Returning to Work in an Office Environment During COVID-19

Guidance on how to reduce risk when re-engaging employees in an office environment following the reinstatement of premises.

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# Returning to Work in an Office Environment During COVID-19

Introduction

This document is part of a series of Aviva Loss Prevention Standards providing advice during the COVID-19 pandemic and contains guidance on how to reduce risks to employees when planning to reinstate or reopen office buildings after shutdown or mothballing.

It is not possible to provide detailed steps for every type of office premises, but instead the following guidance seeks to support general principles that can be adapted and applied to the majority of situations.

This guidance is up to date as at 26th March 2021.
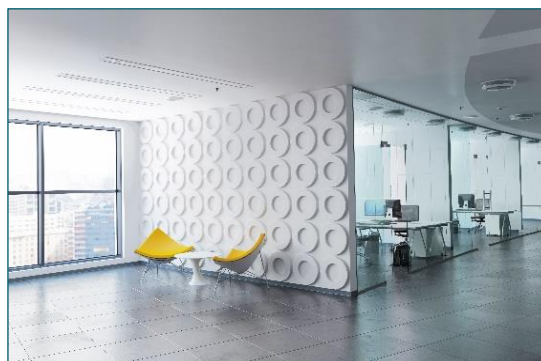
Risk Assessment

The first step is to undertake a risk assessment to more fully evaluate if you and your colleagues can safely return to the office. The risk assessment must be written down if you have 5 or more employees and the findings communicated to them. Communication can be in the form of safe working procedures and safe systems of work and employees should be trained on any new or revised procedures.

All businesses need to demonstrate they have carried out a risk assessment by displaying a 'Staying COVID-19 Secure' sign in a prominent place within the workplace and on their website (if applicable).

As part of your risk assessment, you should ensure you have an up to date plan in case of a COVID-19 outbreak and nominate a single point of contact to lead on contacting your local Public Health team. Click here for further guidance.

A checklist is provided as an appendix to this Loss Prevention Standard to aid you and provide evidence of the steps you have taken.

Who Should Return to Work?

Staff should work from home where possible, however, it may be that employees in critical roles or those who undertake tasks that cannot be carried out from home, do need to return to the office. Individuals who are self-isolating and those who are clinically extremely vulnerable should remain at home. Clinically vulnerable people should be offered the option of the safest available on-site roles, enabling them to stay 2-metres away from others. If this is not possible you should carefully assess whether any proposed working practice involves an acceptable level of risk.

Some groups of people may be at higher risk of becoming infected or having an adverse outcome if affected and this should be taken into account within your risk assessment. These include those who are older males, have a high body mass index (BMI), have health conditions such as diabetes or are from some Black, Asian or minority ethnic backgrounds (BAME).

For further guidance on protecting people who are at higher risk click here.

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Social Distancing at Work

Workers must maintain 2-metre social distancing wherever possible, including while arriving at and departing from work, while in work and when travelling between sites.

If social distancing cannot be achieved and the activity needs to be carried out then mitigating action should be taken, such as:

- 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
- Reducing the number of people each person has contact with (creating a bubble)

In the event of an emergency such as an accident, fire or break-in, social distancing guidelines do not have to be complied with if it is unsafe to do so. People who provide assistance should sanitise immediately afterwards and wash their hands.

For further guidance on social distancing click here.

Factors to consider in support of social distancing:

- Staggering arrival and departure times to reduce crowding
- Providing additional parking or facilities such as bike racks to help people avoid public transport
- Limiting passengers in corporate vehicles, e.g. minibuses (this could include leaving seats empty)
- Reducing congestion – consider more entry points to the workplace
- Providing more storage for workers for clothes and bags
- Using markings and introducing one-way systems at entry and exit points
- Providing handwashing facilities or hand sanitiser at entry/exit points and not using touch-based security devices
- Deactivating turnstiles requiring pass checks in favour of showing a pass to security personnel (at a distance)
- Reducing movement by discouraging non-essential trips within buildings and sites (consider email/telephone/radios instead and cleaning them between use)
- Reducing maximum occupancy for lifts, providing hand sanitiser for the operation of lifts, and marking lift floors to show where to stand. Encouraging use of the stairs wherever possible
- Making sure that people with disabilities are able to access lifts
- Regulating use of corridors, lifts, turnstiles, and walkways to maintain adequate physical distances
- Reviewing the layout of workstations to allow people to work further apart from each other
- Using floor tape or paint to mark areas to help employees keep to a 2-metre distance
- Only where it is not possible to move workstations, arrange people to work side by side or facing away from each other. Use screens to separate people from each other
- Avoiding the use of hot desks. If this is not possible clean workstations between different occupants including shared equipment

