

COVID-19: Guidance for Businesses

- *Health & Safety Response*

Northern Ireland is currently under a strict lockdown with a clear message to stay at home. The NI Executive has urged businesses to allow staff to work from home wherever possible.

Despite this lockdown, it is essential that businesses have a plan in place for upholding health and safety standards and start to plan for a full reopening where staff are welcomed back into offices and places of work. With the vaccine roll-out, a return to the workplace could happen sooner than expected and it is essential that businesses are proactive and have strategies for dealing with COVID-19 in the workplace.

Legal obligations

Businesses owe a legal obligation to staff to keep them safe while at work and minimise any risk to their health and wellbeing. Businesses have a duty to instruct, train and supervise their staff in order to maintain health and safety in the workplace and must take reasonably practicable steps to safeguard their staff during the pandemic.

Guidance

- HSENI [guidance](#) on how best to mitigate the risks posed to health and safety by the current public health emergency.
- The [NI Direct government](#) website is regularly updated with the latest regulations and guidance on COVID-19.
- The HSC website has a useful [flowchart guide](#) on how to adapt when a member of staff has suspected or confirmed COVID-19.

How to safeguard staff

Businesses should carry out regular risk assessments to ensure compliance with health and safety law and consider how to achieve social distancing. Businesses may wish to:

- rearrange worksites
- put barriers between workers
- supply PPE
- reduce the number of staff permitted in the building
- encourage staff to work from home
- clean the workplace regularly

Collaboration between businesses and staff is necessary in order to implement the safety measures. Therefore, businesses should:

- Aim for regular communication with staff about the latest developments.
- Provide training to all staff
- Support those shielding

Innovative steps

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| <p>1</p> <p>Compliance</p> <p>Employ a COVID-19 compliance officer responsible for supervising social distancing and informing staff about updated guidelines.</p> | <p>2</p> <p>Sanitisation</p> <p>Sanitisation stations are a way of reducing the risk of contracting the virus.</p> | <p>3</p> <p>Technology</p> <p>Investment in technology would enable workers to work from home (WFH Technology)</p> |
| <p>4</p> <p>Facilities</p> <p>Providing more car parking spots or investing in a bicycle rack could help deter staff from using public transport.</p> | <p>5</p> <p>Communication</p> <p>Regular emails and contact with staff reminding and informing them of the rules is imperative.</p> | <p>6</p> <p>Health</p> <p>Carryout a thermal temperature check on entry to building and provide a daily health log platform for staff members.</p> |

Consequences for breach of regulations & guidelines

If businesses breach COVID-19 government guidelines fines can be imposed. The Health and Safety Executive carry out spot checks on businesses to monitor their response to COVID-19. During the summer of 2020, HSCNI received hundreds of complaints about businesses in Northern Ireland breaching the COVID-19 guidelines.

Staff can refuse to attend work if it is not a safe environment for them and they feel that the business is not compliant with COVID-19 guidelines.

Businesses could potentially be shut down due to breaches or due to isolation if COVID-19 spreads in the workplace. There is also a risk of tort claims in future for negligence and breach of statutory duty arising from staff members contracting the illness at work.

Conclusion

Businesses should prepare and have strategies in place to welcome staff back to workplaces safely. The law surrounding health and safety should be at the forefront of the decision making process for employers when making business decisions during the current pandemic. Businesses are advised to appropriately train staff on the safety measures they put in place to combat the spread of COVID-19. Keeping staff informed will aid compliance with COVID-19 guidelines and reduce disruption to the business. www.publichealth.hscni.net

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