



Rialtas na hÉireann  
Government of Ireland

## **Transitional Protocol**

# **Good Practice Guidance for Continuing to Prevent the Spread of COVID-19**

31.01.2022

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# 1. Introduction

## A. Context

The public health management of the COVID-19 pandemic in Ireland continues to evolve in light of changing circumstances and risks. This document, *Transitional Protocol - Good Practice Guidance for Continuing to Prevent the Spread of COVID-19*, which has evolved from the Work Safely Protocol (last updated on 14 January 2022), and reflects the most recent public health advice, is the current guidance for the safe return and continued safe operating of workplaces.

On 21<sup>st</sup> of January, the Government announced the easing of a number of public health measures, while emphasising a continued strong focus on personal protective behaviours, based on individual and sectoral risk assessments, for the coming period.

From 24<sup>th</sup> of January, the requirement to work from home unless it is necessary to attend the workplace in person ended. This means a phased return to physical attendance in workplaces can commence. This phased return should proceed dependent on the circumstances of individual workplaces, informed by consultations with workers, and as appropriate to each sector.

To support the transition back to physical attendance in the workplace, and the continued safe operation of workplaces, this Transitional Protocol has been prepared, reflecting the Government decision of the 21<sup>st</sup> of January. It draws on lessons learned to date, along with the latest public health guidance.

The most recent changes to public health advice have seen a number of measures removed including for example, the general requirement for physical distancing of 2 metres in workplaces. There has also been a removal of the need to maintain contact details, however, employers may need to provide attendance information as appropriate to the Department of Public Health in the event that they are investigating an outbreak in the workplace. As part of the phased approach to the return to physical workplaces, employers and workers are called upon to be supportive of continued good practices, built up over the past two years, which support a safe working environment for all. Continued adoption of good infection prevention

and control measures such as hand washing, respiratory hygiene, and ventilation in workplaces is advised. Critical components of the collective response in relation to COVID-19 continue to apply including the rapid self-isolation if symptomatic (even if fully vaccinated/boosted) or if having a positive COVID-19 test.

It remains critically important that everyone continues to play their part in limiting transmission. COVID-19 continues to pose a risk to public health. The pandemic is not over and the emergence of new variants with increased levels of transmissibility, immune escape and/or virulence remains a risk both nationally and globally.

Engagement will continue to take place between Government, trade unions and employer representatives, under the auspices of the Labour Employer Economic Forum, in relation to guidance required for employers and workers for the transition period ahead, taking account of latest public health guidance and any further decisions of Government. The Transitional Protocol will be updated, and guidance reviewed as necessary in the period ahead.

This Transitional Protocol provides the necessary advice and guidance for employers and workers to maintain infection prevention and control (IPC) and other measures to allow a safe return to the workplace and its continued safe operation.

This Transitional Protocol continues to be a collaborative effort by the Department of Enterprise, Trade and Employment (DETE), Health and Safety Authority (HSA), the Health Services Executive (HSE) and the Department of Health. The update also follows 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 related to the labour force. This work has also been overseen by the Department of the Taoiseach and the Department of Enterprise, Trade and Employment.

This guidance is a general document applicable to all sectors. It is not designed to prohibit the introduction of specific measures in particular sectors or workplaces. On foot of the latest public health and Government advice, and this guidance document, all businesses and sectors who have specific guidance should review and update their own guidance in line with the advice contained herein. It should also be noted that employers, in consultation with their

workers, may also consider maintaining some of the practices that were introduced of the Work Safely Protocol, as last published on 14 January 2022.

The Government will continue to implement *Making Remote Work, Ireland's National Remote Work Strategy* which will support employers and employees in ensuring that, following the pandemic, remote working is a permanent feature in the Irish workplace in a way that maximises economic, social and environmental benefits.

## **B. Working together to suppress COVID-19 in the workplace**

The key to a safe workplace remains strong communication of key messages, consistency in the implementation of infection prevention and control measures such as rapid self-isolation of those displaying symptoms, and a shared collaborative approach between employers and workers. Employers, workers and/or their recognised Trade Union or other representatives need to continue to have regular engagement about COVID-19 infection prevention and control (IPC) measures in workplaces even with the changed public health advice issued on 21<sup>st</sup> of January 2022.

