



Health and safety guidelines relating to staff who occasionally work at home

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Guidelines for Deans of Faculties/Heads of Schools/Services/senior managers

- 1.1. Some staff, with varying degrees of frequency, carry out elements of their work away from the University. It is important to remember that, with regard to health and safety, it should not be “out of sight out of mind”. Under the Health and Safety at Work Act an employer has to take reasonable steps to protect the health, safety and welfare of its staff wherever they carry out their work.
- 1.2. Depending on the type of work being carried out, health and safety risks will vary. For example, where the work may involve use of equipment (e.g. use of a VDU) the obligation to ensure that such work is carried out safely is just as important as if it were carried out in the University.
- 1.3. It is difficult to prepare an exhaustive list of every possible hazard, but some of the things to be considered when staff work from home are outlined below.

2. Risk assessment

- 2.1. There is a duty to carry out a risk assessment in relation to work activities for all staff, whether working at the University or at home. In the University the work environment

and equipment is more easily assessed and controlled. When working at home, however, working conditions may be less than ideal.

- 2.2. This does not mean a visit to the home of staff who carry out some of their work at home to check their working conditions. It will usually be sufficient to bring to their attention possible hazards and provide a checklist to allow them to undertake their own risk assessment. The attached should therefore be issued to all staff who work at home.

3. Electrical and other work equipment

- 3.1. It is important to ensure that any electrical equipment (for example laptop computers) provided for working at home is safe and regularly maintained and staff should be encouraged to bring in such equipment for checking in accordance with local maintenance arrangements in the School/Service. This does not, however, extend to responsibility for the safety of the household electrical supply.
- 3.2. In the case of working with computers/VDUs the Display Screen Equipment Regulations apply. The aim of these is to minimise the risk of musculo-skeletal problems (e.g. repetitive strain injury), visual fatigue, mental stress etc and the same form of risk assessment should be applied as for staff working at an office-based work station. This may be done by the member of staff using an appropriate checklist (a University pro forma is available in the Office Safety Manual or can be obtained from the Safety Advisory Services). The pro forma looks primarily at equipment factors i.e the desk, the chair, the screen and keyboard, with the questions designed to ensure that appropriate adjustments are made to achieve a comfortable working position. Environmental factors such as lighting, space etc. are also to be considered since these can influence comfort. Laptops should only be used for limited periods – say about an hour – since prolonged use given the elevated nature of the keyboard compared to a normal inclined keyboard can cause wrist discomfort. It is therefore unlikely that, for example, working for long periods on a laptop at a kitchen/dining table on an ordinary dining chair will pass a VDU risk assessment.

4. First aid provision

It is an employer's duty to provide adequate first aid provision at work. It is reasonable to assume that most people will have adequate domestic provision for minor cuts and bruises and in many instances it may be judged that the type of work does not represent a first aid hazard. If, however, a member of staff who works at home has an accident relating to that work he/she should be encouraged to report this to their local Health and Safety Officer when they next come in to the University to work. It is the Health and Safety Officer's responsibility to record the incident on Sentinel, our online accident reporting system.

5. Stress

- 5.1. In some respects working at home may be considered to be less stressful than having to come in to the University – staff can control what work they do and when, and in many cases the very reason for doing work at home is to get away from distractions and interruptions. There can, however, be negative elements to home working, which could result in feelings of stress or anxiety. Things to bear in mind, particularly where staff work at home for long periods, with little time in the office, include:

- lack of feedback on work performance could lead to anxiety;
- long periods working at home can lead to a feeling of isolation;

- the fact that a person working at home can do the work to fit in with domestic commitments may mean that at certain times domestic pressures take priority, resulting in a backlog leading to feelings of guilt and stress;
 - ill health problems may go unnoticed for long periods;
 - there is no clear end point to the working day, which could lead to working excessive hours.
- 5.2. Some thought may need to be given to workload and expected output from periods working at home to ensure that the member of staff does not feel obliged to work excessive hours in order to meet departmental expectations.
- 5.3. It is important that staff who regularly work at home are made to feel part of the School/Service, invited to relevant meetings (or sent details of discussions if unable to attend), included in any social events, kept up to date with any changes and that their career and development needs are not neglected.

