

Is your Organisation's Covid-19 Response Plan fit-for-purpose?

The Government issued its updated **Work Safely Protocols** last week ahead of the phased return to the workplace for many Organisations on Monday, 20th September. In this article, we highlight the key points from the Protocols that will help those in the non-profit sector open safely.

It is important to note that much of the public advice to-date is still in place such as mask wearing, physical distancing, hand and respiratory hygiene and the use of adequate ventilation so continued adherence is important. Also, while much has been said about the lifting of all Covid-19 related restrictions on 22nd October, protocols will still be in place so it is worth taking the time now to fully implement the guidance.

There is very little by way of change in the latest Work Safely Protocols. The directive from Government for employees to work from home has been lifted and employers are advised that any return to the workplace must be done in a **careful and cautious manner**. This includes ensuring employee attendance is for specific work-related reasons and done in a staggered way to ensure appropriate levels of health and safety compliance aligned to public health advice and as reflected in the Protocols.

For non-profit Organisations with employees and volunteers out in the community, specific care and attention must be taken if undertaking work amongst the public, particularly for those who may be vulnerable. Specific risks and actions should be outlined in the Covid-19 Response Plan.

Importance of keeping your Covid-19 Response Plan updated

The Work Safely Protocols is a general document that should be applied across all sectors, including the non-profit. So, it is crucially important that employers revise and update their specific Covid-19 Response Plans in line with the latest advice ahead of putting into practice what has been planned for the last number of months.

The Covid-19 Response Plan follows similar principles as other health & safety documents in that it should:

- Identify & assess the risks
- Implement protective control measures
- Clearly outline procedures in the event of infection or suspected infection
- Document findings & regularly review the plan to ensure its effectiveness

Employers should also have in place:

- Covid-19 Policy Statement
- Lead Worker Representative
- Return to Work Form & Checklists
- Employee communications on preventing the spread of Covid-19
- Adequate ventilation
- CO2 monitors where required
- Provision of PPE where relevant
- Adequate hygiene and cleaning
- Ensure the correct use of face coverings

Role of Lead Worker Representative (LWR)

Every workplace should appoint at least one LWR who is in charge of 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.

Employees can engage with their employer through the Lead Worker in relation to concerns in the workplace. If their concerns are inadequately dealt with in relation to the implementation of the Protocol within a workplace, an employee may raise these concerns with the Workplace Contact Unit of the Health and Safety Authority (HSA), who will review all complaints and will follow up as appropriate

Health & Safety

The LWR, together with the COVID-19 response management team, should support the implementation of the public health measures set out in the Work Safely Protocols as well as ensuring the Organisation's Covid-19 Response Plan is clearly communicated to all. The identity of the person or persons appointed should be clearly communicated within the workplace. **They should also receive the relevant and necessary training from their employer.**

Given the absence of the majority of employees from the workplace for the past 18 months, we recommend that Organisations look to retraining employees on aspects of Health & Safety – obviously including Covid-19 prevention.

Employers should also pay particular attention to employees who have been onboarded during lockdown and refresh their induction training plans and procedures.

Other watch-outs for employers

Vaccines: It is worth reminding employers that they cannot mandate or ask employees if they have been vaccinated. Clear communication with employees to reiterate the importance of the vaccine is the appropriate approach.

Face-to-face interactions: The Protocols now stipulate that any face-to-face interactions should be necessary. This also includes the need for business travel.

Remote & Hybrid Working: The Protocol also reiterates the Government's support for remote working and has called on employers, in consultation with their employees, to start to develop and finalise their long-term arrangements for blended or remote working having regard to their operational requirements and in-line with public health advice.

Finally, with the planned removal of restrictions intended for 22nd October, employers should ensure they are keeping a watchful eye on any changes to the Work Safely Protocols over the coming weeks.