

T: 0300 244 4000
E: scottish.ministers@gov.scot

Paul Sheerin
Scottish Engineering
paulsheerin@scottishengineering.org.uk

Dr Liz Cameron
Scottish Chambers of Commerce
lcameron@scottishchambers.org.uk

Your Ref: PS/MM
Our Ref: 202000073246

26 August 2020

Dear Paul and Liz

Thank you for your letter to the First Minister of 5 August, raising your members concerns, and requesting that the minimum physical distancing guidance for the manufacturing sector is aligned with that in place for other sectors. I have been asked to respond on her behalf.

I would like to take this opportunity to commend Scottish manufacturers for all of their efforts, both to continue operating in very difficult circumstances and in managing the risk of COVID-19 transmission in the workplace. In my visits to companies in the sector I am consistently struck by the emphasis on safety and the wellbeing of workers. It is no surprise to me that this has been retained whilst seeing an increase in the level of operations.

You understandably raise the current exemptions in place for retail, hospitality and public transport. It is worth clarifying that we have identified sectors for exceptions not solely or even primarily on the basis of their risk in relation to other sectors. Rather we have taken a more rounded approach that seeks to balance transmission risk – with mitigations in place – against the broader benefits that would come from reducing the distancing requirement to 1 metre, acknowledging that some sectors and settings are more affected than others by the distancing requirements.

We know that almost all sectors and settings would like to open up and get back to normal as quickly as possible. However the status of the epidemic means that we consider that this cannot happen all at once. We must therefore make difficult decisions about which sector and settings to allow an exception for at which time. The science on physical distancing has not changed and we need to take a balanced judgement on the different risks and harms. We weigh up factors including the economic and broader benefits of reducing the restrictions, potential mitigations, transmission risk, and how much change overall we think it is safe to introduce at this time. Important recent context in this regard includes recent events in Aberdeen and the nationwide return of schools.

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That said, I wish to make very clear that the concerns of the manufacturing sector are recognised and fully understood. I am acutely aware of the related reduction in productivity and also extremely concerned about some of the potential effects including a possible impact on investment decisions and/or jobs.

It is for those reasons that I am committed to exploring the scope for further measures that will aid manufacturers to increase capacity. That includes the regular review of sectoral exemptions.

So whilst I am not in a position currently to confirm the exact timeframes for a manufacturing sector review, I want to emphasise that manufacturing remains uppermost in my priorities. Whilst fully supportive of the Scottish Government's approach and goal of COVID elimination, I will continue to ensure the merits of the case for an exemption for manufacturing continues to be considered in the short-term.

I appreciate that this may not be the response that you were hoping for, however, I do hope that this goes some way to providing you with a fuller understanding of the factors being considered by the Scottish Government in line with your request.

As you know, Scotland needs a strong manufacturing sector to drive forward Scotland's recovery and future prosperity. I am committed to do whatever I can to ensure the survival of businesses, protect jobs and support the manufacturing sector's recovery from the devastating effects of this pandemic.

*Kind regards
Fiona Hyslop*

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St Andrew's House, Regent Road, Edinburgh EH1 3DG
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