NHS Wales

Guidance on supporting shielding employees return to the workplace

Introduction

During the response to the Covid-19 pandemic, 'clinically extremely vulnerable staff' have been shielding at home. From 16th August 2020, shielding will be paused (1st August 2020 for residents in England) and Health Boards/Trusts will need to consider how employees will be supported following the change in status from this date. The guidance covers employees who are shielding as well as those employees who are supporting the shielding of a household member. Organisations may have members of staff who live in England and it should be noted that whilst shielding will cease in England from 1st August 2020, for the purposes of this guidance, the date of the 16th August will apply to both Welsh and English residents. Notwithstanding this, conversations with English residents in line with this guidance, may take place from 1st August 2020 to determine how and when individuals may be able to return safely to the workplace.

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 cover those employees that received a shielding letter from the Chief Medical Officer, consultant, or GP.

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 this remains the case for all NHS Wales employees.

In addressing the change in status, NHS Wales organisations should consider which roles, tasks and functions can continue to be supported and undertaken from home in the short/medium/long term.

To assist with the planning for essential employees to return to work during August 2020, organisations may want to utilise the list of roles locally identified as suitable during the COVID-19 pandemic to be undertaken remotely and how such arrangements may continue.

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;

- Protective of their lockdown routine as they would rather not have to deal with more change or uncertainty.

Is it sufficiently safe for the employee to return to work?

Where it is identified by a manager that it is essential that an employee needs 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 and their specific role and work environment (both in their workplace and the wider site from which they will be working).

It should be acknowledged that some employees who are shielding may have a disability and as such the Health Board/Trust has 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 a safe return to the workplace.

Examples of reasonable adjustments which could be considered include:

- Being flexible and allowing employees to use annual leave in an appropriate manner to support their return to the workplace 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, so as to assist transition back into working from their workplace.

- 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 homeworking guidance).

- Temporarily redeploying employees to work in a lower risk area.

- Altering start and finishing times.

- Adapting ways of working. For example, minimising contact with patients and/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.

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

The manager and employee should work together to ensure that the NHS Wales COVID-19 Risk Assessment is carried out for all shielding employees returning to the workplace when the shielding period ends.

Health Boards/Trusts 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 are supported to adhere to these.

- Ensuring work lists are manageable and controlled to allow other measures, e.g. adequate cleaning, to take effect between appointments.

- 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 etc.

- Introducing more frequent cleaning of all workplace areas, including non-clinical areas, toilets, kitchens and staff rooms.

- Providing additional facilities for employees to enable them to walk, run or cycle to work, where appropriate. Managers should be aware that some employees may have health concerns or issues that they do not wish to discuss with them. In this situation, it would be appropriate for the manager to signpost the employee to the Occupational Health Team or Employee Wellbeing Services.

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. Managers should be aware that shielding employees may have 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.

Managers should consider the wellbeing support and services provided throughout COVID-19, to signpost to 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

- Counselling support

- Employee Assistance Programme

- Occupational Health Assessments and advice

- Trade union representatives

- Chaplaincy support services

- Organisation Wellbeing resources and information (insert link)

- Facilities for employees – rest spaces, food and refreshments, showers etc.

- [Procedure for NHS Staff to Raise Concerns](#)

- signposting to [nationally available free support](#) and self-help resources for wellbeing

For Managers

- This guidance on supporting shielding employees return to the workplace

- Organisation Wellbeing resources and information (insert link)

- Signposting to [nationally available free support for managers](#), including coaching, mentoring and virtual 'leadership circles'

Additional Resources to Support Manager

CIPD FAQ on returning to the workplace
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
Charted Institute of Ergonomics and Human Factors – Creating a safe workplace during Covid-19