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Eileen Fallon
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Special Committee on Covid-19 Response
Leinster House
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Sent by email to: aileen.fallon@oireachtas.ie
Copied to: covid19@oireachtas.ie

Date: 5th June 2020

Dear Eileen,

RE: INVITATION TO MAKE WRITTEN SUBMISSION - COVID-19 TRAVEL RESTRICTIONS

I am writing further to your email and attached document sent to my colleague Patrick McCusker who is TSSA's Senior Irish Organiser, based in Dublin. Patrick has asked me to forward our submission to the Special Committee on Covid-19 Response.

For your information, TSSA is an independent trade union that operates in the Republic of Ireland and across the United Kingdom. The Union organises and represents public transport workers in rail and bus companies who are employed in administrative and supervisory roles as well as professional, technical and management positions. As such, the Union is recognised for collective bargaining purposes by a number of Irish firms, including CIE, and UK companies like Network Rail.

Our response to the Committee is based on our experience to date in participating in UK rail forums that deal specifically with COVID-19 arrangements across the industry.

Yours sincerely

Rob Jenks
Policy Advisor

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TSSA WRITTEN SUBMISSION TO SPECIAL COMMITTEE ON COVID-19 RESPONSE - TRAVEL RESTRICTIONS

Introduction

TSSA is an independent trade union that operates in the Republic of Ireland and across the United Kingdom. The Union organises and represents public transport workers in rail and bus companies who are employed in administrative and supervisory roles as well as professional, technical and management positions. As such, the Union is recognised for collective bargaining purposes by a number of Irish firms, including CIE, and UK companies like Network Rail.

In making this submission we are offering some of the experience that we have gained in Britain from working jointly with sister trade unions and all the railway companies as part of the Railway Industry Coronavirus Forum (RICF). The Forum has been putting together measures that would accommodate an increase in passenger rail services as the UK Government seeks to gradually release the lockdown that has been applied across the country.

Facilitating people getting to work using public transport

As a result of measures taken in the UK, large numbers of workers had either started to work from home or been the subject of furlough arrangements from their employers. Schools had also been shut. Consequently, the number of rail journeys reduced significantly from the pre UK lockdown (implemented on 23rd March 2020) rail usage with only key workers supposed to be travelling, a description that also included some frontline rail staff.

The decision to start to gradually release the UK Government COVID-19 measures as part of a desire to increase economic activity meant that arrangements had to be implemented that would maintain social distancing provisions amongst railway employees and passengers as more trains were to be run (increasing from about 20 per cent to an average of 50 per cent by mid May 2020). This would mean more staff in work and potentially more people travelling. Consequently, the railway employers, trade unions and rail regulator (Office of Rail and Road) entered into discussions during May 2020 that eventually led to an agreement known as the "COVID-19: managing the risks of transmission in the context of increasing rail services and staffing."

That agreement was adopted by the Rail Regulator as the way that they would expect companies to operate, enforcing compliance should individual companies deviate without at least equal measures put in place.

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The agreement sets a range of industry wide principles that local managers should then apply in their own organisations and which include:

- The use of risk assessments to assess social distancing issues in the workplace and in terms of passengers attending stations, purchasing tickets and travelling on trains;
- Working with company level trade union staff representatives as part of the risk assessment process in each business;
- Adherence to social distancing measures by using the hierarchy of control method (elimination, substitution, etc) in the workplace for all activities that would involve staff being closer than 2 metres. The agreement specifically considered issues at stations, in offices and depots as well as on trains;
- Use of practical measures at stations (eg, signage, announcements, 2 metre separation floor markings, use of Perspex screens to ensure separation around ticket sales points, etc), on trains and in terms of revenue collection, etc;
- Types of PPE including the use of visors and masks for workers where the separation from colleagues or passengers cannot be maintained (PPE provided by the company free to staff) after the risk assessment process has been properly applied;
- Measures to ensure crowd control/"policing" demand at stations rather than find a free for all taking place and social distancing compromised (this could include passengers trying to get on a train at an intermediate stop on the journey);
- Recognition that maintaining social distancing on trains may mean the need to run more services.

Conclusion

In closing, it is worth noting that the agreement is based on collaboration between individual employers and the trade unions and their members with recourse to the Rail Regulator in the event of disagreements. It is also helped by the UK Government standing behind the industry negotiated agreement.

A copy of the agreement can be made available to the Committee if required.

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