

The logo for Fórsa, featuring a red chevron pointing right above the word "FÓRSA" in a bold, white, sans-serif font.

**FÓRSA**

# **Fórsa in the Covid-19 crisis**

**Supplementary report  
to conference 2020**

**November 2020**

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# Introduction

The [Fórsa biennial report 2018-2020](#) was finalised and distributed to branches and executives in May 2020. The biennial report, which covers union events and activities in the two years prior to the outset of the Covid-19 crisis, is on the Conference 2020 agenda for adoption.

In light of the deferral of Fórsa's 2020 conference, and the extraordinary circumstances of this year's public health crisis, this supplementary report has also been produced for conference. It covers the period from the onset of pandemic-related restrictions in March 2020 until mid-October.

This report does not give details of the huge activity and effort of branches, activists and staff in the six Fórsa divisions during the period. In line with usual practice, this information will be contained in reports to the union's 2021 divisional conferences.

Instead, the report attempts to capture the main activities and decisions taken at a national and union-wide level, to record the union's approach and activities between the onset of the Covid crisis and the rescheduled digital conference. More detail will be included in the biennial report for 2020-2022.

# The Covid-19 crisis

The first case of the Covid-19 virus in the Republic of Ireland was confirmed on 29th February 2020. Two days later, Google told the majority of its 8,000 Irish-based staff and contractors to work from home after a member of staff reported flu-like symptoms, and Fórsa advised members working in areas of potential risk, including health settings, education, social protection and local authorities, to rigorously follow and implement HSE advice regarding the virus.

In the same week, and on foot of representations from Fórsa and other unions, the Department of Public Expenditure and Reform (DPER) issued guidance that civil and public servants – including non-commercial semi-state staff – who contracted the Covid-19 virus, or who were advised to ‘self-isolate’ by a medical practitioner, would receive basic pay including fixed allowances from day one. It also agreed that coronavirus-related sick leave would not be counted as part of sick leave records in cases where a worker had medical or HSE confirmation of the need to self-isolate. By early April, Fórsa had reached agreement with health employers to ensure that the pay provisions were extended to agency staff in the HSE and voluntary hospitals.

On 12th March, then-Taoiseach Leo Varadkar made a live televised broadcast from Washington DC, in which he announced the introduction of sweeping public health measures. These included the closure of schools, crèches and cultural institutions. His advice that people should work at home if possible was strengthened on 24th March when stringent new restrictions were announced. By now, well over 1,000 Covid-19 cases had been confirmed in Ireland.

The union’s elected national officers met on Friday 13th March and agreed the following approach to the emerging situation, which guided the union’s activities throughout the crisis:

*“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.*

*“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.”*

The union published updated advice to members about safety measures and work attendance over the following weekend. This was distributed via special ebulletins to over 56,000 members, and was frequently updated in the weeks and months that followed.

The union 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.

This approach was informed by a recognition 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 practices were unlikely to respond with the deftness required to marshal and reassign major human and other resources – in health and elsewhere – at the speed required.

It was also facilitated by a continuing high degree of regular consultation at national, sectoral and local level (see below).

On 18th March, DPER announced new arrangements for a public service-wide mobilisation to tackle the Covid-19 virus and maintain essential public services. These included the temporary transfer of civil and public servants to critical roles for up to three months. Following consultation with Fórsa, the measures guaranteed that staff who took on temporary roles would continue to be employed, and paid, by their existing employer, and that they would return to their existing employer and role after the temporary

transfer. Meanwhile, thousands of Garda vetting applications were expedited by the Garda National Vetting Bureau to ensure that staff could transfer to essential roles as a matter of urgency.

In another public announcement on Friday 27th March, An Taoiseach said people should stay at home unless it was essential that they attended work, and workplaces across the country began to close on public health advice. Tens of thousands of Fórsa members were subsequently instructed to work from home.

The union issued advice that staff should attend work unless alternative arrangements had been agreed with their line managers and, over the weekend following the announcement, union staff made contact with hundreds of employers and provided members with updates on which employments would remain open to deliver essential services, and which were implementing remote working arrangements. Detailed advice was published on the website and updated at least on an hourly basis. Most employers had given clear instructions to their staff by the following Tuesday, when Fórsa updated its advice to say that members should work from home unless specifically instructed to go into their workplace.

Throughout March and April, and the months that followed, Fórsa staff and activists engaged with employers, in all sectors and at national and local level, to deal with the many workplace and related issues arising from the pandemic.

On 1st May, the Government published the first version of its 'roadmap for reopening society and business,' which set out a phased timetable for the easing of Covid-19 restrictions from 18th May. It included general direction, as well as some specific plans in sectors like healthcare, education, libraries, and cultural institutions. Revisions to the roadmap were first announced on 5th June, including the intention to reduce the number of phases from five to four, with the final phase beginning on 20th July. A further relaxation in the roadmap's timetable was agreed by the Cabinet on 19th June.

