

COVID-19:

WORKING THROUGH THIS TOGETHER

**A PRACTICAL GUIDE
TO MAKING
WORKPLACES SAFER**



Department for the
Economy
www.economy-ni.gov.uk



ABOUT THIS GUIDE:

During the Covid-19 (Coronavirus) emergency, employees of businesses and organisations permitted to operate should go to work only if they cannot work from home.

The safety, health and wellbeing of everyone is of paramount importance and this is the primary concern and purpose of this guide. We would like to applaud those employers who have moved swiftly and with innovation, putting their employee's health and wellbeing at the centre of their operations in these new and uncertain times.

This guide sets out principles and practical steps that are vital for employers and employees to keep themselves and their workplaces safe. It also sets out necessary steps to be followed if employers and employees are concerned about safety.

This guide is intended to be universal and does not replace existing legislation or industry-specific guidance (see references at the end of this guide).

This guide has been endorsed by the NI Engagement Forum on Covid-19. The Forum comprises: Confederation of British Industry, Chambers of Commerce, Federation of Small Businesses NI, Institute of Directors, Manufacturing NI, NI Retail Consortium, the Northern Ireland Committee of the Irish Congress of Trade Unions, SOLACE, the Health and Safety Executive for Northern Ireland (HSENI), the Labour Relations Agency and the Public Health Agency.



KEY PRINCIPLES:

Employers will continue to fulfil their legal duties under existing health and safety law to maintain and protect the physical and mental health, safety and welfare of their employees and customers.

Where an employer cannot provide a safe working environment during the current emergency, they must determine what steps are required to create a safe working environment, taking all reasonably practicable measures to implement a safe working environment. If all appropriate actions have been taken and having sought advice from HSE NI or similar authority, the employer still cannot provide a safe working environment, then the employer must close.

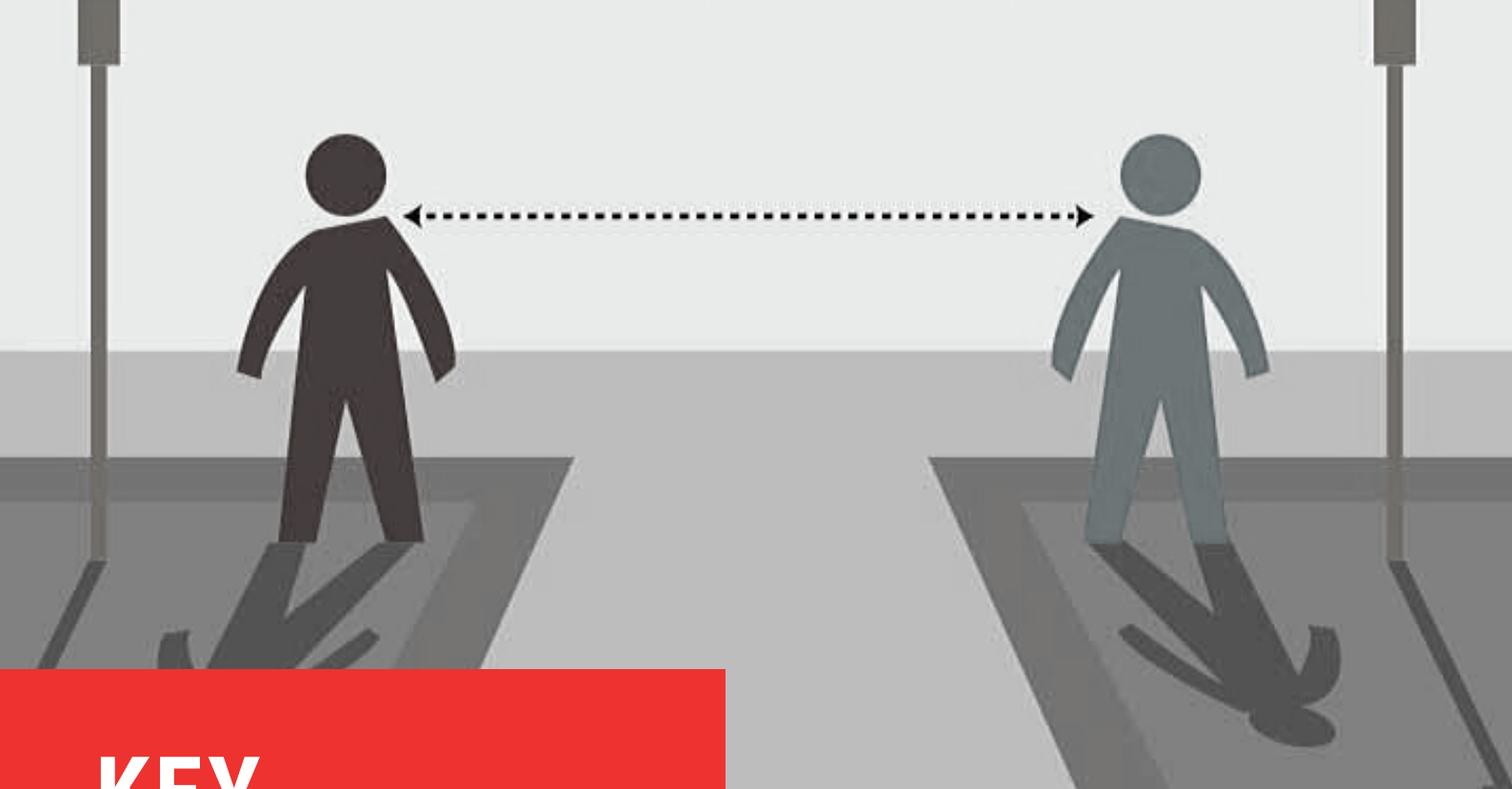
Employers, where appropriate, should then seek to 'furlough' employees using the Government's Coronavirus Job Retention Scheme. HMRC will ultimately decide on the eligibility of such claims.

