport, together with health concerns related to commuting, could inhibit the reopening of the economy. The Oireachtas Select Committee may want to explore these matters with the appropriate authorities.

Childcare issues

33. A misalignment of the return to workplaces and the reopening of childcare facilities could present a serious impediment to the effective reopening of the economy in the coming weeks. Fórsa expects that increasing numbers of workers are likely to struggle with childcare problems as they migrate back to workplaces after working remotely.
34. The Government's 'roadmap for reopening society and business' envisages crèches, childminding and pre-school facilities reopening for essential workers "in a phased manner" from the end of June. This is meant to expand gradually to other workers, also on a phased basis, from 20th July.
35. Around 40% of workers in Ireland have dependent children, and half of them depend on formal childcare facilities. But the Government's roadmap says they could initially open for just a day a week before "slowly increasing thereafter." Public health imperatives dictate that schools and colleges are unlikely to open to (the vast majority) of their students until September at the earliest.

36. A recent report from the union-backed Nevin Economic Research Institute (NERI) says women are set to be disproportionately affected by insufficient childcare, which it says will be a significant issue for many people returning to work. Although the official focus on childcare is on the reopening of schools and crèches, NERI points out that large numbers of working parents depend more heavily on family and friends for and that, for many, this support is currently unavailable because of public health restrictions. Without an effective policy intervention to address this issue, there is a serious risk that lack of access to childcare will affect families' ability to leave the home and participate in the labour market.

Remote working and the organisation of working time

37. The impact of the response to the coronavirus on the organisation of work, and particularly the rapid shift from office-based to remote working, holds huge potential for productivity, public services, regional balance, quality of life, and the environment. But it also comes with challenges.

38. While significant parts of the economy and public services remained open throughout the public health crisis, the Covid-19 pandemic has changed the working circumstances of almost half of Ireland's workers. More than a third were working remotely at the peak of the public health crisis, while others experienced significant changes to rostering and other aspects of the organisation of working time.

39. The Government's 'roadmap for reopening society and business' is clear that many workers will continue to work remotely for some time, notwithstanding its programme for reopening the economy.

40. For the most part, this extended period of home working – certainly on the scale we are witnessing – has been a new experience for employers and employees alike. In all sectors of the economy, employers and their staff should be applauded for establishing productive and rewarding remote working arrangements in an extraordinarily short period of time. While many will return to traditional workplaces for some or all of their working time, it is likely that we are experiencing a permanent shift to more widespread home working, at least in some sectors of the economy and public services.

41. As with most aspects of the response to the public health emergency, workers responded rapidly to the need to switch to remote working. While this has been a positive and productive experience for many, others have personal and family circumstances, and/or accommodation constraints, that result in huge difficulties in home working. While Fórsa understands that a largescale move to temporary homeworking arrangements, and other changes to working time arrangements, were necessary during the immediate crisis, employers now have a responsibility to engage with staff representatives to

foster an agreed approach to the organisation of working time and location that can accommodate the various circumstances and concerns of their staff.

42. At public policy level, there may emerge a need for stronger statutory and regulatory safeguards, as the expansion of remote working could otherwise be accompanied by an increase in the insecurity and exploitation associated with the 'gig' economy.
43. In addition, there will likely be a need for State agencies, such as the Health and Safety Authority, the Data Protection Commissioner and the National Cyber Security Centre to consider strengthening their advice and/or inspection and enforcement regimes, where necessary, to reflect a situation where remote working becomes far more prevalent.

Social dialogue

44. The recent public health crisis exposed the limitations the Irish approach to social dialogue between Government, employers and trade unions. It simultaneously demonstrated the willingness and ability of the parties to develop the model, as well as its positive potential for assisting in the reopening of the economy, and for meeting the hugely enlarged social and economic challenges of the pandemic period, including Brexit.
45. In the period between March and early summer 2020, politicians and senior managers necessarily adopted a 'command and control' approach to change and management in the public service. Fundamental, albeit temporary, changes were introduced rapidly and without formal agreement in a unionised industrial relations environment where significant change is generally subject to often-lengthy negotiations and formal agreements, usually followed by ballots of large numbers of staff.
46. These included the temporary closure of the workplaces of tens of thousands of staff, the designation of services as essential, the allocation of workers to new environments (including ones of high personal health risk), the policy and practise of temporary reassignments of staff to new duties (including across sectors), outsourcing, health and safety matters, rostering and shift patterns, and (in some cases) payments.
47. This was possible for two reasons. Firstly, workers and their unions readily accepted it as a necessary temporary phenomenon because of the seriousness, scale and singularity of the public health crisis and its challenges. It was accepted that in such an emergency, standard industrial relations practises were unlikely to respond with the deftness required to marshal and reassign major human and other resources at the speed demanded.

