

# Homeworking guidance for managers – COVID-19 pandemic

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This guidance is for those managing staff during the current COVID-19 pandemic to help them to establish effective remote working relationships with those that they manage. For some staff, working at home was already a well-established way of working before the COVID-19 pandemic. However, for many staff it is unfamiliar and has had to be set up in haste and without much time to prepare.

Working from home presents practical challenges for individuals and separate guidance is available to help staff to adapt to this new way of working. The [Homeworking and Wellbeing webpage](#) for staff contains links to practical guidance on working from home, from pay arrangements to IT, as well as offering suggestions to help with issues of work-life balance, and working at a distance from colleagues.

### Key actions for departments

- Ensure that all staff have an identifiable line manager and know how to contact them;
- Ensure line managers understand their responsibilities, as set out below, for managing their staff throughout this period and how to access any support and training they may need;
- Ensure that all staff who are working from home complete the [DSE Homeworking Self-Assessment Worksheet](#) if they have concerns about their workplace, and discuss the outcomes of the assessment with their line manager.

## Key practical actions for line managers and supervisors

### Look after yourself

The guidance below is intended to help you to support your teams during the Coronavirus pandemic, but do also make sure that you are looking after yourself. The [Homeworking and Wellbeing webpage](#) provides suggestions that all staff may find helpful during this challenging time.

### Support and training

We recognise that managers will have different levels of experience with remote team management, and that this may require changes to your ways of working. POD have put together a guide to [Managing a Dispersed Team](#), and a worksheet for [Building your confidence in managing a team remotely](#).

### Team structure

- Consider identifying a deputy/deputies who can take over key activities in the event of your own absence or illness, or who can help you with some of the actions below, and communicate this to your staff;
- Check in with your direct reports on a regular basis - deputies may be needed if you have responsibility for a large team. Make sure everyone has a nominated point of contact;
- Make contact with staff who are currently on sickness, family leave or other leave to make sure they are up to date with what is happening within the University and know who to contact with questions.

### Working hours

- Agree core hours of work with your staff. These are the hours when you can expect them to be 'at work' and at the end of a phone or e-mail;
- Core hours for each individual might be different from their usual hours to take account of the fact that they are not commuting or are balancing work with caring responsibilities;
- Recognise that some staff may need flexibility in the hours they work and may not be able to work their full hours, particularly while schools remain wholly or partially closed, although staff should be encouraged to make alternative care arrangements wherever possible. Where staff can only work limited hours, reassure them that they will continue to be paid their full salary;
- It is important to discuss and agree boundaries so that everyone knows when it is acceptable to contact colleagues. If your team are working to different timetables, for example, if a colleague has adjusted their hours to accommodate caring responsibilities, but others are working standard office hours, clarify expectations that responses are not expected outside their new 'normal' working hours;
- Try to keep an hour each day free of meetings to encourage staff to take a lunch break. This is particularly important where colleagues are sharing their workspace with other household members and/or need to prepare meals for others.

## Working arrangements

- The University has an obligation, as a minimum, to ensure that staff are working safely, with the equipment they need, and to enable a sufficiently comfortable working environment in order to reduce the risks associated with DSE and avoid workplace stress as far as possible. All staff who are working from home for all or part of the time should complete the [DSE Homeworking Self-Assessment Worksheet](#) if they have concerns about their workplace and send the completed checklist to you. There is accompanying [guidance on addressing the outcomes of the assessment](#);
- Ensure that staff are aware of IT Services guidance on remote working resources, which can be found at [Adjusting to working from home](#). Tools include:
  - the main [Work remotely](#) page;
  - 'quick start' guides on the [IT tools and guides for home working](#) page;
  - 'how to' videos and courses on the [how to work remotely](#) page, including how to use Teams, OneDrive, and working productively.
- Establish what your team member's home working arrangement is: is it a quiet, separate room or a shared space? Be sensitive to their circumstances;
- Remember you will be contacting your colleagues in their own homes in most cases, so be careful to establish if sensitive conversations can be held by phone;
- Ensure that staff are familiar with data protection and [information security arrangements](#). What arrangements do they have in place for disposing of sensitive paperwork? Help them devise a strategy to keep electronic information secure, especially on a shared device or in a shared workspace;
- If staff have disclosed a disability, discuss whether any changes are needed to existing reasonable adjustments or whether new reasonable adjustments need to be put in place to support them to work from home. For further advice, see the [Support for Disabled staff webpage](#);
- Keep a record of any equipment, files and other work-related materials that staff are taking home, and encourage them to store it all in a clearly identifiable place so it will be easy to return to the workplace in due course;
- Agree a shared location for work to be stored, such OneDrive or via VPN to shared drives, so that, in the event of illness, it can be accessed without the individual or their family.