Employees have a **legal** responsibility to their employer and each other to follow instructions regarding safe working practices.

Everyone should approach the health, safety and wellbeing of each other in the workplace with **compassion** and **understanding**.

Employers are advised to have regular and meaningful **engagement** with their employees and/or their recognised trade union or other representatives (including their health and safety committee, where this exists) about the Covid-19 emergency.

These engagements provide additional opportunities to remind everyone about safe working practices, necessary precautions, and to share concerns.



KEY PRINCIPLES:

It is recommended that larger workplaces have a standing group (comprising management and union/employee representatives) to meet regularly, adhering to social distancing guidelines (see below) if the meeting cannot be held virtually, to anticipate issues that might arise during the crisis. Owners/managers in smaller workplaces should have similar regular discussions with employees.

Employers are advised to circulate safety messages regularly to all employees using mobile technology, such as WhatsApp groups. The use of posters and other visual aids around the workplace will also help reinforce safety messages.

Employers must consult with employees and/or their recognised trade union appointed health and safety representative, or other representatives, on the required steps to keep the workplace safe from the virus.

Employers and employees and/or their recognised trade union or other representatives have a shared responsibility to work together to resolve concerns about safety in the workplace. See 'What to Do When Concerns Arise' (below) if the matter cannot be resolved.



PUBLIC HEALTH GUIDELINES

Employees with suspected symptoms of Covid-19:

- Employers will ensure that all employees are aware of the symptoms of the virus; we recommend that you refer to Public Health Agency information. Employers are encouraged to keep themselves and their employees informed of updates to public health guidance.
- Employees who have symptoms of the virus must let their employer know immediately, follow public health advice and stay at home. If the symptoms come on while at work, go home immediately. Where possible, an 'isolation room' should be designated if the employee cannot leave immediately – this must be cleaned thoroughly afterwards in line with public health advice.

- Employees who are designated as extremely vulnerable, and subject to shielding' are strongly advised to stay at home at all times. They should also avoid any face to face contact. These measures are in place for a period of at least 12 weeks from the day they are informed by the NHS or their GP that they fall into this category.

Hand Washing

- Employers must ensure there are facilities for everyone to wash hands with soap and hot water for at least 20 seconds, and/or hand sanitiser.
- Everyone should wash their hands. when they get home or into work, and while at work after blowing their nose sneezing or coughing, eating or handling food.
- Employers must ensure there are adequate washing facilities and/or hand sanitiser at the workplace, e.g. entrances, rest/breakout rooms, and canteens.



PUBLIC HEALTH GUIDELINES

Social distancing

- Everyone must keep two metres apart, wherever possible. For working practices which necessitate closer working than the recommended public health advice, these will be facilitated with appropriate safety measures, such as PPE or protective screening.
- The need for all employees to social distance applies equally to work and canteen areas as well as changing facilities.
- Floor markings, spaced two metres apart, help everyone to respect social distancing in queues.
- Install partitions and barriers, such as screens, where possible to improve segregation where social distancing cannot be achieved.

Personal Protective Equipment (PPE)

- Employers must continue to provide PPE as required by their risk assessments.
- Face masks and gloves play an important role in clinical settings, such as hospitals. There is currently no evidence that they are effective in preventing the spread of the virus outside of clinical settings. Employers must review the advice as it is updated by the Government.



SAFER WORK PRACTICES

Movement

- Non-essential travel should be avoided. Where travel cannot be avoided, employees should travel alone wherever possible.
- When employees use a vehicle with others, try to travel with the same person, preferably with one in the front and one in the back of the vehicle and ensure good ventilation.
- Practice social distancing when using car parks. For employer's own car parks, consideration should be given to leasing additional car parking spaces, where available, to help create space for social distancing
- If employees have no alternative but to use to use public transport to travel to work, they should be advised to observe social distancing.

