

Home working handbook



Working at home during
the Coronavirus Pandemic

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Introduction

In March 2020, the outbreak of coronavirus acted as an overnight catalyst, creating a new working landscape for Cumbria County Council where, for many, home working became not just beneficial, but vital to both employee wellbeing and service delivery.

As the Covid19 pandemic continues, this home working handbook seeks to provide support and guidance to enable employees to operate effectively in safe and well-connected spaces that work for them and the services they deliver.

The guidance within this handbook applies to staff who are working from home as a result of the pandemic as well as those who will continue to work from home in the future as part of a new way of working. As such, we expect that it will be updated regularly over time to reflect the changing ways of working.



The benefits of home working



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1 The Benefits of home working

Home working is a type of flexible working which can be also used in conjunction with other arrangements such as flexible hours, working part-time, term-time working or the employer's core hours.

Home working has many work-life balance benefits which are positive for both staff and the organisation. These include:

- Personal reduction on commuting time and costs.
- Increased flexibility with more control over working time.
- Easier to balance work with caring, family and household responsibilities.
- Reduction in carbon emissions, workforce mileage and travel time, resulting in lower costs and an increase in productivity and available resources.
- More accessible job opportunities, for example for some disabled people who previously had limited access to the labour market.

1.1 Categories of home worker

Throughout the pandemic, CCC have and will continue to seek feedback and engage with staff, services and trade unions about their home working experiences. This will ensure that any emerging concerns or issues can be addressed. It also ensures that as an organisation, we can plan for a future where home working will continue to balance the ongoing needs of the services with individual's circumstances, preferences and wellbeing.

Going forward, it is likely that a higher number of staff will work from home on a more regular basis than before and as part of the planning process, all posts are currently being explored to identify some home working parameters. These parameters will highlight the potential that each post has for future and longer term home working arrangements.

1.2 Longer term home working arrangements

At present, the COVID 19 government advice is that if employees can work from home they should continue to do so. Consequently, the temporary working from home arrangements currently in place should continue where this is possible.

Future work will be undertaken to engage and seek preferences from individuals regarding longer term working arrangements and going forward it is envisaged that any formal or permanent home working arrangements will compliment and reflect the categories outlined above.



Home working responsibilities



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2 Home working responsibilities

Whether home working is a temporary or longer term arrangement, there are responsibilities from both the employee and the employer that are needed to ensure the working environment is safe, secure and suitable for the work being undertaken. Line managers and home working employees should review the following guidance which is summarised below and ensure they are aware and undertake any necessary actions, training and risk assessments needed to support the home working arrangement and comply with legislation.

The relevant areas include:

- Health and Safety.
- Information Security, Equipment and Technology.
- Expenses, Tax Relief and Terms and Conditions.
- Household Matters.

2.1 Health and safety

Under the Health and Safety at Work etc. Act 1974, employers have a duty to protect the health, safety and welfare of their employees.

Line managers should review the suite of corporate **Health and Safety Procedures** and ensure that all procedures relevant to the work being undertaken within the role are considered, hazards, identified and risks suitably controlled.

For those working under a home working arrangement, this would include a consideration of risks associated with the individual's home working environment, their home workstation and the lone-working that will be undertaken.

The main Health and Safety procedures applicable to a home working arrangement are outlined below.

Corporate Health and Safety Procedure	Overview
Risk Assessment No15	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Outlines principles around carrying out risk assessments for employees. • Provides advice, guidance and training around general hazard identification and risk management. • Provides training links for managers.
Safe Use of Display Screen Equipment No.16	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Provides advice and guidance on the safe set-up and use of display screen equipment. • Employees should access an online e-learning, complete the self-assessment tool for workstations and share the findings with the individual's manager so that any issues can be discussed and addressed. • "Managing Workstation Assessments" is also available to assist managers in responding to identified concerns and issues.
Health and Safety for Home workers No.23 and checklist	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Provides an overview of hazards and advice on risk management when the individual's working environment is their home. • Includes a Self-assessment home working check list to be completed by the home worker and provided to the line manager for discussion and review.
Lone Working No.24	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Provides an overview of the potential hazards relating to lone working. • Provides practical advice and guidance on the risk assessment for lone workers. • Outlines practical ways to manage risks that lone working presents.

Principally, in relation to health and safety, assessments must be completed initially when someone is working from home and when changes occur, for example, to workstations or work practices eg new equipment, new systems, house moves.

On an ongoing basis:

- Home workers must adhere to the advice provided in relation to health and safety and complete relevant training and self-assessments.
- Employees have a duty to report accidents, incidents and near misses via the E-Safety system <https://genohsisportal.cumbria.gov.uk/Portal/Portal> and general work related concerns directly to their Line Managers.
- Managers will have regular discussions with employees to assess whether additional steps are needed, for example if employees report:
 - Health issues related to DSE arrangements.
 - Adverse effects of working in isolation, on remote IT systems.
 - Working longer hours without adequate rest and recovery breaks.

