Guidance for UNISON branches about NHS staff currently working from home
The Next Phase of Dealing with the Pandemic
Guidance for Office Based Staff in the NHS

This guidance has been developed to help branches engage with their employer on the next phase of the pandemic. It particularly focuses on the office-based, admin and clerical workers who are currently working at home and may be asked to return to the office.

The guidance brings together useful resources on risk assessments, social distancing and hygiene measures including the latest guidance from UNISON on the new requirement to wear face masks.

It is generally aimed at branches in England. Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland are taking different decisions about easing of lockdown. Advice differs in the devolved administrations and we have included some of the relevant links to advice in Scotland below.


https://www.hps.scot.nhs.uk/a-to-z-of-topics/covid-19/
Introduction
Over the past three months many NHS workers have adapted to working at home, been redeployed or changed their working patterns to help the service deal with the many challenges of COVID-19. Office based NHS workers have risen to the challenge of adapting work practices to working remotely, despite in some cases experiencing anxiety, stress and isolation.

Staff working in IT infrastructure have worked hard to ensure that office-based staff can effectively work from home. Many employers have allowed staff to transport desk top IT to their home, and meetings are being carried out via online meeting facilities. Some office-based staff have been voluntarily redeployed into other roles for example, into community testing facilities. Lots of admin and clerical staff have continued working within acute settings during the pandemic and some staff have voluntarily agreed to change their shifts to temporarily allow for weekend working, for example medical secretaries and those working in patient discharge.

UNISON members report to us that many office-based staff want to be visible in supporting their colleagues working in clinical environments. However, there should be no rush back to the office for those currently working remotely. The NHS must continue to limit the risk of the spread of infection of COVID-19. Anyone who can work remotely should continue to do so unless due to service needs or individual circumstances this is not possible. Where it is not possible, a workplace and individual risk assessment should be undertaken. The test and trace system applies to NHS staff too. NHS staff who are contacted will be required to self-isolate, there
are no exceptions. Therefore, to reduce the risk staff could continue to work from home safely.

If staff must return to the office there should be a discussion on the timescales of this, considering the volume of staff returning to the office and if staff have to travel via public transport. The return can be staged and prioritise those whose role is most difficult to carry out at home. These discussions should take place in partnership with the employer and working closely with health and safety reps.

The Blueprint for Return
In publishing its blueprint for the return, UNISON along with 16 other unions in health, called for the NHS to continue with a safety-first approach. This means ensuring adequate supplies of PPE, risk assessments for returning staff, support for staff mental health and wellbeing, maintaining the rules on social distancing rule and continuing to allow staff to work from home.

https://www.unison.org.uk/content/uploads/2020/05/26086.pdf

The NHS Operating Framework for England
The NHS operating framework which was published by NHS England on the 14th May 2020 outlines how trusts in England should approach the second phase of its planning for dealing with the pandemic. This includes maintaining the capacity to provide care for patients with COVID-19, whilst also increasing other urgent clinical services, routine appointments and planned surgery.


The operating framework states that: -
“A key objective in executing these plans must be to minimise the transmission of COVID-19 infection within hospitals, also referred to as hospital-onset infection or nosocomial transmission.”

As we move into the next phase of the pandemic branches will want to discuss with their employer how to promote best practice around remote working and to comprehensively risk assess workplaces and
individuals for those roles which require them to be back in the office.

**The Framework for Recovery in Scotland**
Sets out how health boards will safely and incrementally prioritise the resumption of some paused services, while maintaining COVID-19 capacity and resilience.


**Workplace and Individual Risk Assessments**

As NHS organisations plan to bring routine and planned services back on stream, employers must conduct a risk assessment working with UNISON health and safety reps. This should look at the current arrangements in place for staff and whether these need to be adjusted to reflect the next phase.

The starting point in discussions with your employer over responding to easing of lockdown measures should be the government’s advice that staff should continue to work from home where such arrangements are feasible. However, where this is not possible, decisions over when different groups of staff return to the workplace should be based on a thorough Covid secure risk assessment of the workplace for all roles.

The risk assessment will be split into two parts, a workplace risk assessment and an individual risk assessment to consider staff circumstances and vulnerabilities.

A risk assessment identifies the risks faced by members of staff and seeks to eliminate or mitigate that risk. In seeking to eliminate the risk facing office-based staff in the NHS those who can safely remain working at home should continue to do so. There should be objective justification for the return to the office in discussion with UNISON branches and health and safety reps.

For those office-based roles who are essential and must return to the office social distancing, hygiene and PPE measures (i.e., face masks) will need to be put in place to mitigate the risk.
Each workplace should have its own risk assessments to eliminate or mitigate the risk that COVID-19 poses to our members. You may want to break these risk assessments down into different offices as the purpose of the office space, those working in the office and those who visit the office may differ.

Below are the links to some useful pieces of guidance on risk assessments which can be used in your discussions with your employer.

https://www.gov.uk/guidance/working-safely-during-coronavirus-covid-19/offices-and-contact-centres#offices-3-4

UNISON risk assessment checklist for safety reps
https://www.unison.org.uk/content/uploads/2020/05/26094.pdf

**Individual Risk Assessments**

A risk assessment should be undertaken for those returning to work in the office. The guidance below will take consideration of members of staff who are potentially more at risk due to their race and ethnicity, age, weight, underlying health condition, disability, or pregnancy.

