



Submission to Ireland's independent Covid-19 Evaluation

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"Fórsa and its members across the civil, public, private, voluntary and semi-state sectors are committed to cooperating 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."

Kevin Callinan
General Secretary
Fórsa

March 13th, 2020.

Executive summary

Fórsa, the largest trade union representing public sector workers, and its members were critical to the national response to the Covid-19 pandemic. Our members exist across the length and breadth of the country, and in every corner of the public sector. They are in our hospitals, our schools, our government departments, and our local services. These workers kept essential services running, safeguarded livelihoods and ensured households and businesses were supported through times of economic uncertainty.

It was Fórsa members who delivered the Pandemic Unemployment Payment (PUP) and the Temporary Wage Subsidy Scheme (TWSS), processing hundreds of thousands of applications in a matter of weeks. Many public service workers were also redeployed to critical roles to help contain the virus and prevent the spread of Covid-19.

Fórsa leadership responded quickly to the announcement made by the Taoiseach on 12th March 2020 that closures would begin the following day. The clear, decisive and early intervention to co-operate with the Government was critical to the emergency response effort.

This was a conscious decision, with Fórsa's National Executive Committee acutely aware of the necessity for swift responses to the significant challenges brought by the virus. This decisive stance enabled the government to act quickly and demonstrated Fórsa's commitment to the public good.

Fórsa members, and their commitment to public service, were essential to the overall contribution of the crisis. They were heavily relied on to deliver state supports and keep the country afloat. Without them, their cooperation and committed work, the government's capacity to respond to the crisis would have been much more difficult.

This report highlights areas where the Government and its departments embraced elements of social dialogue by bringing together trade unions and employers to tackle some of the significant challenges of the pandemic. Where this dialogue existed, the outcomes were largely positive.

Many successful policies were borne out of this process, such as the TWSS and its requirement that employees must be retained on the books of their employers for businesses to be eligible for inclusion in the scheme. This policy, and specifically this requirement which was put forward by the unions, supported businesses and workers to resume more quickly to normal conditions once the recovery began, and prevented mass layoffs and long-term damage to the economy. Additionally, this report shows that when there was a breakdown of dialogue with unions, or when this dialogue was absent, the Government's Covid-19 response was weaker.

Overall, this evaluation submission shows that, even in times of unprecedented crisis, social dialogue can deliver innovative policy solutions to address national problems. This demonstrates that tripartite policy making should also exist outside of crisis, to help resolve ongoing issues and where communities have been failed. Despite the successful outcomes of social dialogue during Covid-19, once the danger of the virus receded, the Government returned to the ways of old and quickly began to reprioritise markets over communities, neglecting to meaningfully engage with workers.

Social partnership in Ireland collapsed in December 2009, and has been effectively replaced with the Labour Employer Economic Forum (LEEF) – which has become a box-ticking exercise of engagement for Government to discuss “areas of shared concern affecting the economy, employment and the labour market on a thematic basis, such as competitiveness, sustainable job creation, labour market standards and equality and gender issues in the workplace”. This forum lacks the ambition of genuine collaboration and cooperation on mutually beneficial policies that social partnership was introduced for in 1986.

Fórsa has repeatedly called for a new social compact – which would bring together government, employers and unions – to support the country to better address or resolve present and future challenges, such as childcare, education, housing and climate change. Such a system would also strengthen Ireland's resilience and ability to respond to future crises.

An approach to prioritise community health and civil protection was also adopted at European level through the triggering of the “general escape clause”. This clause suspended restrictions on borrowing and spending in order to deal with the challenges of Covid-19 and allowed governments the needed flexibility to take necessary measures to protect their economies. This clause was deactivated in 2023, and a return to market priorities resumed – similar to the Irish Government's reprioritisation of markets over communities, once the immediate danger of the virus diminished.

It could be argued, however, that many other crises and threats exist which require a relaxation of public spending rules. In an era where one crisis follows another, the trade-off between public spending priorities such as health, housing and climate change, is unhelpful. Rather, EU fiscal rules should be based on the cost of servicing debt rather than the level of deficit or debt itself. This would allow countries to address long-term social and economic problems, and better prepare for the future, through larger borrowing where the government can sustainability afford to service the debt. This would prevent cuts in public spending in other important areas to address one specific challenge.

Furthermore, the Government must move away from its economic model which priorities privatisation, short-termism, and chronic underinvestment in public services. Instead, it should adopt a proactive and progressive economic strategy – one that will deliver a better quality of life for workers and their families and build stronger communities. The lessons learnt from the pandemic must shape a fairer and stronger State.

Introduction

The Covid-19 pandemic was a time of immense upheaval and uncertainty. The actions of governments and other relevant stakeholders during the Covid-19 pandemic are being examined across the world, through public inquiry or independent non-statutory evaluations. These investigations seek to determine the appropriateness of the pandemic response, learn lessons for the future, and to assess the wider impact on the economy and society.

Given the scale of the crisis, Fórsa welcomes a thorough evaluation of Ireland's response, particularly in relation to its impact on workers during and after the pandemic and welcomes the opportunity to contribute to the independent Covid-19 Evaluation.

However, we are conscious that the enormous toll of the pandemic, and how it was responded to, is unlikely to ever be adequately captured. It is impossible to quantify the tremendous personal loss experienced by so many, and the grief of those left behind, especially those who could not say goodbye to their loved ones. Nor can we measure the scale of change wrought on a population who entered this crisis together but too often emerged feeling alone.

Who we are

Fórsa represents more than 89,000 workers in the public and civil service including health, education and local authorities, as well as staff in the commercial state sector, state agencies, private companies and the community and voluntary sector.

