



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.

As this crisis has evolved there have been numerous, and sometimes confusing, changes to government guidance. In addition there have been different restrictions depending on whether you live and work in England, Scotland, Cymru/Wales and Northern Ireland.

However, some things have not changed. Firstly, your employer is legally required to do everything they reasonably can to keep you safe. Secondly whatever your job or wherever you work, if you have any coronavirus symptoms you should self-isolate immediately in line with government advice.

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

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 and disabled workers. Research has shown Black workers to be at increased risk of infection, disease and death through COVID-19 and 59% of deaths have been amongst disabled people. UNISON has produced sector advice and guidance for branches in supporting Black and disabled 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/>

Working from home

Employers in England have been advised that all workers that can effectively work from home should do so. Employers in the other three countries of the United Kingdom are required to make every reasonable effort to enable as many staff as possible to work from home. Further information on working from home is available at <https://www.unison.org.uk/coronavirus-rights-work/coronavirus-working-home/>



If you are required to go to work

If you are required to go to work, your employer must carry out a risk assessment, consult with your reps and do everything they reasonably can to keep you safe.

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

If you have concerns about the safety of 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 what to do on arrival at work 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.

When making changes to the workplace, employers should consider how access for disabled people can be maintained and how changes might impact on agreed reasonable adjustments for disabled workers. 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, go to <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 ensure that supplies of handwash and hand sanitiser are replenished more frequently than usual. They should also communicate to staff and visitors changes to the cleaning regime.

Social distancing

Employers should re-design workspaces to maintain a two-metre distance between people wherever possible. They must also consider all other ways of maintaining social distancing by staggering start times, creating one-way walk-throughs, opening more entrances and exits, or

changing seating layouts, to maintain the distance between them and ensure they are facing away from each other. UNISON has produced social distancing guidance which you can find at <https://www.unison.org.uk/coronavirus-rights-work/social-distancing-workplace/>

Additional measures

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 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 creating social bubbles, 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, and changing shift patterns.

Ventilation can be improved by opening windows, and air conditioning should be switched from re-circulation, to fresh air source.

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

Advice regarding "Working from home" (see above) is particularly important for disabled, pregnant and older workers and those with an underlying health condition. Refusal of home working for a disabled person might amount to unlawful discrimination under the Equality Act.

If you come under any of the groups referred to above, and work in Scotland, Wales or Northern Ireland, please go the UNISON advices pages covering that country (see <https://www.unison.org.uk/coronavirus-rights-work/>)

UK government has also issued new guidance for shielded people in England. The government strongly advises them to work from home. If they cannot work from home, they should not attend work for this period of restrictions (currently up until 2 December 2020). Best practice is to allow special paid leave for the period of shielding, but if this is not possible you may be eligible for furlough or, failing that, Occupational or Statutory Sick Pay. However employers should avoid making decisions that discriminate against disabled people.

For disabled workers who are not shielding, and for pregnant or other vulnerable workers, if your current role cannot be done from home your employer should consider whether you can be temporarily re-deployed to a role that would allow home working until it's safe to return to the workplace. Alternatively, your employer should consider offering special paid leave and other types of adjustments if you cannot work from home. Your employer must

undertake a risk assessment (and keep you updated) to identify any additional steps they need to take to keep you safe.

If home working is not reasonable, disabled workers and those who are pregnant should be offered the option of the safest available on-site roles, particularly if they might normally spend time within two metres of others. Your employer should carefully assess what is an acceptable level of risk.

If your employer won't let you work from home or allow paid leave, or has not undertaken a satisfactory risk assessment, please contact your local UNISON branch for help.

Employers must also do everything they reasonably can to allow staff over the age of 70 to work from home where possible and should consider the risks to all older workers, particularly those working in roles where social distancing is difficult to maintain.

Employers must pay regard to whether staff doing the work are especially vulnerable to COVID-19

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.

Research has shown that Black workers are at increased risk of infection, serious illness and death through COVID-19. 59% of deaths in the UK are among disabled people. UNISON has produced Guidance on Risk assessments for Black, disabled and other vulnerable workers <https://www.unison.org.uk/content/uploads/2020/06/Template-risk-assessment-for-Black-and-other-Vulnerable-Workers.pdf>

Personal protective equipment (PPE)

You may be required to wear PPE (face masks, aprons/gowns and gloves). This depends on what you do, where, and with who you work. It is only provided following a risk assessment, must be provided by your employer (along with any training required), and certified as meeting legally required standards. PPE is provided



to keep the wearer safe from infection, and must not be confused with items such as face coverings/visors etc.

More information and guidance on who requires PPE and how it should be used can be found at <https://www.unison.org.uk/coronavirus-rights-work/personal-protective-equipment-coronavirus/>

Face covering

It is now compulsory, where face masks are not required as PPE, to wear face coverings and visors in any close contact services. Employers also have a duty to remind anyone to wear face coverings wherever it is compulsory to do so.

There may also other cases where 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 these items must not be used as a replacement for PPE, and they do not provide the protection against the risk of infection that PPE such as certified face masks do.

What employers must do if any of their staff test positive for COVID-19

Employers in England must ensure their staff self-isolate if they have tested positive for coronavirus, or have been in close recent contact with someone who has tested positive, and received a notification to self-isolate from NHS Test and Trace

If there is more than one case of COVID-19 in a workplace, employers should contact their local health protection team to report the suspected outbreak who will then advise them on what they need to do.

More information on this, plus what your employer should do if you work in Scotland, Wales or Northern Ireland, is available on the UNISON Coronavirus your rights at work website (see above).

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.