



**County Wexford**  
**Chamber**  
Advancing business together



**Reviving**  
Wexford

**REVIVING WEXFORD REPORT 2020**



# Contents

<b>President’s Foreword</b> .....	<b>2</b>
<b>Introduction</b> .....	<b>3</b>
<b>Key Data at a Glance</b> .....	<b>4</b>
Headline results.....	4
Other key data:.....	4
<b>Consensus on Required Actions</b> .....	<b>5</b>
Grants.....	5
Taxation .....	6
Banking & Insurance .....	7
Marketing.....	8
Top ranked Infrastructure Projects .....	9
<b>Sector Specific Actions</b> .....	<b>10</b>
Hospitality .....	10
Tourism.....	11
Retail.....	12
Services .....	13
Construction.....	14
Manufacturing .....	15
Transport & the Motor Trade .....	16
Agriculture.....	17
Healthcare .....	18
<b>Concluding Remarks</b> .....	<b>19</b>
<b>Appendix</b> .....	<b>20</b>
Sample of Survey.....	20



**Sean Reidy**

*President, County Wexford Chamber*

County Wexford Chamber is all too aware of the seismic shift that has occurred in our economy due to the Covid-19 pandemic. The terms unprecedented, shuttered, social distancing and cocooning have now become familiar to us. Uncertainty and worry has dominated our lives and, tragically, some within our community have had to face the untimely loss of a loved one.

The spirit and resilience of people shines through at a time like this. This is very evident in the tremendous response we received to the Reviving Wexford survey. A total of 217 businesses completed the detailed survey representing 9 sectors, providing very comprehensive feedback.

Such a reaction is highly gratifying, though knowing the community as I do, it is not surprising to me. Many original suggestions and novel ideas have come forward as to the supports required and innovations needed to ensure County Wexford is best placed to come out of this challenging period with optimism. The findings of the survey will form the basis of a sustained and highly focused process of lobbying Government on behalf of the County Wexford business community.

We recognise that Government is and will continue to be inundated with appeals and requests for support. This report though is a great deal more than a mere petition; rather it is a roadmap to steer our way out of these Uncharted waters, with a highly targeted submission to central Government and relevant agencies. Necessary and defined financial and other supports are set out including outstanding new ideas and initiatives which can help County Wexford to emerge into a post coronavirus phase energised and ready to act.

County Wexford can be proud that in no sphere has it demonstrated a mere reactive stance than in the face of Covid-19. Whether it's the performance of our outstanding healthcare professionals on the front line, the

civic mindedness of the people of the county for adhering diligently to the restrictions that have led to Wexford having one of the lowest infection rates in the country, or the dynamic business community uniting behind the Reviving Wexford initiative: the Model County is living up to its name. County Wexford is again, during this most difficult time, the Exemplar Hiberniae, an example to Ireland, of how with the right supports people can focus positively on recharging the local economy.

We in County Wexford are grateful to have Wexford County Council and South East Radio as our sponsorship partners in this initiative.

Finally, on behalf of our members, and our Board, I would like to express my sincere thanks to Professor Kevin Sludds for taking on the task of writing this report. Given the nature of the crisis, the permitted timeline was extremely testing and I wholly appreciate his efforts and the fine piece of work he has produced on our behalf.

**Sean Reidy, May 2020**



**Fiona Lewis,**

*County Wexford Chamber CEO*

The Covid-19 pandemic of 2020 will be remembered as one of the greatest economic shocks of all times. In order to support Wexford's economic recovery, County Wexford Chamber launched "Reviving Wexford" – an initiative to allow members, business owners and managers to share their opinions on what is needed to support the revival of the Wexford Economy. The process identified the actions needed to start the journey back to economic prosperity, and this resulting document is the blue print for that journey. I would like to thank all those who contributed to the report, the 217 businesses who responded, to Professor Kevin Sludds for analysing the results, Shane Cullen for designing the document and to Wexford County Council and South East Radio for their sponsorship.

**Fiona Lewis,**  
*County Wexford Chamber CEO May 2020*

# Introduction

The results contained within this report are based on information extrapolated from the Reviving Wexford survey which was completed by 217 respondents between 19<sup>th</sup> April and 3<sup>rd</sup> May 2020. County Wexford has in fact been at the vanguard when it comes to canvassing the views of its business community. The survey was developed as part of a concerted response by County Wexford Chamber of Commerce, aimed at rejuvenating the local economy in the aftermath of the Covid-19 pandemic. It was created to capture not merely a percentile account of respondents' views but more significantly, the original suggestions and actions which the County Wexford business community wish to see initiated.

Undoubtedly it is the case given the number of businesses which have been forced to close, and the consequent large number of the workforce having to file for the *Covid-19 Pandemic Unemployment Benefit* or access the *Revenue Wage Subsidy Scheme*, that the County as a whole has been thrust into a wholly unforeseen recession. Though consumer confidence is presently at a nadir and the economy has contracted with extraordinary rapidity, nevertheless, County Wexford has also seen a renewed awakening of core values such as solidarity, innovation and resilience.

The *Reviving Wexford* initiative is a clarion call for rejuvenation around these values amongst the business owners and managers of County Wexford which the Chamber of Commerce wishes to act on. Its chief goal is to guarantee the County is in prime position for the post pandemic phase, to seek effective supports and to reactivate commercial activity and life into the Model County again.

