



Feidhmeannacht na Seirbhíse Sláinte
Health Service Executive

HSE Policy on Public Health Service Employees Working from Home during COVID-19

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1. Policy Statement

In line with the Government's *Roadmap for Reopening Society and Business*, public service employees will be required to return to the employer's work premises when and as necessary and deemed appropriate by their employer. Home working will continue as and when deemed appropriate by the employer. Any continuation of home working must be balanced with the requirement to continue to provide the most effective and efficient services to the public.

The purpose of this policy is to support the health and wellbeing of health service employees who are working from home during COVID-19; to ensure effective performance management and employee engagement; to ensure that good practice is followed by all employees when working from home; and to support the effective delivery of high quality services.

It is important to note that that any remote/home-based working arrangements that have been implemented due to COVID-19 are temporary and apply to the COVID-19 period only.

This policy will be subject to review, on a regular basis, and will be updated in line with the phases of the Roadmap to Recovery and official guidance.

2. Scope

This policy applies to all employees in the Health Service Executive (HSE) and Section 38 organisations who are remote working on a temporary basis during COVID-19. Some employees may be working a combination of on-site and remote working.

3. Roles and Responsibilities¹

3.1 ROLE OF MANAGERS

Line managers play an integral part in organisational business continuity by aiding the transition from working on-site to working from home during COVID-19. This includes supporting employees regarding health and wellbeing; performance management; training needs; and other supports as necessary.

¹ Guidance on the duties of employers and employees under the Safety, Health and Welfare at Work Act 2005 is available from the HSA's website [here](#).

The role of the line manager is a vital connection for employees during this pandemic. Line managers should provide support and assistance, to help employees to navigate their way through these unsettling times and crucially to provide direction to employees on how to adapt to the current circumstances.

Line managers can experience additional challenges while working from home as they must also adjust to managing a team who are working remotely. The HSE website provides guidance on managing a team working from different locations:

<https://healthservice.hse.ie/staff/coronavirus/working-from-home/managing-a-team-working-from-different-locations.html>

Line managers should check in regularly with their staff and utilise the online tools designed to help teams communicate and work as a group (see link for details). There are a number of options available for audio and video conferencing and managers should avail of those approved by their organisation.

Line managers at all levels must continue to lead, engage with and manage the performance and development of their teams.

The HSE website provides information on a range of issues that are integral to safe and effective remote working.

<https://healthservice.hse.ie/staff/coronavirus/working-from-home/getting-ready-to-work-from-home.html>

Line managers at all levels should:

- Promote a positive, open and inclusive working environment where individuals and teams feel valued and supported while remote working.
- Be open to new ways of working - discuss and agree flexibility around work times with their employees (for example, to accommodate caring responsibilities).
- Empower their employees to take responsibility for their work whilst providing support and guidance.
- Help their employees to avoid burnout and overworking by encouraging a healthy routine around the hours they work, for example, set their start time and end time and take breaks – allowing flexibility around other responsibilities where needed.
- Inform employees of their right to disconnect and maintain a healthy work-life balance.
- Be a role model and proactively manage their own health and wellbeing.

Maximise individual and team productivity and performance

Managers at all levels should:

- Assign work duties in the normal manner and set clear work priorities, objectives and expectations. Focus on what employees should be accomplishing and consider how best to support employees in achieving their agreed objectives in the short term while at the same time developing their knowledge and skills in the longer term.
- Provide feedback on work performance and address issues promptly as they arise.
- Trust employees to get on with their work but provide them with ongoing support and supervision. Without trust, working relationships can deteriorate and well-being can suffer.
- Ensure employees have access to the relevant tools, systems and equipment to perform their jobs and help them adjust to new ways of working.
- Review their own and their team members' individual learning and development needs in light of remote working and job requirements.
- Enhance opportunities for participation and recognition as these not only motivate the individual, but serve as a strong signal to other team members that their contribution is valued.

Engaging employees and communicating effectively

Managers at all levels should:

- Maintain close and regular contact with their employees to maximise engagement at an individual and team level and seek to offer support as and when required.
- Keep employees informed of ongoing developments by regularly communicating relevant organisational and team information and enabling dial-in/log-in for briefings/meetings.
- Hold regular online team meetings to share updates, discuss the work programme, agree ways of working, and support employees.
- Hold frequent one-to-one conversations to discuss outputs, progress and development options.
- Acknowledge that virtual communications are different — and won't be perfect — but should still be professional and respectful of others. Agree on 'meeting etiquette' to facilitate effective online discussion such as video on/video off, utilising the 'mute' function when not speaking to minimise background noise, etc.
- Make time for social conversations. This increases rapport, reduces feelings of isolation and eases communication between employees working from home.
- Look after the health and wellbeing of employees— keep a look out for any signs of anxiety or distress. Remind employees of existing health and wellbeing supports within the organisation including online supports.

