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Return to work

Employers have a duty of care to ensure the workplace is sufficiently safe to return to, and that the latest Government guidance is followed.

This bitesize article focuses on risk assessment & safe working procedures, agile working and office work from home. It also provides a checklist of key return to work planning considerations.

Local Community Advisory Service

Our Local Community Advisory Service has a free interactive guide with risk assessment templates, and other risk management tools, available for you to download.

If your not-for-profit organisation, town, parish or community council is insured with Zurich, you can also benefit from free access to our specialist LCAS health and safety advice line 0800 302 9052 (option 3) and email service lcashelpline@ uk.zurich.com (open Monday – Friday, 9am – 5pm).

Risk Assessment & Safe Working Procedures

A key part of the decision-making process to return staff to conventional workplaces starts with the completion of a risk assessment. Organisations must do all they can to keep up with the guidance issued, and this includes a regular review of workplace risk assessments.

A risk assessment should evidence that all reasonable steps to reduce the risk of COVID-19 infection have been taken and demonstrate safe working procedures for the work and services your organisation carries out.

As well as COVID safety considerations, employees must be provided with appropriate information, instruction and training for any new safe working practices and services as well as refresher training on their traditional safe working practices, which they may not have undertaken for some time.

Control measures may include continued social distancing measures, reconfiguring workspaces and common areas, working hours or shift patterns, ventilation and increased cleaning and sanitation measures.

Please refer to relevant guidance such as:

- England: GOV.UK guidance on going to work

- Scotland: Coronavirus (COVID-19): creating and maintaining safer workplaces

- Wales: Business and employers: coronavirus

Agile working

Recent surveys suggest that over half of workers would like to retain a mix of working at home and their workplace and many organisations are considering adopting longer term agile, or hybrid working patterns. This may involve employees not only working in isolation, but also undertaking visits to sites away from their normal workplace.

It is important to note that employers have a responsibility to assess the potential risks associated with the type of lone working activities and to implement suitable precautions to keep lone workers safe.

The following control measures should be considered when assessing lone working risks:

- Training
- Providing details of locations and the duration of planned visits
- Means of maintaining contact e.g. mobile phones and accessing back up / emergency assistance
- Avoidance of lone working outside normal office hours
- Employee health considerations
- Provision of first aid equipment

Office work from home

Where office work is being completed from home, employers should provide workers with appropriate equipment and information, instruction and training on completing their own basic workstation assessment at home - a practical workstation checklist is available from the HSE.

Employers will need to determine when "temporary home-working" amounts to a permanent arrangement. Organisations that make the decision to make people permanent home workers will need to comply with the requirements of the Health and Safety (Display Screen Equipment) Regulations. Your policy arrangements must be updated to reflect this change and formal DSE risk assessments should be completed.

If employees do return to an office at their previous workplace, employers should consider revisiting the original DSE assessment. They may not be working at their usual desk, and the office may have changed layout, so staff should be reminded to set up their new workstation to suit their personal profile and a formal risk assessment should then be completed.

Remember, in either case, you must keep your employees informed.

Use this checklist of key return to work considerations, to ensure your organisation is ready for its people to return to work safely:

Covid restrictions and workplace government guidance – what rules apply?
Where will staff work from or in and are the buildings safe to return to?
What changes are there to working arrangements / workplaces / tasks / methods / roles / services provided?
Which staff, agencies, contractors, and service users are involved?
What risk assessments and safe working methods need to be reviewed, updated or completed?
How will reviewed and revised risk assessments and safe working methods to be effectively communicated to all relevant parties?
What information/ instruction and training needs to be provided, by whom, for whom and by when?
What equipment provision and inspection requirements are there?
What are the PPE requirements and what arrangements are in place for provision and replenishment?
What ventilation requirements does the organisations facilities have?
What additional provisions need to be made for hygiene and workplace cleaning?
Are there implications for transportation modes and safe systems?
What are the Covid testing and vaccination requirements?
What are the supply chain requirements and challenges?
Do safeguarding requirements and implications require review and update?
What emergency arrangements are in place?