Government supports such as the *Temporary Covid-19 Wage Subsidy Scheme* must, at this

point, be extended and mirrored by resourceful ways of safeguarding other operating costs receive similar protection in the form of targeted grants. In the survey business owners and managers were asked to detail the assistance they believed would be required in order for the County to emerge from this crisis confidently. The particulars harvested through this process will act as the Reviving Wexford Action Plan, a report which represents the needs and action points of the local business community across core sectors of the economy.

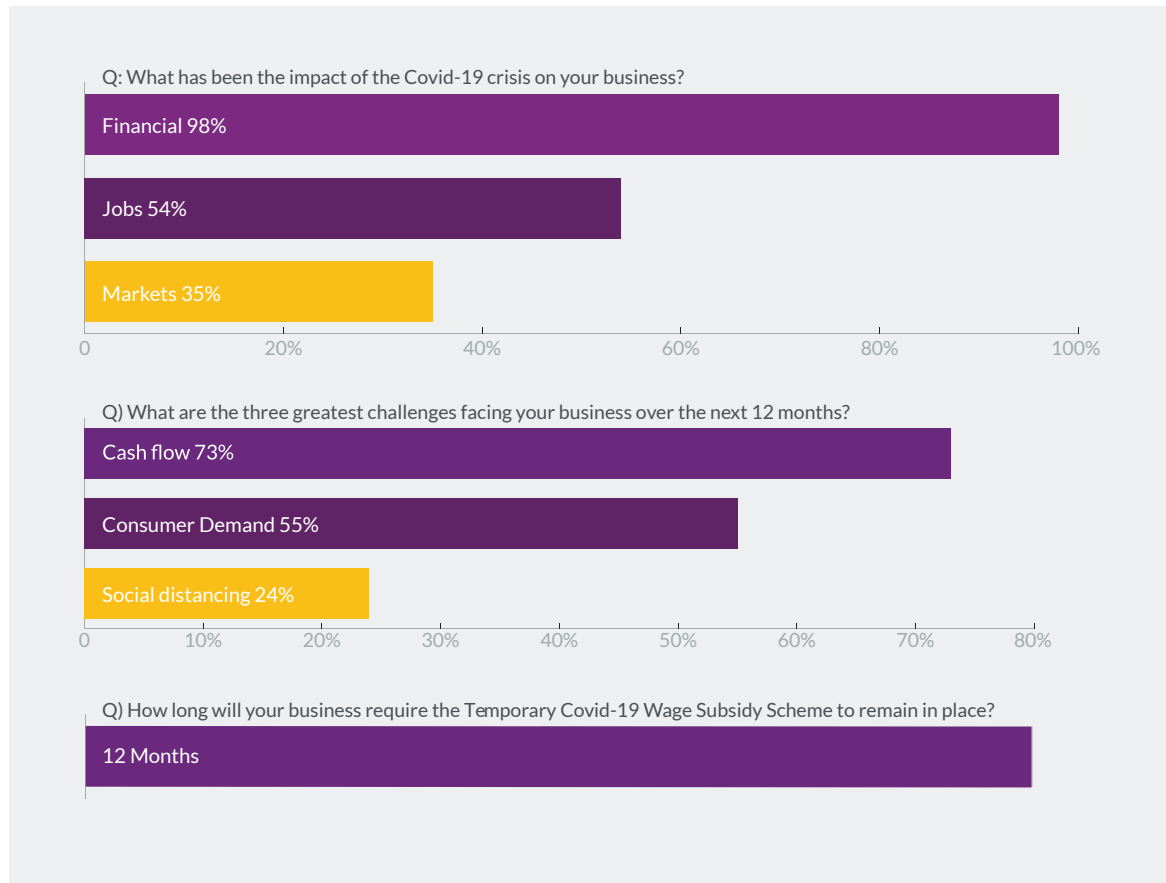
The Taoiseach's announcement on the 1<sup>st</sup> May that a slow lifting of Covid-19 restrictions is to begin on the 18<sup>th</sup> May and run over 15 weeks, further demonstrates just how profound the impact of this five month pandemic has been, and continues to be, on the business community. Within sectors such as hospitality we are informed it will be the 10<sup>th</sup> August, at the earliest, before bars can resume trading. Despite the appearance of tentative pathways to re-opening, it remains imperative that the genuine concerns expressed, and novel ideas voiced, in this survey are recognised by Government. By so doing they will enable the twin prongs of trust and confidence, essential for a vibrant economy, to be reclaimed by a populous presently fatigued by isolation and lockdown.

There is some degree of harmony in the suggested supports required by businesses, however, the structure of this report is such as to allow for ease of reference, completeness and trends to be discerned. The broad range of view points, opinions and actions proffered plainly illustrates that the County Wexford business community are at the forefront of how to concretely tackle this crisis and emerge from it with optimism and strength combined.

# Key Data at a Glance

In canvassing the views of the business community in County Wexford this survey sought to collect new and innovative ideas while also providing a clear statistical breakdown of just how the Covid-19 pandemic is impacting the County commercially. In order to achieve this, specific questions were formulated in such a way as to elicit the most direct responses.

## Headline results included the fact that when asked:



When taken in isolation these overview results undoubtedly indicate a serious crisis is being faced by the County. Yet, this report will offer unequivocal reasons for believing that County Wexford not only has the wherewithal but the imagination to flexibly re-position itself in order to utilise Government supports in the most dynamic way possible.

