

Working from Home Stressors Guidance for Managers

Overview

Current home working requirements and the impacts of the Covid 19 pandemic may require managers to look at different impacts of work on the employee's ability to cope. In response to this situation, a specific risk assessment template has been created to enable a focus on home working stressors for long term home working arrangements and as a tool to assist in supporting staff.

Generally speaking the aim of this conversation is to prompt change for the employee to take the lead on. It is not anticipated that formal changes e.g. to job descriptions or working hours will be included as measures without solid business led rationale and consideration of permanency of arrangements and the bigger picture. Transferring demands from one employee to another, increasing costs or reducing service levels are issues that should not emerge from this process unless and until you have had relevant conversations with others including your Executive Head. This is about practical workable solutions that do not have unintended consequences or move problems around the organisation.

Common Working from Home Stressors

The attached 'Home Working Stress Risk Assessment' is split into the 6 key stressors identified by the Health & Safety Executive (HSE). These are Demands, Control, Support, Relationships, Role and Change. More information about HSE stressors can be found on the [HSE website](#). This risk assessment therefore includes examples of some common sources of stress that many work-at-homers face and therefore provides guidance on a conversation with your employee alongside some potential mitigation measures to support them to build their resilience during the prolonged period of enforced home working.

Potential stressors from extended working from home:

- 1. Working space/environment** - Temporary home working can cause practical difficulties where equipment and space is compromised by multiple family members needing to work together. There are many scenarios where lack of space or a suitable work environment may cause additional stressors for staff. Practical solutions may be available to support staff, such as the option to collect office equipment to create a better working environment.

Resources currently available to staff include: *Information and tips on working from home and creating your own space (Molly), [Occupational Health](#) assessments available (for managers to complete) if issues identified.*

- 2. Working longer hours / unable to switch off from work** – With a lack of boundaries between work and home, particularly where home working arrangements are temporary and/or set up at short notice some employees may find it more difficult to 'switch off' from work (both physically and mentally). For some roles (e.g. those that are more generic or senior and less on/off in response to specific customer demands during 'office' hours), working hours can be less visible. However as a manager it is

your duty to have some level of awareness of the hours your employee is working¹. *If you have concerns you should talk to your employee about excessive hours that have become an ongoing pattern in order to better understand the nature of the demands and whether these are external or internal (it is very tempting in an organisation like MVDC to imagine you are indispensable, and in addition to negative impact on health this disempowers others, causes bottle necks and – depending on the role - can generate more work for others).*

Resources currently available to staff include: *Lots of tips and advice on the Molly Health & Wellbeing pages and Winter Wellbeing pages.*

- 3. No boundaries** - Creating a structure in your relationship and schedule and ensuring that you don't blur the lines between productivity and leisure time, between socialising time and working time becomes vital when you work from home. This, however, can be more challenging than many people expect. Some people get better at this over time, but conversely some get worse and just checking emails before bed or before doing anything else in the morning can become bad habits ultimately leading to burn out. This is highly individual – for some these habits enhance their feeling of control and/or allow more breaks in the normal working day. *It is up to your employee to do this - some will find it easier than others, but you as a line manager can also be a powerful role model. Some employees may have developed different working habits during the pandemic, where their jobs have made this possible, in order to manage competing family demands – e.g. stopping work earlier to accommodate school run/return and picking up work later in the evening so don't assume what the boundaries 'should' be but talk through the practicalities if useful.*

Resources currently available to staff include: 1-2-1's, EAP

- 4. Isolation / Loneliness** - Those who work at home may find that the solitude can be a double-edged sword. While solitude to allow for uninterrupted work that requires complete concentration can feel blissful at times, when we have no mandate for social interaction during the workday we can become lonely before we realise it and this can make it harder to make contact with others. *Getting into a pattern of 121s and team meetings is a vital support measure – as is encouraging contact within the team amongst colleagues, recognising there will be some close individual relationships in the team where people naturally buddy up, whilst ensuring everybody has some contact and no-one is left out.*

Resources currently available to employees: Health & Wellbeing pages (Molly), Wellbeing Individual Assessment (Molly) MS Teams to communicate with other MVDC colleagues, Wellness action plan (Mind), Mental health first aiders, workplace facebook, volunteering in the community, EAP

