

COVID-19 (coronavirus) – GUIDANCE FOR MANAGERS AND STAFF

This guidance contains advice for staff. Given the current pace of change, it is being kept under constant review and will be amended as necessary.

It is important that you keep in touch with your management during this time and that everyone's contact numbers and emergency contact details are up to date.

COVID-19 is the disease caused by novel Coronavirus SARS-CoV-2. Symptoms might include fever, a cough that may progress to a severe pneumonia causing shortness of breath and breathing difficulties.

Public Health Agency (PHA) guidance will provide staff with the latest updates. If you think that you have COVID-19 infection or have been in contact with a suspected or confirmed case you should consult the Public Health Agency website www.publichealth.hscni.net.

Northern Ireland Legislation

Following agreement by the NI Executive, the Department of Health has published **The Health Protection (Coronavirus, Restrictions) Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2020**. Full details can be found at [new coronavirus \(COVID-19\) regulations and what they mean for you](#). The regulations came into force on 28 March 2020 and will be reviewed at least once every 21 days.

Health and Well-being

Departments have an equal responsibility to ensure the health and wellbeing of essential worker colleagues who cannot work from home and members of the public who may come in contact with NICS staff through accessing essential services. Therefore social distancing and risk assessment actions must be taken to ensure the health and well-being of both NICS colleagues and the public.

In addition to the guidance within this document and the associated FAQs you will find useful advice on the COVID-19 section of HSENI website [here](#)

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SOCIAL DISTANCING

Currently we all **must** take social distancing measures to reduce social interaction between people. These measures will help reduce the transmission of COVID-19. With regards to the workplace, the Executive has agreed that:

- Anyone who can work from home must work from home;
- Employers must facilitate working from home where it is feasible;
- No employer should compel an employee to come to work if it is feasible to work from home;
- Every employer must take all reasonable steps to safeguard the health, safety and well-being of employees during the COVID-19 emergency, whether working from home or in the workplace;
- Every employer must have particular regard to the safety of employees in the workplace and must put into effect the guidance on social distancing issued by the Department for the Economy;
- Every employer has a legal duty to ensure, so far as it is reasonably practicable, the health, safety and welfare at work of all employees.

Currently, NICS staff in the three categories below have been told they **must** stay at home, working from home where this is possible.

- over 70;
- have an underlying health condition; or
- pregnant.

Staff in these categories above will continue to be paid until government advice indicates that it is safe for them to return to the workplace.

See link below for details:

<https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/covid-19-guidance-on-social-distancing-and-for-vulnerable-people>

Essential workers who cannot work from home

If you are required to come into work to perform an **essential** role, as determined by your Department, then all steps will be taken by your Department to implement social distancing.

The relevant business areas should seek to take all steps to protect staff including:

- ensuring they are sitting 2 metres apart;
- putting in place rotas that are based on the absolute minimum numbers of staff required to deliver essential service/perform essential duties;

- putting in place working hours/patterns/shifts/ rotas that minimise time in the office and use of public transport; and
- using technology as much as possible to minimise time in office.

Reducing the risk of spreading coronavirus

There are simple steps that everyone can take to reduce the risk of catching or spreading coronavirus.

- wash your hands with soap and water often – do this for at least 20 seconds
- always wash your hands when you get home or into work
- use hand sanitiser gel if soap and water are not available
- cover your mouth and nose with a tissue or your sleeve (not your hands) when you cough or sneeze
- put used tissues in the bin straight away and wash your hands afterwards
- try to avoid close contact with people who are unwell

In view of these unprecedented circumstances, everyone **must** follow these measures.

Health and Well-being

Departments have an equal responsibility to ensure the health and wellbeing of essential worker colleagues who cannot work from home and members of the public who may come in contact with NICS staff through accessing essential services. Therefore social distancing and risk assessment actions must be taken to ensure the health and well-being of both NICS colleagues and the public.

In addition to the guidance within this document and the associated FAQs you will find useful advice on the COVID-19 section of HSENI website [here](#)

More information can be found at [Staying at home and away from others \(social distancing\)](#)

SELF-ISOLATION

- People who live alone and have symptoms of COVID-19, however mild, should stay at home for 7 days from when their symptoms started. People do not need to seek medical advice before self-isolating.
- Where anyone lives with others that have symptoms of COVID-19, however mild, then everyone in the household must stay at home and not leave the house for 14 days. The 14-day period starts from the day when the first person in the house became ill. Anyone in the household who starts displaying symptoms, needs to stay at home for 7 days from when their symptoms appeared, regardless of what day they are on in the original 14-day isolation period.