Our membership is broad, with members working in very diverse professions, occupations, grades and work settings, and so their employment-related experience of the Covid-19 public health crisis varied accordingly. Thousands of our members continued to attend workplaces to maintain essential services during travel restrictions. These included health workers and health and social care professionals, staff in social protection and other civil service departments, and many local authority workers. Many more quickly adjusted to working remotely from home. Others (predominantly in aviation) depended on State income supports, and experienced wage reductions and/or reductions in working time.

This submission will highlight experiences across the public sector, mainly in health, education, local government, and also in aviation. Evidence was gathered through structured interviews with senior trade union officials in Fórsa who were representing workers employed in sectors most impacted by the Covid-19 pandemic. Additional sources included published e-bulletins throughout the evaluation period of 1 January 2020 to 28 February 2022, as well as published union reports about the experience of workers during Covid-19. The below sections provide a brief overview of the sectors and workers this evaluation seeks to primarily discuss.

Health

Fórsa represents over 30,000 health and welfare workers including health and social care professionals, clerical, administrative, management and technical staff. These members worked in environments most closely associated with the Covid-19 virus. Many members were temporarily redeployed from their existing roles to more critical roles to help prevent the spread of the virus, namely, vaccination centres and contact tracing within the HSE.

Civil Service

Fórsa represents 25,000 civil servants. This includes clerical, administrative, technical and professional staff and service officers. Civil servants were critical to the administration of State supports to support income retention, prevent mass unemployment, and to protect the economy during Covid-19.

Education

In education, Fórsa represents school secretaries and clerical staff, special needs assistants (SNAs) and caretakers. During the pandemic these workers' roles changed significantly, with many moving to remote work and facing challenges with technology and access to systems. School secretaries and clerical staff had to adapt to remote administration, often without access to adequate equipment in the early stages of the pandemic. Meanwhile, SNAs provided support to students with additional needs remotely.

Local Government and Services

Fórsa represents 12,000 workers employed by local authorities including clerical, administrative, management, technical and professional, and outdoor staff. Local authorities led Covid-19 community response initiatives across the country. Community response forums provided non-emergency and non-medical support during the pandemic. The forums coordinated the collection and delivery of food, essential household items, fuel and medication. They also provided advice and support to at-risk members of the community. The Civil Defence also played a central role in the Community Response initiative.

Aviation

Fórsa represents members who work in the aviation industry, including cabin crew and pilots, who were particularly affected by the pandemic due to travel restrictions and the fact that Irish aviation is dominated by international markets. This reliance on international travel meant its recovery period was slower to begin than that of other European countries. In the early stages of the pandemic, aviation workers were classified as essential workers, in part, so that flights could continue to facilitate Irish residents looking to return home after restrictions were announced. The travel restrictions and impact on aviation necessitated significant State support for the sector.

Role of trade unions in responding to the Covid-19 crisis

Fórsa played a strong leadership role throughout the public sector in responding to the Covid-19 pandemic. Our members were engaged in delivering many essential services, proving themselves to be remarkably agile, responding with efficiency and professionalism to the unprecedented challenges brought by the Covid-19 pandemic. Our members, who worked across a wide range of public service workplaces, including the civil service, health management and administration, local authorities, and schools, proactively set the tone for constructive engagement throughout the crisis.

An early decision was made to ensure that communication with members and the public was fast, decisive and clear. An early example of this approach was on March 13th 2020, when Fórsa made the below public statement:

"Fórsa and its members across the civil, public, private, voluntary and semi-state sectors are committed to cooperating 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."¹

This early intervention made clear how Fórsa would engage with emergency measures being rolled out to respond to the pandemic. Senior union officials pointed to the value of the directive throughout their contributions for this report.

The unprecedented crisis required changes to be introduced rapidly across the public service, 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. The seriousness of the threat of the spread of Covid-19 infections, meant that decisions had to be made quickly, and without undue delay. Fórsa, recognising the seriousness, scale and singularity of the public health crisis and its challenges, decided to cooperate with government, adopting a collaborative approach throughout the union from its national executive all the way down to the branch level. The following formal position was adopted by the union:

"The union will continue to advise its members to cooperate 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."²

1 Fórsa members' SPECIAL COVID-19 news bulletin: Friday 13th March 2020

2 Fórsa members' SPECIAL COVID-19 news bulletin: Friday 13th March 2020

Members were instructed to cooperate with management efforts to contain the virus, protect the health and safety of communities and workers, and maintain essential services. This approach supported prompt decision-making, enabling the Government to respond quickly to the challenges posed by the pandemic – which required major human resource reassignment and the allocation of other resources at pace.

Unprecedented remote working saw tens of thousands of workers in the civil and public service sent home to work remotely. Although the circumstances were less than ideal, the union and its members reacted very quickly to adapt to the new remote working guidance and restrictions on travel and thousands of civil and public servants worked productively from their homes during the first lockdown, which was announced by the Taoiseach on 27th March 2020.³ Elsewhere thousands of workers turned up at offices to deliver essential services. Many were temporarily redeployed to critical roles in the HSE for vital contact tracing work, or to provide assistance on telephone services in social protection.⁴

Following consultation with Fórsa, the agreed 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.

Staff in Fórsa contacted 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. The union published advice to members about safety measures and work attendance, which was frequently updated throughout 2020.

Unions' effective communications infrastructure

Throughout the pandemic, particularly in the earlier stages, there was a high degree of regular consultation and engagement between government and trade unions. This collaboration was crucial to fostering trust, maintaining workplace safety, and underpinning an exceptionally high degree of cooperation among workers and employers which was needed to navigate and adapt to the rapid and dramatic changes in workplaces and across communities.

