

Newham as an employer: managing the risk to staff of contracting Covid-19
(1st July 2020)

The Covid-19 pandemic has provided a variety of significant challenges to the London Borough of Newham's ways of working and to the services the Council have been able to deliver safely.

As our residents have shown through their countless visual and verbal tributes, our staff have responded fantastically to these challenges. Some have designed and delivered entirely new services whilst others have radically reformed the way existing services are delivered. Some of our key workers have continued to work onsite throughout the crisis, whilst others have worked from home as required by Government. A large number of our staff have been temporarily redeployed to deliver services that are totally new to them.

As a responsible employer, Newham is committed to ensuring that our staff remain connected, safe and well throughout the Covid-19 pandemic and beyond. We have adopted a risk-based approach to protecting our staff. In consultation with staff, we have adapted our approach as Government guidance has changed. We have also learnt from emerging practice both within Newham and elsewhere.

The Government has published detailed [guidance](#) on how employers should be supporting their staff through the next phase of the country's response to the Covid-19 pandemic.

Newham Council has reviewed this guidance and has revised our own plans accordingly.

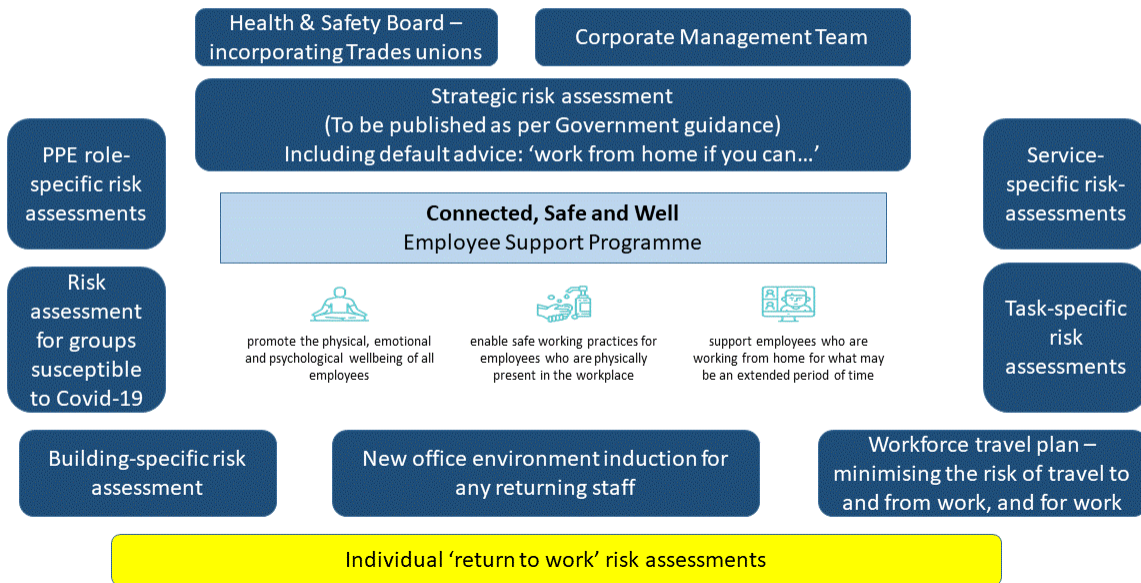
This statement sets out the Council's overarching approach to reducing the risk to staff of contracting Covid-19 in the workplace. It provides an overview of our approach, as well as an overview of the specific risks identified and actions taken to reduce those risks. Appendix 1 provides a summary of specific risks and actions we have taken to mitigate them.

Our staff have been involved in shaping our approach. Both formal and informal consultations have taken place on the Council's overall approach, and on specific elements of our approach.

Managing risk: a multi-layered approach

Newham's approach to managing the various risks and issues related to staff contracting Covid-19 has been multi-layered, with actions continuously taken to reduce the likelihood of staff catching Covid-19 whilst at work.

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The risks to staff of contracting Covid-19 whilst at work, and the Council's actions to reduce that risk, are kept under continuous review by the Council's Corporate Management Team and by the Health & Safety Board which includes Trades Union members.

Formal and informal consultation has been undertaken on:

- The Council's approach to risk-assessing the need for personal protective equipment (PPE) within different environments and for different roles;
- The approach to supporting vulnerable groups
- Services' approaches to managing risk;
- Building-specific risk assessments; and
- The proposed approach to bring a limited number of staff back to the workplace in accordance with latest government guidance associated with the easing of lockdown measures.

