Liverpool John Moores University (LJMU) guidance on homeworking during the COVID-19 situation

Introduction

Coronavirus (COVID-19) has drastically reduced face-to-face contact in universities. It has meant dramatic changes in a short period for many members of staff. We have quickly moved from an organisation working from university buildings, focusing on face-to-face teaching and meetings to one that has needed to embrace online delivery and home working.

The switch to home working has been sudden and the Government's guidance on the importance of social distancing and reducing public contact means that it is likely to continue for some time.

This document is intended to support members of staff working at home. It sets out best practice on how to manage your time, communicate effectively with students and colleagues, keep healthy and safe and details the expectations you should have of the university. It covers a wide range of topics and is intended to be 'one stop shop' for all your home working needs.

Operating principles

It is a difficult time for everyone, with people having to work in ways that they had not previously planned. With that in mind, we should be practical, flexible and sensitive to each other's situation when working from home because of the COVID-19 pandemic.

From a contractual perspective, working from home arrangements do not affect a member of staff’s terms and conditions of employment. When staff are working from home, they are subject to the same policies, procedures and expected standards of conduct and performance, as they would be when working on LJMU premises. For example, staff should still follow the university's standard reporting procedure if unable to work due to sickness.

The line manager's role in home working is critical. Keeping their team working effectively is a key priority in managing teams remotely. Line Managers will want to ensure that they continue to look after their teams and ensure that everyone stays connected during this uncertain time.

Communication

We should all keep in touch regularly, including regular communication between individual staff and their managers, staff who need to work together and all team members.

Setting clear expectations

There should be clear expectations set of the work required to help alleviate any anxiety that staff may have as they adjust to new ways of working, such as using video or conference calling technology.

Changing to home working may be a challenge for many managers and staff, particularly if they are used to working together face-to-face. It is vital to establish a healthy relationship of trust and confidence. If you are a line manager, you should make sure that everyone working from home knows what is expected of them. This includes considering and agreeing:
• when staff will be available to work
• how they will keep in touch
• how work-life balance will be achieved
• rules around storing information and data protection
• how performance will be managed - taking into account individual circumstances and having a conversation about any particular challenges or issues that individuals are facing.

Managing your time

When working from home, staff should consider how they manage their working day. There is a risk when working from home that staff work longer hours, as there is not always the same routines (such as commuting) to help switch off. Staff members should ensure that they continue to follow the usual Health and Safety requirements, for example ensuring they take a 30-minute unpaid break after working five hours.

Staff are responsible for managing their work effectively and will be expected to work in alignment with their personal and team objectives as agreed with their manager. Communication is vital during this period to ensure that everyone is aware of what they are working on, their plans, and how they will update on the work they have undertaken. Line managers remain responsible for the oversight of the work of staff in their teams and if there any concerns these should be raised at the earliest opportunity.

Tips for keeping in touch

- Two minutes on a video call can save many more minutes than a lengthy back-and-forth on email and can help people feel less isolated.
- Use your webcam on calls as much as possible this helps you know when people have finished speaking or want to talk.
- Have a shared document for meetings so people can follow along with the conversation and keep track of what’s been agreed or asked.
- Email may not be the best medium for sharing difficult or complex messages – consider using the phone or video chat.
- You don’t need to be available for phone calls or to respond to emails at all times. However, it can be useful to keep your calendar up to date with availability.
- Remember, not everyone has a home office. People will be working with kids, dogs, cats and partners in the background. Be understanding and respectful of this situation.
- If using video or voice calls expect delays and for there to be a loss of concentration at times. Consider using instant messages to write questions or ask specific people for answers and responses.

Health and safety advice when working from home

Staff should ultimately take responsibility for assessing their health and wellbeing while working from home. However, the university will, where possible, offer various support and guidance.

Workstation set up

Many members of staff will not have a home office and so will need to have created a workstation at home to work. Staff members will be working in a variety of environments and using a variety of communication devices.

As part of creating a good routine while working from home, it is useful to designate a place to work that is as free of distractions as you can make it. You should ensure that this a suitable working zone with sufficient light, ventilation and that there are no trailing cords.
If possible, it is recommended that your workstation should include:

- A table or desk
- Chair
- Surface, laptop or PC
- Peripherals, e.g. mouse, keyboard

If you have not already done so, it is recommended to complete the display screen equipment training that accompanies SCP20 Display Screen Equipment on the Policy Centre [https://policies.ljmu.ac.uk/UserHome/Policies/PolicyDisplay.aspx?id=365&l=1](https://policies.ljmu.ac.uk/UserHome/Policies/PolicyDisplay.aspx?id=365&l=1)

When working for long periods at a computer screen, it is advisable to adopt the following positive behaviours:

- take regular breaks or change your activity to avoid eye strain
- regularly change your seating position to avoid developing poor posture or back pain
- get up, move around or do stretching exercises to improve circulation and concentration
- drink water to keep hydrated

A pragmatic approach should be taken to risk assessment. The Health and Safety Executive do not require specific risk assessments for display screen equipment used at home on a temporary basis, at this current time. This will be kept under review.

