

National Joint Council for local government services

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**To: Chief Executives in England, Wales and N Ireland
(copies for HR and Finance Directors)
Members of the National Joint Council**

17 March 2020

Dear Chief Executive,

COVID-19: working at home

All information contained in this circular is correct at time of publication but all links to external government websites should be checked regularly as official advice is likely to be updated as the situation continues to develop.

Please continue to visit the LGA's [Coronavirus: information for councils](#) webpage for all up to date advice.

The Government yesterday urged everyone to now work at home where possible. This presents practical challenges for councils. All councils will already have flexible working policies that set out protocols for employees whose roles readily lend themselves to working at home and we would expect those arrangements to now be kicking in.

Employees should ensure that they are taking steps to look after their wellbeing during their period of working from home. This includes:

- maintaining regular contact with their manager and colleagues
- taking regular breaks
- avoiding being 'always on' by ensuring that they identify non-working time
- contacting the employee assistance programme if they need support, for example, in relation to heightened feelings of anxiety
- being aware of the things that can cause them poor wellbeing and the activities and resources that can help to address this

Employers have the responsibility to ensure business continuity and service delivery. We again urge local parties to work together from the outset when now considering practical implications for those roles that are mainly, but not solely, public facing jobs or similar roles

which cannot be carried out at home. We expect all parties to be flexible and reasonable. The country faces an exceptional crisis of the like not experienced by the vast majority of the population. Custom and practice may need to be disregarded and usual ways of working and existing policies and protocols may need to be suspended. Wherever possible, unless there are urgent, mitigating reasons, such suspensions should be agreed beforehand with local trade unions. Employees should not suffer any detriment in pay and conditions for the period of any temporary changes that are introduced.

Where staff are asked to work flexibly to cover other jobs, initially volunteers should be sought. New roles must be clearly explained to them and they should receive appropriate training. If they are asked to work in roles which have increased risks, such as cleaning, a risk assessment must be carried out before they start.

Employers should seek the necessary legal advice where appropriate.

Vulnerable groups

Councils will have employees who are in the vulnerable groups where they could be looking at months of working at home. This group includes those who are:

- pregnant women
- aged 70 or older (regardless of medical conditions)
- under 70 with an underlying health condition listed below (broadly anyone instructed to get a flu jab each year on medical grounds):
 - chronic (long-term) respiratory diseases, such as [asthma](#), [chronic obstructive pulmonary disease \(COPD\)](#), emphysema or [bronchitis](#)
 - chronic heart disease, such as [heart failure](#)
 - [chronic kidney disease](#)
 - chronic liver disease, such as [hepatitis](#)
 - chronic neurological conditions, such as [Parkinson's disease](#), [motor neurone disease](#), [multiple sclerosis \(MS\)](#), a learning disability or cerebral palsy
 - [diabetes](#)
 - problems with your spleen – for example, [sickle cell](#) disease or if you have had your spleen removed
 - a weakened immune system as the result of conditions such as [HIV and AIDS](#), or medicines such as [steroid tablets](#) or [chemotherapy](#)
 - being seriously overweight (a BMI of 40 or above)

There are some clinical conditions which put people at even higher risk of severe illness from COVID-19. Next week the NHS in England will directly contact people in this category with advice about the more stringent measures that should be taken in order to keep themselves and others safe.

People falling into this group are those who may be at particular risk due to complex health problems such as:

- People who have received an organ transplant and remain on ongoing immunosuppression medication

- People with cancer who are undergoing active chemotherapy or radiotherapy
- People with cancers of the blood or bone marrow such as leukaemia who are at any stage of treatment
- People with severe chest conditions such as cystic fibrosis or severe asthma (requiring hospital admissions or courses of steroid tablets)
- People with severe diseases of body systems, such as severe kidney disease (dialysis)

Roles that do not readily lend themselves to working at home

Our [previous advice](#) dealt with employees who are self-isolating or sick. This circular sets out considerations for employees who are otherwise well but cannot attend their normal place of work due to the Government’s instruction for people to work at home and avoid all non-essential travel.

As previously advised, all options for using annual leave, special leave etc should be explored but given the length of time that this national emergency is set to last it is not reasonable, for example, to expect employees to use their entire annual leave entitlement to cover all or part of the lockdown period as consideration should be given to planned booked holidays later in the year, along with employees who may require leave throughout the year to support dependents.

The position relating to all support staff in schools presents particular challenges. [Current guidance](#) is that schools are to remain open unless specific circumstances dictate otherwise. At such time as the expected closure of schools is announced, council employers will need to work quickly with Head Teachers and School Business Managers to ensure consistency of approaches to home working as applied to corporate council employees and school-based employees.

Ultimately, in many cases employers will have no option other than to accept that some employees can neither work at home nor be redeployed / seconded etc and will therefore be staying at home on full pay for the duration of this emergency. The LGA is and will continue to be in discussion with government regarding the support required for the sector.

We know that councils are thinking urgently about ways to best use people’s skills and energy to help communities deal with the crisis and we thank all those in the local government workforce for their care and commitment.

Yours sincerely,

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