**Making the change from office to home working – advice for employers and organisations**

Many companies have now or are in the process of moving office workers to home working for an undetermined length of time. Although it is presumed that the law will take a more lenient view to health & safety in some cases due to the speed and lack of time to prepare for these changes, it is important to remember that it is still the responsibility of the organisation to ensure that Health & Safety at Work law is being followed and that employees are protected while working from home.

Things that an organisation should be thinking about are:

What are our Health & Safety criminal law obligations in dealing with Covid-19?

What do we have to do?

How can we protect ourselves from blame if we get it wrong?

The answers to these questions are:

* Risk Assessment
* Provision of suitable equipment
* Show that thought has been given to the situation. Prioritise where necessary pregnant workers, employees with pre-existing musculoskeletal conditions etc. Keep a record of the thought process/decisions.

Keep in mind that an injury sustained while working from home falls under a workplace injury – It is important to therefore inform your business insurance that you have 95% of staff working from home rather than 3% for instance.

Provision of equipment to employees should be risk based.

For **short term** work from home, a laptop, keyboard and mouse should be adequate, employees should be encouraged to place the laptop on a box/biscuit tin/ reems of paper so that the screen is at or just below eye level.

**Long term** work from home should also consider the table, desk and chair being used and use of a desktop.

A questionnaire should be issued to staff as early as possible in the switch to establish the home working environment.

More action on improving the home working environment should be seen to be taken as time moves on and weeks turn into months.

Whichever form of workstation the employee is working from, be it:

* Sofa, laptop, coffee table
* Dining table and dining chair
* Desk and office chair

This will be considered the workstation provided by the organisation. Portable workstations are acceptable for a week or two but there will be an expectation for improvements to be made at different stages, the longer employees are working from home the more provision should be made to establish a compliant workstation .

Prosecution during this time is highly unlikely and there is no call for DSE assessment to take place on home workers during Covid 19 but it is expected that organisations will do what is reasonably practicable to improve home working environments over time.

The obligations in the DSE regulations are strict liability, if this law is breached it will be deemed a criminal offence.

Remember – short term comfort is not a predictor of long-term health.

# Example risk assessment questionnaire for office workers working from home.

What type of seating do you have to work from? ☐Sofa ☐Armchair ☐Dining Chair ☐Office Chair ☐Other

If working from a chair, is it height adjustable? ☐Yes ☐No

What type of desk do you have? ☐Coffee Table ☐Dining Table ☐Office Desk ☐Other

Which device do you work from? ☐Laptop ☐Desktop

If working from a laptop, do you have a separate: ☐Keyboard ☐Mouse

Do you have anything suitable to place the laptop ☐Yes ☐No on to raise it to eye level (keeping in mind the laptop has a fan and needs air circulating)?

If working at a dining table, are you comfortable? ☐Yes ☐No

Organisations should be looking to provide employees with the basic minimum standard.

Priority should be given to employees working from a sofa with a laptop.

Short term comfort is not a predictor of long-term health. Sitting on the sofa with a laptop may feel great for the first couple of hours, but hour after hour, day after day, week after week for an indefinite length of time, it is going to cause musculoskeletal discomfort at the very least with long term problems more likely.

Where possible, employees should be working at a fully compliant workstation.

Ideas for a basic workstation set up at home should include:

1. Adjustable chair – Could office chair be taken and used at home or a dining chair with cushions to raise height and a rolled towel provide lumbar support.
2. Laptop stand – Anything available to raise the laptop to just below eye level e.g. biscuit tin, books, bricks, reems of paper.
3. Mouse and keyboard – if working from a laptop, employees must be provided with a separate mouse and keyboard, if they do not already have one at home could one be borrowed?
4. Footrest – use a reem of paper or a box to place feet on if the floor cannot be reached comfortably.

Encourage movement, the worse the position the more movement is needed. Take regular breaks.

If taking calls, move away from the workstation, wonder around, make notes with a pen and paper.

Things to think about when setting up a workstation at home:

Back – sitting height is very important. Elbows should be at keyboard height, at a 90o angle, forearms parallel to the desk. Feet and back supported, not leaning forwards.

Neck – screen should be at arm’s length away, at eye level, directly in front of user, avoid leaning or reaching forward.

Upper limb – Check wrist position, wrists should be level and hands relaxed. Upper arms should be relaxed by sides, not pulling away from the body. Avoid repetitive, awkward movements. If more mouse work is involved, move the keyboard to the side and have the mouse central.

Take regular breaks – Good DSE set up, every 20 mins, laptop set up, every 15 mins. Move as much as possible.