

COVID-19 – Getting back to work 28.04.20

Many employers starting to resume operations in some way, and we also now have to start planning for the easing of lockdown measures generally.

The Government has stressed throughout the current measures that, where work cannot be undertaken from home, workplaces can remain open if it is safe to do so – save for a number of non-essential retail businesses which have previously been ordered to close.

But, in planning for the return of even a handful of employees, businesses need to be mindful of the need to protect the health and safety of workers, and the need to minimise the risk of transmission and spread of the coronavirus. The most common requirements are:

1. Maintaining a distance of at least 2 metres (3 steps) between individuals;
2. Reminding employees to wash their hands regularly using soap and water for 20 seconds;
3. Providing these washing facilities or, where such facilities are not available, hand sanitiser to employees;
4. Ensuring regular cleaning of the premises, in particular areas, objects and surfaces which are used frequently and/or by a number of individuals, using standard cleaning products.

The Government has prepared general guidance (<https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/guidance-to-employers-and-businesses-about-covid-19/guidance-for-employers-and-businesses-on-coronavirus-covid-19>) and sector-specific guidance (<https://www.gov.uk/guidance/social-distancing-in-the-workplace-during-coronavirus-covid-19-sector-guidance>) to assist businesses, and it is stressed that employers should also look to guidance prepared from trade associations and similar groups in their own industry for more detailed advice.

So, once a business has decided to re-open at least in part, what should they consider? Much of the guidance below is a summary of the current Government advice; there will also be specific considerations for each business depending on their premises, industry, nature of the workforce and the impact of current and future Government measures.

Administration

- ☞ Ensure all contact numbers and emergency contact details are up to date;
- ☞ Ensure all managers are aware of what to do where symptoms are infected or suspected of being infected;
- ☞ Ensure all managers are aware of the Company's sickness absence provisions to ensure they can communicate what will happen during any period of self-isolation.

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Hygiene and promotion of Government advice

- ☐ Ensure there are places to wash hands for 20 seconds with soap and water, as well as hand sanitiser and tissues;
- ☐ Remind employees of these facilities and the need to practice social distancing generally (posters are available here: <https://coronavirusresources.phe.gov.uk/>);
- ☐ External visitors to premises also need to be made of aware of on-site requirements, and their movement within premises should be restricted as far as possible;
- ☐ Employers should frequently clean and disinfect objects and surfaces which are touched regularly;
- ☐ Require employees to remain at home if they display symptoms of the virus, or anyone in their household is displaying symptoms, for the length of time advised by the Government;

Maintaining a distance

- ☐ Avoid crowding and ensure a distance of at least 2 metres can be maintained between individuals;
- ☐ Use floor markings to mark the 2-metre distance, particularly in the most crowded areas;
- ☐ If social distancing guidelines cannot be followed in relation to a particular activity, does it need to continue? If so, how can the risks be minimised? For example, in the sector-specific guidance:
 - In construction, where face-to-face contact is essential, this should be kept to 15 minutes or less wherever possible;
 - In manufacturing or processing businesses, where staff cannot be kept 2 metres apart, can employees work side by side or facing away from each other?
 - In transport, where workers must share an enclosed space such as a cab, the window should be kept open for ventilation at all times.
- ☐ For customer-facing businesses, consider additional signage for customers, entry regulation and plexiglass barriers at points of regular interaction;

Working patterns and practices

- ☐ Keep teams working together and keep teams as small as possible – this ensures that employees are only exposed to a lower number of colleagues and this reduces the risk of spread of the virus;
- ☐ Consider shift working or staggering of work processes to reduce the number of individuals in the workplace at any one time. If there is a significant amount of homeworking currently, businesses may wish to rotate on-site attendance whilst keeping others working from home;
- ☐ Consider whether working hours can be amended to reduce public transport use during peak periods;
- ☐ Consider whether a proportion of the workforce can continue with homeworking;
- ☐ Encourage the use of digital transfers of material i.e. emails rather than paper;
- ☐ Consider early dialogue with those who are at greater risk of infection (for example those who have been advised to shield or who have respiratory diseases) and those who live with others at greater

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risk of infection. They may be more comfortable continuing to work from home or remaining on furlough leave if this is possible.

Food & drink and rest areas

- ☐ Encourage staff to bring their own food and drink to work;
- ☐ Encourage staff to bring their own cups, plates, cutlery etc rather than using any communal equipment;
- ☐ Areas where food and drink are stored, prepared and consumed must be cleaned and disinfected regularly;
- ☐ Consider extending and staggering mealtimes to avoid crowding.

Sector-specific guidance

Beyond these general guidelines, as noted above the Government has prepared some limited sector-specific guidance for the following:

- ☐ Shops running a pick-up of delivery service;
- ☐ Tradespeople and working in people's homes;
- ☐ Construction;
- ☐ Manufacturing and processing businesses;
- ☐ Retail;
- ☐ Logistics businesses;
- ☐ Outdoor businesses;
- ☐ Transport businesses;
- ☐ Waste management businesses.

Cleaning following a suspected coronavirus case

Where someone displays symptoms of coronavirus in a workplace, they will must be instructed to return home "quickly and directly". The guidance makes clear "It is not necessary to close the business or workplace or send any other staff home, unless government policy changes".

However, on the assumption that the workplace does remain open, the Government has published guidance on how to clean the potentially contaminated environment (<https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/covid-19-decontamination-in-non-healthcare-settings/covid-19-decontamination-in-non-healthcare-settings>).

In summary, the following requirements apply:

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- ❏ The minimum PPE required to clean a contaminated area is disposable gloves and an apron;
- ❏ Disposable cleaning equipment such as cloths, mop heads and paper roll should be used and disposed of after use;
- ❏ Public areas where the individual passed through and spent minimal time can be cleaned as normal;
- ❏ Recommended detergent and/or disinfectant solution is listed for areas which the individual has come into more regular contact with;
- ❏ Waste from cleaning should be put in a tied rubbish bag and a second bag. It can be disposed of if an individual subsequently tests negative, otherwise the waste should be stored for 72 hours and then disposed of normally if the test result is positive.