



How to work safely

Guidance for UNISON members as more workplaces open and more staff return to their workplaces

Many UNISON members have continued to work throughout this crisis, providing essential services to help deal with the pandemic.

Some have worked where they normally do, others have been redeployed, while some staff have worked from home.

The announcements of the gradual easing of lockdown restrictions has commenced across the UK, but there are different restrictions depending on where you live and work in England, Scotland, Cymru/Wales and Northern Ireland.

One thing has not changed. Whatever your job or wherever you work, if you have any coronavirus symptoms you should self-isolate immediately in line with government advice. This is the only way to stop the spread of coronavirus in a workplace or to the wider community.

UNISON is here to support members through these changes. If you have any questions or concerns about any of the things mentioned in this guidance, or are worried that your employer is not properly assessing the risks and taking steps to protect you at work, you should contact your UNISON health and safety rep. You can do this via your UNISON branch. If you don't know how to contact your branch use our branch contact finder at <https://branches.unison.org.uk/>

Your UNISON branch health and safety rep will then be able to raise your concerns with your employer and, if necessary, go to the Health and Safety Executive, the UK government agency responsible for the regulation and enforcement of workplace health, safety and welfare.

You will also find more information on our website at <https://www.unison.org.uk/coronavirus-rights-work/>

Staying safe

For those returning to work – or working alongside colleagues as they come back into the workplace – we need to ensure that the risks to staff and employers are assessed and managed. The aim is to make workplaces “COVID secure”.

Employers have a legal responsibility to protect staff and others from risk, while enabling them to carry out their jobs effectively. They must start with a risk assessment where they prioritise measures that eliminate or minimise the risk of COVID-19, for their employees and service users.

Employers must identify all other groups at increased risk through COVID-19. This includes Black workers. Research has shown Black workers to be at increased risk of infection, disease and death through COVID-19. UNISON has produced sector advice and guidance for branches in supporting Black members to get risk assessed.

Employers must consult with trade union safety reps, and should, where possible, jointly agree and publish the risk assessment.

We would expect employers to consider the following options to help keep staff safe while they are working.

<https://www.unison.org.uk/get-help/knowledge/health-and-safety/risk-assessment/>

Returning to work

Since 1st August 2020, it was announced, in England, that it is up to employers to decide how staff can continue working safely.

In some cases this may include allowing you to work from home, however your employer may ask you to return to your normal workplace, but only when they have carried out a risk assessment to ensure that your workplace meets government guidelines and is “COVID-Safe”.

In addition they should consult staff and union safety reps on any proposals before you return to the workplace.

Employers must, in particular, consider the risks to staff who are most vulnerable to infection, so please refer to our advice (overleaf) for those are Black, disabled, over 70 or have an underlying health condition.

If you work in Scotland, Wales or Northern Ireland please refer to your own country's advice pages.

If you have concerns about returning to your workplace speak to your local UNISON Rep and discuss any issues with your employer.



Work with staff and unions to make workplaces as safe as they can be

Employers must use the results of their risk assessment to help them adapt workplaces and working practices to comply with the government's social distancing guidelines. That means keeping people two metres apart wherever possible and to minimise face to face contact between people to the safest level possible. Any planned adaptations should then be agreed with union safety reps, explained to all staff, and appropriate training organised for staff before a workplace reopens or more staff come in. Training on arrival at work procedures is especially important. Every employer should provide handwashing facilities or hand sanitisers at entry and exit points for staff and any visitors.

Employers and unions should work together to continually monitor the impact of these changes to workplaces and working practices. In addition we know that change and uncertainty, especially when people are worried about their health and safety, can give rise to mental health issues. Employers should be aware of government guidance and offer staff support if they need it. UNISON's There for You charity can also provide signposting to emotional support. <https://www.unison.org.uk/get-help/services-support/there-for-you/>.

Keeping workplaces clean

Workplaces should be cleaned more frequently, paying close attention to high-contact objects like door handles and keyboards.

Employers should display more signs reminding staff and others to wash their hands regularly and should ensure that supplies of handwash and hand sanitiser are replenished more frequently than usual. They should also communicate to staff and visitors how the cleaning regime has been changed to help tackle the threat of coronavirus.

Social distancing

In workplaces where social distancing measures are possible employers should re-design workspaces to maintain a distance of two metres between people wherever possible. There are many ways this can be achieved including staggering start times, creating one-way walk-throughs, opening more entrances and exits, or changing seating layouts in break rooms. UNISON has produced social distancing guidance which you can find at <https://www.unison.org.uk/coronavirus-rights-work/social-distancing-workplace/>

Where people cannot be two metres apart, manage transmission risk

Social distancing will help minimise the risk – but there may be other measures employers are required to consider. This may be because social distancing is not always possible (for example where staff are delivering personal care for patients/residents), and also because even where it is, there are additional measures necessary to ensure the safety of staff and service users.

This can also include reducing the number of people each person has contact with by using 'fixed teams' or 'partnering' (so each person works with only a few others). Other measures could include putting barriers in shared spaces such as vehicles, consider changing shift patterns and ensuring staff can work facing away from colleagues.

There may also be circumstances where PPE (personal protective equipment) and proper training for staff in its use, is required. <https://www.unison.org.uk/coronavirus-rights-work/personal-protective-equipment-coronavirus/>

Where staff are especially vulnerable to COVID-19 or have protected characteristics

Employers must pay particular regard to whether staff doing the work are especially vulnerable to COVID-19. Research has shown that Black workers are at increased risk of infection, serious illness and death through COVID-19. UNISON has produced Guidance on Risk assessments for Black, disabled and other vulnerable workers. Extremely vulnerable staff ("shielded") should work from home. If this is not possible they can be considered for special paid leave or furlough (failing this they are eligible for statutory sick pay). <https://www.unison.org.uk/content/uploads/2020/06/Template-risk-assessment-for-Black-and-other-Vulnerable-Workers.pdf>

Staff who are clinically vulnerable (have an underlying condition but are not in the "shielded" group) should also be supported to work from home where possible. If these staff cannot work from home and furlough or special leave is not possible, they should be offered the option of the safest available on-site roles, enabling them to stay two metres away from others.

If they have to spend time within two metres of others, the employer should carefully assess whether this involves an acceptable level of risk.

Particular attention should also be paid to staff who live with clinically extremely vulnerable ("shielded") individuals.

The employer must also ensure that any measures they take do not unfairly discriminate against anyone on the grounds of age, race, sex, disability or other protected characteristic and that reasonable adjustments for disabled workers are provided.



Personal protective equipment (PPE)

You may need to wear PPE. This depends on what you do, where, and with who you work. You are more likely to require PPE if you are providing direct care to service users, or cleaning premises contaminated by COVID-19. However there may be other circumstances especially such as when social distancing and other measures are not always possible. UNISON guidance on PPE can be found at <https://www.unison.org.uk/coronavirus-rights-work/personal-protective-equipment-coronavirus/>

Face covering

In some cases, although PPE is not required, your employer may ask you to use, or may provide, ordinary clothing (such as a scarf or bandana) to cover your face especially when you are in confined spaces, such as lifts. However where the risk assessment shows that PPE is required such items are not considered sufficient protection against the wearer being infected by the disease.

How to raise a concern

Remember, if you have concerns about what is happening in your workplace, please speak to your health and safety rep who you can contact via your UNISON branch. You can get contact details for your branch at <https://branches.unison.org.uk/>

UNISON health and safety reps are working hard to ensure that employers are making our workplaces safe for all staff and service users. Are you interested in helping? Email us at HealthandSafetyUnit@unison.co.uk to find out more about being a health and safety rep.