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Opening Statement
Joint Committee on Media, Tourism, Arts, Culture, Sport and the Gaeltacht
December 2nd, 2020

The Impact of Covid-19 across the Tourism Sector

Cathaoirleach, Members

Thank you for the invitation. In 2019 tourism accounted for 260,000 jobs, in some counties, as many as 1 in 5 jobs relied on tourism. In 2020 the sector revenue declined by a massive €6bn and hundreds of thousands of jobs were lost. But while revenue stopped for businesses the costs did not and the stress on business owners is immense.

Fáilte Ireland's response has been comprehensive. Our Covid Advisory Group of industry, agencies and department officials has met 26 times, we refunded €3 million to businesses in fees and delivered 14 separate suites of online supports and training tools which have been accessed over 500,000 times by industry. And supplemented this with extensive individual business mentoring.

We developed and continuously update 11 sets of Sectoral Safe Reopening Guidelines, that have been accessed 90,000 times.

We launched a major new summer marketing campaign 'Make a Break for It'. We also launched the Fáilte Ireland Covid Safety Charter designed to deliver, and instil confidence in, safety in tourism. 5,000 businesses have registered to date. And this week we are launching campaigns to promote safe indoor dining practices and to promote accommodation gift vouchers. We also established 23 Local Destination Recovery Taskforces nationwide.

On business tourism Fáilte Ireland, working with industry, continue to win future business. This year, we generated 206 new conference leads worth €121million, our total future leads pipeline is now worth €1billion. We delivered 12 virtual international sales platforms with over 2,000 global business tourism buyers.

On international leisure tourism, we supported over 1500 Irish industry to engage with international buyers on 17 virtual sales platforms organised in Ireland by Fáilte Ireland and Tourism Ireland's overseas virtual sales platforms.

The total support industry requires is well beyond the resources of Fáilte Ireland and we have worked tirelessly providing analysis and input to our Department, the Tourism Recovery Taskforce and wider Government on everything from wage subsidy schemes, restart grants, VAT, and fixed cost cover supports, to inform July stimulus, Budget 2021 and ongoing supports.

We are currently administering 4 completely new grant schemes for Covid Adaptation, B&B Restart, Coach Tourism and Inbound Agents. Combined through these 4 schemes we hope to distribute €54million to more than 12,000 businesses.

Budget 2021 allocated an additional €55million for strategic tourism business survival. We are working with the Department on developing this to work in a complimentary way with CRSS.

All this work is underpinned by extensive research - since March we have undertaken 27 separate research projects getting insights from over 3,000 businesses and over 32,000 individuals.

I want to acknowledge the work of the Fáilte Ireland team and our departmental colleagues on behalf of the tourism industry. In addition to this, the Fáilte Ireland team have also contributed significantly to the wider national effort. Several of our staff helped the speedy processing of the PUP applications and we worked with the HSE in developing the "Keep Your Distance" and "Hold Firm" communication campaigns.

Looking to the future. While the industry is very grateful for the significant government support, the severity and longevity of public health restrictions mean that for many businesses the current level of support is not going to be enough. We have already seen some insolvencies and we are likely to see a rapid acceleration in this after Christmas unless something significant changes.

Recovery will not be immediate, but tourism will recover, and the speed of Ireland's recovery will be primarily determined by how many tourism businesses have received the support they require to stay solvent. We cannot rebuild employment without employers so we must not shy away from providing the business supports required. To do so would be to abandon balanced regional development and self-sustaining rural communities.

Go raibh maith agat.