Following the publication of the roadmap, Fórsa published detailed 'return to work' advice to members. This was revised and reissued frequently on foot of developments, including changes to the roadmap's provisions and clarifications of how it was being interpreted and implemented by DPER and other employers. Fórsa officials also initiated detailed discussions on return-to-work arrangements, and the implementation of associated safety protocols, in specific sectors and workplaces.

The period June-September saw extensive discussions, involving Fórsa and other education unions, on all aspects of the reopening of schools and other educational institutions, which had emerged as the centrepiece of the Government's plans to reopen the economy and society. The union also gave written and oral evidence on the matter to the Oireachtas Special Committee on the Covid-19 Response.

In early June, Fórsa warned that a return to normal workplace industrial relations – where major issues are decided by agreement between managers and workers' representatives – must be a feature of the reopening of the economy. In a [detailed written submission](#) to the Oireachtas Special Committee on the Covid-19 Response, the union said a degree of normality should return to working life after an extraordinary period when staff had cooperated with major temporary changes introduced by management without prior negotiation or agreement. These included a massive shift to remote working, the designation of services as essential, the allocation of staff to high-risk work environments, temporary reassignments, health and safety issues, and rostering and shift patterns.

The union's paper pointed out that huge changes like these would normally be subject to detailed negotiations with the union, with workers backing or rejecting the outcomes in ballots. While public servants and others had accepted this, because of the scale and seriousness of the Covid-19 crisis, a return to normal negotiation and consultation was needed.

Fórsa also said the limits of the temporary 'command and control' approach to workplace change had become evident at times, including in a debacle over the promised provision of childcare to essential staff and the initial reassignments of special needs assistants to the HSE.

In late June, the union's elected National Executive Committee (NEC) advised branches and officials that significant changes to, or departures from, agreements governing pay and working conditions should again be negotiated through normal industrial relations procedures with effect from 29th June.

In September, the Government published 'resilience and recovery 2020-2021: plan for living with Covid-19,' which established a new approach to coronavirus restrictions with five levels of response linked to levels of confirmed Covid-19 cases and related public health metrics. The entire country was at level two when the six-month plan was launched, but Dublin and Donegal soon entered level three. The rest of the country soon followed.

On foot of discussion with Fórsa, DPER subsequently brought its advice on work attendance in line with the new national framework. A revised 'frequently-asked questions' document, distributed to managers across the civil and public service, said that workers in areas designated at level three should "work from home unless [it's] absolutely necessary to attend in person."

At the end of September, Fórsa called on employers on both sides of the northern border to facilitate flexible working arrangements, including remote working, for staff who commute to work in different jurisdictions on the island of Ireland. The union also appealed to managers to minimise demands on staff to cross the border for work-related meetings. The move came after the chief medical officers for the Republic of Ireland and Northern Ireland last week called on people to avoid all unnecessary travel across the border.

From midnight on 21st October, the entire country entered level five, the highest level of restrictions, for at least a six-week period. Level five includes tight restrictions on travel, assembly and economic and social activity, including the requirement that employees work from home unless they are providing essential services that require their physical presence. But schools and childcare facilities remained open.

# Consultation and social dialogue

Fórsa maintained close contact with senior Department of Public Expenditure and Reform (DPER) officials from the early stage of the crisis. In response to the emergency, politicians and senior managers adopted a 'command and control' approach to management in the public service. This meant that, while the union was deeply involved in discussion and consultation at national, sectoral and workplace levels, far-reaching temporary changes were introduced rapidly and without formal agreement.

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 areas of high personal health risk, temporary reassignments of staff to new duties, the introduction of health and safety measures and changes to rosters and shift patterns.

These measures were facilitated by a high degree of regular consultation between Fórsa and employers at national, sectoral and local level. This allowed the union to express concerns on behalf of workers, and put forward suggestions about the efficacy and consequences of proposed measures. Though these were not negotiations, the approach allowed the union to influence aspects of policy and practise determined in the 'command and control' environment, and help maximise the effectiveness and speed of the public service response.

It also enabled Fórsa to communicate rapidly and effectively with members and activists 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 was the foundation of a committed and determined response to the crisis among civil and public servants and other workers, this consultative approach underpinned an exceptionally high degree of cooperation with rapid and dramatic demands and changes.

Meanwhile, a high degree of social dialogue took place 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.

## Services to members

As restrictions on travel and meetings were introduced in March, all Fórsa face-to-face meetings were cancelled and union staff were redeployed to prioritise dealing with members' queries quickly and efficiently on a seven-day-week basis. Union staff were rapidly equipped to work remotely and Fórsa's regional offices closed from 25th March, while a minimal presence was maintained at its Dublin headquarters. This involved a significant investment in ICT equipment to enable remote working and communication between staff, elected representatives and individual members as necessary. By the end of the month, the vast majority of members' queries were being communicated to the union digitally, and work on an online membership application facility was accelerated.

