

Government Updates: Government Plan & Support of HR Infrastructure

The Government has published a new mid-term plan on dealing with the ongoing health crisis, *Resilience and Recovery 2020-2021: Plan for Living with Covid-19* which comes into effect from midnight tonight and is intended to run for a period of 6-9 months. For employers in the community and voluntary sector it will serve as a useful planner in its own right for the purposes of business continuity planning and re-prioritising strategic initiatives, whether organisational or employee relations in nature.

The new plan has five levels of alert to respond to the level of outbreak at any given period of time. The plan will involve a risk-ranking system, from a lowest risk level of one to the highest, full lockdown level five. The entire country is now considered to be at level two.

In this plan individual counties can and will be assigned a particular level if there is a widespread upsurge with key indicators linked to the fortnightly rate per 100,000 people (which shows the pattern of the outbreak) and the “R” rate.

Impact on Employers

With the emergence of this plan Ireland is once again at the precipice of change, something most will be familiar with at this stage and for employers this is no different to the consequential agility that has been demonstrated by most already.

However, the silver lining amidst the organised chaos is the opportunity for employers to strengthen their organisational continuity planning and prepare communications plans that will mirror each of the stages highlighted in the *Resilience and Recovery 2020-2021: Plan for Living with Covid-19*. Employers should prepare for strategic continuity planning aligning to the government’s plan to enable organisations to foresee human resource requirements.

Main Changes from Employment Perspective

Work

Levels one through five of the plan outline the requirements for work to include the following:

- Levels 1 & 2: Provide for continued work from home *if possible*,
- Level 3: Provides for a directive of working from home unless it is absolutely necessary to attend the workplace,
- Levels 4 & 5: Provide for essential or other designated workers to attend the workplace.

Public Transport

Levels 1 through 5 require continued wearing of face masks and will in the main have reduced capacity.

- Level 1: Travel during off peak hours if possible
- Level 2: Travel during peak hours for essential workers or essential purposes only
- Level 3: Travel for essential workers or essential purposes
- Level 4: Avoid public transport - essential workers and essential purposes only
- Level 5: Avoid public transport - essential workers and essential purposes only

Separate advices are to issue for the medically vulnerable and domestic travel will only be impacted from level 3 onwards, only permitting travel outside your county for work, education and other essential purposes, if appropriate.

Strategic HR Priorities

The primary aim of the government's plan is to ensure that restrictions can be applied depending on the reproductive number of the virus. Employers must now use this information as part of their basis for decision making. From a strategic point of view the five levels depicted in the plan will allow for organisational continuity planning.

Most organisations have already had to re-prioritise strategic initiatives at the commencement of the health crisis and sustainability was the main objective for this. Re-prioritised HR strategic objectives can still be realised with the added advantage of continuity planning which aligns to the various stages of the plan. For example, if you take level 5 which would result in a State-wide lockdown the questions to ask include;

- How can strategic HR priorities be realised at level 5?
- What contingency plans should be put in place?
- What policies are prepared to deal with potential full remote working?
- How does the organisations communications plan fit into each level of the government's plan?

Being able to identify what may become a reality will allow organisations not only sustain heavy restrictions and the impacts that flow from them but will also perpetuate well prepared and agile contingency planning. In a worst-case scenario, where the country re-enters a complete lockdown warning signs will have presented before that moment enabling organisations to re-prioritise strategic objectives.

It is at level 3 or 4 that HR Practitioners and Senior Management should heed the warning signs and prepare for all eventualities, such as a complete lockdown. From a people perspective this may mean implementing a workforce planning process. Workforce planning is probably the most obvious and unfortunate unintentional consequence of the health crisis and has had a substantial impact on changes to the workforce. Whether workforce planning occurred in the initial stages or

not, most organisations have been, or will be, impacted with pay cuts, layoffs, short time or redundancy situations.

In order to deal with this effectively and prepare for all eventualities organisations need to implement a workforce plan, assess newly emerged priorities on a consistent basis, analyse the financial circumstances of the organisation and assess the current needs of the organisation, to fully understand the suitability of skills, experience and requirements within the new norm. Proper planning and transparent communications are key to managing the unintended consequences that come from changes to roles and impacts on the workforce.

Effective Employee Relations Management

While it is extraordinary the steps that have been taken by employers and employees alike since the onset of the health crisis, the reality is that management of employees in this way will continue for some time.

The benefit of identifying with each stage of the government plan is to again place an emphasis on contingency planning. This means having updated policies and practices in place to manoeuvre through each stage, whether this is to address probation or performance management in a completely remote setting, reviewing health and safety requirements or even to pre-empt the types of leave that will apply for each situation or stage of the plan.

As part of the announcement for the *Resilience and Recovery 2020-2021* plan the government have outlined that they will be adopting the new EU “common colour code” which acts as a traffic-light colour system based on data provided by the European Centre for Disease Prevention and Control for people travelling abroad. This new system allows employers to communicate in advance a requirement to restrict one’s movement if returning from a designated country to which this applies, meaning that employers can relay communications in advance in accordance with the code.

The ability to contingency plan means that organisations can identify certain work practices with each level of the government plan and quickly adapt to the requirements under each. If at level 4 or 5 only essential or designated workers can attend the workplace then this may point to implementing a workforce plan. Also, at these levels additional health and wellbeing initiatives could be required for remote workers and employers must ensure adherence to Health and Safety compliance through completion of virtual ergonomic assessments. Training and assessments in the ergonomics field are options available to all employers that should be considered in a remote working space.

Whatever level of restrictions, employers and HR Practitioners must use this plan as a conduit for best practice human resource management which will support the mitigation of employee relations or industrial relations discontent.

Communications Management

The final and probably most pertinent consideration running through each level of the plan is that of communications management.

An outlier of the main HR strategic initiatives, transparent communications is the foundation of all contingency planning. Employers and organisations alike have become quite adept at communicating processes, practices and changes since the onset of the health crisis, but the opportunity now is to approach a formal planning process of all communications necessary to align to each level of the government plan.

Considering the 5 levels of risk categorisation this means that employers should plan to effectively communicate on changes to work practices, employment policies and where remote working either moves from a blended approach to a more permanent setting, what the employer expectations of staff are. It is also important to consider how employee relations will be managed whether this is through additional virtual 1:1 meetings, requirements of the IT infrastructure, GDPR and confidentiality requirements or the expectations of implementing virtual meetings to address disciplinary or grievance issues.

Whatever the stage employers should facilitate good communications planning as a HR strategic initiative in its own right to best serve compliant practices and best practice HR management.

Remaining in a period of flux has become the new reality. How organisations manage this flux from a people perspective will create stability and allow for continued contingency planning that will best serve the overall organisational strategy supported through strong HR strategic initiatives.

Disclaimer – The information in this section is provided for reference purposes only to assist Employers with the government protocols and guidance and must be read in that context and should not be used for or interpreted as a legal definition of any of the information provided. Some of the information provided is per information published on the government websites at www.gov.ie. Professional advice should always be sought before making any such decisions.

**For further information or advice, please contact the designated HR & Employment Helpdesk at thewheelhrhelpdesk@adarehrm.ie or via telephone on (01) 5394661
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