COVID-19: Return to Work Arrangements

Organisations preparing for some of their employees to return to the workplace face a complex series of issues that require detailed planning and communication. This document outlines some key considerations for businesses that are planning employee return to work arrangements.

The guidance is based on current UK government and good practise advice from the European Union. Please note that advice will continue to change and evolve, with further information scheduled to be released by the UK government in the week commencing 11 May.

All organisations should evaluate their own workspace requirements and add all site specific controls. When conducting a risk assessment, decisions should be discussed with senior management, health and safety advisors, employee representatives (Trade Unions and other professional bodies represented in the workplace), HR and the premises' Facilities Management. Additionally, it may be necessary to review and update contracts and arrangements with third parties such as Facilities Management, cleaning and catering companies in light of the changing requirements.

A useful guide from the Health & Safety Executive entitled 'Working Safely During The Coronavirus Outbreak' can be seen here.

This document was produced by HP Risk Management, in consultation with a CMIOSH- qualified health and safety expert with more than 18 years' experience working in media, events and varied corporate environments. All guidance provided in this document is stored and regularly updated within RiskPal, an online health and safety and travel risk assessment platform. For more information or to access additional COVID-19 related information concerning international travel and staff wellbeing, contact info@riskpal.co.uk

Are your staff at a heightened risk of severe infection from COVID-19?

Staff should consider and discuss the following points before returning to work:

- Are you aged 65 or over?
- Do you have any medical risk factors or health conditions (be they historical or ongoing) that could result in an infection being severe or life threatening? Such conditions include (but are not limited to) those who suffer from immunosuppression, respiratory issues like cystic fibrosis and asthma, diabetes, heart/lung/kidney disease, high blood pressure, obesity, cancer and those who suffer from rare diseases.
- Have you received a notification from the NHS that you must 'shelter in place'?
- Are you pregnant?
- Do you have vulnerable dependents at home or close by?

Safety control measures

- Discuss your situation with your health and safety team/ HR / your line manager.
- Work from home should be extended for all vulnerable staff for as long as necessary
- Place all vulnerable staff that do need to come on site in low risk jobs and locations
- Staff should review their journey to/from work. Avoid using public transport if possible, particularly during peak travel times

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Has a member or staff or contractor reported they have been infected by COVID-19?

Controls should be checked and approved by the health and safety team and HR.

- Check where they have been in the building and who / what equipment they have been in contact with.
- With their permission, inform work colleagues.
- Place work colleagues who have been in physical contact on home isolation for the next 7 days (or for the current recommended period).
- Instigate a detailed and deep clean of their workstation, equipment and surrounding area immediately.
- If the infected person is on site when they confirm the infection, ensure a detailed plan of action is in place to isolate the person immediately, and to safely get them back to their home

Do your staff know what to expect on return to work?

All staff should be informed of the following safety information and guidelines in advance of returning to the workplace:

- Gradual reopening of the workplace will include social/physical distancing of at least 2 metres at all times, unless other measures such as screening are in place. This measure will affect the pace of return.
- Staff should not come in to work if sick.
- Staff should not come into work if they live with or are involved with the care of a vulnerable person.
- Staff should be encouraged to take their temperature before work, and stay at home if it is at or over 37.8⁰ C.
- If feeling unwell, staff should inform their manager immediately and return home in the safest way possible.
- Continue current working arrangements until formally notified of return.
- There should be a short site induction before the first day back. This may be conducted by email/phone/conference call/other means.
- Staff should be encouraged to maintain personal hygiene at all times.

Has your building been correctly and adequately maintained during the lockdown period?

Many buildings have been empty or unoccupied during the COVID-19 lockdown. Before staff or tenants are allowed to return to their workplace, landlords, building/facilities management and owners of buildings should check adequate maintenance has been carried out.

Good practice advice

- Check that the general structure of the building remains in good order.
- Check the status of the water system to ensure any build-up of Legionnaires bacteria is treated and flushed.
- Conduct visual checks of mould or other invasive agents, including insects and rodents.
- Carry out a thorough deep clean to remove dust and other contaminants such as allergens.
- Check for water damage caused by weather or plumbing faults.
- Vent little used spaces, drains and pipes.
- All mechanical systems and internal spaces should be thoroughly cleaned

- Check the operation of all taps, security doors, toilets, light switches and fire/smoke alarms. If not qualified to do so, ensure the relevant technician is contacted in advance to do so.

Is there a general risk of cross contamination / infection?