## Other key data:

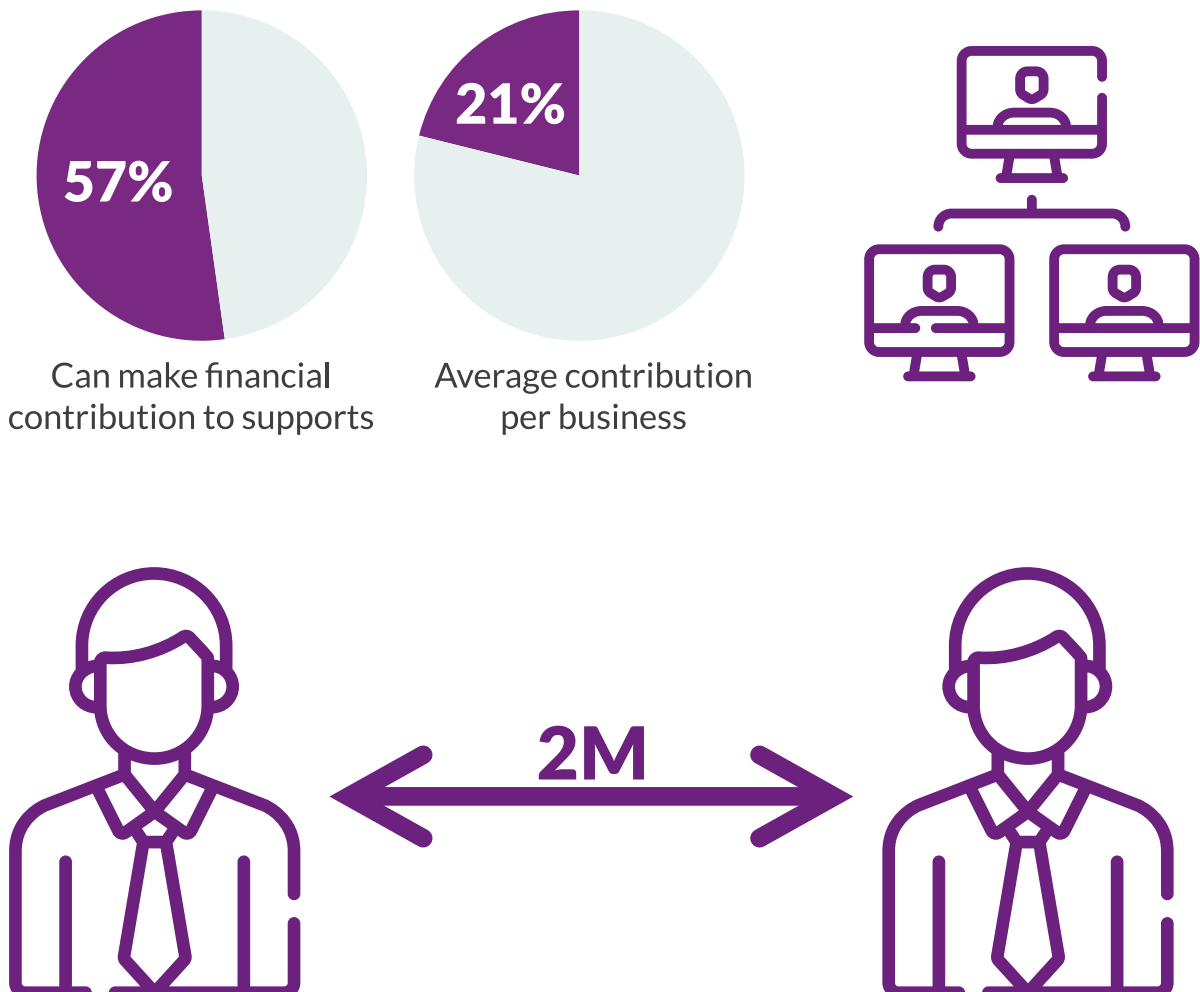
- Average number of employees in the businesses surveyed: 10
- Businesses still trading through the pandemic: 38%
- Average number of years in business: 19 years
- Businesses willing to make an average contribution of 21% to Government initiatives: 57%
- Businesses seeking grants in relation to marketing and advertising: 44%

# Consensus on Required Actions

The results of the survey show a distinct pattern of answers amongst the 217 respondents to some of the questions posed. The most striking and immediate actions suggested were captured in the following findings:

## Grants

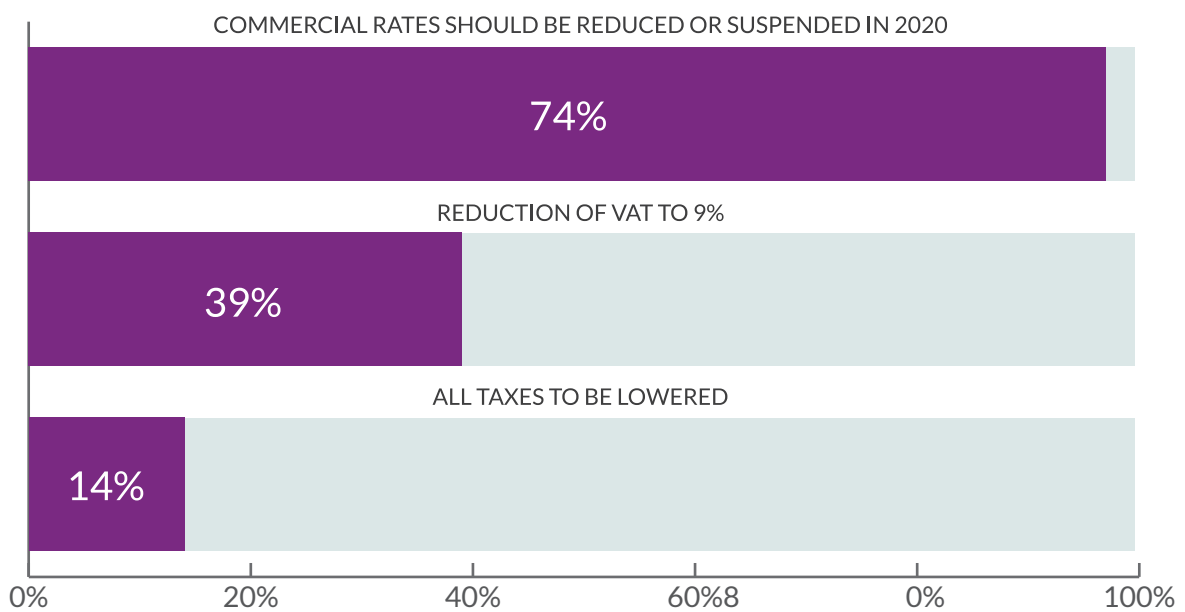
- Respondents called for additional targeted grants, rather than loans
- Businesses require an extension of the Temporary Covid-19 Wage Subsidy Scheme - on avg. for a period of 12 months
- Respondents called for supports to introduce remote working
- Reduce bureaucracy associated with accessing R&D grants
- Provide grants for introducing Covid-19 protocols into business
- Government to pay all redundancy costs incurred by employers as a result of Covid-19



# Consensus on Required Actions

## Taxation

- 74% of respondents stated categorically that there was a requirement for Commercial Rates to be reduced or suspended in 2020
- 39% suggested a reduction of VAT to 9%
- 14% called for all taxes to be lowered



**PRSI**



**PAYE**



**USC**

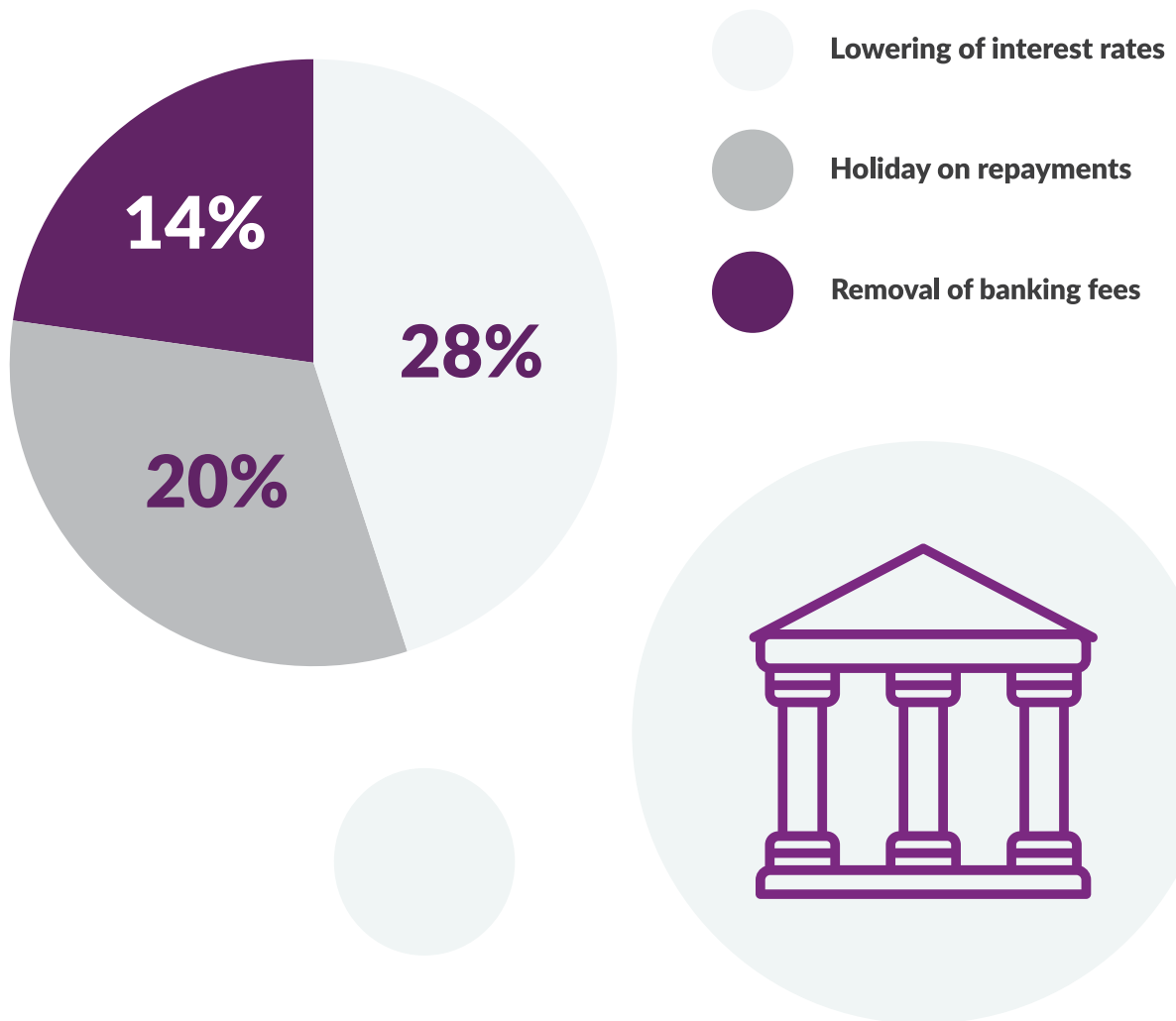




# Consensus on Required Actions

## Banking & Insurance

- 28% of respondents appealed for a lowering of interest rates
- 20% requested a holiday on repayments
- 14% wanted the removal of banking fees
- 36% called for reductions of insurance premiums
- 25% called for insurance premium rebates to be provided to businesses for the duration of closure



