

CORONAVIRUS (COVID-19)



Issue 10: 10 March 2021

(previous guidance is superseded by the most up-to-date issue)

Information and guidance issued by NIFRS regarding COVID-19 (Coronavirus) is correct at the time of issue. We will aim to keep updating our communications to reflect changing information from Public Health (for the purposes of this document this refers to Public Health Agency & Public Health England). However, this is an evolving situation and therefore you should also refer to the most up-to-date information and advice published on the [Public Health Agency website](https://www.pha.site/coronavirus) <https://www.pha.site/coronavirus> and the [NI Direct website](https://www.nidirect.gov.uk/campaigns/coronavirus-covid-19) <https://www.nidirect.gov.uk/campaigns/coronavirus-covid-19>

We are fully committed to protecting and educating our people to help prevent the spread of COVID-19 (Coronavirus). The following questions and answers have been developed to help inform you about important employment related issues in response to questions which you have been raising with us.

If you have any queries relating to COVID-19 that are not covered in this document please contact covid19recovery@nifrs.org

We continue to highlight the following 3 core messages:

1 Wellbeing	Your health and wellbeing is of primary importance – it is critical that we work together to protect everyone as the situation evolves. This will be at the forefront of our thinking as we make decisions and issue communications.
2 Personal Responsibility	We all have a responsibility, as employees and as citizens, to read and adhere to guidance on this matter – in particular Public Health guidance which is being updated regularly. This will continue to be our primary reference point going forward so, if in doubt, refer to public health guidance.
3 Flexibility	Mutual flexibility is very important as we work through this period – this is likely to include different ways of working and temporary policy/procedural amendments to enable us to respond in an agile way to evolving public health guidance.

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General information:

1 What are the signs and symptoms of COVID-19 (Coronavirus)?

1.1 The most common symptoms of COVID-19 (Coronavirus) are:

- a **high temperature** – this means you feel hot to touch on your chest or back (you do not need to measure your temperature); OR
- a **new, continuous cough** – this means coughing a lot for more than an hour, or 3 or more coughing episodes in 24 hours (if you usually have a cough, it may be worse than usual); OR
- a **loss of or change in sense of smell or taste**.

1.2 For most people, COVID-19 (Coronavirus) will be a mild infection. An online COVID-19 symptoms checker is available [here](#).

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Health, support and self-isolation:

2 My symptoms match those of COVID-19 (Coronavirus). What should I do? (updated 10 March 2021)

2.1 To prevent the possible spread of the virus you must not attend work. You must follow PHA guidance which is being regularly updated, see [Stay at home: Guidance for households with possible Coronavirus \(COVID-19\) infection](#)

The points below reflect guidance at the time of writing.

2.2 If you have symptoms of COVID-19 (Coronavirus), however mild, stay at home for **10 days** from when your symptoms started (see question 9 for further details regarding your absence).

2.3 If you live with others and one of them has symptoms of COVID-19 (Coronavirus), then all household members who are **without symptoms** must stay at home and not leave the house for **10 full days**. The 10-day period starts from the day when the first person in the house became ill.

2.4 It is likely that people living within a household will infect each other or be infected already. Staying at home for **10 days** will greatly reduce the overall amount of infection the household could pass on to others in the community.

2.5 For anyone in the household who starts displaying symptoms, they need to stay at home for **10 full days** from when the symptoms appeared, regardless of what day they are on in the original **10 day** isolation period.

2.6 If you can, move any vulnerable individuals (such as the elderly and those with underlying health conditions) out of your home, to stay with friends or family for the duration of the home isolation period.

2.7 If you cannot move vulnerable people out of your home, stay away from them as much as possible.

- 2.8 If you have coronavirus symptoms:
- 1 do **not** go to a GP surgery, pharmacy or hospital;
 - 2 you do not need to contact 111 to tell them you're staying at home;
 - 3 testing for COVID-19 (Coronavirus) is not needed if you're staying at home.
- 2.9 **You do not need to call NHS 111 to go into self-isolation.** If your symptoms worsen during home isolation or are no better after 7 days contact [NHS 111 online](#). If you have no internet access, you should call NHS 111. For a medical emergency dial 999.
- 2.10 You only need to contact your GP if you have an existing health condition, problems with your immune system, or have very serious symptoms.

3 When can I end self-isolation? (updated 10 March 2021)

- 3.1 If you have been symptomatic, then you may end your self-isolation after **10 days** if your symptoms have improved and you are feeling better. The **10 day** period starts from the day when you first became ill.
- 3.2 If living with others, household members who have no symptoms may end household-isolation after **10 days**. The **10-day** period starts from the day illness began in the first person. Fourteen days is the incubation period for COVID-19 (Coronavirus); people who remain well after **10 days** are unlikely to be infectious.
- 3.3 After **10 days**, if the first person to become ill feels better and no longer has a high temperature, they can return to their normal routine. If any other family members become unwell during the 10-day household-isolation period, they should follow the same advice – ie, after **10 days** of their symptoms starting, if they feel better and no longer have a high temperature, they can also return to their normal routine.
- 3.4 Should a household member develop COVID-19 (Coronavirus) symptoms late in the **10-day** household-isolation period (eg, on day 9 or day 10) **the**

isolation period does not need to be extended, but the person with the new symptoms has to stay at home for 10 full days. The 10-day household-isolation period will have greatly reduced the overall amount of infection the rest of the household could pass on, and it is not necessary to re-start 10 days of isolation for the whole household. This will have provided a high level of community protection. Further isolation of members of this household will provide very little additional community protection.

- 3.5 At the end of the 10-day period, any family member who has not become unwell can leave household isolation.
- 3.6 If any ill person in the household has not had any signs of improvement and have not already sought medical advice, they should contact [NHS 111 online](#) . If your home has no internet access, you should call NHS 111.
- 3.7 The cough may persist for several weeks in some people, despite the COVID-19 (Coronavirus) infection having cleared. A persistent cough alone does not mean someone must continue to self-isolate for more than 10 days.
- 3.8 If you have a positive diagnosis of COVID-19 (Coronavirus) you cannot return to work until a review is carried out with our Occupational Health Provider. This is to ensure your fitness or otherwise to return to work.