If a minimum safe distance of 2 metres can be maintained throughout the workplace at all times, medical personal protective equipment (PPE) is not required.

A policy of self-isolation should be implemented if staff feel unwell (i.e. not entering the workplace). Note that social/physical distancing, regular handwashing with soap and hot water, and thorough cleaning is sufficient to provide reasonable protection at work – providing a high compliance with the following safety control measures is maintained at all times:

NB: *Individuals may choose to wear 'protective items' at work. This should be permitted within reason as long as it does not affect general safety.*

Safety control measures

- All workplaces must ensure that sufficient key duty holders (e.g. fire wardens, first aid) are in place and fully briefed before the introduction of other employees.
- Ensure a controlled and carefully phased return to organisation buildings to help minimise potential for cross contamination/infection.
- Ensure the building is properly and thoroughly cleaned before reopening.
- Check with engineering/maintenance that ventilation is working in all areas.
- An induction on new arrangements should be conducted before the first day back (via email/phone/conference call).
- Ensure all entry and exit points from the workplace are not congested and a safe minimum safe distance of at least 2 metres can be maintained at all times.
- Instigate additional cleaning protocols for turnstiles, doors and handles.
- Tell staff not to come to work if feeling ill or experiencing a temperature over 37.8⁰ C.
- Consider non-invasive electronic temperature control at entry points for all personnel, and exclude individuals with temperatures over 37.8⁰ C (for example a 'no contact infrared forehead scanner'). A protocol will be required in conjunction with the health and safety team and HR to ensure privacy.
- Where possible and safe to do so, fix doors open to minimise contact. Note that additional security may be required when doing so. Always check this does not compromise any fire safety regulations and arrangements.
- Staff should be informed to use their arm or shoulder to push doors open instead of their hands.

- Provide, promote and ensure regular handwashing with hot water & soap is adhered to by all staff throughout the day (non-touch hand dryers or single use paper towels should be provided).
- Supply easy access to suitable hand sanitiser and ensure stocks are maintained. Sanitiser should be alcohol-based with greater than 60% ethanol or 70% isopropanol content
- Monitor building traffic flow and identify potential hot-spots for congestion.
- Where busy communal areas are identified, instigate one-way flow systems or restrict access.
- Provide physical markers to identify the safe minimum 2 metres distance in busier areas of the building
- Stagger lunch and other breaks to minimise congestion (also see advice on catering)
- Self-service catering hubs are a potential hot-spot for hard surface contamination. You should increase cleaning and enforce hand washing, or the use of hand sanitiser by self-dispensing areas.
- Desks/chairs should be at least 2 metres apart and have wide enough spaces between to move around. This may mean only a percentage of desks can be used.
- Desks and keyboards/IT accessories should be subject to regular cleaning (especially between users). Computer wipes (greater than 70% alcohol content) should be available at all times, and staff requested to wipe down hard surfaces at the start and end of shifts. Used wipes can be placed in open bins as alcohol evaporates quickly.
- Ensure toilets are easily accessible – outside doors may be propped open in some layouts.
- Wash hands after handling all post / deliveries.

Are you prepared if an employee tests positive for COVID-19 whilst at work?

Good practice advice

- Note that infected staff may be ill, but could also feel well and not show any symptoms (asymptomatic). **Note that test results are not 100% accurate.**
- A selection of emergency medical personal protective equipment (PPE) should be purchased and held by a designated person. This should include FFP3 rated face masks, disposable gloves and antiviral hand gels.
- Treat the situation sympathetically and avoid any general panic, pointing out that test results are not 100% accurate.
- Infected employees should follow the 'stay at home guidance' and avoid public transport when returning home. Instead use a pre-vetted taxi service with a separate passenger cab (e.g. black cab), or ask a family member to collect the individual.
- If the staff member is experiencing breathing difficulties or other serious symptoms, call the emergency services for help. Tell them the patient has a positive test result. In the UK, visit NHS 111 online or call 111. Only dial 999 if they are seriously ill.

- If practicable, isolate the employee in a safe space while waiting for collection, providing constant reassurance from a safe distance.
- Staff who have or could have been in contact with the individual should be traced, **where possible**, and be notified of the situation - **without relaying the infected employee's name.**
- Infected staff should be advised to wash hands thoroughly with hot water and soap, be given a face mask, and return home by a specially hired vehicle with driver protection screens (e.g. a black cab).
- Staff should self-isolate at home for 7 days immediately (or current recommendation - always check the most up-to-date guidance). Affected staff can take work equipment home after routine cleaning.
- Cleaners with the appropriate PPE and cleaning equipment should commence a deep clean of all areas affected by the infected staff immediately.
- World Health Organisation advice suggests that human coronaviruses can survive on hard surfaces for up to 72 hours, less than 4 hours on copper and less than 24 hours on cardboard. The virus can be killed using common household disinfectants and effective handwashing. https://www.who.int/news-room/q-a-detail/q-a-coronaviruses

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Are elevators / lifts / stairs used in your building?