3.2 ROLE OF EMPLOYEES

All employees have a responsibility to ensure so far as is reasonably practicable that they maintain a safe environment while working from home in accordance with their obligations under the Safety, Health and Welfare at Work Act 2005 and to comply with guidance from their manager (see Section 5 of this Policy). Employees must remain contactable during working hours and productive in their work and maintain regular contact with their line manager. All employees should:

- Adhere to the organisation's policies and procedures in the normal manner
- Participate in online/teleconference meetings as required
- Protect themselves and others from harm during the course of their work, for example, take care of any equipment provided and report any issues without delay in the normal manner.
- Notify their line manager if they have a disability or are sensitive to risk (for example, pregnant, mobility needs) and have specific workspace or equipment needs/concerns.
- Be available and contactable to their colleagues and line manager throughout the working day.
- Co-operate with work priorities and timelines and request support or assistance if required.
- Comply with the organisation's arrangements for recording working hours and rest breaks.
- Inform their line manager if unable to work on a given day for example, due to illness, and follow the normal procedures.

4. Health & Wellbeing

The health and wellbeing of all employees is paramount, particularly throughout the pandemic. Line managers should be aware of issues that may be impacting employees in the current environment such as the feeling of isolation, maintaining a work-life balance etc. and should provide information on accessing organisational supports available.

Guidance on Health and Wellbeing is available from the HSE's website:

<https://healthservice.hse.ie/staff/coronavirus/>

<https://www.hse.ie/eng/staff/workplace-health-and-wellbeing-unit/employee-assistance-and-counselling-service/>

5. Health, Safety and Welfare at Work

Under the Safety, Health and Welfare at Work Act 2005, employers have a duty to ensure, so far as is reasonably practicable, the safety, health and welfare at work of their employees, including those who are working from home. This covers (non-exhaustively) the completion of risk assessments, the provision of supervision, education and training and the implementation of sufficient control measures to protect employees who are working remotely. Information on the HSE's safety management policy and key systems and structures can be found in the Corporate Safety Statement 2020 (CSS) and the Integrated Risk Management Framework, as well as local Site/Service Specific Safety Statements (SSSS) and topic-specific Safety Policies². For further information see:

- <https://www.hse.ie/eng/staff/safetywellbeing/>
- <https://www.hse.ie/eng/about/qavd/riskmanagement/risk-management-documentation/hse%20integrated%20risk%20management%20policy%202017.html>

Due to the exceptional circumstances that have resulted in employees working remotely at short notice during the pandemic, the ideal setup may not be reasonably practicable but clear guidance should be given to employees. Decisions on control measures must be based on risk assessment. Further guidance on the risk assessment process can be found at the following link:

- <https://www.hse.ie/eng/staff/safetywellbeing/healthsafetyand%20wellbeing/safetystatementsandriskassessments.html>

Key roles and responsibilities are detailed in the HSE's Corporate Safety Statement, Site/Service Specific Safety Statements and, with specific reference to home working, the HSE's Guidance Document COVID-19 - Home Working (**Ref: GD:011:00**). This information can be found at the following link:

- <https://www.hse.ie/eng/staff/safetywellbeing/>

The Safety, Health and Welfare at Work Act, 2005 places specific duties on both managers and employees. In the context of home working, these duties are summarised below:

Managers' responsibilities include:

- Managing and conducting all work activities to ensure, so far as reasonably practicable, the safety, health and welfare of employees

² Section 38 organisations should refer to their health and safety policies and related documents.

- Assessing risks and implementing appropriate control measures, paying due regard to vulnerable and pregnant employees
- Providing safe systems of work that are planned, organised, and maintained
- Providing safe equipment including personal protective equipment, where necessary
- Providing information, instruction, training and supervision regarding safety and health to employees, and
- Having plans in place for emergencies.

Employees' responsibilities include:

- Cooperating with their manager and following their instructions
- Protecting themselves and others from harm during the course of their work, e.g. taking care of any work equipment provided and reporting any defects immediately to their manager
- Reporting any injury arising from work activity to their manager in line with HSE Incident Management Framework, 2018³
- Following procedures that have been put in place by their manager.

