



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

Working from home remains the most effective way of reducing workplace exposure to the virus and as a minimum, employers should continue to follow national government guidance on home working. Where the government no longer advises home working, employers should implement a phased return to the workplace and a rota based system to ensure the environment is not crowded. They should also recognise that some workers will be anxious about a return and should support staff by for example, allowing them to stagger their journeys on public transport to and from work at less busy times. Vulnerable workers may need to continue to work from home. Consultation should take place with union reps on any plans to move to permanent home working or a mixture of home and employer workplace (so called hybrid working).



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 consider the risks to staff who are more vulnerable to infection including those who are Black, disabled, over 70, have underlying health conditions, those who are exempt for vaccination due to health conditions and those immunocompromised and immunosuppressed individuals who may not have responded so well to the vaccine .

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

Once employers have identified who may be at risk of exposure and how they are exposed, they need to adapt the workplace and working practices and take all reasonable steps to reduce the risk of exposure. 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. Information and 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

While socially distancing rules in workplaces have been removed in parts of the UK, it remains a way of reducing exposure to the virus. The virus spreads more easily when in close contact with people in an enclosed workspace. Employers should follow national laws and Health and Safety Executive guidance on social distancing and take all reasonable steps to implement. Where social distancing rules don't apply other measures such as effective

ventilation, layout of the workplace and barriers should be implemented as part of an employer's risk assessment. 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/>

Ventilation

Employers have a duty to ensure that workplaces have an adequate supply of fresh air which can be natural or mechanical ventilation. This is even more important when dealing with COVID-19 due to the nature of airborne transmission.

Areas where the air feels stuffy or smells bad indicates ineffective ventilation. Employers must take practical steps to improve both natural and mechanical ventilation, including stopping the recirculation of air in mechanical systems; ensuring that the air flow is at least 10 litres per person per sec with minimum of 6 air changes an hour; opening windows and doors and reducing the occupancy in rooms. Carbon dioxide meters can be used to identify poorly ventilated areas.

Where members visit domestic premises employers should communicate with residents and encourage them to ventilate the premises e.g. open windows just before and during the visit.

Ventilation in vehicles used for work should also be assessed and systems set to draw in fresh air and not recirculate.

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 up barriers in shared spaces such as vehicles, changing the layout of the workplace so people aren't sitting face to face and changing shift patterns.

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 to the UNISON advice pages covering that country (see <https://www.unison.org.uk/coronavirus-rights-work/>)

Recommendations for shielded people are at different stages in different parts of the UK. For links to the latest guidance go to <https://www.unison.org.uk/coronavirus-rights-work/covid-19-and-shielding/>

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

The legal requirement to wear face coverings in enclosed public places in England has been removed but remains in place in other parts of the UK. Face coverings can help reduce the risk of exposure to the virus and employers should consider requiring their use in crowded areas, where social distancing cannot be maintained or areas where there is poor ventilation e.g. lifts.

Employers also have a duty to remind anyone to wear face coverings wherever it is compulsory to do so. Where workers interface with the public and are asked to enforce requirements, employers need to ensure that they are supported to do so and steps are taken to protect them from verbal and physical abuse

Face coverings 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 must have procedures in place for when staff test positive for Covid 19 or are close contacts with someone who has and should support staff to follow the national requirements.

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. The employer may also need to report cases to the Health and Safety Executive.

More information on this, plus what your employer should do if you work in England, Scotland, Wales or Northern Ireland, is available on the UNISON Coronavirus your rights at work website (<https://www.unison.org.uk/coronavirus-rights-work>)

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.