Introduction
The members of the AIPCO are significant contributors to the Irish economy not solely in terms of our contribution to business tourism but to sectoral economic development and the knowledge economy of Ireland.

In 2019, our members collectively organised 90 conferences in Ireland with an economic impact of 51 million and employed over 232 people. In addition, our members have organised 175 conferences internationally with 44,916 delegates. Although these conferences do not take place in Ireland, approximately 30% of this revenue is for Irish based companies. Many of our members have exported their consultancy services, which has resulted in increased employment to the sector.

As an association, we would like to differentiate our support requirements from other Tourism sectors, as the challenging situation we find ourselves in is much more long term than other sectors. The beginnings of a recovery of our sector will be a minimum of 1 to 2 years away. Our biggest challenge is retaining our workforce to complete project work with no revenue coming in as many of our members manage the finances of our association clients.

Support Plan
We present the following 7-point support plan to keep our members in business with the aim of continuing our excellent working relationship with Fáilte Ireland to position Ireland as a top performing destination for International Conferences. A destination’s professional offering in terms of “Quality delivery” relies on “Quality PCOs”. To maintain our reputation and continue our collaborative work, we need to secure the financial position of our members.
Increased sales activity for the association conference sector

We propose an increased focus on sales activity within the Business Tourism division of Fáilte Ireland with particular focus on increasing business from the Ambassador Programme. We have seen from the last recession that the Association Sector is resilient and associations will always want to meet to share their research and knowledge. We would like to suggest increasing resources dedicated to three areas: 1. Medical Conferences (hospital focus) 2. Academic Conferences (2 resources for Dublin and Regional Universities) and 3. Regional Conferences (Universities & ITs).

We believe it is important to invest now in quality resources to protect our future as PCOs and Ireland’s position in the global market place.

Reasoning:
The focus of our business has had to move away from sales and identifying new ambassadors within our sales division. This will impact our business in two to three years times. We need to keep the momentum going through the Fáilte Ireland Ambassador Programme

Wage subsidy scheme to be continued until March 31st 2021

Due to the long lead nature of the PCO business model, there is no revenue coming into our member companies for at least 12 months

Reasoning:
a. The majority of our business has postponed into Summer 2021 with some business being deferred into 2022 due to the 2020 editions being postponed into 2021.
b. PCO’s have completed the majority of the project work for their 2020 conferences, but will not be paid until one year later.
c. PCOs have pre-financed clients with many deposit payments on the basis that registration and sponsorship fees would commence in March. However, all revenue from delegates, sponsors etc. will cease until early next year.
d. When conference do start taking place, we predict a decrease in numbers of up to 50% resulting in lower fees for the PCO and for the entire supply chain.
e. PCOs are struggling with cash flow to not only pay salaries and keep their doors open, but also cash flow to finance conferences that have postponed.
Grant Scheme
A resilience and hardship grant scheme to be put in place to support PCOs in keeping their doors open. This grant could be scaled based on the number of employees or turnover in each company. We refer you to the Scottish resilience and hardship support which offers up to 350k per company.

Reasoning:
With no revenue coming into our business, we require support to retain our talent for when the business does come back and to continue sales for future years. The work done now is vital for the future recovery of our sector. We need cash flow to sustain operations and service the postponed business for 2021. The continuation of business development for future years is key to the revival and sustainability of the association conference sector.

Financial support for Associations
Due to the forecasted reduced attendance of conferences, the conferences are no longer financially viable. For Ireland to remain competitive, we would ask that Government give a grant to associations to offset the high venue hire costs and low capacities due to physical distancing.

We would like to request increased financial support for the marketing of conferences to 20 euros per delegate. Increased marketing activity will support us in ensuring we maintain or come close to the original delegate numbers.

A new short-term initiative of supporting national associations with a fee per delegates will help us support the national conference association market and enhance the opportunity of bringing business to the regional and out of high season.

Reasoning:
There is a concern that conferences will be forced to cancel due to them being no longer financially viable. This will be a loss of business to the venue and the PCO but also hotels, restaurants, transport companies, airlines etc. If there was a financial support system in place, it will bring business to the entire supply chain and support in making the conference financially viable. An investment of 100k equates to 1.6 million in economic impact. A small investment to offset the risk of a conference cancelling.

With flight restrictions and low attendance of international meetings, we need to focus on the national market. By supporting the National Associations of Ireland, not only will be bring conference business to the regions and out of season, but Failte Ireland will develop a database of potential Ambassadors of International meetings. Every national association has the potential to bring in an International Conference to Ireland.
VAT
We recommend a 0% vat rate for PCO services to increase our competitive position with International associations and Core PCOs. This is the case in Spain, Portugal and Italy are currently considering moving to a 0% rate for PCOs and DMCs.

Reasoning:
To position Ireland in a competitive playing field with other European Destinations.
This is vital in an environment where air access costs are likely to be higher over the next 5 years. European delegates can travel with more ease within central Europe, so Ireland need to differentiate from central European Countries.

Brand Ireland
Very clear guidelines on SOPs on how conferences will take place safely. Reduce the 2m physical distancing to 1m to ensure we can maximise the capacity in conference venues. We must remain nimble and agile in customising our message to the International market place.

Reasoning:
To demonstrate that Ireland continues to behave as a leading light country in following safety guidelines in the gathering of people in a safe environment. The development of a safety stamp for relevant suppliers will deliver consumer confidence.

To maximise the capacity of venues to ensure we can cater for the number of delegates visiting Ireland and that the conference remains financially viable.

Dedicated Association Meetings Task Force group
In order to focus on the survival and growth of the association conference sector in Ireland, we would like to set up a dedicated association meetings task force group. Every city and country is suffering right now. With the right people around the table, we can be first out to market with our competitive stance. We would like to see the speciality task force group feeding into the revised Business Tourism working group.
**Final Statement**

Sometimes a crisis can bring out the best. A negative situation can propel us forward with the most positive action. The AIPCO would like to collaborate with Fáilte Ireland in re-positioning Ireland as the best in class conference destination.

Collaboration has resulted in enhanced understanding and education across all sectors. This in turn has led to powerful commitment, energised engagement and an improved vision. Most importantly, it has opened our eyes to opportunity. Believe it or not, Covid-19 provides us with an opportunity. The collective energy of the AIPCO working in harmony with Fáilte Ireland will lead to strategies being effectively translated into actionable project plans with clear focus and responsibility. Measure of success and failures are identified, well-understood and communicated to all stakeholders. Excitement for the “to be” state easily overcomes the inertia of the status quo. Let’s grab this opportunity to invest in a great future for the association conference sector in Ireland.

The AIPCO is an enabler of collaboration, we are the conjugate for International Associations to connect with the knowledge economy of Ireland. We need to protect our future.