A key role in each workplace since the pandemic began has been that of the Lead Worker Representative (LWR). Therefore, employers and employees are encouraged to maintain this role in each workplace, with at least one LWR in place charged to ensure that a shared responsibility to prevent the spread of COVID-19 in the workplace continues for an appropriate transition period. The LWR, together with the COVID-19 response management team, should support the implementation of any new or revised IPC measures required. The identity of the person or persons appointed should be clearly communicated within the workplace.

As a phased return to the workplace commences, workers may be particularly concerned about returning to the physical workplace and employers should consult and address concerns where appropriate.

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## 2. Steps to Reduce the Spread of COVID-19 in the Workplace

While public health and Government advice has changed, there remains a number of steps where continued implementation by employers and employees will contribute to preventing the spread of COVID-19 in workplaces. Maintaining these steps will also enable workplaces, employers and employees respond quickly should the public health advice change or should COVID-19 levels increase in the future.

### A. Keep a COVID-19 Response Plan in place

Employers, in consultation with the employees and their representatives, should continue to maintain or take the following steps:

- update their COVID-19 Response Plan to take account of the changed public health advice and the advice in this guidance document. These plans should be updated in consultation with workers and communicated once finalised,
- facilitate the ongoing appointment and engagement of the Lead Worker Representative(s), as appropriate,
- review and update their occupational health and safety (OSH) risk assessments and safety statement as workers return to the physical workplaces and as changes to the workplaces take place to take account of changed public health advice including details contained in this document,
- maintain measures to deal with a suspected case of COVID-19 in the workplace,
- maintain any specific measures or response for dealing with an outbreak of COVID-19 (refer to HPSC general guide on management of COVID-19 outbreaks in the workplace – [link](#)).

## **B. Maintain policies and procedures for prompt identification and isolation of workers who may have symptoms of COVID-19**

The management and isolation of potentially infectious individuals remains a crucial step in protecting the worker involved, their colleagues, customers or others at the workplace. It is also a crucial step in preventing an outbreak in a workplace from moving into the wider community and also to prevent cases in the community causing an outbreak in the workplace too. Employers and workers should still continue to keep themselves up to date on all public health information as the information can change on a regular basis.

While the need to maintain a contact log with details of workers and visitors to a workplace has been removed, employers may need to provide attendance information as appropriate in the event the local Department of Public Health has to investigate an outbreak.

### **Employers should continue to:**

- advise that workers do not come to work if they are displaying any signs or symptoms of COVID-19 or if they have had a positive COVID-19 test,
- provide instruction for workers to follow if they develop signs and symptoms of COVID-19 during work,
- display information on signs and symptoms of COVID-19,
- cooperate with the local [Public Health Offices](#) if a case of COVID-19 and/or an outbreak is confirmed in their workplace and implement any follow up actions required, and

### **Workers should also continue to:**

- keep themselves up to-date on the signs and symptoms of COVID-19,
- not go to work if they are displaying signs or symptoms of COVID-19 or if they have symptoms of COVID-19,
- follow the public health advice regarding self-isolation, restricting movement, testing and what to do if identified as a close contact ([HSE COVID-19 information: contract tracing](#))
- report to managers immediately if any symptoms develop during work, and

- cooperate with any Public Health personnel and their employer for contact tracing purposes and follow any public health advice given in the event of a case or outbreak in their workplace.

## C. Maintaining COVID-19 Infection Prevention and Control (IPC) Measures

While a number of measures have been removed, the public health advice remains that individuals self-isolate if they have any signs or symptoms of COVID-19 or if they have a positive COVID-19 test. Vaccination, including getting a booster, also remains a recommendation from public health as it will protect the individual from serious illness. Public health continues to advise that sector specific measures such as promotion of rapid self-isolation when a worker is symptomatic, appropriate use of face masks (outside of specific regulated sectors where face masks are required), physical distancing, hand and respiratory hygiene, ventilation and signage be considered. Therefore, employers in consultation with their workers and following consideration of their individual workplaces, should continue to maintain the measures set out below. Employers may, following consultation with workers, also continue to follow previous advice set out in the Work Safely Protocol, if this is considered necessary in their particular workplace.

