

# Scottish Joint Council for Local Government Employees

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Dear Chief Executive,

## **SJC-61**

### **COVID-19: Working at Home**

The UK Government on 16 March 2020 urged everyone to now work at home where possible. This presents practical challenges for councils. All councils will already have flexible working policies that set out protocols for employees whose roles readily lend themselves to working at home and we would expect those arrangements to now be activated.

Employees should ensure that they are taking steps to look after their wellbeing during their period of working from home. This includes:

- maintaining regular contact with their manager and colleagues
- taking regular breaks
- avoiding being 'always on' by ensuring that they identify non-working time
- contacting the employee assistance programme if they need support, for example, in relation to heightened feelings of anxiety
- being aware of the things that can cause them poor wellbeing and the activities and resources that can help to address this

Employers have the responsibility to ensure business continuity and service delivery. We again urge local parties to work together from the outset when now considering practical implications for those roles that are mainly, but not solely, public facing jobs or similar roles which cannot be carried out at home. We expect all parties to be flexible and reasonable. The country faces an exceptional crisis of the like not experienced by the vast majority of the population. Custom and practice may need to be disregarded and usual ways of working and existing policies and protocols may need to be suspended. Wherever possible, unless there are urgent, mitigating reasons, such suspensions should be agreed beforehand with local trade unions. Employers should avoid detriments in pay and conditions for the period of any temporary changes that are introduced.

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Where staff are asked to work flexibly to cover other jobs, initially volunteers should be sought. If essential services are at risk we will consult with trade unions and employees about how to deploy staff. New roles must be clearly explained to them and they should receive appropriate training. If they are asked to work in roles which have increased risks, such as cleaning, a risk assessment including PPE requirements in line with HPS (Health Protection Scotland) advice must be carried out before they start.

Employers should seek the necessary legal advice where appropriate.

### Vulnerable groups

Councils will have employees who are in the vulnerable groups where they could be looking at months of working at home. Pregnant and vulnerable workers should follow government advice on self-isolation.

This group currently includes those who are:

- aged 70 or older (regardless of medical conditions)
- under 70 with an underlying health condition
- those who are pregnant

Underlying health conditions include:

- chronic (long-term) respiratory diseases, such as asthma, chronic obstructive pulmonary disease (COPD), emphysema or bronchitis
- chronic heart disease, such as heart failure
- chronic kidney disease
- chronic liver disease, such as hepatitis
- chronic neurological conditions, such as Parkinson's disease, motor neurone disease, multiple sclerosis (MS), a learning disability or cerebral palsy
- diabetes
- problems with your spleen – for example, sickle cell disease or if you have had your spleen removed
- a weakened immune system as the result of conditions such as HIV and AIDS, or medicines such as steroid tablets or chemotherapy
- being seriously overweight (a BMI of 40 or above)

### Higher risk of severe illness

There are some clinical conditions which put people at even higher risk of severe illness from COVID-19. If you are in this category, further advice will be issued. For now, you should rigorously follow the social distancing advice in full, outlined below.

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People falling into this higher risk group are those who may be at particular risk due to complex health problems such as:

- People who have received an organ transplant and remain on ongoing immunosuppression medication
- People with cancer who are undergoing active chemotherapy or radiotherapy
- People with cancers of the blood or bone marrow such as leukaemia who are at any stage of treatment
- People with severe chest conditions such as cystic fibrosis or severe asthma (requiring hospital admissions or courses of steroid tablets)
- People with severe diseases of body systems, such as severe kidney disease (dialysis)

Councils will have employees in vulnerable groups who may be looking at working from home for a considerable period. These groups need to follow current NHS inform advice linked below:

<https://www.nhsinform.scot/illnesses-and-conditions/infections-and-poisoning/coronavirus-covid-19#social-distancing-and-protecting-older-and-vulnerable-people>

Councils should consider sympathetically requests to change working arrangements because of caring responsibilities.

#### Roles that do not readily lend themselves to working at home

Our previous advice issued under SJC and SNCT circulars dealt with employees who are self-isolating or sick. This circular sets out considerations for employees who are otherwise well but cannot attend their normal place of work due to the Government's advice for people to work at home and avoid all non-essential travel.

For employees who are unable to work normally all options including, for example, alternative duties and special leave should be explored. Consideration should be given to requests for annual leave, or changes in annual leave requests. Some employees may require special leave to support dependants.

Ultimately, in some cases employers will have no option other than to accept that some employees can neither work at home nor be redeployed / seconded etc and will therefore be staying at home on full pay for the duration of this emergency. COSLA is and will continue to be in discussion with government regarding the support required for the sector.

We know that councils are thinking urgently about ways to best use people's skills and energy to help communities deal with the crisis and we thank all those in the local government workforce for their care and commitment.

In the light of the announcement on the day this circular was issued that schools are to close, further guidance will be worked on taking account of Scottish and UK Government advice.

Yours sincerely

TOM YOUNG (COSLA)  
JOHANNA BAXTER (UNISON)  
DREW DUFFY (GMB)  
WENDY DUNSMORE (UNITE)

Joint Secretaries

To: Chief Executives  
Heads of HR  
Directors of Finance