

## **Food Drink Ireland Opening Statement to Special Committee on Covid-19 Response**

**13<sup>th</sup> August 2020**

Chairman, Deputies and Senators

Thank you for the invitation to appear before the Committee today. My name is Paul Kelly, Director of Food Drink Ireland and I am accompanied by my colleague Linda Stuart-Trainor, Director of Prepared Consumer Foods.

Food Drink Ireland is part of Ibec and represents 150 companies across food and drink including the Prepared Consumer Foods sector and within that a group of Prepared Consumer Meats companies. These companies produce cooked, cured and other value-added meat products. They employ over 2,800 people and buy over €230 million worth of goods and services domestically every year.

The food industry has been identified as an essential service by Government and so, along with other essential services has to remain open while dealing with the risks of the pandemic.

Our members have introduced stringent control and mitigation measures since mid-March in addition to fully implementing the prevention and control measures in the National Return to Work Protocol and the specific HSE guidance for meat processing. The measures include engineering and organisational controls, physical distancing measures such as perspex screens, enhanced biosecurity, temperature checking, training and information, personal protective equipment.

Verification of this has been overseen by the Health and Safety Authority and the Department of Agriculture, Food and the Marine. Both announced and unannounced inspections have taken place in the sector.

Despite the nation's ongoing efforts, the COVID-19 virus remains in our community. A very unfortunate but inevitable outcome of this is the transmission of the disease within clusters.

Where cases of Covid-19 have been detected, our members have responded in accordance with the specific HSE guidance for meat processing in particular:

- Steps to be taken when an individual case of COVID-19 is suspected or confirmed
- Additional steps to be taken as soon as an outbreak is detected

Their approaches have been informed by public health expertise at all times and agreed with the HSE through frequent communication.

With no clear timeline for the development of a vaccine, it is essential that as a country and an economy we operate responsibly within this uncertainty. We must take appropriate measures to ensure the continuity of essential businesses and protect our economy. This must involve Government, public health officials and businesses working together to ensure that there is a proportionate response to outbreaks within the community.

The experience of the sector to date has highlighted a number of key considerations for further testing in communities and workplaces:

- Speed of swabbing/testing – The speed at which positive cases can be identified and isolated from the community and the workplace is vital. A full site test and turn-around of results

within 24 hours is critical. Without this there will be problems of business continuity. Public health authorities must ensure that there will be sufficient capacity in the system throughout the testing programme.

- Data protection – GDPR issues are hampering critical information being swiftly provided to site management. There can be no delay between the communication of results to individuals and to management. Given the public health imperative, solutions will need to be developed.
- Business continuity and sustainability – Clarity is needed on outcome scenarios, for instance what number (or proportion of the workforce) testing positive would trigger specific further responses by HSE? These scenarios must be mapped out in a proportionate and coordinated way, taking account of the essential nature of food processing and the critical need to keep supply lines open to customers in Ireland and export markets. If supply to these customers is interrupted for even a short period of time that business will not be easily won back.

As our economy and society continues to open up, it is likely that other sectors will experience cases and clusters. In this context, it is vital that a considered and coordinated approach is developed for the food sector, which can be rolled out to other sectors as needed. This approach must be proportionate, take account of the essential nature of food processing and grounded in expert advice from the health authorities.

In conclusion our members will continue to focus on protecting employees through stringent prevention and control measures and to work with the public health authorities in this regard.