It is your responsibility to ensure that you are safe while working from home. Check your electrical equipment is still safe to use. Do not overload sockets or daisy chain extension leads. Become familiar with all escape routes in case of a fire. You should document that you have made the checks using the risk assessment form that accompanies SCP18 Risk Assessment on the Policy Centre. Further advice can be found in SCP26 Working from Home. These policies can be found at: [https://policies.ljmu.ac.uk/UserHome/Policies/PolicyView.aspx?c=5](https://policies.ljmu.ac.uk/UserHome/Policies/PolicyView.aspx?c=5)

**Adverse event reporting**

Accidents, near misses and ill health (linked to accidents), should still be reported in the usual way using the form on the Safety, Health and Environment website or by clicking on the following link [https://www.ljmu.ac.uk/staff/hsu/adverse-event-reporting-form](https://www.ljmu.ac.uk/staff/hsu/adverse-event-reporting-form)

**Managing your wellbeing when working from home**

**Getting into a routine**

Working from home or remotely can be challenging and isolating. Sometimes our attention wanders, we miss people or can feel we lack the support of a colleague at the next desk who can provide informal help and advice when we are in the office.

A structured day can be an good way to address this:

- Set a routine for working at home - it's important to get up and get started, to take regular breaks including a lunch break, and to finish working and turn off at an appropriate time.
- No matter how tempting, avoid working in your pyjamas all day. Working at home is already likely to be a big change already so try not to lose all your daily routines at once.
- Try and set clear tasks for the day - one great tip was to have a WEB list:
  - **W** – what you want to achieve
- E – what you expect to achieve
- B – what you had Better achieve that day. This can help you prioritise.
- Have a proper lunch break. Stop, makes something nice to eat, and eat away from your work area. Try and get outside and get some natural light if you can do so safely and within the Government's guidance.
- Use your diary to clearly say to others when you are working and when you are available to speak.
- When you are done for the day, pack away your work things or leave your work area at the end of the day.

**Dealing with conflicting priorities**

If you are home schooling or looking after children while trying to work, have a conversation with your line manager about those realities. Try and set up a routine whereby you have distinct times for working and for helping with school time. Dividing your attention may leave both things suffering and being there for children offering undivided attention at these uncertain times is very important. It may be possible to agree on a more flexible arrangement e.g. a change to working hours, reduction in days or workload, or being flexible about deadlines (where possible).

The above approach is also encouraged if staff member’s have other caring responsibility e.g. an older relative or someone who is ill, and it is important to be mindful that personal circumstances may change.

It is important that you are realistic about what you will be able to achieve while home working. Try not to put extra pressure on yourself to deliver results and prove you are working to a high level in such times, especially those who have additional childcare or caring responsibilities, as well as various domestic demands.

It is understandable that at times many will be struggling with feelings of loneliness and isolation, as a direct result of working from home, and this can lead to increased levels of stress and anxiety.

You may find the following general wellbeing tips helpful:

- maintain or improve levels of sleep and get as much natural light as possible during the day
- explore ways of keeping in touch regularly with colleagues, friends and family
- ask for help when you feel it is needed
- use breathing exercises and mediation to help you relax and reduce negativity
- make time to reflect on how you feel, recognise success and identify what you are grateful for
- switch off from work at the end of the day by scheduling an activity you enjoy
- try new things to stay mentally and physically active outside of working hours
- ensure you remain active, as little as 30 minutes of activity reduces stress, increases energy levels and aids sleep
- wind down before bed, by reading a book or listening to music, and avoiding using devices

**Technology and access**

IT services have produced a working from home guide to help staff with setting up the technology needed to work effectively from home

Data Protection and Security

Members of staff must make themselves aware of their responsibilities under the General Data Protection Regulation. Breaches of personal data security must be reported to the Data Protection Officer per the Data Protection Policy.

Individuals working from home must be aware of computer security, and in particular:

- ensure that any work transferred between home and the University does not transfer viruses to University machines. Staff using personal computers are responsible for installing up-to-date virus protection software
- ensure that work is adequately backed up
- to ensure that appropriate safeguards are in place in relation to the confidentiality of any material being worked on

Some top tips on staying cyber safe while working from home are available in the Working from Home Security document.

There is help and guidance on how to protect your mobile phone in the attached Protect Your Phone Document.

More information is available for you

'LJMU Together' allows us to remain connected with colleagues and will try to keep staff, students and external stakeholders updated of the changing situation, via a twice-weekly email. It will contain useful information about university business, positive pieces about how we are pulling together as a community, and some helpful tips and advice to help us all adjust and thrive in the new working landscape in which we find ourselves.

The Reward, Recognition and Engagement webpage (formerly Benefits and Wellbeing) is constantly being updated and will soon include various resources you may find useful to manage your physical and mental wellbeing, over the coming weeks, from online resilience sessions and virtual fitness classes, to general advice and guidance. This page will be updated regularly to ensure you have as much information as possible.

You can also access Benefits Plus, which remains available to all staff. As part of Benefits Plus, the Wellbeing Centre, a new feature of the site has just been launched, offering a range of additional external support and guidance, should you need a little more help. Whilst the guidance in the Wellbeing Centre is not specific to COVID-19 it is a good general wellbeing resource

As mentioned above, we will use LJMU Together to highlight expertise from our academic and professional services teams to provide specific, tailored health and wellbeing advice and support to LJMU staff and students over the coming weeks.