Fórsa, as the leading public sector union, is well-connected to its members and therefore, can communicate effectively and quickly with its membership. The union's communication infrastructure is robust with well-established communications channels including e-bulletins, a frequently visited website, and social media, as well as structured communication through meetings with elected workplace representatives. This meant that Fórsa could play a key role in disseminating information about health and safety and workplace measures, the rationale for them, their implications for staff, and the safeguards and supports available for workers. The frequency of communications increased dramatically during the crisis, with continuous sector specific updates and real-time information on workplace requirements.

Fórsa's commitment to regular, clear, and honest communication fostered a strong, trusted relationship with its members. This trusted relationship enabled the union to effectively promote adherence to guidelines issued by the Government and the HSE throughout the Covid-19 pandemic. Similarly, the union consistently communicated with its members that there was a high level of engagement with the HSE and government officials, and this ongoing engagement further reinforced trust among public sector workers and the general public.

Fórsa's capacity to disseminate timely information often outpaced the government, providing valuable help to the government at a period of uncertainty for workers and the public. It was often better than individual employer's attempts to get information out quickly. As a result, the union's website became a trusted source of accurate and reliable information and attracted people outside of the union's membership. This effective communications strategy was only made possible by the union's regular engagement with government.

As the Government began the easing of Covid-19 restrictions from mid-May, Fórsa played a key role in supporting workers to return to work safely. It published detailed return-to-work advice to members, which was revised and frequently updated on foot of developments, as well as initiated detailed discussions with employers on return-to-work arrangements and the implementation of associated safety protocols. This proactive role further underscored Fórsa's value as a conduit between the government, workers, and the general public.

³ Speech of the Taoiseach Leo Varadkar TD, Government Buildings, 27 March 2020

⁴ Large number of public service staff to be redeployed to contact tracing – The Irish Times

Fórsa's leadership and effective communications strategy emphasised collective responsibility and our members' commitment to public service.

Trust between parties

Trust between parties responding to the pandemic was frequently identified by senior leaders in the union as being of critical importance to the early pandemic response. Interviews further highlighted that open communication between the union leadership, government departments, and other relevant employers was noted as having a positive impact on the earlier phases of the pandemic response.

In some cases, pre-existing relationships between government officials, employers and union representatives meant that there was a strong foundation of trust and cooperation already established between parties. In areas where pre-existing relationships were not as well established or did not exist, the ready sharing of information and an open and collaborative approach to decision making was noted as being a key component of building trust between the union and government officials, and employers.

Trust between the partners was critical to the success of programmes such as test and trace and the redeployment of staff. Decisions around the development of these programmes were significant in nature and made early in the pandemic response. In general, union leaders felt there was an opportunity to provide feedback on decisions as they were being made, in appropriate areas.

Due to the decision by Fórsa to fully co-operate with emergency measures early in the pandemic response, it was generally understood that Fórsa officials operated in a supportive and collaborative fashion with a view to improving proposals or delivering on actions agreed by the Government. This was especially the case in the earlier part of the pandemic. However, as the crisis continued, traditional advocacy became a more prominent feature of the union's intervention.

Information sharing

Senior union officials highlighted that the high frequency and quality of information being shared by their counterparts in relevant employers significantly impacted decision-making. Overall, these reports were generally positive. However, there were instances in which the structure of the engagement with unions hampered information sharing and, by extension, decision making.

Weekly meeting with Department of Public Expenditure and Reform

A weekly meeting between Fórsa and the Department of Public Expenditure and Reform was seen as being critical to building trust in the early stages of the pandemic. This meeting was attended by senior leaders from Fórsa and representatives from the Department as well as from the Department of the Taoiseach.

It was considered useful that there was appropriate recognition of the wide remit and representation of Fórsa in the civil service and public sector. Additionally, the ability to raise important issues at a central and senior level facilitated smoother action and decision making. The flow of information from the Department at the meeting was also viewed in a highly positive manner and was considered central to building trust in the early days of the pandemic.

Policy development and the Temporary Wage Subsidy Scheme

An example of the union's contribution to national policy development and ultimately delivering on government objectives was the design and administration of the pandemic related social welfare payments. Through the General Secretary, the union provided feedback on how the payment should operate and be distributed. Further, through the elected leadership at branch level, the union facilitated full cooperation with the decision to provide the payment to those who qualified in a timely manner.

Insufficient engagement in Aviation

Aviation is one area where issues were reported relating to trust between the union and government parties. Senior union officials reported insufficient engagement between the union and government departments through official channels. Most official communication was between the employers and the Department. This was especially problematic in the early onset of the pandemic when there was almost no official engagement between the union and government. This lack of communication occurred at a time when airline staff were operating flights repatriating Irish citizens. There was little advice available in relation to the use of PPE, even where PPE was available.

Union officials noted that staff operating flights with large numbers of people in confined spaces reported distress at the prospect of exposing family members to Covid-19 as a result of carrying out their duties. Additionally, the gap created by the absence of communication was filled with speculative and unhelpful reports on the disease from elsewhere.

While a new Taskforce for Aviation Recovery was announced on 10 June 2020, this was almost three months after the announcement of travel restrictions.⁵ The makeup of this taskforce was heavily weighted towards industry, with eleven out of the fifteen members from industry, only one department representative, one academic, and one trade union representative. Additionally, some of the communication that did come from departments was sometimes at odds with public health advice. This led to confusion and distress among staff and later, to general mistrust.

Senior union officials reported that the Department eventually recognised the need for structured and formal engagement with unions but that this took too long to establish, and recovery plans were hampered as a result.

Local authority community response

Not all actions related directly to emergency or health related responses. Community response initiatives played an important role in maintaining social cohesion and support, especially at times when public health advice meant many people could not meet in person.