A 'contact us' facility was established on the home page of the union's website, and the Nerney's Court switch was redirected to reception staff working remotely. All staff collated daily summary reports of individual member queries submitted by phone and through the 'contact us' facility. Formatted by query category, these reports recorded the nature and scale of issues arising as members endeavoured to cope with working in the emergency. The information gained enabled the union to better target its staff resources and communications output.

From the outset of the crisis, the union's officers met remotely each week to manage the union's response. So did the Fórsa senior staff group. Arrangements were quickly put in place to enable meetings of the National Executive Committee, divisional executives and councils, and staff to take place remotely. This was facilitated by a significant investment in IT equipment, particularly the development of IT solutions to enable real engagement in virtual meetings.

Senior divisional officials also put measures in place to ensure regular remote discussions with employer representatives, and communication between staff and branch officers and activists. A guide to organising and participating in remote meetings was issued to branches in June.

A small number of face-to-face meetings became possible as officials restrictions eased in the summer months. A number of well-attended and highly-engaged members' webinars on specific issues and challenges in the divisions were also organised over the summer. These included events for social welfare staff, library workers, health and social care professionals, members in aviation, special needs assistants and other school staff, and lead Covid-19 workplace safety reps. Most of these virtual events attracted better participation than similar physical events have in the past.

Union communications promoted the web-based 'contact us' facility, advising members that, in the prevailing circumstances, it was the best and quickest way to raise issues with the union. Tens of thousands of member queries were dealt with by staff and activists over the period. The union also heavily promoted its 'join online' and 'update my details' web-based facilities.

In the fortnight up to 29th March, the union's Communications Unit issued nine members' ebulletins, each to over 56,000 members. By June, it had settled into a pattern of issuing ebulletins on a weekly basis, alternating between fortnightly 'all member' bulletins and fortnightly sets of five sectoral bulletins. The numbers of members receiving ebulletins rose from just over 56,000 to almost 68,000 between March and September, an increase of over 21%. Member engagement with the ebulletins peaked at an average of almost 50% across all divisions in March and early April.

Information and guidance to members was also regularly updated on the Fórsa website and, by the summer, sustained traffic to the site was running at nearly 90% of comparable 2019 figures. The union's social media platforms were also used extensively throughout the crisis, again with substantially-increased engagement.



# Conference 2020

In March 2020, Fórsa sought and received legal advice on the question of the deferral of the 2020 national conference in light of the extraordinary circumstances. The legal opinion was that the National Executive Committee had powers, under rule, to defer the 2020 conference until a date in the second half of 2020. On 25th March, the NEC approved the officers' proposal to defer the conference to dates in November 2020. The general secretary advised Fórsa branches of the decision on 19th March.

On foot of continuing and extraordinary coronavirus-related public health restrictions on travel, public gatherings, and related matters, the July NEC meeting agreed that the conference should be organised on a remote basis, and that the officers' elections should be conducted by secure postal ballot. At their meeting of 30th July, the officers subsequently agreed that the conference would be a one-day event, to take place on Thursday 19th November 2020. The officers also agreed proposed arrangements for the postal ballot and conference, which were set out in a letter to branches from the general secretary on 11th August 2020.

# Protecting workplace safety

From the outset of the crisis, Fórsa issued general advice to members on reducing personal risk and helping prevent the spread of the virus, along with guidance on the actions members should take if they showed symptoms. This advice was generally based on prevailing HSE guidance, though the union generally advised more caution for pregnant women and more vulnerable workers. Specific additional advice was issued for members working in settings, including health settings, that were actually or potentially more exposed to the virus. Again, the union guidance was largely based on official advice, although it was more cautious in certain areas.

Meanwhile, Fórsa's divisions developed specific guidance for particular workplace settings including schools, health facilities, libraries, community settings, and 'customer-facing' offices in the civil service and elsewhere. In these and other areas, Fórsa officials were in frequent and ongoing discussions with management in order to shape official advice and ensure that it represented the best possible staff and service-user safeguards compatible with the provision of essential public services. Collectively, union officials and staff dealt with thousands of individual member queries on safety and related matters. All the general and specific advice issued by the union was updated several times as the situation changed and as official advice was altered to reflect developments.

In many settings, the inadequate supply of PPE, and training in its proper use and disposal, was an issue of great concern, particularly at the outset of the crisis and on the reopening of schools.

