COVID-19 “Coronavirus” - Information for Staff

Staff Continuing to Work Remotely

During the current national lockdown that began on 6th January 2021, only those colleagues whose role explicitly requires on-site working, or those who have an urgent, immediate and unavoidable need to be on-site should currently come onto College buildings. Further detail and information concerning on-site working is provided in later sections of this document.

The first step in easing the UK’s lockdown began on 8 March 2021 with millions of children now back at school. Some of the rules on what you can and cannot do changed on 29 March 2021. The stay-at-home rule has ended, although the government asks that people “minimise travel”; In England, all restrictions could be lifted by 21 June 2021, at the earliest, as part of a four stage "roadmap" based on certain conditions being met, such as the successful rollout of the vaccine programme.

The College recognises the additional pressures that working remotely for the past twelve months and other aspects of the pandemic have placed on the ability of many colleagues to carry out their work, including the additional pressure of undertaking unexpected caring responsibilities.

Whilst it is understood that colleagues may well find it difficult to work while caring for dependents, you are asked to do whatever you are able to. Where this is a struggle, you should discuss the detail of your situation with your line manager and explore with them what options may be available such as:

▪ identifying those key tasks that are essential to continue with and those which might be postponed until a later time;

▪ undertaking a higher of volume work in the mornings and/or evenings and less during the middle part of day e.g. agreeing with your manager a different or more flexible working pattern;

▪ identifying particular days or times when caring responsibilities are most acute and agreeing working patterns to accommodate this whilst still maintaining contractual working hours but over for example a period of a week or month;

▪ exploring the possibility of a temporary reduction in working time i.e. reduced FTE for a limited period;

▪ if eligible, to consider a period of unpaid Parental Leave’ or other leave entitlement as outlined in the College’s ‘Family Leave’ policy.

▪ explore the possibility of any temporary re-deployment to a different role that might bring with it a greater degree of flexibility in delivery;

▪ or, for a limited number of roles, accessing the government’s ‘furlough’ scheme might be possible. However, this will not be an option to most staff of the College because the funds aren’t made available to employers funded by student fees and through publicly funded research.

The College also recognises that staff have different levels of accessibility to fast or reliable broadband or that at this very unusual period, there is a greater demand on bandwidth in general with work and social related internet use.
Whilst working from home, time for social interactions is equally as important, if not more so, than when working on-site. Staff can feel isolated and the College would like to remind staff to keep in touch with each other and encourage getting together as a group on MS Teams to reduce the disadvantage of not having social contact.

Staff must have regular conversations with their line managers and teams and this would include information sharing about any flexibility they request/need.

To help ensure services are in place to support staff, the College has launched a new Employee Assistance Programme (EAP) which can be accessed via the free 24-hour, confidential helpline: 0800 028 0199. In addition to the helpline, you will find support through the ‘My Healthy Advantage’ mobile app, which is available to download from Google Play or the App Store. To access the app, you will be asked for the employer code, which is MHA162410. Find out more information about the EAP.

**Shielding and the Clinically Extremely Vulnerable**

Although the advice to shield has ended, clinically extremely vulnerable people must continue to follow the rules that are in place for everyone.

We are also advising clinically extremely vulnerable people to continue to take extra precautions to protect themselves. You are advised to follow the practical steps described below to minimise your risk of exposure to the virus.

Further details as they relate to colleagues in this group.

**Workstation Setup**

The way in which your workstation is set up can affect your health. The Health, Safety and Wellbeing site includes resources that can help you evaluate your set up and reduce the risk of musculoskeletal injuries by learning where your ergonomic work zones are and making sure that your workstation is set up correctly. If you need more guidance or help with your workstation set up, contact the Health and Safety team.

**Costs for increased utility bills**

Any additional utility costs incurred as a result of working remotely should be off-set against any savings made from reduced or eliminated travel costs. If staff believe that they are incurring additional costs by working from home beyond any savings, they should contact their line manager stating what costs have been incurred (including receipts) and details of what savings have been made in relation to their travel.

