



Working through COVID-19: Guidance for Employers



PENINSULA

Introduction

Employers throughout Ireland are assessing how they can continue to work through COVID-19.

The broad scale of challenges they face include the possibility of a restructure, redundancies, and adhering to new mandatory Government health & safety measures that protect employees and customers.

To help you overcome these challenges, we've come up with ten simple steps to help your business continue working through COVID-19.

1. Building measures

Evaluate what measures need to be put in place in your premises to ensure the safeguarding of employees, contractors, and visitors.

A risk assessment should be carried out ensuring you involve and consult your employees throughout this process.

Staff may be feeling anxious about returning to work and what measures your company is putting into place to safeguard them.

Involving staff in your risk assessment process means that not only are you getting the correct input, meeting your legal obligations as an employer, but you are relieving some of that staff anxiety by including them in decision making for safeguarding matters.

A deep clean of the premises might be required before opening, and on a regular basis depending on the nature of the business, alongside a number of other measures included below.

2. Communicating with employees

Under the Return to Work Safely Protocol, you must put a COVID-19 Response Plan in place and as part of this process, you must appoint a Lead Worker Representative who will consult with fellow workers on the safety measures that need to be implemented.

Some of the issues you need to communicate with staff on include:

- Needs of the business itself regarding who needs to return first (for example managers first, employees second etc.)
- Which staff members are considered vulnerable or extremely vulnerable, taking into account individuals they may live with.
- Which employee groups are able to continue working at home and which need to return to work.

Your response plan should be documented, clear to follow and communicated to all employees. Employees who have to continue to stay at home due to being vulnerable/highly vulnerable, living with those who are classed as vulnerable/highly vulnerable, or who need to stay at home due to other COVID-19 factors should be supported to do so.

You also need to provide employees with a return to work form to allow them to confirm their health status before resuming work.

3. Implementing social distancing

Social distancing is reducing day-to-day contact with other people as much as possible. In the first instance, businesses and workplaces should encourage and enable their employees to work at home wherever possible.

This will not be the case for everyone, and as an employer, you must ensure social distancing measures are followed in the workplace.

These measures can include:

- Ensuring a minimum two-metre distance between people.
- Avoiding small and large gatherings (so, where practicable, meetings should take place virtually or over telephone systems).
- If you have a large workforce, you will want to ensure you are not crowding your workforce, so this might mean staggering breaks and work patterns.
- Restricting or limiting the number of customers inside your premises at any time, for example, a one in, one out policy.
- Specifying seating/desk arrangements for staff to ensure minimum work distances are adhered to.
- Using digital means for transferring paperwork, such as invoices, delivery notes and pro forma, instead of hard copies.
- Using contactless payment methods, such as contactless card terminals or prepayment via online banking rather than cash handling.
- Putting a no handshake policy in place.

4. Limit access and control

You will want to limit visitors and contractors to your sites/buildings in line with the advice in the Government's Roadmap Document.

One suggestion is to only allow business-critical visitors and contractors access. These might include:

- Those delivering or collecting goods in order for the business to function.
- Contractors undertaking statutory repairs & services such as fire systems maintenance or lift technicians.
- Contractors undertaking emergency maintenance works.
- Members of the public purchasing goods.

Additional control measures you might want to consider are:

- Drop off and collection points for deliveries, with enhanced safety measures for staff who enter or work in this area, such as regular cleaning and disinfecting of equipment and use of protective gloves.
- If practicable, separate entrance and exit points for staff to prevent cross contamination.

For public-facing employees, additional control measures may be:

- Installing plexiglass shields/clear plastic shielding screens as appropriate at points of regular interaction with customers (these will need a regular cleaning and disinfecting program).
- Regulating entry into premises (such as one in, one out).
- Signs to control movements, such as one-way systems and enhanced floor marking.

5. Ensure high levels of hygiene

Maintaining high levels of hygiene at your business premises and by your staff will minimise the spread of COVID-19. As mentioned earlier, you may need a deep clean of the premises prior to opening.

