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Coronavirus (COVID-19) advice for UK employers

Understand how to support your business and workforce through a global health emergency

Introduction

The new coronavirus disease, officially named COVID-19, has been declared a pandemic by the World Health Organization. As the virus continues to spread extensively, it's likely to pose a significant challenge to many organisations.

This factsheet provides an overview of the current coronavirus situation. It explains what the virus is and gives advice on how employers should respond to the threat and support employees by being prepared, looking after employees' health and safety, precautions for employees returning from travel, and developing flexible resourcing plans.

We're updating this factsheet regularly to ensure it reflects Government advice as this evolves.

What is coronavirus?

Coronaviruses (CoV) are a large family of viruses that cause illness ranging from the common cold to more severe diseases such as MERS-CoV and SARS (Cov). The official name for this new disease, not previously seen in humans, is COVID-19. It was first identified in Wuhan City, in Hubei province, China.

COVID-19 spreads in a similar way to flu, where there is close contact between people. If someone with the virus coughs or exhales and is within a metre of someone else, the other person could catch it by breathing in droplets of infected fluid. People can also catch it by touching contaminated surfaces or objects. Most people infected with the virus have mild symptoms and recover, but some experience more serious illness and may need hospital care. People over 40 seem to be more vulnerable, as are those with weakened immune systems or an underlying health condition such as diabetes, cancer

and lung disease.

The incubation period of COVID-19 is between 2 and 14 days. Common signs of infection include a fever, a cough and difficulty in breathing.

On 12 March the Government announced that the UK is moving from the 'contain' into the 'delay' stage of the outbreak, and the risk to the public has now been raised from moderate to high by the UK Chief Medical Officers.

In January 2020, the World Health Organization (WHO) declared the virus a public health emergency of international concern. As it's spreading around the world, and spreading quickly, the WHO has now categorised it as a 'pandemic' which, in WHO terms, is 'the worldwide spread of a disease'.

Currently, a key concern for UK employers is dealing with travel of people to and from the most affected areas. The Foreign and Commonwealth Office (FCO) publish an A to Z of countries with detailed information and travel advice for each country. FCO travel advice remains under constant review: keep up to date with the latest advice on travel.

How employers should respond to the COVID-19 threat

As the virus continues to spread, it's likely to pose a significant threat to some organisations. We live in a global economy and many employers have operations or supply chains based overseas. The level of risk an organisation may face will depend on whether it's directly or indirectly affected in this way. An organisation may also be affected if it employs people who have travelled back from an affected area, or been in contact with anyone who has been affected by the virus. People's health and well-being, and measures to prevent the virus from spreading should be at the heart of every employer's response.

The virus is likely to cause wider disruptions with suppliers and customers, and could lead to shortages of fuel and other basic commodities. There may also be disruptions to public transport and large social or sporting events, and school closures.

As measures to stem the spread of COVID-19 take on increasing priority, we'll collate and publish updated resources to support your response on our Responding to the coronavirus hub.

Be informed and prepared

- **Keep up to date with Government and public health advice**: This is a fast-moving

issue. Employers should keep up to date with the situation as it develops and refer employees who are concerned about infection to official and expert medical sources such as GOV.UK and the National Health Service. Use the basic but effective ways to help prevent the infection's spread, including:

- Making sure your workplace is clean and hygienic.
- Promoting regular and thorough hand-washing by everyone.
- Providing all employees with an alcohol-based hand rub.
- Encouraging people to use and bin tissues.

- **Refer to the NHS 111 online coronavirus service** for more guidance.

- **There are some countries and areas where there's a higher risk** of coming into contact with someone with COVID-19. The Foreign and Commonwealth Office lists a number of countries/areas where it may be necessary to get medical advice: check out the Government's travel advice pages and how to contact NHS 111.

- **Government data on COVID-19 is updated at 14:00 daily**, and it's vital that organisations keep up to date with the latest official advice. On 12 March the Government and public health advice is for anyone with certain symptoms (a high temperature of 37.8 degrees or above and a new, continuous cough), to self-isolate at home, regardless of whether they have travelled to affected areas. People in this situation do not have to call NHS 111 to go into self-isolation. The NHS will no longer be testing people who are self-isolating with mild symptoms. On 12 March the Government published this 'stay at home' guidance.