If your line manager supports your case for additional costs, they will then discuss this with your Director of Professional Service/Director or Operations who will advise whether a claim for the difference can be made via expenses on Business World, subject to appropriate documentation being provided.

Staff may be able to claim up to £6 a week (£4 a week before 4th April 2020) tax relief for some of their utility bills if they have been asked to continue working from home. Staff can only claim for work related reasons such as, business telephone calls or the extra cost of gas and electricity for their work area. Staff cannot claim for things they use for both private and business use, for
example, rent or broadband access. In addition, any payments claimed on expenses from the College (as above), cannot be claimed as tax relief.

Staff can check their eligibility on the tax service website. If your circumstances require you to complete a self-assessment, you will not be eligible to claim this particular tax relief via this route as you have the option to make this claim when completing your self-assessment.

**Staff Returning to Work in College Buildings - 12th April to 21st June 2021**

Birkbeck is committed to providing a safe and reassuring environment to support our world class teaching and research during these unprecedented times. Whilst the college is encouraging staff to work remotely where possible we require the assistance of the Birkbeck community in following some simple guidelines, prior to, during and after visiting College buildings, as outlined below. These guidelines supersede any previous guidance given to those colleagues who have already returned or who have continued to work onsite.

**Before You Arrive**

- Please ensure that you are coming into the College for specific purposes, in particular where you are unable to undertake tasks remotely or you need to access your workstation/office.

- Before you can return it is necessary for everyone to familiarise themselves with the COVID Risk Assessment and any COVID secure arrangements that have been implemented to protect our students and staff.

- You are required to read and understand the following documents, and to complete the Staff Declaration Form, prior to returning to use your workspace:
  - Departmental COVID Risk Assessment
  - Campus Induction

- In addition, before you can return it is necessary to consult your line manager who will review your requirements and agree any necessary arrangements for you to return to site.

- Before coming in, please consult the guidance provided on the NHS 111 website to ‘self-check’ for the symptoms of COVID-19 and follow any advice and guidance accordingly.

- Limit the number of possessions you bring with you as far as possible e.g. bags or other personal items. This will help to reduce the potential for transferring the virus as well as making the maintenance of social distancing easier within shared spaces.

- You should follow Government advice and take a rapid lateral flow test, available on line, twice a week (every 3 or 4 days) and report the results of the flow test on line the day you or someone in your household takes the test.

- The College is also providing ‘asymptomatic testing’ facilities in Student Central for staff and students. Full details of the service and a related set of Q&As are provided on the University of London website.
During Your Visit

▪ As you enter and leave the building, you will be required to ‘tap in’ and ‘tap out’ on the card readers located in building receptions. This will enable you to move around the estate whilst at the same time maintaining the College’s ability to support the NHS test and trace scheme.

▪ All those entering Birkbeck buildings, including students and staff, should (subject to defined exceptions*) wear a face covering for the duration of their time inside the building. Where Staff have single-occupancy offices, they can remove their face covering if tasks require e.g. delivering teaching from their PC or attending online meetings.

▪ The College has adopted a ‘1M+’ approach to social distancing across the estate. This means that people should maintain a 2M distance as far as is reasonably possible whilst in buildings but, with the mitigation of face coverings, it is possible for people to be in closer proximity, such as sitting 1M+ apart in a classroom or shared office space.

▪ Do not move any furniture or seating when using shared or public facilities. This will have been set up with specific distancing and safety in mind.

▪ Take note of all signage and instructions displayed in the buildings with regard to your safety, including prompts in relation to regular handwashing, social distancing and the use of toilet facilities.

▪ Please do not shout or raise your voice to communicate over a long distance or overcome background noise as this increases the risk of transmission. Equally please refrain from generating loud noise e.g. through playing music or loud conversation.

▪ You should wash your hands often and thoroughly with soap and water. In particular you should wash your hands after going to the toilet, before eating or handling food, and when you get to work/get home. The College provides hand sanitiser dispensers throughout the estate.