48. Secondly, there was a high degree of regular consultation with unions, which generally communicated rapidly and effectively with their members about the measures being implemented, the rationale for them, the implications for staff, and the safeguards and supports available. Along with Ireland's strong public service ethos, which engendered a committed and determined response to the crisis among civil and public servants, this consultative approach underpinned an exceptionally high degree of cooperation with rapid and dramatic demands and changes.
49. The consultation described in paragraph 47 above occurred at national, sectoral and local level. Unions were able to express concerns on behalf of workers, and input suggestions about the efficacy and consequences of proposed measures. Though these were not negotiations, this approach allowed unions to influence aspects of policy and practise determined in a 'command and control' environment and, indeed, to help maximise the effectiveness and speed of the public service response.
50. Significant limits of the efficacy of the 'command and control' approach also became evident over time. Two prominent examples were the debacle over the promised provision of childcare to essential staff (which remains unresolved), and the initial reassignments of all special needs assistants to the HSE (now resolved, for the most part, on foot of a Fórsa proposal).
51. A more standard approach to sectoral and workplace industrial relations will be necessary to address issues, including those referenced in paragraph 45 above, as we pass the peak of the public health crisis and some degree of 'normality' returns to workplaces and working life.
52. Meanwhile, a high degree of successful social dialogue was evident at a national policy level from the outset of the crisis. This was at its most formal and detailed in the negotiation of the 'Return to Work Safety Protocol,' negotiated by the Government, unions, and employer representatives through the Labour Employer Economic Forum (LEEF). But it was also strongly evident in union and employer representative input into the establishment of the Pandemic Unemployment Payment and the Temporary Wage Subsidy Scheme, and in the general atmosphere and the attitudes of the parties during peak crisis.
53. Both trade unions and employers' representative organisations, particularly Ibec, had earlier advocated the strengthening and formalisation of national social dialogue. The case for this is stronger as we begin to address the huge economic and social crises now facing Ireland.
54. A failure to take this path would also risk putting Ireland at odds with the direction of the European Union, where social dialogue is likely to feature strongly in the response to the crisis (not least because many successful European economies, including those with stronger health and public services than we enjoy in Ireland, have well-developed and embedded mechanisms for

social dialogue). The EU Commissioner for Jobs and Social Rights, Nicolas Schmit, emphasised the importance of a strong social dimension to recovery when he addressed the Institute of International and European Affairs (IIEA) on 15th May 2020. He promised an Action Plan on the Pillar of Social Rights at the beginning of next year.

Brexit

55. The impact of the Covid-19 crisis has, to a significant degree, taken the spotlight off the issue of Brexit at a time when a hard Brexit (or, at best, a minimalist trade deal between Britain and the EU) at the end of 2020 looks increasingly likely. The economic impact of a hard Brexit obviously has the potential to fundamentally undermine the post-pandemic reopening of the economy, with certain sectors – notably food and agriculture – being particularly vulnerable. Dealing with this threat will require supports at a domestic and European level. It will be necessary to coordinate these supports, and other Brexit policy interventions, with measures to reopen the economy post-Covid-19.

The health sector

56. The country-specific recommendations (CRS) in the European Commission's recently-published 'European Semester Spring Package' (see paragraph 20-22 above) highlighted "the structural limited efficiency, flexibility, resilience and accessibility" of Ireland's healthcare system, and said plans for the implementation of Sláintecare remain vague.

57. The pandemic has produced a tremendous national effort, led by the health service and other frontline staff, and supported by the wider public service. Nevertheless, our infection rates, notably among healthcare workers, are poor compared with countries with better health systems.

58. The historical underfunding of our public system, coupled with a convoluted model of private provision in acute hospitals and residential and homecare settings – supplemented by the provision of many social care services through section 39-funded organisations – has impaired Ireland's ability to maximise a fully coherent and integrated response to the pandemic.

59. Dealing with Covid-19 will be a top public and health service priority for some time to come, perhaps for the foreseeable future. Even if it were not, the pandemic has demonstrated the need to address the dysfunctionality of our public/private/voluntary sector health system. The funding and advancement of Sláintecare should, therefore, be seen as a major pillar of public policy in the context of our response to Covid-19 and its economic impact. The funding of the section 39 sector, and the strengthening of its relationship with mainstream public health bodies, should also feature strongly in the response.

Other challenges that require public investment and support

60. Paragraphs 20-22 above cite other areas where the European Commission's recent country-specific recommendations for Ireland identified areas where investment is required. A degree of European support is likely to be available for investment in at least some of these areas, which include infrastructure to support climate action, digitisation and the rollout of publically-supported broadband, social housing and education.
61. In a similar way to health (see paragraphs 55-58 above), the impact of the Covid-19 crisis demonstrated shortcomings in Ireland's system of early childcare and education. Fórsa believes that this is likely to continue to hamper the reopening of the economy (see paragraphs 32-35 above). Prior to the crisis, it was evident that the State response to Ireland's high-cost, low-pay early years system (which mainly took the form of limited payments to parents) was continuing to fall short. For this reason, the formalising of early childcare and education as a publically-funded and publically-provided public service should be included in the medium to long-term objectives of the reopening of the economy.
62. In the immediate term, State supports to workers and businesses in particular sectors – vital to Ireland's employment and economy, and hard-hit by the impact of the pandemic - will need to continue. These include tourism, the cultural and leisure sectors, hospitality and aviation. As in the rest of the economy, State supports to businesses in these sectors should be consistent with wider economic and social objectives including the maintenance of employment capable of sustaining a decent standard of living.
63. In the medium and longer term, much increased and strategic investment in our public education system – especially higher and further education and training – is also necessary to reopen, rebuild and sustain a robust modern economy.

Further information

Contact Bernard Harbor at bharbor@forsa.ie or 087-230-1262 for more information.