### C1. Hand Hygiene

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

#### **Employers should continue to:**

- ensure that appropriate hygiene facilities and materials are in place to accommodate workers adhering to hand hygiene measures,
- make available advice on [how to perform hand hygiene](#) effectively,
- display posters on how to wash hands in appropriate locations throughout the workplace,
- provide hand sanitisers (alcohol or non-alcohol based) where washing facilities cannot be accessed. In choosing an alcohol-based sanitiser, a minimum of 60% alcohol is required. **Note:** alcohol-based hand sanitisers are highly flammable and must not be stored or used near heat or a naked flame.



- provide facilities for frequent hand hygiene for outdoor work, which should be located close to where workers are working. Outdoor toilet facilities, if reasonably practicable, should also be considered.

**Workers should continue to:**

- follow [hand hygiene guidance and advice](#),
- wash their hands with soap and water or with hand sanitiser for at least 20 seconds,

## **C2. Respiratory Hygiene**

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

**Employers should continue to:**

- provide tissues as well as bins/bags for their disposal,
- empty bins at regular intervals, and
- provide advice on good respiratory practice including [the safe use, storage and disposal of face masks/coverings and the safe cleaning of face coverings](#).

**Workers should continue to:**

- adopt good respiratory hygiene and cough etiquette, and
- follow good practice on the safe use, storage, disposal and cleaning of face masks/coverings.

## **C3. Physical Distancing**

The requirements to maintain a 2 metre physical distance and to adopt pods of 6 for indoor events have been removed. However, public health advice for the individual and for sectors notes that adopting a physical distance continues to be good practice.

Employers may choose to maintain some of the practices or arrangements that were in place based on the Work Safely Protocol for the period of transition back to office working. In meetings, events or training, the continued focus on hand and respiratory etiquette and adequate ventilation are all measures that may continue.

The legal requirement to wear a face mask/covering remains in place only for specific regulated settings (e.g., healthcare, public transport, taxis, public offices, retail premises etc.). The regulations, which remain in place until February 28 2022, also require workers in a relevant premise to wear a face mask/covering when involved in the preparation of, service of, food or beverages for consumption on the premises (S.I. No 571/2020 consolidated, [link](#)).

Outside of the above regulated settings, it is still good practice to continue to use face masks/coverings particularly in crowded areas. Workers who use or share work vehicles may also consider using a face mask/covering. Individuals at high or very high risk should also follow public health advice in relation to mask wearing, including wearing a surgical or FFP2 mask when in crowded indoor settings ([link](#)). If face masks/coverings are worn, they should be clean and they should not be shared or handled by other colleagues. Employers should continue to support and facilitate the use of face masks by workers who may wish to continue to use them.

#### **C4. Dealing with a Suspected Case of COVID-19 in the Workplace**

**The key message remains that a worker should not attend the workplace if they are displaying any signs or symptoms of COVID-19 or if they have a positive COVID-19 test.**

However, while a worker should not attend the workplace if displaying any symptoms of COVID-19, the following outlines the steps employers should maintain to deal with a suspected case that may arise during the course of work.

##### **Employers should continue to:**

- include a defined response structure that identifies the team(s) responsible for responding to a suspected case in the COVID-19 response plan,
- appoint a case manager/designated contact person(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 COVID-19 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, and
- provide as is reasonably practicable:
  - Ventilation, i.e. by opening a window,
  - Tissues, hand sanitiser, disinfectant and/or wipes,
  - PPE, gloves, medical grade or respirator mask, and
  - Waste bags/bins.