- People with symptoms should not go to a GP surgery, pharmacy or hospital. If they cannot cope with their symptoms at home, or if their condition gets worse, or they do not get better after 7 days, or if they have underlying medical conditions; then they are advised to telephone their GP or in a medical emergency dial 999.

You should consult the PHA website www.publichealth.hscni.net for guidance. If you are in self-isolation and are symptom free then your manager should, if possible, make arrangements for you to work from home. If this is not possible, your manager will record this as paid special leave for a period of up to 14 calendar days and you will be required to complete a retrospective special leave application on your return to work.

If you display COVID-19 symptoms your home working and/or special leave arrangements will cease and sickness absence will be recorded.

It's important that you keep in touch with your line manager throughout your absence.

COVID-19 (CORONAVIRUS) TESTING FOR ESSENTIAL/KEY WORKERS

National Testing Programme for Essential/Key workers

Coronavirus testing is currently available in Northern Ireland for essential/key workers who are self-isolating due to having coronavirus-like symptoms or because a member of their household has symptoms.

Essential workers in the NICS are included in the list of those eligible for testing.

This testing is targeted at those essential workers who are self-isolating because they are symptomatic, or have household members who are symptomatic, to help enable critical workers to return to work as soon as is safely possible.

Those eligible for testing are:

- Essential workers who are self-isolating because they or someone they live with is displaying symptoms;
- people over the age of 18 who are displaying symptoms and who live with an essential worker who is self-isolating;
- people aged between 5 and 18 who are displaying symptoms and who live with an essential worker who is self-isolating. A parent or guardian must perform the swab test on 5-11 year olds. 12-18 year olds can perform the test on themselves. The test is unsuitable for under-fives.

If you are an essential worker in NICS who is self-isolating because either you or a member of your household has symptoms of COVID-19 (coronavirus) you may now make an appointment for a test at one of the three test centres in Northern Ireland:

Full details of the testing programme, including test centre locations and details of how to arrange testing can be found on the PHA website: [Information on Coronavirus National Testing Programme](#)

If you are unsure whether you are an essential/key worker who is eligible for this test, it is important that you confirm this first with your line manager.

Please see the section in the [FAQ's for managers, staff and agency workers](#) for further information.

Should any change to the eligibility criteria for testing be determined by PHA, this guidance will be reviewed accordingly.

EXPERIENCING SYMPTOMS OF COVID-19 WHILST IN THE WORKPLACE

If you are required to come into work to perform an **essential** role, as determined by your Department, and you become unwell with a new, continuous cough or a high temperature while in the workplace you should tell your manager immediately that you are unwell and you will be sent home to commence a period of sickness absence until you are fit to return to work. Remember, you are required to self-isolate for a period of 7 days after you become ill with a symptom of COVID-19 so you may not return to the workplace within this period.

You should consult the PHA website www.publichealth.hscni.net for further guidance.

You do not need to seek medical advice before self-isolating. Do not visit the GP, pharmacy, urgent care centre or a hospital.

If a colleague has helped you when you were taken unwell with a new, continuous cough or a high temperature, they do not need to go home unless they develop symptoms themselves. They should wash their hands thoroughly for 20 seconds after any contact with someone who is unwell with symptoms consistent with coronavirus infection.

It is not necessary to close the business or workplace or send any staff home, unless government policy changes.

- If you need to wait for medical assistance, you may be moved to an area which is at least two metres away from other people. If possible your manager may find a room or area where you can be isolated behind a closed door, such as a staff office. If it is possible, open a window for ventilation.
- You should remain at least two metres from other people. You should avoid touching people, surfaces and objects and to cover your mouth and nose with a disposable tissue when you cough or sneeze and put the tissue in a bag or pocket

then throw the tissue in the bin. If you don't have any tissues available, you should cough and sneeze into the crook of your elbow.

- If you need to go to the bathroom while waiting for medical assistance, you should use a separate bathroom if available.

MEDICAL EVIDENCE

Under normal rules you can self-certify a period of sickness absence for the first seven calendar days before needing to obtain a GP 'Fit Note'. The requirement to have a GP 'Fit Note' has now been suspended for all types of sickness absence which includes suspected cases of COVID -19. If you are absent due to sickness you should **not** ask your GP for a Fit Note.