Local authorities were instrumental in the provision of vital services to communities throughout the pandemic. In January 2023 the Department of Local Government published a report on some of that activity.

The community call initiative sought to link members of the community with services to meet their needs. This was delivered through a dedicated phone service in every local authority.

Local authorities handled 70,297 calls in the period when community call was in service.⁶ This included meal service, medical and health service calls, social isolation calls, collection and delivery service calls among other concerns. The Community Call initiative was later adapted to co-ordinate the community-led response to people fleeing the war in Ukraine.⁷

The Keep Well initiative ran for six months from January 2021 to June 2021 and was focused on the physical and mental health and the overall wellbeing of the community. Local authorities supported organisations in organising thousands of events reaching out to hundreds of thousands of people.⁸

Digital library services were provided during 2020 and 2021 at a time when much of the in-person service was closed. The period saw a significant increase in the provision of online resources such as courses, newspapers and eAudiobooks.

The Civil Defence in particular took on an important role in responding to the pandemic in communities. The Civil Defence were involved in patient transfer, distributing medicine, PPE and other items.

5 Minister Ross announces new Taskforce for Aviation Recovery

6 <https://www.localgov.ie/sites/default/files/2024-03/local-government-covid-19-response-data.pdf>

7 <https://www.gov.ie/en/department-of-the-taoiseach/publications/how-people-and-community-groups-can-help/>

8 <https://www.localgov.ie/sites/default/files/2024-03/local-government-covid-19-response-data.pdf>

Collaborative decision-making during the crisis and public service mobilisation

For the purposes of this report collaborative decision-making should be understood to mean adequate consultation by government departments and other public sector employers and social partners, which in the case of this report is Fórsa trade union. It is recognised that not all of the decisions being made required collaborative decision-making. Additionally, it is understood that many decisions, particularly early in the pandemic, were made in an environment that did not facilitate standard consultation procedures.

Senior union officials noted that Fórsa's representative role across the public service was respected during the early stages of the pandemic. Its leadership was actively involved in shaping the decisions that were being made and in influencing policy development. Its involvement was not just cooperative, but essential.

The union also played a critical role in public service mobilisation, which is evident through the efficiency of the redeployment of public service workers to other or new crisis-focused roles, the effective organisation of work in high-risk areas, the rapid and largely effective switch to remote working on a scale unprecedented pre-Covid-19 and, later, in the 'return to work' environment.

The active collaboration between unions and public service employers allowed the delivery of emergency income payments, the test-and-trace programme and other critical components in the early days of the pandemic.

While most of the public focus was on health in the early period of the crisis, the 'hidden' contribution of workers in areas like social welfare, revenue, and many local authority services, was vital to the national response.

The level of engagement and collaboration varied between government departments. In some cases, union officials felt that the union was an active participant in planning and decision-making where appropriate. However, in other government departments, there were challenges in getting the union's views across to decision-makers. It should be noted that this applied at a time when the operating assumption of the union's leadership was to co-operate fully with emergency measures. In this environment, it was felt inadequate consultation with unions contributed to avoidable errors in government decision-making.

Honouring commitments made in an emergency context

A positive example of the collaborative decision-making and cooperation was the HSE's clear communication that decisions were being made in an emergency context. It was widely understood that the rapid shift in working arrangements and practices were temporary and would not be expected afterwards, and there would be a return to the normal industrial relations mechanisms. The HSE followed through with this commitment post-Covid-19. However, other departments have been less committed to this reversal and are expecting outputs delivered in emergency situations to become the expected output at present and in the future. This perceived reneging has damaged trust between the partners, eroded goodwill and has created an environment in which similar commitments made in the future are likely to be met with scepticism.

Confusing messaging in Education

Senior union representatives in education noted that some decisions being made by the Department of Education undermined trust in government messaging. This related to the variance in the social distancing advice being offered to the public and that being presented to schools.

While some of this could be explained by the different environments in which schools operate versus most of the rest of the country, there was some unfortunate, and ultimately unnecessary, confusion in messaging that was a source of distress for members. The discrepancies in advice ultimately led to the delay of the plan to return to schools.

A source of particular frustration among the union, was the resistance it encountered in trying to convince the Department to provide adequate PPE to school workers. The issue continued to the point that the union was forced to purchase proper masks for its members. While the Department eventually agreed to provide the PPE, the delay and resistance was deemed unnecessary and severely undermined trust in communications issuing from the Department.

Redeployment of SNAs

One area where there was a mixed experience in collaborative decision making was in relation to the redeployment of staff.

In March 2020, an elected official announced that Special Needs Assistants (SNAs) could be redeployed in health settings. A proposal was subsequently drafted on what that deployment would look like. While the proposal was drafted on foot of the announcement by an elected official both actions occurred without any consultation with unions, and the Government was forced to backtrack when issues arose with the plan as outlined.⁹

This series of events undermined confidence in decision making at the Department of Education and could have been avoided if the Department adopted a similar approach to engaging with unions as their counterparts in other departments.

Conversely, union leaders reported positive experiences in engaging with the HSE, the Department of Health and the Department of Social Protection. This led to measurably positive outcomes in pandemic response. Most notably in expanding capacity to address the surge of demand relating to Pandemic Unemployment Payments (PUP) in social protection and the agreement to make HSE staff available to private nursing homes in health.

It is important to note that senior union officials stated that the Department of Education did eventually move to a more collaborative approach in dealing with unions.

Recovery plans

Collaborative decision making was an issue in the aviation industry mainly owing to a lack of communication and responsiveness within the Department of Transport.

The Department did not initially create any structures for direct engagement with unions despite the significant focus on the industry in the lead up to the lockdown including the use of flights to repatriate residents of Ireland and the highly publicised PPE flights.

