# Coronavirus Disease 2019 (COVID-19)

Workforce Considerations for the South Australian Public Sector Moving to a 'New Normal'

11 September 2020

COVID-19 RESPONSE

This paper has been prepared by the Office of the Commissioner for Public Sector Employment for guidance to Public Sector Agencies.

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# Purpose

This document provides high level guidance on transitioning towards a new way of working while following the continued easing of COVID-19 restrictions in the South Australian community.

# Background

South Australia has been largely successful in managing the ongoing risks to the community associated with COVID-19.

The public sector acted quickly and adapted to allow, where possible, employees to work remotely in order to minimise the spread of the virus and keep themselves, their families and the community safe.

Since May 2020, agencies have been physically returning employees to the workplace, with the sector now encouraged to return to the office under a 'new normal', provided appropriate plans are in place.

As a priority, agencies should ensure they are confident their business continuity plans are comprehensive, introduce the right controls and have been clearly communicated to all stakeholders.

Transition and recovery from COVID-19 is expected to be prolonged, so agencies must ensure they continually review plans to keep them up to date and reflective of the current situation. Modelling should also be factored in to ensure the agency is prepared for various possible scenarios in the future.

# Planning Resources

Many tools and resources are available to enable leaders to plan and support their teams as the adapt to a new way of working.

The *South Australian Public Sector COVID-19 Safe Workforce Return Toolkit* can assist with planning. This toolkit was developed by the Office of the Commissioner for Public Sector Employment based on information from SafeWork Australia and provides practical tools and resources for planning to return people to the workplace.

Wellbeing SA has created a range of resources to support all South Australians look after all aspects of their wellbeing. The Working and Thriving Beyond COVID-19 provides a practical checklist to help leaders frame discussions with their workers on return to the office.

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# Guiding Principles

While the requirement to have people work from home where practicable and appropriate has now been removed, it is still important to plan the new way of working, with consideration given to the following principles.

> Above all, focus should remain on how you take care of employees and safeguard their health and wellbeing.

## Physical principles

Agencies should ensure they have a comprehensive plan in place which maintains distancing and hygiene requirements. Principles for agencies to consider include:

- Planning sufficiently to ensure physical distancing can be maintained. This should include all shared spaces such as bathrooms, kitchens and utility areas, as well as workstation set ups.

- In general, staff should maintain a distance of 1.5 metres from others as much as possible and while offices are exempt from the density requirement, but are encouraged to apply this calculation if possible (1 person per 2 square metres).

- Ensure sufficient hygiene products are available for workers, and that everyone understands expectations regarding use.

- As required, adjust the office cleaning schedule to ensure a high standard of hygiene and cleanliness can be maintained.

## Wellbeing principles

Employees may be concerned and anxious at travelling to the workplace or returning to work and being near a larger number of people. Others may be very keen to return to the office following weeks of working in isolation.

The risks to an employee's health are psychological as well as physical. Some may have experienced challenging domestic situations such as juggling childcare or caring for a vulnerable family member, as well as financial worries if a partner has lost their income.

Agencies should keep the following front of mind:

- Recognise that there will be a period of readjustment for employees re-entering the workplace, and that it may take some longer to adapt than others.

- Communicate the supports available to workers. This may include the additional Employee Assistance Provider sessions or the peer-support program.

- Schedule performance discussions with teams to re-set and clarify expectations and priorities on returning to the office. This is also an ideal opportunity to check in on your employee's wellbeing.

The Mentally Health Workplaces toolkit has a broad range of additional strategies and information to support mental health at work.

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## Attendance principles

There will be some employees who have been working in isolation for a considerable period of time. Agencies should ensure a robust re-orientation process is developed for those returning, which should include information on new safe working practices or controls.

Agencies should also consider how to balance any need to have staff physically in the office with offering continued access to flexible working provisions.

**Staggered start and finish times to reduce pressure on public transport should be a key consideration.**

- Consider what adaptions need to be made to start and finish times and meal breaks to manage physical distancing.

- Ensure protocols are clear on what an employee should do if they are unwell, or they suspect a colleague is unwell.

- Have you planned how to notify workers of any changed circumstances? E.g. an outbreak in close vicinity of the workplace, a probable case of COVID-19 in the office etc.

- Is there any specific training to be completed prior to returning to work?

- Do any staff need to be re-engaged in order to deliver services? (e.g. casuals)

- Any employees previously deemed vulnerable should seek the advice of their medical practitioner on their proposed return to the workplace. It would also be appropriate to complete a risk management plan for individual employees at higher risk.

## WHS and industrial principles

Agencies must continue to observe work health and safety obligations, and ensure appropriate communication and engagement with employees and industrial associations.

- Ensure **regular and open communication with staff** regarding expectations and office requirements and protocols

- Engage industrial associations early on in relevant discussions

- Pre-plan an appropriate response to a staff member presenting for work when they appear unwell

- Ensure you have mechanisms in place to enable staff and/or customers to confidently raise any concerns relating to health, safety or wellbeing in the workplace.

## Additional information

covid-19.sa.gov.au
Latest information and advice

openyourworld.sa.gov.au
Information on maintaining wellbeing

publicsector.sa.gov.au/hr-and-policy-support/covid-19-workforce-arrangements
Public sector information and support

sahealth.sa.gov.au
Health advice
and information

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