4 Will I be paid if I have to self-isolate without displaying symptoms?

- 4.1 You must contact your line manager and Silver Cell if you need to self-isolate in order to comply with PHA stay at home guidance (as per question 2 above) and provide the reason for self-isolation.
- 4.2 Alternative working arrangements will be considered in the first instance where it is possible to do so, eg, working from home. For

employees where this is not normally possible due to the nature of the role (eg, operational personnel) this will include allocation of different duties outside of your normal role.

4.3 We recognise we have a number of employees with underlying health conditions that will require particular vigilance at this time. We will consider whether adjustments can be made where practicable and for specific cases we may also need to seek occupational health advice. Please refer to questions 20 and 21 in this document for more details.

4.4 Special paid leave will be granted where alternatives/adjustments are not possible to ensure that self-isolation requirements are followed.

5 What if I begin to display symptoms of COVID-19 (Coronavirus) at work? (updated 10 March 2021)

5.1 If you are in work and you begin to display symptoms of COVID-19 (Coronavirus) **you should inform your line manager and Silver Cell immediately** and follow the PHA guidance at www.pha.site/Coronavirus.

5.2 You will be required to go home and asked to follow the stay at home guidance for people with confirmed or possible COVID-19 (Coronavirus) as set out in question 2 above.

5.3 If you are too unwell to travel home your line manager will make the appropriate arrangements.

6 What will happen if one of my work colleagues has had a positive diagnosis of COVID-19 (Coronavirus)?

6.1 If a confirmed case is identified in work, your line manager will follow guidance which has been issued to ensure all necessary actions are taken to prevent the spread of the virus. (This is set out in the manager's guidance 'Line Manager Workflow Process Following Confirmation of Positive COVID-19 Diagnosis'). A risk assessment will be completed and appropriate action will be taken which may include cleaning of the workplace.

- 6.2 You should only self-isolate if you or a member of your household have symptoms of COVID-19, a high temperature and/or a new continuous cough and/or a loss or changed sense of smell or taste. Otherwise you should continue to work. Keep following PHA guidance as normal (frequent, thorough hand washing and social distancing as far as possible).
- 6.3 If a work colleague has received a positive COVID-19 test result and you are deemed to be a close contact, you will be contacted by Silver Cell (NIFRS contact tracing team). See Question 17 for more information.

7 Where can I get support if I have concerns about my health?

- 7.1 You can find the latest advice at www.pha.site/Coronavirus. You should discuss your concerns with your line manager and your GP in the first instance particularly if there are circumstances which might put you at higher risk.
- 7.2 Remember access to Inspire Workplaces continues - Freephone telephone support line 0808 800 0002.

8 Is the flu vaccination available to employees? (new question 7 October 2020)

- 8.1 Flu occurs every year, usually in the winter. Sometimes flu can lead to serious illnesses or make existing conditions worse. The best way to protect yourself is to get the free seasonal flu vaccine if your GP offers you the vaccine. Certain groups are encouraged to get the vaccine and these are listed on the nidirect website.
<https://www.nidirect.gov.uk/articles/flu-vaccine-adults>
- 8.2 Additional vaccine has been secured to allow following groups to receive a free flu vaccination during the 2020/21 flu vaccination programme:

- household contacts of those who received shielding letters during the Covid-19 pandemic can request vaccination via their GP
- school children in year 8 (those who will be in the first year of secondary school from September 2020)

Subject to vaccine availability, the programme may be extended to include those in the 50-64 year old age group who are not in clinical risk groups, starting with the oldest first.

- 8.3 If you are unable to access a free flu vaccination through your GP, you can purchase the vaccination yourself and we will reimburse the cost of the vaccine up to a maximum of £20 on the production of a receipt. Claims must be submitted on form SC09(d) and you will be asked to confirm that the vaccine is for yourself and that you are not eligible for a free vaccine through your GP. Under current HMRC rules the claim is taxable. However, we are working with HMRC to seek agreement for a special arrangement which would make it tax free. We will provide further update once the tax status is confirmed by HMRC.

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Attendance Management:

9 If I contract COVID-19 (Coronavirus) and have to take time off work sick as a result, or if I have been required to stay at home because of possible COVID-19 (Coronavirus) infection, will it affect my sickness record?

- 9.1 No, in order to mitigate any risks of COVID-19 (Coronavirus) spreading across the Service it is important that infected (or potentially infected) people do not come into the workplace.
- 9.2 In order to further ensure compliance with public health guidance, you will be entitled to full sick pay for the period of absence related to COVID-19 (coronavirus) and it will not impact on your contractual sick pay entitlements.

- 9.3 Absence related to COVID-19 (Coronavirus) will not form part of any absence triggers, and will not be viewed as such in relation to your sickness absence record.

10 How do I report my absence?

10.1 COVID-19 (Coronavirus) absence should be reported in the normal way and will be recorded by your manager, using **specific register markings**, as follows:

- **CR:** COVID-19 Related Absence, eg, caring for a dependent
- **CI:** COVID-19 Self-isolation due to symptoms
- **CP:** COVID-19 Confirmed Positive, clinical diagnosis confirmed
- **CO:** COVID-19 Self-isolation due to household member with symptoms
- **CV:** COVID-19 Increased risk of severe illness in line with PHA guidance (determined by occupational health)

The markings will only be used to monitor and report on the impact of absence across the Service.

10.2 **In addition to the normal reporting, you must also phone 028 9266 4221 to report absence.** This will enable NIFRS to take action to manage shortfalls across the Service. You will be asked to provide the following information:

- Name and Service Number;
- Station/Department location;
- Reason for absence;
- Anticipated period of absence;
- Contact details.

This information will be passed on to the HR COVID Advice team who will then be in contact with you, normally within 48 hours, to discuss your absence and provide advice in line with PHA guidance.

You must also phone **028 9266 4221** to report that your absence has ended.