## Sickness absence

- Request that your team contact you promptly if they are unable to work due to sickness or other issues arising (for example caring for a sick relative);
- Sickness, holiday and family leave need to be recorded as normal and should be communicated to local HR colleagues so that appropriate record-keeping and payroll actions can be implemented. Staff needing to take sickness absence of more than seven days are normally required to produce a Fit Note from their GP (staff can self-certificate for up to

seven days). Under the current circumstances staff may find it difficult to get a Fit Note, so speak to your local HR officer for further advice;

- Staff with symptoms of COVID-19 or possible exposure to COVID-19 must self-isolate for up to 14 days and obtain an Isolation Note from <https://111.nhs.uk/isolation-note> rather than a Fit Note;
- Should a member of your team inform you that they are too unwell to work (with COVID-19 or other illness), agree with them how you will keep in touch. For example, asking them to check in with you through a daily phone call, email or MS Teams chat may be appropriate. If their symptoms worsen, it may be that they need to agree that a family member/next of kin will keep you up to date and a weekly update in such circumstances may be more appropriate. In the event that your team member lives alone, check whether they have access to support services. There are a number of local volunteer networks which can provide home deliveries of food and medicines (Oxford Together, Oxfordshire All In and Oxfordshire Community Foundation are good places to start). Don't forget that, whilst working remotely, other members of your team will need to be advised that a team member is away from work. They may be anxious about their colleague so do keep them up to date, but be careful not to disclose sensitive personal information.

### Looking after your team

This is an unsettling time and you may need to spend more time than normal on supporting your team. However, remember that the same principles apply as in the office, such as: having a purpose to meetings; having regular one-to-ones; having clear team and individual objectives and communicating these well (recognising that these may have evolved during the pandemic); giving time for people to talk about challenges and how best to meet these. Remember also to build in time to socialise.

### Keep in touch

- Use Microsoft Teams or a similar tool to help your team to stay in touch with one another;
- Discuss and agree with your team how frequently they want to be in touch with each other. You may find a combination of informal check-ins, such as virtual coffee breaks, and longer, formal team meetings helpful;
- Keep your schedule visible and updated, and let your team know when you are available to respond to any questions or concerns they may have;
- If you manage a larger team, consider setting up regular online drop-in sessions to update staff on any recent developments and give them space to ask questions;
- Use video calls and the phone as well as email to maintain positive lines of communication with colleagues, though bear in mind that some colleagues may not have access to a private space;
- Agree a time to regularly check in on any staff who have been put on furlough to ensure they are up to date with any developments.

## Be supportive

- Reassure staff that these are exceptional times and that you recognise the pressures on them;
- Your team will value clear communications, guidance, reassurance and opportunities to ask questions – you will not always have the answers but give colleagues the opportunity to raise concerns;
- Some staff will find it easy to work in isolation/from home and others may find it harder to motivate themselves to work without the stimulus of a team environment. You may need to check in more regularly with staff who are struggling with working from home. Discuss with them how you can support them, such as setting weekly milestones to help them keep their work on track. POD have some resources that may be helpful, under ‘Personal Organisation’ and [‘Self Awareness’](#);
- Be sensitive to the difficulties that staff may be experiencing, especially if they are stressed or under pressure or worried about family members and/or caring responsibilities. There are sources of support signposted in the [Homeworking and wellbeing webpage](#) for staff;
- Be patient with those who are less comfortable or skilled with technology or who may be working with less than optimal equipment or conditions;
- Take particular care of staff who may have few local support networks – for example international staff or other staff who are newly arrived in Oxfordshire (particularly those who may need to self-isolate on arrival). A buddying-scheme for such staff, pairing them with a colleague to check in with them regularly, may be helpful;
- Recognise that some staff, particularly those early in their careers or on fixed-term contracts, will have concerns about the negative impact of reduced productivity on their career development and future employment. Discuss these with them and identify any ways in which this impact might be reduced. Research Services have further guidance for researchers about [keeping an impact log](#);
- Staff nearing the end of a fixed-term contract may be anxious about their ability to secure a new position in the current economic climate. Those who are interested in looking for alternative work within the University should regularly review the Internal Vacancies website. This is accessed via HR Self-Service (NB if you are not working in a University building you need to be logged onto the VPN in order to access Self-Service). Additional support for staff eligible for redeployment is available from the [Priority Candidate Support Scheme](#).

