Working from Home Policy during COVID -19
(Updated July 2021)

Policy Statement

Since the onset of the COVID-19 emergency in early 2020, a significant proportion of University staff have, in the main, been working remotely to ensure the continued functioning of the University and to contain further transmission of the virus.

The *COVID-19 Resilience and Recovery 2021: The Path Ahead* plan ("the Plan") https://www.gov.ie/en/campaigns/c36c85-covid-19-coronavirus/ - was published by the Government on 23 February 2021 and has been updated at various stages since. Within the revised plan there is a Framework for Restrictive Measures with five levels. In line with the Plan, public service employees are required to return to the employer's work premises when and as necessary and deemed appropriate by their employer based on current Government advice. The current position is that home working may continue as and when deemed appropriate by the employer, having regard to the changes that may be required at each level of the Framework and based on current Government advice under the Plan. Home working must be balanced with the requirement to continue to provide the most effective and efficient services to the public, having regard to the changes that may be required at each level of the Framework and based on current Government advice under the Plan.

The Plan provides that the employer will determine the essential roles which require physical attendance by staff at the workplace throughout the levels, taking into account the differing requirements at each level of the Framework for Restrictive Measures. The Resilience and Recovery Plan identifies many public services as being essential during this time.

On 15 June 2021 the Government published *A Safe Return to on-site further and higher education and research* - https://www.gov.ie/en/publication/bcd91-a-safe-return-to-on-site-further-and-higher-education-and-research/. This publication highlighted that Higher and further education and training, and research are essential activities, and that the plan for 2021 to 2022 is for mainly on-site activity for all students, learners and staff.

On 21 July 2021, the government reaffirmed that third-level education/research is an essential service and will return safely on-site in September 2021 with some modifications to overall numbers and specific mitigation measures. The Government has also indicated that a gradual return to the office generally in line with public health advice may commence in September.

The University is committed to ensuring that all work premises have implemented robust pre-return to workplace procedures and that all procedures comply with the updated *Work Safely Protocol* https://enterprise.gov.ie/en/Publications/Work-Safely-Protocol.html. The Protocol, which is a revision of the previous Return to Work Safely Protocols, was published on 14 May 2021 and incorporates current public health advice. It outlines the measures needed to reduce the spread of COVID-19 and to facilitate the re-opening of workplaces following temporary closures. All employees have a critical role in ensuring that the procedures of the Protocol are followed to suppress COVID-19 in the workplace. It is incumbent on all employees who are required to attend the workplace to fully comply with their organisation's COVID-19 response plan.

It is important to emphasise that any employee who is feeling unwell should not attend the workplace and should follow public health advice. This applies to any transmissible illness during this Covid-19 emergency period.

Against this background, the University is committed to the maintenance of the health, safety, and wellbeing of staff at all times, while ensuring the most effective and efficient delivery of education and research services on-site subject to the prevailing public health restrictions.

Staff should note that any remote or home-based working arrangements that have been implemented due to COVID-19 apply so long as necessary to address the health and safety risks of COVID-19; and that any longer-term/future access to remote working will be dealt with by way of a Blended Working Policy.

Purpose

The purpose of the policy is to provide information, guidance and support to individuals working remotely from home arising from the COVID-19 virus outbreak.

Scope

This policy applies to all employees who are working from home on a temporary basis during COVID-19. Some employees may be working a combination of on-site and remote working.

Aim of the Policy

The COVID-19 worldwide virus pandemic is unprecedented for all of us and it is completely normal for staff and students to be anxious and worried. We are committed to the health and safety of our staff and we are aware of the extraordinary work that colleagues are doing to ensure that the University can continue to operate as normal as we can at this time.

The purpose of this policy is to support the health and wellbeing of employees who are working from home during COVID-19; to ensure effective performance management and employee engagement; to ensure that good practice is followed by all employees when working from home; and to support the effective delivery of high quality services. It is important to note that that any remote/home-based working arrangements that have been implemented due to COVID-19 are temporary and apply to the COVID-19 period only.

These guidelines are being provided to support employees and line managers during the COVID-19 outbreak.

Health & Wellbeing

Looking after your health and wellbeing at this time is very important.

Know when to step away from your desk. Be clear about when your working day begins and ends and take breaks to refresh. It's easy to let yourself be 'always on' when your home and office are the same place. When work is over, be sure that you switch off to avoid burnout. Think about having 'core hours 'which people you work with are around for. It is important that managers and colleagues are aware that staff cannot be contactable 24/7 and always in a position to provide an immediate response.

Ask for support when needed. Speak out when you need assistance, further training or support. Your manager, colleagues and you are part of a team and should be supporting each other, especially remotely.

The Human Resource Department have a number of supports that are available on our webpage. Staff may contact their Human Resource Business Manager or Staff Wellbeing and Development to support individuals at this time.