11 What medical evidence is required during the COVID-19 (coronavirus) period? (updated 3 July 2020)

- 11.1 Under normal rules you can self-certify your sickness absence for the first 7 calendar days before needing to obtain a GP 'Fit Note'.
- 11.2 If you are absent from work **because you are sick or symptomatic** due to COVID-19 you can submit a self-certificate to cover your absence, there is no requirement for a GP 'Fit Note.'
- 11.3 Certification for all other sickness absence which is not related to COVID-19 (coronavirus) should follow the usual process, i.e. self-certificate for up to and including 7 days and a GP fit note for subsequent periods.
- 11.4 If you are absent from work because you are self-isolating as someone in the household has COVID-19, you do not need to submit a self-certificate to cover your absence.

12 What are the arrangements for agency workers or secondees from other organisations? (updated 10 March 2021)

Please note temporary measures are in place for agency workers during these exceptional circumstances. They will remain under review as the situation develops and may be withdrawn or amended

- 12.1 All of our workers are critical to ensure continued service delivery at this time. We want to ensure that everyone is facilitated to follow guidance regarding COVID-19 (coronavirus).

- 12.2 If you are an agency worker and you develop symptoms of COVID-19 (coronavirus) at work you should report this to your manager **and Silver Cell** within NIFRS and follow the advice for NIFRS employees within this guide. You must also contact your employment agency.
- 12.3 You will be provided with full pay if you are unwell due to COVID-19 (coronavirus).
- 12.4 If you are self-isolating without symptoms, or are absent due to being in a vulnerable category, homeworking will be arranged and full pay will be provided.
- 12.5 If you are absent due to caring responsibilities homeworking will be arranged if possible. If this is not possible special leave may be considered as for NIFRS employees.
- 12.6 If you are on secondment to NIFRS and are absent due to COVID-19 (coronavirus) you must report your absence to your manager in the normal way. You should also contact your parent organisation and follow their absence management procedures.

Testing and Tracing:

13 Will I be tested for COVID-19 (coronavirus)? (updated 3 July 2020)

- 13.1 If you are displaying symptoms of COVID-19 (coronavirus) arrangements will be made for you to be tested at the earliest opportunity. If you have arranged a test yourself, you must ensure to notify your line manager and Silver Cell of the test result as soon as this is received.
- 13.2 If you are self-isolating due to a member of your household displaying symptoms of COVID-19 (coronavirus), the individual will be offered the opportunity to be tested at the earliest opportunity. If the test is negative

you can return to work immediately. If the test is positive you will need to continue to self-isolate in line with the stay at home guidance above.

14 What happens if my test for COVID-19 (coronavirus) is positive? (updated 7 October 2020)

- 14.1 If your test for COVID-19 is positive your details will be passed to the Public Health Agency and a representative from Public Health Agency will contact you to obtain details of recent household and community contacts you have had and also provide advice on any requirements for self-isolation amongst your household contacts.
- 14.2 If, as a consequence, you are advised by Public Health to self-isolate for **10 days** you must do so. It is important you notify your line manager and Silver Cell as soon as possible and Occupational Health will then be contacted.
- 14.3 If your test is positive, you can return to work on day 11 if you have not had a temperature for 2 days and you feel well enough to return to work. If a cough, or a loss of or change in sense of smell or taste, is the only persistent symptom on day 11, you can still return to work. A telephone review with OHP will also be arranged before your return to work.

15 What happens if my test for COVID-19 (coronavirus) is negative? (updated 7 October 2020)

- 15.1 If the test is negative, you can return to work immediately provided you feel well enough to do so and have not had a temperature for 48 hours. Unless otherwise contacted by the PHA's contact tracing service as a contact of a confirmed COVID-19 case, see question 16.

16 What happens if I am notified by the PHA's contact tracing service that I am a contact of a confirmed COVID-19 case? (updated 7 October 2020)

16.1 The Public Health Agency has established a contact tracing service to minimise community transmission of COVID-19. It is designed to ensure that anyone who develops symptoms of COVID-19 can quickly be tested to find out if they have the virus. It also helps to trace close recent contacts of anyone who tests positive for COVID-19 and, if necessary, notify them that they should self-isolate at home to help stop the spread of the virus.

16.2 If you have had close recent contact with someone who has COVID-19, you will be contacted by a representative from the Public Health Agency. **Close contact excludes circumstances where PPE is being worn in accordance with current guidance.** If as a consequence you are advised by Public Health to self-isolate for **10 days** you must do so. You must continue to self-isolate even if you receive a negative test result when you were not displaying any symptoms. It is important you notify your line manager, Silver Cell and Occupational Health as soon as possible. Where you can work from home you should do so (see question 4 regarding self-isolation).

16.3 This highlights the need for social distancing in the workplace (see question 18 below). If you do not follow social distancing, it increases the likelihood of a colleague being named as a contact and more people from your team potentially having to self-isolate. This could have a significant impact on public safety.

17 If I have been notified that I am a contact of a confirmed COVID-19 case who is also a work colleague, what do I do? (new question 3 December 2020)

17.1 If a work colleague has received a positive COVID-19 test result and you are deemed to be a close contact, you will be contacted by Silver Cell (NIFRS contact tracing team).

- 17.2 The same guidance applies as if you are named as a community contact (see question 16).
- 17.3 Close contact excludes circumstances where PPE is being worn in accordance with current guidance on infection prevention and control.
- 17.4 If you are advised to self-isolate you must do so. Where you can be facilitated to work from home you should do so.
- 17.5 This highlights the need for social distancing in the workplace (see question 18 below). If you do not follow social distancing, it increases the likelihood of a colleague being named as a contact and more people from your team potentially having to self-isolate. This could have a significant impact on public safety.
- 17.6 Those who have been identified as a close contact of a confirmed case, or who are required to quarantine following their return from a higher risk country, must continue to self-isolate even if they receive a negative test result.