If a worker displays symptoms of COVID-19 during work, the case manager/designated contact person 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, keep their distance from the symptomatic person and also make sure that others maintain a distance too,
- provide a medical grade or respirator mask for the person presenting with symptoms. The worker should wear the medical grade or respirator mask if in a common area with other people or while exiting the premises,
- assess whether the individual can immediately be directed to go home, get tested and follow the public health advice,
- facilitate the person presenting with symptoms remaining in isolation if they cannot immediately go home and arrange to get tested. 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 to put the tissue in the waste bag provided,

- arrange transport home or to hospital for medical assessment if required,
- 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 (refer to section below on Cleaning), and
- provide advice and assistance if contacted by the Department of Public Health / HSE in relation to contact tracing.

**Note:** If the employer has in place a designated occupational health service, this service may be used by the employer to respond and support measures dealing with a confirmed or suspected case of COVID-19 as set out above.

## C5. At Risk Workers

Infection with the virus that causes COVID-19 can cause illness, ranging from mild to severe, and, in some cases, can be fatal. For some people and workers, the risks are higher. There are two levels of higher risk – [very high risk \(extremely vulnerable\)](#) and [high risk](#). There is different public health advice for each of these groups and employers should continue to follow and adopt this advice.

As workers return to the workplace, employers should take account of the particular needs of those in the high or very high risk (extremely vulnerable) category. Public health advice is that such individuals should get vaccinated and should follow public health advice in relation to mask wearing, including wearing a surgical or FFP2 mask when in crowded indoor settings ([link](#)).

At risk workers, may be particularly concerned about returning to the physical workplace and employers should engage and address concerns. A fitness for work medical risk assessment may also need to be completed with the worker and the employer's Occupational Health practitioner (where available) and/or the worker's family doctor. Guidance on Fitness to Work is available from the HSA website ([link](#)).

## C6. Working from home

A phased return to the workplace has been announced and as employers start to put this in place, they should engage and communicate with workers and their representatives. Some workers may be anxious about the physical return to the workplace and in such instances, the employer should discuss and engage with the individual concerned and endeavour to provide supports where available.

The Government has also called on employers, in consultation with their employees, to start to develop or finalise their long-term arrangements for blended or remote working and draft legislation has been published to formalise this. The employer should develop and consult on any remote or working from home policy and in conjunction with workers and/or Trades Unions. [Guidance on Working from Home](#) is available from the HSA.

## C7. Cleaning

Cleaning of work areas should continue to be conducted at regular intervals.

**Employers** should continue to:

- implement thorough and regular cleaning of frequently touched surfaces, rooms and work areas. If disinfection of an area is required, it must be performed in addition to cleaning, never as a substitute for cleaning,
- provide workers with essential cleaning materials to keep their own workspace clean (for example wipes/disinfection products, paper towels and waste bins/bags),
- provide workers with hand sanitisers and cleaning equipment for their work vehicle, with cleaning taking place before and after each shift,
- provide sufficient waste collection points and ensure these are emptied regularly or as needed,
- ensure hot desks have appropriate cleaning materials in place for workers to clear the area before and after use.

## **C8. Customer Facing Roles**

With the updated public health advice now in place and the removal of certain restriction measures, employers in sectors and workplaces where direct customer or client contacts occur, will need to review the measures in place. Mask wearing is still required in the following settings (public transport, retail premises, and in certain premises where food and beverages are prepared and served (see C.3 above).

Continued provision of hand sanitisers at entry and exit points, displaying advice on COVID-19 in prominent locations and maintaining regular cleaning are all measures that should be continued.

## **C9 Ventilation**

Ventilation refers to the movement of outdoor air into a building, and the circulation of that air within the building or room while removing stale air to improve the air quality. This can be achieved through natural means (e.g., opening a window) or by mechanical means e.g. HVAC systems. While ventilation reduces the amount of virus in the air and the aerosol risk, it will have minimal impact on droplet transmission where people are within 2 metres of each other, or contact transmission (touching surfaces), which is why it is not a standalone measure and continued adherence to other public health advice is absolutely essential.