6. Hazardous substances

Staff are prohibited from taking hazardous substances (solvents, chemicals, biological agents, tissue etc. samples, radioactive material etc.) from the workplace to home.

7. Guidelines for staff

Outline guidelines for staff who work at home provided below.

Guidelines for Staff

1. General matters

- 1.1. For a variety of reasons many staff of the University undertake part of their work at home, rather than on University premises. In some cases, working at home is a normal expectation of a role e.g. in the case of lecturing staff. In other cases working at home will be the exception e.g. when a member of staff requests permission to work at home in order to complete a piece of work which needs to be done with minimum distraction or interruption. In either case it is important that your School/Service is aware that you are working at home and is able to contact you, if necessary, during working hours on work related matters. In the latter circumstances it is important to obtain permission to work at home so that your manager knows where you are and there is no possible confusion about why you are not at your normal place of work.
- 1.2. Most of the work undertaken at home by University staff is generally administration, office/paper based work or work on a computer. In general, this is not work involving high risk, but there are two key areas to be aware of:
- Computer safety/security
 - Health and safety

2. Computer safety/security

- 2.1. It is important to ensure that work moved on disk between home and the University does not transfer viruses to University machines.

- 2.2. You should ensure that your work is adequately backed up in case of e.g. disc corruption or damage in transfer.
- 2.3. You must ensure appropriate safeguards in relation to confidentiality of any material you are working on.

3. Health and safety

- 3.1. While the University has a duty to take reasonable care of staff's health and safety, staff are expected to take primary responsibility for ensuring safe working conditions in their home.
- 3.2. The following guidelines are aimed at raising your awareness of potential risks to health and safety which may result from working at home and indicating possible action you can take to provide safe working conditions.
- 3.3. General risk assessment principles
 - 3.3.1. In most cases, offices and other places of work are configured to ensure that the work carried out there is done safely. This is not necessarily the case when working at home. It should also be borne in mind that, although you may be aware of certain hazards associated with the work you are doing, your family or others in the home with you may not be. To take a simple example, if you are working with a lap top computer plugged in to the mains, the mains lead may be trailing across a part of the floor where other people may need to walk. This could result in them tripping over the mains lead, hurting themselves and damaging the computer.
 - 3.3.2. Whatever work you are doing, you should at least make a mental note of any possible risks to the health and safety of yourself and others who are present whilst you are working. If the risk is significant you should take appropriate steps to minimise the problems, where appropriate seeking advice, assistance or resources from your School/Service or the Safety Advisory Services.
- 3.4. Hazardous Substances
 - 3.4.1. Staff are prohibited from taking hazardous substances (solvents, chemicals, biological agents, tissue etc. samples, radioactive material etc.) from the workplace to home.
- 3.5. Electrical Equipment
 - 3.5.1. You are responsible for the safety of the wiring/electricity circuit in your home, but the University remains responsible for regular maintenance of any electrical equipment that it provides to allow you to carry out work at home. This means that if you are provided with a computer, for example, you should make sure that it is taken in to work periodically and checked to make sure it is safe. You should either check with your School/Service what the arrangements are for regular checks of computers in the workplace or look up the details on the Office Safety Manual and ensure that your home equipment is checked in line with this arrangement. You should also ensure that you do not do anything that affects the health and safety of others in the home e.g. avoiding trailing leads.
 - 3.5.2. Some simple visual checks you can make on electrical equipment include:
 - Check that plugs are not damaged

- Check that the outer covering of cable/wire leading to plugs is firmly gripped where it enters the plug or the equipment
- Check leads/wires/cables for damage to the outer covering
- Check that the outer cover of the equipment is not damaged – look out for loose parts or screws
- Check for burn marks or staining which may suggest overheating