18 Do I need to wear a face mask in work? (new question 3 December 2020)

- 18.1 As an emergency service provider it is vital that everyone in the Service takes personal responsibility to reduce the risk of transmission of the virus in work.
- 18.2 Wearing a face mask may also prevent the need to self-isolate due to being considered a close contact.
- 18.3 As we are now conducting workplace tracking and tracing, it is mandatory for everyone to wear **Type IIR face masks**:
- when transiting common areas in buildings
 - if social distancing is not possible for aspects of your work

- if travelling in a car/van with anyone (this must be avoided unless absolutely necessary)
- if operational guidance requires a face mask (eg, when travelling in an appliance). NOTE: you should only remain in an appliance whilst it is mobile and you must exit the vehicle immediately once you have reached your destination).

If in doubt, wear a face mask.

19 How does the StopCOVID NI app affect me while in work? (updated 3 December 2020)

- 19.1 The StopCOVID NI app has been launched to speed up the process of contact tracing, particularly for close contact with someone who is not known to you. At present, the app does not link to the contact tracing service directly. Once someone has a positive test, manual contact tracing will be initiated. The app will operate in parallel, encouraging 'high risk' contacts that might have been missed otherwise, to get tested.
- 19.2 The app will identify individuals who meet the PHA definition for a 'close contact' (contact for more than 15 minutes in duration within a distance of 2 metres or less), however it obviously cannot account for whether other control measures have been in place at time such as use of appropriate PPE.
- 19.3 The PHA's manual contract tracing service considers mitigations and control measure that are in place such as the use of PPE and face coverings. These measures are considered to effectively reduce the risk of infection therefore the manual tracing service would **not define those individuals as 'close contacts'** and **would not require follow up action.**
- 19.4 PHA guidance states that if you work somewhere that uses social distancing and added safety measures (such as PPE), you can disable the app while working. This is because the app does not know you have extra protection from close contact in this scenario, so disabling it will **avoid 'false' contact notifications.**

19.5 Therefore, when you are in the workplace and are following operational guidance regarding the appropriate use of PPE and following the control measures in place, **you must disable Bluetooth** on your phones temporarily (the app can be paused and a reminder set to turn it on again – for further information see <https://www.nidirect.gov.uk/sites/default/files/publications/StopCOVIDNI-app-easy-explainer-guide.pdf>)

The app can be paused because you are complying with PPE or other control measures and it is essential to **prevent false notifications** of close contact through the app. Bluetooth capabilities should be switched on again, once you have left these environments.

20 What happens if I am notified by the StopCOVID NI app that I am a contact of a confirmed COVID-19 case? (new question 13 August 2020)

20.1 If you receive a notification through the app you must contact your line manager and Silver Cell immediately to discuss this and the appropriate steps to take.

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Social Distancing in the Workplace

21 How will social distancing be handled in the workplace? (updated 10 March 2021)

21.1 Social distancing measures are steps you can take to reduce the social interaction between people to help reduce the transmission of COVID-19 (coronavirus).

21.2 Social distancing (along with other measures including wearing PPE and ensuring good hygiene) is even more important in order to ensure that you are not identified as being in close contact with anyone who has received a positive test result.

- 21.3 In line with public health guidance we will continue to enable you to work from home where possible in your role. This will not be possible for the majority of our operational personnel who are carrying out critical roles to continue to protect our community.
- 21.4 When you are in the workplace you must ensure that you remain **2 metres** apart as much as possible. This will minimise the risk of you being identified as having been in close contact with a positive case of COVID-19 (coronavirus). It is recognised that it will not be possible to achieve this at all times when carrying out some operational tasks. In such circumstances you must follow guidance in relation to any other measures you need to take to prevent the spread of infection, eg, handwashing, use of PPE as per operational guidance.
- 21.5 In office environments this may include spreading individuals across available offices or working alternative shift patterns.
- 21.6 Employees are reminded that the 2 metre rule also applies during rest breaks and meal times. An IIR Mask should be worn at all times during rest breaks, including during food preparation and masks should only be removed when consuming food or drink at a safe 2 metres distance.

22 Am I permitted to share a vehicle with an NIFRS Colleagues during the COVID pandemic (new question 10 March 2021)

- 22.1 Employees should avoid sharing a vehicle with an NIFRS colleague if at all possible.
- 22.2 Current restrictions on car sharing do not apply when car sharing is necessary as part of your work as this is identified as being exempt under the Government guidelines e.g. when travelling together in an appliance.

- 22.3 An IIR mask must be worn at all times when travelling in an appliance. Drivers may dynamically risk assess the wearing of IIR masks where there is a risk the drivers vision is likely to become impaired.
- 22.4 In relation to vehicle sharing when not traveling in an appliance careful consideration should be given to what other options are available to avoid car sharing being required. If it is deemed essential to travel together then face coverings/masks must be worn at all times. However and you should ensure that car sharing takes place only when absolutely necessary.
- 22.5 In circumstances that it is deemed essential to vehicle share, employees should contact their line manager and obtain approval in advance.

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Underlying Health Conditions

23 What if I have an underlying health condition?

- 23.1 The current Public Health England advice is that those who are at increased risk of severe illness from COVID-19 (coronavirus) should be **particularly stringent in following social distancing measures.**
- 23.2 Advice is available at [PHA Guidance for Staying alert and safe \(social distancing\)](#).
- 23.3 If you have an underlying medical condition, as outlined in the Public Health guidance link, which may put you at an increased risk of severe illness from COVID-19 (coronavirus), you must inform your line manager and notify Human Resources by e-mailing occhealth@nifrs.org
- 23.4 Information provided should state the nature of your condition, prescribed medication and your contact details. This will enable consideration to be given to your specific circumstances. [PHA Guidance for Staying alert and safe \(social distancing\)](#).

23.5 If you have been required to self isolate in line with NIFRS Occupational Health advice, this will be kept under review and you will be contacted by a member of HR regarding any changes.

24 **What is the guidance for those with SEVERE underlying medical conditions? (updated 7 October 2020)**

24.1 Expert doctors in England have identified specific medical conditions that, based on what we know about the virus so far, place someone at greatest risk of severe illness from COVID-19.