Safety control measures

If the elevators / lifts / stairs are shared – discuss the following points with the relevant responsible people from each floor.

- Most lifts do not allow for the recommended safe minimum 2 metres distance - so should be avoided unless only one person needs to travel. Note that others may enter the lift before it gets to the floor you selected.
- Lifts should be prioritised for staff with disabilities (note that disabilities may be hidden).
- If required, a marked queuing system should be put in place, including a safe space to exit the lift without coming into close contact with the queuing staff.
- The location of stairs should be indicated (if it is not obvious) and a one way system put in place.
- Doors onto stairs should be fixed open, where possible and safe to do so, noting all relevant fire safety regulations are still adhered to.
- Staff should be informed to use their arm or shoulder to push doors open instead of using their hands.
- Staff should always thoroughly and properly cleanse their hands on return to their desk/workspace.

Do staff share equipment such as IT, cameras or phones?

Safety control measures

- Personal issue work equipment (laptops, keyboards, mice, headsets, mobile phones etc) should not be shared and should be regularly cleaned using alcohol wipes which have a minimum alcohol content of 70%. Any wipes used should be certified as effective at destroying viruses.
- Maintain supplies of suitable and appropriate cleaning products, and ensure these are available to all relevant staff.
- Avoid using mobile phones and tablets/laptops in congested areas on the way to work (e.g. on public transport).
- Mobile phones and all IT equipment should be cleaned before starting work and at regular intervals throughout the day. Always thoroughly wash hands after cleaning.
- Where reasonably practicable, cameras and shared equipment should be cleaned and used in rotation.
- All shared equipment such as cameras, chargers and microphones should be subject to a written cleaning protocol with detailed guidance on best practices to avoid cross contamination.
- Keep a log book for shared equipment to record names of users and personnel responsible for carrying out the cleaning process - in case contact tracing is required. Thoroughly wash hands after any cleaning.
- If using shared technical vehicles – instigate a cleaning regime of hard surfaces between drivers and keep a written log record. Areas to focus on include the steering wheel, hand brake, gear lever, door handles, seat belts, head rests, window winders/buttons, light switches etc etc).
- Where possible, utilise all space by locating passengers around the vehicle to provide greatest distance. Consider driving with the windows down to ensure good air flow at all times.
- If the minimum safe 2 metres distance cannot be achieved, and the team consents to travel together, provide FFP3 rated face masks and gloves and guidance on their safe use.

Are you providing refreshments on site for staff?

Self-service refreshment hubs are often confined to a small and/or restricted space, and are therefore a potential hot-spot for hard surface contamination, cross contamination and social interactions.

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Control Safety Measures

- Set guidelines and rules for use, paying particular attention to capacity (for example 'one out = one in').
- Inform all staff of the new arrangements by email and signage.
- Monitor compliance on a routine basis.
- Request that staff do not make or carry drinks for each other during this period.
- Increase the frequency of cleaning. Provide and enforce the use of hand sanitiser by self-dispensing areas (sanitiser should be alcohol-based with greater than 60% ethanol or 70% isopropanol)
- Consider asking all staff to leave their cups/glasses/plates/bowls/cutlery etc on desks after use for collection by cleaning personnel, who will use gloves to load items into a dishwasher, or for a hot water wash with detergent.
- Cleaning personnel should have clean hands when placing items back into the cupboard/draw.
- Staff should be permitted and encouraged to bring their own cups/plates/bowls/cutlery etc into the office and take them home to wash.

Is catering provided and/or required for staff on site?

Discuss with the contractors or managers responsible for providing catering if the kitchen and food storage areas can be used with social distancing in place (i.e. a minimum safe distance of 2 metres or more at all times). This may be an area where further controls and the use of PPE is required.

NB: Risk assessment for cleaning & catering staff/contractors should be updated to include COVID19 controls.

If catering can be provided safely, the following safety control measures should be considered.

- Stagger meal times to control / minimise usage during peak periods

- Staff must always thoroughly and properly wash hands before accessing catering areas.

