



National **‘Return to Work Safely’** **Protocol**

ICTU User Guide

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Covid19 Public Health Risk – Implications for Workplaces

Exposure to COVID-19 is a public health risk which affects all citizens. The COVID-19 pandemic also has implications for all workplaces as it can present a health risk to workers and other persons at a place of work. The reopening of the economy goes hand-in-hand with the provision of public health measures to reduce the risk of spread of COVID-19 as well as the existing occupational health and safety measures. Managing the risk of spread in the workplace is important in relation to the health of workers but is also important as part of general efforts to control the spread and protect the most vulnerable. The following protocol describes the measures required to be put in place by employers and adhered to by workers to reduce the risk of spread of COVID-19 in the workplace.

What is this Protocol?

This 'Return to Work Safely Protocol' is a mandatory document. It sets out the measures which must be put in place which will prevent the spread of COVID-19 in the workplace. The protocol was developed following discussion and agreement at the Labour Employer Economic Forum (LEEF), which is the forum for high level dialogue between Government, Trade Union and Employer representatives on matters of strategic national importance. The work has been overseen by the Department of the Taoiseach and the Department of Business, Enterprise and Innovation.

Who does the Protocol Cover?

This Protocol is a general document applicable to all industry sectors. It is a live document and subject to change. It is not designed to prohibit the introduction of further specific measures in particular sectors or workplaces, as long as they enhance the measures set out in the Protocol.

Workers Representation

Each workplace will appoint at least one lead worker representative charged with ensuring that COVID-19 measures are

strictly adhered to in their place of work. The number of representatives appointed will, ideally, be proportionate to the number of workers in the workplace. The purpose of this role is to work collaboratively with the employer to assist in the implementation of measures and monitor adherence to the measures to prevent the spread of COVID-19. The person(s) undertaking the role must receive the necessary training and have a structured framework to follow within the organisation to be effective in preventing the spread of the virus together with the management team. The person(s) should be clearly identifiable in the workplace. The lead worker representative(s) appointed should also be involved in communicating the health advice around COVID-19 in the workplace

Regular Employer communication with Workers

Employers will also have regular and meaningful engagement with their worker representative, workers and/or their recognised Trade Union or other representatives (including their Health and Safety Committee where this exists) about the measures being put in place to address the occupational exposure to

COVID-19 in the workplace. Employers will also communicate with safety representatives selected or appointed under the Occupational Health and Safety legislation and consult with workers on safety measures to be implemented in the workplace. Workplace controls to comply with infection prevention measures included in this protocol should be communicated and explained to all relevant workers and others (visitors, contractors) at the place of work.

Workplace Training

Employers will provide a COVID-19 induction training for all workers. Workplace representatives undertaking the role must receive the necessary training and have a structured framework to follow within the organisation to be effective in preventing the spread of the virus together with the management team.

Induction Training for all Workers

This training should at a minimum include the latest up to-date advice and guidance on public health; what a worker should do if they develop symptoms of COVID-19; details of how the workplace is organised to address the risk from COVID-19; an

outline of the COVID-19 response plan; identification of points of contact from the employer and the workers; and any other sector specific advice that is relevant.

Training on PPE

- Workers should be trained in the proper use, cleaning, storing and disposal of PPE.

At Risk/Vulnerable Workers

If an at risk or vulnerable worker cannot work from home and must be in the workplace, employers must make sure that they are preferentially supported to maintain a physical distance of 2 metres. However, employers should enable vulnerable workers to work from home where possible

Working from home

Office work should continue to be carried out at home, where practicable and non-essential work. The employer should develop and consult on any working from home policy in conjunction with workers and/or Trade Unions. Advice on working from home on a temporary basis is available from the Health and Safety Authority.