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- Using remote working tools to avoid face to face meetings. If this is not possible maintain social distancing throughout. Provide hand sanitiser in well-ventilated meeting rooms. Preferably hold meetings outside whenever possible
- Avoiding sharing equipment, e.g. pens, phones, documents, etc.
- Staggering break times to reduce pressure on break rooms or canteens. Encourage workers to use outside break areas if possible
- Creating additional space for breaks to enable workers to keep 2-metres apart
- Installing screens to protect workers in receptions
- Providing packaged meals to avoid fully opening staff canteens. Encourage workers to bring their own food
- Reviewing incident and emergency procedures to reflect social distancing principles as far as possible
- Considering any new or altered security risks resultant from operational changes

Managing Customers, Visitors and Contractors

It is important to minimise the number of unnecessary visits to your offices.

Factors to be considered to reduce the number of visits to your offices by third parties:

- Restrict access to required visitors only
- Encourage remote visits using technology
- Provide visitors/contractors/customers with guidance on your social distancing and hygiene arrangements
- Ensure appropriate hygiene arrangements for visitors entering and leaving the premises
- Limit the number of visitors at any one time and keep a record of who has visited
- Consider if schedules for maintenance can be carried out when less workers are present, e.g. at night
- Do not share equipment, e.g. visitors signing-in with communal pen. If equipment is shared make sure it is cleaned between use
- Review entry/exit arrangements for visitors/contractors to minimise contact with other people

Cleaning the Workplace

All offices should be cleaned and made ready before a re-start commences. Adequate hand sanitiser and cleaning materials must be in place before workers return. If cleaning is taking place after a known or suspected case of COVID-19 then you should refer to Government guidelines: COVID-19: cleaning in non-healthcare settings.

Factors to be considered in respect of a cleaning regime for your offices:

- Check whether ventilation systems need to be serviced or adjusted
- Open windows and doors frequently to encourage ventilation
- Frequently clean work areas and equipment including door handles and keyboards
- Limit the use of high-touch items, e.g. printers and whiteboards
- Use signs and posters to build awareness of good handwashing techniques, '*catch it, bin it, kill it*' campaign, personal hygiene standards, etc. Refer to How to wash your hands – NHS
- Provide hand sanitiser in multiple locations in addition to washrooms
- Set clear use and cleaning guidance for toilets to ensure they are kept clean and social distancing is maintained as much as possible
- Enhanced cleaning for busy areas
- Provide additional waste receptacles and arrange frequent waste collection

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- If there are shower or changing facilities, set clear use and cleaning guidance to ensure they are kept clean and clear of personal items, and social distancing is achieved
- Introduce enhanced cleaning of all facilities regularly during the day and at the end of the day
- Restrict non-business deliveries and introduce greater handwashing for employees handling goods and merchandise

Personal Protective Equipment (PPE) and Face Coverings

If you are already using PPE in your work activities, you should continue to do so. This guidance does not relate to offices within a clinical setting. Exposure to COVID-19 should be managed through social distancing, good hygiene and fixed teams or partnering (bubbles,) in the first instance, and then if this is insufficient, through the use of PPE. If your risk assessment does show that PPE is required, then you must provide this equipment free of charge to workers who need it. Any PPE provided must be appropriate to the hazard identified and fit the user properly.

A face covering can be very simple and may be **worn in enclosed spaces where social distancing isn't possible. It** should cover your nose and mouth **and it's important to use them properly**. A face covering is not the same as a face mask used by healthcare and other workers.

Face coverings are not mandatory in offices, although they are required in some customer facing businesses in areas open to the public or where staff are likely to come into close contact with a member of the public such as banks, building societies, post offices, premises providing professional, legal or financial services, estate agents and auction houses. For further guidance on face coverings click here.

Workforce Management

It may be necessary to change the way work is organised to reduce contact between employees. This can be done by creating distinct groups (bubbles) to reduce the number of contacts each employee has in their team or shift group.

It is also important to support NHS Test and Trace by keeping a temporary record of shift patterns for 21-days and assisting with data access requests, as this can help to contain outbreaks. For further guidance on NHS Test and Trace in the workplace, click here.

Factors to be considered when organising work patterns:

- Fix teams or shift groups, so where contact is unavoidable, it happens within the same group of people
- Identify areas where items may be directly passed, e.g. office stationery, and introduce drop-off points or transfer zones
- Support NHS Test and Trace by keeping a temporary record of shift patterns for 21-days and assist with data access requests
- Minimise non-essential travel
- Minimise the number of people travelling together in any one vehicle
- Clean shared vehicles between shifts and/or handover
- If employees are required to stay away from their home, ensure overnight accommodation meets social distancing guidelines

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Communication and Training

It is important that all workers understand COVID-19 related safety procedures and that they are kept up to date with how safety measures are being implemented and updated.