- Set out catering areas to ensure queues and seating can maintain social distance, and provide a physical indication of the minimum safe 2 metres distance e.g. floor markings.

- Ensure access routes can also maintain the minimum safe 2 metres distance. If not, set up a one-way flow system.

- Catering staff must ensure they have clean hands at all times by using gloves and adhering to a strict hand washing routine. Staff must not touch their faces or hair whilst wearing gloves. All jewelry should be removed.

- Food preparation and service staff should wear clean clothes for each shift, and wash their hands regularly and thoroughly for 20 seconds at a time using hot water and soap.

- Staff should not work if they are ill or if they have a temperature (above 37.8 C).

- Plates, bowls, cups, glasses and cutlery should all be washed in a dishwasher using a hot cycle with detergent.

- All cutlery should be removed from shared communal areas, and instead be given out with the meal.

- Shared items like sauces or condiments should be withdrawn from shared communal areas and single use sachets provided on request.

- Designate areas to deposit used items for collection by catering staff, and ensure this area does not become congested.

- Vending machines should only be stocked using clean gloves. Vending machine surfaces should be regularly cleaned and disinfected.

- Packaging of takeaway items (including vending) should be removed and then hands washed before consumption. Hands should again be washed after disposal of packaging.

Are you operating a visitor reception?

Additional safety measures should be implemented in areas where maintaining a minimum safe distance of 2 metres is not possible.

Some measures, such as temperature checks on visitors should be approved with the health and safety team and HR in advance.

Safety control measures

- Minimise visitors by using telephone and online meetings wherever possible.
- Provide cleanable protective screens at till or reception points.
- Ensure a visitors log is completed by reception/security staff, including contact details (i.e. mobile phone number) - in case contact tracing is required.
- Establish a structured 2 metre queuing system using physical markers.
- Display site rules clearly and brief visitors on arrival regarding safety and hygiene arrangements.

- Visitor passes should be a lanyard style hands free with a wipe clean surface.
- Consider checking all visitor's temperatures before entry, including staff/contractors. Do not permit the visitor to enter the workplace if they have a temperature.
- Establish a clear space for visitors to meet staff where practicable.
- Visitors who need to enter the building must maintain a minimum safe distance of 2 metres from others at all times.
- Screens and all hard surfaces in the reception area should be routinely cleaned and a log kept by cleaning staff.
- Consider the use of face visors and gloves for front line staff who are in contact with the general public (e.g. security personnel and reception desk staff).
- If queuing is required outside of the building, mark minimum safe distances and consider providing additional security to manage the queue and deter any potential criminal activity. This is also an opportunity to inform people entering of the site rules.

Will post and other deliveries be received at the building?

Safety control measures

- All deliveries should be directed to the post room, where established security procedures should be in place.
- All post room personnel must be able to maintain a minimum safe distance of 2 metres at all times. Consider staggered work times and physical markings. Screens may need to be installed at the point of contact with staff.
- Post room staff working on the floor can use their trolley as a physical estimation of the 2 metre distance.
- Post deposited by staff at collection points should be handled wearing gloves.
- The face must not be touched and hands washed thoroughly and properly using hot water and soap immediately after removing gloves.

Will your established management arrangements for fire safety, security and maintenance be substantially altered by the lockdown and subsequent re-opening of the premises?

Safety control measures

- Allow a period to confirm the building maintenance and fire arrangements remain effective.
- Work with your Facilities Management Team / Landlord to implement new procedures, as outlined in your risk assessment.
- Update the visitor logbook to include contact details (i.e. mobile phone numbers) in case contact tracing is required.

- For an interim period, cancel any planned/scheduled fire evacuation tests that would empty the building onto the streets.
- Make additional efforts to avoid any false alarms on the fire system – for example remove toasters/ovens or other sources of smoke.
- Brief staff on the importance of avoiding false alarms – but ensure they will act correctly in the event of a fire or emergency alarm.
- Check building and surrounds for any unauthorised activity during the lockdown, paying particular attention to access/exit points such as doors, windows, parking lots and the roof.
- Ensure contractors risk assessment include related COVID-19 safety controls. Managers of 'Permit to Work' (PTW) protocols should take this into consideration when booking and authorising work, especially works with naked flames.
- Brief all contractors before they access the site on the arrangements you have in place, and establish that their work will not compromise your staff safety. This may mean temporarily cleaning and isolating areas to ensure the maintenance of minimum safe distances of 2 metres.

Have you reviewed the building emergency response plan?