3.6. Display Screen Equipment

- 3.6.1. If you do work at home on a VDU/computer, the Display Screen Equipment Regulations apply and you should undertake an assessment of your workstation to make sure it does not constitute a health and safety hazard. (Information on assessing your VDU workstation may be found in the University's Office Safety Manual. Appendix 1 contains guidelines taken from the Health and Safety Executive's leaflet 'Working with VDUs'). The aim of these regulations is to minimise the risk of musculo-skeletal damage (e.g. repetitive strain injury often affecting wrists and forearms or back strain from inappropriate seating) and visual fatigue due to inappropriate lighting etc. The guidelines concentrate primarily on equipment factors i.e. the desk, the chair, the screen and keyboard with the questions designed to ensure that appropriate adjustments are made to achieve a comfortable working position. Environmental factors such as lighting, space etc. are also to be considered since these can influence comfort. Laptops should only be used for limited periods – say about an hour – since prolonged use given the elevated nature of the keyboard compared to a normal inclined keyboard can cause wrist discomfort. It is therefore unlikely that, for example, working for long periods on a laptop at a kitchen/dining table on an ordinary dining chair will pass a VDU risk assessment.
- 3.6.2. Even with a conventional computer at a well configured work station it is important to take a break and vary your activity for a few minutes every hour to avoid the onset of physical, mental or visual fatigue.

4. First aid and accident reporting

- 4.1.1. You will, no doubt, have the usual battery of minor medical supplies to deal with aches and pains, cuts and bruises and there will not be a need for the University to supply a first aid kit for the type of work you do at home.
- 4.1.2. When not at work you will not have immediate access to the School/Service's accident book. If, however, you do have a work related accident while working at home you should keep a brief record of what happened and any detrimental effects and enter this in the departmental accident book next time you are in your School/Service.

5. Contact with the School/Service

- 5.1.1. In many ways working at home can be less stressful than going to work. You can avoid the inevitable problems of travel to and from the University; you can, to some extent, decide when you do the work to fit in with other commitments; there may be less distractions from colleagues, students etc allowing you to concentrate on that important piece of work, report etc.
- 5.1.2. There can, however, be a down side if you work at home regularly, with little time in your School/Service. For example:

- It may be difficult to consult or gain feedback on your work from colleagues or more senior staff.
- You may not be in the University at the time of staff meeting and consequently feel isolated and uninformed.
- You may be excluded from social occasions.
- In the event of a family crisis, work may take second place, with the intention of catching up later. This can lead to the pressure of a backlog.
- If you are ill there may be a temptation not to report sick, but just to press on and do what you can when you can. This can add to the pressure of building up a backlog and may slow down your recovery.
- You may not keep track of the actual hours you work since there is no clear start and end point to the working day.

Prolonged periods of absence working from home are, therefore, discouraged.

- 5.1.3. If you are working at home, remember that it is work. Make sure you keep in touch with key people in your School/Service and ask to be kept up to date with any changes, developments etc which you would be aware of if you were in the office. If anything is worrying you, you have as much right to discuss it with you Head of School/manager/supervisor as if you were in the office every day so make that appointment or telephone call to express your worries and concerns.

Appendix 1

Health and Safety Executive Guidelines on Working with VDUs

What can I do to help myself?

Lots! You should make full use of the adjustment facilities for your VDU and work environment to get the best from them and avoid potential health problems. Here are some specific tips.

- Adjust your chair and VDU to find the most comfortable position for your work. As a broad guide, your arms should be approximately horizontal and your eyes at the same height as the top of the VDU casing.
- Make sure there is enough space underneath your desk to move your legs freely. Move any obstacles such as boxes or equipment.
- Avoid excess pressure on the backs of your legs and knees. A footrest, particularly for smaller users, may be helpful.
- Don't sit in the same position for long periods. Make sure you change your posture as often as practicable. Some movement is desirable, but avoid repeat stretching movements.
- Adjust your keyboard and screen to get a good keying and viewing position. A space in front of the keyboard is sometimes helpful for resting the hands and wrists while not keying.
- Don't bend your hands up at the wrist when keying. Try to keep a soft touch on the keys and don't overstretch your fingers. Good keyboard technique is important.
- Try different layouts of keyboard, screen and document holder to find the best arrangement for you.
- Make sure you have enough work space to take whatever documents you need. A document holder may help you to avoid awkward neck movements.
- Arrange your desk and screen so that bright lights are not reflected in the screen. You shouldn't be directly facing windows or bright lights. Adjust curtains or blinds to prevent unwanted light.
- Make sure the characters on your screen are sharply focussed and can be read easily. They shouldn't flicker or move.
- Make sure there are no layers of dirt, grime or finger marks on the screen.
- Use the brightness control on the screen to suit the lighting conditions in the room.