MENTAL HEALTH AND WELLBEING

- Employers should put in place support for workers who may be suffering from anxiety or stress. Workers, when they return to work, may have gone through traumatic events such as the serious illness or death of a relative or friend, or be experiencing financial difficulties or problems with their personal relationships.
- Workers who are returning to the workplace after a period of isolation are likely to have concerns about the risk of infection or changes to their job due to the implementation of measures to prevent the spread of COVID-19. Employers should provide workers with information on publicly available sources of support, advice and information about the prevention and control measures taken in the workplace to reduce the risk of infection.
- Employers should ensure workers are made aware of and have access to any business provided Employee Assistance Programmes or Occupational Health service.

- A range of supports and advice is also available from the Health and Safety Authority on work related stress at: https://www.hsa.ie/eng/Topics/Workplace_Stress/. The Authority also provides a free online risk assessment tool for addressing work related stress: WorkPositive (www.workpositive.ie).
- The Government's "In This Together Campaign" also provides information on minding one's mental health as well as tips on staying active and connected and may be useful for use by employers and workers: <https://www.gov.ie/en/campaigns/together/?referrer=/together>

Changes to Workplace Policies/Work Patterns

In circumstances where such changes are required employers should agree through negotiation with workers/Trade Unions any temporary restructuring of work patterns / policies to implement the necessary COVID-19 prevention measures in the workplace. In so doing, any existing sectoral agreements must be taken into account. As information about the virus is evolving, public health advice is being updated on a regular basis, and it is important for employers and workers to

recognise that flexibility will be required on the part of employers and workers in meeting the measures to reduce the spread.

Decision to re-open a Workplace

Any decisions to re-open a workplace shall be in done in compliance with the Government and public health advice.

In this regard, employers, in consultation with the nominated worker representative(s), must take the following steps:

- Develop and/or update a business COVID-19 Response Plan.
- Update their occupational health and safety risk assessments and safety statement.
- Address the level(s) of risk associated with various workplaces and work activities in the COVID-19 business plans and OSH risk assessments. For example, where, how and to what sources of COVID-19 might workers be exposed, including the general public, customers, co-workers etc.
- Take into account worker's individual risk factors (e.g. older workers, presence of underlying medical conditions, etc.).
- Include in the plan a response plan to deal with a suspected case of COVID-19.
- Include the controls necessary to address the risks identified.
- Include contingency measures to address increased rates of worker absenteeism, implementation of the measures necessary to reduce the spread of COVID-19, changing work patterns, etc.
- Develop plans in consultation with workers and communicate once finalised.

Steps to be taken Prior to return to Work

Employers must:

- Establish and issue a pre-return to work form for workers to complete at least 3 days in advance of the return to work. This form should seek confirmation that the worker, to the best of their knowledge, has no symptoms of COVID-19 and also confirm that the worker is not self-isolating or awaiting the results of a COVID-19 test. If a worker answers Yes to any of the questions, they are strongly advised to follow the medical advice they received or seek medical advice before returning.

- Implement temperature testing in line with public health advice.

Workers must:

- Complete and return the pre-return to work form before they return to work.
- Inform their employer if there are any other circumstances relating to COVID-19, not included in the form, which may need to be disclosed to allow their safe return to work.
- Self-isolate at home and contact their GP promptly for further advice if they have any COVID-19 symptoms.
- Stay out of work until all symptoms have cleared following self-isolation.
- Participate in any induction training provided by the employer on their return to the workplace.

Symptoms of COVID-19

Infection with the virus that causes COVID-19 can cause illness, ranging from mild to severe, and, in some cases, can be fatal. It can take anything from 2 days up to 14 days for symptoms of coronavirus to appear. They can be similar to the symptoms of cold and flu.

4 Common symptoms of coronavirus include:

- A fever (high temperature - 38 degrees Celsius or above).
- A cough - this can be any kind of cough, not just dry.
- Shortness of breath or breathing difficulties.

Some people infected with the virus, so called asymptomatic cases, have experienced no symptoms at all.

For the complete list of symptoms, please refer to the HSE Website.