When the Department eventually announced a taskforce for recovery in June 2020 the group was comprised of 15 members with an obvious imbalance favouring industry in the makeup of the group.

Generally, as plans for recovery became a more central focus, interviewees for this report noted an overall reduction in the levels of social dialogue. In some cases, social dialogue had been relegated to only informing stakeholders about decisions, rather than involving or consulting them as part of the decision-making process.

9 SNAs to be redeployed to other public service duties

Temporary Wage Subsidy Scheme

A key example of Fórsa and the Irish Congress of Trade Union's influence on significant policy decisions was the design of the income supports, namely, the Temporary Wage Subsidy Scheme (TWSS). This scheme allowed eligible employees, who were employed in businesses experiencing significant negative disruption due to the Covid-19 pandemic, to receive wage supports directly from their employer. Crucially, it aimed to keep employees registered with their employers, so that they could get back to work quickly after the pandemic.

This crucial 'stay-in-situ' feature was put forward by the unions and agreed by all parties and prevented mass layoffs, supported employees to retain a substantial portion of their income, supported consumer demand, protected businesses, and reduced the risk of long-term unemployment. This proved to be of vital importance when the economy began to 'reopen' making it easier for the economy to recover after the initial shocks. The wider societal focus of the union leadership and its commitment to the public good also delivered a better social support payment.

Essential to the delivery of this scheme were Fórsa members across the civil service, particularly in Revenue, who ensured the scheme was administered efficiently and that businesses could access the scheme. The scheme was up and running in under two weeks,¹⁰ since the announcement of lockdowns, which is a testament to the employees who worked to deliver and administer the scheme. Employees successfully rolled out this new payment initiative while working from home, demonstrating that large scale innovations and high levels of productivity can be achieved with remote working. PUP provided people who lost their jobs due to Covid-19 closures and disruptions with income support. The PUP was announced on 16 March 2020, and by 30 March 2020, 283,000 people had been approved for receipt of the payment. This was the equivalent of a 19-month caseload in normal times.¹¹

Workplace safety protocols

Unions' involvement in the design and implementation of safety at work and return to work protocols were critical to their success, and importantly, to their acceptance by workers. It should be widely understood that the Government would have struggled to implement these and other workplace changes without the support of unions.

The leadership of Fórsa, particularly in relation to the return of schools, where Fórsa represents school secretaries, caretakers, special needs assistants (SNAs) and school completion programme staff was important given the difficulty of managing the risk of the spread of Covid-19 infection in school settings and with children.

Schools

The Government did not adequately engage unions in respect of the plan to reopen schools. This led, in January of 2021, to unions declaring that return to school plans were "unrealistic"¹² and the Government ultimately delayed the reopening of schools.

The primary concern of Fórsa, and other unions, was that the health advice being offered to the public was at odds with statements about safety in schools. It was felt that the Department did not adequately address the reasons for this, and the primary focus was re-opening schools even when doing so was at odds with public health advice.

This approach sometimes left schools in a difficult position of having to choose between which safety protocols were best to violate. For example, if schools chose to keep windows and doors open to ensure adequate air circulation, they could often risk the room temperature dropping below acceptable standards for teaching.

¹⁰ Temporary COVID-19 Wage Subsidy Scheme (TWSS)

¹¹ 283,000 approved for COVID-19 Pandemic Unemployment Payment - Extra.ie

¹² <https://www.forsa.ie/new-lockdown-plans-for-special-education-unrealistic/>

While Fórsa and other unions accepted the extraordinary circumstances of the situation, there was a shared feeling that the Department, at times, did not recognise that they were advocating policy that was at odds with public health advice. Additionally, the case being made as to why schools could deviate from the public health advice was not convincing.

Provision of PPE

While it is possible to argue that reopening schools was of paramount importance, concerns were exacerbated by the Department Of Education's unwillingness to accept widely understood public health advice relating to PPE. Union officials reported that the Department took far too long to agree to distribute N95 masks to schools.¹³ Eventually, the union was forced to order and distribute the equipment to members.¹⁴

A similar situation arose in the very early days of the pandemic when staff operating flights did so without adequate access to PPE. This experience was quite distressing for a number of staff, especially those who lived with a vulnerable person. Additionally, the lack of communication from the Department of Transport at the time meant that information gaps were being filled with unsubstantiated claims about the virus and its effect.

Remote working

During the pandemic there were inconsistencies in the application of remote and hybrid working policies. This issue was highlighted in January 2021 when Fórsa reported that many public service employers were flouting official government restrictions on workplace attendance.¹⁵ The issues arose because of a failure to identify which workers needed to attend their work premises to undertake essential functions. This inconsistent approach and lack of preparation led to workers being compelled to present at their work premises unnecessarily at time when Covid-19 was at its peak in the community.

13 Less than 50% of schools providing basic PPE – Fórsa survey - Fórsa

14 Union to distribute masks to SNAs amid concerns about inadequate provision in schools

15 Employers flouting workplace attendance rules - Fórsa

Challenges

Underfunded public health system

The historical underfunding of our public health 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 – impaired Ireland's ability to maximise a fully coherent and integrated response to the pandemic and poses a threat to the response to future crises.

The spirit of social solidarity that played such a prominent role in decision-making in the early days of the pandemic was gradually sidelined in favour of a return to a more market-oriented policy making, reflecting the priorities of the business lobby, often at the expense of workers.

It is clear that early and comprehensive engagement led to a collaborative approach between the Government and workers, particularly in the public sector. However, where this engagement faltered, or in instances where such engagement did not happen, there was confusion, mistrust and distress among workforces.