In early April, Fórsa published specific guidance for members in health and elsewhere who were working in, or who could be asked to work in, environments where there is a higher-than-average risk of contracting the coronavirus. The union also sought the following commitments:

1. Volunteers should be sought for higher-risk tasks and work areas wherever possible
2. For the protection of patients, clients, the public and workers themselves, staff should have the training and qualifications required to undertake their allocated tasks and functions safely and effectively
3. The provision of adequate personal protective equipment (PPE), and training in the use and disposal of PPE, should be provided, along with any other necessary supports (eg, mental health support) that can reasonably be expected
4. The individual family circumstances of staff should be taken into account when people are being allocated to higher-risk tasks and functions. In particular, those living with - or whose caring responsibilities demand contact with - elderly and other high-risk groups should not be obliged to work in high-risk areas except in very exceptional circumstances
5. Wherever possible, such workers should also receive other practical supports from their employer, including childcare supports
6. There should be equity in the application of these criteria.

Fórsa officials consistently pressed for the adoption of this approach in talks with relevant employers across the civil and public service.

Around the same time, the union added its voice to ICTU calls for the Health and Safety Authority (HSA) to be given extended powers, along with additional staffing, to encompass all health and safety issues related to Covid-19. This demand initially emerged on foot of concerns in the construction sector.

Later, Fórsa and other unions insisted that the safety of workers and the people they serve be protected as staff migrated back to workplaces after working remotely. In mid-May, the union issued fresh advice in this regard. It covered the workplace aspects of the Government's 'roadmap for reopening society and business,' which was published in early May, and outlined the State's guidance on the essential measures that will be required to contain the virus as the economy begins to reopen.

Working through the Irish Congress of Trade Unions (ICTU), Fórsa had been at the forefront of the negotiation of an agreed national 'return to work safety protocol', which was also summarised in the new Fórsa guidance. The safety protocol required employers to implement a number of measures in advance of staff returning to workplaces, including:

- Appointing Covid-19 workplace representatives
- Implementing a Covid-19 response plan
- Preparing information for staff
- Making physical changes to underpin social distancing
- Sending 'self-declaration' forms to staff before they return
- Preparing staff training
- Cleaning and sanitising premises, and
- Assessing the need for personal protective equipment (PPE).

The protocol was agreed in early May between unions, employers and the Government through the main union-employer-Government forum for social dialogue, the Labour Employer Economic Forum (LEEF). At the unions' insistence, its safety and enforcement guarantees included a requirement for employers to recognise at least one Covid-19 lead worker safety representative, with more in larger employments. Fórsa advised its branches to ensure that the union was central in the selection of these representatives at workplace level.

Shortly after the publication of the protocol, Fórsa won confirmation that civil and public service employers must abide by its measures, and that it would apply equally to employees who remained in their workplace throughout the first lockdown. The union had raised these matters with the Department of Public Expenditure and Reform (DPER) after its initial guidance suggested that parts of the public service might take a different approach.

In mid-June, and on foot of union pressure for more stringent application of Covid-19 safety regulations, the Government announced that 500 agriculture, environmental health and labour inspectors would be given powers to enforce coronavirus workplace health measures under the guidance of the Health and Safety Authority. At that stage, the HSA had assigned 67 inspectors to frontline enforcement, and Fórsa called on the agency to develop a business case for extra in-house inspectors.

Fórsa also raised the need to consult on the safety of public service workplaces in meetings with the Department of Public Expenditure and Reform (DPER), which manages overall public service employment arrangements. And union officials engaged in detailed discussions on return-to-work arrangements, and the implementation of the safety protocol, in specific sectors and workplaces.

In early June, the union sought assurances over the appointment of lead worker representatives after it emerged that public service employers were taking different approaches. Some were opting to work through traditional health and safety structures that don't necessarily feature union involvement.

In a letter to DPER, Fórsa general secretary Kevin Callinan argued that arrangements under the agreed safety protocol were distinct from the normal workplace health and safety role which, in law, doesn't necessarily require employers to include union representatives. He said a different approach was necessary because staff were raising Covid-related safety concerns through their unions, which needed to be deeply involved in coronavirus-related safety measures in highly-unionised public service environments, including the public service.

DPER went on to advise managers across the civil and public service that "any arrangements should have the confidence of all parties." This was seen as confirming a central role for Fórsa and other unions, while giving employers scope to introduce safety measures in circumstances where union input was unavailable.

In mid-July, Fórsa health officials gave evidence to the Oireachtas Special Committee on Covid-19. They told the committee that over a quarter of the 8,347 Irish health workers who were known to have contracted the virus at that point worked in grades and professions represented by Fórsa. The union called on the HSE to become fully compliant with agreed return to work safety protocols.

After the entire country was put at level five of the Government's Covid plan, Fórsa and other public service unions called on the Government to improve legal safety protections for essential public service workers, in health, education, social protection, local authorities and elsewhere. Through the ICTU Public Services Committee, the union said a lack of HSA oversight was putting these workers at greater risk, and called for a legal requirement for the agency to investigate Covid infections in the workplace, as recommended by the Oireachtas Special Committee on Covid-19 Response.

