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# COVID-19: returning to the workplace

This guide will help you plan your organisation's eventual return to the workplace as lockdown restrictions continue to evolve

As businesses work towards reopening in part or full, and mindful of advice and restrictions that continue to change, employers must plan for any return to the workplace in a way that cares for their people and safeguards their health and wellbeing.

In January 2021, England entered another national lockdown, meaning that everyone who can work effectively from home must do so. Only those people who cannot work from home (for example in construction or manufacturing) or those public sector employees working in essential services, including education settings, should continue to go into work. This coincides with similar restrictions in Wales and restrictions in Northern Ireland and Scotland, all designed to help contain the virus.

The government has now outlined its 'roadmap' to begin easing lockdown in England from March 2021 and the devolved nations are setting out their plans. However, employers should note that the timetable and rules set out in any 'roadmap' for easing lockdown are still subject to review and it is essential to keep up to date with any further changes during the progressive easing of lockdown.

Where a return to the workplace is necessary, at the heart of any plans should be a commitment to support flexible and remote working where possible, and the provision of support for physical and mental health for workers who cannot work from home, and may be concerned about being in the workplace or travelling there.

## Making the decision about returning to the workplace

Government advice to work from home wherever possible, offers two options:

- Supporting working from home until lockdown restrictions or social distancing is relaxed
- Facilitating a return to the workplace in line with COVID-secure workplace guidance when working from home is not possible.

Employers must take an individualised approach and follow steps to allow staff to work from home as much as possible; they need to consider the physical, emotional and mental wellbeing of the workforce and monitor government guidance.

With so much disruption from the pandemic, people's expectations around work, how they fulfil their role, and how they reconcile work and domestic responsibilities may have changed dramatically. This is an ideal time for employers to think more creatively about effective ways of working, and harness more agile and flexible working practices to meet individuals' changing expectations. A flexible approach could help employers develop more effective people management practices, resulting in improved productivity. Employees may be required to review existing or produce new policies on flexible working; you can refer to the CIPD's flexible working page for advice on improving flexible working while maintaining team cultures.

When home working is not possible the CIPD recommends three key tests before bringing people back to the workplace: **is it essential; is it sufficiently safe; and is it mutually agreed?** Many factors must be considered, including the size and nature of the workplace, the number of vulnerable staff or those who live with vulnerable people, caring responsibilities, public transport dependency, as well as local and wider outbreaks. So, an employer with a large premises and car park may be able to fully implement social distancing and minimise employees' local transport use, while an employer with smaller premises may feel social distancing is impossible in the workplace.

Employers can use their Coronavirus specific risk assessments (a template risk assessment form is available from HR-inform) to assist in their decision-making process, considering the factors referred to above, including the feasibility of implementing social distancing and local outbreaks (if any). As employers with workforces that cannot work from home have found, adapting premises to accommodate all staff returning on a socially distanced basis is highly challenging.

Some employers may decide to remain completely closed with staff on furlough while the scheme is in operation. When the scheme ends employers will need to consider other options.

## Risk assessments and health and safety measures

For a return to the workplace, employers must consider detailed risk management approaches to safeguard employees' health and minimise the risk of infection, basing plans on up-to-date government and public health guidance. The Health and Safety Executive will be conducting spot checks and has also published advice and guidance relating to COVID-19 on its website which may be useful when considering health and safety measures. SOM, in collaboration with the CIPD, Mind, Acas and BITC have produced a toolkit to help employers plan a return to the workplace in a way that manages risk

alongside their legal obligations. IOSH have also produced <u>resources and free e-learning modules</u> on returning safely.

It's crucial to work in close collaboration with your health and safety and occupational health teams wherever possible. Regularly communicate to staff the practical measures you are taking to help reassure them that their health, wellbeing and safety is your top priority. Make sure they are clear about the rules and procedures they should follow both in the workplace and at home, especially if they begin to feel unwell.

You will need to review your workplace and consider – can staff maintain safe distance between each other? How will you manage meetings, interviews and other interactions? What about communal areas such as canteens or kitchen areas? How can you implement resourcing strategies to support physical distancing such as 'cohorting' (ie keeping teams of workers working together and as small as possible), or staggering working hours to limit numbers in the workplace at the same time.

To maintain protection and hygiene measures and minimise the spread of infection, remind staff about regular and effective handwashing, and provide hand sanitiser. If your premises have been closed for a period of time, you should consider carrying out a deep-clean before reopening. You should therefore review your cleaning arrangements, for example ensuring all phones/keyboards etc are wiped daily with anti-viral cleaner. You can refer to the <u>government guidance</u> for more information.

Depending on your working environment, you may need to consider providing additional PPE, including gloves, masks or anti-viral hand gel. Remember that face coverings are now mandatory for shop workers, bar staff and waiters; more information is available on the <u>government website</u>.  If you want people to wear gloves or masks, then you will also need to think about training and briefing staff on their correct usage – since both can be ineffective if used inappropriately.

Good ventilation can help reduce the risk of spreading coronavirus, so focus on improving general ventilation, preferably through fresh air or mechanical systems. The risk of air conditioning spreading coronavirus (COVID-19) in the workplace is extremely low as long as there is an adequate supply of fresh air and ventilation. Advice on the use of air conditioning systems can be found on the <u>HSE website</u>.

It's also likely that more large-scale testing for COVID-19 infection will form a key part of facilitating a safe return to the workplace for larger numbers of employees. This could form an extension of the current framework for the <u>testing of essential workers</u> and members of their household, and will mean every employer implementing a systematic approach for their workforce. Employers should continue to monitor the latest government guidance and be prepared to act upon any changes. More information on lateral flow testing under the government scheme for employers in England is available in our FAQ '<u>What are the considerations for employers when looking at lateral flow testing</u>

for employees?'

