Managers Guide - COVID-19 “Coronavirus”

Returning to Work in College Buildings - September to December 2020

Office Space - government guidance provides eight key points for employers to consider when providing a ‘COVID-Secure Workspace’ in the context of office-based workers. The following is a summary of those points and how the College will approach each of them:

1. **Ensuring both workers and visitors who feel unwell stay at home and do not attend the premises.**

   The College has produced clear guidance for all staff and students, which includes a ‘self-check’ process in line with NHS guidance. See ‘COVID-19 Information for Staff’.

2. **In every workplace, increasing the frequency of handwashing and surface cleaning.**

   Signage will be prevalent across the estate, including reminders to wash hands. Additional hand sanitising points are being provided and the frequency of cleaning is also being increased. Staff will also be given access to surface wipes to enable them to clean their workspaces, in addition to the planned cleaning regime.

3. **Businesses and workplaces should make every reasonable effort to ensure their employees can work safely.** From 1 August 2020, this may be working from home, or within the workplace if COVID-19 secure guidelines are followed closely. When in the workplace, everyone should make every reasonable effort to comply with the social distancing guidelines set out by the government (2m, or 1m with risk mitigation where 2m is not viable). From 1 August, clinically extremely vulnerable individuals, who were previously advised to shield at home, can go to the workplace as long as it is COVID-secure, but should carry on working from home wherever possible.

   Birkbeck workspaces will be adopting a 1m+ rule within all Birkbeck buildings. People should try to maintain 2m distancing wherever possible, but mitigating action will also be implemented to allow the 1M+ approach to be taken (see point 4 for mitigations).

4. **Where the social distancing guidelines cannot be followed in full, in relation to a particular activity, businesses should consider whether that activity can be redesigned to maintain a 2m distance or 1m with risk mitigations, where 2m is not viable.**

   Given the diverse nature of the College’s estate, support of local managers will be required to consider how the use of shared office spaces can be adapted to mitigate the risk of transmission within the workplace.

   These mitigations will include:

   - Further increasing the frequency of hand washing and surface cleaning;
   - using back-to-back or side-to-side working (rather than face-to-face) whenever possible;
• reducing the number of people each person has contact with e.g. by implementing a rota for individuals or sub-teams in each shared office so that on-site working is planned and managed to avoid overcrowding.

5. Where the social distancing guidelines cannot be followed in full, even through redesigning a particular activity, businesses should consider whether that activity needs to continue for the business to operate, and if so, take all the mitigating actions possible to reduce the risk of transmission between their staff.

Where local managers do not believe that they can provide a COVID-secure workplace, based on the use of the mitigations in question 4 above, they should consult with the College’s Health & Safety Advisor to see if further mitigation is possible.

6. You should ensure that steps are taken to avoid people needing to unduly raise their voices to each other. This includes, but is not limited to, refraining from playing music or broadcasts that may encourage shouting, including if played at a volume that makes normal conversation difficult. This is because of the potential for increased risk of transmission, particularly from aerosol transmission. We will develop further guidance, based on scientific evidence, to enable these activities as soon as possible.

The requirement to not raise voices or generate loud background noise is included in the College’s ‘COVID-19 Information for Staff’.

7. Finally, if people must work face-to-face for a sustained period with more than a small group of fixed partners, then you will need to assess whether the activity can safely go ahead. No one is obliged to work in an unsafe work environment.

The College will reopen as a COVID-secure environment within which a key aim is to avert this scenario from arising. However, if managers believe that this is a requirement for their work areas, then they must consult with the Colleges Health & Safety Advisor before any decisions or actions are taken.

8. In your assessment you should have particular regard to whether the people doing the work are especially vulnerable to COVID-19.

We are aware that Birkbeck has a diverse group of staff and as such we are committed to supporting those who feel that they are particularly vulnerable to COVID-19. The Public Health England report ‘Disparities in the risk and outcomes of COVID-19’ shows that some groups of people may be at more risk of being infected and/or an adverse outcome if infected.

The higher-risk groups currently identified in those findings include those who:

• are older males
• have a high body mass index (BMI)
• have health conditions such as diabetes
• are from some black, Asian or minority ethnicity (BAME) backgrounds

In the first instance, line managers in discussion with individual staff, should listen to any concerns and consider what mitigation could be used to help support them. Fuller detail covering individual staff support and risk-assessments is outlined in the section: ‘COVID-19 Individual risk assessments for all staff including those deemed clinically extremely vulnerable’.
COVID 19 Office use Risk Assessments

COVID-19 office specific templates have been produced. Managers should review their office spaces in the context of these risk assessments and add to them if they feel that any further measures are required.