How COVID-19 Spreads

The virus that causes COVID-19 disease is spread from people in fluid and in droplets scattered from the nose or mouth of an infected person when the person with COVID-19 coughs, sneezes or speaks. The fluid or droplets land on objects and surfaces around the infected person. Other people contaminate their hands by touching these objects or surfaces and then bring the virus into contact with their eyes, nose or mouth by touching them with their contaminated hands. COVID-19 can also spread if droplets from an infected person land directly on the mucous membranes of the eye, nose or mouth of a person standing close to them.

It is still not known how long the virus survives on surfaces in different conditions. The period of survival may vary under different conditions (e.g. type of surface, temperature or humidity of the environment). Studies indicate that it can persist on surfaces for hours and up to several days in the absence of effective cleaning. Thorough and regular cleaning of frequently touched surfaces is essential. If disinfection is required it must be performed in addition to cleaning, never as a substitute for cleaning. While people are most likely to pass on the infection when they have symptoms, current information suggests that some infected people spread the virus to others prior to developing or displaying symptoms themselves.



Procedures for prompt identification and isolation of Workers who may have symptoms of Covid19

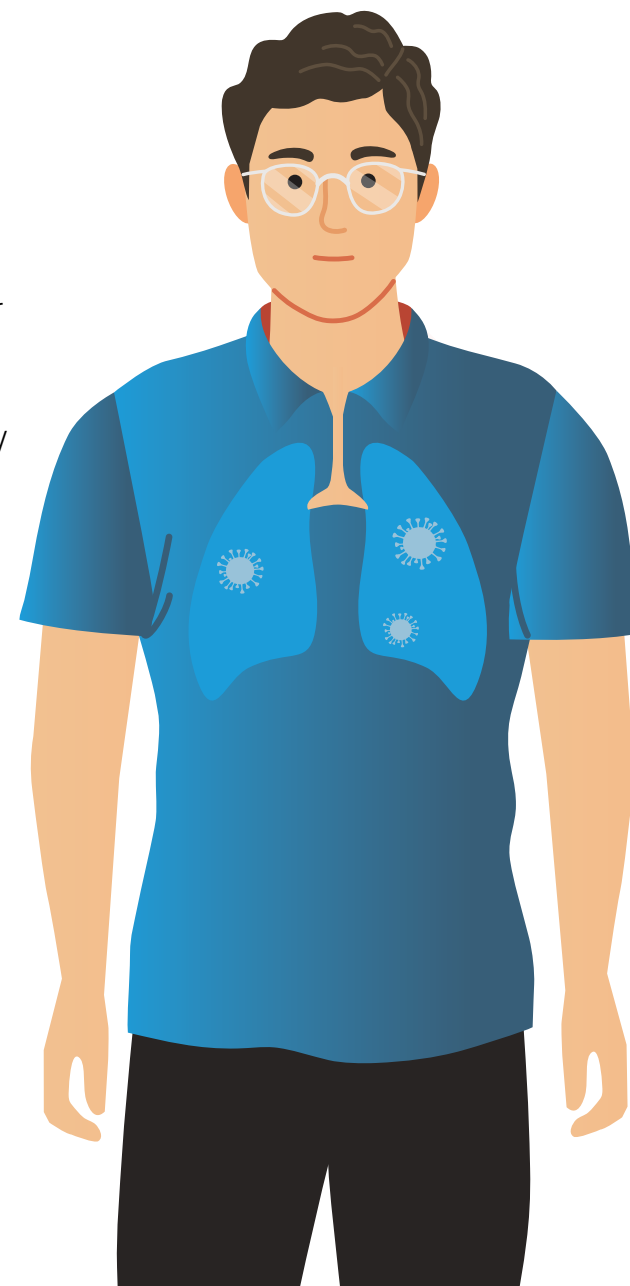
The prompt identification and isolation of potentially infectious individuals is a crucial step in protecting the worker involved, their colleagues, customers or others at the workplace.

