

## **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](http://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.

### **1. SOCIAL DISTANCING**

Social distancing measures are steps you can take to reduce the 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.

If you cannot work from home, then you **must** stay away from the workplace if you are:

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

Staff in the three 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

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

In addition, further guidance on safety in the workplace can be found on the HSENI website [here](#)

## **2. 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 who lives with others that have symptoms of COVID-19, however mild, then all household members 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 the 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 people 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 [www.publichealth.hscni.net](http://www.publichealth.hscni.net) for guidance. If you are in self-isolation and are symptom free then, if possible, your manager should make arrangements for you to work from home. If this is not possible, your manager will record this as special paid leave for a period of up to 14 calendar days – 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 sick absence will be recorded.

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

### 3. EXPERIENCING SYMPTOMS OF COVID-19 WHILST IN WORK

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 in the workplace you should be sent home. You should tell your manager you are unwell and consult the PHA website [www.publichealth.hscni.net](http://www.publichealth.hscni.net) for guidance immediately.

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

If you cannot cope with your symptoms at home, or if your condition gets worse, or you do not get better after 7 days, or if you have underlying medical conditions; then you are advised to telephone your GP or in a medical emergency dial 999.

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.

### **Depending on the guidance you receive the following may happen.**

- 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.
- Normal contact arrangements apply and you should keep in touch with your manager about your absence and expected date of return.

## **4. MEDICAL EVIDENCE**

Under normal rules you can self-certify your 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 back at work you should forward an extended self-certificate for the whole period of the absence/ period not covered by a medical certificate to your manager. Staff 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 when it is possible to do so.

## **5. SECONDEES, AGENCY WORKERS AND CONTRACTORS**

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. You must also contact your employment agency.

**If you are an Agency worker you should refer to specific guidance given within the FAQ's.**

## 6. SPECIAL LEAVE

If you are required to perform an essential role and are not sick but are unable to attend work due to COVID-19, managers should try and be flexible and allow home working where this is possible. 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 special paid leave (up to 14 calendar days).
- **Caring responsibilities:** If 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 entitlements, 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 entitlement 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 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 may consider, in your particular, circumstances to extend for a further period of paid special.

This will include confirmation of the unavailability of a school place contrary to Education Authority guidelines. In this case, 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 patterns, 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 at the [Employee Services Portal](#). Periods of special leave may be made and approved retrospectively.

- **Social distancing:** staff who are over 70, have an underlying health condition listed on the [PHA website](#) or are pregnant must take social distancing measures. If working from home is not an option then the absence will be recorded as special paid leave (See Annex A).
- **Other reason:** such as an office closure or break down in public transport.

**In all cases managers should keep in touch with their employees; and employees 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 follow Alternative Working Patterns (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 sick absence must be reported as described above.

## **7. ANNUAL LEAVE**

You can request annual leave as normal. Within the terms of the current annual leave policy, managers have discretion to cancel or refuse annual leave. However, this discretion must only be used in exceptional circumstances and in the current situation there should be no need for any cancellation or refusal. More details can be found in the annual leave section of the [FAQ's](#).

## **8. FLEXIBLE WORKING HOURS**

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

For the period of COVID-19 (coronavirus), where you are being required to work from home, you should complete your normal standard day. Flexi will not be operated and there should be no loss or gain of flexi during this time. Managers cannot oversee and sign off flexi for staff who are working from home therefore it is not possible to effectively and robustly operate the system at this time in this context

## **9. RECORDING COVID-19 SICKNESS ABSENCES**

If a member of staff's symptoms are consistent with COVID-19 the sick 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.**

You should consult the PHA guidance at [www.publichealth.hscni.net](http://www.publichealth.hscni.net) – specifically refer to the section ‘Guidance for employers and businesses’ for what to do if a member of staff (or the public):

- a. with suspected COVID-19 infection has recently been in your workplace
- b. with confirmed COVID-19 infection has recently been in your workplace
- c. have had contact with a confirmed case of COVID-19

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.

## **10. UPDATING YOUR CONTACT DETAILS**

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

## **11. 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.

## **12. 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.

[IT and Information Management Unit guidance on remote working](#)

## FURTHER QUERIES

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

Department	E-mail Address
Department of Agriculture, Environment & Rural Affairs	<a href="mailto:NICS.HRDAERA@finance-ni.gov.uk">NICS.HRDAERA@finance-ni.gov.uk</a>
Department for Communities	<a href="mailto:NICSHR.EmployeeRelationsDFCONLY@finance-ni.gov.uk">NICSHR.EmployeeRelationsDFCONLY@finance-ni.gov.uk</a>
Department for the Economy	<a href="mailto:NICS.HREconomy@finance-ni.gov.uk">NICS.HREconomy@finance-ni.gov.uk</a>
Department of Education	<a href="mailto:NICS.HREducation@finance-ni.gov.uk">NICS.HREducation@finance-ni.gov.uk</a>
Department of Health	<a href="mailto:NICS.HRHealth@finance-ni.gov.uk">NICS.HRHealth@finance-ni.gov.uk</a>
Department for Infrastructure	<a href="mailto:NICS.HRInfrastructure@finance-ni.gsi.gov.uk">NICS.HRInfrastructure@finance-ni.gsi.gov.uk</a>
Department of Justice / Public Prosecution Service	<a href="mailto:DOFSMNICSHREmployee.RelationDOJPPSOnly@finance-ni.x.gsi.gov.uk">DOFSMNICSHREmployee.RelationDOJPPSOnly@finance-ni.x.gsi.gov.uk</a>
The Executive Office	<a href="mailto:NICS.HRTEO@Finance-ni.gov.uk">NICS.HRTEO@Finance-ni.gov.uk</a>
Department of Finance	<a href="mailto:NICS.HRFinance@finance-ni.gov.uk">NICS.HRFinance@finance-ni.gov.uk</a>