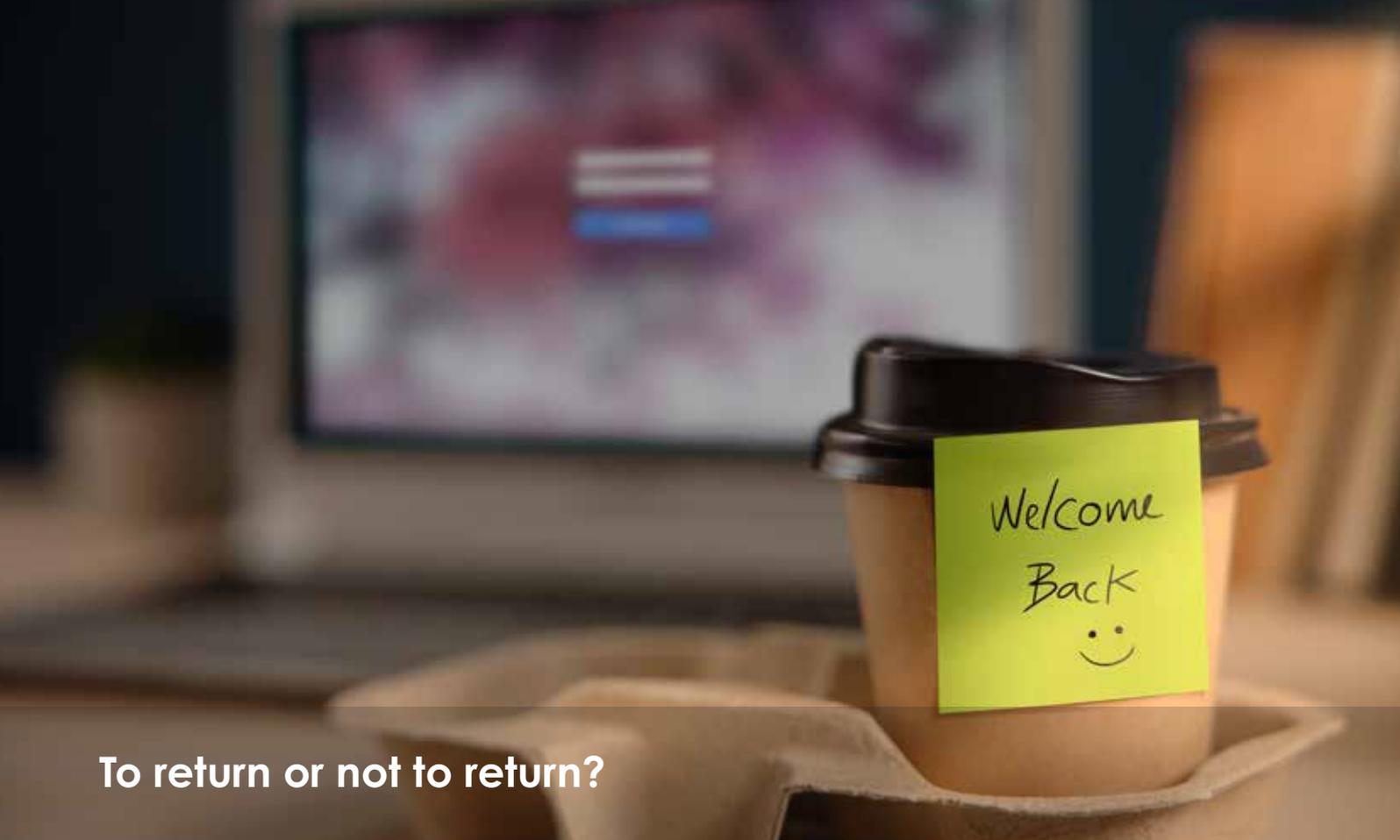


# Personology

Covid-19 Business support



Returning to work guide



## To return or not to return?

As we progress through the government's 'roadmap' to easing lockdown in England, and the devolved nations follow their own timetables, employers will need to plan for gradual return to the workplace.