It is the responsibility of the relevant Director of Professional Services/Director of Operations/Head of Department to ensure that a suitable risk assessment has been carried out for workspaces. It is also necessary to confirm that any mitigations have been implemented and that processes are in place to ensure that staff have read the risk assessments, as well as the ‘COVID-19 Information for Staff’ and ‘Campus Induction’ documents, prior to them returning to use their workspace.

It is expected that tasks will, in some cases, be delegated due to the potential volume of work required. However, before staff will be able to return, Directors/Heads of Department need to confirm that due consideration has been given to each area that is proposed to be used. To this end a declaration needs to be completed for each department using this form: Departmental COVID 19 Risk Assessment Declaration - September 2020

Staff will not be permitted to return until such a confirmation has been received. Therefore, Directors/Heads of Department may wish to phase the return of staff in different areas, and in those areas where there is added complexity, to potentially delay the re-opening of that area.

COVID-19 Individual Risk Assessments for staff, including those deemed clinically extremely vulnerable

As the College considers the phased return to the workplace, it recognises its duty of care to all staff, including those who are clinically extremely vulnerable, those who have dependants who are clinically extremely vulnerable and those not in a group identified as being at more risk of being infected and/or of having an adverse outcome if infected but nonetheless have significant concerns about returning to on-site working.

Any staff member who has concerns about returning to on-site working should raise this with their line manager in the first instance. It is your role to listen to those concerns and to consider any proposals the staff member may have for alternative arrangements. You may seek advice, at this or at any point from your manager, the HR Business Partnering team and/or the Colleges Health & Safety Advisor as appropriate.

In your discussions with staff you should explain the risk management measures and controls that have or will be put in place to minimise transmission to keep them, and others, safe.

If alternative proposals cannot be readily agreed, or if those concerns are not alleviated, guidance should be sought from the College’s occupational health advisers. To access this on behalf of the staff member, you will need to contact the HR Business Partnering team for your work area who will then provide, directly to the staff member, a secure link to complete an online questionnaire, which will then be assessed by an occupational health professional.

The outcome of that assessment will be shared with you and your staff member for you to then discuss. The outcome/advice could entail the recommendation that a fuller individual health assessment be undertaken (see below) or that further exploration of restrictions or adjustments be made to support a returning to on-site working. A copy of the outcome/advice and any agreed next steps should be shared with Human Resources to be kept confidentially on the staff member’s file.
In addition to the online questionnaire assessment process outlined above, you and the staff member may identify from the outset, the need to move directly to a fuller individual occupational health assessment. This may be the case for staff, aged over 70, for those with serious underlying health conditions, for those who have had COVID-19 and experienced complications, or for those with high risk dependents. In such cases, this would be via the usual occupational health referral process and you should contact your designated HR Business Partnering team to initiate the referral with your input.

**Continuing to work from home - September to December 2020**

**Flexibility and wellbeing**

The Coronavirus SharePoint site includes specific guidelines to help them manage their teams remotely. It is key that managers have frequent and regular conversations with their staff via telephone or MS Teams.

To avoid for staff who are working remotely from feeling isolated, time for social interactions will continue to be important. Managers should therefore, encourage staff to keep in touch with each other and to arrange the team getting together as a group on MS Teams to reduce the disadvantage of not having social contact.

Regardless of where and how staff work from home it is important to ensure that their wellbeing is looked after. It is important that staff do not put themselves at risk of any unnecessary discomfort whilst working from home and in providing support of this, please re-familiarise yourself with the working from home information sheet.

The College recognises that for those colleagues who continue to work from home, in part or in full, this may bring challenges that require flexibility e.g. around work patterns/shifts. It is expected that managers will continue to be open to flexible arrangements and keen, where possible, to accommodate these.

The College also recognises that staff have different levels of accessibility to fast or reliable broadband or that at this very unusual period there is a greater demand on bandwidth in general with work and social related internet use.

Managers need to be mindful that parents and carers may have additional responsibilities that could reduce their ability to respond as quickly as normal and which might lead to a higher of volume work being done in the mornings and evenings and less during the normal working day.

To help ensure that we have services in place to support staff, the College has launched a new Employee Assistance Programme (EAP). Staff should be advised that they can access the services by logging into the Employee Assistance Programme (Organisation code birkbeck\WELL) site or by use of the telephone counselling & information line - 0800 1116 387.

