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Bwrdd Iechyd Prifysgol  
Cwm Taf Morgannwg  
University Health Board

## **Guidance on supporting shielding employees return to the workplace**

### **1. Is it essential for shielding employees to return to work?**

The current Welsh Government guidance advises that employees continue to work from home where possible, and for 'clinically extremely vulnerable staff' to continue to shield at home until the 16<sup>th</sup> August 2020. It should be noted where employees live in England, shielding will cease from the 1<sup>st</sup> August 2020. However, for the purposes of this guidance, the date of the 16<sup>th</sup> August will apply to both Welsh and English residents.

The guidance includes those employees who are supporting the shielding of a household member.

The manager should consider which roles, tasks and functions can continue to be supported and undertaken from home in the longer-term. To assist with the planning for essential employees to return to work during August 2020, the organisation may want to utilise the list of roles identified as suitable to be undertaken remotely, at the beginning of the COVID-19 pandemic.

This document provides guidance for managers and employees to facilitate, enable and to continue to support home working, where it is appropriate and safe to do so.

It should be noted that all references to shielding employees covers those employees that received a shielding letter from the Chief Medical Officer, consultant or GP.

## **2. How shielding employees may be feeling about returning to work?**

Shielding employees may be feeling relieved or excited, they may be feeling more anxious or they may move through a range of different feelings and emotions. For example, they may be feeling;

- ✚ Stressed and unprepared to return to the workplace;
- ✚ Anxious, afraid or panicked that their return to the workplace could increase their risk of infection;
- ✚ Anxious that they will be exposing their family / household members etc. to a risk of infection that was not there when they were shielding;
- ✚ Angry or frustrated because they believe that it is too early for the government to remove the requirement to shield;
- ✚ Conflicted or confused as they may want to socialise more but feel that they should stay at home to mitigate the risk of infection;
- ✚ Worried that social distancing rules will not be followed in the workplace, increasing their risk of infection.
- ✚ Fearful that the pandemic will make their work more difficult or higher risk, especially if they are working in patient facing / clinical roles;
- ✚ Apprehensive that their workplace relationships with colleague may have changed as a result of their requirement to shield;
- ✚ Powerless because they have not had a say in anything that has happened in their home or working life since lockdown;
- ✚ Anxious about changes that may have made to the workplace during their absence.
- ✚ Protective of their lockdown routine as they would rather not have to deal with more change or uncertainty.

## **3. Is it sufficiently safe for the employee to return to their workplace?**

Where it is identified by a manager that it is essential for an employee to return to the workplace to fulfil their role at the end of the shielding

period, they should only be invited back when it is sufficiently safe for them to do so, as determined by government guidance and the NHS Wales COVID-19 Risk Assessment outcome.

The level of risk associated with returning to the workplace is individual to each employee's personal risk factors, underlying health condition and their specific role and work environment. Therefore, all returning employees should be provided with a return to work plan which is specific to their individual requirements.

It should be acknowledged that some employees who are shielding are disabled and as such the organisation have a duty to implement reasonable adjustments, in line with the Equality Act 2010.

Where appropriate, reasonable adjustments must be considered and form part of the risk assessment action plan for all shielding employees, to enable them to safely return to the workplace.

The Health Board recommends that the following reasonable adjustments are considered and implemented, where appropriate, to support the employee to return to work:

- ✦ Being flexible and allowing employees to use their annual leave in an appropriate manner, to support their return to work over a short period of time.
- ✦ Creating a temporary agreed rota which permits, where appropriate, the employee to work from home on some days and the workplace on others, to assist them to transition back into working from their workplace.
- ✦ Offering a short phased return to work over a 2 week period e.g. working 50% of their contracted hours during week one and 75% of their contracted hours during week two.
- ✦ Enabling employees to continue working from home, if this is appropriate and safe to do so, and particularly if this has worked effectively to date.
- ✦ Enabling employees to continue to work from home, if this is appropriate and safe to do so, and particularly if this has worked effectively to date (see [NHS Wales Home Working Guidance](#)).
- ✦ Redeploying employees to work in a lower risk area.

**N.B.** The NHS 111 Wales service is able to deploy Health Board clinical staff into speciality triage services. This work can be undertaken from home. More information is available regarding this option from your Head / Deputy Head of Workforce.