Once you are fit and able to work, either from home or in the workplace to perform an essential role as determined by your Department, you should forward an **isolation note**. This will cover your self-isolation due to COVID-19 and can be obtained online through [NHS 111](#) . You should ignore any automatic alerts sent by HRConnect.

If you have been absent due to reasons other than COVID-19 or flu-like symptoms you will be required to obtain a backdated fit note from your GP to cover your absence as soon as it is possible to do so.

ALLOCATION OF ALTERNATIVE DUTIES/WORK

During these exceptional circumstances, it is for individual Departments to decide which areas of work are essential and to ensure that these are adequately resourced. If a member of staff's normal role is not considered essential, then it is entirely reasonable and appropriate for them to be asked to carry out alternative essential duties or work, as long as suitable direction is given and the appropriate support, training and equipment are provided.

In addition, it is also reasonable and appropriate to ask staff to carry out alternative non-essential duties that sit outside their normal role or which are of a higher priority. This will also be done with the appropriate direction, support, training and equipment.

In all cases where alternative duties/work are allocated, this should be done at home wherever possible. Any issues the member of staff may have with working from home should be raised with line management to find a solution.

In cases where alternative duties/work absolutely cannot be done at home and they are considered to be essential, there will be a requirement to attend the workplace. Social distancing measures in place must be followed for travelling to and from work and while in the workplace. The Head of Branch should be aware that an individual

has been allocated alternative duties/work so they can ensure the appropriate social distancing measures are in place.

Should a member of staff feel that they are unable to carry out the alternative duties/work, they should discuss their reasons and justification with their line manager with a view to seeking a resolution. It is important that all avenues to resolve points of disagreement are explored thoroughly by the member of staff and their manager. The member of staff may wish to involve their TUS representative in these discussions.

SECONDEES, AGENCY WORKERS AND CONTRACTORS

Currently, everyone must follow the guidance on social distancing and ensure this is being adhered to in the workplace. These measures should also be afforded to contractors/other non-NICS staff and members of the public who visit the workplace.

General guidance on social distancing can be found [here](#). For further guidance on safety in the workplace see the [COVID-19 Safety Measures advice for businesses on the Health and Safety Executive NI website here](#).

If you are on secondment to the NICS and are absent due to COVID-19 you must report your absence to your NICS manager in the normal way. You should also contact your parent organisation and follow their absence management procedures.

If you are an agency worker or contractor and are displaying signs of COVID-19 at work you should tell your manager and follow the advice for staff on what should happen next.

If you are an agency worker you must also contact your employment agency. More guidance is available within the Agency Worker section of the [FAQ's](#).

SPECIAL LEAVE

Currently all NICS staff who can work from home should be doing so. If this is not possible, and you are unable to attend work, the use of paid special leave will be considered. Each case will be treated sensitively and on its merits. Examples of special leave situations may include:

- **Self-isolation:** You do not need to seek medical advice before self-isolating. If you are self-isolating you can apply for paid special leave (up to 14 calendar days).
- **Caring responsibilities:** Where your usual caring arrangements have broken down for reasons linked to COVID-19 (e.g. school closure or carer self-isolating) you must make strenuous efforts to establish alternative arrangements as soon as possible. You should discuss this with your line manager. Where you have tried but not been able to make alternative arrangements, or those arrangements cannot commence for a few days, you may be granted paid special leave if working from home is not a viable option.

Where home working is not possible, you may apply for up to five days' paid special leave under the provisions for domestic crisis to put alternative arrangements in place. In addition, up to five days' paid special leave may be granted under the provisions for care of dependents.

The five days' paid special leave available under both the above categories will normally be restricted to a 12 month period (pro-rata for staff who work alternative working patterns). If you have exhausted your limits, your managers should consider applications for a further five days' paid special leave for reasons connected to COVID-19.

Where (i) you have exhausted your full limit to special leave as outlined above and (ii) you have been advised that you are an essential worker whose work cannot be done at home (or your caring responsibilities are to the extent that working from home is not possible) and (iii) you have a dependant who cannot be looked after by anyone else, (Note, if your dependant is a child, this will include your child's school or an alternative school), then you should notify your manager and provide evidence of your circumstances. Your manager will consider your particular circumstances and your request to extend paid special leave for a further period.

You should provide all relevant information to your line manager to support your request for extended paid special leave. In the case of childcare responsibilities this may include confirmation of the unavailability of a school place for the child of an essential worker contrary to Education Authority guidelines.