Factors to be considered when training and communicating with workers:

- Provide clear, consistent, and regular communications to improve understanding
- Engage with employees and employee representatives to explain and agree changes in working arrangements
- Develop communication and training materials for individuals prior to returning to site
- Engage employees on an ongoing basis to monitor and understand any unforeseen impacts of changes to working environments
- Consider the importance of mental health at times of change and uncertainty
- Consider how you communicate with workers who do not have English as their first language

Testing and Vaccination

Free NHS tests are available to anyone with coronavirus symptoms. You can also order rapid lateral flow tests to test employees with no coronavirus symptoms provided your business is registered in England and employees cannot work from home. For further details click here.

It is important that the safety measures identified in your risk assessment are followed even if employees have received a recent negative test result or had the vaccine (either 1 or 2 doses).

Checklist

A generic Returning to Work in an Office Environment During COVID-19 checklist is presented in Appendix 1 which can be tailored to your own organisation.

Specialist Partner Solutions

Aviva Risk Management Solutions can offer access to a wide range of risk management products and services at preferential rates via our network of Specialist Partners.

For more information please visit:

Aviva Risk Management Solutions – Specialist Partners

Sources and Useful Links

- Working safely during coronavirus (COVID-19) – GOV.UK
- Making your workplace COVID-secure during the coronavirus pandemic – Health and Safety Executive (HSE)
- Face coverings and face masks at work during the coronavirus (COVID-19) pandemic – HSE

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Additional Information

Relevant Loss Prevention Standards include:

- [Measures to Manage People and Operations Following Reinstatement after a Shutdown](#)
- [Risk Assessments during Rapid Change Events](#)
- [Health and Wellbeing During COVID-19](#)
- [Wearing of Face Masks and Face Coverings](#)

To find out more, please visit [Aviva Risk Management Solutions](#) or speak to one of our advisors.

Email us at riskadvice@aviva.com or call 0345 366 6666*

*Calls may be recorded and/or monitored for our joint protection.

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Appendix 1 - Returning to Work in an Office Environment During COVID-19 Checklist

Location	
Date	
Completed by (name and signature)	

	Planning	Y/N	Comments
1.	Have you carried out and recorded a risk assessment for COVID-19?		
2.	From this risk assessment have you produced a safe system of work/safe working procedures?		
3.	Have you communicated this safe system of work/safe working procedures to your employees? Have you kept written records so that you can prove you have communicated this to all employees?		
4.	Have you displayed a 'Staying COVID-19 Secure' notice within the workplace?		
5.	Do you have an up to date plan in case of a COVID outbreak?		
6.	Have you considered any new or altered security risks?		

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	Who Should Return to Work	Y/N	Comments
7.	Have you assessed all job roles to establish if employees can work from home rather than coming into the office? If employees need to come into the office, have you: • Established if any of them are clinically extremely vulnerable? • Established if any of them are clinically vulnerable? • Determined if any of them live with someone who would be classed as clinically extremely vulnerable or clinically vulnerable? • Considered higher risk groups? • Communicated with them to establish if there are any other factors that may prevent someone returning to work in the office?		
	Social Distancing	**Y/N**	**Comments**
8.	Have you made sure social distancing can be maintained at all times? If social distancing cannot be maintained have you taken mitigating action?		
	Managing Customers, Visitors and Contractors	**Y/N**	**Comments**
9.	Have you put steps in place to minimise the number of unnecessary visits to your offices?		
	Cleaning the Workplace	**Y/N**	**Comments**
10.	Have you implemented an additional cleaning regime for your office? Have you provided additional hand sanitiser around the workplace? Are there adequate waste disposal arrangements?		

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	PPE and Face Coverings	Y/N	Comments
11.	Have you risk assessed the activities to determine if PPE is required? If PPE is required have you ensured employees have received training on how to use this and how to maintain the correct fit?		

	Workforce Management	Y/N	Comments
12.	Have you fixed teams or shift groups to reduce contact? Do you keep temporary records of shift patterns for 21-days?		
13.	Have you identified areas where people directly pass things to each other, e.g. office supplies, and introduced drop-off points or transfer zones?		
14.	Have you implemented procedures to manage employees that may have to work away from their normal workplace including the use of Company Vehicles?		

	Communication and Training	Y/N	Comments
15.	Do you have procedures in place to communicate with all employees during the COVID-19 pandemic and keep them up to date regarding any changes?		

	Additional Comments		
16.			

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Please Note

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