- ✚ Altering start and finishing times.
- ✚ Adapting ways of working. For example, minimising contact with patients or other employees. Arranging for the employee to work in a defined 'bubble' with allocated team members /colleagues, to reduce the number of interactions they have with people in the workplace.
- ✚ Also refer to flexible working arrangements which are set out in the [CTMUHB Flexible Working Policy](#).
- ✚ Also refer to the Occupational Health Guidance below.

#### 4. Do I need to undertake a risk assessment before the employee returns to work?

A shielding employee should work with their manager to ensure that the NHS Wales COVID-19 Workforce Risk Assessment Tool is carried out prior to their return to the workplace, when the shielding period ends (16th August 2020).

***It should be noted that those staff that are shielding with a 'shielding letter' will automatically score a 7 on the NHS Wales COVID-19 Workforce Risk Assessment Tool.*** An individual that scores 7 or above is deemed to be at 'very high risk' and should continue to work from home or only go to work if they can work in a COVID-19 secure workplace, with stringent 2m social distancing at all time.

It is still important that the employee and the manager undertake a COVID-19 Workforce Risk Assessment if an employee currently has a shielding letter, to ascertain if it is still appropriate for them to work from home or whether reasonable adjustments could be considered and implemented to support their to return to work:

***Please Note: The Risk Assessment Tool has omitted to include 'previously shielding staff with a shielding letter' as a risk factor / allocated a score of 7 (see page 4 of the Risk Assessment Tool). Therefore, when undertaking the Risk Assessment, complete step 1 (Check the risk) and Step 2 (Consider each risk factor that applied to you and total your score. If you have previously been shielding with a shielding letter an additional score of 7 should be added to the previous total score.***

The Health Board can reduce the workplace risks for their employees by implementing the following measures:

- ✚ Ensuring all employees are aware of the latest [infection control measures and PPE guidance](#) and adhere to these.

- ✦ Ensuring all relevant employees have access to suitable PPE.
- ✦ Adopting an employee 'bubble' approach, where returning employee's working days / shifts patterns are arranged so that they work with the same team members / colleagues, as far as is practicable, to reduce the number of people interactions they have in the workplace.
- ✦ Adapting employee's working times / shift patterns to help them to avoid travelling on public transport during peak times.
- ✦ Enforcing social distancing measures and having visible signage in place.
- ✦ Providing additional hand washing facilities and / or hand sanitizer in work areas.
- ✦ Providing disinfection wipes to clean down desks, chairs, keyboards, kitchen and staff room equipment and facilities etc.
- ✦ Ensuring work lists are sustainable and controlled to allow the other measures (like adequate cleaning) to take effect.
- ✦ Introducing where possible more frequent cleaning of all workplace areas, including non-clinical areas and toilets.
- ✦ Providing additional facilities for employees to enable them to walk, run or cycle to work, where appropriate. For example, increase the number of bike racks, provide shower and changing facilities etc. where possible.

Managers should be aware that some employees may have health concerns or issues that they do not wish to discuss with them or have issues related to their underlying health condition that requires further advice to support the Covid-19 Risk Assessment outcome and the decision whether they should return to work at the end of the shielding period. In these situations, it is appropriate for the manager to signpost / refer the employee to the Occupational Health Team (also see the Occupational Health Guidance below) or another relevant person within the organisation e.g. Psychologist.

## **5. How do I access the NHS Wales COVID-19 Risk Assessment Tool?**

The Health Board has mandated that all employees complete an NHS Wales COVID-19 Risk Assessment. From the 12<sup>th</sup> August, this will appear on your ESR compliance matrix as a training requirement and will appear as follows:

110|MAND|COVID19 Workforce Risk Assessment - 6 months|

The ESR competency will automatically appear “red” on your compliance matrix and once successfully completed the learning certification, the ESR competency will turn “green” and will therefore make your compliant.

The Risk Assessment can be accessed by completing an ESR 110 E-learning Certification. The Learning Certification is called

[“110 e-Learning Certification - COVID19 Workforce Risk Assessment”](#)

At this time employees are advised to complete the Risk Assessment every 6 months, or more frequently should any of their relevant circumstances change. All employees have been automatically enrol onto the NHS Wales COVID-19 Workforce Risk Assessment e-learning package as a core competency.

[How to complete the NHS Wales COVID-19 Risk Assessment on ESR Guidance](#)

## **6. How will returning employees be supported?**

Prioritising the physical and mental health of our workforce is essential to ensure they can continue to provide high quality NHS services in the long-term. Manager should be aware that shielding employees may have not been out in or had limited exposure to public areas for a number of months and many will be very anxious about returning to the workplace. They may therefore require additional support prior to and following their return to the workplace.