## Mental health

A survey of over 5,000 Fórsa members, carried out by Cornmarket in late May, found that four-fifths felt anxious or nervous as a result of the Covid-19 crisis. Over 70% reported problems with sleeping, while more than half said either they or a family member had experienced depression or a related condition as a result of the pandemic.

The results reflected the stress of a period when thousands of workers had stepped-up to serve in high-risk frontline environments, with many more having to rapidly adjust to remote working. A significant number also grappled with reduced pay, lay-offs, and insecurity about their jobs.

When asked to name their top five concerns, half of the respondents cited mental health and 45% mentioned physical health. Almost a quarter (24%) said they were worried about money. Other concerns included juggling childcare and home-schooling with remote working, redeployment concerns, and poor support from the workplace. Many respondents also mentioned worries about the physical and mental wellbeing of elderly parents, children and other vulnerable family members.

On foot of the survey, Cornmarket worked with the union to deliver a series of podcasts and digital articles featuring psychotherapists, motivational speakers and mental health professionals. These included a series of five well-attended 'Wednesday Wellness' podcasts, which came on foot of a number of Fórsa members' ebulletin articles on coping with the stress and other challenges of Covid-related developments, including remote working and childcare.

In early August, Fórsa highlighted the mental health-related aspects of home working in its detailed submission to the Department of Business, Enterprise and Innovation's (DBEI) public consultation on official guidance on remote working. Drawing on a member opinion survey, conducted for the union by Amárach Research in July, the submission said that respondents were more likely to cite mental health concerns (19%) than broader health and safety issues (13%) as potentially negative aspects of remote working. This was in step with earlier studies, including a 2019 DBEI employee survey, in which over 12% of respondents cited mental health concerns as "the biggest challenge of working remotely. Earlier surveys, including a 2019 survey of over 1,600 Fórsa health workers, confirmed that workers are reluctant to raise concerns about mental health with their line managers.

The Fórsa remote working submission noted that, while there are health and wellbeing benefits associated with home working, there were concerns over the potential impact of loneliness and isolation on mental health. It said that the Health and Safety Authority had no specific ongoing guidance on remote working, and called for the authority to be tasked with drawing up specific guidance on the mental health aspects of remote working.

# Remote working

As patterns of remote working settled across large areas of the public service and wider economy, Fórsa published a large number of web and bulletin pieces with advice on working at home. By the end of May, more than a third of employees continued to work from home, and the union brought together detailed advice in a single guide. *Working at home: Staying safe, connected, healthy and productive* contained advice on health and safety, setting up a workspace, breaks, staying in touch with managers and colleagues, and balancing work with home life and childcare. The guide also included useful tips on data protection, cybersecurity, and safeguarding mental health.

On 10th August, Fórsa issued the results of Ireland's largest ever employee opinion survey on the issue of remote working. The study, conducted on behalf of the union by Amárach Research, found that 86% of respondents were interested in working remotely. Over 80% of those who favoured home working expressed a preference for a hybrid arrangement.

Over 4,300 Fórsa members completed the survey. Seven-in-ten of those who had worked at home during the Covid-19 crisis said remote working had been a positive or very positive experience. Over two-thirds of those who had not worked at home during the crisis also expressed an interest in having access to remote working. Concerns about home working related to four broad areas: Disconnection from the workplace; work encroachment on home life; costs and the appropriateness of home work space; and health and safety issues. The biggest single negative aspect of home working, cited by 69% of respondents, was the lack of interaction with colleagues. Worryingly, just 28% of those who worked remotely said a manager had asked them about their home working set-up from a health and safety perspective.

Fórsa then made a very [detailed submission](#) to the Department of Business, Enterprise and Innovation (DBEI) consultation on remote working. Informed by the union's membership survey, the submission made 20 recommendations and called on the Government to open a dialogue with unions and employers with the aim of strengthening the legal framework around remote working. It said employers should be required to set objective criteria for determining the tasks and staff selected for home working arrangements, and that employees should have the right to refuse home working without having to give their reasons.

The submission argued that those working remotely should benefit from the same rights, guaranteed by legislation and collective agreements, as comparable staff at their employer's premises. And it called for strong safeguards on health and safety, surveillance, privacy, data protection and cyber-security. It noted that additional household costs accrue from home working. "This was not addressed in temporary arrangements introduced during the Covid-19 emergency, but a different approach is required for long-term arrangements where employees are based at home for significant periods of work time," it said.

The Fórsa survey and submission attracted substantial print and broadcast media coverage, and some 200 people participated in a Fórsa webinar on the issue, in late September.

## Working time

The Covid-19 crisis had a significant impact on working time and other working arrangements for tens of thousands of civil and public servants, staff in State agencies and the community and voluntary sector, and in the private sector. These included remote working, temporary reassignments to new duties, and the suspension of flexitime. Many experienced temporary changes to rosters and shift patterns, introduced to support social distancing and other public health requirements. Staff whose shift patterns were altered were generally rostered for fewer hours than normal.