The Department of Education, while it did improve its level of engagement throughout the two years of crisis management, was slow to engage meaningfully with the sector and this had a negative effect on both workers and the families they serve. The lack of consultation on redeployment proposals caused significant distress, and could have been avoided if engagement was more structured like that in the HSE and other areas of the public sector.

The aviation sector faced unique challenges, including financial hardship among workers, lack of planning, and insufficient support – issues which were less pronounced in the public sector areas of health, education, local government and the civil service. However, the Department of Transport was slow to initiate structured engagement with employee representatives and employers.

Inconsistent communication from central government

Inconsistencies in communication proved challenging for workers, as different government departments sometimes issued contradictory advice on health and safety information or requirements. This was most evident in Education and Aviation.

Delays in PPE provision

There was a serious delay in providing SNAs with adequate PPE when they were required to work on-site. Without the unions stepping in to provide PPE, these workers would have had a significantly increased risk of infection in the workplace.

Exclusion of health workers from the Pandemic Special Recognition Payment

While many health workers were formally recognised through the Pandemic Special Recognition Payment (PSRP), there remain issues of exclusion of some workers within the sector. Fórsa members working in health and social care settings were vital in ensuring the provision of essential care and in keeping services running during the pandemic. It is their dedication and commitment to helping people that kept the most vulnerable people safe during the most challenging of times for people and their families.

In January 2022, the Government announced that a once-off payment, the PSRP, would be made available for frontline healthcare workers, in recognition of their dedication to providing public health services and care during the most challenging and difficult circumstances of the Covid-19 pandemic. Feedback has shown that many workers were excluded from the scheme, and it remains our position that they should have been included, given the essential, frontline work that they completed.

It is Fórsa's position that all relevant workers who delivered frontline services should receive the pandemic special recognition payment. In cases where workers were excluded from the PSRP, unions should be allowed to make their cases for inclusion through a case-by-case review. Additionally, a third-party review should be commissioned to review the implementation of the PRSP to ensure relevant organisations were not excluded from the spirit of the scheme.

Lack of formal recognition for non-health workers

Outside of the health sector, there are many workers who contributed majorly to the national response to Covid-19 – be this through the timely administration of social welfare and income payments, the provision of education to young children with additional needs, or the redeployment of workers to roles other than their own. Many workers also worked beyond their contracted hours during the crisis and risked their health and safety and that of their family by attending workplaces. However, there has been no formal recognition of workers' efforts or the toll placed on them over the period of the pandemic response.

The lack of recognition has a social cost, meaning it can affect workforce morale, lead to burnout, or lead to a breakdown of trust between them and the employer, as well as lead to a breakdown in social cohesion and social solidarity.

Deterioration of goodwill

The Covid-19 response heavily depended on the goodwill of workers, many of whom went beyond their normal duties and worked beyond their contracted hours. They did this in recognition of the collective responsibility to manage the crisis, to maintain public health, protect jobs, and support communities. As previously mentioned, the normal industrial relations process was bypassed in order to expedite necessary changes to work practices.

During the pandemic, there were commitments made regarding terms and conditions of employment that have not been followed through. This has created tensions between workers and their employers and has led to a deterioration of goodwill and a breakdown in trust. This is particularly evident in the Department of Social Protection where targets in respect of work output have not returned to non-crisis levels, even where that output during the crisis involved workers going above and beyond reasonable workloads.

For example, a situation has developed in the Department of Social Protection where targets being set by the employer are informed by outputs achieved during the crisis and in an emergency. It is the view of the union that the Department has failed to meet the spirit of the commitment laid out in 2020 to revert to pre-covid expectations in respect of work output. The current situation, if left unaddressed is likely to make it difficult to take future declarations of this nature at face value. This may cause delays in reaching agreement or other empirically driven scepticism on behalf of some parties.

Recommendations

The Covid-19 pandemic presented a wide range of challenges for the Government, employers, and for workers and their families. These challenges, while at an unprecedented scale, were overcome through effective collaboration, coordination, and through a strong collective responsibility to support each other and communities through the crisis.

The consensus among union officials was that the State's response to the crisis was appropriate given the pace of the spread of the virus, and the tools at the State's disposal at the time. However, this evaluation and analysis of the management of Covid-19 and the State's response has uncovered several areas where the response could have been improved or where lessons can be learned. The below recommendations may help to avoid some of the challenges which emerge in a crisis, including those mentioned earlier in this document.

Strengthen access to collective bargaining and promote trade union membership

Fórsa committed early to full cooperation with necessary emergency measures and continued to advise its members to cooperate with decisions, even where such decisions would usually require lengthy negotiations before their adoption or agreement. It is the union's understanding that this early intervention and cooperation was crucial to cohesion throughout the public sector and in our communities.

Several studies, both in Ireland and across the EU, have shown that unionised workplaces or industries where high union density exists, fared better than those with low density or where union recognition was non-existent. Unionised workplaces were able to respond quickly to issues of concern from their employees, often reaching solutions with union representatives, and making the return to work safer for everyone. Those with union representation felt their concerns about workplace safety were addressed more than those without.¹⁶

The promotion of union membership and collective bargaining will strengthen unity in workplaces, and foster a shared sense of collective responsibility, helping to protect social cohesion across society and communities. This can only serve to benefit the State in future instances where a crisis response is necessary. Ireland should strengthen access to collective bargaining and strive to meet the ambitions of the EU directive on collective bargaining to increase this type of protection, in preparation for future similar crises.

Improved coordination of public services

There is a lack of coordination and diverse policy agendas and interests between government departments which brings subsequent consequences for frontline services. A 'whole-of-government' approach to implementing policy across departments, following a shared understanding of strategy and desired impact, would strengthen policymaking and improve outcomes.