The manager should consider the wellbeing support and services provided throughout COVID-19, to identify those interventions which could support their employee to transition safely back into the workplace.

The following are some of the wellbeing support mechanisms that are available:

### **For Employees**

- ✚ [Government COVID-19 Shielded Patient List](#)
- ✚ Counselling support
- ✚ Employee Assistance Programme (VIVUP see page 9 below for contact details)
- ✚ [Occupational Health](#) Assessments and advice (See Occupational Health Advice below)
- ✚ Trade union representative support
- ✚ [Chaplaincy](#) support services

- ✚ [CTMUHB Wellbeing Resources](#)
- ✚ [Wellbeing Resources for Staff](#)
- ✚ Facilities for employees – rest spaces, food and refreshments, showers etc. [Raising Concerns Procedure](#)
- ✚ signposting to [nationally available free support](#) and self-help resources for wellbeing

## For Managers

- ✚ [Occupational Health](#) Assessments and advice (See section 9 below)
- ✚ Guidance on supporting shielding employees return to the workplace
- ✚ [Wellbeing resources and information](#)
- ✚ Signposting to [nationally available free support for managers](#), including coaching, mentoring and virtual 'leadership circles'

## 7. Top Ten Tips for Managers Supporting Shielding Employees Return to the Workplace

1. Consider how you can help a shielding employee prepare to return to the workplace. For example, offering the opportunity for a short visit to the workplace, before they return could help them familiarise themselves with the changes and to experience the new social distancing and infection control practices. A return to work discussion may provide a perfect opportunity for such a visit.

Make contact with your employee who is currently shielding at home as soon as possible. This will ensure that you can arrange to meet with them prior to the 16<sup>th</sup> August 2020, to support them to complete a [NHS Wales COVID-19 Workforce Risk Assessment Tool](#) and to give full and fair consideration to the implications in respect of their underlying health condition.

2. You must review the outcomes of the risk assessment and health related discussions and agree and sign off, where appropriate, a supportive and documented return to work plan. This approach will provide you and your employee with the time to consider the risk assessment outcome(s) and to implement any changes or reasonable adjustments required to support the return to the work place. It will also provide you and the employee with sufficient time to seek additional advice /guidance on specific issues from Workforce and OD, Occupational Health Department etc.

3. The return to work meeting should:

- ✚ Be arranged and held well in advance of the shielding employee's planned date to return to the workplace;
- ✚ Be held in a location where the employee is comfortable to meet with you and can be conducted in private. These meetings do not necessarily need to be held in the workplace and may be held virtually;
- ✚ Be supportive and conducted in a sensitive and considerate manner with the primary focus being on supporting the employee to return to the workplace.
- ✚ Explore issues and concerns in a caring and compassionate manner, with an open mind and without making judgements and assumptions.
- ✚ Provide the employee with the opportunity to discuss their anxieties, concerns etc. about returning to the workplace.
- ✚ Provide an opportunity to sign post the employee to relevant Health Board Health and Wellbeing services and resources. Insert Link
- ✚ Update the shielding employee on any changes to their team or work environment as a result of any revised operating procedures implemented to ensure safe working. This will ensure that they are aware of changes in advance of their return to the workplace.

4. Support the employee to undertake an NHS Wales COVID-19 Risk Assessment for all shielding employees who are required to return to the workplace, taking into account their health condition, circumstances etc. Where appropriate, work with the Occupational Health and Workforce and OD Team to identify reasonable adjustments.

5. Where an employee is returning to work and they are a new or expectant mother, the managers should also ensure they follow the HSE expectant mothers risk assessment guidance [HSE Expectant Mother Risk Assessment Guidance](#).

6. Hold a structured return to work discussion with each returning employee, in a sensitive and compassionate manner. The purpose of the discussion is to:

- ✚ Enquire and gain an understanding of how your employee is feeling about returning to the workplace and consider how you can support them.
- ✚ Thank them for their contributions to work during the COVID-19 pandemic, or acknowledge that they may be feeling guilty for not



being able to work in the same way as their colleagues or not being able to work during this period.

