



## **APSE Briefing: COVID-19: New Guidance for Employers in Offices and Contact Centres**

**To all APSE members in England and for information to Wales, Scotland and Northern Ireland**

### **Key issues**

- Following announcements by the Prime Minister on Sunday 10 May as to a route map out of lockdown a series of measures have now been announced to support employers bringing staff back into the workplace.
- This briefing therefore provides links to the latest guidance effective as of the 12 May but subject to further updates on measures in relation to offices and contact centres, though many of the recommendations apply across other workplaces
- It is worth noting that this guidance has been prepared by BEIS in consultation with devolved administrations in Northern Ireland, Scotland and Wales; this guidance should be considered alongside local public health and safety requirements and legislation in Northern Ireland, Scotland and Wales.

### **1. Introduction**

Regardless of COVID-19 all employers have a duty to reduce workplace risk. This should be to the lowest reasonably practicable level by taking preventative measures. Therefore, given the known risks of COVID-19, workplaces cannot simply re-open without suitable assessments to ensure the health and safety of the workforce. This includes employers working with any other employers, or contractors, sharing the same workplace, so that everybody's health and safety is protected.

The guidance issued on the 11 May (updated / effective as of the 12 May 2020) suggests the following principle steps for offices, and contact centres; it also applies to the self-employed and to employees, who also have a duty of care for their own health and safety.

The guidance measures are: -

- In every workplace, increasing the frequency of handwashing and surface cleaning.
- Businesses and workplaces should make every reasonable effort to enable working from home as a first option. Where working from home is not possible, workplaces should make every

reasonable effort to comply with the social distancing guidelines set out by the government (keeping people 2m apart wherever possible).

- Where the social distancing guidelines cannot be followed in full, in relation to a particular activity, businesses should consider whether that activity needs to continue for the business to operate, and if so, take all the mitigating actions possible to reduce the risk of transmission between their staff.
- Further mitigating actions include:
  - Increasing the frequency of hand washing and surface cleaning.
  - Keeping the activity time involved as short as possible.
  - Using screens or barriers to separate people from each other.
  - Using back-to-back or side-to-side working (rather than face-to-face) whenever possible.
  - Reducing the number of people each person has contact with by using 'fixed teams or partnering' (so each person works with only a few others).
  - Finally, if people must work face-to-face for a sustained period with more than a small group of fixed partners, then you will need to assess whether the activity can safely go ahead. No one is obliged to work in an unsafe work environment.

The guidance also suggests that in assessments you should have particular regard to whether the people doing the work are especially vulnerable to COVID-19. The recommendations in the rest of the guidance suggest you should also consider specific sector guidance, for example by trade associations or trades unions and that if you have not already done so, you should carry out an assessment of the risks posed by COVID-19 in your workplace as soon as possible and it recommends that the guidance document is used to identify any further improvements that should be made.

## **2. The guidance**

This is a link to the full guidance document which runs to 32 pages and contains downloadable resources such as posters for employers.

[Working safely during COVID-19 in offices and contact centres Guidance for employers, employees and the self-employed](#)

It should be noted that councils have already extensively planned for remobilisation, including through APSE's remobilisation working groups, and in many cases, staff have remained on-site albeit with additional safety measures. This guidance should also be read in the context of the additional and specific guidance on work within vehicles, for example parks staff using transit vehicles on site, existing guidance in refuse and recycling, for example the WISH guidance which

has been regularly updated throughout the pandemic, and existing and new guidance on working in people's homes, for example repairs and maintenance teams and gas servicing. Briefings on these matters are available on the APSE COVID-19 support hub. However as more people transition back to the work environment the guidance may prove to be a useful 'check list' to ensure the safety and well-being of staff. It is also important to note that the document continues to emphasise home working 'where possible' but acknowledges that this test is not just be about workers in *"roles critical for business and operational continuity, safe facility management, or regulatory requirements and which cannot be performed remotely"* but also covers *"workers in critical roles which might be performed remotely, but who are unable to work remotely due to home circumstances or the unavailability of safe enabling equipment."* On this latter point a number of APSE members have raised, during remobilisation forum discussions, that although temporary working at home during the pandemic was accepted initially, there are increasing concerns about the sustainability of home working in the longer term. This guidance should therefore go some way to informing local decision making.

### **APSE recommendations**

Clearly all councils will have the safety of their workforce and service users at the heart of their decision-making processes. COVID-19 does not supersede the normal requirements for safe working and obligations under the Health and Safety at Work Act, and other regulatory requirements. Where workers are returning to council offices, contact centres or other workplaces undoubtedly consideration will need to be given to effective planning, to ensure that a safe transition to a physical workplace takes effect. There may be no current urgent need to bring people back into workplaces but, where this is necessary, then a phased transition, to test operational safety and practices would be a sensible place to start.

### **Further support**

The APSE COVID-19 support hub was set up to ensure quick information is available on frontline services to our member councils. You can access the hub using [this link](#).

APSE has also introduced new services to support our members including a rapid response network query service, dedicated WhatsApp groups, dedicated COVID-19 briefings and online forums for remobilisation of council services. To access these services please enter your details using [this link](#).

If your council is not a member of APSE you can enquire about joining using [this link](#).

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