



# Back to work guide: Offices

# BACK TO WORK FOLLOWING COVID-19

## Introduction

Considering the announcement by the government on 10th May 2020 and the updated 'COVID-19 Secure' guidance released by the government on the 30th March 2021. We understand our clients will be returning to work (depending on numerous factors such as industry etc).

As well as working with our clients already to prepare for this we have developed a number of tools and guides to help such as:

- A Re-opening Health and Safety Checklist.
- A COVID-19 Hygiene at Work Toolbox Talk.
- A Back to Work Hygiene Checklist and Guidance Note.
- Safety Rules and Guidance for Contractors and Visitors.
- Example Risk Assessments.

## What You Need To Do

**Businesses and workplaces should make every reasonable effort to ensure their employees can work safely. National restrictions apply in England from the 6th January 2021. People should stay at home where possible and should only travel to work if it is unreasonable for you to do your job from home. Your workplace must be COVID secure.**

We have come up with some simple steps to help our clients prepare, plan and implement any changes they may need to in order to adhere to the new 'COVID-19 secure' guidelines.

The 'Staying COVID-19 Secure in 2020' poster should be displayed in your workplace to show you have followed this guidance.

**Please Note:** In the event of new local lockdowns / restrictions put in place by the authorities, employers must follow all instructions provided to them by local authorities.

## 1. Risk Assessment And Building Preparation

Evaluate what measures need to be put in place in your premise to ensure the safeguarding of employees, contractors and visitors. A COVID-19 risk assessment should be carried out ensuring you involve and consult your employees throughout this process.

Staff may be feeling anxious about returning to work and the measures the company are putting into place to safeguard them. Involving staff in your risk assessment process means that not only are you getting the correct input, meeting your legal obligations as employers but you are relieving some of that staff anxiety by including them in decision making for safeguarding matters.

Any risk assessment should be shared clearly and openly with your staff, you might want to:

- Email / print off copies of completed risk assessments to ensure all staff have received this.
- Put a notice on display stating that you have followed the COVID-19 Secure Guidance).
- Publish the results on your website (If you have over 50 employees the Government expect you to do this).

A deep clean of the premises / vehicles might be required before opening and on a regular basis depending on the nature of the business alongside a number of other measures outlined in the following sections.

## 2. Prepare And Protect The Workforce

When returning to the workplace, consultation with workers must take place including with trade unions (if applicable). Government advice states that a 'meaningful consultation' must take place which is an open conversation about returning to the workplace before the decision to return to work has been made. This should consider a person's use of public transport, childcare responsibilities, protected characteristics, and other individual circumstances. Extra consideration should be given to those people at higher risk.

To help contain the virus, office workers who can work effectively from home should do so over the winter. Where an employer, in consultation with their employee, judges an employee can carry out their normal duties from home they should do so. Public sector employees working in essential services, including education settings, should continue to go into work where necessary. Anyone else who cannot work from home should go to their place of work. The risk of transmission can be substantially reduced if COVID-19 secure guidelines are followed closely. Extra consideration should be given to those people at higher risk.

When it is decided that workers should come into their place of work then this will need to be reflected in the COVID-19 risk assessment and actions taken to manage the risks of transmission in line with this guidance.

For those that are working from home, keep in touch on a regular basis and monitor their wellbeing, ensure they can stay well connected with the rest of the workforce so they do not feel isolated.

Ensure remote workers have the correct equipment to work safely from home and can remote access work systems and shared drives etc.

On 12th October 2020 the government introduced a system of local COVID-19 alert levels. If you live, work or volunteer in an area that is part of local high or very high COVID-19 alert level, there are additional restrictions which apply to you.

Please check the local COVID-19 alert levels page to find out what level your area is in and the additional restrictions that apply.

You may wish to consider providing support to all workers around mental health and wellbeing this could be in the form of advice or access to telephone support, mental health wellbeing plans etc.

Particular attention should also be paid to people who live with "Clinically Extremely Vulnerable" individuals.

Those classed as "Clinically Extremely Vulnerable" must work from home during this period of restrictions.

**Note:** The two links below provide further information on each classification.

["Clinically Vulnerable"](#)

["Clinically Extremely Vulnerable"](#)

Higher-risk groups also include:

- Older males.
- Individuals with a high body mass index (BMI).
- Individuals with health conditions (e.g. diabetes).
- Individuals from some black, Asian or ethnic minority backgrounds.