- ✚ Support the employee to complete the NHS Wales COVID-19 Risk Assessment, discuss their underlying health condition etc. review the outcomes, agree actions and a structured return to work plan, where appropriate. The return to work plan must be documented and agreed and signed off by the manager and the employee.
  - ✚ Identify any signs of distress, anxiety or psychological ill health which may need further professional advice and or specific support. Where a manager has such concerns they should refer the employee to the Occupational Health Department for assessment, prior to agreeing a return to work plan and date.
  - ✚ Discuss any factors outside of work that may affect the employee returning to work and encourage them to consider any interim adjustments or changes they may need to make. For example, do they have childcare or caring responsibilities and how can these be managed when they return to work?
  - ✚ Signpost employees to the [CTMUHB Wellbeing Resources](#) to assist them to take responsibility for and proactively manage their health and wellbeing.
  - ✚ Update the employee on changes. There may have been a lot of changes in ways of working, the physical work environment, team roles etc. during the pandemic, so make sure you update each employee and re-induct them as they come back into the workplace.
7. Identify any additional training, clinical supervision etc. needed to support the shielding employee to return to the workplace. Proactively contact your employee if they do not return to work on the planned date, to identify the reason and establish whether they are experiencing any issues or barriers, not already identified via their COVID-19 Risk Assessment / return to work plan. Where new issues or barriers are identified, the manager and employee must review the COVID-19 Risk Assessment to determine the action(s) to be taken, to assist with the revised return to the workplace date, if appropriate for them to do so.
8. Regularly meet with your returned employees during the first few weeks of their return, to assess how they are settling back into the workplace and to enquire about their health and wellbeing. You should be mindful that an employee's circumstances might change rapidly and they may need different support over time. It is therefore important

that you continue to focus on their health and wellbeing of returning employees. Risk assessments must be reviewed where there is a change of circumstance, or the employee requests it.

9. Shielding employees who are returning to the workplace after a significant period of time away may feel nervous, anxious, and guilty. Equally, employees who have been in the workplace during the pandemic may feel resentment towards those shielded staff, regardless of whether they have been working from home or not.

You and your team leaders have a role to help employees understand each other's perspectives and experiences. Advice and support is available from your Workforce and OD Team if you have any issues that you are unable to resolve.

10. Consider what peer support returning employees might want or Need. For example, could they be paired up with a colleague that has been in the workplace throughout, for most of the pandemic or recently returned to work?

## 8. Additional Resources to Support Managers and Staff



Help at any time, available  
**24/7**  
365 days a year

To access the service, simply call  
**03303 800658\***  
Or to find the full range of services available, visit  
**vivup.co.uk**

### Mental health support in difficult times

We have launched an Employee Assistance Programme (EAP), to ensure that help is available to all of our employees, especially with the additional stress of COVID-19.

Our Vivup Employee Assistance Programme (EAP) Offering you a range of information and practical support for problems at work and home including:

Stress | Family Difficulties | Relationships | Health | Finances | Bereavement | Anxiety | Depression | Workplace Issues | Trauma

Please note the helpline is for mental health support and cannot provide any advice for COVID-19 health-related issues

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\* Calls charged at local rates

[CIPD FAQ on returning to the workplace](#)

[Going for Growth – an outline NHS staff recovery plan post Covid-19](#)

[Society of Occupational Medicine – Returning to the workplace after the Covid-19 lockdown: A toolkit](#)

[Society of Occupational Medicine – Covid-19 return to work guide: for health professionals advising patients and employers](#)

## **9. OCCUPATIONAL HEALTH GUIDANCE FOR MANAGERS AND EMPLOYEES ON RETURN TO WORK WHEN SHIELDING RESTRICTIONS IN WALES ARE LIFTED**

*The following guidance has been prepared by Occupational Health in response to queries around shielding and return to work. This advice will be continuously reviewed and may be updated dependant on Welsh Government or Chief Medical Officer Advice or instructions.*

It is likely that managers and employees will be seeking advice and information regarding return to work arrangements for employees following a period of shielding / self-isolation at home due to the coronavirus pandemic. Shielding is a measure to protect people who are extremely vulnerable by minimising the risks of them coming into contact with the virus.

The fact that an employee has received a shielding letter means that the employee falls within an extremely vulnerable group due to an underlying health condition and will remain in a vulnerable category whilst COVID-19 is still ongoing, despite the fact that shielding is likely to be lifted. Where possible, individuals shielding or self-isolating as a result of Government or Chief Medical Officer Advice may have continued their work activities through working from home.