Employers should note that the timetable and rules set out in any 'roadmap' for easing lockdown are still subject to review and it is essential to keep up to date with any further changes during the progressive easing of lockdown.

### **An opportunity to review existing working arrangements**

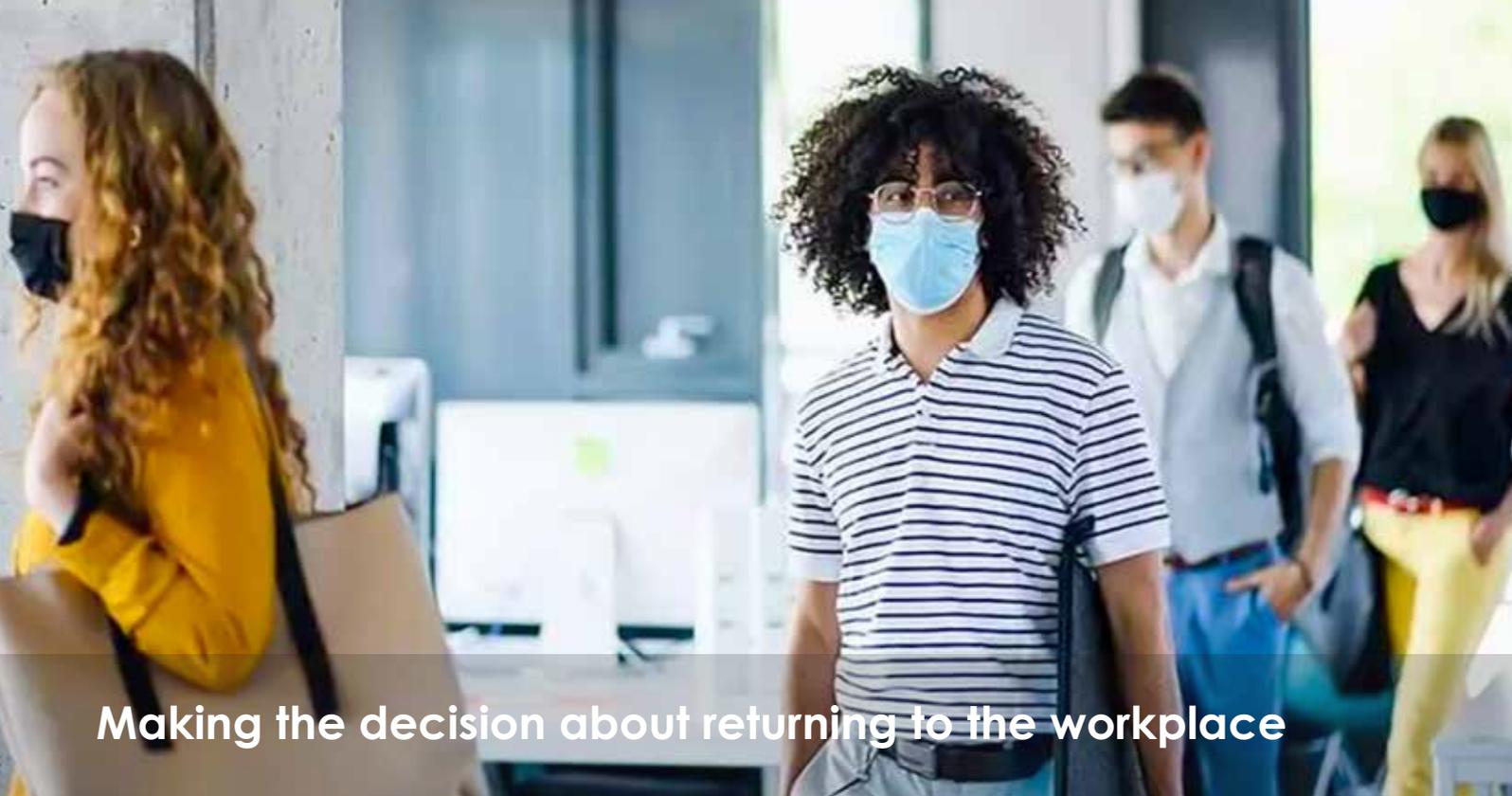
While companies analyse whether they can or cannot return to the workplace for some it may be a great opportunity to review whether they should or need to go back to how it was before the pandemic.

