

## Working from Home: Brief Guide for Employers

As more and more employees are being asked to work from home to help control the spread of COVID-19, employers are being faced with the task of ensuring that suitable measures are in place to protect and promote the health, safety and welfare of their employees while they are working from home.

In this brief guide we will look at the responsibilities that you have as an employer for the safety and wellbeing of your employees who are working from home, and how you can help to protect their physical and mental wellbeing during this challenging time.

### Employer's Responsibilities

The general duty on employer's contained in the Health and Safety at Work etc. Act 1974 to ensure the health, safety and welfare of their employees at work, so far as is reasonably practicable, applies equally to employees working from home.

There are of course many challenges to ensuring the wellbeing of employees in their home, as direct supervision and monitoring is extremely difficult. The fact that many employees who are currently working from home will not have previously done so and won't continue to do so following the current crisis, adds further challenges as they are unlikely to have appropriate workstations in their home (this is discussed further below).



Employees are also responsible for ensuring their own health, safety and welfare, and their responsibilities when working from home are arguably more extensive than in a traditional office environment as they are likely to be at least partially responsible for the electrical installation, gas safety, fire safety and many other aspects of health and safety that are managed by employers in traditional workplaces.

Perhaps the simplest way for both parties to ensure that they are meeting their responsibilities is for employers to provide appropriate guidance to employees on how to work safely from home, along with any necessary equipment; and for employees to provide confirmation to their employers that they are taking suitable measures to protect themselves. We have made the following documents available to assist you in this process:

**Working from Home: A Brief Guide for Employees** – This document has been developed to provide guidance to employees who may find themselves working from home for the first time, or on a more regular basis. The document sets out how employees can help to protect their physical and mental health when working from home. You may issue this guide directly to employees or use it to inform your own internal guidance.

**Temporary Home Worker Self-Assessment Checklist** – This checklist can be issued to employees for them to complete and return to their manager, or other nominated person. The checklist can then be reviewed to ascertain whether employees are taking the necessary steps to ensure their own health, safety and welfare, and to identify where additional information, guidance and/ or equipment may be required.

For a fee of £5\* per employee, we can provide you with an online Temporary Home Worker Self-Assessment, which also includes a guidance section. We will issue the guidance and assessment to your employees and compile the responses via an Excel spreadsheet to assist you in quickly identifying any issues that may need to be addressed. Please contact [ONE@hettleandrews.co.uk](mailto:ONE@hettleandrews.co.uk) for more information.

## The Health and Safety (Display Screen Equipment) Regulations



As is the case with most health and safety legislation, the Regulations concerning the use of Display Screen Equipment (DSE) apply equally to employees working from home. However, it is unrealistic to expect employers to provide employees who are only temporarily working from home with the same equipment that they will have access to in their usual workplace (e.g. a desk, office chair, monitor, etc.). It is therefore unlikely that employees will be able to set up a workstation at home that will meet the full requirements of the DSE Regulations.

The HSE (Health and Safety Executive) have acknowledged this fact and have stated that DSE assessments are not required for temporary home workers in the current situation. However, it is still important to encourage your employees to follow good practice when working with DSE to protect their physical health. As such, our recommendation is to provide your employees with guidance on the safe use of DSE when working at home, taking into account their limited equipment, and to provide inexpensive equipment (e.g. wireless keyboard and mouse, laptop riser, etc.) to assist them in setting up an appropriate temporary workstation. Guidance on the use of DSE is given in our brief guide for employees.

Whilst it is not necessary to complete a full DSE assessment, we have included some key points on the set-up of workstations in our [Temporary Home Worker Self-Assessment Checklist](#).

## Employee's Physical Health

Working from home has the potential to negatively impact on the physical health of your employees. Without having to commute into work and move around the workplace they may be considerably less active. Prolonged periods of time spent at a potentially make-shift workstation will also put strain on their back, neck, arms and wrists. Employees should therefore be encouraged to take regular breaks from their work to stand up, stretch and move around. Regular exercise should also be actively encouraged, ideally outdoors (within Government guidance). There is of course no expectation on you to ensure that your employees keep active, but it is recommended that you encourage them to do so and make it clear that they can take regular breaks from their computer.



As well as being beneficial for employees, having a physically active workforce has many benefits for employers. Exercise helps to reduce stress and anxiety and is generally beneficial for employee's mental health. Regular physical activity also helps employees to stay mentally alert and has been shown to improve productivity, memory and concentration.

## Employee's Mental Wellbeing

Whilst the physical health of employees is very important, it is their mental wellbeing that is perhaps most at risk during the current crisis. Social isolation, fear and uncertainty greatly increases the likelihood of employees suffering with mental health issues. There are some simple steps that can be taken to help protect the mental wellbeing of employees, and to identify when additional support may be needed, which centre around communication and support.



**Communication:** It is essential that regular communication is maintained between managers and their teams. At least once a week, managers should check in with their staff to make sure that they are coping with their home working arrangements, their workload, and to answer any questions or concerns that they may have. Managers should try to ask open ended questions and give employees the opportunity to speak openly and honestly.

Managers will also need to keep their team informed of any changes that may be taking place or provide reassurance that there are none planned. In uncertain times, rumours spread quickly and can cause undue stress and anxiety if left unchecked. It is not in your control to prevent the spread of false information about COVID-19, but you can help to minimise or prevent rumours about the future of your organisation or the security of particular roles. Providing employees with the facts will help to reduce hearsay and prevent undue anxiety.

It is also important that employees continue to speak regularly with their colleagues. For some, the contact they have with colleagues at work may account for most, or even all, of their social interactions. Without these regular interactions there is a very real possibility of them suffering from loneliness and depression. Employees should therefore be encouraged to speak to each other during the working day, not just about work but also general conversation, as would naturally occur in a traditional workplace.

Where possible the use of video calls should be promoted. There are many applications available (e.g. Microsoft Teams, Google Zoom) that can be used for video calls and conferencing, and the use of this technology will help people to feel more connected to those that they are speaking to, which is crucial at this time.

**Support:** If you do not already have a procedure in place for assisting employees who are suffering from stress or other forms of mental ill-health, now is the time to develop one. You should provide information to employees on who to speak to if they need help (e.g. line manager, HR) and provide details of any external resources they have access to (e.g. confidential helpline, occupational health, Employee Assistance Programme, etc.). If you do not already have an occupational health provider that you can refer employees to, it may be beneficial to identify some potential providers in advance.



A list of NHS Trust Occupational Health providers is available [here](#).

Regular reminders of the support that is available should be sent to employees. For smaller organisations this may simply be an email to remind staff that members of the management team are available and willing to hear any concerns or difficulties they may be having.

Guidance for employees on simple steps that they can take to look after their own mental wellbeing is given in our brief guide for employees.

## Manager's Mental Wellbeing

It is vitally important that managers also take care of their own mental wellbeing. It is easy for managers to focus on the wellbeing of their teams and neglect to take appropriate care of themselves. This has obvious implications for their own mental health and may also make them less effective as managers. The guidance given in our brief guide for employees is equally applicable to managers and may be referred to for some practical tips.

## Accidents and Incidents



More accidents occur in the home than in offices. The *Temporary Home Worker Self-Assessment Checklist* will help employees to identify and control some common hazards, but accidents may still occur. It is therefore important that employees are reminded of the need to report accidents, incidents and near misses that occur during the course of their work, and how to do so. Arrangements will also need to be put in place for the reports to be reviewed by a manager(s). This will help to identify common hazards and enable tailored guidance on preventing accidents to be developed and issued.