- Employers must consider ways of ensuring that all movement around the premises and between sites supports social distancing. Recommended measures include, one person at a time in lifts, and making entrances, corridors, stairways and aisles 'one-way' to prevent the risk of congestion.

Work Processes

- Employers will, where appropriate, stagger start/finish times, shift patterns, and lunch, tea and smoking breaks to reduce the number of employees in an area or using entrances/corridors at any given time.
- Employers will, where appropriate, reconfigure production lines and processes, and common areas such as reception, canteens, changing rooms and smoking shelters, to create space for social distancing.
- Employers will, where appropriate, keep the same team rosters every day to minimise contact with wider groups.



SAFER WORK PRACTICES

Cleaning

Employers are to:

- Ensure regular cleaning of touch points, such as door handles, hand rails, lift buttons, vending machines, and biometric clocking-in systems, using cleaning methods and products in line with the manufacturer's guidance.
Cleaning frequency should reflect how often touch points are used.
- Ensure washing facilities and hand sanitiser supplies are kept stocked up.
- Consider the use of pedal, rather than hand, operated waste bins, where possible.

- Seek to minimise the use of shared tools, if this is not possible, then the equipment must be cleaned between each user.

Meetings

- Are to be conducted by telephone or videoconference, whenever possible. Where physical meetings cannot be avoided, effective social distancing measures must be ensured.



MENTAL HEALTH & WELLBEING

Everyone is naturally concerned about the Virus at this time so additional attention should be directed at mental health issues.

Employers and line managers are advised to be alert to mood or behavioural changes in employees and talk to them compassionately about problems.

Employers and Trades Unions will collaborate to promote their existing range of support networks available to employees and members, and where appropriate publicise Employee Assistance Programmes, Union Support Schemes and other government and third sector Mental Wellbeing resources. Employers should signpost online training aids to promote mental health and wellbeing.

What to do when concerns arise:

Employees are encouraged to raise any concerns they have with their employer, through their line manager, recognised trade union or other employee representative body if in place. Constructive dialogue is advised for the resolution of these concerns.

Employees have the absolute right to work in an environment free from serious or imminent danger or harm and should not suffer detriment or dismissal for acting on a reasonable belief of serious or imminent danger.

Employees are often better placed to put ideas forward on how to resolve concerns. This can be achieved through early dialogue and consultation. Where normal consultative arrangements do not resolve the issues, employees are entitled to raise a grievance.

If agreement on a resolution cannot be reached, employees and/or their recognised trade union or other representatives should contact the HSENI on [Phone Number expected to be operational COP 8/4/20] to obtain advice or make a complaint. Appropriate enforcement action will be considered as necessary.

An employee who suffers disadvantage or dismissal because they reasonably and genuinely believed their employer was not complying with their legal obligations has legal protection; as per the existing legislative framework.

Employers should use their disciplinary procedures to deal with serious or repeated breaches of health and safety practices.



FURTHER HELP & INFORMATION

General guidance for employers, employees, etc:

<https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/guidance-to-employers-and-businesses-about-covid-19/guidance-for-employers-and-businesses-on-coronavirus-covid-19>

Contact details and specific guidelines per Local Council District:

<https://www.nidirect.gov.uk/contacts/local-councils-in-northern-ireland>

Making a complaint to HSENI:

<https://www.hseni.gov.uk/complaints-about-unsafe-and-unhealthy-work-activities>
[Phone Number expected to be operational COP 8/4/20]

Information on employment rights:

See the **Labour Relations Agency's** website www.lra.org.uk or contact its Workplace Information Service on 03300 555 300.

Trade unions will also provide support. For more information on, or to join a trade union go to www.ictuni.org

Posters to Download, Print and Display from the Public Health Agency:

Social Distancing Poster:

<https://www.publichealth.hscni.net/sites/default/files/20203/V1%20social%20distancing%2026032020.pdf>

Hand washing poster:

<https://www.publichealth.hscni.net/sites/default/files/2020-03/handwash%20poster%2019%2003%202020%20%283%29.pdf>

Catch it, bin it, kill it poster:

<https://www.publichealth.hscni.net/sites/default/files/2020-02/Catch%20it%20bin%20it%20kill%20it%20SQUARE.png>

Isolation Poster

https://www.publichealth.hscni.net/sites/default/files/2020-03/Covid-19_poster%2019%2003%202020%20B.pdf

Industry Specific Guidance:

<http://nifda.co.uk/wp-content/uploads/2020/03/NIFDA-Good-Manufacturing-Practice-Covid-19.pdf>

<https://www.gov.uk/guidance/social-distancing-in-the-workplace-during-coronavirus-covid-19-sector-guidance>

<https://brc.org.uk/media/674414/brc-warehouse-and-distribution-implementation-practices-v3.pdf>