The HSE website provides guidance to employees on how to minimise risks and improve comfort and productivity while working from home:

<https://healthservice.hse.ie/staff/coronavirus/working-from-home/setting-up-your-work-space-at-home.html>

<https://www.hse.ie/eng/staff/safetywellbeing/healthsafetyand%20wellbeing/safetystatementsandriskassessments.html>

6. Induction

An effective induction process is essential for ensuring new employees successfully adapt to the organisation's values and professional expectations of their new role, enabling them to carry out their work to the required standards. Line managers should be conscious that it can be challenging for employees who join an organisation in a remote environment to adjust to the organisation's culture and gain the formal and informal knowledge that may be more readily accessible in a face-to-face work setting and may assist them in becoming proficient in a shorter timeframe. Consideration should also be given to existing employees who commence a new role within the

³ Section 38 organisations should refer to their equivalent policies and procedures.

organisation (for example, promotion or transfer) as this may require the employee to join a new team and take on new tasks and responsibilities. Therefore, it is important for managers to implement an induction process that meets the requirements of employees joining a new role remotely and maintain contact with new employees to offer any additional supports that may be required to facilitate their integration.

Role of Line Managers

Managers at all levels should:

- Ensure new employees have the equipment and access required to carry out their role effectively.
- Use video conferencing, where possible, to introduce new employees to their colleagues.
- Give new employees the opportunity to attend team meetings as quickly as possible
- Adopt innovative solutions to facilitate the delivery of information or training that would traditionally have been provided in person.
- Set objectives and carry out the probationary process in the normal manner to ensure performance expectations are clearly communicated to the new employee from the outset and any issues addressed in a timely manner.
- Schedule regular video conferencing/phone calls with new employees and use this time to check how the employee is settling in, encourage and answer any questions they may have and discuss progress with assigned tasks in order to identify any support they may need.
- Encourage team colleagues to pro-actively engage with the new member of the team to ensure that they are actively involved in social and work initiatives and can build up a support network amongst colleagues.
- Inform new employees about any upcoming online social events and networking opportunities arranged by the organisation that will give the employee an opportunity to get to know their colleagues.

Further information on **Induction Guidelines and Checklists Revised for COVID-19 Pandemic** is available from the HSE's website:

<https://www.hse.ie/eng/staff/resources/employee-resource-pack/>

HSE employees can register for HSELand at this link: <https://www.hseland.ie/dash/Registration>

7. Supports

7.1 CARING RESPONSIBILITIES

It is recognised that many employees are currently having to balance work responsibilities with personal caring responsibilities (children, elders, other dependants) during this time. At all times both managers and employees should be as flexible as possible in addressing these challenges. Where employees are unable to work their standard working hours, arrangements should be agreed between the employee and their line manager to accommodate this. This may include agreed common contact times which take account of responsibilities in the home.

7.2 LEARNING AND DEVELOPMENT

Establishing Effective Virtual Teams is an e-learning programme on HSeLanD (www.hseland.ie) which is available for everyone. A new virtual programme is currently in development which will focus on *Managing Virtual Teams Effectively* and this will launch late in 2020.

Tips for effective video conferencing are available at Appendix A.

7.4 TECHNOLOGY/EQUIPMENT

Issues for consideration by the line manager include, but are not limited to, the following:

- Types of devices to use
- Immediate access to technical support via helpdesk, phone number etc.
- Security/firewall etc.
- Methods and contingencies for fixing devices used for work

Employees have a responsibility to take necessary precautions to safeguard their equipment and ensure that the appropriate policies are followed in relation to security, personal data and work use.

Requests from employees to bring appropriate office equipment home should be facilitated where appropriate to enable employees to work effectively. Removal of equipment from the workplace should be documented thereby ensuring an appropriate audit trail.

Managers should give particular consideration to the needs of employees who have a disability or who are sensitive to risk (for example, pregnant, mobility needs) and provide reasonable accommodation where appropriate and as far as practicable.

Guidance is available from the HSE's website

<https://healthservice.hse.ie/staff/coronavirus/working-from-home/getting-ready-to-work-from-home.html>

The National Cyber Security Centre has issued guidance in relation to the key challenges arising during remote working including phishing, vishing, remote access threats and business email compromise. The guidance also contains advice on how employees working from home can maximise wi-fi security, good practice when using personal or work devices, and remote conferencing. This guidance is available via this link: [Cyber Security Guidance on Working from Home](#).

7.6 EXPENSES

Health service employees may claim tax relief from Revenue in respect of the additional costs of working from home, such as light, heat and electricity. Public servants are **not** entitled to payment of a daily allowance in respect of working from home. It is open to employees to make claims directly from the Office of the Revenue Commissioners in respect of actual costs incurred in working from home at the end of the relevant tax year, in accordance with the relevant tax laws. Any claim made in this regard is solely a matter for the individual employee. Further details on how to claim expenses on tax returns are available at: <https://www.revenue.ie/en/tax-professionals/tdm/income-tax-capital-gains-tax-corporation-tax/part-05/05-02-13.pdf>

8. Terms and Conditions

During this temporary arrangement the employee's contracted terms and conditions of employment remain the same when working from home. Flexi-time arrangements do not apply to employees who are working from home during COVID-19.