Employers will:

- Keep a log of contact/group work to facilitate contact tracing.
- Inform workers and others of the purpose of the log.
- Display information on signs and symptoms of COVID-19.
- Provide up to date information on the public health advice issued by the HSE and Gov.ie.
- Provide instruction for workers to follow if they develop signs and symptoms of COVID-19 during work.

Workers will:

- Make themselves aware of the signs and symptoms of COVID-19 and monitor their own wellbeing.
- Self-isolate at home and contact their GP promptly for further advice if they display any signs or symptoms.
- Report to managers immediately if any symptoms develop during the shift.



Dealing with a Suspected Case of COVID-19 in the Workplace

While a worker should not attend work if displaying any symptoms of COVID-19, the following steps outline how employers should put in place a response plan in advance and also deal with a suspected case that may arise during the course of work.

Employers must:

- Include a defined response structure that identifies the team(s) responsible for responding to a suspected case in the COVID-19 response plan.
- Appoint an appropriate manager(s) for dealing with suspected cases.
- Identify a designated isolation area in advance. The designated area and the route to the designated area should be easily accessible and as far as is reasonable and practicable should be accessible by people with disabilities.
- Take into account the possibility of one or more persons displaying the signs of COVID19 and have additional isolation areas available or another contingency plan for dealing with same.

- Ensure the designated area has the ability to isolate the person behind a closed door. Where a closed door area is not possible, the employer must provide for an area away from other workers.
- Provide as is reasonably practicable:
 - Ventilation, i.e. via a window.
 - Tissues, hand sanitiser, disinfectant and/or wipes.
 - PPE; gloves, masks.
 - Clinical waste bags.

If a worker displays symptoms of COVID-19 during work, the manager and the response team must:

- Isolate the worker and have a procedure in place to accompany the individual to the designated isolation area via the isolation route, keeping at least 2 metres away the symptomatic person and also making sure that others maintain a distance of at least 2 metres from the symptomatic person at all times.
- Provide a mask for the person presenting with symptoms if one is available. The worker should wear the mask if in a common area with other people or while exiting the premises.

- Assess whether the unwell individual can immediately be directed to go home and call their doctor and continue self-isolation at home.
- Facilitate the person presenting with symptoms remaining in isolation if they cannot immediately go home and facilitate them calling their doctor. The worker should avoid touching people, surfaces and objects. Advice should be given to the person presenting with symptoms to cover their mouth and nose with the disposable tissue provided when they cough or sneeze and put the tissue in the waste bag provided.
- Arrange transport home or to hospital for medical assessment. Public transport of any kind should not be used.
- Carry out an assessment of the incident which will form part of determining follow-up actions and recovery.
- Arrange for appropriate cleaning of the isolation area and work areas involved.
- **Provide advice and assistance if contacted by the HSE. Additional advice on dealing with a suspected case is available from the NSAI: <https://www.nsai.ie/images/uploads/general/NSAI-Guidelines-for-COVID-19-2020-04-09.pdf>**

FIRST AID

In the event that first aid is required in the workplace it may not be possible to maintain a distance of 2 metres. Workers with a specific role in acting as first responders should be provided with updated training on infection prevention and control principles including performance of hand hygiene and appropriate use of personal protective equipment when delivering first aid. Further advice on first aid is available from the Pre Hospital Emergency Care Council (PHECC): <https://www.phecit.ie>

**The best way
to prevent
person-to-person
spread of COVID-19
is to use proper
hand hygiene and
respiratory etiquette
and practice physical
distancing**

HAND HYGIENE

Regular hand washing with soap and water is effective for the removal of COVID-19.

Employers must:

- Ensure that appropriate hygiene facilities are in place to accommodate workers adhering to hand hygiene measures.
- Make available advice and training on how to perform hand hygiene effectively.
- Display posters on how to wash hands in appropriate locations.