# Consensus on Required Actions

## Marketing

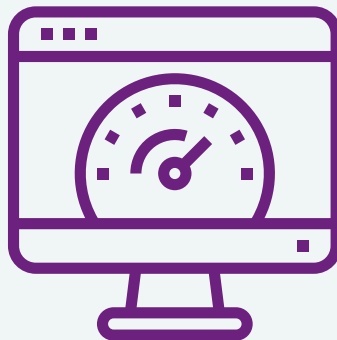
- County Wexford should ensure 1st mover advantage in domestic tourism
- Failte Ireland should fund a National Confidence Campaign and create a new Quality Assurance Accreditation Mark for 'Safe' Businesses
- Reaffirm the mantra of 'shop local' through a targeted local marketing campaign
- Each adult in the County should receive a voucher worth €500 to shop locally
- Introduce a 'Heroes' Voucher' of €1,000 for County's courageous frontline workers



# Consensus on Required Actions

## Top ranked Infrastructure Projects

- Investment in stable and faster broadband
- Upgrading of Rosslare Europort
- Acceleration of Greenways



# Sector Specific Actions

## Hospitality

*"Let's work together"*

The hospitality sector (incl. hotels, bars and restaurants) clearly stands at the coalface of some of the most profound negative effects of Covid-19. Of the 33 respondents just 2 answered affirmatively that they were still trading, with the remaining now shuttered. Though of course the sector provides valuable direct economic benefits to County Wexford, it also contributes significantly to other areas, such as, retail and tourism.

Fundamental concerns revealed in the survey pertain to matters financial and how credit will be sourced once businesses can restart. Fear of cash flow shortages and the availability of required grants are prevalent as are questions about the accumulated negative financial impact following the extended shutdown.

The provision of interest free working capital is imperative for the sector as it readies itself to reboot, something which can only be done by

implementing some of the suggested financial stimulus packages outlined by respondents. Mitigation options and innovative proposals to support the local economy's recovery include:

- Importance of reducing the VAT rate to its previous 9% rate
- Each adult in the County should receive a voucher worth €500 to shop locally
- Introduce a 'Heroes' Voucher' of €1,000 for County's courageous frontline workers
- SBCI should introduce a new term loan facility to help refinance all existing debt over a 10 year period
- Grants to adapt premises for takeaway/ delivery service, accommodate outdoor seating and implement technology for table ordering



# Sector Specific Actions

## Tourism

*“Promote Wexford on the Irish stage as a holiday destination”*

County Wexford has an array of particularly positive features (physical, rural, urban, coastal, retail, music, food) which make it best placed to take full advantage of domestic tourism. Its reputation in this sector has been long in the making as evidenced by the sheer number of people from other counties who have second homes in the County and holiday in Wexford annually. The restoration of the tourism sector is of chief importance for regional development and has a significant multiplier effect on many other aspects of the local economy and society.

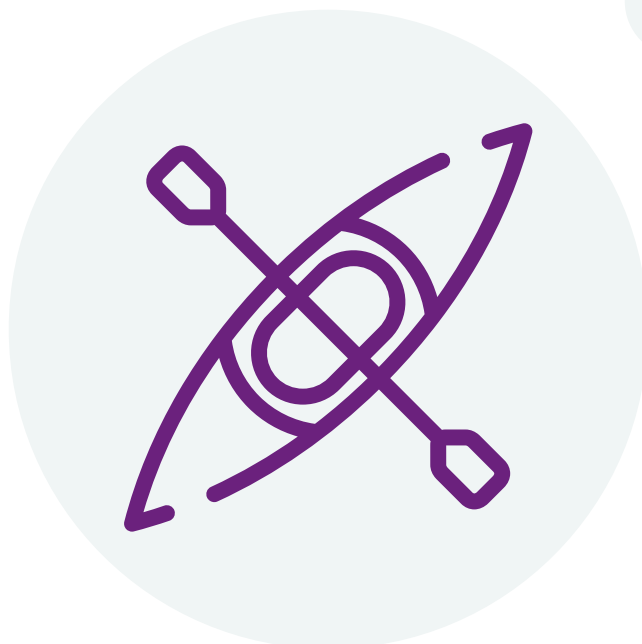
With that in mind and, until the present pandemic has abated, County Wexford should invest heavily in tourism and and promote itself as the No1 destination to attract domestic tourists. With a large population base just 2-2.5 hours away an energised campaign of re-modelling the Model County as the destination of choice under this new banner will place it in prime position to take greatest advantage once people start to travel.