Adopting a more flexible approach to working may well have been a topic that would, at some point, be discussed and perhaps introduced in some form – or it may have just stayed on the Board minutes until it was 'the right time'. What

the necessities of the pandemic have done is to force the issue and by doing so have in many cases shown that a more flexible approach to how companies work can actually be more productive, more efficient and offer employees a better work life balance than the traditional approach.

So right now, is the ideal time for employers to think more creatively about effective ways of working, and harness more agile and flexible working practices to meet individuals' changing expectations. But businesses must appreciate and allow for the fact that working from home will not suit everyone and that each employee request must be considered rather than a one size fits all approach.

A flexible approach could help employers develop more effective people management practices, resulting in improved productivity. Remember if how an employee works has changed, from when they were hired, employers may be required to review, and perhaps, replace existing policies and contracts to reflect any new way of working.



## Making the decision about returning to the workplace

Government advice to work from home wherever possible which is expected to last until May or June 2021, offers two options:

- Supporting working from home until lockdown restrictions or social distancing is relaxed
- Facilitating a return to the workplace in line with COVID-secure workplace guidance when working from home is not possible.

When home working is not possible the CIPD recommends three key tests before bringing people back to the workplace:

- is it essential;
- is it sufficiently safe;
- is it mutually agreed?

Many factors must be considered, including:

- the size and nature of the workplace
- the number of vulnerable staff or those who live with vulnerable people

- caring responsibilities
- public transport dependency
- local and wider outbreaks

So, an employer with a large premises and car park may be able to fully implement social distancing and minimise employees' local transport use, while an employer with smaller premises may feel social distancing is impossible in the workplace.

Employers can use their Coronavirus specific risk assessments to assist in their decision-making process, considering the factors referred to above, including the feasibility of implementing social distancing and local outbreaks (if any).

As employers with workforces that cannot work from home have found, adapting premises to accommodate all staff returning on a socially distanced basis is highly challenging.

Some employers may decide to remain completely closed with staff on furlough while the scheme is in operation. When the scheme ends employers will need to consider other options.



## To return:

Where a return to the workplace is necessary or possible under the latest stage of lockdown easing, at the heart of any plans should be a commitment to support flexible and remote working where possible, and the provision of support for physical and mental health for workers.

Employees may be concerned about being in the workplace or travelling there. This will be particularly true for employees who have been shielding.

The way businesses tackle returning to work cannot be a blanket approach as every workers' situation/experience will be different. Employers must take an individualised approach and follow steps to allow staff to work from home as much as possible; they need to consider the wellbeing of the workforce and monitor government guidance specifically regarding their employee's:

- physical health
- emotional health
- mental health

## How might employees have changed in their approach to work?

There are many ways in which an employee may have been affected by the pandemic and for some this may

affect their feelings toward returning to work. People's experience and concerns may include:

- anxiety about the ongoing health crisis and fear of infection
- concerns about travelling and socially distancing on public transport – or it may not be as readily available.
- the unknown effects of social isolation due to the lockdown.

Many will have experienced challenging domestic situations, such as juggling childcare or caring for a vulnerable relative, and financial worries if their family has had a reduction in income. Some will have experienced illness, or bereavement.

Some may be struggling with the significant change that society has seen, and the familiar workplace routines could feel very different.

So, with so much disruption from the pandemic, it is not really surprising that people's expectations around work, how they fulfil their role, and how they reconcile work and domestic responsibilities may have changed dramatically.



## Risk assessments and health and safety measures

For a return to the workplace, employers must consider detailed risk management approaches to safeguard employees' health and minimise the risk of infection, basing plans on up-to-date government and public health guidance.

It's crucial to work in close collaboration with your health and safety and occupational health teams wherever possible.