For further health and safety information and support you can contact the team directly by e-mailing healthandsafety@cumbria.gov.uk or visit [intouch.ccc/healthsafety/default.asp](https://intouch.ccc.healthsafety/default.asp)

2.2 Information security, equipment and technology

Whilst working from home it is extremely important that Cumbria County Council information remains secure at all times. Consideration must be given to who can overlook your laptop screen, access physical paperwork in your home or overhear your conversations. Being mindful of who can overhear your conversations is extremely important. Ensure that your own devices such as Alexa or Echo are not within earshot of Cumbria County Council conversations taking place as these devices will be picking up the conversation.

Storing confidential information

In the first instance, all employees should aim to find a digital solution to storing and viewing any confidential documentation and any documentation / paperwork that is taken home must be returned to the office at the earliest opportunity. Where a digital solution is not possible and employees need to store confidential documents at home, Assistant Directors can authorise the use of a secure lockable box. This can be obtained via approved stationery suppliers. Physical paperwork must be kept secure at all times and must not for example be left in the boot of a car unattended or inadvertently placed with your household recycling.

Confidentiality and protecting data

It is essential that employees are fully aware of their working arrangements and ensure they follow the appropriate steps to protect data.

- Find a quiet place: if possible work in the same place to avoid losing papers, position devices/files away from windows and make sure they are stored out of view if you need to leave the house.
- Keep it confidential: avoid having confidential telephone or skype conversations near family members, open windows or in the garden.
- Transferring documents: confidential council information should not be transferred to personal devices as connections may not be secure and could lead to interception.
- Social Media: should not be used to replace CCC email correspondence and/or to communicate confidential council information, for example between colleagues. Social media exchanges which are work related should only be used in exceptional circumstances where there is an authorised reason to do so, such as a service requirement.
- Destroy paperwork: if you have copies of confidential paperwork that are not required to be retained for business purposes store them until they can be deposited in a confidential waste bin situated in a council building. (Never dispose of papers in household bins or at Household Waste Recycling Centres).

If you have any concerns regarding information security please contact security@cumbria.gov.uk who will be able to assist.

Printing / scanning multi-function devices (MFDs)

Where it is not possible to find a reasonable digital solution and there is a need to print documents, employees can visit any of the COVID safe CCC locations and will be able to access the MFD's (which allow for printing, copying and scanning to email).

Unless urgent and essential, employees should only be printing when they are on site for other business and should not carry out a journey when printing is the only purpose.

Equipment provision

Employees will be provided with appropriate equipment to allow them to work from home safely and effectively.

The following equipment will be available:

- Laptop
- Laptop Riser
- Monitor
- Keyboard
- Mouse
- Mouse pad (if required)
- Chair

Employees who wish to purchase a desk for use at home will be entitled to claim up to a maximum of £80 towards the cost. This will be reimbursed on receipt of a valid VAT receipt, or other proof of purchase. Claims for reimbursement should be submitted through **MyHR** on a **Desk Claim Form** in the usual way.

If you have any queries in relation to how to submit your claim you can contact the Service Centre via the **Service Centre Portal** or by telephone on 01228 223333. If you have any specific queries in relation to whether or not you are eligible to claim you can contact the People Management Team using the **People Management portal** or by telephone on 01228 221231.

Specialist equipment

Employees who have previously been advised by Occupational Health to use specific ergonomic chairs and/or desks, and who are now working from home are able to submit a request to take their equipment home. You can complete a request on the ICT portal by following the homeworking link <https://businessresource.cumbria.gov.uk/helpdesk/WebObjects/Helpdesk.woa>

When setting up equipment at home employees should complete the Safe use of your Workstation **e-learning** <https://cumbria.learningpool.com/course/view.php?id=374> and the **Self-assessment home working check** list referred to in 2.1 above. If any concerns are highlighted from the self-assessment, they should discuss this with their line manager. The line manager can then complete an Occupational Health Fitness for Work Referral and send it to Occupational Health along with the self-assessment. <https://genohsisportal.cumbria.gov.uk/Portal/Portal>

Where identified by Occupational Health that an employee requires a specific chair and/or desk, this will be supplied at their primary work location.

2.3 Expenses, tax relief and terms and conditions

Workbase

Employees who work from home will have a dual work base, this will be their home address and a designated Cumbria County Council location. The designated location will usually be the building the individual is required to attend most frequently as part of their role.

Household allowances

No allowances are payable at this current time. However, employees who are working at home due to the Coronavirus pandemic can submit a claim to HMRC for the relevant tax relief allowance.

