



Guideline on How to Return to Onsite Work

Information for Irish law firms on how to
organise return to onsite working following
the COVID-19 pandemic health crisis



Guideline for Law Firms in Ireland on Return to Onsite Working as at 14 May 2020

The Irish Government has produced a *Roadmap for Reopening Society and Business*. This document revolves around five reopening phases. Businesses have been instructed to plan their return to onsite working according to these five phases.

Phase 1 - commences on 18 May and will involve outdoor workers returning to their workplaces on a phased basis.

Phase 2 – starts 08 June and will see a return to onsite working for solitary workers and others who, due to the nature of their work, can maintain 2m distance constantly.

Phase 3 - begins on 29 June and will be relevant to organisations where employees have low levels of daily interaction with people and where social distancing can be maintained.

Phase 4 – starting 20 July will involve organisations where employees cannot work remotely and those employees who are selected to be the first people to return to onsite working.

Phase 5 - to begin on 10 August will see a phased return to full onsite working arrangements.

It will be up to individual law firms to decide what phase is relevant to their organisation and their staff based on the kind of work they do, how they do it and the kind of workplace they operate within. However, there is a critical proviso within the Roadmap. Right across all first four phases, up until 10 August, employers are instructed to continue remote working for all employees and businesses that can do so.

The Roadmap advises businesses to develop plans for a return to onsite work by employees – taking COVID-19 risks into consideration. Employers are advised to review matters such as:

- Social distancing compliance.
- Hygiene and cleaning compliance in high risk situations.
- Plans for medically vulnerable people – such as staff with medical conditions and staff who are pregnant.
- Extended opening hours to enable social distancing.

Outlined below in this guideline are typical things that legal firms should consider doing to meet the responsibilities just listed above and to safeguard the health of their employees, clients and owners.

Return to Onsite Working Matters That Should Be Attended To

1. Risk Assessment

- The firm should carry out an appropriate COVID-19 risk assessment.
- This risk assessment should be done in consultation with staff.
- Firms should share the results of the risk assessment with their staff.
- The risk assessment should be regularly reviewed and updated.

2. Internal Communications

- Provide clear, consistent and regular communication to improve understanding of new ways of working.
- Engage with staff to understand unforeseen impacts of changes to the working environment.
- Engage with staff to explain and agree any changes in working arrangements.
- Develop communication and training materials for staff prior to returning to site, especially around new procedures for arrival at work.
- Use simple, clear messaging to explain guidelines using images and clear language.
- Use visual communications such as whiteboards or signage, to explain changes to schedules, problems or cancellations to reduce the need for face-to-face communications.

3. Working Arrangements Organised

- Staff should work remotely from home if possible. Consider who is required on-site.
- Plan the minimum number of people required on site to operate safely and effectively.
- Monitor the wellbeing of people who are working from home and help them to stay connected to the rest of the workforce.
- Keep in touch with off-site workers on their working arrangements including their welfare, mental and physical health and personal security.
- Provide facilities for people to work at home effectively, for example, remote access to work systems.
- Consider providing support for workers around mental health and wellbeing.

4. Vulnerable Staff Accommodated

- Vulnerable individuals should be strongly advised not to work outside the home.
- Enable workers to work from home while self-isolating, if appropriate.
- Consider whether you need to put in place any measures or adjustments to take account of your duties under the equality law.
- Make reasonable adjustments to avoid disabled workers being put at a disadvantage and assess the health and safety risks for new or expectant mothers.
- Make sure that the steps taken do not have an unjustifiable negative impact on some groups compared to others – for example, people with caring responsibilities.

5. Risks Managed

- Where remote working from home is not possible, firms need to make every reasonable effort to comply with Government social distancing guidelines.
- Where the social distancing cannot be followed in full, in relation to an activity, firms need to consider whether that activity needs to continue for the business to operate.
- If the activity is necessary, the firm needs to take all mitigating actions possible to reduce the risk of transmission to staff.

6. Social Distancing Facilities

- Stagger arrival and departure times at work to reduce crowding into and out of the workplace.
- Provide handwashing facilities, or hand sanitiser where not possible, at entry and exit points and do not use touch-based security devices such as keypads.
- Reduce movement by discouraging non-essential trips within buildings and sites, for example, restricting access to some areas.
- Introduce more one-way flow through buildings.
- Reduce congestion, for example, by having more entry points to the workplace.
- Provide more storage for staff for clothes and bags.
- Use markings and introduce one-way flow at entry and exit points.
- Reduce maximum occupancy for lifts, providing hand sanitiser for the operation of lifts and encouraging use of stairs wherever possible.

7. Workplaces and Workstations Reorganised

- Review layouts and processes to allow people to work further apart from each other.
- Use floor tape or paint to mark areas to help workers keep to a two-metre distance.
- Where it is not possible to move workstations further apart, arrange people to work side by side or facing away from each other.
- Where it is not possible to move workstations further apart, use screens to separate people from each other.
- Manage occupancy levels to enable social distancing.

8. Meetings Adapted

- Use remote working tools to avoid in-person meetings.
- Only necessary participants should attend meetings and should maintain two metre separation throughout.
- Minimise the risk of transmission during meetings through the sharing of object such as pens and fobs.
- Provide hand sanitiser in meeting rooms.
- Hold meetings outdoors or in well-ventilated rooms whenever possible.
- For areas where regular meetings take place, use floor signage to help people maintain social distancing.

9. Common Areas Adapted

- Work collaboratively with landlords and other tenants in multi-tenant sites/buildings to ensure proper social distancing across common areas such as reception areas and staircases.
- Install screens to protect staff in receptions or similar areas.
- Encourage workers to bring their own food.
- Reconfigure seating and tables to maintain spacing and reduce face-to-face interactions.
- Regulate use of locker rooms, changing areas and other facility areas to reduce concurrent usage.
- Stagger break times to reduce pressure on break rooms or canteens.
- Create additional space by using other parts of the workplace or building that have been freed up by remote working.

10. Client and Contractors Accommodated

- Encourage visits via remote connection/working where this is an option.
- Where site visits are required, site guidance on social distancing and hygiene should be explained to visitors on or before arrival.
- Limit the number of visitors at any one time.
- Determine if schedules for essential services and contractor visits can be revised to reduce interaction and overlap between people, for example, carrying out services at night.
- Maintain a record of all visitors.
- Consider all arrangements for accommodating visitors to ensure social distancing and hygiene precautions are adequate. Organise objects such as pens are not shared during signing in.
- Provide clear guidance on social distancing and hygiene to people on arrival, for example, signage or visual aids and before arrival, for example, by phone, on the website or by email.
- Establish host responsibilities relating to COVID-19 and provide any necessary training.

11. Teamwork Reorganised

- Consider how teamwork is organised and if existing arrangements compromise social distancing in the workplace.
- As far as possible, where staff are split into teams, fix these teams so that where contact is unavoidable, it happens between the same people.
- Identify areas where people directly pass things to each other and develop ways to remove direct contact - such as, drop-off points or transfer zones.

12. Work Related Travel Reviewed

- Minimise non-essential travel and encourage remote options.
- Minimise the number of people travelling together in one vehicle, increase ventilation when possible and avoid sitting face-to-face.
- Clean shared vehicles between shifts or on handover.
- Where workers are required to stay away from their home, make sure accommodation meets social distancing guidelines.