In its submission to the Department of Business, Enterprise and Innovation (DBEI) consultation on remote working, Fórsa argued that these developments should be factored into broader policy debates about the scope for reducing working time, particularly in the context of the impact of artificial intelligence and other new technologies.

Flexitime arrangements were formally, though temporarily, suspended across the civil and public service in early April as part of the response to the coronavirus crisis. It had effectively been suspended in most public service employments, including the HSE, major civil service departments, and a number of local authorities, from the onset of the crisis. A DPER circular published at the time said the operation of traditional flexi-time and attendance management rules were incompatible with the flexibility required during an extraordinary situation, and said that the measure would “show solidarity as a unified one public service” at a time when Covid-19 has had an “unprecedented impact” on normal working arrangements.

At the end of July, Fórsa sought the reinstatement of flexitime for staff who had returned to workplaces and were back on their normal hours and work patterns following periods of remote working or changed working time. The union raised the issue with the Department of Public Expenditure and Reform (DPER), which agreed to return to normal flexitime arrangements by 24th August for those based in the workplace on pre-coronavirus working time and attendance patterns. The union is now seeking the restoration of flexitime for others too.

New flexibilities were introduced to give managers the option to cancel or postpone individual ‘shorter working year’ arrangements in the civil service, but only with the consent of the worker involved. The measure also allowed individuals to seek the cancellation of their shorter working year arrangements, although their manager retains the final say.

In early April, Fórsa’s intervention in the health sector led the HSE to agree that leave not taken because of the Covid crisis could be carried over.

## Childcare

In a submission to the Oireachtas Special Committee on Covid-19 Response, published in June, Fórsa argued that the Covid-19 crisis had highlighted shortcomings in Ireland's system of early childcare and education. It said that the inadequacies of the State's response to Ireland's high-cost, low-pay early years system was inadequate prior to the crisis, and called for the formalising of early childcare and education as a publicly-funded and publicly-provided public service.

While the Department of Public Expenditure and Reform (DPER) and other public service employers had agreed to a number of measures to assist staff with childcare during the period of school and crèche closures, Fórsa and other unions were critical of the Government's response, most especially on childcare provision for essential workers. This was a particular and pressing problem in the health sector where union officials were involved in frequent and intensive talks on the issue from March to July 2020. The union sought direct State childcare provision for essential staff, or payments to meet the additional costs incurred by individuals who made their own childcare arrangements after schools and crèches closed.

An Economic and Social Research Institute (ESRI) report, published in early May, had also criticised the Government's response. It said that over a fifth of the Irish workforce were essential workers, and that 100,000 of them had children under the age of 14. It criticised Government proposals to provide childcare to 5,000 health workers as inadequate. *Essential employees during the Covid-19 crisis* found that most essential workers were concentrated in low-paid sectors like retail and non-professional health grades, and couldn't afford extra childcare costs.

After the Government published its 'roadmap for reopening society and business' in early May, Fórsa warned that tens of thousands of workers would struggle with childcare problems as employees migrated back to workplaces after working remotely. This was because half of all workers with children depend on crèches, childminding and pre-school facilities, and the Government's roadmap envisaged these reopening later than many other workplaces, with schools and colleges remaining closed until September.



## Economic and recovery measures

The Irish Congress of Trade Unions (ICTU) wrote to An Taoiseach on 4th March, setting out concerns about eligibility for sick pay for thousands of workers with no occupational sick pay scheme. On foot of this, the Government agreed to improved provisions including higher levels of sick pay from their first day of illness regardless of the number of PRSI contributions made. ICTU was also working with employer groups and the Government to develop what became the pandemic unemployment payment (PUP), which was introduced on 16th March, with enhanced State benefits for workers who lost their jobs because of the pandemic.

On 26th March, and following further discussions with ICTU and employers' representatives, the Government introduced its Covid-19 temporary wage subsidy scheme (TWSS). Initially intended to run for 12 weeks, the scheme gave publicly-funded wage supports to businesses that temporarily closed or lost business because of the pandemic. Designed to keep staff on their employer's payroll, the scheme gave employers up to 70% of pay for worker's earning up to €76,000 a year, capped at a net €350 per week. A significant number of employers in aviation and elsewhere adopted the scheme, which was subsequently modified on a number of occasions.

In early May, the scheme was improved on foot of trade union lobbying. The improvements included increased payments for some, and ensured that workers who remained on payroll were eligible for the subsidy even if they were working reduced hours or were temporarily furloughed. By this time, over 40,000 companies had registered for the scheme, which had come under fire for encouraging part-time and low-paid workers to leave their jobs because they could get higher payments under the PUP scheme.

By mid-May, well over 1.2 million workers had become dependent on State income supports, with more than 580,000 receiving the PUP, 205,000 on Jobseekers Benefit, and over 450,000 being supported through the TWSS. Fórsa members in the Department of Employment Affairs and Social Protection (DEASP) and their counterparts in the Revenue Commissioners were widely and rightly applauded for the rapid, flexible and effective rollout of these vital supports to working people and the economy.