- 5. Distractions** - When there are interruptions all day, and work descends into a succession of interrupted clusters of a few minutes at a time, this can be very stressful for those who need to produce work to a deadline. Some people may be working in a shared space at home and therefore more 'available' to family or other household members during the working day than when 'in the office'. Others may find their day

¹ Under current legislation the Working Time Regulations restrict working hours and mandate regular breaks unless the employee opts out (which must be voluntary). For further details [see here](#). Remember though, this is one aspect – additionally we owe a duty of care to our employees and ignoring regular overworking that leads to mental health issues is likely to be breaching this duty. It should also be remembered that if your employee is completing flexi-records there is an expectation that you monitor these.

less structured than usual as there is a presumption they are more available for ad hoc work calls and requests for support. *Assisting with a discussion as to how this can be managed better with planned breaks and clear messages as to when interruptions must only be for emergencies (depending on the role and/or household situation) can be a support measure.*

Resources currently available to staff include: Display Screen Equipment (DSE) sent by Ellie Miles and Team Risk Assessments (available for managers) to complete, option to collect office equipment to create a better working environment, information and tips on working from home and creating your own space (Molly), Occupational Health assessments available (for managers to complete) if issues identified.

6. **Demotivation** - Extended periods alone and without the usual structure and ad hoc demands can result in a feeling of inertia and the perception that work or effort isn't noticed. Lack of movement and interaction becomes draining and when energy is low, motivation suffers. *Maintaining a focus on the future is vital and setting goals for any changes or improvements can assist. It can be tempting to assume that somebody under stress wants to be left alone, or not have any additional pressure – but this can be misleading. Sometimes assisting with prioritising key areas where the employee has the skill and ability to make visible progress can improve mental health and choosing not to approach them with project work you would normally talk to them about may fuel anxiety. If the role isn't goal focused but is an ongoing customer support role, reminding your employee of the value of their work and how it fits into the work of the Council can be extremely motivating. Most people work for the public sector because they want to feel they are making a difference – as their manager – you will know what that is and, if necessary, can remind them of the value/purpose of their work.*

Resources currently available to staff include: Surrey Learn and eLearning training courses available to all employees to refresh or learn new skills, MS Teams to communicate with colleagues, Health & Wellbeing / Winter Wellbeing including Mindfulness (Molly), EAP

7. **Less Supervision** – With less opportunity for quick 'over the desk' conversations it can become difficult to ensure that staff are receiving the same level of supervision as they did before. For new starters or those with less work experience this can cause additional strain with staff finding it more difficult to identify goals or work scope without supervisory support and, if not handled well, this can also be a source of stress for you as the manager who can then receive repeated interruptions. *Changes to frequency of supervision can be compensated by the quality of supervision. This needs more planning and structure to consider what outcomes you need the employee to achieve and plan the appropriate frequency of check-points to keep them on track. Alternatively, depending on the role, you may need to consider setting up virtual team check in's, or drop ins for anybody needing to offload about difficult or upsetting calls. This isn't always about 'fixing', it can be just about listening.*

Resources currently available to staff include: 1-2-1's, MS Teams share screen functionality for training and collaborating.

8. **Technology (using / depending on smart devices)** - This UN study found that working from home in itself may not be inherently more stressful than working on-site, but frequent use of mobile devices can be a significant source of added stress. Part

of the reason is that those who use mobile devices late at night, (as those who work from home may be more prone to do), can harm their sleep schedule.

Resources currently available to staff include:

There are lots of options to reduce – ranging from apps to restrict the mobile phone user from spending over a pre-set time on particular activities (e.g. 30 minute max allowance for social networking sites), or alternatively it is best to focus on doing something instead (rather than stopping doing something – which will naturally happen as the new habit takes up more time). There are also blue light blocking glasses which can be bought relatively cheaply on the internet. These filter the glare from devices so as not to delay the body's natural development of sleep hormones after dark. Managers should be encouraging home workers to take a break of at least 5 minutes an hour away from their screens or phones, and encouraging employees to look after their physical wellbeing too (Zumba class and other home exercise programmes available on [Molly](#)).

