



# Promoting safe work during Coronavirus

– A guide for UNISON branches



## Introduction

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**This pack offers UNISON NI important health and safety advice and some tools to organise and advise members during Coronavirus.**

It is general advice that applies equally in health, education and the community and voluntary sector.

It is particularly intended to clarify our members' rights to self assess their safety.

It includes:

- advice on how to raise safety concerns starting with guidance and discussion with the employer.
- a checklist for members to record any concerns that are not addressed by the employer. This can be forwarded to the branch and/or Regional staff for action

Contact your Regional Organiser to discuss model letters for use with employers.

Workplaces cannot be centres of infection. Worker's rights are also public health rights. Safety first.

The core advice is to use the official safety guidance, seek solutions.

Try to get members to work collectively in any dialogue with the employer.

Only escalate when necessary. Always seek advice.

# Promoting Safe Work & Tackling Unsafe Work

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Safe workplaces are crucial to protect the wellbeing of essential workers and to prevent workplaces contributing to the spread of the disease. This guide sets out the steps that stewards, safety reps and groups of members can take to promote health and safety at work during the pandemic. This is the guide for branches. There is a shorter guide for members.

## Our Message

- In a global pandemic, safety rights are public health rights.
- Unsafe work spreads the virus.
- Our members have the right to self assess their safety at work, particular in a care at home context

## Should you be at work?

The guidance on "shielding" and "isolating" is set out on the UNISON Website <https://www.unison.org.uk/coronavirus-rights-work/>. It covers the rights of workers with health conditions, and the rights of workers who live with someone shielding or isolating. This pack contains a checklist to help members assess whether they should be at work, and model letters for use with employers.

## Is my work safe?

The official guidance on safety in the face of coronavirus varies according to occupation and work setting. In a home care setting it may vary from client to client. As a result, UNISON attaches the highest importance to workers' self assessment of their own safety, minute by minute, hour by hour.

There are links to NI guidance on the UNISON NI website ([www.unison-ni.org.uk](http://www.unison-ni.org.uk)). However, fundamentals of health and safety still apply and the [UNISON website \(www.unison.org.uk/coronavirus-rights-work/covid-19-advice-reps/\)](http://www.unison.org.uk/coronavirus-rights-work/covid-19-advice-reps/) provides key Health and Safety materials.

Hazards should be assessed and protective measures put in place. Bottom line, members have a legal right to self assess the risk they face and step back if absolutely necessary (see below). The right to step back only applies if workers believe they face serious and imminent danger, that belief is reasonable, and they have acted appropriately to avert the danger. Branches will require regional support in assessing such situations.

## UNISON's PPE Alert

Some workers may not feel confident to be identified with any challenge to working conditions. To meet this need, and to ensure that issues are still brought to the attention of politicians and the wider public, UNISON has set up a confidential reporting system called [UNISON PPE Alert \(https://www.unison.org.uk/coronavirus-rights-work/trouble-getting-personal-protection-equipment-ppe\)](https://www.unison.org.uk/coronavirus-rights-work/trouble-getting-personal-protection-equipment-ppe) where workers can leave anonymous accounts of their experience.



UNISON has campaigned tirelessly on health and safety issues to protect its members at work during the COVID-19 pandemic and is launching a new campaign, **Be on the safe side**, ([www.unison.org.uk/unison-health-and-safety/become-safety-rep/](http://www.unison.org.uk/unison-health-and-safety/become-safety-rep/)) to recruit more safety reps in workplaces – as the need for them becomes greater than ever.

It has also supported its safety reps in carrying out their difficult role, whether ensuring that members have access to correct PPE, conducting workplace risk assessments or addressing the particular risks to vulnerable workers.

### What are key message to give to new potential Safety Reps?

1. By being a Safety Rep they can make a real difference, help their colleagues, keep workplaces safe & clean, and even save lives.
2. They are not expected to be a health & safety expert.
3. However every worker is an expert in their own job and what makes it safe. Once they become a Safety Rep, they will have the opportunity to listen to members about their jobs and develop their knowledge.
4. UNISON will support them at every step of the way by providing the training they need, and assisting them in discussions with employers on issues such as any time off needed to perform their role as a Safety Rep.

### How can members find out more about being a Safety Rep?

UNISON has launched a new web site, along with a leaflet that explains what a being a Safety Rep involves - [www.unison.org.uk/content/uploads/2020/06/26101.pdf](http://www.unison.org.uk/content/uploads/2020/06/26101.pdf)

There is also a more detailed guide that explains the role in full, and the powers Safety Reps have at their disposal - [www.unison.org.uk/content/uploads/2019/07/23941.pdf](http://www.unison.org.uk/content/uploads/2019/07/23941.pdf)

### How can Safety Reps help make workplaces COVID-Safe?

UNISON's advice page on Coronavirus (COVID-19) tells them everything they need to know about the disease, their rights at work and the measures required to keep them safe. This include links to bargaining information for reps.