Meanwhile, a report published by DEASP in May revealed that young, low-skilled, female and part-time workers were more likely to lose work as a result of Covid-19. At that stage, some 43% of all PUP recipients were under 35.

Prompted by union demands, the Government moved in June to close loopholes in the temporary wage subsidy scheme, which had disqualified some women returning from maternity or adoptive leave.

Fórsa, ICTU and the union-sponsored Nevin Economic Research Institute continued to call for enhanced supports to workers, businesses and communities. In late April, a joint [Irish Times opinion article](#) by the general secretaries of Fórsa and Siptu argued that the crisis has demonstrated 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 equal access to essential goods and services. Calling for a fundamentally different approach to economic reconstruction to that adopted during the 2008-2010 banking crisis, the article helped shape the public policy debate to ensure a more progressive fiscal response to the employment and economic impact of the crisis.

Fórsa and Siptu jointly drew up detailed proposals, which were submitted to ICTU as it developed its demands for a massive fiscal stimulus, with public investment across a range of public service and infrastructure projects, as part of a plan for Ireland's recovery from the economic crisis caused by the Covid-19 pandemic.

The ICTU programme was published in late May as '[No going back: a new deal towards a safe and secure future for all](#)', which also called for universal free public health care, a massive programme of public house building, a cap on the price of childcare, increased investment in education, and the scrapping of plans to increase the State pension qualification age to 67.

The paper outlined proposals for a 'green new deal' to tackle climate change, and included environmental taxes among measures to fund its ambitious programme. It also called for higher taxes on wealth – including inheritance and gifts – as well as higher social contributions from employers. 'No going back' also set out demands for stronger social dialogue and collective bargaining rights.

Building its earlier interventions, Fórsa developed its approach to economic recovery. This was published in a detailed Fórsa submission on '[Reopening the economy: The State's response and support for businesses](#),' which was presented to the Oireachtas Special Committee on Covid-19 Response in early June. The submission called for business supports to be made conditional on employers' support for jobs that can sustain a decent income. It also covered a range of economic and workplace issues including the need for Government to continue to support incomes and demand, EU policy requirements, safety issues related to the return to workplaces, childcare issues, remote working and the organisation of working time, industrial relations and social dialogue, and Brexit.

The union continued to make detailed inputs into ICTU submissions and representations on the subject, and did the same at a European level through the European Federation of Public Service Unions (EPSU) and other international trade union confederations. Throughout the period, its general secretary, Kevin Callinan, published several blogs and made high-level representations as a member of the Labour Employer Economic Forum (LEEF), the Government-union-employer social dialogue vehicle.

At the end of July, Fórsa gave a guarded welcome to the announcement of the largest ever Government-funded stimulus package, funded by exchequer borrowing, which allocated over €7 billion in supports to businesses and incomes. The union said the scale of the package and its emphasis on economic recovery over immediate debt repayment, was in line with the approach that Fórsa and other unions across Europe had advocated as an alternative to catastrophic austerity policies.

The announcement came in the same week that EU leaders agreed a €750 billion continent-wide investment programme, in another significant departure from the previous austerity-based response to recession. Fórsa general secretary Kevin Callinan welcomed the approach in an [opinion piece](#) in the *Irish Examiner*.

Fórsa and other ICTU affiliates continue to maintain that public money allocated to businesses should be conditional on maintaining employment with decent pay and working conditions, including collective bargaining.

ICTU also called for a reversal of reductions in the pandemic unemployment payment (PUP), which were imposed in September, along with an urgent review of the adequacy of supports for businesses closed down on foot of the pandemic. Congress also demanded that a legal entitlement to sick pay be extended to all workers in the economy.

# Aviation

Fórsa has thousands of members in airlines, airports, aviation regulation and services. The aviation sector was amongst the hardest hit by the pandemic. Demand plummeted by over 95% at the onset of the crisis, and it remains extremely low. Unlike the last recession, when aviation was among the first sectors to recover, most industry observers believe it will be among the last this time.

As a result, most Fórsa members in the sector continue to experience or face wage reductions, lay-offs and redundancies. The union has worked with its branches in the sector to manage and minimise the damage through negotiations with employers, and to lobby for more and continued State supports.

In written evidence to the Taskforce for Aviation Recovery, which was established by the Government in March, Fórsa said wage supports were essential to protect thousands of workers in airlines, airports and air navigation bases, along with an estimated 150,000 jobs in tourism, hospitality services and aircraft maintenance, which depend on aviation.