24.2 It is important to protect people who are clinically vulnerable by minimising all interaction between significantly vulnerable people and others. We are therefore strongly advising people with serious underlying health conditions, which put them at very high risk of severe illness from COVID-19 (coronavirus), to rigorously follow protective measures in order to keep themselves safe.

24.3 Employees with underlying health conditions that present highest risk factors were advised to rigorously follow **shielding measures** in order to keep themselves safe. After 31 July 2020 shielding was no longer a requirement and a return to work was therefore possible on the basis that a risk assessment is carried out and their place of work is COVID-safe.

24.4 We have issued specific guidance on returning to work following shielding for line managers and employees and this is available on the COVID-hub.

24.5 Please continue to follow the [PHA Guidance on Shielding for Extremely Vulnerable People](#).

24.6 In all circumstances managers will work closely with employees to understand the risks in relation to their condition(s), and how it affects their particular job role and duties, seeking Occupational Health advice.

25 I fall into the category of clinically extremely vulnerable and have received a letter stating that I am clinically extremely vulnerable and should remain at home from 26 December 2020. (new question 10 March 2021)

- 25.1 For a definition of CEV, please follow this link [Clinically Extremely Vulnerable \(CEV\)](#).
- 25.2 **'From 26 December CEV people who are working and are unable to do so from home are advised not to attend the workplace.'** However, it is important to note that this is advice only; people are free to make their own judgements about whether or not they should attend work, depending upon the safety measures in place within your working environment.
- 25.3 The Chief Medical Officer will write to CEV people to advise of this change and pending receipt of the new letter, people can use their original CEV letters as evidence.
- 25.4 This is not a return to shielding as it was previously. CEV people are not being advised to stay permanently indoors, and are encouraged to continue to go outside for exercise, provided they observe social distancing when they do so.
- 25.5 This advice applies to clinically extremely vulnerable individuals only. Others living in a household with someone who is clinically extremely vulnerable are not advised to follow it, but should continue to stringently follow the organisational guidance on PPE, social distancing, face masks and hand hygiene.
- 25.6 This is currently in place until 1 April 2021 with a review to take place on 18 March 2021.

26 If I am considered clinically extremely vulnerable and cannot work from home due to the nature of my job role what should I do? (new question 10 March 2021)

- 26.1 If you are unable to work from home due to the nature of your job role, you may be asked to carry out alternative duties that can be facilitated at home.
- 26.2 As a matter of urgency, we are asking all employees who are defined as CEV to contact Silver Cell immediately and HR will then contact you to discuss your individual circumstances and provide assistance.
- 26.3 If you have received one of the 'CEV' letters, you should notify your line manager in the first instance.

27 I am over 70 years old, should I still be coming into work? (new question 10 March 2021)

- 27.1 In the same way that staff who had been "shielding" can return to the workplace from 01 August 2020, staff who are over 70 years of age who have been away from the workplace, can return to the workplace providing a risk assessment has been carried out by the line manager and their place of work is COVID-19 safe.
- 27.2 You will be encouraged to be as open and honest as possible including discussing any concerns you may have about returning/remaining in work. An action plan will be completed to reduce risks within the workplace as far as reasonably practicable. Your manager may also seek further advice from Occupational Health. If staff over 70 years of age can work from home they should do so.
- 27.3 If you have any concerns in relation to how the above arrangements might affect you please contact your line manager in the first instance.

28 What steps are being taken to protect Black Asian Minority Ethnic (BAME) staff? (new question 10 March 2021)

- 28.1 A UK level inquiry has been launched to understand why people from BAME backgrounds appear to be disproportionately affected by coronavirus. There is as yet no UK or local guidance on whether BAME staff are vulnerable to more severe COVID-19. At present we are presuming there is vulnerability because of data observed. This is a precautionary step.
- 28.2 If you have any concerns in relation to the data presented for those in the BAME category and how this might affect you please contact your line manager in the first instance.

29 What is the projected roll out of the vaccine for NIFRS employees? (new question 10 March 2021)

- 29.1 Everyone over the age of 18 years will ultimately be offered a COVID-19 vaccination in Northern Ireland. NIFRS employees do not currently have prioritisation in the roll out of COVID-19 roll out process.
- 29.2 The Joint Committee on Vaccination and Immunisation (JCVI) are the independent experts who advise the Government on which vaccine/s the UK should use and provide advice on who should be offered the vaccination first.
- 29.3 JCVI guidance has identified the first priority groups to be care home residents and staff, health and social care workers and those over 80 years of age who will be offered the vaccine first.
- 29.4 It is anticipated that further priority groups based on age and clinical vulnerability factors will be added to those eligible to receive the new COVID-19 vaccinations as supplies increase in 2021.

30 Can I get the vaccine during working hours? (new question 4 March 2021)

- 30.1 Employees should aim to take appointments outside of working hours if at all possible.
- 30.2 When it is not possible to take appointments outside of working hours where possible these should be arranged at the most appropriate times during the day, to cause minimum disruption to services.
- 30.3 Employees should work with managers to agree their attendance for vaccination during working hours to ensure the Service Delivery is maintained at all times.

31 Do I have to disclose to my manager if I have had the vaccine or not? (new question 10 March 2021)

- 31.1 This information will be gathered as part of the recording of the details regarding the uptake of vaccinations at the relevant vaccination centres.
- 31.2 Whilst we appreciate that this vaccination is not mandatory, it would be recommended that employees disclose to their appropriate manager when they have received the vaccination. This will allow for the support of employees who have had the vaccination, in the event of any reactions to this.

32 I got the COVID-19 vaccine does this mean I am no longer considered clinically extremely vulnerable and do not need to follow the guidance issued to clinically extremely vulnerable people? (new question 10 March 2021)

- 32.1 The Government is advising that the advice issued to clinically extremely vulnerable people from the Chief Medical Officer remains unchanged, regardless of whether or not they have been vaccinated. This is because, while a full course of the vaccine will reduce your chance of becoming seriously ill with Covid-19, we do not yet know whether it will stop you from catching and passing on the virus.