This should be considered as part of your assessment.

Advice to clinically extremely vulnerable individuals on attending work differs depending on which Tier their local area is in. In Tier 1: Medium alert and Tier 2: High alert, clinically extremely vulnerable individuals are advised to work from home where possible but can still attend work if they cannot work from home.

In Tier 3: Very High alert, clinically extremely vulnerable individuals are strongly advised to work from home, but can still attend work if they cannot work from home.

In Tier 4: Stay at home, clinically extremely vulnerable individuals are strongly advised to work from home.

Employers should consider whether clinically extremely vulnerable individuals can take on an alternative role or change their working patterns temporarily to avoid travelling during busy periods.

Those that need to self-isolate due to symptoms of COVID-19 or contact with someone who has suspected symptoms should also be enabled to work from home if this has not already been done.

Remember to treat everyone in your workplace fairly when following the "COVID-19 Secure" Government guidance, it is against the law to discriminate directly or indirectly.

Consider whether you need to put in place any specific measures or adjustments in order to meet your duties under the equalities legislation.

Ensure any adjustments you put in place avoid disabled workers being put at a disadvantage and ensure you assess the health and safety risks for new or expectant mothers.

Those isolating or have to isolate as advised by the test and trace service, should be permitted to work from home where possible.

### **3. Implement Social Distancing**

What is social distancing? Social distancing is reducing day to day contact with other people as much as possible, in the first instance Businesses and workplace should encourage and enable their employees to work at home wherever possible. This will not be the case for everyone and as an employer you must ensure social distancing measures are followed in the workplace. These measures can include the following.

#### **Arriving And Leaving Work**

- Staggering work patterns if you have a large workforce so you are not crowding your workforce.
- Provide additional parking or facilities such as bike-racks in order to encourage staff to walk, run or cycle to work. Also providing more storage.
- Limiting passengers in corporate vehicles.
- If possible multiple one-way entrance and exit points to reduce congestion.
- Additional handwashing and sanitising facilities at entry / exit points.
- Maintaining use of security access devices and adjusting processes at entry / exit points to reduce transmission.

#### **Moving Around Buildings And Work Sites**

- If you have lifts in the workplace reducing the maximum capacity inside the lift making sure those with disabilities are able to access lifts.
- Restricting access between different areas of a building / site.
- Discourage non-essential trips.
- Introduce one-way flow systems if possible.
- Reducing the need for job and location rotation.
- Manage high traffic areas.

#### **Workstations And Desks**

- Ensuring social distancing rules between people are followed using floor tape / paint to achieve this.

- Installation of privacy screen between desks if it is not possible to move workstations further apart.
- If not possible to move workstations further apart then rearrange so workers are side by side or facing away from each other.
- Reducing the number of people each person has contact with for example having fixed teams or shifts.
- If possible, avoid the use of hot-desking.

### **Meetings**

- If possible, use remote video / telephone calls instead of face-to-face meetings.
- If this is unavoidable then meetings should maintain social distancing by ensuring the correct distance, meeting outdoors or in well ventilated large rooms. Provide sanitiser.
- No sharing of pens, stationery etc.
- Holding meetings outside where possible.
- Use signage to maintain social distancing.

### **Common Areas**

- Collaborate with managing agents and landlords.
- Stagger break times to reduce the number of persons in canteens / rest rooms or use outside.
- Consider creating additional break rooms if practicable.
- Reconfigure existing seating and tables to maintain spacing and encourage social distancing.
- Encouraging workers to bring own meals or if a canteen is in operation providing packaged meals.
- If possible, encourage staff to stay on-site during break times.
- When permitting make use of safe external areas of the business premises for staff to have a break.
- Workplace canteens providing on-site sit in services must now display an official NHS QR code poster.

### **Shouting**

- Ensure that steps are taken to avoid people needing to unduly raise their voices to each other. This would include refraining from playing music or broadcasts that may encourage shouting, including playing at a volume that makes normal conversation difficult.

**Note:** If in an emergency for example an accident or a fire people do not have to socially distance if it is unsafe to do so.

#### **4. Limit Access And Control**

If you have or operate from a premises. You will want to limit visitors and contractors to your sites / premises. In the first instance encourage remote connection such as video calls rather than face to face if possible.

