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Choimirce Shóisialach, Forbairt Pobail
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**Joint Committee on Social
Protection, Community and Rural
Development, and the Islands**
Leinster House
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Ref: JSPCRDI-i-008

Ms Heather Humphrey, TD
Minister for Social Protection, Community and Rural Development, and the Islands
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Pandemic Unemployment Payment Scheme

Dear Minister Humphreys,

As you are aware, the Joint Committee on Social Protection, Community and Rural Development, and the Islands, recently completed its consideration of the Pandemic Unemployment Scheme.

It is clear to the Joint Committee that the administration of the Pandemic Unemployment Payment scheme has raised a lot of questions for those impacted by the restrictions in place since March.

The Joint Committee undertook a detailed examination and review of the Scheme, as administered by the Department of Social Protection. The Committee sought public submissions, and held a public hearing with officials from your Department. The full transcript of that hearing is attached, and the strongly expressed views of Members of the Joint Committee are contained therein for your attention and appropriate actions.

As part of our work we also examined the Temporary Wage Subsidy Scheme. The Joint Committee are of the view that there have been clear anomalies in the operation of the Pandemic Unemployment Payment as well as its interaction with other supports such as the Temporary/Employment Wage Subsidy Schemes since last March, with thousands of people and families impacted.

In total, the Committee received 69 submissions from various stakeholders. Submissions were received from Maynooth University Social Science Institute; Free Legal Aid Centres (FLAC); Music and Entertainment Association of Ireland (MEAI); Irish Congress of Trade Union (ICTU); Fórsa Trade Union; Deputy Padraic Mac Lochlainn; Deputy Joan Collins; Deputy Mattie McGrath; Senator Roísín Garvey; Ms Deirdre Twohig, Independent Tour Guide; and numerous submissions from Aer Lingus staff.

These submissions are also attached for your attention, and the Joint Committee fully endorses the recommendations made in these submissions for appropriate actions.

The Joint Committee requests that particular attention be given to the submission made by the Music and Entertainment Association of Ireland (MEAI). The Joint Committee separately met with Senator Frances Black who passionately made representations to Committee Members on behalf the industry, which has been tragically devastated by the impact of the pandemic since last March, a situation which is likely to continue well into 2021 and possibly longer.

Cuirfear fáilte roimh chomhfhreagras i nGaeilge

To quote President Higgins recently, “the beauty, the joy and the irrefutable cultural importance of what our musicians collectively give to us is immeasurable. Over the course of past nine months, they have not, either individually or collectively, been able to fulfil their creative destiny, or to earn a living by playing their music live.”

The Joint Committee strongly endorses the recommendations submitted by the MEAI and is of the opinion that special status should be granted to our musicians and entertainers, as an industry which has been decimated and continues to be adversely affected by the pandemic, perhaps more than any other sector in society.

The Joint Committee also submits the following key recommendations on the operation of the Pandemic Unemployment Payment Scheme for your attention.

The Joint Committee has expressed serious concerns with regard to the abolition mortgage interest supplement particularly for families who have been forced out of work due Covid 19. It recommends that a mortgage interest supplement should be re-establish as a matter of urgency

The Department must immediately review the interaction of the PUP with the wage subsidy schemes operated by the Department of Finance. It is the view of the Joint Committee that it is preferable for employees to maintain their employment income and direct connection with their employer rather than having to avail of PUP. In order to achieve this objective every effort must be made to assist employers in keeping employees on their books rather than forcing them to avail of PUP.

The Department should review the imposition of a requirement to “genuinely seek work” while in receipt of the Covid PUP. At the very least, regulations should be introduced setting out how this criteria is to be applied to claimants for the payment which take into account the fact that many claimants have limited access to childcare and, further, that many claimants for the payment are temporarily laid-off and have every expectation of resuming their previous employment or self-employment.

The Joint Committee recommends that in the event that in the event of a resurgence of Covid-19 or in the event of another similar major occurrence requiring the introduction of emergency social welfare measures that any such measures are introduced by way of primary legislation so as to provide a clear legislative basis for any such measures and to provide clarity as to who is eligible to avail of any new social welfare scheme.

The Joint Committee recognises the measures taken by the Minister to extend the date for the receipt of applications under the PUP until March 2021.

The Joint Committee believes that the current earnings cap of €480 in a 4 week period is too inflexible to meet the needs of the entertainment industry and instead recommends that the €480 threshold would be based on average net earnings over the full period that an applicant is in receipt of the PUP, which would be in line with the treatment of income under Farm Assist etc.

The Joint Committee recommends that self-employed persons over the age of 66, who are not eligible for a State Pension, would be deemed eligible for the PUP.

The Joint Committee recommends that persons under the age of 18, who have been in paid employment and paying income tax and PRSI should not be excluded to qualify for the Pandemic Unemployment Payment Scheme.

The Joint Committee recommends that persons should be allowed to avail of returning to short term education, either full time or part time, for a period of up to twelve months without losing eligibility for the Pandemic Unemployment Payment Scheme.

The Joint Committee recommends that the administration of the Rent Supplement Scheme needs to be streamlined in light of delays in processing applications.

The Joint Committee recommends that dedicated resources be established within the Department to deal with the unique situation encountered by the Music and Entertainment industry and to speed up delays in processing of payments.

The Joint Committee notes the Department's commitment to resolve difficulties encountered by staff in Aer Lingus getting their applications for payments processed and recommends that the Department engages with the company to ensure such difficulties are not repeated in the future.

Finally Minister, and behalf of all Members of the Joint Committee, I would like to record our gratitude and pay tribute to all of the staff in your Department, who have been involved at all levels in the administration of the Pandemic Unemployment Payment Scheme since its inception last March. It has been a mammoth undertaking for the Department, and the staff of your Department are to be commended on their professionalism and contribution to public service.

This correspondence is being submitted to you in advance of the Social Protection Bill 2020 passage through the Oireachtas, and is deemed to be the Report of the Joint Committee, and will be published on the Oireachtas website.

Yours sincerely,

Denis Naughten TD.,
Chairperson.

8th December 2020.