

Statement of STUC General Council on Levels and Lockdown

The monthly meeting of the STUC General Council brings together representatives of unions spanning the whole of the Scottish economy and the public service landscape. Yesterday's meeting took place at a time of fast-moving change and uncertainty during the current crisis.

Last week, the STUC broadly welcomed the approach set out by the Scottish Government to initiate, from Wednesday, a new COVID-19 Framework with a five-tiered system of restrictions to be applied regionally. The aim of suppressing of the Covid-19 virus over the winter period is paramount to protecting public health and avoiding the NHS and other services being overwhelmed.

As the representatives of workers in Scotland we naturally remain gravely concerned at the economic impacts of the pandemic. Wherever possible, we will support maintaining economic activity, but only where it is in the interests of public health and the longer-term security of our economy.

We reject the false premise being promoted in some quarters that to protect jobs we must risk health or vice versa. To achieve the right balance, it is essential that where it is not safe for business to operate, financial support for jobs and pay is consistent, clear and covers all workers. This is important, not only for the protection of jobs and livelihoods, but to avoid disincentivising workers' and businesses' compliance with necessary public health provisions. Ten of thousands of workers are falling through the cracks. A whole cohort of self-employed workers from taxi drivers to musicians have had little or no support since the start of this pandemic.

Moreover, the support must be sufficient to ensure no worker falls below a reasonable wage. The number of workers receiving less than the Minimum Wage has increased 5-fold since the start of the pandemic.

Following intensive lobbying, including by the STUC, the confusion surrounding the UK Government's Furlough announcement on Saturday appears to be lifting. We now have clarity that the Furlough Scheme will apply fully in Scotland and that it will continue through to March. We should not have needed the level of pressure applied to Westminster from politicians, trade unions, and business leaders across Scotland before that clarity was finally delivered.

We now urgently need UK and Scottish governments to work together to ensure a comprehensive package of support and measures that will protect both health and lives as well as people's jobs and livelihoods.

Notwithstanding our general support for the COVID-19 Framework, it is clear that the Scottish Government's decisions on the tiered Framework were substantially influenced by the provisions in the Westminster Government's previous support package and concerns about the lack of support it provided for workers. These provisions have now changed and should trigger a reconsideration of whether current measures go far enough.

The current restrictions lack the clarity and consistency of the measures introduced in March. Whilst scientific evidence is regularly cited to support strategy, we believe that more transparency and better communication of data as a driver of decision making is required.

This requires absolute clarity on the transmission risks inherent in schools, colleges and universities remaining open, non-essential workplaces continuing to operate, workers being required to travel across local authority boundaries and the use of public transport that all of this entails.

We are concerned that level 4 of the Framework still continues to allow all of the previously mentioned activity.

In this context we have major doubts that a decisive break on transmission will be achieved. We understand that the Scottish Government accepts that level 4 is not currently seen as being a full lockdown level and that they reserve the right to implement even more comprehensive measures, should this be required.

We also call for extended protections for shielding workers, pregnant women and those with underlying health issues.

Now that clarity on the question of support available from the UK Government has finally been achieved, we are calling on the Scottish Government to:

- Reconsider the current provisions in level-4 and set out in detail what the higher level of full lockdown will entail including whether it will enable the closure of educational establishments as well as all non-essential workplaces.

- Set out additional measures of protection for shielding workers, pregnant workers and those with underlying health conditions.
- Clarify whether the higher lockdown level will be applied regionally as with the current Framework levels or apply only nationally.
- Provide transparent information on the decision-making processes that will be used to determine what level an area is put into and publicise the data that will be measured in making these determinations.
- Put in place a system of income support for those workers and self-employed who have not been covered by the existing support packages currently available.
- For all measures introduced locally/regionally above level 3, facilitate bringing together emergency consultative forums involving public health bodies, local authorities, business and trade unions to discuss the detail of any implementation, aid compliance and ensure messaging is clear.

Finally our collective aim throughout this crisis should be to act decisively to defend public health and our economy, protect as many existing jobs as possible, create as many new jobs as possible as we recover and to accept nothing less than full employment for our population going forward.