The sector has, in the past, shown itself capable of rebounding after adverse times and there is little doubt it will do so again. County Wexford is rich in culture, heritage and natural beauty each of which can be capitalised on in a post Covid-19

situation, the 22 respondents paid particular heed to the importance of ensuring:

### Key Actions:

- Failte Ireland should fund a National Confidence Campaign and create a new Quality Assurance Accreditation Mark for ‘Safe’ Businesses
- County Wexford should ensure 1st mover advantage by heavily promoting itself as the No1 tourist destination for domestic tourism.
- Accelerate the Greenways and Blueways multi-activity recreational trails
- A County Wexford is Open marketing campaign
- Grants to develop virtual experiences within our Tourism attractions
- Encourage the citizens of County Wexford to visit our tourism amenities, locations and attractions in the immediate future



# Sector Specific Actions

## Retail

*“Getting customers back safely”*

The 23 respondents from this segment of the survey found that a titanic shift has occurred within their industry since March. Some exceptions included, pharmacies, off-licences and supermarkets, however, overall, it is certain the sector has been plunged into an unforeseen and negative new economic reality.

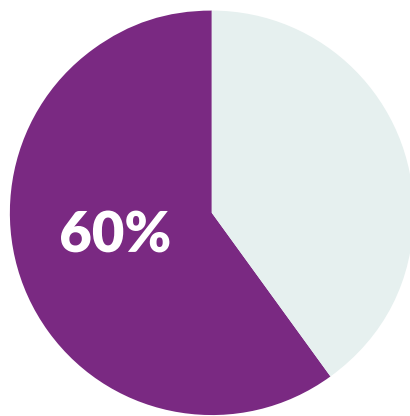
Retailers have expressed concerns regarding not only the timeframe for re-opening but the exact manner of how shoppers will return. The fact that firm social distancing requirements are set to continue well into the future, wedded to a deflated economy, makes the remaining months of 2020 challenging. To succeed the sector is reliant on a number of key supports, including the continuation of Temporary Covid-19 Wage Subsidy Scheme, the reduction of VAT to 9%, the suspension of Commercial Rates for 2020 and the guarantee of rebates for insurance premiums paid during the pandemic.

Beyond these features businesses must also plan for a wholly distinct economic landscape

and adapt to shifting customer patterns of buying and behaviour. With an emphasis on social distancing, trust will play a fundamental role in customer’s minds when they choose which retailer they will select. Online retail has, of course, become a credible alternative to the physical purchasing of items for many and this trend is set to be emboldened.

**Key Actions:**

- Government should provide a rent subsidy of 60% for 12 months
- Training/Mentoring on how to trade successfully online
- Introduction of a ‘digital tax’ on all goods bought online
- Free car parking to entice customers to shop in town centres
- Reduce level of paper work to access Government grants and supports
- Grant to cover cost of POS systems to help reduce physical contact.



**RENT SUBSIDY**



# Sector Specific Actions

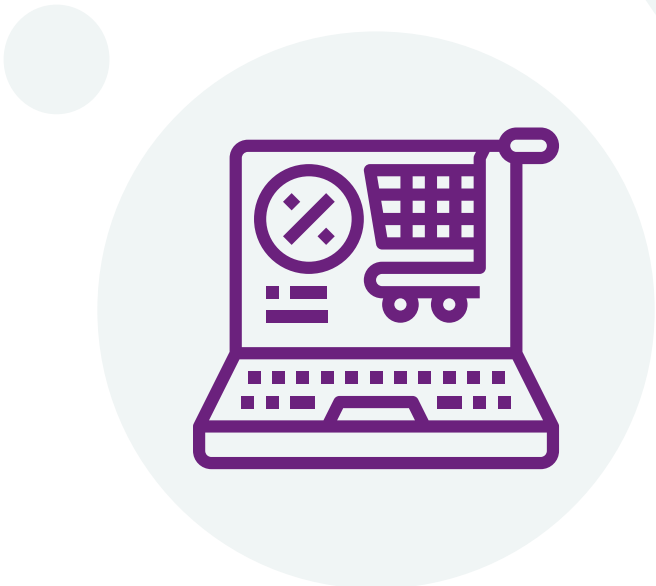
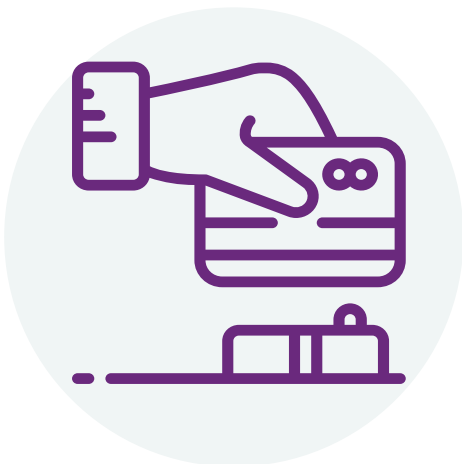
## Services

*“Reviving Wexford is a very good initiative”*

This segment of those surveyed provided the largest number of respondents at 39. Naturally they represent a sizeable cross-section of the business population in the County and include those working as solicitors, hairdressers, estate agents, nail technicians, auctioneers etc.

### Key Actions:

- Stringent measures must be activated against the growth in the black economy
- Importance of capital investment projects proceeding by Government
- Offer payment breaks to businesses on loans up to 12 months without charging ongoing interest on deferred payments
- Online trading vouchers increased from €2,500 to €5,000 at 90% grant aid
- Grants for implementing cashless and contactless payment systems
- Training in Covid-19 compliance, infection control and return to work protocols



# Sector Specific Actions

## Construction

*“Keep promoting local businesses”*

Although the recent announcement of a slow lifting of Covid-19 restrictions was welcome, we must remember that for the construction sector the 18th May represents only a “phased return of outdoor workers.” Covid-19 has, in fact, marked the construction industry in County Wexford in a decidedly insidious way, something noted by the 13 respondents to the survey.