This guidance is applicable, with appropriate local adaptations, in all healthcare settings.

https://www.nhsemployers.org/covid19/health-safety-and-wellbeing/risk-assessments-for-staff

Individual risk assessments for office-based staff who may be required to return should include questions around if it is possible for the members of staff to still work from home, including the home office environment and identifying caring responsibilities.

Options around safe commuting to work should also be explored including alternatives to using public transport at busy times.

Here is some UNISON guidance for Black staff
Measures to mitigate the risk. Social Distancing, Hygiene and PPE

The preferable option currently is to keep NHS office-based staff working at home.

However, if this is not possible then the following measures should be put in place to reduce and mitigate the risk.

Social Distancing Measures.

The link below is to UNISON’s Bargaining Over the Return to the Workplace. It includes practical suggestions on how you can ensure staff safety in the office environment.


Ensuring that the two-metre social distancing rule is maintained between workspaces, such as desk seating, (or in England, where people cannot be two metres apart, the ability to be one metre apart and to additionally manage transmission risk).

Multi occupancy offices should be re-arranged to enable social distancing. Desks should be re-arranged and should avoid desk occupants facing each other. Screens can be erected between desks to further minimise risk.

Hot desking should be avoided and communal items such as printers should be used minimally and cleaned often. In larger offices you may want to consider the movement or flow of people walking around the office and provide signage to direct people around the office space.

Reduce movement of staff in and out of office spaces and schedule meetings online if possible. Ensure that all staff are aware of the measures being put in place to keep staff safe.
Hygiene Measures
The UNISON Bargaining Over the Return guidance has some practical suggestions on hygiene measures.


The NHS England Operating Framework outlines that we should have an “understanding of the risk of surface contact transmission and frequently cleaning any shared equipment e.g. mobile phones, desk phones and other communication devices.”

This means more frequent cleaning of office equipment, minimising the use of shared office facilities for example printers, regular cleaning of office areas and desk equipment and access to hand washing facilities.

Handling of paper medical records should be kept to a minimum and the digitisation of records should be sped up wherever possible. If records are being handed over from COVID 19 clinical areas a risk assessment should take place to establish the extent of the risk and mitigating measures to put in place.

Screens for reception staff.
As more inpatient and outpatient services come back on stream branches may want to request that screens are installed in reception areas following a risk assessment. This may also apply for smaller departmental reception areas.

PPE - Use of Face Masks
On Friday, 5\textsuperscript{th} June 2020, the Secretary of State for Health and Social Care announced that from Monday, 15th June 2020 all staff in hospitals in England must wear surgical face masks, and all visitors and outpatients must wear face coverings while in the hospital setting, to reduce the risk of transmission in hospitals. This measure is being introduced to reduce the asymptomatic transmission of COVID–19. Current risk assessment and infection control measures should remain in place and be expanded as new services resume. This includes admin, clerical workers and other office-based workers if you share an office with others.
Branches will want to discuss with their employer the use of face masks for those working in NHS offices. This will be to ensure that training and instruction is in place for staff who have not normally needed to wear PPE and that staff have adequate access to the required surgical masks, when and where they should wear them and how to safely dispose of the mask. Clarity for those who work in offices and / or move around between patient and non-patient areas should be given.

Branches may want to clarify how the public will be briefed about the need to wear face masks and who will be the first point of contact for the public, particularly identifying how conversations with the public will be managed if they refuse to wear a face mask?

**Remote working policy**

The guidance below outlines best practice on supporting NHS staff who are working remotely and from home.


Now is a good time to work with your employer to review your organisation’s remote working / home working policy. This may include:

- **Requests to continue working from home.** How temporary and long-term requests for home working will be agreed and any right to appeal? Some staff have found that working from home has increased their wellbeing as they are no longer making long journeys to work.
- **Home environment.** Does the employer need to provide equipment to make the home environment safer? For example, lap top risers, foot stools, desk chairs.
- **Management of data.** How confidential information can be stored safely at home.
- **Supporting staff working remotely.** Practical suggestions which can help managers to support their staff in working remotely, including staying in touch regularly, and managing in a different way by focussing on outputs and setting realistic goals.
- **Work-life balance.** Some members have told us that they are currently working long hours from home and are struggling to maintain work-life balance. Your policy can include some
advice for managers on identifying those who are working excessive hours and measures to ensure that this is tackled.

- **Wellbeing and keeping in touch.** Ensuring that staff keep in touch and any wellbeing concerns are identified early.

UNISON have produced a model working from home policy for the duration of COVID-19.


**Checklist for the next phase of the pandemic for office-based staff**

1. Agree with your employer some core principles. The discussion should start with the principle that office-based staff will continue to work from home.
2. Undertake robust workplace and individual risk assessments with a UNISON health and safety rep or other branch officer, if there is no other option than a return to the office.
3. Put in place measures to mitigate risk in returning to the office. This will include social distancing, hygiene and PPE.
4. Agree or update your remote working policy to ensure that staff have the correct equipment and are being supported to work from home.
5. Recruit more health and safety reps. UNISON has launched a campaign to recruit more health and safety reps called Be on the safe side. New health and safety reps will receive online training to carry out the role.