**Staff requesting reimbursement for increased utility bills**

Any additional utility costs incurred as a result of working remotely should be off-set against any savings made from reduced or eliminated travel costs. If staff believe that they are incurring additional costs by working from home beyond any savings, they should contact their line manager stating what costs have been incurred (including receipts) and details of what savings have been made in relation to their travel.
If the line manager supports the member of staff’s case for additional costs, they should discuss this with the Director of Professional Service/Director or Operations who will advise whether a claim for the difference can be made via expenses on Business World, subject to appropriate documentation being provided.

Staff should be made aware that they may be able to claim up to £6 a week (£4 a week before 4th April 2020) tax relief for some of their utility bills, if they have been asked to continue working from home. Staff can only claim for work related reasons such as, business telephone calls or the extra cost of gas and electricity for their work area. Staff cannot claim for things they use for both private and business use, for example, rent or broadband access. In addition, any payments claimed on expenses from the College (as above), cannot be claimed as tax relief.

Staff can check their eligibility on the tax service website. Staff complete a self-assessment cannot claim this particular tax relief as they can make their claim when they complete their self-assessment.

**Sickness Absence and COVID-19**

If staff develop the COVID-19 symptoms of:

- a high temperature
- a new, continuous cough
- a loss of, or change to, sense of smell or taste

and they are on-site, they must leave work as quickly and safely as possible. Whether on-site or working from home, staff are advised that they will need to get a test done as soon as possible and within the first five days of having symptoms. Full details of what is needed to access that testing is available on the government website here.

**Staff must stay at home if they have symptoms** – if staff are getting a test because they have symptoms, they or anyone they live with must self-isolate until they get the test result. This applies to anyone in their support bubble (where someone who lives alone - or just with their children - can meet people from 1 other household).

Staff must also self-isolate if they cannot get a test because it is more than five days since their symptoms started.

Full and current details of when staff must self-isolate and what must be done are outlined here.

In addition, staff are required to notify you, their line manager, by telephone or MS Teams as soon as possible if they were on site but subsequently left due to becoming unwell or, if working from home, before they were due to start work, or as soon as possible if that was not practical.

**COVID-19 Specific Sickness Absence Notification Requirements**

The notification requirements relating to COVID-19 are the same as when reporting any sickness absence i.e. if a member of staff becomes unwell, they must let their line manager know as soon as practically possible. However, there is the additional requirement to complete a short online form that will drive the College’s track, trace and communication processes.

If a member of staff becomes unwell with COVID-19 symptoms they must:

- Report their sickness to their line manager by telephone or MS Teams as soon as possible and to confirm the reason as either COVID-19 or Self-isolation in relation to COVID-19. If their manager is away, they must inform their manager’s manager.
Additionally, they also need to report this information on their My Birkbeck Staff page via the link to ‘update my COVID 19 Status’ by completing the short form they will be presented with.

This specific information will then go to the College’s COVID-19 tracing team and most importantly, will provide the information needed if the member of staff has been to any College buildings in the previous 14 days.

Line-managers/record keepers will log the sickness absence in the usual way on My Birkbeck for Staff, by selecting the staff member from the directory and the appropriate reason i.e. as either ‘COVID-19 (coronavirus) self-isolating’ or ‘COVID-19 (coronavirus) confirmed’.

A member of staff’s personal health data is ‘special category data’ i.e. it is confidential information and therefore must be omitted from any communication with the rest of the workforce. Under no circumstances should any manager or member of staff send out communications to other staff or students concerning the personal health information of other staff or students.

Certification Requirements – if a member of staff needs to self-isolate, they are required to provide the College with an ‘isolation note’ that will be obtained from the NHS via the link here. If they are ill and in self-isolation, their absence will be treated as sickness absence and they should subsequently follow the College’s normal certification requirements for any longer period of related sickness absence.

If a member of staff is not ill but nonetheless required to self-isolate, their line manager should discuss with them what, if any, work they can do/continue to do from home.

Staff are responsible for ensuring that all medical statements (e.g. ‘fit notes’, isolation notes, or a notification letter from the NHS test and trace service) reach their manager promptly. Periods of absence that are not covered by medical statements will not qualify for occupational or statutory sick pay. Each case will be considered on its merits before any occupational sick pay is withheld.