A building could experience various emergency situations including fire, bomb threat, terrorist activity or other building failures. Ensuring robust fire, security and maintenance arrangements are in place will help minimise the chances of these events occurring. Note that in such emergency situations the minimum safe distance of 2 metres is unlikely to be maintained.

Safety control measures:

- In an emergency, established evacuation procedures should be followed – the risk of immediate harm should always take precedence over the theoretical risk of virus spread.
- Fire wardens and other duty holders should be briefed in advance of any changes to their established procedures.
- If attending the assembly/muster points, efforts should be made to reinstate the minimum safe 2 metres distancing.
- After the all clear, allow staff to return to their work stations in an orderly fashion, ensuring 2 meters physical distancing is maintained when doing so.

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Are you travelling to work during the COVID-19 pandemic?

Safety control measures

- Staff should avoid using public transport if possible, especially during peak travel periods. Note that maintaining the minimum safe distance of 2 metres will remain challenging, even during quieter travel times.
- Management should stagger the start and finish of the working day to avoid peak travel periods, and to help manage the volume of people in the building at any one time.
- The use of face coverings/masks and gloves when travelling by public transport depends on relevant government advice. Some countries require the use of a simple face covering like a scarf or home-made masks to minimise droplets from coughs and sneezes.
- If face coverings are worn they should only be used once before being placed into a sealed bag for washing at a high temperature with detergent.
- Hands should be thoroughly and properly washed with hot water and soap for at least 20 seconds immediately after any gloves have been removed.

Can staff use their cars to travel to/from work?

Safety control measures

- Consider making additional car parking available and discuss meeting the additional costs of public car parks/congestion charges.
- Discuss with staff the importance of cleaning their vehicles on a routine basis, of note the steering wheel, gear lever, hand brake, door handles, seat belts, keys, head rests etc.
- Consider implementing additional security measures to monitor parking areas, particularly if in a high crime area.

Is there a risk of cross contamination to vulnerable people through your work during the epidemic?

Staff visiting the elderly, sick, immunocompromised, pregnant, those with underlying health conditions and/or otherwise high risk / vulnerable individuals, should consider the following safety advice.

Safety control measures

- To minimise the risk of exposure, and wherever possible, phone/online interviews should be carried out rather than in person.
- Ensure the consent of all parties.
- Always follow the safety rules and restrictions of the establishment visited.
- Do not visit if you feel ill or are experiencing a temperature over 37.8⁰ C.
- Do not visit if someone in your home has symptoms or confirmed COVID-19.

In addition to the above, RiskPal contains extensive guidance on additional safety control measures and PPE for COVID-19.

Do I need to provide personal protective equipment (PPE) for staff?

Currently medical PPE is not advised for people outside of a clinical care setting, which remains in short supply and is essential to the NHS effort. If a distance of 2 metres can be maintained it is not necessary to use PPE, **unless working in a high risk location such as a medical facility or mortuary**. A strict and regular regime of cleaning and handwashing with hot water and soap is sufficient to provide protection at work. Note that most PPE used in workplace & facilities settings is not medical and is sourced through workplace/engineering suppliers.

Below are some examples and scenarios where PPE should be worn, or stored for emergencies.

Safety control measures

- Cleaning, warehouse, production and maintenance staff (etc) should maintain use of PPE as indicated on their existing risk assessments. If this PPE is not available at present the risk assessment must be reviewed on an urgent basis.
- Food preparation staff may also require a barrier – government guidance should be followed which currently relies on effective handwashing.
- A small emergency supply of face masks (FFP3 and disposable gloves) should be retained at work in case a member of staff receives a positive COVID-19 test result or someone develops symptoms while at work. This is to enable them to travel home while possibly reducing the risk of infecting other people. Information and guidance on using the facemask should be given. This is a 'one off' activity.
- Facemasks are only effective when used in combination with regular and thorough hand washing with soap and hot water, or an alcohol based hand sanitiser (greater than 60% ethanol or 70% isopropanol)
- Undertaking essential international travel carries identifiable risks because social/physical distancing is impossible on flights and in airports. For this reason, consideration should be given to provision of face masks and gloves to international travellers. Information on the safe use and disposal of facemasks should also be given.

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- Crews may need to travel together in technical vehicles (sat trucks etc), in which a minimum safe distance between people should be adhered to wherever possible. For this reason, consideration should be given to provision of face masks and gloves to certain crews. Information on the safe use and disposal of face masks should also be given. Travelling with windows down should ensure a good airflow in the vehicle and help reduce the spread of any droplets.