¹⁶ Essential workers who were union members felt safer during COVID-19

Engagement with trade unions

Early, regular dialogue with unions and stakeholders is essential in crisis management. This proved to be invaluable to those sectors where it existed, but detrimental to those where it did not, particularly in terms of maintaining workforce morale and helping to assuage workers of their fears in relation to the spread of the virus.

Adequate engagement with unions will help to build mutual trust between parties, making the necessary transition to crisis work-practices easier, while also helping to identify problems and solutions early in the decision-making process. The Government should avoid managing public services by diktat. Failure to collaborate and engage meaningfully with unions can create unnecessary tensions in workplaces and does not support problem-solving in a crisis.

As evident throughout the Covid-19 crisis, maintaining regular communication with unions also supports the timely sharing of adequate and trusted information. This helped with the adherence to health and safety guidelines, reducing the risk to workers and their families, as well as the wider community.

Clear and consistent communications

Consistent, clear communication and a unified narrative is critical in any future crisis. Conflicting or contradictory advice or messaging risks eroding trust among workers and the general public. This can result in a loss of public 'buy-in' and weaken the effectiveness of future communications. All information must be well thought through, aligned with government departments, and easily understood. Where differences in communications or guidelines cannot be avoided due to policy decisions, early engagement with stakeholder representatives is absolutely essential to ensure a unified narrative and approach.

Review the impact of the crisis

Post-crisis, the Government should conduct a thorough review of the impact of Covid-19 on workers, their families, and the wider public. Following a review, the Government should take necessary steps to address any long-term impacts on workers, including implementing adequate supports.

Targeted support measures

Targeted supports were very effective during the Covid-19 crisis, and future emergency measures should follow the same principle. Recent policy decisions, such as the 'Cost-of-Living' measures to reduce energy bills, have been implemented universally to all households in the country.¹⁷ This has reduced the overall impact of the support by providing financial support to those who do not need it (as much as others). Failure to adequately target financial supports results in unnecessary higher costs on the State.

Acknowledgement of workers' contributions

There is a need for a more lasting acknowledgement of the contribution made by workers during the Covid-19 crisis. Across all sectors, workers played their part in the national response – whether that be through delivering public services in health, education, and local communities; supporting households through retail; or in ensuring our economy could withstand the unprecedented challenges and recover strongly.

¹⁷ Government announces new cost-of-living measures for families, businesses and the most vulnerable

The post-Covid-19 environment

Interviewees noted that a key aspect of the early decision-making process was the total uncertainty of the duration and severity of the crisis. As time progressed it became increasingly apparent that Covid-19 was here to stay, at least in the medium term. It also became clear that, while all sectors moved into lockdown at the same time, they would not all emerge at the same time or at the same pace. One of the more obvious examples of this was the recognition that the aviation sector would likely be one of the last sectors to “return to normal.”

Over time it became clear that sectors should plan for stages of recovery. This initially took the form of “living with Covid-19” and later “post-Covid” strategies.

During this period, consultation with the Department of Transport regarding aviation and the Department of Education improved. While this did not necessarily mean the union's concerns were fully taken on board it was reported that, in general, there was better recognition within these departments of the need to properly engage with unions.

It was during this period that Fórsa began to expand on advocacy and enforcement as part of its remit in the Covid-19 response. This included responding to decisions being made at the time and advocating on issues of concern in the longer term.

While some of the challenges presenting in this area have been examined elsewhere in the report it is worth exploring some elements in greater depth.

State building

As early as April 2020 trade unions were advocating for the spirit of the emergency response, in terms of collaboration and cooperation with social partners and strong levels of State investment, to be the foundation of long-term planning for the country.¹⁸ Unions noted that social solidarity and strong support for a State-led response formed the bedrock of the initial response to the massive challenges of the Covid-19 crisis.

Fórsa argued that if this approach was central to policymaking, the State could deliver an Ireland that was “more secure, more equal, more united, and better prepared for future shocks.” This would provide better opportunities for unions and other social partners to influence policy decisions on living with and through post-covid strategies.

In May 2020, the Irish Congress of Trade Unions (ICTU) published an extensive report titled “No Going Back” outlining a recovery that established an “economy based on inclusivity, participation and sustainable development.”¹⁹

Over the summer of 2020, unions successfully cautioned against a return to austerity politics on foot of reports of pay freezes²⁰ for public servants.²¹ From the beginning, unions were focused on a recovery that identified people and communities as the central concern.

Some announcements by the Government in the period from June 2020 to February 2022 indicated a receptiveness to this approach. Announcements pertaining to sick leave,²² the living wage²³ and, remote and hybrid working policies²⁴ initially seemed promising and were welcomed by unions. However, over time, the Government has underdelivered or walked back commitments in each of these areas.

18 <https://www.forsa.ie/blog/covid-19-our-1945-moment/>

19 <https://www.ictu.ie/publications/no-going-back>

20 <https://www.irishexaminer.com/news/arid-40040321.html>

21 <https://www.rte.ie/news/ireland/2020/0914/1165189-public-servant-pay/>

22 <https://www.gov.ie/en/department-of-enterprise-tourism-and-employment/press-releases/all-workers-to-have-right-to-sick-pay-as-t%c3%a1naistes-sick-leave-law-passes-all-stages-of-oireachtas/>

23 <https://www.gov.ie/en/department-of-enterprise-tourism-and-employment/press-releases/t%c3%a1naiste-announces-introduction-of-national-living-wage/>

24 <https://www.irishexaminer.com/news/arid-40066281.html>

The spirit of social solidarity that played such a prominent role in decision-making in the early days of the pandemic was gradually sidelined in favour of a return to more market-oriented policy making, reflecting the priorities of the business lobby, often at the expense of workers.