Newham has also committed to implementing individual risk assessments with those staff that are required to work onsite. Our approach ensures that factors such as pre-existing health conditions, age, ethnicity, gender and body mass are taken into account alongside job-specific factors when assessing each individual staff member's risk.

Practical measures put in place in our workplaces

In advance of government-announced lockdown measures, during lockdown and now that various aspects of the lockdown are being eased, the Council has continued to review our workplaces to ensure that they are as safe as they can be for our staff and for those residents that visit us.

Because the London Borough of Newham has been particularly hard-hit by Covid-19, we have adopted a risk-averse approach to applying social distancing measures to our workplaces. Above all else, we have continued to advise staff that if they can successfully perform their role from home, then they should continue to work from home.

A number of measures have been taken across all of the Council's buildings to ensure that those that do have to enter our buildings are entering buildings that are 'Covid-19 compliant'.

Measures adopted within each of our workplaces include, but are not limited to:

- De-commissioning desks, introducing signage, revised building circulation, entry and exit and shared facilities protocols, all to ensure that social distancing is maintained
- Increasing the frequency of hand washing and surface cleaning and the availability of desk wipes at each desk
- Ensuring that air conditioning within buildings is compliant with latest HSE guidance
- Equipping every usable desk with new technology to ensure that use of shared equipment is minimised
- Introducing 'team zones' on floors of buildings and limiting the number of people that will share any desk
- Installing screens and social distancing queueing arrangements at receptions
- Providing staff working out and about in the borough with appropriate social distancing advice

To ensure that two metre social distancing measures can be maintained, capacity at the Council's office buildings has been reduced from approximately 3,000 to below 800.

A building-by-building risk assessment has been conducted to identify actions required to make buildings 'Covid-19 secure', and some buildings have remained closed because their layout made social distancing in accordance with current guidance impossible.

The building by building risk assessment has been shared with staff representatives and is available to individual staff members via their building manager.

Supporting staff through Covid-19 – adapting our approach

Public health messaging

At all times throughout the pandemic, the Council has promoted latest Public Health England advice to staff on the steps we should be taking to minimise the risk of conducting Covid-19. For example hand washing infographics are displayed in prominent positions within our buildings. Symptom-checkers and what to do if you believe you could have Covid-19 have also featured strongly within our internal communications.

Our internal communications channels have been enhanced to ensure that our public health messages have been given out more frequently and reach all staff.

HR policies

The Council has ensured that its' HR and other policies reflect latest government advice. For example, only those key workers that delivered critical and essential services that could not be delivered from home were required to travel in to work; and those officially 'shielding' were supported to remain at home whatever service they worked on.

As things currently stand, the Council is still asking a large proportion of staff to work from home. Only those staff that cannot perform their role from home are required to travel to their workplace.

Specific HR guidance sets out our approach to supporting the following groups of employees:

- employees who are clinically extremely vulnerable ("shielding")
- employees who are clinically vulnerable
- employees who live with someone who is vulnerable to Covid-19
- employees who are unable to attend the workplace because their child or children cannot attend nursery or school
- employees who are isolating because they have symptoms of Covid-19, someone they live with has symptoms of Covid-19, or because they have been advised to isolate as part of the NHS Test and Trace programme
- any other employees

Workforce travel plan

Newham's HR guidance sits alongside other policies such as our Workforce Travel Plan, which provides advice and support to staff travelling to and from work, or for work.

The Workforce Travel Plan promotes walking and cycling as means of travel through which staff are less likely to contract Covid-19.

To support staff to comply with government guidance on wearing face coverings on public transport, re-usable face coverings are being made available to any staff member required to travel on public transport either to or for work as a means of limiting the spread of the virus to others.

Personal Protective Equipment (PPE)

Newham's approach to the provision of Personal Protective Equipment (PPE) to staff has also been kept under regular review to ensure that it aligns with Public Health England advice. A specific PPE risk assessment has been undertaken to inform Newham's approach to allocating PPE to those staff that require it. Information on access to PPE by task and by type has been published on the intranet, as has guidance on how to use that equipment. Staff provided with PPE are required to undertake training on how to safely don and doff PPE and how to safely dispose of PPE. PPE equipment has been added to general first aid kits.

Considerable effort has been put in to ensuring that PPE stocks have been secured and are maintained at good levels.

Staff wellbeing

Staff wellbeing is a priority. The Council has reviewed and enhanced its Employee Assistance Programme and other support to staff, to ensure that colleagues can access both general and specialist support, such as trauma support and bereavement support. Staff Mental Health First Aiders have provided support to colleagues, and new wellbeing networks are being established. Advice and guidance has been and will continue to be provided to those working from home, to enable them to stay connected and to support each other.