- Regularly communicate to staff the practical measures you are taking to help reassure them that their health, wellbeing and safety is your top priority.
- Make sure they are clear about the rules and procedures they should follow both in the workplace and at home, especially if they begin to feel unwell.
- review your workplace and consider – can staff maintain safe distance between each other?
- How will you manage meetings, interviews and other interactions? Remote meeting facilities and video-conferencing should be encouraged wherever possible to minimise the need for staff to travel and/or use public transport

➤ What about communal areas such as canteens or kitchen areas? How can you implement resourcing strategies to support physical distancing such as 'cohorting' (i.e. keeping teams of workers working together and as small as possible), or staggering working hours to limit numbers in the workplace at the same time.

➤ To maintain protection and hygiene measures and minimise the spread of infection, remind staff about regular and effective handwashing, and provide hand sanitiser. If your premises have been closed for a period of time, you should consider carrying out a deep clean before reopening. You should therefore review your cleaning arrangements, for example ensuring all phones/ keyboards etc. are wiped daily with anti-viral cleaner.

**You can refer to the government guidance for more information.**





## Practical considerations:

Depending on your working environment, you may need to consider providing additional PPE, including gloves, masks or anti-viral hand gel. Remember that face coverings are now mandatory for shop workers, bar staff and waiters; more information is available on the government website.

If you want people to wear gloves or masks, then you will also need to think about training and briefing staff on their correct usage – since both can be ineffective if used inappropriately.

Good ventilation can help reduce the risk of spreading coronavirus, so focus on improving general ventilation, preferably through fresh air or mechanical systems. The risk of air conditioning spreading coronavirus (COVID-19) in the workplace is extremely low as long as there is an adequate supply of fresh air and ventilation. Advice on the use of air conditioning systems can be found on the HSE website.

It's also likely that more large-scale testing for the COVID-19 infection will form a key part of facilitating a safe return to the workplace for larger numbers of employees. This could form an extension of the current framework for the testing of essential workers and members of their household, and will mean every employer implementing a systematic approach for their workforce.

Some employers have already signed up to carry out lateral testing in the workplace (application deadline in England was 6th April) which means this

has to be managed by a nominated qualified person.

Although lateral testing is recommended whether you have had a vaccine or not, at this stage for their own peace of mind and that of fellow workers this may be particularly pertinent to the under 50s sector as they are yet to receive the vaccination

The UK Gov advises that lateral testing is recommended for large employers with 50 or more employees who cannot work from home, have a higher exposure to risk, work in close proximity to others and deliver and maintain key services for the public. However, if it is feasible to undertake lateral testing, particularly from a cost perspective, it is advisable to do so regardless of company size.

If lateral flow testing is not feasible there are other ways of monitoring the likelihood of the presence of the infection such as a temperature check. Many employers are already doing this as part of their facilitation to return to work and have invested in suitable temperature testing equipment. It is not a fool-proof method though and not an alternative to actual testing just more of an additional safeguarding/H&S measure.

**With all methods of testing, as it deals with sensitive data, how the information is managed is a key consideration. If you need advice on how best to do this, keeping to guidelines, please get in touch.**



Unfortunately, in Wales employers cannot apply for free testing and will have to pay a provider.

So an employer who is keen to encourage their employees to undertake an individual lateral test are advised to ask their employees to check if they are entitled to receive one which can be done via the Gov. website. There are lateral testing kits available, for an individual to collect, from a variety of locations across Wales.

As the UK's COVID-19 vaccination rollout continues, employers will also need to prepare for its impact on the wider population and their workforce. *The Health and Safety Executive will be conducting spot checks and has also published advice and guidance relating to COVID-19 on its website which may be useful when considering health and safety measures.*

### **Managing employees return:**

Companies should encourage all managers to have a re-orientation or re-induction process for returning staff with a sensitive and open discussion with every individual to discuss any adjustments and/or ongoing support required to facilitate an effective return to the workplace. In these initial meetings there should be a focus on health, safety and well-being.

This is especially important for those who have been furloughed, and should cover topics such as:

- Changes in company services or procedures,
- How specific customer queries or issues are being addressed
- Changes in supply arrangements,
- Any agreed changes to their work duties or tasks.

Whilst employers should not attempt to unilaterally change previous terms and conditions, some staff may require a phased return to their full role, or want to discuss a new working arrangement, especially if their domestic situation has changed because of the pandemic.