Guidance on ‘Shielding’ and the Clinically Extremely Vulnerable

For those deemed by the government to be clinically extremely vulnerable, the advice during the peak of the pandemic, was to take extra precautions collectively termed as ‘shielding’.

The government is advising that people who this was applied to, do not need to shield at the moment. This is because the rates of transmission of COVID-19 in the community have fallen significantly.

As this relates to work, it means that:

- staff do not need to follow the previous shielding advice.
- staff can work on on-site because the College’s estate will meet the criteria of being COVID-secure.

However, the current government advice is that staff who had this designation should continue to work from home, if it is possible for them to do so. In any case where it is not possible to do so, managers must follow the guidance and process as outlined in the section above ‘COVID-19 Individual Risk Assessments for staff, including those deemed clinically extremely vulnerable’.
If the situation changes and the transmission of COVID-19 increases, individuals could be advised to shield again. The College will continue to actively monitor the situation and any corresponding government advice and will be communicated to staff and managers accordingly.

**Leave from work and COVID-19**

**Annual Leave** – in response to these very unusual circumstances, the College we continue to support staff in adapting to different ways of working. Nevertheless, managers should continue to encourage staff to take annual leave throughout the full course of the annual leave year so as to support their health and wellbeing.

The government has temporarily amended the law regarding annual leave. The new temporary regulations are intended for key workers and allow up to 4 weeks of unused annual leave to be carried into the next 2 leave years, easing the requirements on Birkbeck to ensure that employees take their statutory annual leave in any one year. The key workers in Birkbeck have been identified and written to and it is only this category of staff that can request annual leave to be carried over from this leave year, 2019/20, into the next two years if it was not reasonably practicable for them to take holiday due to the effects of coronavirus.

For all other staff, which is the majority of staff at Birkbeck, the College has temporarily amending the normal rules for carry over of annual leave for this year as follows:

Staff may carry leave over to the next leave year with the advance agreement of you, their line manager, and in conjunction with any local arrangements such as approval of the Director. In recognition of the impact of COVID-19, the College has agreed to increase the maximum days leave which may be carried forward to the 2020/21 annual leave year to 10 days (for part time employees this will be pro rata).

All leave not given permission to be considered as carry over leave will be lost. The College will not pay employees for leave not taken as an alternative to carrying it over to the next leave year.

Staff are required to request annual leave in the normal way, and are required to ensure that they take their annual leave, regardless of whether some or all remote working arrangements apply over a prolonged period of time.

If staff need to cancel or change planned leave, they need to discuss this with you. The expectation is that managers will be as flexible as possible, whilst encouraging their staff to have a break and reminding them of the requirement to take their annual leave by the end of the leave year on 30 September. Annual leave needs to be cancelled in the usual way.

**Other forms of leave** - All other forms of leave are still relevant during this difficult time, including **Family leave**. Staff should request any form of leave in the normal way using Business World.

**Volunteering Leave** - Birkbeck has a Volunteering leave policy, which is benchmarked across the sector, and enables staff to take one day’s paid leave a year. Normally, any additional days for volunteering leave would be unpaid, however during these extraordinary circumstances, Birkbeck has decided to allow staff to be able to undertake volunteering for a recognised scheme such as the NHS scheme. In these circumstances, the number of paid days volunteering leave will be increased to one day per calendar month. It is anticipated that this change would apply for the duration of the Government restrictions imposed due to COVID-19.

Staff who take this opportunity to volunteer for a recognised scheme need to log onto Business World and book this as Volunteering Leave.
Where can I point staff to for advice and guidance on COVID-19?

Staff can access the Coronavirus SharePoint site which has many resources, including those related to health and wellbeing.

Staff to log into the Employee Assistance Programme (Organisation code birkbeckWELL)

Staff can read more about the virus and how to prevent it at Public Health Matters, the NHS Website and government guidance.

The National Health Service (NHS) have produced a list of answers to common questions. Staff can also use NHS 111 (online or by phone).

The Department of Education have also set up a helpline and this can be accessed via 0800 046 8687.

Communication concerning COVID-19

All communications to staff and/or students concerning COVID-19 will be issued by the College Secretary, and/or the Academic Registrar (for cases involving students) and/or the Director of Human Resources (for cases involving staff).

There is a dedicated SharePoint site for staff that contains wider information which can be accessed through My Birkbeck and the link through to ‘Coronavirus Information for Staff’. Managers should draw the attention of their staff to this site and ensure they regularly visit it for updates.

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