Where you are the sole carer for your dependant, and it is not possible to make other arrangements for their care, an alternative person will be identified to perform the essential role and you will continue to be paid while caring for your dependant. **Your circumstances will be regularly reviewed by your line manager and it is essential that you keep in contact.**

For staff who work an alternative working pattern, a day's special leave will relate to a working day i.e. the hours they were due to work on that day.

Information on how to record special leave granted in these circumstances can be found on the [Employee Services Portal](#). Periods of special leave may be made and approved retrospectively.

- **Social distancing:** NICS staff who are over 70, have an underlying health condition listed on the [PHA website](#) or are pregnant have been told to stay at home. For staff in those categories for whom working from home is not an option, the absence will be recorded as paid special leave (See Annex A).
- **Other reason:** for example an office closure or break down in public transport.

In all cases managers should keep in touch with their staff. Staff should take all practicable steps to resume duty as soon as possible, taking account of advice and guidance from ER Team members using the e mail addresses provided at the end of this guidance.

For staff who work an alternative working pattern (AWP), a day's special leave (paid or unpaid) will relate to a working day i.e. the hours they were due to work on that day.

If you begin to display COVID-19 symptoms, any homeworking and/or special leave arrangements will cease and sickness absence must be reported as described above.

Further guidance for recording special leave applications can be found [here](#)

ANNUAL LEAVE

Business needs during the COVID-19 (coronavirus) period will be intense, requiring NICS staff to contribute to the delivery of vital services through periods of prolonged pressure. At the same time, it is important to use annual leave for the purpose for which it is intended - to allow staff to take a rest from work and recharge, so that their resilience and wellbeing remain strong.

Achieving this balance requires a relationship between line managers and staff that is understanding and flexible on both sides not only during the coronavirus situation, which may last for some time, but also during the business recovery period afterwards.

Annual leave principles

- Annual leave **should not be used where staff are ill with COVID-19 (coronavirus) symptoms.** This should be recorded as a period of sickness absence.
- Managers should **continue to apply [HR policy 3.07 Annual Leave](#)**, taking into account business needs and the wellbeing of staff when considering requests for annual leave.
- Managers should **encourage all staff to take annual leave** where the business can support this. Taking annual leave gives staff the opportunity to rest, maintain their wellbeing and keep their resilience strong to ensure that we are resourced to meet future business needs.
- Managers should **consider applications for leave sympathetically.** They should only refuse a request for annual leave where this is necessary and the only viable option.

- Managers should **only cancel or postpone a member of staff's annual leave** where this is necessary and the only viable option.
- Managers should only **recall employees who are absent on annual leave** as a last resort.

Best practice for line managers

- Do make sure that staff understand the NICS annual leave policy.
- Do monitor the take up of annual leave by your staff.
- If you're working, set a good example by taking leave yourself.
- Don't make staff feel guilty about taking annual leave.
- Do periodically remind your staff how much annual leave entitlement they have left.
- Do review whether your staff have taken, or intend to take, leave.
- Only contact a member of staff who is on annual leave if this is absolutely essential.

More information can be found in the annual leave section of the [FAQ's](#).

FLEXIBLE WORKING HOURS

If you are an essential worker and in work, flexi arrangements will be subject to business needs.

At the discretion of your line manager you may work flexi time and accrue flexi leave while you are being required to work from home but this arrangement must be robustly managed by your line manager.

RECORDING COVID-19 SICKNESS ABSENCES

If a member of staff's symptoms are consistent with COVID-19 the sickness absence must be reported on HRConnect immediately or within 24 hours at the latest.

This will not impact on absence review points or contractual sick pay, the period of absence will be discounted. Any absence due to COVID-19 will not lead to a pay detriment. However, if at the beginning of your sickness absence relating to COVID-19, you are entitled to either full pay, half pay or nil pay (pension rate of pay), this level of Occupational Sick Pay (OSP) will be maintained throughout the duration of this period of absence.

When a member of staff is fit to return to work following medical advice, managers should carry out a return to work discussion which, depending on circumstances, may take place via telephone.

Further guidance for recording sickness absence can be found [here](#)

KEEPING YOUR CONTACT DETAILS UP TO DATE

It is essential that your line manager can keep in contact with you at this time. You **MUST** ensure your contact details, **including your emergency contact** are up to date and available to your manager.