## If your business has international work

If your business operates internationally, you will need to plan based on the restrictions and/or guidance of different countries. Adopt a consistent approach while ensuring you are aware of local circumstances. International travel is likely to remain disrupted even when other restrictions are lifted. Some may maintain stricter lockdown arrangements than the UK; others may lift restrictions sooner.

- Consider if the meeting is vital or could you effect the same outcome using technology. As many have realised during the current lockdown, many (though not all) business meetings can be done via video - conferencing.
- Passengers entering the UK from abroad may have to quarantine on arrival, supply contact details of accommodation, or self-isolate in their accommodation for 14 days. This of course seriously affects or rules out some business travel.
- If an employee travels to a destination that requires quarantine on arrival and then on return to the UK, the employee could be away for a minimum of one month plus the number of days they were away.

- staff may have concerns about travelling to other countries where the risk of COVID-19 is higher. Be aware of your health and safety responsibilities and keep business travel to safer destinations or to a minimum.





## Other non-COVID-19 issues that may affect your business still need to be planned for:

The UK ended the Brexit transitional arrangement on 31 December 2020. This will have major implications for businesses that trade internationally, or who currently employ EU nationals, or who may need to recruit from outside the UK.

The pandemic has had an unequal impact across the workforce in many ways, affecting groups of employees and individuals differently according to their job role and individual circumstances. Some organisations will have people who have been furloughed on 80% or 100% pay, for example, while others may have continued to work or even had increased workloads.

This uneven nature of people's work and personal experiences and the challenges of the ongoing situation may lead to negative feelings in employment relations climate, so it's important that the organisation fosters an inclusive working environment, and managers are sensitive to any underlying tensions and confident about nipping potential conflict in the bud.

### **Diversity and Inclusion:**

In addition to health and well-being, employers should bear in mind the importance of diversity and inclusion in any decisions or plans made.

From ensuring that decisions don't discriminate against certain groups of employees (e.g. decisions about flexible, home or part time working due to school closures where women could be disproportionately affected leading to sex discrimination claims)

To fostering an inclusive working environment that takes account of the different experiences people have had during the pandemic.





## To conclude

It has certainly been a challenging year and the fallout will undoubtedly be felt for many years to come.

A guide such as this cannot possibly cover every business situation, but it should help you think about the sort of issues that all businesses will need to consider as restrictions begin to be relaxed.

We have presented guidance on suggested steps, principles and measures to be taken in workplaces and every employer will need to consider future planning.

Changes to the current lockdown restrictions have affected different sectors and regions differently and these changes are likely to continue to fluctuate, with stricter measures being imposed, possibly with very little notice.

Organisations therefore need to use this time to prepare and plan their next steps.

Communication with your staff is key. Keeping people informed of what your business is doing – whether it is good or bad news for individuals - will help them to make their own decisions and give them some degree of security in very uncertain times.

Continue to prioritise their health and safety knowing they are valued and supported by their employer – and that

you care – will be pivotal to their wellbeing.

Employers should continue to monitor the latest government guidance and be prepared to act upon any changes.

There is no one 'blanket' approach – remember to find out what is best for each employees' individual circumstances and within the confines of what is possible for the company, do your best to oblige.

Take this opportunity to look at the way the company was working pre-pandemic and to re-evaluate whether some changes, such as a more flexible WFH policy would benefit employees and subsequently the business.

***If you would like to discuss any of the issues raised in our guide please do not hesitate to get in touch. We offer a free 30-minute consultation to discuss how we can support you through these challenging times and beyond.***



+44 (0)1792 296 178



[Shakira@personology.co.uk](mailto:Shakira@personology.co.uk)



[personology.co.uk/contact](https://personology.co.uk/contact)

DISCLAIMER: The materials in this guidance are provided for general information purposes and do not constitute legal or other professional advice. While the information is considered to be true and correct at the date of publication, changes in circumstances may impact the accuracy and validity of the information. Personology is not responsible for any errors or omissions, or for any action or decision taken as a result of using the guidance.