Determining ventilation of enclosed workplace settings should be considered as part of the workplace risk assessment. The priority for the risk assessment is to identify areas of the workplace that are usually occupied and are poorly ventilated. These are also the areas that should be prioritised for improvement to reduce the risk of aerosol transmission of the virus. A poorly ventilated area may include:

- Areas where people work and where there is no mechanical ventilation or natural ventilation such as open windows, doors or vents etc.
- Areas that use mechanical ventilation if the system recirculates air and has no outdoor air supply in place.
- Areas that are stuffy or smell bad.

There are various recommendations made for what the appropriate air changes per hour (ACH) could be for different indoor settings. However, the overall objective should be to increase the ventilation in the workspace wherever possible thereby improving the existing ventilation without impacting on the workers'/occupants' comfort.

Details on ventilation, including how to assess ventilation in the workplace, are available from the HSA ([HSA coronavirus information and resources](#)).

## **C10. Antigen Diagnostic Tests (ADTs) and Rapid Antigen Diagnostic Tests (RADTs)**

Rapid Antigen Diagnostic tests (RADTs) are currently being used by public health to identify cases of COVID-19 in particular age groups. However, their more widespread use in the workplace remains a voluntary option which employers, in consultation with workers and their representatives, may wish to adopt. Even if RADTs are deployed in a workplace setting, general public health advice regarding hand washing, wearing masks/coverings, respiratory etiquette, and ventilation, all still need to be adhered to in full. In addition, the use of RADTs does not preclude the strict requirement that all those who are symptomatic should self-isolate and not attend the workplace. The employer may get advice on establishing a programme of testing from their occupational health or medical service. If a workplace adopts a RAD testing system, employers must maintain personal information collected in line with GDPR requirements.

## **C11. Vaccination**

Public health advice still emphasises that vaccination against COVID-19 remains a key element to not only protect the individual from serious illness but also in protecting the wider community too. Employers and workers should keep up to date with information on the national strategy regarding vaccination against COVID-19 ([HSE COVID-19 vaccination information](#)).

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## 3. Worker Role – Workplace and Community Settings

Workers should continue to follow the public health advice and guidance as it relates to workplace and community settings.

### **Workplace Settings**

In the workplace, the worker should continue to follow the requirements set out in this document and with any specific direction from the employer. They should also continue to maintain good hand hygiene and respiratory etiquette practices. If a worker has any signs or symptoms of COVID-19, they should not attend work and should get a test and follow the relevant public health advice.

### **Community Settings**

Public health advises that continued wearing of masks, practicing of physical distancing and avoidance of crowded environments based on individual risk assessment, and adherence to basic hand and respiratory hygiene is important. Workers travelling on public transport to and from work must continue to wear a face mask/covering. Workers travelling to and from work in cars should also consider wearing a face mask/covering.

Workers, who have yet to be vaccinated, should also make themselves aware of and keep up to date with the information in relation to the National Vaccination Programme roll-out. Getting vaccinated not only protects the individual worker but also their family and loved ones too.



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## 4. Advice and Information Resources

- **Government** - ([Government information COVID-19](#))
- **The Health and Safety Authority Contact Centre** can be contacted at
  - **Tel:** 0818 289 389 and **Email** - [wcu@hsa.ie](mailto:wcu@hsa.ie)
  - An online [complaint form](#) is also available and this should be used where possible.
  - [www.hsa.ie](http://www.hsa.ie)
- **The Health Service Executive and Health Protection Surveillance Centre (HPSC)**
  - [HSElive](#) - **Tel:** 1800 700 700
  - [www.hse.ie](http://www.hse.ie)
  - [www.hpsc.ie](http://www.hpsc.ie)
- **[Department of Enterprise, Trade and Employment](#) COVID-19 Business Support Call Centre** - for information on the Government supports available to businesses impacted by COVID-19.
  - **Tel:** 01 631 2002 and **Email:** [infobusinesssupport@enterprise.gov.ie](mailto:infobusinesssupport@enterprise.gov.ie)
- **Workplace Relations Commission ([WRC](#)) Information and Customer Service:**
  - **Tel:** 059 9178 990
- **National Standards Authority of Ireland ([NSAI](#))**
  - **Tel:** 01 807 3800 and **Email:** [COVID-19-support@nsai.ie](mailto:COVID-19-support@nsai.ie)

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