IF YOU ARE CONCERNED ABOUT COVID-19 EXPOSURE AT WORK

Every effort is being made to maintain a healthy working environment for those essential staff who cannot work from home.

You may have an underlying health problem, **not** covered under [social distancing for vulnerable people](#), and are concerned that you may run a greater risk of being exposed to COVID-19 because of the nature of your work, for example, your duties may require you to visit institutions where it is known that there have been recent cases of COVID-19. In these cases, you should discuss this in confidence with your manager. Your manager will consider what action might reasonably be taken to minimise the risk of exposure, for example transferring you to other duties temporarily if practicable.

GUIDANCE FOR STAFF WORKING FROM HOME

If you are required to work from home you must follow IT security and records management guidance which can be found on the COVID-19 staff information hub:

ITAssist advice and guidance

A new section with information and FAQs from ITAssist has been added to the hub.

[ITAssist advice and guidance](#)

Guidance from Information Management Unit on remote working

Please read this guidance to ensure you are aware of your continued obligations in protecting personal data and applying good records management.

Working from home and health and safety advice

This Guidance provides some tips and reminders to help ensure your health and safety while working from home. You are also encouraged to refer to your Department's health and safety guidance and/or policies for more information and contact details for your Health and Safety Advisor.

[Working from home health and safety advice](#)

WORKING FROM HOME AND PERFORMANCE MANAGEMENT

NICS performance management and managing poor performance arrangements will apply to staff working from home, in the normal way. Staff should know what is expected of them and how their performance will be assessed. The manager and the member of staff should make sure they are clear about what outcomes are required and should keep their work calendar/diary up to date. Managers will need to ensure they are taking account of personal circumstances on a case by case basis.

Staff may feel isolated and be faced with new challenges around self-motivation and personal organisation. The manager and employee should discuss the practical steps which can be taken to address these issues, ensuring good health and wellbeing is maintained where possible [NICS COVID-19 Guidance: Health and Wellbeing](#). It is especially important that managers, staff and teams maintain regular contact and are supporting each other while teams are dispersed.

Working from home for teams

Guidance for line managers and staff should include the following good practice:

- Agree objectives, working arrangements and how the team will operate and communicate to maintain service delivery. Plan ahead and promote flexibility to manage work-life commitments, encouraging the use of diaries and collaboration tools to show availability and work flexibly.
- Stay connected by using video conferencing and digital collaboration tools to collaborate and communicate on projects, and consider phone calls to discuss ideas and catch-up instead of constant email and instant messaging traffic.
- Adapt line management and peer relationships to build trust in this new approach to people management and team working.

- Share information and track progress of priority tasks, giving feedback on work and discussing new ideas to avoid isolation and maintain a sense of community.
- Keep moving and stay healthy by taking breaks, setting boundaries and creating a safe and comfortable place to work.
- Have regular health and wellbeing conversations and be flexible to responding to business and employee needs.
- Maintain contact with the department and stakeholders to manage relationships and expectations over service delivery.
- Prioritise time and budget to have meaningful conversations

On line training is now available on LInKS as follows:

- Top Tips for Effective Online Meetings - <https://www.nical.gov.uk/course/view.php?id=442>
- Top Tips for Managing a Team Remotely - <https://www.nical.gov.uk/course/view.php?id=440>
- Top tips for Re-Prioritising Your Work - <https://www.nical.gov.uk/course/view.php?id=439>

(If you open LInKS from your desktop icon before clicking on the hyperlinks you won't be asked to log in).

FURTHER QUERIES

If you have any questions please discuss with your manager in the first instance.
You can also contact a member of the NICSHR ER Team – contact details below:

Department	E-mail Address
Department of Agriculture, Environment & Rural Affairs	NICS.HRDAERA@finance-ni.gov.uk
Department for Communities	NICSHR.EmployeeRelationsDFCONLY@finance-ni.gov.uk
Department for the Economy	NICS.HREconomy@finance-ni.gov.uk
Department of Education	NICS.HREducation@finance-ni.gov.uk
Department of Health	NICS.HRHealth@finance-ni.gov.uk
Department for Infrastructure	NICS.HRInfrastructure@finance-ni.gsi.gov.uk

Department of Justice / Public Prosecution Service	DOFSMNICSHREmployee.RelationDOJPPS Only@finance-ni.x.gsi.gov.uk
The Executive Office	NICS.HRTEO@Finance-ni.gov.uk
Department of Finance	NICS.HRFinance@finance-ni.gov.uk