Signs That Could Indicate Stress

Not everyone will show obvious signs of stress and it's important not to make assumptions. A change in the way someone thinks or feels can indicate signs of stress, for example:

- Appearing tired, anxious or withdrawn
- Loss of motivation, commitment and confidence
- Increased emotional reactions – being more tearful, sensitive or aggressive than the situation would appear on the surface to warrant
- Increase in sickness absence (not always citing 'stress' as some may be reluctant to do this)
- Changes in the standard of their work or focus on tasks
- Being less interested in tasks they previously enjoyed
- Changes in usual behaviour, mood or how the person behaves with the people they work with

It's harder to spot these signs if employees are working from home especially when society overall is experiencing a heightened level of anxiety and stress for reasons over which we have no control. You may also be feeling more stressed yourself as a manager, and have less headspace to take on board an added level of duty of care. Whilst the tone of your discussions will naturally vary according to the nature of your working relationships it's important to set up an atmosphere of openness and trust and to have discussions about how your employees are doing, whilst creating boundaries so that this discussion remains professional, (with the ability to refer elsewhere when needed) so that you don't take on an added unmanageable burden yourself.

How to Have a Conversation about Stress

When discussing stressors and suitable measures with employees who have restrictions to their working arrangements this will constrain the support and measures that can practically be put in place (e.g. whereas under normal circumstances if working from home was thought to be adding to an employee's stress for any of the reasons above, it would be straightforward mitigation for the employee to work in an office but the greater risk posed by the virus makes this less possible). It is therefore important that staff are clear about the support that can and

cannot be provided and whilst an open and honest conversation is essential to this process you also need to manage the boundaries of that conversation.

It may be difficult for employees to take the step to discuss these issues. If you can be calm, patient, supportive and reassuring it is more likely to create an atmosphere of trust.

During the conversation, keep in mind these tips:

- Listen carefully to what they say
- Try to identify what the cause is, for example by keeping questions open ended
- Don't make any assumptions (easier said than done, but extremely important in this kind of conversation)
- Gently challenge any assumptions the employee is making (often he/she will jump to conclusions or present a fait accompli, whereas with a bit of careful challenging you could both uncover a root cause that is different to the one originally assumed by the employee)
- Think about ways to help, for example if there's any specific support they can get at work or potential referral pathways for further more specialist advice
- Reassure them – let them know you're doing this to help them get the support they need
- Recognise that you may not have any easy answers, sometimes there are things over which you will have no control – but don't underestimate the value in making time to hear an employee sound out the problem. Feeling heard and understood bring benefits of their own. It can be tempting to put up barriers for fear of an issue being raised that you cannot 'fix'. This is far more harmful than just listening to what they have to say.

Whilst you are unlikely to have open-ended time for a wellbeing conversation, try not to appear too rushed or distracted or it is unlikely they will open up to you and a very rushed distracted conversation is unlikely to achieve the intended purpose.

If either of you need to reflect on what's been discussed before any decisions are made, you should agree to have some time to think things through. It may not always be the best thing to do to rush to solutions – sometimes a bit of thinking time after a discussion can lead to a much better outcome and sometimes the employee will reflect after the conversation leading to new insights and potential ways to improve the situation.

Putting Solutions (reasonable adjustments) in place

Once any suggested actions are agreed, complete the Home Working Stress Risk Assessment template, recording any key areas of stress for the individual and any realistic supportive measures that may help the employee mitigate against stress.

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Getting Support for Yourself

Where a larger proportion of your time is spent supporting others, you may find that you need advice and support for your own mental health. For example, you may be under more pressure than usual to support your team and resolve problems.

It may be helpful to talk things through with someone who can support you, for example:

- Your own manager
- Someone else at work (a colleague or a member of the HR team)
- A Mental Health First Aider
- The Employee Assistance Programme (EAP).

If discussing with a colleague, remember to ensure that you keep the original issue confidential, on a 'need to know' basis. You will need to use your judgment on this or alternatively refer to situations anonymously.

This guidance is a living document, further suggestions for additions or change are welcome (please contact the HR team).