## Workload and contingency planning

- Discuss and agree as a team how workload will be managed and what tasks or projects may need to be delayed, taking into account existing commitments and new demands that are resulting from the COVID-19 situation;
- Agree the key tasks that require continuity and how these will be managed if there is reduced capacity in the team, for example due to caring responsibilities or sickness;
- Discuss workload concerns with individuals and try to identify activities that can be reduced, such as their attendance at certain meetings during this period.

## 1:1 meetings and virtual team meetings

- IT Services have produced guidance on [running remote meetings](#);
- Continue holding regular 1:1 meetings with your direct reports to check in with their work and with how they are more generally. This is an opportunity to discuss what the individual is working on, help them to prioritise, and also give feedback. Working from home can be very isolating and regular feedback on work is important;
- 1:1 conversations are also an opportunity to find out how your staff are dealing with the issues of remote working, isolation, etc.
- It is a good idea to keep and share a brief note of any issues discussed and actions agreed during these 1:1 meetings, particularly if you feel that the member of staff is stressed, or otherwise performing in a way that is uncharacteristic;
- Setting up a regular virtual team meeting will also help. Staff will be concerned for colleagues and maintaining lines of communication which are not purely 'transactional' but retain an element of social interaction will be valuable to ensuring that positive working relationships continue.

## Dealing with HR or welfare issues

Escalate any concerns or difficulties arising through your normal departmental channels so that they can help and advise.

## *Holiday*

- Staff who are working from home should still take their holiday as normal. Whilst many normal holiday activities, such as travel, may be restricted, it is still important for people to take a break from work so you should authorise and record holiday in the normal way;
- Staff who are on furlough may also wish to take holiday – for example to spend some focussed time with children or other family members. Whilst it may seem counter-intuitive to take holiday during furlough, remember that some staff who are furloughed must be available to recommence work with 24 hours notice. Being on holiday ensures that time 'off' is protected. It also prevents a 'backlog' of untaken leave when they return to work;
- The normal rules on holiday carry-over will continue to apply for most staff, ie a maximum of 5 days' leave may be carried over from one holiday year to the next, and only in exceptional circumstances. However, if you are managing staff who are 'key workers' and who are prevented from taking their holiday due to pressures of work related to Covid-19, some additional leave may be carried over. Please see the [full guidance](#) on this.

## *Managing staff with caring responsibilities*

### **Managing staff with caring responsibilities**

- Staff with very intensive caring responsibilities may be furloughed on a full-time or part-time basis, but many staff continue to work whilst also managing caring responsibilities for their family or other dependants.
- Staff should be encouraged to make alternative care arrangements wherever possible. The Government's definition of critical workers currently includes those in support and teaching

roles in Higher Education, so staff with school age children may be eligible for their children to continue to attend school during any period of partial closure. But where this is not possible staff whose working hours are constrained by significant additional caring responsibilities due to the COVID-19 pandemic will continue to receive their full normal rate of pay..

- Discuss with staff how much work they are realistically able to do and help them to adjust their workload, where necessary. Reassure staff that they are not expected to work in the early morning or late at night to 'catch up' on hours, but try to accommodate staff who want unusual work patterns that fit with their lives;
- Be aware that staff juggling care and work may need to schedule work for periods when children or dependants are napping, watching educational resources/TV, or asleep at the end of the day, so different members of your team may have different 'normal office hours'. Try to ensure that everyone respects one another's working hours;
- Those sharing care responsibilities with another parent or family member who is at home may want to timetable the care so that each has some protected time to work.

#### *Dealing with performance issues*

- If a member of your team refuses to do any work, but their post has not qualified for furlough, explore with them what the reasons for this are. Be sensitive that:
  - some people will be struggling with invisible and undeclared disabilities such as anxiety, which may be exacerbated by the current situation;
  - they may need a short period of focussing on family, for example, in order to settle their children into a new routine, but be able to pick up work after that.
- If you consider that they are refusing unreasonably to carry out any work, speak to your local HR contact for advice on how to take this forward.
- Similarly, if a member of your team is not performing to the level that you would normally expect or is behaving uncharacteristically, explore with them what the reasons for this may be. We are all affected by the pandemic in different ways and you may not necessarily be aware of the pressures that others are under or of the impact that it is having on their mental health.

#### *Dealing with mental ill-health*

- If a member of your team discloses to you that they are struggling with current situation, or that they are displaying symptoms which can be associated with mental ill-health such as sleep difficulties or anxiety, reassure them that support is available, and direct them to the resources on the [Occupational Health website](#);
- If you and your team member would benefit from clinical advice on how to manage mental ill-health and its impact on work, discuss whether making a management [referral](#) to Occupational Health would be appropriate.