Tax relief

You may be able to claim tax relief (within HRMC limits) for some of the bills you have to pay because you have to work at home on a regular basis. But you cannot claim tax relief if you choose to work from home.

You can only claim tax relief for additional expenses to do with your work, for example, business telephone calls or the extra cost of gas and electricity for your work area. You cannot claim for expenses that would have normally occurred, for example, rent or broadband access.

For the latest information, individuals should refer to the government website:

[gov.uk/tax-relief-for-employees/working-at-home](https://www.gov.uk/tax-relief-for-employees/working-at-home)

Mileage expenses

Before undertaking any journey, all employees should consider if there are alternative means (such as: video conferencing, email, telecommunications, e-learning etc.) rather than a face-to-face meeting which could be utilised.

Where journeys are required, employees should refer to the Travel and Subsistence Scheme and Rates procedure; this will detail what expenses employees can be reimbursed.

Work related travel will be paid in accordance with HMRC legislation which classes the place at which you work as a permanent workplace if you attend it regularly. People who work from home will not be reimbursed for travel between home and their regular work base. However travel expenses can be claimed for other work related journeys providing the home to work mileage is deducted.

Leave, sickness, other absences and availability for work

Established procedures should be followed for booking leave, reporting sickness or injuries and agreeing other absence with your line manager.

Working hours

Working hours remain unchanged when working from home and the normal flexi time scheme and any individual flexible working arrangements will continue to apply to a home working arrangement.

The normal employee and employer responsibilities relating to the Working Time Regulations continue to apply to a home working arrangement.

2.4 Household Matters

Personal home insurance / mortgage / rental or tenancy agreements

Employees are advised to contact their household insurance provider, mortgage lender or landlord, along with their broadband/internet provider and any other relevant party to inform them that they will be undertaking work from home. It is not expected this change would result in any additional charge, but it is possible that by not notifying insurers, policies could be invalidated.

Council's business insurance and council property loss or damage

The council's business insurance continues to apply to staff who are working from home. The same claim process applies, success would depend on the circumstances and each case would be considered on its own merits.

Staff are not expected to use their own contents insurance to cover council property such as laptops/phones/office furniture. The council would fund any losses/repairs.

Internet access

It is an employee's responsibility to ensure they have a suitable internet connection to work from home.

Home visits

In exceptional circumstances it may be necessary for a line manager/ICT or other identified contact to visit someone's home eg during a period of sickness absence, to deliver equipment/information or to resolve an ICT / health and safety issue. This would always be by prior agreement, with reasonable notice, at a mutually agreed time, and within Covid safe measures.

Contingency planning / changes in circumstances

Should any home working conditions change, which may impact on an employee's safety at work or the quality of their home working environment, employees must inform their line manager as soon as possible. This applies but is not limited to the following circumstances:

- Workstation changes.
- Workplace hazards.
- Security breach / risk.
- Internet / telephone changes that are detrimental to the quality of information accessibility.
- Major or substantial building works.
- Property damage eg flood / weather damage.
- Changed / additional occupancy within the home.
- Change to any caring arrangements impacting on the home working environment.
- Any other changes that could impact on the employee's safety at work or the quality of the working environment or deem the home unsuitable for work on a temporary or permanent basis.

Working from home and childcare / caring responsibilities

Childcare or caring for a dependent should not normally be undertaken while working from home. However, it is recognised that during COVID19, some caring providers or carers (eg grandparents) may be unavailable, or have limited availability. This means that care provision for dependents could be substantially reduced. Every effort should be made to obtain alternative caring provision, however it is appreciated this may not be possible in all circumstances. Staff should raise any individual circumstances or concerns with their line manager to discuss how they will manage this while working from home.



**Supportive
home working
practices**

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3 Supportive home working practices

Work life balance

When a home working arrangement is in place, it is important to ensure there is a healthy balance between an individual's personal needs and the needs of the service and organisation.

Working from home has many reported benefits for both the individual and the organisation - however without a proper work routine or parameters in place, it is possible for work and home life to begin to blur. This can tip the scales, either way, on the work / life balance.