A suggestion is to only allow business critical visitors and contractors access. These might include:

- Those delivering or collecting goods in order for the business to function.
- Contractors undertaking statutory repairs and services such as fire systems maintenance, LOLER (Lifting Operations and Lifting Equipment Regulations 1998) Thorough Examination and Inspections.
- Contractors undertaking emergency maintenance works.
- Members of the public purchasing goods.

#### **For visitors that are still required then the following should be considered:**

- Issuing site guidance on social distancing and hygiene prior to visitors' arrival or just as they arrive (for example a notice in the reception area).
- Limit the number of visitors at any time.
- If practicable maintain a record of all visitors.
- Review entrance and exit points for visitors and contractors to minimise contact with other staff.

#### **For inbound and outbound goods consider:**

- Revising pick up and drop off points.
- Consider reducing frequency of deliveries for example by ordering larger quantities less frequently.
- Minimising unnecessary contact at gatehouse security, yard and warehouse. For example, non-contact deliveries where the nature of the product allows for use of electronic pre-booking.
- If possible, and safe, use the same person(s) for loading or unloading vehicles.
- If possible, encourage delivery drivers to stay in vehicles.
- Restricting non-business deliveries for example personal deliveries to workers.
- Consider if cleaning procedures for goods and merchandise entering the site are required.

## 5. Ensure High Levels of Hygiene

Maintaining high levels of hygiene at your businesses premises and by your staff will minimize the spread of COVID-19. As mentioned earlier you may need a deep clean of the premises prior to opening, but most likely depending on the nature of the business, regular deep cleans will need to be undertaken.

Higher frequency cleaning should be considered in the following areas:

- Workspaces and work stations.
- Bathrooms and rest rooms.
- Canteens and break rooms.
- Reception areas.
- Showers and changing rooms.
- Other busy areas as applicable.

A number of other measures to consider are:

- Putting disinfectant sprays and wipes in prominent areas throughout the business, such as entrances and exits, kitchen areas, offices, at points of customer interaction and drop off / collection points.
- Ventilation into the building should be optimised to ensure a fresh air supply is provided to all areas of the facility and increased.
- Removing shared tools and equipment.
- If you have a ventilation system consult with your normal engineer to see if they need adjusting.
- Implement a clean desk and self-sanitising policy for staff, ensuring they are empowered to keep own equipment clean.
- Opening windows and doors to encourage ventilation.
- Where possible provide paper towels as an alternative to hand dryers.
- If the company has vehicles then cleaning procedures should be implemented for these.

### Staff Hygiene

It is also important that staff keep high levels of personal hygiene to minimise the risk of COVID-19 spreading. The two main forms of hygiene in this area are:

- A. **Respiratory Hygiene:** Ensuring all sneezes, coughs or blows of the nose are caught in tissues that are disposed of immediately, and hands washed immediately after. The NHS refer to this as "Catch it. Bin it. Kill it":



B. **Hand Hygiene:** The correct hand washing technique is important. The key steps are:

1. Wet hands with water.
2. Apply enough soap to cover all hand surfaces.
3. Rub soap in liberally to form a thick lather (bubbles) all over the hand, including between fingers and thumbs, wrists and nails.
4. This should be done for at least 20 seconds.
5. Hands then rinsed with water.
6. Hands dried with a single-use towel.

**Note:** hands should not be wet. Wet hands can spread bacteria 1,000 times faster than dry hands.

## 6. Personal Protective Equipment (PPE) And Face Coverings

PPE already used for non-COVID-19 reasons should still be worn. The guidance states “Unless you are in a situation where the risk of COVID-19 transmission is very high, your risk assessment should reflect the fact that the role of PPE in providing additional protection is extremely limited”.

However, if your risk assessment does show that PPE is required, then you must provide this PPE free of charge to workers who need it. Any PPE provided must fit properly.

There is growing evidence that wearing a face covering in an enclosed space helps protect individuals and those around them from COVID-19. However, face coverings are not an alternative for employees who wear a visor in close contact services.

Face coverings are not a replacement for the other ways of managing risk, including minimising time spent in contact, using fixed teams and partnering for close-up work, and increasing hand and surface washing.