Remote meeting facilities and video-conferencing should be encouraged wherever possible to minimise the need for staff to travel and/or use public transport. You can refer to our recommendations for developing effective virtual teams, our series of tips for making the most of remote working and the recording of our webinar session on looking after your remote teams.

It will be vital to have a re-orientation or re-induction process for returning staff. Encourage and support every manager to have a one to one return meetings with every employee, where a key focus is on health, safety and well-being. Managers need to have a sensitive and open discussion with every individual and discuss any adjustments and/or ongoing support to facilitate an effective return to the workplace. This is especially important for those who have been furloughed, and should cover topics such as changes in company services or procedures, how specific customer queries or issues are being addressed, or changes in supply arrangements, as well as any agreed changes to their work duties or tasks. Whilst employers should not attempt to unilaterally change previous terms and conditions, some staff may require a phased return to their full role, or want to discuss a new working arrangement, especially if their domestic situation has changed because of the pandemic.

As the UK's COVID-19 vaccination rollout continues, employers will also need to prepare for its impact on the wider population and their workforce. More information is available in our guide on preparing for the COVID-19 vaccination.

## Other issues to consider

The risks to people's health from this pandemic are psychological as well as physical. These include anxiety about the ongoing health crisis and fear of infection, as well social isolation due to the lockdown. Many will have experienced challenging domestic situations, such as juggling childcare or caring for a vulnerable relative, and financial worries if their family has had a reduction in income. Some will have experienced illness, or bereavement. Some members of staff may have concerns about travelling and socially distancing on public transport – or it may not be as readily available. Some may be struggling with the significant change that society has seen, and the familiar workplace routines could feel very different. If your business has an Employee Assistance Programme or access to Occupational Health advisers make staff aware of the services they can provide. Refer to the CIPD's content on mental health or resources from organisations like Mind for more. CIPD members can also access a new well-being helpline for advice and support. You may also wish to share the advice from Carers UK and Carers Trust with any employees with caring responsibilities.

If your business operates internationally, you will need to plan based on the restrictions

and/or guidance of different countries. Some may maintain stricter lockdown arrangements than the UK; others may lift restrictions sooner. Adopt a consistent approach while ensuring you are aware of local circumstances. International travel is likely to remain disrupted even when other restrictions are lifted. Passengers entering the UK from abroad may have to quarantine on arrival, supply contact details of accommodation, or self-isolate in their accommodation for 14 days. This of course seriously affects or rules out some business travel.

If an employee travels to a destination that requires quarantine on arrival and then on return to the UK, the employee could be away for a minimum of one month plus the number of days they were away. Many countries have strict quarantine rules for those entering, which may prevent travel. Even if this is not the case, some staff may have concerns about travelling to other countries where the risk of COVID-19 is higher. Be aware of your health and safety responsibilities and keep business travel to safer destinations or to a minimum. As many have realised during the current lockdown, many (though not all) business meetings can be done via video-conferencing.

Other non-COVID-19 issues that may affect your business still need to be planned for. For example, the UK ended the Brexit transitional arrangement on 31 December 2020. This will have major implications for businesses that trade internationally, or who currently employ EU nationals, or who may need to recruit from outside the UK.

The pandemic has had an unequal impact across the workforce in many ways, affecting groups of employees and individuals differently according to their job role and individual circumstances. Some organisations will have people who have been furloughed on 80% or 100% pay, for example, while others may have continued to work or even had increased workloads. This uneven nature of people's work and personal experiences and the challenges of the ongoing situation may lead to negative feelings in employment relations climate, so it's important that the organisation fosters an inclusive working environment, and managers are sensitive to any underlying tensions and confident about nipping potential conflict in the bud. You may wish to refer to our report on managing conflict in the modern workplace for advice.

In addition to health and well-being, employers should bear in mind the importance of diversity and inclusion in any decisions or plans made. From ensuring that decisions don't discriminate against certain groups of employees (eg decisions about flexible, home or part time working due to school closures where women could be disproportionately affected leading to sex discrimination claims) to fostering an inclusive working environment that takes account of the different experiences people have had during the pandemic. The EHRC has produced guidance for employers to make sure the decisions they're making are not discriminatory, as well as guidance for employers on making reasonable adjustments.

# Conclusion

Changes to the current lockdown restrictions have affected different sectors and regions differently. The changes are also likely to continue to fluctuate, with stricter measures being imposed, possibly with very little notice. There is now guidance on suggested steps, principles and measures to be taken in workplaces (where the preferred option is working from home if possible) and every employer will need to consider future planning. Organisations therefore need to use this time to prepare and plan their next steps.

Communication with your staff is key. Keeping people informed of what your business is doing – whether it is good or bad news for individuals - will help them to make their own decisions and give them some degree of security in very uncertain times. Knowing they are valued and supported by their employer – and that you continue to prioritise their health and safety – will be pivotal to their wellbeing.

A guide such as this cannot possibly cover every business situation, but it should help you think about the sort of issues that all businesses will need to consider as restrictions begin to be relaxed. Keep checking the CIPD coronavirus hub for further resources and advice and keep up to date with the latest government advice.

The CIPD has recently contributed to a COVID-19 return to work guide by SOM which offers guidance from Occupational Health Professionals on how workers can manage getting back to work after COVID-19 infection and Long COVID. The guide is available to download from the SOM website.

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