To support the management of a healthy work / life balance, the following is advised to help establish a good home working routine:

- Where possible, have a consistent and allocated area where work is undertaken. A dedicated work space in an individual's home helps to create a feeling of "arriving for work" and "leaving work" at the beginning and end of the working day.
- Establish starting, finishing and break times that work for the individual and the service. This should be discussed with the line manager and allow for an appropriate variance (as per the flexi scheme) to support peaks and troughs in service demand as well as accommodating personal and wellbeing needs throughout the working day.
- Build in regular time during the day for mental rest, exercise and / or the outdoors and if possible, face to face interaction with others.
- Continue to monitor working time under a flexi-timesheet to ensure that individuals keep abreast of the hours they are working and that these are not consistently too high or low.
- Be disciplined about switching off when the working day has finished. To support this, it is helpful to turn your working devices off (eg laptop, tablet, mobile phone) and make sure they are out of sight until the next working day.
- For those sending emails outside of the normal 9-5 working pattern, the following sentence should be added to the signature of emails to prevent an "always on" culture throughout the team:
 - "Please be aware that I work flexible hours, so whilst this is a convenient time for me to send this email to you - I do not expect a response from you outside your normal working hours."
- Further guidance on best practice in using and managing emails can be found under the title Effective Emails at cumbria.learningpool.com/course/view.php?id=1585

If there are any concerns about an individual's work/life balance whilst working from home, these should be discussed with the line manager as soon as possible so that support and / or guidance can be put in place.

Wellbeing

Wellbeing guidance, elearning and signposting to sources of support for staff who are homeworking are available under our employee support pages: <https://www.cumbria.gov.uk/employeeinformation/wellbeing.asp>

Keeping in touch

When regularly working from home, it is important that staff remain connected and engaged to their working teams and services despite the physical distance. A lack of engagement or connection to the team and service has an impact on morale, mental health, productivity and retention so this is a very important aspect of home working to get right, with the underlying principle being that home workers should feel as integrated and connected to the team as those who are on site / office based.

There are many practices that can be used as appropriate to create a strong feeling of integration and prevent a feeling of isolation from the team and the services being delivered. Managers, teams

and individuals should discuss what methods would work for them from the suite of options available below:

Performance based activities:

- Regular online team meetings (consider, weekly, fortnightly or monthly).
- Regular contact between line manager and employee through 1-2-1s, supervisions or regular calls/ video calls.
- Regular contact with a range of colleagues (through shared work / projects).
- VIP meetings and conversation starters (see the VIP guidance on InTouch).
- Team building and relationship based activities.
- Buddy system.
- Yammer as a mechanism to connect informally to wider teams.
- Informal virtual social drop in sessions, for example over lunch.
- Teams messaging service.
- Team building sessions.

When managing a team where there are remote workers line managers should, more than ever, ensure that active and ongoing communication is in place, that remote workers are clear around their remit and focus and that all team members feel comfortable, supported to participate and are engaged in virtual meetings.

Meetings

If you work from home there is an expectation that you may still need to attend office premises from time to time in line with service needs. For example, to meet face-to-face with the team, partners or service users. However, in the main, virtual meetings and calls will be the main form of communication.

Feedback shows us that meetings feel more inclusive for remote workers, and they feel able to make a better contribution when the meeting is fully virtual, and all individuals connect to the meeting via their individual devices. Where possible, meetings should be held online in this way to ensure there is an equal platform for both remote and site based officers to contribute. This is in contrast to meetings where some participants are on site in a meeting room, and the other individuals attend, for example through a surface hub.

Line managers and colleagues should ensure that everyone feels included and has an opportunity to participate in online discussions. This is especially the case for new, less experienced or less confident members of the team who may need some extra support to engage in online activities. Equally, those returning from maternity or long-term sickness may initially need some extra support when reintegrating into the workplace. Managers and colleagues should be aware to ensure that all members of the team are supported to contribute and participate positively.

Some practical ways to support the smooth operation of online meetings for all participants, including remote workers can include:

- Establishing online and shared agendas, for example via a shared one note where everyone is able to access and add items to the agenda in real time.
- Ensuring everyone in the team is confident with the technology used to facilitate the conversation, (eg Microsoft teams functions such as sharing screens, raising hands, background effects).
- Whilst chairing, ensuring everyone has a voice in meetings, acknowledging that some may be naturally more confident to contribute online than others.

The ease and convenience of virtual meetings, with the removal of travel time and room bookings, means online meetings can be arranged quickly and more efficiently than site based ones. The benefits of this is that it is a more efficient and productive way of working.

However, attending back-to-back meetings on a regular basis can lead to meeting fatigue and reduce the thinking, doing and creativity time that is essential for good, long-term performance and

wellbeing. It is important to achieve a good balance between both and to recognise if steps need to be taken to address any arising issues.

Any concerns around diaries should be discussed between line manager and employee and the following offer some practical solutions to consider and adopt where appropriate:

- Arrange meetings to allow for a 15-minute gap between sessions. For example, have a 45 minutes meeting instead of an hour.
- Set aside and block out time in the online diary for the completion of work, break times and lunch breaks.
- Discuss the frequency and length of meetings with the organiser if workload and diaries are tight.
- Consider and discuss with the organiser whether to attend for part of the agenda items only, rather than the full meeting.

