COVID-19 and returning to work

23 Jul 2020

On Friday 18 July, the Government announced major changes to their policy on controlling the risk from the Covid-19 coronavirus.

These were:

- Permitting a full return to use of public transport, so long as a face covering is worn.
- From 1 August, allowing employers to decide how their employees can work safely, rather than mandating that everyone who can stay at home does so.

These are substantial changes, and it is important to recognise that this does not simply mean that all workplaces reopen, and we are back to 'business as usual'. In making the announcement, Prime Minister Boris Johnson made it clear that these changes are conditional – they will be suspended if the rate of infection rises to a second peak in the autumn or winter of 2020.

The Prime Minister also pointed out that the changes do not mean that workers should no longer work from home – simply that employers must now decide for themselves how best to manage the Covid risk, and that this can still include working from home.

GMB's Five #MakeWorkSafe Tests - click to expand

1. Consult with the workforce and their union – GMB

2. Enable working from home wherever possible

3. Protect and support for vulnerable and at-risk groups

4. Secure safe transport to work and on-site

5. Ensure systems of work are safe - with enough PPE for everyone who needs it

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1 August also sees changes to the shielding arrangements for extremely clinically vulnerable people in England and Scotland, with Wales pausing their arrangements from 16 August. This will permit those workers who have been shielding to return to the workplace if they cannot perform their job role at home.

These changes mean employers should now take a range of actions, before any widespread return to work. These include:

- Surveying the workforce on their ability and readiness to return to the workplace. Workers' health, caring responsibilities and transport situation may have changed during lockdown, and employers should not simply assume that every worker can immediately resume their pre-Covid duties.

- Performing risk assessments specifically on the risk of Covid exposure, in consultation with GMB. If the workplace is already open, but more workers will be returning, the risk assessment will still need to be reviewed and updated. Click for more details.

- Implementing measures to ensure that social distancing requirements are met, and workers are protected as far as is achievable. Measures for consideration should include:

    - The provision of screens, barriers and other measures as needed to segregate the workplace
    - Provision of hand sanitiser throughout the workplace
    - Cleaning the workplace more frequently, especially in areas of high contact such as entrances, exits, door handles, kitchen and bathroom areas etc.
    - Staggering shift start and finish times to avoid large numbers of workers entering or exiting the workplace at the same time.
    - Allowing workers who travel into work using public transport to work outside of peak hours
    - Consider providing facilities such as bike storage and showers to allow people to travel to work by bike or running rather than using public transport

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- Performing specific individual risk assessments on workers who have been shielding, involving Occupational Health professionals where needed. One risk assessment tool is the Covid19 Age Tool, developed by the Association of Local Authority Medical Advisors – <u>see here for more</u>. This is not a substitute for a full risk assessment, but is a useful starting point. GMB strongly recommends that where the job role can be performed at home, all workers who have been shielding remain working at home. If this is not possible, then those workers should work away from the public wherever possible.

- Performing specific risk assessments on all BAME (Black Asian and Minority Ethnic) workers, as there is clear evidence of increased risk of serious ill-health from Covid for BAME workers. GMB is developing a pre-assessment tool for BAME Workers to feed into the employer risk assessment, and we encourage all BAME GMB members to make use of this.

GMB's Risk Assessment Checklist - click to expand

We've put together a checklist of 10 areas to cover when doing a COVID-19 risk assessment

- Ensuring that updated risk assessments are in place for all disabled workers, particularly where maintaining social distancing is likely to be challenging. This must include the creation or updating of Personal Emergency Evacuation Plans for emergency situations.

- Providing all the necessary Personal Protective Equipment necessary for safe working as identified by the risk assessments. See the <u>GMB Get Me PPE Toolkit</u> for further details.

- Giving clear information on what changes have been made to the workplace, how this will affect the work being performed, and giving clear expectations on what workers should be doing.

- Providing a Return to Work induction to the workplace changes, and ensuring that any training on new processes, equipment or policies is in place before work commences. This should include full training on any PPE provided and explaining procedures for cleaning areas or equipment and on handwashing.

- Having a clear policy in place to handle suspected or confirmed cases of Covid at work, that clearly spells out the impact on the rest of the workforce. This should specify the actions taken if a worker develops Covid symptoms, and the expectations on workers if

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Covid is confirmed in terms of self-isolation.

- Clearly explaining the policy on track and trace, particularly the arrangements on pay to ensure that workers required to self-isolate are paid, do not lose holiday entitlement and are not subject to disciplinary action. <u>See this for more information</u>.

- Having a well-understood contingency plan in place if a local lockdown is enacted, so everyone is clear on how they are expected to work.

More detailed guidance is likely from governments in England, Northern Ireland, Scotland and Wales, and we will update this page whenever further announcements are made.