

COVID-19 – Temporary Volunteering Policy

Special Leave

1. Time off for volunteering falls under the NICS Special Leave policy. Line managers can approve paid and unpaid Special Leave for staff for volunteering. The provision in NICS HR policy sits alongside Departmental Volunteering arrangements.
2. The most valuable contribution civil servants are making during this unprecedented time is in undertaking their departmental duties through which they serve society, their local communities and Northern Ireland as a whole.
3. The priority for NICS Departments during the COVID-19 outbreak, is to continue to deliver essential services. Those staff who are working in roles deemed essential by their Department are either working from home in line with government guidance or, where required, in the workplace with appropriate safeguards and social distancing measures in place. Staff working in these essential roles are not eligible to apply for Paid Special Leave for volunteering under this policy due to the essential nature of their role.
4. There are however, some staff who are currently in non-essential roles and/or whose role cannot be done from home. Given the unprecedented circumstances, any staff who are in non-essential roles or not able to work from home or not required for redeployment to essential roles and are not ill, self-isolating or in a vulnerable group should be encouraged to consider volunteering opportunities to support the COVID-19 crisis.
5. To support the COVID-19 crisis, a common approach to the paid special leave (PSL) facility for all employees has been agreed.

Current arrangements

6. Under current NICS policy, staff can be given PSL (within limits) for listed Voluntary Public Service up to a maximum of 3 days PSL, with an equivalent amount contributed from their own annual leave for voluntary service with the non-statutory sector. This is pro-rated for staff who work alternative working patterns.

Temporary new arrangements to support the COVID -19 crisis

7. In the current COVID-19 crisis some civil servants will feel compelled to do more and 'serve twice'. Where they wish to do so, up to 6 days PSL will be available specifically to support COVID-19 volunteering activities, with no requirement for staff to match the special leave with their own annual leave. This will not be available for other forms of volunteering.
8. At management discretion, this may be extended beyond 6 days PSL for volunteering activities specifically to support COVID-19. Managers would be required to keep any volunteering arrangement under review to ensure that staff remain available for redeployment to essential roles if required.
9. These are temporary arrangements that will be kept under review.



Who would this apply to?

10. All employees are eligible to apply for PSL for volunteering, including those on temporary contracts, fixed term appointments and probationers. It is also applicable to agency workers but is not applicable to contractors.
11. Where an individual has been identified as an Essential Worker, they are not eligible to apply for PSL for volunteering under this policy due to the essential nature of their role.

Types of volunteering

COVID-19 Volunteering

12. Civil servants are expected to adhere to the Chief Medical Officer's advice on social distancing and self-isolation, and have been asked to work from home, where possible. Employees wishing to volunteer on tasks supportive of COVID-19 must adhere to this advice. Therefore, they are limited to activities where they can support the call to arms, but also except for essential travel stay home in order to save lives and protect the NHS.
13. The additional PSL being introduced is only for volunteering specifically related to supporting the response to the COVID-19 outbreak. Examples of volunteering activities could include working with a Covid -19 related helpline or delivery of essential food parcels or medicines for vulnerable members of the public isolated at home or a helpline for members of the public requiring advice on IT. It should not be used for any other form of volunteering.
14. Many civil servants are choosing to make a contribution through volunteering in their own time. This includes activities that are COVID-19 supportive such as giving blood or running errands for neighbours. When doing this, the Chief Medical Officer's advice on social distancing and self-isolation still applies.

Emergency Volunteering Leave

15. The COVID-19 Act introduced a new statutory right to Emergency Volunteering Leave (EVL). Civil servants (along with other vital public sector staff) are exempt from taking EVL so as not to deprive the Civil Service of its workforce. Therefore, civil servants cannot claim leave under the statutory scheme.