▪ In addition, please ensure that you:

  ▪ cover your mouth and nose with a tissue or your sleeve (not your hands) when you cough or sneeze;

  ▪ put any used tissues in the bin straightaway and wash your hands immediately after handling used tissues;

  ▪ avoid touching your eyes, nose or mouth if you have not washed your hands recently.

After Your Visit

▪ Please continue to monitor your wellbeing after your visit by following the guidance on the NHS 111 website.

▪ If you do subsequently need to self-isolate or indeed contract COVID-19 (regardless of where you think you may have contracted it) please follow the COVID-19 specific sickness absence reporting requirements as outlined further on in this document.
In addition to the sickness absence reporting process we would also ask staff who are self-isolating to update the COVID-19 status via the link available in My Birkbeck for Staff. This will assist the College in supporting the NHS test and trace scheme.

If you are subsequently contacted by the NHS test and trace programme please provide them with the following e-mail address to enable them to follow up on any contacts that you may have made whilst at Birkbeck.

* Please follow the NHS guidance on face coverings. There are legitimate exemptions to the requirement to wear a face covering but equally, individuals who consider themselves to be exempt should give careful consideration of the risks of entering buildings without a face covering, prior to their visit.

The College recognises that these are extremely challenging times and that people will be anxious about their safety, which in turn may lead to assumptions and misunderstandings e.g. in relation to the wearing of face coverings. It is reasonable, for health and safety reasons, to be able to seek clarification through ‘polite enquiry’ of those not wearing face coverings, but also to respect the fact that some individuals may have legitimate exemptions from doing so.

**COVID-19 Related Sickness and On-site Working**

If you develop the COVID-19 symptoms of a high temperature, a new, continuous cough or a loss of, or change to, sense of smell or taste and you are on-site, you need to leave work as quickly and safely as possible. Whether on-site or working from home, you need to have a test undertaken as soon as possible and within the first five days of having symptoms. Full details of what staff will need to do to access that testing is available on the government website.

**Stay at home if you have symptoms** – if you are getting a test because you have symptoms, you or anyone you live with must self-isolate until you get your result.

You must also self-isolate if you cannot get a test because it is more than five days since your symptoms started.

Full and current details of when to self-isolate and what individuals must do is outlined on the NHS website.

In addition, you must notify your line manager by telephone or MS Teams as soon as possible if you were on site but then left due to becoming unwell or, if working from home, before you are due to start work, or as soon as possible if that is not practical. Fuller details are outlined in the following section on ‘COVID-19 Specific Sickness Absence and Self-Isolating Notification Requirements’.

**COVID-19 Individual Risk Assessments for staff**

The College recognises its duty of care to all staff, including those; who are clinically extremely vulnerable, those who have dependants who are clinically extremely vulnerable, and those not in a group identified as being at more risk of being infected and/or of having an adverse outcome if infected with COVID-19 but nonetheless have significant concerns about on-site working.

Any staff member in a role that requires on-site working and who has concerns should raise these with their line manager in the first instance. The manager will listen to those concerns and will consider any options or proposals for alternative arrangements. They will also explain the risk
management measures and controls that have or will be put in place to minimise transmission to keep them, and others, safe.

If alternative proposals cannot be readily agreed, or if those concerns are not alleviated, guidance will be sought from the College’s occupational health advisers. In such cases, staff will be provided with a secure link to complete an online questionnaire, which will be assessed by an occupational health professional. The outcome will then be discussed between the employee and their line manager and could entail the recommendation that a fuller individual health assessment be undertaken or that further exploration of restrictions or adjustments should be explored in support of a returning to on-site working. A copy of the assessment and any agreed actions will be kept confidentially on the staff member’s HR file.

**COVID-19 Specific Sickness Absence and Self-Isolating Notification Requirements**

The notification requirements relating to COVID-19 are the same as when reporting sickness absence i.e. you must inform your line manager as soon as practically possible. In line with the College’s obligations to support the NHS Test and Trace scheme, there is now an additional requirement for you to complete a short online form.

