

Proposal for a **ZERO COVID IRELAND**

How an all-island approach can tackle
COVID-19.

THE WORKERS' PARTY



Summary

Make Zero-Covid the Goal of the next Lockdown

1. **All island lockdown** based on the Foot & Mouth response
2. **Mandatory mask usage** (*visors are ineffective*) in **all** shared indoor spaces
3. A **suspension of all non-essential travel** into the island of Ireland
4. Mandatory testing and **strictly monitored quarantine** for everyone entering the island of Ireland
5. Mandatory **ventilation regulations** to be achieved by all shared buildings before re-opening
6. Investment in **contact tracing, teacher recruitment & retrofitting buildings** during lockdown
7. **Plan for a public recovery**; a public house building programme, making use of EU emergency lending, post lockdown

Proposal for a zero Covid-19 Ireland, and Public Economic Recovery Plan

Ireland has entered a dangerous new phase of its response to Covid-19. The number of new cases of Covid-19 each day climbed from 2-5 in June to 100-200 in mid-September (Irish Times/ Sept 19 2020). Similar resurgences have been seen in other countries who took an approach of “living with the virus” after a period of lockdown; Spain, Italy, France are all seeing similar rates of increase.

It is clear that a combination of improved treatment capacities, and the fact that infection rates are now higher amongst younger people, have reduced the numbers of deaths associated with the virus. Nonetheless, this trend is unlikely to continue when the resurgence of the virus inevitably spreads to older people.

Meanwhile, as the severe limitations of the government’s “living with the virus” public health strategy have become obvious: the Irish economy has continued to falter and decline.

Globally, the assumption that “living with” rather than “eliminating” the virus could limit economic damage does not appear to be bearing out in reality. According to the OECD, the New Zealand economy contracted by 12.2% in quarter 2 of 2020, compared with 11.8% in the Euro area, which imposed far less stringent travel and lockdown conditions. And where the New Zealand The ECB predicts a rebound of 8.4% for the Euro area in quarter 3, below the 10% partial recovery predicted by New Zealand economists. Meanwhile Norway and Finland experienced far smaller recessions than Sweden, in spite of imposing far more stringent lockdown conditions.

It is clear those countries which imposed “less rigid” lockdowns were not protected from the economic damage of Covid-19 – and are now in a worse position to recover, because of the greater likelihood of an uncontrolled resurgence of the virus.

In June, a large group of public health specialists, infectious disease experts, virologists, immunologists, and doctors published a proposal to delay reopening of the economy until the level of new Covid-19 infections had reached zero. They argued their proposals, based on measures introduced in Austria, New Zealand, Iceland, China, Vietnam and South Korea, could successfully eliminate the virus “in weeks, not months,” if implemented in full.

The primary measures which they highlighted included:

- Eliminating the virus entirely from the island of Ireland before reopening from lockdown.
- The introduction of the mandatory use of masks in **all shared public spaces**.
- Far more extensive limitations on travel, including elimination of non-essential international travel, and mandatory testing and/or strictly-monitored quarantining for essential travel.
- The immediate expansion and proper resourcing of contact tracing services.

None of these measures were fulfilled in Ireland. By contrast, in countries where they have been fulfilled, Covid-19 was eliminated, and contact tracing of emerging cases post-lockdown has been extensive and rapid enough to keep the virus at bay.

The Irish government chose to reopen the country while the virus still circulated, and this has led us to the point we are at now, where economic and social damage continues because of a protracted lockdown, but infections continue to surge. In effect, Ireland chose a path which caused an economic contraction greater than that seen in “zero Covid” countries, but unlike those countries was unable to successfully revive the economy when it reopened. The country is now caught in a limbo in which its economy is not functioning, *and also* infections and, soon, deaths resulting from Covid-19 continue to spiral.

Sadly, the Irish government has squandered the resilience and solidarity demonstrated by the public during the first lockdown. Instead of capitalising on this solidarity and ensuring a full exit from the Covid-19 emergency phase, the government bowed to pressure from business to reopen too quickly, and failed to invest in upgrading critical infrastructure like hospitals, school improvements, contact tracing services, the recruitment of additional healthcare and teaching professionals, or the provision of adequate ventilation systems in essential workplaces.

This amounts to an enormous betrayal of the confidence the Irish people placed in the government earlier this year. It also leaves no option except to move backwards in order to move forwards. A second, intensive lockdown can pave the way for a proper and sustained reopening of our society.

Meanwhile, the location of outbreaks suggests that there is likely to be significant transmission amongst communities moving back and forth across the border between Northern Ireland and the Republic. Without adopting a true all-island approach to tackling the virus, it will be impossible for either jurisdiction to manage it.

The Northern Ireland Executive and Irish Government should immediately use the powers of review under the St. Andrews Agreement (2007) to move health co-operation as it relates to responding to pandemics from being separately implemented and create a properly funded and staffed implementation body.

This body should prioritise as a matter of urgency the adoption of common quarantine procedures for those entering into the island of Ireland, including extensive monitoring of all those quarantining.

It is remarkable that the outbreak of Foot & Mouth saw the establishment of such an all-island response, including common limitations on the movement of people, in order to safeguard the wellbeing of the national herd – but there is no political willingness to do the same in this instance. This shows a total disregard for human life, and must be challenged.

