

Return to work guidance from LEEF forum

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A guidance note on the updated Work Safely Protocol from the Labour Employer Economic Forum (LEEF) sets out several factors that should be taken into account if returning to the workplace.

The guidance note was issued by the LEEF Consultative Group, which was established to oversee implementation of the Work Safely Protocol and includes Ibec, CIF, ICTU, SIPTU, HSA, HSE, and the Government Departments of: Health; Enterprise, Trade and Employment; Agriculture, Food and Marine; and Taoiseach.

The guidance note says that “a cautious and careful return to workplaces should take into account:

- appropriate attendance levels, cognisant of public health guidance as reflected in the Work Safely Protocol and associated checklist(s);
- the use of staggered arrangements, such as non-fulltime attendance and flexible working hours, and
- that attendance is for specific business requirements”.

It adds: “The interpretation of this guidance will depend on the specific circumstances of each workplace and should be informed by consultations with workers.”

WORKER REPS

Almost half of the guidance note is taken up with discussing the role of the Lead Worker Representative (LWR), a role originally established under the first edition of the protocol in May 2020.

It says: “The LWR should work together with the employer and workers to assist in the implementation of and monitor adherence to the measures in the Protocol. The number of representatives appointed will ideally be proportionate to the number of workers.

It adds that the LWR role “is particularly important” as workers return to workplaces, many of them with concerns about Covid-19 risks. However, “collaborative and open engagement between employers and workers, based on the Work Safely Protocol”, can ensure re-opening without spread of the disease.

Workers with concerns “should engage with the employer” through the LWR or other representative. If concerns continue, these may be raised with the Workplace Contact Unit of the Health and Safety Authority (www.hsa.ie). “The HSA will review all contacts received by the WCU in relation to the Work Safely Protocol and will follow-up as appropriate.”

Workplace inspections for compliance with the protocol, undertaken by the HSA and other agencies, will continue. Inspections “will routinely engage both with management and workers”.

A statement from the Department of Enterprise, Trade and Employment said last week that 45,000 Covid-19 inspections have taken place since May 2020, by the HSA and other agencies.

UPDATED PROTOCOL

The Work Safely Protocol has been updated again to take account of the retention last week of many of the remaining restrictions, in response to the recent rise in Covid-19 case numbers.

Up to a few weeks ago there had been hopes that this new version of the Protocol would relax requirements for physical distancing and mask-wearing in workplaces.

However, IRN’s sister journal Health and Safety Review (HSR) reported this week that the new October version of the protocol differs little from the September edition. Two detailed changes are:

- For those who were identified as close contacts of a confirmed case of Covid-19, the advice was not to go to work. Now the advice is to follow the close contact advice on the HSE website (<https://www2.hse.ie/conditions/covid19/contact-tracing/close-contact/>)
- In the September edition of the Protocol there was, under the heading contractors and visitors, a reference to business travel. That is not included in the updated Protocol.

To download a copy of the October edition of the Work Safely Protocol, click on <https://www.enterprise.gov.ie/en/Publications/Publication-files/Work-Safely-Protocol.pdf>