Construction companies in County Wexford will be effected by the Covid-19 crisis in distinct ways depending on their size and within which areas of the sector they work. There was a common refrain from the 13 respondents that infrastructural projects should be encouraged as a means of kick-starting the economy:

### Key Actions:

- Speed up the pace of building social and affordable housing
- Instigate measures to expedite the planning permission process. Encourage and promote the retrofitting of existing housing stock
- Given the public bailout for the banking sector in the past, meaningful supports must now be forthcoming from them in the form of e.g. flexible overdraft facilities
- Introduce interest free loans for first-time house buyers





# Sector Specific Actions

## Manufacturing

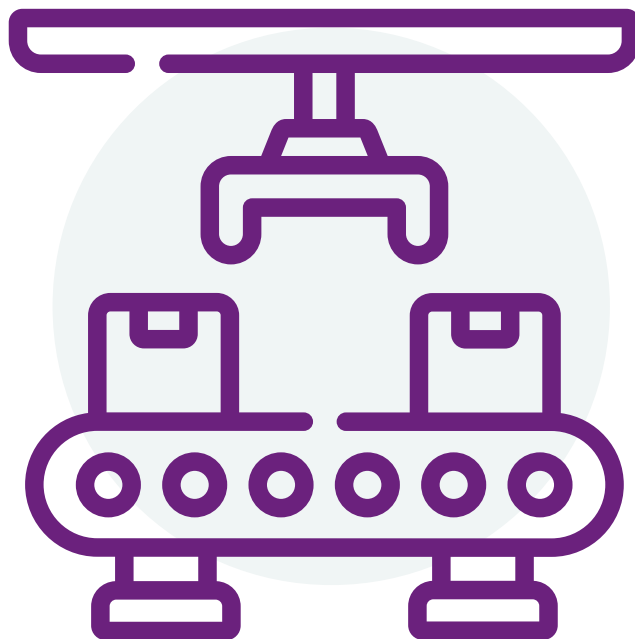
*“Reaffirm to people the need to support local businesses”*

Particular challenges exist for the manufacturing sector with regard to the Covid-19 pandemic, none more so than the stark reality that many of its workers simply cannot carry out their duties remotely. With cash-flow liquidity problems and difficulties in managing debt, the future is somewhat uncertain at present.

Even when the issues of remote working are set aside and where onsite jobs can resume the question of on-going social distancing requirements raises its head and may make re-opening difficult. Nevertheless and echoing the depth of imagination and innovation observed in other sectors, the 9 respondents from this sector made a number of insightful suggestions:

### Key Actions:

- Greater action on upgrading and enhancing Rosslare Europort
- Offer tax breaks on Research & Development expenditure
- Capital investment in Industrial Sites & Estates – respondents felt that too few units are available for start-ups or for businesses to expand
- Low cost sites should be made available for business expansion
- Central Bank of Ireland should borrow at 0% interest rate from Europe to enable the commercial banks to offer lower rates on all their existing loans to businesses



# Sector Specific Actions

## Transport & the Motor Trade

*"Thanks for the opportunity to let our feelings be known"*

The devastating impact of the coronavirus has also exposed the fact that this sector of the County Wexford economy is not immune. A total of 5 businesses responded to the survey and, apart from the points of general agreement outlined previously in this report, they made a number of unique suggestions:

- Allow businesses with small employee numbers to re-open sooner than large businesses
- The motor repair trade sector should be classified as 'essential'
- Faster rail connection to Dublin

### Key Actions:

- Provide subsidies for ferry sailing costs
- Provide a reasonable time to pay taxes without penalties



# Sector Specific Actions

## Agriculture

*"Keep plugging away"*

As in all sectors agriculture is counting the toll of the commercial impact of Covid-19. From the results of the survey it is undoubtedly the case that people regard urgent and well honed measures to support their industry as critical at this time. As described by the 5 respondents 'financial' was the major impact on this sector.

### Key Actions:

- Reduce excessively high payouts for accidents, which could then lead to a decrease in insurance premiums
- Grants should be provided for private electricity generation
- Below cost selling should be made illegal
- In tandem with the upgrading of Rosslare Europort, New Ross Port should also be developed



# Sector Specific Actions

## Healthcare

*"Feature and promote small businesses"*<sup>3</sup>

By the very fact that much healthcare work necessitates close proximity to patients and clients, concerns around social distancing and associated health and safety issues were brought to the fore by the 9 respondents in this sector:

### Key Actions:

- Grants for adapting premises to ensure safe working environment e.g. UV lights, air and plasma filtration and PPE
- Allow all dental treatments to be tax deductible
- Introduce a specific trauma relief course after the Covid-19 crisis
- Grants for virtual pre-screening programme for patients
- Improved remuneration from the Department of Employment Affairs & Social Protection & the HSE for treatments to cover higher costs
- Funding for vital contact tracing related technology



<sup>3</sup>The quotations at the beginning of each Sector Specific Actions section of this report are comments made by respondents.

# Concluding Remarks

The respondents should be thanked for their level of engagement, each business for investing their time in completing the Reviving Wexford survey. That level of conscientiousness is echoed in the depth and quality of the answers provided.

