



HELPING SMALL BUSINESSES – COVID-19

COVID-19 is a new strain of coronavirus. Typical symptoms include a fever, dry cough, and can progress to a severe pneumonia causing shortness of breath and breathing difficulties. Generally, coronavirus can cause more severe symptoms in people with weakened immune systems, older people, and those with underlying long-term conditions like diabetes, cancer and chronic lung disease¹. The World Health Organization declared on 11 March that the outbreak is a pandemic, meaning the disease is spreading in multiple countries around the world at the same time².

In the worst-case scenario, a broad spread of COVID-19 may grind global growth down to 1.5 per cent in 2020 - a sharp decline from the 2.9 per cent increase registered for 2019³. While large businesses will have the financial reserves to absorb this shock, NI's small business network may not. Small businesses are the backbone of the NI economy, and, as the virus continues to spread and impact staff, customers and supply chains, small businesses may require more support. Mental health⁴ and caring for the most vulnerable in our society are two of the biggest issues. Please refer to the Health Minister's latest press release – *Our health and social care system will only be able to cope with Covid-19 if we all rally behind it*⁵.

This factsheet includes measures available to SMEs as we work through this pandemic.

Government support

- The Finance Minister, Conor Murphy, said all businesses will pay zero rates for the next three months.
- The UK Government will provide at least £1.5 billion to the devolved administrations for their COVID-19 response. This means £260 million for the Northern Ireland Executive.
- The above measure is in addition to the support people across the country will receive through UK-wide measures tackling the impact of COVID-19, including extending Statutory Sick Pay.
- Additional measures are currently being developed by the NI Executive to support businesses. BITCNI will post all relevant updates on our website – www.bitcni.org.uk
- Commitment made by Economy Minister – 17 March - <https://www.economy-ni.gov.uk/news/minister-meets-business-leaders-discuss-covid-19-response>
- Commitment made by Infrastructure Minister – 17 March - <https://www.infrastructure-ni.gov.uk/news/infrastructure-minister-nichola-mallon-confirms-contingency-planning>
- Jobs and benefits – Statement from the Communities Minister - <https://www.communities-ni.gov.uk/news/minister-announces-measures-protect-most-vulnerable-ensure-delivery-social-security-services>

¹ NHS Inform, 2020, Coronavirus (COVID-19), viewed 13 March 2020, www.nhsinform.scot/illnesses-andconditions/infections-and-poisoning/coronavirus-covid-19

² World Health Organisation, 2020, WHO Director-General's opening remarks at the media briefing on COVID-19 11 March 2020, viewed 13 March 2020, www.who.int/dg/speeches/detail/who-director-general-s-openingremarks-at-the-media-briefing-on-covid-19--11-march-2020

³ World Economic Forum 2020, COVID-19, viewed 13 March 2020, www.intelligence.weforum.org/topics/a1G0X000006O6EHUA0?tab=publications

⁴ WHO Guidance on Mental Health, released 12 March 2020, <https://www.who.int/docs/default-source/coronaviruse/mental-health-considerations.pdf>

⁵ <https://www.health-ni.gov.uk/news/our-health-and-social-care-system-will-only-be-able-cope-covid-19-if-we-all-rally-behind-it>



- The UK government is currently looking for companies who can enter the supply chain and provide ventilators and ventilator components -
- <https://www.gov.uk/government/news/product-on-and-supply-of-ventilators-and-ventilator-components>
- More measures from government will be announced in the coming days (17 March 2020)

Support from large businesses

The business community can support small businesses in a number of ways, including:

- Setting aside financial support for small businesses
- Proactively contacting customers to see what help their businesses need
- Offering repayment holidays to free up cash within the business
- Reviewing overdrafts or trade loans to allow stock to be held for longer
- Supporting customers with their supply chains
There is also a need to be aware of the cyber-security risks posed by coronavirus with organisations warning that mass staff absences are making small business more vulnerable.
- Many of the banks are already working with small businesses to help them through this difficult time. For example, see Danske Bank's statement - <https://danskebank.co.uk/important-information/coronavirus-info>

The National Cyber Security Centre (NCSC) has also confirmed that the outbreak is being used in phishing traps. Considering this, we would recommend signposting to NCSC guidance on spotting scam emails.

Other support

- The Community Foundation for Northern Ireland has launched a new emergency fund for older people - <https://supportingcommunities.org/funding-news-1/2020/3/16/coronavirus-community-fund>

What can SMEs do to mitigate the impacts of coronavirus?

Business continuity plan

Having a business continuity plan and emergency activation plan can help mitigate the impacts coronavirus will have on critical business functions, products and services.

A lot of businesses will not have planned for a crisis on this scale, but, as many are finding out, they need a plan. Knowing what must be considered and ensuring there is sufficient cashflow to keep the business afloat in an environment where demand may be dropping off, compounded by staffing problems, could be the difference between a business surviving or failing.

Business in the Community has created a checklist to help consider what should be included in a business continuity plan, and actions that can be taken to mitigate the risks that coronavirus poses to a business. This covers an organisation's:

- people
- technology
- premises
- suppliers and customers
- data
- communication



BUSINESS CONTINGENCY CHECKLIST

Stay informed and keep your employees up to date	CHECK
What is novel coronavirus COVID-19?	
How to help prevent spread of all respiratory infection including COVID-19	
UK Stay at Home Guidance	
Advice for the certification of absence from work resulting from COVID-19	
People	CHECK
Ensure you have up-to-date emergency contact details for all your employees	
Identify and document key tasks that are critical to your business and details of staff with key skills and knowledge	
Consider cross training for key roles/function	
Consider remote working policy	
Are your employees eligible for statutory sick pay and are you clear how you will treat employees that cannot work due to caring responsibilities	
Communicate regularly with employees to update them on the situation, any new internal policies and ways of working	
Consider the effects that self-isolation may have on employee's wellbeing and signpost to relevant guidance, internal wellbeing networks, or your employee assistance programme	
Technology	CHECK
Does your technology support remote working and have you tested it?	
Do you have clear employee guidelines for remote working and use of personal devices?	
Do you have a list of employee access and privileges for all your IT systems	
Do you know if your IT system providers have business continuity procedures in place?	
Can your products and services be delivered digitally?	
Premises	CHECK
Have you reviewed your cleaning regime to reduce the likelihood of the virus spreading?	
Does your workplace provide handwashing facilities and are you promoting the need for effective handwashing and respiratory hygiene?	
In the event of quarantine, have you ensured that your facilities are safe, secure and clean?	
Suppliers and customers	CHECK
Create a contact list of current and alternative suppliers and diversify suppliers where possible	
Contact your suppliers to ask what they have in place in terms of emergency/business continuity plans with regards to coronavirus	
Create a contact list of key customers and communication with them what action you are taking	
Data	CHECK
Ensure devices are secure and software is up to date	
Use passwords to protect data	
Protect against viruses and malware	
Ensure that employees working remotely are aware of the importance of cyber security	
Communications	CHECK
Create contact lists and cascade plan for: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • All staff and their emergency contacts • Key customers and suppliers • Insurer – claims manager • Bank – relationship manager • IT and cyber security support • Electricity, gas and water (24-hour emergency) 	
Be prepared to use social media to communicate with stakeholders about your business disruption	