How often you need to undertake deep cleans will depend on the nature of the business. You should communicate your hygiene measures to employees too.

However, a number of measures can be taken in-house, including:

- Putting disinfectant sprays and wipes in prominent areas throughout the business, such as entrances and exits, kitchen areas, offices, points of customer interaction and drop off/collection points.
- Considering low-touch or no-touch doors, switches, and other fittings.
- Removing shared tools and equipment and ensuring staff have personal tools and equipment instead.
- Implementing a clean desk and self-sanitising policy for staff, ensuring they are empowered to keep their own equipment clean.

6. Staff hygiene

It is also important that staff keep high levels of personal hygiene to minimise the risk of COVID-19 spreading. The two main forms of hygiene in this area are:

1) Respiratory hygiene

Ensuring all sneezes, coughs or blows of the nose are caught in tissues that are disposed of immediately, and hands washed after.

2) Hand hygiene

Correct hand-washing technique is important.

The key steps are:

1. Wet hands with water.
2. Apply enough soap to cover all hand surfaces.
3. Rub soap in liberally to form a thick lather (bubbles) all over the hand, including between fingers & thumbs, wrists, and nails.
4. This should be done for at least 20 seconds.
5. Rinse hands with water.
6. Dry hands with a disposable paper towel.

Note: make sure hands are dry. Wet hands can spread bacteria 1000 times more than dry hands.

7. Redundancies

Redundancy is a tough situation for both employers and employees. It is worthwhile to have a Redundancy Policy in place outlining the applicable legislation, the statutory consultation obligations and the steps your business will take to implement a redundancy programme.

To avoid an expensive redundancy-related claim, we recommend that all businesses take advice on the matter to ensure that a genuine redundancy situation exists, and that the redundancy process is implemented correctly and in line with the legislation.

A good handling of the redundancy process is vital not only from a legal point of view but for your reputation with customers, your remaining workers and the public at large.

8. New wage subsidy to remain in place until April 2021

A new Employment Wage Support Scheme (EWSS) will be available to employers until April 2021. The EWSS will first run in parallel to the Temporary Wage Subsidy Scheme (TWSS) from July 31st and will then succeed the TWSS from September 1st.

The eligibility criteria are slightly different. You will need to prove that turnover or customer orders will decrease by 30% during the July to December 2020 period. This is up from the 25% decline required under TWSS.

Under the EWSS, employers will receive a flat-rate subsidy for each employee on your payroll. The exact amount will depend on the employee's pre-COVID-19 gross weekly pay.

You can use the EWSS scheme for new and seasonal employees as well as existing employees.

9. "July Job Stimulus" Measures

The Government has unveiled the "July Job Stimulus" package setting out various measures to spark a jobs-led economic recovery. The policies include income and recruitment supports that your business could benefit from. The main employment-related policies are:

- A new Employment Wage Support Scheme that can subsidise employee wages until April 2021.
- An extension of the Pandemic Unemployment Payment until April 2021.
- Recruitment supports with grants of up to €7,500 available under various schemes.

Speak to one of our experts today to find out more about how to make these government supports work for your business.

10. New Five-Level Framework of Restrictions

The Government confirmed that business and society will move to Level 3 of the Living with COVID-19 Plan with certain special measures from December 1st.

While the relaxation from Level 5 restrictions will allow more businesses to open up, there remains limits on travel and work that will impact employers. People should continue to work from home where possible and people should stay within their county unless travelling for essential work or essential purposes.

All retail and personal services can reopen from December 1st while the hospitality trade must wait until December 4th to reopen (subject to sector specific restrictions). Wet pubs may provide take-away and delivery services only.

The Government is also advising employers to ask staff to wear face masks in crowded workplaces.

This latest announcement should allow many business owners to get back trading during the busy end of year period. However, we expect tough HR decisions may need to be made next year as the fallout from the pandemic becomes more clear.

For instant answers to all your questions, contact Peninsula's HR and health & safety experts on 1890 252 923.

PENINSULA