- Employees are expected to fulfil their contractual weekly hours, however where flexibility is required around start/finish times, employees should engage with their line manager. Employees who are remote working continue to be subject to the provisions of the Organisation of Working Time Act 1997. Employees should avail of their normal breaks throughout the day and average weekly working hours should not exceed the maximum 48-hour limit.

- All leave entitlements remain the same. Line managers should ensure that employees are availing of annual leave in a way that supports wellbeing, and should ensure that employees take their statutory leave entitlement at a minimum. Managers should facilitate requests for annual leave where possible so that once the crisis passes, organisations can meet increased demand on services without having to cater to a large volume of annual leave requests.
- Sick leave arrangements including pay thresholds remain the same. Employees who become ill/injured while working from home should notify their line manager, as soon as possible, and adhere to the organisation's Managing Attendance Policy and Procedure.
- The provisions in respect of *Special Leave with Pay for COVID-19* are set out in the HSE Circular on the FAQ for Public Service Employers during COVID-19 issued by DPER. The latest version of the HSE Circular/FAQ is available from the Circulars section on the HSE Website [here](#).
- Employees continue to be covered by the organisation's policies and procedures and are required to comply with these in the normal manner, albeit remotely. In some cases, employees may be required to attend the physical workplace for specific onsite meetings.
- The place of work will remain the same. The working from home arrangement is temporary in nature to address the health and safety risks associated with the current pandemic and no employee will have an automatic entitlement to continue remote working.

9. Security, Confidentiality, Secrecy and Standards of Behaviour

Employees working from home are responsible for both the security of any official devices issued to them and the information stored on these devices. The same responsibilities apply to employees enabled to work from home using their own device. The following protocols apply;

- Storing of work-related documents – these should be locked away (See Section 10).
- Work-related calls should be conducted in a confidential setting.
- E-Filing – maintain security by password protecting sensitive/confidential documents. Laptop etc. should be shut down when not in use and when the employee leaves the home.
- Use of IT equipment – Organisational IT equipment should be used in line with relevant organisational policies.
- FOI – all records on computers/laptops etc., including instant messaging conversations are encompassed under the FOI Acts.
- Standards of Behaviour –when working from home, employees are governed by the same policies, procedures and standards of behaviour and professionalism that apply in the physical work environment.

- Disclosure of Information – employees remain subject to obligations in respect of confidentiality and the requirement to avoid the improper disclosure of information gained in the course of their work.

10. Data Protection

- All employees should be aware that their obligations under the GDPR are not confined to the physical workplace. They also apply when working from home and working remotely in any location.
- All employees must adhere to the employer's Data Protection Policy and be mindful of the principles of GDPR:
 - Lawfulness, fairness and transparency
 - Purpose limitation
 - Data minimisation
 - Accuracy
 - Storage limitation
 - Integrity and confidentiality
 - Accountability
- Employees who are processing personal data must have a legal basis to do so - Article 6 and Article 9 (special category data) of the GDPR refers.
- The Data Protection Commission (DPC) website provides the following guidance on how to ensure compliance when working remotely:
 - <https://www.dataprotection.ie/en/protecting-personal-data-when-working-remotely-0>
 - <https://www.dataprotection.ie/en/news-media/blogs/tips-avoiding-data-breaches>

11. Review

This Policy will be reviewed on an ongoing basis to adapt to any changes to public health advice and official guidance in relation to COVID-19.

Appendix A – Tips for the Effective Use of Video Conferencing

Working from home has resulted in most communications now being carried out via video conferencing. The following are general tips and associated risks in the use of video conferencing.

- Appropriate internet connectivity speed for specific tasks will be required e.g. audio/video conferencing, collaboration, etc.
- Be aware of contention on the line within the house
- Turn off smart speakers (especially for phone and video calls)
- Be aware of background and surroundings if on video calls
- If getting an echo on call reset (unplug and plug back in) headset/microphone
- Mute microphones if on video conference calls when not talking
- Turn off internal microphone on laptop or hybrid if using an external speaker as it may lead to echoes
- Use a headset if possible as it reduces speaker and microphone issues
- Ensure all devices are secured at all times including at home and travelling to/from work
- Be mindful when using video conferencing for conversations on matters of a highly confidential nature

Further guidance is available from the HSE's website

<https://healthservice.hse.ie/staff/coronavirus/working-from-home/managing-a-team-working-from-different-locations.html>

A range of videos for the Civil and Public Service are available to employees and managers to support successful home working which can be accessed via these links:

- [Organising and Chairing Effective Virtual Meetings](#)
- [Tips for Effective Virtual Meetings](#)
- [Remote Working during COVID-19](#)
- [Remote Working for Managers during COVID-19](#)