

# COVID-19:

# WORKING THROUGH THIS TOGETHER

ISSUED 28TH MAY 2020

A detailed, grayscale microscopic image of COVID-19 virus particles. The central focus is a large, spherical virus particle with a textured surface and numerous protruding, spike-like structures. Surrounding it are several smaller, similar virus particles, some appearing as faint, out-of-focus shapes. The background is dark, making the light-colored virus particles stand out.

**A PRACTICAL GUIDE  
TO MAKING  
WORKPLACES SAFER**



## 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 employees' 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; this includes ensuring that any other employers or contractors sharing the workplace abide by their legal duties and apply these good practice guidelines.

Employers must carry out a COVID-19 risk assessment, this risk assessment must be done in consultation with unions or employees and any findings shared with the workforce.

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, informed by their COVID-19 risk assessment, taking all reasonably practicable measures to implement a safe working environment. If all appropriate actions have been taken and having sought advice from HSENI or similar authority, the employer still cannot provide a safe working environment, the employer must close.

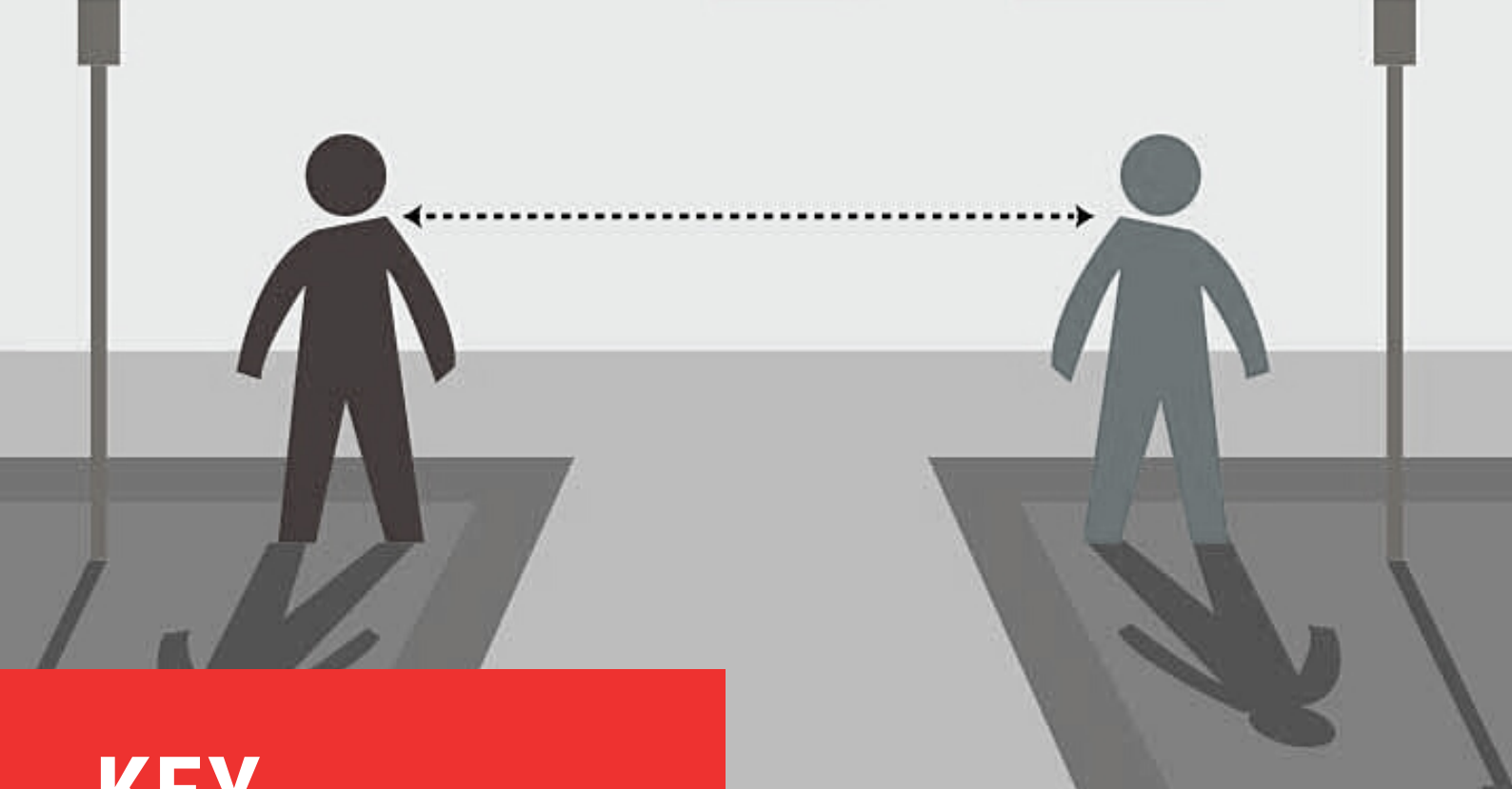
Employers, where appropriate, should then seek to 'furlough' employees using the Government's Coronavirus Job Retention Scheme. HMRC will ultimately decide on the eligibility of such claims.