We recommend that such a proposal should proceed as follows:

(1A) Phase 1A: Shorter, More Extensive Lockdown (Oct – Nov 2020)

A short (four week) phase 2 lockdown to reverse current increases in the virus. **In order to shore up public buy-in and morale, this should be extensive but with a clear, short-term end point and exit plan.**

In contrast to the lockdown which took place previously, this should include:

- A continuation and expansion of the mandatory use of masks in **all shared indoor spaces** which was not a feature of the initial lockdown.
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- An immediate suspension of all non-essential travel onto the island of Ireland, with strictly-monitored quarantining of essential long-term visitors, or mandatory pre-arrival testing where that is not possible (immediate family funerals, essential workers etc.);
- A 4-week closure of schools and childcare facilities, accompanied by period of 4 weeks of additional paid leave for all workers with care responsibilities;
- Provision of weekly testing where necessary, paid sick leave and PPE for all essential workers (to include all those who are required to go to their workplace during lockdown, extending to healthcare, food retail, emergency service workers etc.);
- The optional redeployment of workers in receipt of the Pandemic Unemployment Payment into non-contact essential services, including contact tracing (currently outsourced at cost to a private agency), the provision of shopping and support services to vulnerable adults, and retrofitting of schools to facilitate safe re-opening. This project of retrofitting should include the emergency construction of additional classrooms and division of existing rooms wherever feasible, together with the installation of HVAC ventilation systems.
- The establishment of an All Island public health cooperation body under the terms of the St. Andrew's Agreement, to prioritise as a matter of urgency common quarantining procedures for people entering the island of Ireland.

(1B) Phase 1B: Planning to Maintain Zero Covid (Oct – Nov 2020)

During the lockdown, an emergency response plan should be operationalised in order to facilitate re-opening once the virus has been eliminated from the island. It should include the following:

- An emergency recruitment plan to expand teacher numbers. These additional teachers should be used to fulfil increased substitution and supervision requirements, to provide additional non-teaching days for teaching principals, and, where space allows, to reduce class sizes by ensuring all available school places are used;

- The rapid expansion of ICU and hospital bed capacity;
- The rapid expansion of contact tracing systems, to enable far more extensive and rapid contact tracing of all new cases after reopening. This should be instituted via decent jobs within the public service - not outsourced to an agency
- The development of a 'post-war' style Public Economic Recovery Plan, driven by large-scale investment in the public economy.

(2) Re-Opening (Nov - Dec 2020)

Once the country has reached zero new cases of Covid-19, a phased re-opening of the country as follows:

- A continued prohibition on non-essential travel, with mandatory pre-arrival testing and/or 14-day monitored quarantining for all essential travel.
- Continued mandatory use of masks in **all** shared indoor spaces.
- The re-opening of schools, childcare as a priority.
- Once the new contact tracing service has reached sufficient capacity to respond immediately and extensively to all new cases, the full re-opening of the rest of the economy.

(3) Ireland's Public Economic Recovery Plan

A: Economic Recovery activity during lockdown

Ireland's economy is uniquely exposed to economic damage resulting from Covid-19. The country is exceptionally reliant on international trade and multinational corporations, meaning measures which reduce in any way the flow of goods and services will inevitably have an effect. Meanwhile, huge numbers of jobs in the construction of office spaces in Dublin's financial centre, and retail and service workers catering to that office space, are jeopardised because of the potentially permanent shift in how people work.

Secondly, Ireland has minimal significant real industry to replace this lost activity.

Finally, as a member of the Eurozone, Ireland has no real capacity to use monetary policy in times of economic crisis.

As a result of the crisis, the European Union and ECB have agreed to more relaxed lending, and an emergency fund has been made available to support countries during the crisis. While much of this will be spent on essential current spending such as the Pandemic Unemployment Payment, Ireland should take the opportunity to invest as much as possible of the available lending in productive employment and industry which can help to rebuild the economy, and, ultimately, yield returns for the state.

In the medium term, the most obvious way to do this is through a large state house building programme. There is a unique opportunity to avail of cheap financing in order to do this because of the EC's temporary release of loans. The transformation of Bord na Móna into a state recycling company should also be considered.

In the immediate term, this activity will be curtailed by the proposed lockdown. However, during that period, other essential construction activity to provide can be carried out.

Mandatory ventilation regulations should be put in place for every indoor space where people gather, including offices, factories, schools, universities, shops, and leisure & sporting facilities. It should be a requirement of reopening, or staff returning to work, that ventilation guidelines these should be met.

This work will require extensive retrofitting of buildings and installation of HVAC ventilation systems. The state should immediately begin recruiting and contracting workers to carry out this work. It is necessary, productive employment, essential to the functioning of the state.

Ideally, this work should be delivered by a public company.

Financing

As outlined above, loans are available from the EC which can be used to provide up front financing for both the above works programme, and the costs of other items such as regular testing and PPE for essential workers.

It is essential that, in the case of private businesses, the state does not pick up the tab for Covid-19 related investment, while businesses reap the profits of the recovery.

Nonetheless, it is also essential that the above-outlined works actually happen, and happen quickly.

Therefore, if any business does not itself carry out the above work and put in place the mandatory safety measures, the state should carry them out and, in doing so, issue a loan note which, if not repaid by the business by a specified date, would be transformed into equity for the state in the company in question.

It is essential that workers and families not be left to pay the price of private businesses reopening.



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