Workers must:

- Ensure they are familiar with and follow hand hygiene guidance and advice.
- Wash their hands with soap and water or with an alcohol-based hand rub regularly and in particular:
 - After coughing and sneezing.
 - Before and after eating.
 - Before and after preparing food.
 - If in contact with someone who is displaying any COVID-19 symptoms.
 - Before and after being on public transport (if using it).
 - Before and after being in a crowd.
 - When arriving and leaving the workplace/other sites.
 - Before having a cigarette or vaping.
 - When hands are dirty, or after toilet use.
- Avoid touching their eyes, mouth, or nose.
- Have access to facilities to support hand hygiene (for example hand sanitiser/hand wipes/hand washing facilities).
- Not share objects that touch their mouth, for example, bottles or cups.
- Use own pens for signing in.

RESPIRATORY HYGIENE

In addition to hand hygiene, good respiratory hygiene and etiquette is also necessary.

Employers must:

- Provide tissues as well as bins/bags for their disposal.
- Empty bins at regular intervals.
- Provide advice on good respiratory practice.

Workers must:

- Adopt good respiratory hygiene and cough etiquette.
- Ensure they are familiar with and follow respiratory hygiene guidance.

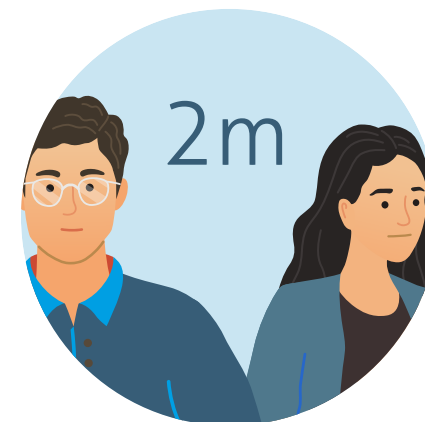


PHYSICAL DISTANCING

Physical distancing is recommended to reduce the spread of infection. The current recommended distance to be maintained between people to minimise risk of transmission is 2 metres.

Employers must:

- Provide for physical distancing across all work activities and this may be achieved in a number of ways:
 - Implement a no hand shaking policy.
 - Where office work is essential, free office capacity must be used as much as is reasonably practicable and work organised in such a way that multiple occupancy of office premises is avoided and/or physical distances maintained.
 - Organise workers into teams who consistently work and take breaks together. The teams should be as small as is reasonably practicable in the context of the work to be done.
 - Organise breaks in such a way as to facilitate maintenance of physical distancing during breaks, or reorganise and rearrange working and break areas. For example, placing tables and chairs far enough apart in canteens.



- Consider closing canteen facilities if public health measures including social distancing cannot be facilitated. If closing, provide information on delivery options.
- Stagger canteen use and extend serving times.
- Implement a queue management system with correct distance markings to avoid queues at food counters, tray return points and checkouts.
- Put in place use of card payment methods where practicable.
- Allocate specific times for collections, appointments and deliverables.
- Conduct meetings as much as possible using online remote means. Where

face to face meetings are absolutely necessary, the length of the meeting and the numbers attending should be kept to a minimum and participants must maintain physical distancing at all times.

- Provide one way systems for access/ egress routes in the workplace where practicable.
- Adapt existing sign-in/sign-out measures and systems, for example, biometrics/turnstiles, to ensure that physical distancing can be maintained.
- Ensure that workers sharing collective accommodation at a place of work are grouped in fixed teams that are as small as is reasonably practicable and consist of individuals who also work together. As far as is reasonably practicable.
- Each team should where reasonably practicable be provided with their own communal facilities (washrooms, kitchens and communal rooms) in order to avoid the additional burden of shift-wise use and the necessity to clean between occupancy by different teams. If this is not possible, employers should implement phased use and an enhanced cleaning regime.
- Accommodation must be regularly cleaned and ventilated either manually (by opening windows and doors) or mechanically.
- Sleeping accommodation should normally be occupied singly.
- Additional rooms must be provided for early isolation of infected persons. o prevent gatherings of workers in the workplace at the beginning and end of working hours (such as at time recording terminals and in changing rooms, washrooms and showers).
 - Implement physical distancing during any outdoor work activity.
 - For outdoor work activities, facilities for frequent hand hygiene should be provided and should be located close to where workers are working.