Fórsa have continued to advocate for a larger state with greater public investment publishing the “Irish State Post Pandemic”²⁵ in February 2022 and a follow up report “The Future of the Irish State”²⁶ in June 2025. Both reports were commissioned by Fórsa and written by the Think Tank for Action and Social Change (TASC).

Social dialogue

A prominent feature of the early stages of the pandemic and unions advocacy on emerging from Covid-19 and post-covid strategies was the status of social dialogue.

In the early crisis management phase, there was a consistent overlap between the levels of social dialogue and the perceived performance of government departments. Where there was a high level of dialogue, such as in the HSE or Department of Public Expenditure and Reform, there was a view that departments responded well to the crisis. Conversely, where dialogue was lacking, there was a less favourable outlook on performance.

It should be noted that in cases where dialogue was below expectations, officials were able to point to concrete examples of how they might have improved the situation if there was more open dialogue. This particularly relates to issues like the reopening of schools and redeployment of staff which have been addressed elsewhere in this report.

Departments did eventually accept the need for greater dialogue with unions, and where there were deficiencies, these were ameliorated, if not fully addressed over time. However, issues relating to top-down decision making sometimes with little or no advance warning was an issue throughout.

As conversations shifted to focus on long-term recovery and “post-Covid” planning unions continued to advocate for increased social dialogue. The focus of this was on avoiding the past mistakes of austerity, greater investment in public services and ensuring an equitable economic recovery for all.

Interviewees felt, in general, that “post-Covid” planning has meant a reduction in meaningful social dialogue and that even structured engagements such as the Labour Employment Economic Forum (LEEF) are not given adequate status by the Government.

The downgrading of social dialogue, which was seen to be at a low ebb pre-Covid, is viewed as posing a risk to future crisis management efforts. Further, some respondents were exasperated at government’s eagerness to move away from the engagements that had been so instrumental to the crisis response in the first place.

As a global public health crisis that required a global public health response, Covid-19 was a unique experience for the vast majority of people, and it presented a significant challenge to a broad range of stakeholders in Ireland. However, it is not the only challenge Ireland has faced in recent years. Lessons should be learned about the immense value of engaging in meaningful social dialogue and those lessons should form the basis for future engagements.

25 <https://www.tasc.ie/publications/the-irish-state-post-pandemic/>

26 <https://www.tasc.ie/publications/future-of-the-irish-state-2025-and-beyond/>

Remote and hybrid working

The possibility of widespread remote and hybrid working arrangements was one of the few positive consequences of the pandemic. The prospect of workers having more free time due to reduced commutes, rural and regional communities having increased opportunities for long-term employment and enhanced career progression, and the general improvements in well-being that are associated with more flexible working arrangements made for an optimistic outlook on the future of work.

The idea to enhance remote and hybrid working policies as a feature of Ireland's workplace culture developed early on. Several supportive statements were made by the Government and in 2022 details of a new law giving workers the right to request remote working were published.

The rather tepid legislation did not meet worker expectations and was described as a "right for employers to refuse remote and hybrid working" by trade unions.²⁷ Rather than strike a balance between worker and employer concerns, the legislation has proven to be almost totally ineffective and, as of May 2025, the majority of complaints have found in favour of the employer.²⁸

²⁷ <https://www.forsa.ie/unions-demand-stronger-remote-work-rights/>

²⁸ <https://www.williamfry.com/knowledge/testing-the-strength-of-the-right-to-request-remote-work-arrangements/>

Conclusion

The Covid-19 pandemic was one of the most challenging times in the last century, placing great strain on our economy and our public services. Although it brought enormous disruption to our lives, it also highlighted the strength of solidarity which exists in our workplaces and our communities, and the ability of workers and families to adapt in order to protect public health and to prevent the spread of the virus.

It must be noted that while the virus brought significant economic and social challenges, the response created new opportunities, such as the widespread introduction and adoption of remote working. Remote working has brought wide-ranging benefits to workers, their families and employers – while also supporting the revitalisation of local economies in towns and villages outside of our cities. However, the crisis also highlighted severe gaps in service provision and put a spotlight on areas where existing capacity constraints and resourcing issues have continued to be a problem over past decades. This has been hugely evident in health and care settings and in housing.

The lessons we have learned from the Covid-19 response must be used to inform future policy making so that Ireland emerges from the pandemic in a way which not only better prepares us for future crises but also improves people's lives.

Looking ahead, increased investment in essential infrastructure and public services and active intervention will be critical to reducing inequality and improving people's quality of life across Ireland.

The 2022 report 'The Irish State post pandemic' argues for an expanded state with increased State intervention and public spending to improve childcare, eldercare, higher education and renewable energy.²⁹ The report outlines the need for more joined-up thinking across government to ensure policies are holistic and achieve long-term strategic plans. Its successor, 'The Future of the Irish State: 2025 and Beyond' further highlights emerging challenges that will affect Ireland in the short and longer term, namely the cost of living, climate action, and artificial intelligence and provides considerations on how to address these issues.³⁰ Both reports call for a more visionary state with a capacity to engage in strategic policymaking and investment to tackle structural social, economic and environmental challenges. We have learnt that decisive State intervention can support our communities, protect livelihoods, and keep our economy moving. The Government, in collaboration with the social partners, must continue to invest in our public services and in our communities to build a fairer, more resilient Ireland.

29 Robert Sweeney, Shana Cohen, 'The Irish state post pandemic', [report], TASC / FORSA, 2022-02-24

30 Robert Sweeney, Shana Cohen, 'The Future of the Irish State: 2025 and Beyond', [report] TASC/FORSA, 2025



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