If you are experiencing difficulties our Employee Assistance Programme remains available through our new provider Spectrum Life. . The Employee Assistance Programme (EAP) provides free and confidential professional counselling and information services designed to support employees and their immediate family members to resolve personal or work related concerns. Further details are available on https://www.ucc.ie/en/hr/eap/

There are also additional supports through various resources which can be accessed through https://www.ucc.ie/en/emt/covid19/

It is important to maintain a balance between working life and your own personal time. It is important to try and keep a healthy daily routine as far as possible. , Keep set times for your breakfast, lunch and dinner .Eat a healthy balanced nutritious diet and drink plenty of water. Take regular exercise whilst maintaining the public health social distancing / travel guidelines and keep regular sleeping patterns. Additional supports in this regard are available on https://www.gov.ie/en/campaigns/together/

The Health and Safety Authority (HSA) has produced practical guidance for Managers and employees on Work Related Stress during COVID-19 which may be of assistance- https://www.hsa.ie/eng/topics/covid-19/covid-19_advice_for_employers_and_employees/covid-19_stress_and_work_-_may_26_2020.pdf-

Working Hours

Currently remote working is a temporary agreement between employees and managers/ the University to allow employees to work from a non-office location, as per government guidance, to reduce the spread of Covid-19. It is expected that during remote working, employees will follow all government and medical guidance on self- isolation, social distancing and other prevention measures.

In these circumstances, working remotely is not deemed to be a change in contractual terms**.** The existing terms and conditions/policies still apply, apart from having to work from home on a temporary basis. Applications/requests for more long-term remote working are not being considered during the current crisis.

The implementation of this policy will have regard to the provisions of the Organisation of Working Time Act 1997 which states that employers have a legal responsibility to ensure that their employees receive their proper breaks within the day, as well as their daily and weekly rest. They also must receive their statutory entitlement to annual leave and public holiday entitlements. The Act which limits working time and sets out rights to rest, breaks and holidays still applies in the context of home working. The law limits the maximum average working week to 48 hours and you are also due a rest period of at least 11 consecutive hours in each period of 24 hours during which you're working.

Department of Finance Circular 04 of 2003 may be useful for guidance purposes in the context of discussions between line managers and staff members in relation to arrangements for remote working and the responsibilities which are attached to it –

https://hr.per.gov.ie/wp-content/uploads/2020/04/Circular-04-of-2003-Pilot-Scheme-to-promote-e-working-in-the-Civil-Service2.pdf

While working from home, it would be expected that you would continue to work your normal working hours while taking regular rest breaks and switching off in the evenings where this is practicable. However, we are conscious that many staff may have increased caring responsibilities for both children and elderly/vulnerable family members, which may bring additional pressure and complexity at this time. It is therefore important for Heads of School/Unit/Line Managers to show sensitivity, discretion and compassion when dealing with staff in this regard. If this is a particular issue for staff, they are encouraged to have discussions with their line managers regarding what flexible working options may assist. Examples of this could be working outside of traditional hours or splitting the work day by logging on early in the morning and later in the evening to carry out work. In facilitating these measures, staff should be mindful in terms of communicating with colleagues who continue to work during core hours.

Many staff will have more screen time than if they were working in the office environment therefore breaks are important to ensure that you get up and move about for a few minutes.

Keeping in contact while apart

While the advice is to observe social distancing at this time, it is more important now that regular contact and communication with updates on progress should be maintained between staff and line managers/Heads of School/Unit. Team meetings and one-to-one meetings should continue as normal. There are various technologies that can be used to keep in contact including University approved MS Teams and Google Meet.

Health & Safety

The Health & Safety Authority (HSA) has provided advice and information for employers and employees on working from home during this time. Guidance on the duties of employers and employees under the Safety, Health and Welfare at Work Act 2005 is available from the HSA's website here.

The University is obliged to determine whether or not the temporary home workspace is suitable for the work that the staff member is required to do. Under normal circumstances it would be necessary to carry out a health and safety risk assessment on the premises that will be used. Under current circumstances the risk assessment may be done online with a view to the implementation of any appropriate corrective measures required including the provision of equipment if necessary. Information in this regard has been developed by the Health and Safety Authority (see FAQ no.7) here and the University is developing a guidance note in this regard.

Reasonable accommodation may need to be considered for employees with disabilities and pregnant employees.

It is the individual staff member's responsibility to take reasonable care of themselves and other people who may be affected by the work they are doing while working remotely. However, it is important that Heads of School/Unit/Line Managers check in with staff members to ensure they are doing ok and taking regular breaks as required.

The University's Safety Statement and policy will be updated to factor in remote working.

Information is also available on managing Display Screen Equipment/VDU workstations:

Equipment/Technology

The Health and Safety Authority has advised that suitable equipment already available in the employee's home can be considered for temporary work from there.
Equipment already in use in the workplace e.g. laptop, mouse, monitor, keyboard and headset could also be used for temporary home-working. You should discuss with your Line Manager if you need to obtain equipment from the office such as monitors, keyboards etc. Line Managers should put the necessary arrangements in place for staff to retrieve equipment from the office and keep a log of equipment that has been brought home and by whom.   Managers are required to assure themselves that the staff member has suitable equipment to enable the work to be done – see section on Health and Safety above.