In settings where 2 metre worker separation cannot be ensured by organisational means, alternative protective measures should be put in place, for example:

- Install physical barriers, such as clear plastic sneeze guards between workers.
- Maintain at least a distance of 1 metre or as much distance as is reasonably practicable.
- Minimise any direct worker contact and provide hand washing facilities, and other hand hygiene aids, such as hand sanitisers, wipes etc. that are readily accessible so workers can perform hand hygiene as soon as the work task is complete.
- Make face masks available to the worker in line with public health advice.

Note: wearing of masks is not a substitute for other measures outlined above. However, if masks are worn they should be clean and they should not be shared or handled by other colleagues. Employers and workers should keep up to date with the latest Public Health advice

Cleaning:

Cleaning of work areas must be conducted at regular intervals.

Employers must:

- Implement thorough and regular cleaning of frequently touched surfaces. If disinfection of an area is required it must be performed in addition to cleaning, never as a substitute for cleaning.
- Ensure contact/touch surfaces such as table tops, work equipment, door handles and handrails are visibly clean at all times and are cleaned at least twice daily.
- Implement modified cleaning intervals for rooms and work areas. This applies especially for washroom facilities and communal spaces. Cleaning should be performed at least twice per day and whenever facilities are visibly dirty.
- Provide workers with essential cleaning materials to keep their own workspace clean (for example wipes/disinfection products, paper towels and waste bins/bags).



- Increase number of waste collection points and ensure these are emptied regularly throughout and at the end of each day.
- Modify use of hot desks to ensure that these are made available to identified staff and have appropriate cleaning materials in place for workers to clean the area before using.

Use of PPE - Personal Protective Equipment

While correctly using PPE can help prevent some exposures, it should not take the place of other preventative measures as outlined above. Examples of PPE include gloves, goggles, respiratory protection. Use of PPE may already be required in many workplaces to address occupational health and safety risks, for example, exposure to hazardous chemicals such as asbestos. In the context of COVID-19 risk, employers should check the HPSC website regularly for updates regarding use of recommended PPE.

- Full hygiene compliance as set out above should be applied and maintained in all circumstances.
- PPE must be selected based on the hazard to the worker.
- Employers must provide PPE and protective clothing to workers in accordance with identified COVID-19 exposure risks and in line with public health advice.
- Workers should be trained in the proper use, cleaning, storing and disposal of PPE.

- Gloves are generally not required for infection prevention and control purposes. Where gloves are necessary, they must not be considered a substitute for hand hygiene and hands must be cleaned whenever gloves are removed. Gloves should not create an additional occupational hazard (such as gloves getting caught in rotating parts). Limitations on wearing time and workers' individual susceptibilities (allergies, etc.) must also be taken into account.
- For particular PPE, such as respirators, these must be properly fitted and periodically refitted, as appropriate.
- PPE needs to be consistently and properly worn when required. In addition, it must be regularly inspected, cleaned, maintained and replaced as necessary.

Note: Face Shields designed and authorised as PPE against respiratory droplets should not be mistaken or used as a substitute for impact protection PPE in the workplace. For example, where standard CE marked Face Visor/Face protection PPE is required for work activities such as welding, grinding or to protect against chemical splashes.

Customer Facing Roles

Many of the measures noted above for workers can and should equally be applied for work activity that involves direct customer or visitor contacts.