Appendix 1: Summary of risks associated with staff catching Covid-19, and mitigating actions

Risk	Headline Mitigating Actions taken
Staff unaware of general advice and guidance from Government; PHE	<p>More regular email and face to face communications to staff covering issues such as:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Infection control measures staff can take • Infection control measures the council is taking • Approaches to test, track and trace and their application locally
Elevated risk to those 'shielding'; those otherwise vulnerable and those living with vulnerable people	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Specific adaptations to policies agreed • Management guidance produced aligning with PHE and Government advice
Adaptation of approach to those staff from groups with a high incidence of Covid-19, including BAME communities, people with disabilities	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Overall approach to the management of risk includes an individual risk assessment undertaken between the manager and the individual staff member – with the conversations covering any demographic and job-specific risk factors, and actions to be taken to mitigate the risks identified
Risk of a staff member coming to work with the virus	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Clear advice to staff on daily checks before coming into the office (e.g. symptom checker, temperature checks). • Clear advice to staff on what they should do if they feel unwell when at home, or feel ill in the office; and clear processes for capturing those that are ill and/or self-isolating • Regular advice issued on availability of testing; and on approach to testing and tracing
Risk of infection in office workplaces	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Reduced office capacity to ensure social distancing – with specific proposals aligned to Government advice on working safely in offices during Covid-19 • Strict approach to managing which staff return to the office, with the default position remaining 'work from home if you can' • Induction for staff returning to the office, including e learning • Limits to physical meetings in buildings –with full use to be made of Sykpe, Zoom and other online approaches; amended lower limits to maximum meeting room occupancy and availability of sanitiser and wipes in meeting rooms; • Clear and obvious signage reinforcing SD rules; building circulation and other protocols • Significantly enhanced cleaning protocols and ready access to wipes and sanitisers – including availability at building entry points • 'Hot-desking' stopped; and all operational desks equipped with Smarter Newham technology. • Revised arrangements implemented in kitchens and tea points – including removal of communal cups, cutlery and plates; enhanced cleaning and availability of wipes; repositioning of equipment and decommissioning of some lunch tables to ensure social distancing • Review of notified cases to inform whether review of existing mitigating actions is necessary • Limit contractor access to council buildings and provide building induction to those contractors allowed access
Risk of infection where the workplace is in the community	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Activity specifically risk-assessed to ensure that it can be and is conducted with risks minimised • Staff provided with revised operational guidance to maximise adherence to social distancing rules and ensure compliance with revised processes

	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • An approach to PPE that provides PPE to those staff that require it based on a risk assessment conducted in accordance with PHE advice.
<p>Risk of cross infection when staff interact with residents and vice versa</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Continued use of 'virtual' meetings when appropriate and increased use of 'digital by default' • Physical mitigation measures in reception areas and meeting rooms – including screens, marked queueing systems, sanitisers • Clear advice to residents on what they should do if they are experiencing symptoms • Clear signage re social distancing visible to members of the public • Event-specific risk assessment to be undertaken prior to any public meetings • PPE available to staff depending upon role; location of interaction (E.g. inside / outside); proximity; likelihood of those staff are interacting with having Covid-19
<p>Risk of infection whilst travelling to, from or for work</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The adoption of a Workplace Travel Plan that provides advice and guidance to staff; as well as practical solutions that support a significant uptake in walking and cycling • Flexibility in core hours where personal circumstances require to allow for staff travel to avoid rush hour • Face coverings issued to staff • Adaptation to working practices to allow social distancing when travelling for work – including specific procedures for cleaning pool vehicles between uses; protective equipment where more than one person are in a small vehicle at any one time; and increased use of mini buses to transport more than one person
<p>Risk of adverse emotional and / or mental health impacts of the Covid-19 crisis; or as a result of measures taken to prevent the spread of Covid-19</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Conducted an online 'pulse' survey of staff wellbeing • Enhancements made to the Council's Employee Assistance Programme – including team trauma counselling; family bereavement support • Increased promotion of Mental Health First Aiders • Compilation of advice for managers on tools and techniques that can support staff wellbeing • Promotion of existing reputable online resources on issues such as financial health; physical fitness; diet; emotional wellbeing • Provided specific resources targeted at home workers • Developing a staff mutual support wellbeing programme • Staff that experience wellbeing challenges as a result of working from home are prioritised for a limited return to the office