

## **Opening remarks by An Tanaiste**

### **Joint Oireachtas Committee**

**Wednesday 19 May 2021**

Thank you Chairman and committee members for the invitation to discuss the employment of content moderators and the re-activation of the economy in the context of COVID-19.

As the two issues are quite different, I will speak initially about content moderators and then move on to the economy more generally.

Although it's a new form of work, content moderation plays a vital role in our use of the internet, and in turn our everyday lives. It's hard to imagine what the internet would be like without them.

Content moderators carry out really important work to protect all of us and we need to ensure that they are protected properly in their work.

They prevent the wider distribution of explicit and harmful content and I know there are very specific stressors – i.e. things that cause distress – inherent in the type of work they carry out.

I believe it requires appropriate training, competence, ongoing de-briefing and supervision within a well-established safe and healthy system of work.

In late January, following a request from Deputy Louise O'Reilly, I met with a group of content moderators and their representatives to hear from them first-hand.

Following the meeting, I wrote to Facebook setting out the concerns raised at the meeting and the company provided a detailed response to my letter, I am happy to share this with the Committee.

There is a strong legislative regime in Ireland to protect all workers in terms of their working conditions, including work-related health and safety.

All employers, no matter what sector they are in, have a duty of care towards employees to ensure that a safe working environment is created. This includes the management of workplace stressors or psycho-social hazards.

As I said, appropriate training must be provided and employers must carry out a risk assessment with a particular focus on potential hazards in relation to content moderation work.

Proper risk assessment, along with mitigation measures, is the foundation for all workplace health and safety. Promoting positive mental health within the workplace is good for the employees and is also a factor in improving overall business performance.

I urge employees to engage in the first instance with their employer to see how their concerns can be resolved at workplace level.

However, any content moderator concerned for their health and safety can contact the Health and Safety Authority in confidence and can also contact the Workplace Relations Commission about broader working conditions. Where necessary, the resolution mechanisms available from the relevant State Agencies can be utilised by both employers and employees.

I am aware that the Health and Safety Authority is addressing matters already raised with them. As you will appreciate, the HSA is independent in the carrying out of its regulatory function.

**Moving on to the second topic – the reactivation of the economy** – I'm very hopeful that we can return to something close to normality by late summer.

It has been an extremely long road for everyone – for workers, businesses, friends and family – but I think our patience will have been worth it.

The vaccination programme is picking up momentum, administering approximately 270,000 vaccines per week.

Nearly 40% of our adult population has had at least one dose

now and we hope to have the vast majority of our adult population at least once by the end of June and fully by end of September.

Within the next two weeks we expect to be in a position to publish the National Economic Recovery Plan.

The Plan will provide certainty for businesses and workers by outlining targeted assistance for sectors which will continue to be most adversely affected by the pandemic.

It will outline the next steps for the emergency pandemic interventions, including the PUP and EWSS, reaffirming the Government's commitment to avoid a cliff-edge.

At the same time, they cannot continue indefinitely.

I think Members will agree that the three main schemes – the CRSS, EWSS and PUP – compare favourably with what's on offer in other countries.

Members may be aware that my colleague Minister Troy published our proposals for a new Small Company Administrative Rescue Process – SCARP – last week. This is a cheaper, quicker alternative to examinership and with the help of the Committee, we hope to have the Bill enacted before the summer recess.



The National Economic Recovery Plan will help to drive a jobs rich recovery, help people return to work, and assist sectors which have been and will continue to be disproportionately affected by the pandemic.

It will also set out our ambition not just to return to the pre-pandemic Ireland, but to build a better “normal” – a more inclusive society that is equipped to meet head on the twin challenges of digital and green.

Last Friday I published updated guidance on ventilation, and antigen testing to reduce the spread of covid in the workplace and help people get back to work and businesses to open and stay open.

The updated Work Safely Protocol is the most up to date public health advice for the workplace. It sets out the measures required to prevent the spread of Covid-19 in the workplace, including information on how to approach the use of antigen testing.

Our advice is still to continue to work from home where possible, but this Protocol makes sure every workplace has clear, up-to-date guidance.

It gives clear information on how to use antigen testing appropriately in the workplace. It sets out that these tests should be used as an additional health and safety measure and not as a substitute for any other precautions.

Employers should also consider how they can improve ventilation in workplaces. Even simple actions like airing rooms or keeping a window open can make a difference.

Although we intend to vaccinate the vast majority of the adult population by the end of June, the reality is some people can't or won't take one. Vaccination is and will remain voluntary so it's important that employers have guidance on how to manage any unvaccinated workers. This document gives that information. It will need to be added to in the next iteration.

Thank you, Chairman. I look forward to Members' comments and I am happy to answer any questions you may have.

**ENDS**