**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.

### 5 STEPS TO WORKING SAFELY:

**CARRY OUT A COVID-19 RISK ASSESSMENT**

**DEVELOP CLEANING, HANDWASHING AND HYGIENE PROCEDURES**

**HELP PEOPLE TO WORK FROM HOME**

**MAINTAIN 2M SOCIAL DISTANCING, WHERE POSSIBLE**

**WHERE PEOPLE CANNOT BE 2M APART, MANAGE TRANSMISSION RISK.**



# 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. <https://www.publichealth.hscni.net/covid-19-coronavirus>
- 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. If an individual is unsure of the symptoms they can check on the Public Health Agency [website](#)

- Employees who are designated as extremely vulnerable, and subject to shielding' are strongly advised to stay at home at all times. As for any workplace risk employers must take into account specific duties to those with protected characteristics, including, for example, expectant mothers who are, as always, entitled to suspension on full pay if suitable roles cannot be found. For further guidance see the Equality Commission for Northern Ireland's [guidance](#).
- Vulnerable workers 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 warm 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 NI Executive. <https://www.health-ni.gov.uk/coronavirus>



# 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 employers' 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:

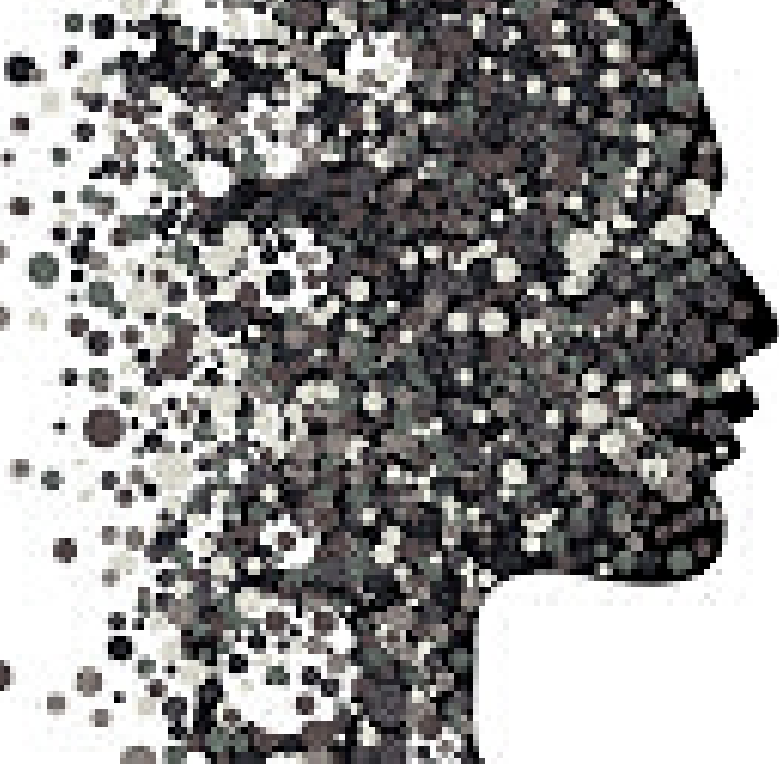
- Ensure regular cleaning of touch points, such as door handles, hand rails, lift buttons, vending machines, and biometric clocking-in systems, using cleaning methods and products in line with the manufacturer's guidance. Cleaning frequency should reflect how often touch points are used.
- Ensure washing 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 employees have the common interests of staying safe and remaining in business and as such there should be open, calm and constructive dialogue on how to resolve problems in a calm and structured way.

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 unions or other representatives should contact HSENI on 0800 0320 121 to obtain advice or make a complaint. Complaints will be passed to the relevant enforcing authority and investigated through a variety of methods, which may include unannounced visits. Appropriate enforcement action will be considered, including the issue of prohibition notices if required.

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/coronavirus>

## **Contact details and specific guidelines per Local Council District:**

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

## **Health and Safety Executive:**

[Making a complaint](#)

[Working Safely During Coronavirus](#)

[Example Risk Assessment](#)

[Talking with your workers about preventing Coronavirus](#)

## **Chartered Institute of Environmental Health**

## **Waste Industry Safety and Health Forum NI**

## **Information on employment rights:**

See the **Labour Relations Agency's** website [www.lra.org.uk](http://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](http://www.ictuni.org)

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

### **Social Distancing Poster:**

<https://www.publichealth.hscni.net/publications/social-distancing-poster>

### **Hand washing poster:**

<https://www.publichealth.hscni.net/publications/coronavirus-wash-your-hands-poster>

### **Isolation Poster**

<https://www.publichealth.hscni.net/publications/isolate-your-household-campaign-poster-and-translations>

## **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>