Data Protection & Security

Whilst working from home it is important that all staff continue to comply with data protection obligations. The Data Protection Commission (DPC) have issued a series of useful guides in relation to data security, information to employees on protecting their data and computers, use of video conference and remote work in general (see https://www.dataprotection.ie/en and specifically their guidance on [“Protecting Personal Data When Remote Working”](#) and “[Staying Safe Online During a Pandemic](#)”)

Staff must keep University data, equipment and materials safe and secure at all times, and ensure that reasonable precautions are being taken to maintain confidentiality in accordance with the University's Data Protection policy. It is acknowledged however that working from home provides a number of challenges in this regard.

It is important that while working remotely/from home you would observe the following:

- Do not use open unsecured Wifi in public places.
- Ensure that when you are working on personal confidential information you are in an environment where others cannot see or access the data.
- Ensure that your computer is locked or logged out when you are away from your screen.
- Minimise or eliminate the printing off of personal/confidential information.
- Keep any hard documents which contain personal data secure when working at home i.e. ensuring that such files are locked securely away when not in use
- Similar to when working in the office all confidential documents that are to be disposed should be done so by shredding. If you do not have a shredder at home, then you should keep the documents safe until you return to work and can shred the document confidentially.
- Be vigilant at this time to the risk of scams and fraudulent emails, as the incidences may rise at this time.

Roles and Responsibilities

Line Managers/Heads of School

- The role of the Line Manager/Head of School as the key support in facilitating the transition to working from home cannot be overstated
- Ensure that you have pre-arranged/agreed means of contact with your team members to enable ongoing communication as required.
- Maintain regular contact with your team, not just for work, it is important to check in with your team to see how they are coping and to identify where challenges are being experienced.
- Look out for signs of overwork and if necessary engage with the staff member to address any issues in this regard.
- Agree work to be carried out while staff are working from home. It is important to clarify expectations and outcomes having consideration of the fact that some staff may also have other commitments to childcare, and other family related reasons.
- Ensure that staff are complying with data protection obligations, and taking regular breaks in line with the Organisation of Working Time Act.
- You should continue to have regular planned team meetings, and one to one meetings with staff remotely.
- Ensure that staff are aware that the normal reporting requirements remain in place along with the University policies and procedures, including annual leave and the responsibility to report absences either COVID-19 or non COVID-19 related.
- Provide regular updates from senior management on the progression of the situation during the COVID-19 outbreak.
- Ensure that staff aware of the FAQ's for Employees https://www.ucc.ie/en/emt/covid19/staff-faq/

Employee Responsibilities

- Maintain regular contact with your line manager regarding work and with a view to early resolution of any challenges or issues that you may be experiencing. This will also help combat isolation and stress.
- Maintain regular contact with your team colleagues.
- Agree work to be carried out or deliverables with your line manager while you are working from home.
- Provide support to colleagues and line manager
- Inform your line manager and HR if you have been medically diagnosed with COVID-19 in line with the Staff FAQ's/
- Ensure that you comply with the Data Protection policy, and ITS advice for working from home.
- Please be aware that University Policies and Procedures remain in place at this time, along with normal reporting requirements.
- Remember it is also your responsibility to take reasonable care to ensure that you do not place yourself or others at risk whilst working at home during this time.

Breach notification - obligation

You must report ALL incidents involving loss or unauthorised disclosure of personal data (e.g. emails sent to the wrong person, files lost or stolen, unauthorised access to data) to your line manager and to the University's Information Compliance Manager / DPO, Catriona O'Sullivan, gdpr@ucc.ie, as soon as you become aware of the incident. The University has an obligation under GDPR to report data breaches to the Data Protection Commission within **72 hours** of becoming aware of the breach. Complete Section 1 of the Data Security Breach Report Form and forward it to gdpr@ucc.ie as soon you discover the incident.

Further information on IT Security and Data Protection at UCC is available at:

* https://www.ucc.ie/en/it/security/
* https://www.ucc.ie/en/gdpr/

The National Cyber Security Centre has published Working From Home Security Advice (pdf).

Working From Home Allowance

The Department of Public Expenditure and Reform has directed that public service employers should not pay a daily allowance (e.g. €3.20 per day) to their employees in respect of WFH. It is open to employees to make claims directly from Revenue in respect of actual costs incurred in working from home at the end of the relevant tax year, in accordance with the relevant tax laws. Any claim in this regard is solely a matter for the individual concerned. Further details for individuals on how to claim expenses on tax returns are available at:

https://www.revenue.ie/en/tax-professionals/tdm/income-tax-capital-gains-tax-corporation-tax/part-05/05-02-13.pdf