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Rt Hon Michael Gove MP
Chancellor of the Duchy of Lancaster
Cabinet Office
70 Whitehall
London
SW1A 2AS



20th May 2021

Prioritising the safe return to work for office-based businesses

Dear Mr Gove,

I write on behalf of BOSS, the British Office Supplies and Services Federation. Our industry manufactures and supplies businesses across the UK with a huge range of products, grouped into categories that include Facilities, Furniture, Technology, Stationery, PPE, Cleaning and Hygiene and Consumables.

Our sector is worth £10 billion to the UK economy and supplies all areas of industry as well as the NHS, schools, care homes and research centres and Government departments including the MoD, the Home Office and HM Treasury. Our members have been focused throughout the COVID-19 pandemic on providing products and services to ensure these businesses and departments could continue to operate.

Our sector, like many, relies on the occupation of offices. Currently sales volumes are around 65% of pre-pandemic levels, due to consumption of office products typically being one third at home compared to in the office. In a recent study PwC warns of a potential £15.3bn hit to UK GDP every year if pandemic-levels of home working continue. PwC also estimate that the negative impact on hours worked is equivalent to 250,000 jobs per year in full time equivalent terms. In our sector alone, of the 1300 independent office supplies resellers in the UK, many have only survived due to Government schemes such as the Coronavirus Job Retention Scheme and Coronavirus Business Interruption Loans. If volumes don't return before the support schemes are withdrawn many of these businesses will fold with significant redundancies.

I am writing regarding the messaging around the 'return of employees to the workplace'. While restrictions have been lifted in many other sectors the government is still recommending employees 'work from home if you can'. This messaging is at contradiction with the relaxing of restrictions elsewhere. In addition the message is open to interpretation and is causing confusion for employers and employees.

While the commitment to remove the current work from home guidance on 21 June is welcome, we remain concerned that this is a full six weeks after the re-opening of other businesses, for example hospitality, leisure and retail. We find it most disconcerting that there has been no mention on the roadmap for something as essential to the economy as office working. On behalf of our sector I ask:

For government to prioritise the return to work for office-based businesses. We would like to see the 21 June date reconsidered, to bring office-based businesses in line with other sectors. This would demonstrate governments' confidence in the health and safety arrangements workplace managers have in place and acknowledge the importance of thriving workplaces to the economy and as a valuable support network for many employee's mental wellbeing.

For government to make clear their messaging around the 'return to work'. Further clarification is needed regarding the lifting of the 'work from home' guidance. For example, will this guidance be replaced with an explicit message encouraging employees to return to the workplace? Will Government highlight the negative consequences on mental health and productivity that working from home can cause? And will Government consider further incentives and assistance for

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businesses to comply with health and safety guidelines in order to encourage employee confidence in returning to work?

For government to provide sufficient notice of any change to their messaging regarding the return to offices so our industry and businesses can plan for this. They will need time to open up in a safe and secure manner and clear instructions and guidance will be essential for employer and employee confidence

We would like to see people return confidently to their workplaces soon, and to be reassured that Government messaging will not undermine this shift - which will, after all, be a significant marker of a return to normality.

Kind regards,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to be "Simon Drakeford". The signature is stylized with a large, sweeping initial "S" and a long, horizontal stroke extending to the right.

Simon Drakeford
Chairman, BOSS Federation

Cc: Rt Hon Kwasi Kwarteng, Secretary of State for Business, Energy & Industrial Strategy
Cc: Alan Dick, Department of Business, Energy & Industrial Strategy