33 If I get the vaccine will I have to stop working from home? (new question 10 March 2021)

- 33.1 The safety measures in place within NIFRS to stop the spread of COVID-19 including supporting Clinically Extremely Vulnerable (CEV) employees with homeworking arrangements will continue during the vaccination programmes and until formally stood down.

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Pregnancy

34 If I am pregnant can I come into work? (updated 10 March 2021)

- 34.1 If you are pregnant, or think you may be pregnant, you must inform your line manager immediately and a referral to Occupational Health will be arranged. A risk assessment will be carried out in all cases. The Royal College of Obstetricians & Gynaecologists (RCOG) published updated guidance for pregnancy. We will continue to review this as updates are provided.
- 34.2 The RCOG guidance advises that, subject to taking social distancing precautions, pregnant women under 28 weeks with no underlying medical conditions can continue to work. Where possible, alternative working arrangements, ie, home working, will be facilitated.
- 34.3 Pregnant women over 28 weeks and those with underlying conditions, should take a more precautionary approach. If you are in this category you are required to stay at home. Where possible alternative work will be agreed with your line manager. If this is not possible you will receive full pay under Covid 19 special leave arrangements and you will continue to accrue annual and statutory leave entitlements. Your maternity leave will then start at week 36 in accordance with legislation.
- 34.4 Line managers (in conjunction with occupational health where necessary) should use the available guidance as appropriate given the context at hand for individuals, eg, gestation, maternal medical history and health status, nature of role, etc.

- 34.5 As soon as a staff member informs you they are pregnant you should conduct - New and Expectant Mothers risk assessment and a specific COVID-19 risk assessment. It will be important to consider reasonable measures to minimise the risk of exposure to the virus, including providing suitable alternative work on the same terms and conditions.

Caring responsibilities:

Please click here for a summary of school guidance relating to COVID-19 (coronavirus) <G:\Covid-19\Covid-19 Communications for NIFRS Employees\Childcare Advice for Parents>. A letter from the Chief Medical Officer to parents / carers of school children is also available, please click the link [CMO Letter](#)

35 My child is showing symptoms of COVID-19 (coronavirus). What do I do? (updated 10 March 2021)

- 35.1 You should take the same approach as with any member of your household showing symptoms of COVID-19:
- Your child should be tested if they have symptoms of COVID-19 (coronavirus). Children should not be tested unless they are showing symptoms of COVID-19 (coronavirus). We can make arrangements for testing.
 - Everyone in the household should self-isolate for **10 full days**.
 - The **10 day** period starts from the day after the first person (child) in the house becomes ill.
 - If anyone else in the household develops symptoms, they can arrange to be tested. If their test is positive, they need to self-isolate for **10 days**.
- 35.2 If your child's test result is negative after they were displaying COVID-19 symptoms and they have not had a temperature for 48 hours, this will enable you to return to work earlier than the **10 day** isolation period i.e. an immediate return to work provided that:
- you are not displaying any COVID-like symptoms yourself
 - you are not a close contact of a confirmed case

- everyone you live with who has symptoms of COVID-19 has tested negative
- You feel well enough, and have not had a raised temperature for at least 48 hours.

36 My child is a close contact of a positive COVID-19 (coronavirus) What do I do? (updated 10 March 2021)

36.1 You must follow PHA advice if you have been contacted by the PHA through their contact tracing team.

36.2 If your child has a COVID-19 test which is negative, or you have been advised by the PHA through the contact tracing team that your child needs to self-isolate, then your child must still isolate for the **10 day** incubation period as COVID-19 symptoms may appear in any of those **10 days**.

37 One of the other students in my child's class, their 'protective bubble', is now COVID-19 positive. My child is not displaying any COVID-19 symptoms but has been sent home to self-isolate for 10 days. What does this mean and can I still come to work? (updated 10 March 2021)

37.1 If your child is not symptomatic, but is required to isolate for **10 days** due to contact with the person who tested positive for COVID-19, the rest of the household **do not need to isolate** (unless they have also been in contact with the person who tested positive) and can **continue to attend work**.

37.2 PHA guidance states that only symptomatic children should be tested.

37.3 Isolation of the whole household would only happen if the child or another member of the household becomes symptomatic or tests positive for COVID-19.

38 Will I be able to work more flexibly if I have caring responsibilities and these are impacted by COVID-19 (coronavirus)? (new Question 7 October 2020)

38.1 We are committed to ensuring that we look after our people in these unprecedented times and that includes being as flexible as possible when supporting those who are trying to balance work and caring responsibilities. We will do all we can to offer as much flexibility, compassion and understanding while balanced with meeting service delivery needs.

38.2 Please talk to your line manager if you are experiencing difficulties in relation to any caring responsibilities. We recognise that this could arise at short notice if a school closes or a class is required to self-isolate. Your line manager will try to ascertain and agree with you what alternative working arrangements could apply, for example:

- using annual leave/TOIL
- working outside your normal shift pattern
- working from home where your role allows this
- shift swaps as set out within the Crewing Framework
- use of other forms of leave may be considered by completing Form SC50
- in an emergency situation, and where no other alternatives are available, use of Emergency Leave, in line with current policy for operational personnel.

39 My partner is a Health & Social Care worker and has to work outside their normal shift pattern. This is creating difficulties for our normal childcare arrangements. What provision will be made in these circumstances? (updated 7 October 2020)

39.1 We are committed to fully supporting our NHS through this pandemic and this includes providing whatever flexibility we can while still providing our emergency service.

39.2 Your line manager will try to ascertain and agree with you what alternative working arrangements could apply, and these are set out in the question 28 above.

39.3 NIFRS workers are also keyworkers and therefore can avail of Department of Education provisions for keyworkers (see question 29).

40 I may have real childminding difficulties if classes are sent home or schools need to close due to COVID-19 (coronavirus). What provision will be made for employees in these circumstances? (updated 7 October 2020)

40.1 It is hoped that the re-opening of schools on a full time basis will enable you to continue to work if you have caring responsibilities for children. We recognise that this is a changing situation which the government will keep under review and that further changes could arise in the future depending on the spread of the virus.