- **Develop a contingency plan**: Every organisation will need to assess its own level of exposure to business disruption caused by the virus. If it has a site, conducts business or has supply chains in China or another seriously affected region, there will be a direct impact to day-to-day operations. The plan will need to take account of current and potential impacts and manage the specific business risks associated with the disruption, including service delivery and workforce issues. Communicate the plan to key teams and individuals across the business.

- **Build a contingency team**: Identify a person, or small group of people, to take responsibility for operating the contingency plan and allocate clear responsibilities for its implementation.

- **As the situation develops**: Those responsible for the contingency plan should meet regularly to review the preparations and ensure they are still fit for purpose. It's important to act early, even if planned contingencies are not then needed.

Look after people's health, well-being and safety

Employees' health, safety and well-being during a global health emergency like COVID-19 should be paramount. Employers have a statutory duty of care for people's health and safety, and to provide a safe place to work, but there's also a strong moral responsibility to ensure that employees feel safe and secure in their employment. Employers need to be proactive to protect their people and minimise the risk of the virus spreading.

Many people will be concerned about the risk of infection and will need reassurance. Communicate clearly to employees that they need to take basic hygiene precautions such as effective hand-washing, avoid travel to affected areas and/or coming into contact with infected or potentially infected people. Follow official public health and medical advice closely and advise them on what to do if they think they may have caught the virus, or are at risk of contracting it.

As the spread of the virus continues, employers are likely to face the following situations:

- **If employees have been told by a medical professional to self-isolate**:

  Statutory Sick Pay (SSP): In the Budget on 11 March, the Government announced a range of new measures around SSP. If NHS 111 or a doctor advises an employee or worker to self-isolate, they are entitled to SSP. This includes individuals who may be a carrier of COVID-19 who may not have symptoms, and will also apply to people caring for those in the same household who display COVID-19 symptoms and have been told to self-isolate. The Government has also announced that Statutory Sick Pay will be made available from day one (instead of from day four) for those affected by coronavirus when self-isolating. These provisions will become law in the forthcoming COVID-19 Bill. The Budget also announced measures whereby employers with less than 250 employees can claim a refund for COVID-19 related SSP costs (up to two weeks per employee).

  Medical evidence for SSP: Employees can currently self-certify for the first seven days, and Government advice is that employers should use discretion around the need for medical evidence for absence where an employee is advised to self-isolate in the current exceptional circumstances. In the 11 March Budget, the Government announced it will introduce a temporary alternative to the current fit note in the coming weeks for the duration of the COVID-19 outbreak whereby those in self-isolation can obtain a notification via NHS 111 to use as evidence for absence from work.

  An alternative option to providing sick pay is to allow people who are asked to self-isolate to work from home wherever possible, and continue to pay as normal.

- **If an employer sends people home as a precaution**: Employees are following the reasonable instruction of their employer and should get their normal pay.

- **If employees choose to self-isolate but have not been advised to by a medical professional, and have no symptoms**: Employees who voluntarily self-isolate without symptoms, and without their employer's agreement, could be required to attend work by their employer. However, employers should take people's concerns seriously, especially if there are underlying health conditions, including mental ill health.

- **If an employee's children are sent home because of school closure**: Many employees would be able to work from home and employers would have to expect there to be some disruption to a person's ability to work as normal, depending on the child's age. Employees may choose to take this time off as holiday so normal processes and pay apply. If an employee is unable to work from home, they could be granted unpaid <u>emergency time off</u> or unpaid <u>parental leave</u>.

Wider health and well-being concerns

- Keep up to date and follow official medical advice as it's updated. Reassure employees if they have concerns, and keep them well informed about your organisation's policies and contingency plans, particularly in relation to the specific guidelines for employees who have returned from affected areas, or have been in contact with an infected person or with an individual who has returned from affected areas. Make sure everyone, including managers, understands which sick pay and leave policies apply and how these will be implemented. Actively communicate this advice with your people, customers and suppliers.