We have also produced:

1. A leaflet to help members understand what is required to keep them safe, as more workers return to work - [www.unison.org.uk/content/uploads/2020/06/26089.pdf](http://www.unison.org.uk/content/uploads/2020/06/26089.pdf)
2. More detailed risk assessment guide for Safety Reps, that includes a supplement on risk assessing COVID-19 - [www.unison.org.uk/content/uploads/2020/07/26114.pdf](http://www.unison.org.uk/content/uploads/2020/07/26114.pdf)

### What training is available?

Go to the UNISON College NI website ([www.unisoncollegeni.org.uk/](http://www.unisoncollegeni.org.uk/)) to keep in touch as to what Health & Safety training is available.

## How do I challenge unsafe work?

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Where groups of workers, or individuals, wish to challenge unsafe work this is done through the following **3 Stage process** for keeping people safe. There is also an option for accelerated action in extreme or urgent situations.

### Stage 1: Guidance & Dialogue

All essential workers are covered by NI Government guidance. There is generic guidance and specific guidance for specific sectors. UNISON NI is working to shape this guidance in daily dialogue with employers and Government. These commitments are minimum standards and must be applied. The right to self assessment of PPE is particularly key.

**Checklist:** Most work arrangements are being addressed and resolved through direct dialogue with employers around existing guidance. However, if members are concerned about the application of the guidance to their workplace they should use the checklist on the following page, work collectively with colleagues, and seek support from the branch and region where required to ensure that relevant guidance is being followed. This covers use of risk assessments, access PPE, provision of hand sanitisers, compliance with social distancing and much more.

### Stage 2: Challenge

Where the checklist reveals the need for action on safety, and members want to make a complaint, UNISON should formally notify the employer and call for specific action on safety. A sample letter is included below (Model Letter 4). The content will vary depending on the specific action needed in the workplace. The notice will explain our concerns (identified using the checklist) and set out our members' right to safety at work and legal protection when raising safety issues.

As always, the aim at Stage 2 is to solve problems, protect workers, stop the spread of the virus and keep services running. Our focus is safety first. Workplace and community. If a formal challenge to unsafe work does not secure improved arrangements, the members may need further assistance. Please record stage two cases and mark for follow up if unresolved.

### Stage 3: Action

In extreme situations there are legal rules that enable workers to withdraw from unsafe situations. If this occurs, we will use the relevant guidance, the checklist, and the employer's response at Stage 2 to assess whether workers are legally protected if they choose to withdraw from work on safety grounds. There are escalation options within workplace procedures. Unless there is an imminent risk of serious danger that cannot be averted we will work within the stages of agreed procedures. When advice is issued it is essential that members stick to the precise wording of the advice.

**Urgent cases of extreme danger:** In urgent cases of extreme or imminent danger we will seek to fast-track the checklist process and urgently assess the need for protective action. As with all organisations combating Covid19, we are working under extreme pressure.

**Escalating issues:** Some individual cases raise issues not covered by current guidance or are of wider importance than one workplace. When this occurs it is important that such cases are shared with branch leadership and Regional Organisers so they can be raised at a regional level where appropriate.

## ARE YOU SAFE AT WORK? Covid19 and your safety rights – A safety checklist for members

Most work arrangements are being addressed and resolved through dialogue with employers around existing guidance. However, if you are concerned about the application of the guidance to your workplace you should use this checklist to ensure that relevant guidance is being followed. Work collectively with colleagues, and seek support from the branch and region where required.

Your name	
Your address	
Your mobile number	
Your email	
Your employer	
Name and address of workplace	
Briefly describe the work done at your workplace	
Do you have contact with Covid19 patients?	
If so, please describe the frequency and nature of the contact with Covid19 patients	
Do you believe you have the correct PPE?	
What type of PPE do you need?	
Is PPE available to you?	
If so, what type of PPE is provided?	
Are there measures in place to advise and enforce social distancing?	
Do you know if the risk assessment has been updated for Covid19?	
Was the union consulted about risk assessment and the implementation of safety	

measures?  
 Have you been told about measures adopted after risk assessments?

Have individual risk assessments been conducted for disabled workers?

Are there notices displayed to highlight measures adopted to manage covid19 risks?

State the name and contact details for your union rep

Are there any other issues or concerns UNISON should be aware of?


Members in working in **education** may also want to focus on the following key H&S issues related to schools opening up more widely. How satisfied are you that effective H&S measures are place with regard to the following

Maintenance of a safe environment	
Building health and safety checks on issues such as water systems; fire safety; kitchen equipment; specialist equipment for pupils	
Cleaning and hygiene arrangements	
Safe movement around the school for staff ad children;	
Safe staffing, staff availability and rotas	
Assessed risks to Black and Minority Ethnic staff	
Involvement of respective catering, cleaning, classroom assistants and other support staff in discussions about how meals will be served, staffing levels, safety etc	
Social distancing & PPE arrangements Special measures related to SEN provision:	
Changes to routines for staff and pupil	
Communication arrangements for staff and parents?	
Managing pupil and staff wellbeing and mental health: Are you satisfied that appropriate measures will be in place when the school begins to open more widely?	

**Contacts**

Contact your branch in the first instance. Branch contacts are provided on branch websites, social media or through the [UNISON Branch Finder](#). Alternatively contact UNISON NI on 02890270190.