One of the chief benefits to be gained by examining such considered responses is that the process of correlating the data was uncomplicated, and the task of extrapolating key findings made easier by the exactness of the replies given. From the results garnered a number of distinct trends emerged across the range of questions posed. The specific supports necessary to guarantee that County Wexford is in a prime position post coronavirus to restart its economy were made abundantly clear.

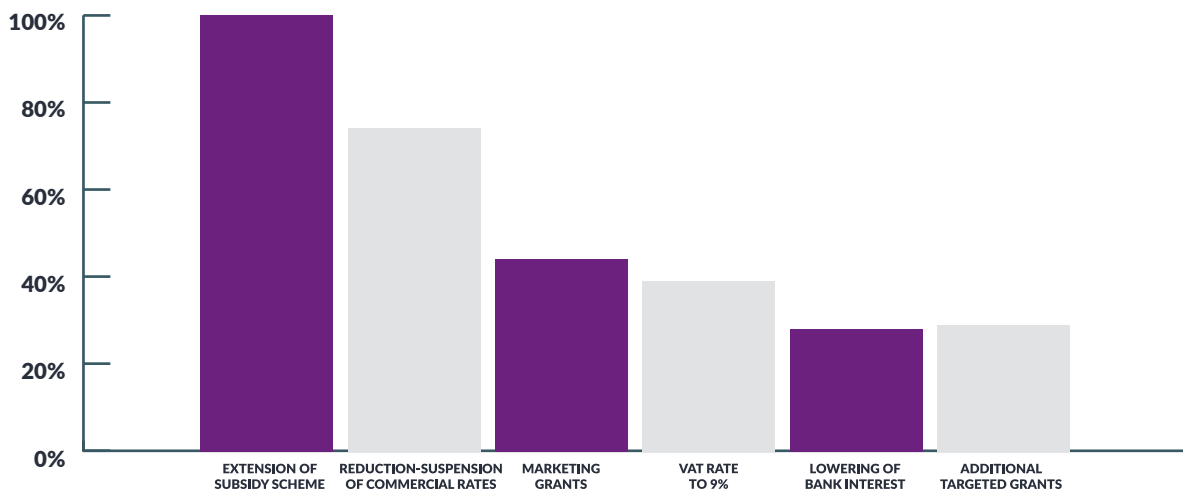
A key takeaway is the degree of accord shown regarding financial and taxation issues:

- 100% of respondents called for an extension of the Temporary Covid-19 Wage Subsidy Scheme
- 74% for a reduction or suspension of Commercial Rates in 2020
- 44% requested marketing and advertising grants
- 39% appealed for a reduction of the VAT rate to 9%
- 28% for the lowering of bank interest rates
- 29% of respondents called for additional targeted grants, rather than loans

As a singular concern each of these financial headings are problematic, however, when wedded to the unique issues around social distancing, health and safety and the reestablishment of trust; rebooting the County Wexford economy highlights real, though not insurmountable, difficulties. Ideas around promoting County Wexford as No1 domestic tourist destination, and having a 'Wexford is Open' campaign, alongside vouchers to shop local and a 'Heroes' Voucher' clearly illustrates the scale of originality and engagement of the respondents.

Although detailed descriptions were offered of the obstacles which exist to the re-emergence of an active economy in the County, each were matched by an equal number of proactive suggestions and imaginative ideas as to how these obstacles might be overcome.

In a time when we as a country have had to manage an exceptional crisis, County Wexford should be proud of the fact that in the first instance all of our frontline communities stepped up to the mark, and now in union with their efforts, our business community is ready and willing to tackle the current challenges with equal determination. We do require the support, engagement and contribution of Government, its state agencies, Local Authority and local agencies to ensure that County Wexford once again prospers in a post pandemic environment.



# Appendix

## Sample of Survey

1. Business name
2. What is your name?
3. Business sector
4. Role
5. Employee numbers
6. Still trading?
7. If not trading
8. Length of time in business
9. Location
10. What has been the impact of the Covid-19 crisis on your business?
11. What are the three greatest challenges facing your business over the next 12 months?
12. What is the one thing that Government could do to support your business?
13. What should the Government's economic stimulus package consist of?
14. Are there any assistive measures that could help you to maintain your existing employment numbers?
15. Are you in a position to make any financial contribution to any Government initiatives that aid your business, and if so, what is the % of this contribution?
16. How long will your business require the Temporary COVID-19 Wage Subsidy Scheme to remain in place?
17. What supports would you like to see Government put in place regarding commercial rates?
18. What new financial supports would benefit your specific business?
19. At a national level, what actions would you like to see the Government take to support your sector?
20. What tax reforms are you calling on Government to make?
21. What marketing supports/grants would you like to see introduced by Government?
22. How can insurance companies assist your business during the recovery period?
23. What training courses, delivered locally or online, would benefit your business?
24. What supports do you require from the banking sector?
25. What technology-related supports/grants should be made available to your business?
26. What changes to legislation or regulation would benefit your business?
27. What rent supports for your business would you like to see Government introduce?
28. What supports would benefit your business with developing new products or services?
29. In terms of capital investment, what new infrastructural projects in County Wexford would have the greatest benefit for your business?
30. What else can County Wexford Chamber do to support your business over the next 12 months?
31. Do you have additional comments?
32. Contact information
33. Do you consent to Reviving Wexford contacting you in the future?

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