Fórsa's submission, which was submitted in June, also called for tax and PRSI breaks for the Dublin Airport Authority, and the maintenance of Dublin airport charges at 2019 levels. In a controversial decision last year, the Commission for Aviation Regulation, which sets airport charges, recommended that the cap on Dublin charges should be reduced over the next five years. But with passenger numbers down 99%, the regulator had conceded that the assumptions underpinning its decision were no longer valid and that it would have to be reviewed.

Fórsa also called for the establishment of a Shannon-specific task force, charged with developing a new business strategy for the airport, and Government funding for a 'Shannon route development fund' to help establish new routes and retain those under threat from other airports. Its submission said the separation of Shannon from the Dublin Airport Authority had failed, with 2019 passenger numbers down 8% before the pandemic struck.

In early July, Fórsa general secretary Kevin Callinan renewed his call on the Government to work with aviation unions and other stakeholders to develop a specific long-term plan, with Government support, to maintain employment in the sector. He criticised the prevailing announcements and threats of redundancies at some airlines, which he said was inconsistent with the spirit in which Ireland had risen to the challenges of the pandemic.

The union has taken every opportunity to impress upon the Government that aviation companies which impose compulsory redundancies or off-shoring should not receive State aid.

## Public service pay

Throughout 2019, Fórsa had pressed for an early engagement to shape and inform 2020 negotiations on a successor to the Public Service Stability Agreement (PSSA), which governs pay and conditions across the civil and public service, section 38 organisations including voluntary hospitals, and non-commercial State agencies. The PSSA expires at the end of December 2020.

The 2019 engagements took place against the background of strong and improving economic performance and public finances. Fórsa argued that new talks should address the fact that public service pay movement had been slower than both inflation and economy-wide pay trends in the period since the 2008 financial crisis. It also said any new agreement must be capable of dealing with sectoral and grade issues, as well as addressing outstanding restoration issues including working time.

However, a long hiatus in the engagement emerged before and following the general election, which took place on 8th February. The election was followed by months of talks on government formation and the new coalition Government was not in place until 27th June. In the meantime, the Covid-19 crisis had radically damaged the country's economic and fiscal position, while pushing the issue of a PSSA successor down the list of public policy priorities.

Nevertheless, the programme for government, published in June, committed the new administration to seek to negotiate a new public service pay deal. It said the new Government's approach to public service pay would "be guided by the State's financial position and outlook, challenges in relation to recruitment and retention, and conditions within the broader labour market," acknowledged the "important role" played by public servants, and pledged to ensure that "positive work practice changes" introduced during the Covid-19 emergency are embedded in any new pay deal, along with general productivity gains. The programme for government said the Government would seek a sectoral bargaining clause in any agreement, although it did not elaborate on this.

Following the formation of the new Government, the ICTU Public Services Committee sought a meeting with the incoming Minister for Public Expenditure and Reform, Michael McGrath. The meeting took place in the final week of the month and the minister agreed that public service unions and the Department of Public Expenditure and Reform (DPER) would engage in early September to explore the potential for a successor to the PSSA. Minister McGrath also confirmed that the new Government would meet its commitment to pay the final PSSA instalment - worth 2% of gross pay - on 1st October.

DPER published the revised pay scales in September, for implementation on 1st October when cuts to fixed allowances were also reversed. The revised pay scales were immediately posted on the Fórsa website.

The pay adjustment meant that, over its three-year lifetime, the PSSA has brought pay adjustments of more than 7% for over 70% of civil and public servants, with slightly smaller percentage adjustments for the higher-paid. Following PSSA and earlier adjustments, around 90% of civil and public servants have now had their basic pay rates restored to 2009 levels. But most of their incomes are lower than in 2009 because of other factors, including increased pension contributions.

Exploratory talks on a successor to the PSSA opened at a meeting between union leaders and senior DPER officials in September, when Fórsa general secretary Kevin Callinan outlined the union's headline issues for the negotiations. Fórsa said the process must acknowledge the contribution of public servants, both during the pandemic and in the hard years following the 2008 banking crisis. The union also called for the talks to address outstanding restoration issues, including additional working time introduced for lower and medium-paid workers in 2013. It sought a mechanism for dealing with issues specific to particular grades and categories of staff, as well as an acceptable approach to public service-wide pay adjustments over the lifetime of any new agreement.

The talks were slowed again by Government preparations for Budget 2021, which took place on 13th October. While informal discussions with officials continued in late September and early October, it was expected that substantial talks would resume, on the basis of post-Budget political direction, from mid-October.

The officers of the ICTU Public Services Committee (PSC), which is chaired by Fórsa general secretary Kevin Callinan, lead the unions in the negotiations. A scheduled meeting between the PSC officers and DPER was postponed in mid-October on the basis that DPER officials had yet to consult with the minister to establish the basis for any negotiations.

The PSC met on 23rd October, and expressed concerns that the time available to negotiate, draft and ratify any agreement, before the end of December was running short. In a statement, the PSC outlined the real possibility that no agreement would be in place at the end of 2020.



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