MANAGING THE IMPACT OF CORONAVIRUS

BRIEFING PAPER

![Black Country Chamber of Commerce]

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Managing the coronavirus in the workplace

As the coronavirus spread continues, the Black Country Chamber of Commerce has produced this summary on practical steps businesses should be taking to mitigate potential impacts.

What is coronavirus or COVID-19?

A coronavirus is a type of virus. Coronaviruses are common across the world and COVID-19 is a new strain of coronavirus, first identified in Wuhan City, China in January 2020.

The incubation period of COVID-19 is between 2-14 days. This means that if a person remains well 14 days after contact with someone confirmed with coronavirus, they have not been infected.

Symptoms that may develop in 14 days after exposure include:
- Cough
- Difficulty in breathing
- Fever

Generally, this infection can cause more severe symptoms in people with weakened immune systems, older people, and those with long-term conditions like diabetes, cancer and chronic lung disease.

How COVID-19 is spread

The spread of COVID-19 is most likely to happen when there is close contact (within 2 metres or less) with an infected person. It is likely that the risk increases the longer someone has close contact with an infected person.

Respiratory secretions produced when an infected person coughs or sneezes containing the virus are most likely to be the main means of transmission.

There are 2 main routes by which people can spread COVID-19:

- infection can be spread to people who are nearby (within 2 metres) or possibly could be inhaled into the lungs.
- it is also possible that someone may become infected by touching a surface, object or the hand of an infected person that has been contaminated with respiratory secretions and then touching their own mouth, nose, or eyes (such as touching door knob or shaking hands then touching own face).

Current understanding is that the virus doesn't live on surfaces for longer than 72 hours.

How is the virus impacting business and what steps can be taken now?

The outbreak is already causing some businesses, who trade directly with affected areas, issues relating to their supply chains for both importing and exporting goods and components.

Businesses need to continue to monitor the impact of the virus on their employees, facilities and supply chains and be prepared to act quickly should there be a major outbreak of the virus in the UK.

Businesses should complete a risk assessment, focusing on their supply chains, identify vulnerabilities if supplies are interrupted and make contingency plans.

Businesses should also consider cash flow if there's a risk that their business model will be disrupted. In some instances, firms may wish to speak to their bank to make provision for extended overdrafts or credit limits

While the risk of catching coronavirus in workplaces is currently low, it is still good practice to make sure everyone at work follows simple hygiene rules, such as:

- washing hands thoroughly with hot water and soap
- using tissues when sneezing or coughing and throwing them away in a bin

In case the coronavirus spreads more widely in the UK, employers should consider some simple steps to help protect the health and safety of staff.

What can businesses do:

- keep everyone updated on actions being taken to reduce risks of exposure

- make sure everyone's contact numbers and emergency contact details are up to date

- make sure managers know how to spot symptoms of coronavirus and are clear on any relevant processes, for example sickness reporting and sick pay, and procedures in case someone in the workplace develops the virus

- make sure there are clean places to wash hands with hot water and soap, and encourage everyone to wash their hands regularly

- give out hand sanitisers and tissues to staff, and encourage them to use them

- consider if protective face masks might help for people working in particularly vulnerable situations

- consider if any travel planned to affected areas is essential

How will the virus affect my sick pay and staff absence?

If someone has contracted the coronavirus your usual sick leave and pay entitlements apply. Employees should let their employer know as soon as possible if they're not able to go to work.

You might need to make allowances if your workplace sickness policy requires evidence from the employee. For example, the employee might not be able to get a sick note ('fit note') if they've been told to self-isolate for 14 days. Find out more about self-isolating on GOV.UK.

1. What if an employee is not sick but cannot work because they're in self-isolation or quarantine?

There is no legal ('statutory') right to pay wages if someone is not sick but cannot work because they:

- have been told by a medical expert to self-isolate
- have had to go into quarantine
- are abroad in an affected area and are not allowed to travel back to the UK

However, it would be considered good practice to treat it as sick leave and follow their usual sick pay policy or agree for the time to be taken as holiday. There is a risk the employee will come to work because they want to get paid.

The employee must tell you as soon as possible if they cannot work.

2. What if an employee is not sick but we don't want them to come to work?

If an employee is not sick but you feel that self-isolation is prudent you should still pay them their usual pay. For example, if someone has returned from China or another affected area and you ask them not to come in.

3. What if employees do not want to go to work?

Some people might feel they do not want to go to work if they are fearful of catching coronavirus. You should listen to any concerns staff may have. If there are genuine concerns, you must try to resolve them to protect the health and safety of your staff.

If an employee still does not want to go in, they may be able to arrange with you to take the time off as holiday or unpaid leave. You do not have to agree to this, and their refusal to come into work could result in disciplinary action.

4. What if someone becomes unwell at work?

If an employee becomes unwell in the workplace and has recently come back from an area affected by coronavirus, they should:

- move at least 2 metres (7 feet) away from other people
- go to a room or area behind a closed door
- avoid touching surfaces
- cough or sneeze into a tissue and put it in a bin, or if they do not have tissues, cough and sneeze into the crook of their elbow
- use a separate bathroom from others, if possible

The unwell person should use their own mobile phone to call either:

- for NHS advice: 111
- for an ambulance, if they're seriously ill or injured or their life is at risk: 999

They should tell the operator:

- their symptoms
- which country they've returned from in the last 14 days

5. What if someone with coronavirus comes to work?

If someone with coronavirus comes to work, you do not necessarily have to close. The local Public Health England (PHE) health protection team will get in contact with you to:

- discuss the case
- identify people who have been in contact with the affected person
- carry out a risk assessment
- advise on any actions or precautions to take

Find your local PHE health protection team on GOV.UK.

6. What if we need to close the workplace?

Currently it is very unlikely that you will need to close your business. However, you should still plan in case you need to close temporarily. For example, making sure staff have a way to communicate with you and other people they work with.

Where work can be done at home, you could:

- ask staff who have work laptops or mobile phones to take them home so they can carry on working
- arrange paperwork tasks that can be done at home for staff who do not work on computers

In some situations, you might need to close your business for a short time. Unless it says in the contract or is agreed otherwise, you will still need to pay your employees for this time.

If you think you will need to do this, it's important to talk with your staff as early as possible and throughout the closure.

Other sources of information

Below, we outline the advice and best practice from the Government, NHS, and other organisations:

- The Foreign and Commonwealth Office has provided guidance for British people travelling and living overseas More here.

- The Chartered Institute for Personnel and Development has produced a fact sheet, which sets out how employers should respond to the threat from Coronavirus. More here.

- The official guidance from the Department of Health and Social Care, and Public Health England, is here.

- The Department for Transport and Public Health England have produced specific guidance for the transport sector here.

- The NHS has a concise guide to Coronavirus setting out how it is spread, how to avoid catching it, symptoms, treatment and what to do if you think you or any of your employees might be infected. Details here.

- The World Health Organisation has more detailed information including videos on best practice and posters to download to inform your workforce. Click here.

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