- Implement an internal communication strategy so that employees are aware of measures being taken to manage the situation in your organisation. Understand that some people may have real concerns about catching the virus, while others may have worries about family or friends stranded in, or returning from, an affected area. It's important to strike the balance between your organisation and its people being prepared for the spread of the virus whilst reassuring people that there is no need to panic. Ensure that line managers are regularly informed about the organisation's contingency plans and how to discuss the situation with any concerned employees, and where to signpost people to for further advice or support, including employee assistance programmes and/or counselling if they are anxious.

- Promote the resources you have available to support people's health and well-being generally, including those through an employee assistance programme.

- Now that the virus is spreading widely and has been declared a pandemic, the risk of infection is heightened. Be prepared to step up the level of support you provide to staff and adjust your resourcing plans accordingly. Keep in mind anyone who may be more vulnerable due to a pre-existing health condition, or disability, age, or

pregnancy, and be aware of the additional duties you have as an employer to these specific groups of employees.

Develop flexible resourcing plans

- As part of your contingency plan, explore more flexible resourcing strategies in case your organisation experiences staffing shortages. If roles can't be performed at home, consider more innovative resourcing solutions that may need to be deployed, such as split shifts to cover essential operations or services.

- Develop strategies to maximise the amount of home working to prevent the spread of infection. There are many roles that could be performed remotely with little disruption to service delivery.

- Investigate ways of using technology to limit the amount of face-to-face contact, for example, video conferencing to facilitate remote meetings. For customer-facing organisations, consider introducing or maximising the use of self-service options and online services. Consider issuing staff with laptops so they can work remotely if necessary.

- Increased sickness absence may create a need for other employees, if willing, to work longer hours to keep your business going. If this happens, you will need to comply with the Working Time Regulations 1998 to ensure appropriate length of daytime working hours, night shifts and rest breaks.

- Have plans ready to enable your organisation to operate on a skeleton staff if necessary. Identify key services and roles that are essential and can't be put on hold, as well as projects or roles that could be temporarily stood down. Identify those individuals and managers who have transferrable skills, who can fulfil more than one function and could be allocated to more essential roles.

- Carry out a resourcing risk assessment of the organisation, identifying essential areas of the business where few employees have the required skills. Training additional employees in these skills should be considered. Ensure that procedures are developed to ensure smooth handovers for employees who are filling in for colleagues in unfamiliar roles. It may be necessary to provide additional training and a risk assessment if individuals are moving to roles where there may be a healthy and safety risk.

- If your operations are severely affected, consider introducing a voluntary special leave policy on a temporary basis whereby individuals can opt to take paid or unpaid leave. Be mindful that there could be some employees who are willing to take additional time off and welcome a break, but others may struggle financially if they lose pay. Consider offering a shorter working week or other flexible resourcing

arrangements, and communicate the business reasons to employees.

Useful contacts and further reading

Contacts

UK Government – Coronavirus (COVID-19): UK government response

UK Government - COVID-19: guidance for employers and businesses

UK Government - Foreign travel advice

National Health Service - Coronavirus (COVID-19)

Acas – Coronavirus advice for employers and employees

World Health Organization - Coronavirus disease (COVID-19) outbreak

World Health Organization – Getting your workplace ready for COVID-19

Books and reports

DEPARTMENT OF HEALTH AND SOCIAL CARE. (2020) *Coronavirus action plan*. London: DHSC.

Journal articles

BASKA, M. (2020) Coronavirus: HR and facilities teams must work together to keep workplaces hygienic. *People Management* (online). 6 March.

CHURCHILL, F. (2020) Coronavirus could mean a fifth of the workforce is off sick, government warn. *People Management* (online). 3 March.

CHURCHILL, F. (2020) Coronavirus: how to manage employee travel. *People Management* (online). 4 March.

HOWLETT, E. (2020) Coronavirus: how should HR approach self-isolation?*People Management* (online). 27 February.

Explore more on the People Management coronavirus hub.

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