With recent developments around the prevalence of the infection and transmission rates, the Welsh Government and Chief Medical Officer are likely to review the recommendation to shield around 16 August 2020. Due to an underlying health condition that has previously resulted in a recommendation to shield, the employee remains in an extremely vulnerable group for COVID-19 infection. In accordance with Welsh Government Guidance on social distancing for everyone in Wales, the employee remains at increased risk of severe illness if they contract COVID-19 infection. It is likely that their underlying health condition will fall under the disability aspect of the Equality Act 2010.

If the option of home working is still available from an organisational perspective, then this could continue as a means to protect the worker despite shielding restrictions being lifted. Otherwise, work can be risk assessed for the office environment (non-patient facing) with stringent 2 metre social distancing measures in place. Please refer to Welsh Government for advice on social distancing guidance for coronavirus.

It is advised that prior to any return to work that the employee complete the current All Wales CoVID-19 Workforce Risk Assessment with their manager and that management consider the likelihood of the employee coming into contact with suspected or confirmed CoVID-19 patients.

*\*Please note that while shielding remains in force, completion of the All Wales COVID-19 Workforce Risk Assessment is not necessary or applicable. When shielding restrictions are lifted, the NHS Wales COVID-19 Workforce Risk Assessment Tool (see section 4 above) that managers and employees could use. However, it is important to emphasise that some individuals who have been recommended to shield due to falling within an extremely vulnerable group will score low on this Risk Assessment tool. If this occurs, managers and employees are advised to apply the principles that the employee falls within an extremely vulnerable group by the very fact that they have received a shielding letter. If necessary seek further advice from Occupational Health. It is not clear whether this Risk Assessment Tool will be revised or whether further guidance will be issued by Welsh Government when shielding is lifted. This will be continuously monitored and advice updated.*

For any return to work for those who were in the shielding category, the work environment needs to be as CoVID-19 secure as possible with low workplace transmission to ensure the risks are as low as reasonably practicable. This should be achieved through stringent social distancing (2 metres), adherence to workplace hygiene / cleaning / infection control measures, use of face coverings and masks as appropriate, protecting vulnerable workers and ensuring that the employee is not exposed to confirmed or suspected cases of COVID-19. Management are better placed to ensure that these measures are operationally feasible and can be reliably implemented.

The risk assessment should be re-visited should there be any changes to any circumstances or the risk of workplace transmission increases.

For employees that have been shielding, it is advised that they do not resume work until after the 16<sup>th</sup> August 2020 which is the date that the Welsh Government is recommending that shielding ends. (Please note that the Welsh Government may reinstate shielding at any time in response to any changes in their monitoring of COVID-19 – to this end, managers and employees will need to be prepared to further implement adjustments or shielding measures).

Where particular activities are considered necessary for their role, all possible mitigating actions must be considered / undertaken and relevant control measures implemented to reduce workplace transmission risk. For clinical staff, returning to any area where the employee will be expected to undertake or be in the presence of aerosol generating procedures should be avoided.

Although COVID-19 measures can be reduced by the use of high level Personal Protective Equipment (PPE), this control measure should only be used where other controls cannot be adopted and it does not eliminate the risk entirely. It is recommended that any training requirements regarding the correct use of PPE and fit testing of face masks (if required) are completed promptly on return to work.

When considering the length of time the employee has been absent from the workplace, management are advised to consider a graduated return and a period of re-familiarisation. This will help to ensure that any concerns or issues are addressed, that all parties are satisfied that any changes, adjustments or control measures are managing any residual risk to an acceptable level.

For additional support, the Employee Assistance Programme is available 24/7 on 03303 800658 or [www.vivup.co.uk](http://www.vivup.co.uk). Employees are able to contact this service directly. For specific advice on underlying health conditions and fitness for work, please refer to Occupational Health.

There is supportive information in relation to returning to work on Share Point within the CoVID-19 section, under Health and Safety and Returning to Work.

**Options for adjustments / alternative duties that could overcome barriers to return to work could include** *(this list is not exhaustive and managers may have other options available to them locally within the scope of their service that could also be considered. The acceptability of what adjustments can reasonably be accommodated is ultimately a management decision. Please seek advice from Workforce if required)*

Where the risk assessment identifies the need to continue working remotely, tasks to consider could include:

- Home working
- Reallocation of duties that are non-patient facing
- Telephone triage / consultations (if access to notes are electronic and accessible remotely)
- Video conferencing via Microsoft Teams / Telephone consultations
- Medication reviews
- Mandatory E-learning
- Audit and Quality Improvement Reviews
- Research Project / Studies
- Policy development
- Writing Standard Operating Procedures
- Administrative tasks
- Updating patient information
- Rota co-ordinating