Wearing a face covering is required by law when travelling as a passenger on public transport in England and will be mandatory in a number of indoor premises from the 24th July 2020. People are also encouraged to wear face coverings in enclosed public spaces where there are people they do not normally meet.

When wearing face coverings care should be exercised, including:

- Maintaining good hand hygiene before putting on a face covering and after taking it off.
- Changing the face covering regularly, and always after it gets damp or if they touch it.

## 7. Workforce Management

### Shift Patterns And Working Groups

You must aim to ensure that you change the way work is organised to create distinct groups and reduce the number of contacts each worker has.

- As far as possible, where staff are split into teams or shift groups, fixing these teams or shift groups so that where contact is unavoidable, this happens between the same people.
- Considering where congestion caused by people flow and 'pinch points' can be improved. Using one-way systems, staggered shifts and assigned staff mealtimes are possible ways to minimise the risk of transmission.
- You should assist the Test and Trace service by keeping a temporary record of all staff shift patterns for 21 days, if the NHS Test and Trace request this data you should assist them.
- When businesses are permitted to re-open in areas under Tier 1: Medium alert and Tier 2: High alert, you must ask one member of every party who visits your premises to provide their contact details to assist NHS Test and Trace. Refuse entry to those who refuse to provide contact details.

### Outbreaks In The Workplace

In the event of an outbreak in the workplace you should have a clear plan in place the following should be considered:

- As part of your COVID-19 risk assessment you should ensure there is an up-to-date plan in the event of a COVID-19 outbreak, the plan should nominate a single point of contact (SPOC) where possible who should lead on contacting local public health teams.

- If there are more than five cases of COVID-19 within 14 days associated with your workplace, you should contact the local PHE health protection teams to report the suspected outbreak.
- If the local PHE health protection team declares an outbreak, you will be asked to record details of symptomatic staff and assist with identifying contacts. You should therefore ensure all employment records are up to date. You will be provided with information about the outbreak management process, which will help you to implement control measures, assist with communications to staff, and reinforce prevention messages.

## 8. Communications And Training

Your aim must be to make sure all workers understand COVID-19 related safety procedures.

- Providing clear, consistent and regular communication to improve understanding and consistency of ways of working.
- Engaging with workers and worker representatives through existing communication routes to explain and agree any changes in working arrangements.
- Developing communication and training materials for workers prior to returning to site, especially around new procedures for arrival at work.

## 9. Ongoing Communications And Signage

You must aim to ensure that you make sure all workers are kept up to date with how safety measures are being implemented or updated.

- Ongoing engagement with workers, including through trade unions or employee representative groups, to monitor and understand any unforeseen impacts of changes to working environments.
- Awareness and focus on the importance of mental health at times of uncertainty. EAPs can support businesses.
- Communicating approaches and operational procedures with suppliers, customers or trade bodies to help their adoption and share experience.
- Using simple, clear messaging to explain guidelines using images and clear language, with consideration of groups for which English may not be their first language.
- Using visual communications, for example, whiteboards or signage, to explain changes to schedules, breakdowns or materials shortages without the need for face-to-face communications.

## 10. Inbound And Outbound Goods

You must ensure maintain social distancing and avoid surface transmission when goods enter and leave the site, especially in high volume situations, for example, distribution centres, and dispatch areas.

- Revising pick-up and drop-off collection points, procedures, signage and markings.
- Considering methods to reduce frequency of deliveries, for example by ordering larger quantities less often.
- Minimising unnecessary contact at gatehouse security, yard and warehouse. For example, non-contact deliveries where the nature of the product allows for use of electronic pre-booking.
- Where possible and safe, having single workers load or unload vehicles.
- Where possible, using the same pairs of people for loads where more than one is needed.
- Enabling drivers to access welfare facilities when required, consistent with other guidance.
- Encouraging drivers to stay in their vehicles where this does not compromise their safety and existing safe working practice, such as preventing drive-aways.
- Creating one-way flow of traffic in stockrooms.
- Adjusting put-away and replenishment rules to create space for social distancing. Where social distancing cannot be maintained due to workplace design, sufficient mitigation strategies should be designed and implemented.

## 11. Review

Finally you should review all your business changes on a regular basis. Government advice is changing as we learn more about COVID-19 and as we enter different phases of the lockdown measures. Any changes made will need to be reviewed on a much higher frequency than those of a normal risk assessment to ensure the latest guidance is being followed.