If you develop COVID-19 symptoms, become unwell with COVID-19 symptoms or are advised to self-isolate you must:

Report your symptoms, sickness or status to your line manager by telephone or MS Teams as soon as practically possible and confirm your current status as being one of the following:

- COVID-19 confirmed - not able to work
- COVID-19 confirmed - able to work
- COVID-19 self-isolation – not able to work
- COVID-19 self-isolation – able to work
- COVID-19 shielding

If your manager is away, you must inform your managers’ manager.

**Additionally, you will need to** record your status on the Welcome to My Birkbeck for Staff page via the blue tab towards the top left-hand side of the page titled ‘Report self-isolation’ and complete the short form that you will be presented with. The specific information on this form will be accessed by the College’s COVID-19 track and trace team and most importantly, will provide the information needed if you have attended any College buildings in the previous 7 days.

**Line-managers/record keepers** will log without delay the sickness absence and/or self-isolation status of staff members in the usual way that sickness absence is recorded on My Birkbeck for Staff, by selecting the staff member from the directory and recording the appropriate reason for the entry from the options, as outlined above.

Please note that in the situation where a staff member either has COVID-19 or when self-isolating (with or without symptoms) and can still work, this will NOT be counted as sickness absence on the HR reports that are generated from the system. The College is only collecting and recording this information under its statutory obligations to support the NHS test and trace scheme.

A staff member’s personal health data is ‘special category data’ i.e. it is confidential information and
therefore, must be omitted from any communication with the rest of the workforce. Under no circumstances should any member of staff send out communications to other staff or students concerning the personal health information of other staff or students.

**Certification Requirements** – if you need to self-isolate, you are required to provide the College with an ‘isolation note’ that will be obtained from the NHS 111 website.

If you are ill and in self-isolation, your absence will be treated as sickness absence and you should subsequently follow the College’s normal certification requirements for any longer period of related sickness absence.

If you are not ill but nonetheless required to self-isolate, your line manager will discuss with you what, if any, work you can do/continue to do from home.

Staff are responsible for ensuring that all medical statements (e.g. ‘fit notes’, isolation notes, or a notification letter from the NHS test and trace service) reach their manager promptly. Periods of absence that are not covered by medical statements will not qualify for occupational or statutory sick pay. Each case will be considered on its merits before any occupational sick pay is withheld.

**Leave from work and COVID-19**

**Annual Leave** - Colleagues are reminded of the importance of continuing to use annual leave during the pandemic. You may have more leave owing to you at this point in the year, than in previous years, because of the additional leave provided and allowed to be carried over from last year.

Even though there are few, if any, options to travel at the current time, it remains important to take time away from work and to make sure that you can schedule your leave, around that of your colleagues, to ensure that we can continue to operate effectively. You should request annual leave in the normal way.

**Other forms of leave** - All other forms of leave are still relevant during this difficult time, including **Family leave**. Staff should request any form of leave in the normal way using Business World.

**Volunteering Leave** - Birkbeck has a **Volunteering leave policy**, which is benchmarked across the sector, and enables staff to take one day’s paid leave a year. Normally, any additional days for volunteering leave would be unpaid, however during these extraordinary circumstances, Birkbeck has decided to allow staff to be able to undertake volunteering for a recognised scheme such as the NHS scheme. In these circumstances, the number of paid days volunteering leave will be increased to one day per calendar month. It is anticipated that this change would apply for the duration of the Government restrictions imposed due to COVID-19.

Staff who take this opportunity to volunteer for a recognised scheme need to log onto Business World and book this as Volunteering Leave.

**Communication concerning COVID-19**

All communications to staff and/or students concerning COVID-19 will be issued by the College Secretary, and/or the Academic Registrar (for cases involving students) and/or the Director of Human Resources (for cases involving staff).
There is a dedicated SharePoint site for staff that contains wider information which can be accessed through My Birkbeck and the link through to ‘Coronavirus Information for Staff’.