



Personal Protective Equipment

A guide for UNISON health branches

What is the role of the UNISON health branch in PPE?

Government guidance on the gov.uk PPE hub states that:

Employers are under a legal obligation – under [Control of Substances Hazardous to Health \(COSHH\)](#) – to adequately control the risk of exposure to hazardous substances where exposure cannot be prevented. The provision and use of personal protective equipment (PPE), including respiratory protective equipment (RPE), will protect staff, patients and visitors. Employees have an obligation to make full and proper use of any control measures, including PPE, provided by their employer.

UNISON health branches can help to ensure that NHS organisations fulfil these obligations in the following ways.

Checking that the employer has a clear PPE plan in place that includes:

communications to staff about what PPE should be worn, including a system for ensuring that all updates to guidance are communicated clearly, recognising that changes may cause anxiety and concern

- process for issue and regular fit-testing of equipment
- guidance on donning and doffing protocols - including safe disposal of single and sessional use equipment
- regular reports on stock levels for PPE
- digest of incident reports relating to PPE and relevant action plans
- details of how concerns about type and supply of PPE can be raised and escalated
- arrangements for increased laundering and supply of normal uniforms - including additional facilities being provided for changing and washing at the start/end of shifts.

Supporting members to ask for risk-assessment of settings/procedures where the guidance requires it, or where members feel that a higher level of PPE is required.

Feeding unresolved PPE issues through to your region/the health team.

Judgements about what constitutes the correct type of PPE for the circumstances are ultimately the role of the senior clinical staff and infection control leads in your organisation. However, branches and reps play an important role as advocates for members or groups of members. Support from reps will be particularly needed by members who have not been issued with the minimum PPE as set out in the government guidance or by those who feel that the equipment they have been given is inadequate for their work environment.

What equipment do members need?

Official guidance is available on the PPE hub. This hub is updated as and when new advice is issued, so please check it on a regular basis.

The UNISON website is updated regularly to include links to the latest information and guidance on PPE: <https://www.unison.org.uk>

Fit testing

Where the setting or procedure requires staff to be issued with respirator masks, testing should be done with the same make/model of mask that will be used when working. Wherever possible, infection control or health and safety leads should be available to train staff to correctly fit masks and staff should follow their advice to ensure masks fit adequately before entering high risk areas.

What if members do not think the PPE recommended in the government guidance is adequate?

The guidance can't cover every eventuality, so it's also really important to flag the need for risk assessments to be undertaken – either where the guidance identifies this should be done or where staff are calling for a higher level of PPE than is set out in the official guidance.

Can members refuse to work if PPE is not provided?

The focus for UNISON branches has been to support staff to provide their vital services safely. We want the correct PPE to be provided so that we don't put staff in a position of choosing between their own safety and that of patients.

This is why we have been advising reps to take the following steps if the member is unsure they have the correct equipment or unhappy with what they have been issued:

1. Check what PPE the guidance says is suitable for the setting
2. If equipment does not meet the requirements set out in the guidance - approach the employer asking them to provide the correct equipment, and escalate that request within the management structure - with support from your staff side lead/region if needed.
3. If the equipment provided matches that which is set out in the guidance, but members think they should have higher levels – approach the employer and ask if a risk assessment has been completed for that environment.
4. If no risk assessment has been completed, ask for a dynamic risk assessment to be undertaken, working with a UNISON health and safety rep if possible.
5. If a risk assessment has been completed, ask for this to be shared with staff in the relevant team and - if possible - for the infection control lead to talk staff through the findings.
6. If there are still concerns from individuals or groups of members, reps will need to follow up with the employer and agree how these issues can be resolved. This may involve an agreement to provide a higher level of PPE than that set out in the risk assessment and formal guidance;

temporary redeployment of an individual to other duties; agreement of close monitoring of each shift by infection control leads; regular review of the risk assessment.

UNISON members should not put themselves at risk. If members are not able to access a risk assessment or the equipment that is identified in a risk assessment as necessary to protect the member of staff is not made available, then the union may need to advise members that the employer has not taken all necessary steps to control the risk of infection and that entering the work environment would lead to serious and imminent danger to the members or others.

In these circumstances you should escalate immediately to ask for action to address the issue so members can enter or be provided with alternative ways of working in the interim. Members should document and report their actions and you should report the situation through to your UNISON region, asking them to inform the health team.

Members registered with the Nursing and Midwifery Council may also want to refer to their statement: <https://www.nmc.org.uk/news/news-and-updates/nmc-statement-on-personal-protective-equipment-during-the-covid-19-pandemic/> which gives details of the steps they would expect registrants to take in circumstances where there are problems with the level or supply of PPE.

How should we treat breaches in the provision or quality of PPE?

It is important that information about every situation where PPE was either not available, did not work or where donning and doffing processes were not followed is reported.

Formal data will help the union establish patterns in problems with access to, or use of, PPE and will be a valuable source of information about where your employer should target support, information and supplies.

Branches can play an important role in:

- reminding members how to record incidents
- ensuring that incident reports are completed within shift time
- feeding back to employers on commonly-occurring problems with the reporting process.

What should be reported?

- no PPE was not available or available PPE was not donned prior to exposure
- PPE issued did not meet the minimum levels recommended for the patient/client treated or procedure undertaken
- PPE issued was faulty/did not fit correctly/was broken during the session
- the donning or doffing process was not followed
- difficulty in safe disposal of used PPE.

Stocks and supply

It is the responsibility of your NHS employer to provide the equipment required to control the risk of exposure to Covid-19.

There have been well-documented problems with the supply of PPE for all health and social care staff, with some branches reporting concerns that employers are withholding equipment now due to concern that stocks will not last the course of the pandemic.

In response, the government has made public pledges about the supply of PPE for health workers, and UNISON will follow up to ensure you get protection, not promises, so that our members can access the equipment needed to keep them safe.

Your employer can escalate concerns about supply of equipment through a number of routes including specific hotlines, reporting through to regulators or via their representative bodies. If there are supply problems for workplaces in your branch, you should ask for details of how these have been reported and escalated by your employer.

If you think that PPE is being withheld from staff over concerns about stock levels, your first step is to follow this up with your employer to establish whether the problem can be managed by better distribution of PPE within the organisation or if it is a problem of stock and supply to the organisation as a whole. If the issues can't be resolved internally, please check that the employer has escalated the problem. If they have and there has been no improvement, or the employer is not willing to escalate the problem, please raise with your UNISON region or the health team.

The equipment being given out looks as if it is out of date

In prioritising distribution over re-labelling, some supplies of equipment were issued without their date stamps being updated, which has caused confusion. Please check that your organisation is aware of this situation and ask your employer to give assurances to staff that where stock appears out of date, or has been relabelled, it has been safety tested in line with HSE advice.

Uniforms

Throughout the pandemic, most staff will be moving between the work environment and their own homes and will need consistent and clear messages from their employer about any changes required to their normal uniform or workwear. Please check that this is in place in your organisation.

If there is a requirement for increased laundering and additional changing time, branches should ask employers to confirm that measures are in place to support staff to make this change. This could include financial support for those expected to wash their own uniforms/workwear; confirmation of laundry arrangements for uniforms washed at work; additional time and facilities for changing built in to shift start and end times.

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