40.2 If for any reason you anticipate any difficulties with childcare at any time you should contact your manager as soon as possible. This is to enable discussions to take place well in advance with a view to agreeing the best solution for your particular circumstances. Where possible you should try and put alternative arrangements for childcare in place. Alternative working arrangements may also be considered, however, this will not be possible for a number of our people.

40.3 If, despite having made all possible efforts, you cannot arrange alternative childcare or work alternative working patterns or times, other

leave arrangements will be considered including, annual leave or a period of special leave. Employees can make an application for special leave through their line manager using the SC50. This situation will be kept under review.

41 Are there any other arrangements to support keyworkers with childcare difficulties?

41.1 The Department of Health has announced a Home Childcare Scheme to allow parents to have their children cared for in their own home. For the duration of the COVID-19 pandemic, a bespoke version of the approved Home Childcare Scheme has been set up which will enable key workers to be temporarily matched with one of their children's current day care workers.

41.2 You can find out more at [Approved Home Care Scheme for Key Workers](#)

Redeployment:

42 Am I likely to be redeployed?

42.1 Services during the pandemic may be reduced to the provision of essential services only. Some services could be suspended. Depending on your existing skills and competencies, you may be redeployed to ensure the provision of essential services. NIFRS has requested volunteers and these will be utilised in the first instance.

42.2 You may be requested to relocate as necessary, taking your personal and health circumstances into account and ensuring terms and conditions are adhered to including excess mileage.

42.3 In order to ensure services continue to be provided you may be allocated tasks outside of your normal role rather than being fully redeployed. This will be dependent on your skills and competencies.

43 If I am to be redeployed, I am worried about how I will know what to do in a different role. Will I receive training?

43.1 Consideration will be given to what is reasonable redeployment and necessary induction and relevant training will take place to enable you to take on different duties.

43.2 Please be assured that you will only be asked to take on tasks within your competence. Where you are working outside your normal role, you should be very mindful of the need to work within your scope of competence and not undertake work which you are not trained or competent to do.

44 If I, as a result of agreed temporary redeployment, am undertaking work of a lower grade, will my terms and conditions be protected and will I receive mileage expenses?

44.1 Yes, your terms and conditions will be protected if you work in another area during your contracted hours and you will receive mileage payments as appropriate.

Homeworking

45 Is there any guidance available to help me when working from home?

45.1 Working from home requires us to think differently about how we approach our work. Some of us will be trying to balance home working with other responsibilities. 'Healthy Working At Home' guidance was issued (service circular 31/20) to help you transition to home working and look after your wellbeing.

- 45.2 If you are required to work from home you must follow NIFRS IT security requirements and records management guidance management guidance which can be found on the COVID-19 hub on global.

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Your Concerns

46 I have to remain in work because of my role but I am afraid I might get infected with COVID-19 (coronavirus) and pass it on to someone in my home who is in a vulnerable category. What provisions can be made?

- 46.1 We are mindful of the increased anxiety levels of our people during this pandemic and that everyone is fearful of putting vulnerable members of their household at risk.
- 46.2 You can find information on how to protect vulnerable people you live with at [PHA Guidance for Staying alert and safe \(social distancing\)](#).
- 46.3 If you live with an extremely vulnerable person you should follow the guidance at [PHA Guidance on Shielding for Extremely Vulnerable People](#)
- 46.4 NIFRS will support individuals in these circumstances to identify temporary alternative accommodation on a case by case basis. This may include consideration of family and friends in the first instance, or accommodation identified by NIFRS.

47 I have been in contact with a work colleague who is now self-isolating. I have no COVID-19 (coronavirus) symptoms. What should I do?

- 47.1 Public health guidance is that you should only self-isolate if you have symptoms of COVID-19 (coronavirus) yourself, ie, a high temperature, a new continuous cough or a loss of sense of taste and smell. Otherwise you should continue to work.

47.2 Keep following PHA guidance as normal (eg, frequent, thorough hand washing and social distancing as far as possible).

47.3 If you develop symptoms follow the guidance set out in question 2 above. Where testing is available to NIFRS, arrangements can be made for you to be tested if you develop symptoms.

48 A member of my household is a keyworker within Health and Social Care (HSC). I am concerned about increased risk of the spread of the virus if I attend work. What should I do?

48.1 If a member of your household works in HSC, they will receive guidance from the Trust regarding the precautions they need to take to protect those in their household.

48.2 In addition to the above, Health Trusts are currently exploring alternative accommodation options with their employees where it is possible to do so.

48.3 You should therefore continue to work unless you develop symptoms of COVID-19 (coronavirus) yourself.

49 Are there contingency arrangements in place to ensure that I continue to get paid?

49.1 Yes, ensuring that payroll can be maintained during the pandemic is a critical service. Contingency plans are in place to ensure that everyone is paid should there be a reduced capacity due to COVID-19 (coronavirus).

50 I am working from home, can I claim costs associated with electricity, heat and broadband?

50.1 You may be able to claim tax relief for some of the bills you have to pay because you have to work at home on a regular basis. You cannot claim tax relief if you choose to work from home. From April 2020 the rate is up

to £6 a week (£26 per month) to cover **additional** costs. For previous tax years the rate is £4 a week (£18 a month).

- 50.2 You can only claim for things to do with your work, for example, business telephone calls or the extra cost of gas and electricity for your work area. You cannot claim for things that you use for both private and business use, for example, rent or broadband access.
- 50.3 Employees should seek guidance from HMRC as necessary - claims are made through a [P87 form](#).

Annual Leave

51 I have annual leave booked — will my annual leave be cancelled?

- 51.1 It is not currently anticipated that we will be unable to facilitate leave being taken during the year. However, due to the unpredictable nature of the pandemic over the next number of months if staffing levels are depleted we may need to review those who have been granted annual leave and ask them to change arrangements if possible. Therefore we would ask you to continue to be flexible in terms of leave/statutory leave arrangements.
- 51.2 Normal annual leave carry-over arrangements can be relaxed due to the exceptional circumstances i.e. if leave cannot be taken due to COVID-19.
- 51.3 You should discuss your leave arrangements with your line manager and if you can postpone or cancel your arrangements in the immediate term that will significantly assist with service delivery.

