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Aileen Fallon
Special Committee on Covid-19 Response
Leinster House
Dublin 2
D02 XR20

17 June 2020

Dear Aileen

Thank you for the opportunity to further elaborate on my contribution to the Special Committee on 19 May last and my written submission of 5 June last. Please find attached our written submission in response to your letter dated 8 June 2020.

Should you require any additional information or clarification please contact me at the above details or directly on (087) 982 4763 or CEO_Office@hsa.ie at any time.

Yours sincerely

A handwritten signature in blue ink, which appears to read 'Sharon McGuinness'.

Dr Sharon McGuinness
Chief Executive Officer



Written Submission to the Oireachtas Special Committee
on COVID-19 Response

Dr Sharon McGuinness, Chief Executive Officer
Health and Safety Authority

Wednesday 17th June 2020

Thank you for the opportunity to provide this update to the Committee. This also follows from our submission and attendance before the Committee on 19th May 2020, and our written update to the Committee of 5th June 2020.

In the points below, I refer firstly to our overall role and will then detail how this relates to the meat processing sector in the current circumstances of the COVID-19 public health emergency.

1. The Health and Safety Authority operates under the provisions of the Safety, Health and Welfare at Work Act 2005 and associated regulations. It is the national body with responsibility to secure occupational safety, health and welfare for all persons at work. The Authority currently carries out approximately 10,000 workplace inspections annually across multiple sectors, focused mainly on high risk areas across a range of sectors.
2. The response to COVID-19 involves a Whole of Government approach which is also addressing the re-opening of the economy and return to work. This includes multiple agencies with our role related predominantly to occupational health and safety in workplace practices.
3. The Return to Work Safely Protocol was first launched on 9th May 2020 and is designed to support employers and workers to put measures in place that will prevent the spread of COVID-19 in the workplace as the economy begins to re-open. It will continue to evolve as Government policy and guidelines evolve. The Protocol follows collaborative work by the HSA, HSE, the Department of Business, Enterprise and Innovation and the Department of Health, with the close involvement of key stakeholders including Congress, Ibec, CIF and Chambers Ireland.
4. The economy began reopening (under the Roadmap for Reopening of Business and Society) on Monday 18th May, 2020.
5. The Authority, in its role of checking compliance with the Return to Work Safely Protocol since 18th May, is undertaking inspections across a wide range of workplaces and industry sectors, including meat processing facilities (MPFs).
6. The Authority has been involved, since 7th May 2020, in reviewing matters relating to meat processing facilities (MPFs) as a member of the National Outbreak Control Team (NOCT) chaired by the HSE. This team reports to the Health Protection Surveillance Centre. The Authority has to date participated in 10 meetings of the NOCT.

7. The National Outbreak Control Team is working to address the issue of outbreaks in meat processing plants and has input from professionals in public health, environmental health, and animal health, along with input from the Health and Safety Authority in relation to occupational health and safety. The Authority's role relates specifically to occupational health and safety and does not involve medical / diagnostic tests or contact tracing which is overseen by the health authorities.
8. The Department of Agriculture, Food and Marine (DAFM) also continues to engage with MPFs about the implementation of guidance and prevention measures within the facilities.
9. The Authority commenced a programme of inspections of MPFs on 20th May 2020. The identification of individual facilities, and the process of inspections, was and continues to be prioritised through ongoing and continuous liaison with Public Health and DAFM officials from the National Outbreak Control Team.
10. As public health COVID-19 preventative measures were put in place by affected facilities following engagement by local Outbreak Control Teams along with *Interim Guidance* for the sector issued to all facilities on 15th May 2020, the Health and Safety Authority was in a position to check for implementation of these specific infection control recommendations within the working environment along with other occupational health and safety requirements unrelated to COVID-19.
11. Inspections were carried out by a specialist inspection team. All areas of the facilities were inspected and engagement with on-site personnel included management, health and safety advisors, Lead Worker Representatives, safety representatives and DAFM officials. Inspectors also liaised pre and post inspection with the chair of the relevant local Outbreak Control Team to ensure effective planning and feedback regarding verification of implemented public health measures for a number of MPFs. Feedback was also provided to the NOCT.
12. Three inspections involved joint attendance with other agencies including the HSE Public Health Department, Environmental Health officials and officials of the Department of Agriculture, Food and Marine. Two of these three inspections involved a single facility.
13. Based on the inspections and investigations carried out (both directly and in conjunction with other agencies and inspectorates), the Authority has identified a generally high level of compliance with measures to limit the spread of COVID-19 in a workplace context, in line with guidance issued by the National Outbreak Control Team.

14. We have received a high level of co-operation from management, staff and contractors in plants inspected and have noted an overall responsiveness to guidance and advice issued both onsite and subsequently.
15. Inspectors have issued written Reports of Inspections (ROIs) for all MPFs inspected. As the level of compliance within the MPFs was satisfactory no enforcement notices were issued.
16. The Authority has now inspected each of the facilities connected with the Outbreak Control Teams.
17. To date, the Authority's Workplace Contact Unit has been contacted on 22 occasions in relation to COVID 19 concerns in connection with 12 MPFs. All 12 of these MPFs have since been inspected.
18. Since commencing the above programme of inspections on 20th May 2020, the Authority has completed 30 inspections of MPFs which covered those connected with COVID 19 outbreaks along with a number of other MPFs.
19. On an overall basis, between 18th May 2020 and close of business on 12th June 2020, the Authority has recorded 1,722 inspections/investigations of which 1,461 addressed the Return to Work Safely Protocol. Inspections were completed across a range of industry sectors, including the meat processing sector.
20. Employers and workers can access advice, guidance, templates, checklists, posters and other documents relating to COVID-19 and workplace health and safety at www.hsa.ie.
21. The Authority's Workplace Contact Unit is our confidential helpline for workers, employers and others to submit queries and complaints. This can be contacted by telephone 1890 289 389 and email wcu@hsa.ie. If any employer or worker has a concern about their workplace, they can contact us confidentially.

Dr. Sharon McGuinness
Chief Executive Officer
Health and Safety Authority
Wednesday 17th June 2020