Employers must:

- Eliminate physical interaction between workers and customers as much as is reasonably practicable through revised working arrangements. For example through provision of online or phone orders, contactless delivery or managed entry.
- Provide hand sanitisers at entry/exit points.



- Install physical barriers and clear markings to ensure that contact between workers and customers is kept to a minimum and to ensure that queues do not form between customers as they wait to be served.
- Implement a cleaning regime to ensure that contact points for workers and customers are kept visibly cleaned at all times.
- Display the advice on the COVID-19 measures in visible locations to ensure that customers are also adhering to what is required.

Many of the measures noted above for workers can and should equally be applied for work activity that involves direct customer or visitor contacts

Business Travel and Contractors/Visitors:

- Business trips and face-to-face interactions should be reduced to the absolute minimum and, as far as is reasonably practicable, technological alternatives should be made available (e.g., telephone or video conferencing).
- For necessary work-related trips, the use of the same vehicles by multiple workers is not encouraged. The number of workers who share a vehicle – simultaneously or consecutively – should be kept to a minimum as far as is reasonably practicable, for example by assigning a vehicle to a fixed team.
- Workers should be encouraged to travel alone if using their personal cars for work or at a maximum be accompanied by one passenger who shall be seated in adherence with physical distancing guidance.
- Workers should be provided with hand sanitisers and cleaning equipment for their work vehicle.
- Workers, contractors or visitors visiting workplaces where there are restrictions

arising from the risk of COVID-19 should follow the site infection prevention and control measures and take into account public health advice around preventing the spread of COVID-19. A system for recording visits to the site(s) by workers/ others as well as visits by workers to other workplaces should be put in place by employers and completed by workers as required.

- Provide induction training for contractors and visitors to the workplace.

HEATING, VENTILATION, AIR CONDITIONING:

Air conditioning is not generally considered as contributing significantly to the spread of COVID-19. Switching off air conditioning is not required to manage the risk of COVID-19. For organisations without air conditioning adequate ventilation is encouraged, for example, by opening windows where feasible etc.

Legionella

For some places of work such as hotels, leisure facilities, offices, dental clinics and hairdressers, the employer needs to put in place control measures to avoid the potential for Legionnaires' disease before they reopen. Further advice on the prevention of Legionnaires' disease after the COVID-19 Pandemic is available at: https://www.hsa.ie/eng/topics/biological_agents/specific_biological_agents_infections/legionellosis/covid-19_legionella_information_note.pdf

Occupational Health and Safety Measures and Recommendations

All existing Occupational Health and Safety provisions will continue to apply to all workplaces during this time and further information and advice is available on the Health and Safety Authority website

Compliance

Health and Safety Authority

The Health and Safety Authority is vested with national responsibility for occupational health and safety in the workplace and will be the lead State body in the oversight and enforcement of the COVID-19 'Return to Work Safely' Protocol. The HSA takes its powers from the Health, Safety and Welfare at Work Act 2005.

The HSA has the power under the 2005 Act, to advise, offer guidance. Monitor, inspect and/or enforce adherence to COVID-19 measures within a place of work as deficed under the Safety, Health and Welfare at Work Act 2005.

INSPECTION

As part of its Occupational Safety and Health inspection programme, HSA Inspectors will provide advice and support to employers and employees on how they are implementing the COVID-19 measures in the workplace, based on the 'Return to Work Safely' Protocol. The Inspectors can address and advise on any shortcomings in relation to the COVID-19 measures in the Protocol through a Report of Inspection which is left with the employer at the end of the visit. Can include timelines/follow-ups as needed.

The Inspector can take the appropriate enforcement action under the Safety, Health and Welfare Act 2005 and associated regulations. Enforcement action includes an Improvement Notice (IN) or Prohibition Notice (PN).

If following inspection, the inspector forms the opinion that further action is required the appropriate action, including the closure of a workplace, will be taken using the relevant powers.

All other Government appropriate officials will work with the HSA to oversee compliance with the Protocol.



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