52 Can I ask to cancel planned annual leave?

- 52.1 It is important you to continue taking annual leave, in order to maintain your own physical and mental wellbeing to sustain them over the next number of months of the pandemic. This is equally important for you if you have been working at home during COVID-19 as you will still need to rest from work.

- 52.2 You are therefore reminded of your responsibility to ensure annual leave is taken. For operational employees this must be in line with specified audit periods, ensuring that summer and allocated leave is also taken as outlined within NIFRS Crewing Level Framework, where possible, while ensuring crewing levels are maintained.
- 52.3 While we anticipate the current carried forward leave arrangements will be sufficient, under new measures introduced by the Government, employees who cannot take all their holiday entitlement **due to COVID19** will be able to carry over some of it into the next 2 leave years. This change to the Working Time Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2016 Legislation will ensure no one will lose annual leave that they have been unable to take as a result of the COVID19 outbreak. However, any carry over leave must be approved in line with normal process and **must be due to the organisation not being able to grant annual leave due to the pandemic or exceptional circumstances. It is not currently anticipated that we will be unable to facilitate leave being taken during the year.**
- 52.4 NIFRS will continue to take account of individual circumstances including the needs of the service, the impact on relevant teams and the unpredictable nature of the pandemic over the next number of months.

53 I am working at home, do I need to take annual leave? (updated 3 July 2020)

- 53.1 It is important for you to take annual leave if you have been working at home during COVID-19 as you still need to rest from work in order to maintain your own physical and mental wellbeing.
- 53.2 If you are working from home while on a CO, CV or CR register marking you will still be required to take periods of annual leave. All operational employees on these register markings will need to take public holidays as annual leave and will not be required to work on these days (support

employees will be considered to have taken the public holiday as normal). Those on CI or CP register markings will be treated as sick on a public holiday in line with normal sickness procedures.

53.3 If you are shielding you will continue to accrue annual leave in line with your contractual entitlements. This does not apply to any public holidays which fall during the duration of the shielding period, which are not accrued.

53.4 If you are working from home whilst shielding you are encouraged to take annual leave to ensure you have some rest and down time. If you are not able to work whilst shielding, accrued leave can be taken, by agreement, on return to work, subject to the needs of the service. COVID-19 carry forward leave arrangements will also apply.

54 What do I need to consider if I travel outside of the UK? (updated 10 March 2021)

54.1 On 8 June 2020 new rules for entering or returning to the UK outside of the Common Travel Area (CTA) became law.

If you are arriving into Northern Ireland from within the Common Travel Area and you plan to remain here for at least 24 hours, public health advice is that you should self-isolate upon arrival for 10 days, unless you are exempt. Further information on exemptions is available at [Coronavirus \(COVID-19\): travel within Common Travel Area | nidirect](#)

54.2 The current Government advice continues to be that **you should not travel abroad unless it is deemed essential**. This advice is being kept under review.

54.3 If you do need to travel abroad for an essential reason in the coming weeks and months ahead **you must contact your line manager immediately** to discuss your travel arrangements and to seek approval for the additional leave from work that will be required if a **10 day** quarantine period applies following your return to the UK.

54.4 If you are required to self-isolate for **10 days** upon your return to the UK (government guidance on this is under review and you will need to check this) **you must not attend work**. This is to ensure you do not place others at risk. Whilst there are some exceptions to this rule, which are set out in government guidance there are no exceptions to this rule if you are travelling for personal reasons or if you have symptoms of coronavirus <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/coronavirus-covid-19-travellers-exempt-from-uk-border-rules>.

54.5 Please be aware that knowingly failing to adhere to self-isolation requirements will be considered a very serious matter which could lead to disciplinary action. Under the Health Protection (Coronavirus, International Travel) Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2020 you could also be subject to a £1000 fine if you leave the location where you are self-isolating.

54.6 Based on the fact that travel abroad should only be for essential reasons, it is not anticipated that many employees will need to seek approval for the additional quarantine period. Decisions on how leave will be treated in such circumstances will be made by the relevant Area Commander/Head of Service. In the first instance you will be asked to use a form of leave to cover this self-isolation period unless your role is suitable for homeworking. Individual circumstances will be taken into account when making decisions on this, while also seeking to meet the needs of the Service and our community at this unprecedented time.

55 How will NIFRS ensure everyone complies with COVID Guidance? (new question 3 December 2020)

55.1 We recognise that everyone has been working extremely hard to help minimise the spread of the virus both in the workplace and the community. We continue to liaise with the Public Health Agency to do all that we can as an employer to manage this with your help. Our liaison with the PHA has highlighted the need for everyone complying fully with COVID related guidance **at all times**, ie, both in the workplace and in our

personal lives. If we don't act responsibly at all times this could endanger others – our work colleagues, our family and friends and the public.

55.2 To help clarify this we regularly communicate actions which everyone needs to comply fully with. Examples of non-compliance include:

- Non-adherence to self-isolation guidelines, as communicated to them by NIFRS Silver Cell through our contact tracing process, the PHA, the StopCOVID NI App or our Occupational Health Provider
- Attending the workplace when symptomatic
- Failure to adhere to social distancing measures in the workplace
- Failure to wear PPE in line with applicable relevant guidance subject to any relevant exemptions agreed with Occupational Health.

55.3 Unfortunately if it is considered that individuals have not complied with COVID requirements, fact finding will be carried out and appropriate action taken to address any concerns. This may include formal investigation in line with NIFRS Disciplinary Policy.

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And finally, some important immediate actions for everyone:

- Notify Human Resources immediately if you believe you are at increased risk of severe illness from Coronavirus (COVID-19) by e-mailing OccHealth@nifrs.org
- Read and adhere to NIFRS and public health guidance and communications;
- Make sure the contact information we hold for you is up-to-date. If any details have changed, submit an updated SC45 and SC45a form to Human Resources immediately.

CORONAVIRUS (COVID-19)

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