

COVIDSafe workplaces in the TSS

A Framework for Transitioning to the “New Normal”

Purpose

This framework is designed to provide high level guidance that supports Tasmanian State Service (TSS) agencies' decision making, and highlights important matters for consideration when planning for the transition to the new normal workplace, and the consideration of the return of employees to the regular workplace where applicable and appropriate, alongside the easing of COVID-19 restrictions.

This document supports the WorkSafe Tasmania COVID-19 Safe Workplaces Framework, the Public Administration Guideline and individual agency COVID-19 Safety Plans.

This document may be subject to change as new public health advice is issued, as restrictions continue to be revised, we Rebuild a Stronger Tasmania, and continue our transition to the new normal workplace.

During the COVID-19 pandemic many changes have occurred across the TSS, as we have continued to adapt to the ever-changing situation and public health advice. One such change saw the TSS move quickly to enable large numbers of employees to work remotely in order to minimise the spread of the virus; keep themselves, their families and the community safe; and enable personal and organisational adherence to public health directions including those regarding physical distancing. The State Service Management Office (SSMO) issued guidance to agencies on employment arrangements, workforce management, work, health and safety, and leave during the COVID-19 response to support agencies as we entered this new working environment, as well as to provide a consistent approach to these issues across the TSS.

As public health restrictions begin to ease, and with the establishment of the WorkSafe Tasmania COVID-19 Safe Workplaces Framework, agencies are beginning to consider the best way in which to manage the return of employees to their regular workplace or otherwise, and plan for the transition to the new normal workplace.

During this transition, we are committed to the State and National COVID-19 Safe Workplaces measures, and accept the guidance of our Public Health authorities, WorkSafe Tasmania, SafeWork Australia, and the Tasmanian Roadmap to Recovery.

Version: 2.0

Date: 1 September 2020

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I. Principles

- We consider and plan our transition back to regular workplaces and identify the “**new normal workplaces**” for our agencies.
- Safety, and providing **safe working environments**, remains our first priority when returning employees to their regular workplace and when maintaining remote working.
- Safe working environments enable **physical, psychological and social wellbeing**, as well as considering and effectively managing fatigue.
- We implement measures in a **phased approach** to reduce the risk of COVID-19 transmission within our workplaces.
- We plan together for **business continuity** in the event of further outbreaks.
- We continue to **communicate** regularly and proactively with our employees.
- We support employees and agencies with flexible **working arrangements** as we continue to transition, and beyond.
- We begin to consider our **future workplace strategies** and undertake longer-term planning.

2. Transition and Recovery Planning



Suggested Actions

- Identify the new normal workplace for your agency
- Consider the way in which you will facilitate any transition of employees to the new normal. Contemplate key components such as business continuity in the event of future outbreaks; communication with employees; and working arrangements

Introduction

Agencies are required to implement COVID-19 Safety Plans by the COVID-19 Safe Workplaces Framework. Agencies may also, in addition to or as part of their COVID-19 Safety Plans, consider the way in which they facilitate the transition of employees back to their regular workplaces or otherwise. While it is appropriate to start considering a return to the regular workplace, it is critical that this process is planned to ensure that we are providing safe working environments for our employees.

It is acknowledged that employees are facing rapid change as a result of COVID-19, potentially experiencing extended periods of anxiety in both their personal and working lives and facing isolation from social networks. These psychosocial risks should be considered and managed alongside the physical elements of work, health and safety during the transition.

The New Normal Workplace

COVID-19 has changed some of our ways of working for the foreseeable future. Accordingly, agencies may not need to return workplaces “to normal” but can instead establish a “new normal” that identifies and responds to these changes, and establishes a COVID safe workplace. A single approach for the TSS is not practicable given the diversity of working environments. As such, each agency’s transition should be different and tailored to its particular agency needs.

Agencies may consider what this will look like, and determine how to best transition their workforce to the new way of working for their workplace/s. The transition process may also consider whether and when employees will return to their regular workplace. Agencies should also consider whether flexibility with regards to work obligations for employees should be ongoing. Due to COVID-19 impacts, some work may not be required or available for a period of time (for example due to the impacts on tourism from COVID-19 border closures). Agencies should consider the work that is available when transitioning employees back to their regular workplace.

Transition processes should be flexible and may change over time to adapt to changing needs or public health restrictions and their impact on the agency, workplaces, the public and employees.

In considering the transition, agencies may also assess/re-assess their workforce to identify/confirm critical functions and categories of employees to prioritise in the transition to workplaces in a phased approach. This will enable the most effective transition possible and maintain delivery of outcomes. Accordingly, transition should facilitate ongoing business continuity and the delivery of services to the Tasmanian community.

Agencies should also consider lessons learned from their response to COVID-19 and how these could impact on the transition to usual workplaces.

2.1 Adopting a Phased Approach



Suggested Actions

- Plan for a phased transition that acknowledges and responds to the gradual easing of public health restrictions alongside operational and employee requirements
- Consider risks and possible control measures and take action to prevent and minimise the potential for COVID-19 impacts at work

Introduction

Agencies should plan for a phased transition for employees back to their regular workplaces or to the new normal. Agencies should assess the gradual relaxing of COVID-19 restrictions against the implications on operational requirements, productivity, employees and workplaces to inform this phased process. Before employees return to their regular workplace, they should be made aware of the transition arrangements, and have been given an opportunity to communicate any feedback.

Specific Considerations for Transition

A number of specific measures may be considered to support prevention and/or minimisation of risk in the workplace. Agencies may give consideration to the following to inform their phased transition (see attachment 1 for a breakdown of additional practical scenarios):

- a. Whether some employees or categories of employees have a greater need to be in the workplace than others, and should be prioritised for earlier phases of the transition;
- b. Personal circumstances of individual employees, e.g. whether they are classified as a vulnerable person, whether they are experiencing potential feelings of isolation or loneliness working from home, whether they are productive when working remotely etc.;
- c. How vulnerable employees will be transitioned (see below and attachment 1 for suggestions regarding this group);
- d. Arrangements to support employees with caring responsibilities, considering whether schools and childcare centres are open and accessible;
- e. How employees are to travel to work. For example, whether there are any public transport restrictions that may impact employees' ability to safely travel to a physical workplace; and
- f. Modifying workplace attendance arrangements where the agency cannot maintain physical distancing in the workplace, for example rostering employees to work from the office or home on different days or alternate weeks, or facilitating more flexible start and finish times.

Transition of Vulnerable Employees

Tasmania has found ourselves on the verge of eliminating coronavirus from the state, in terms of the level of active cases and the absence of community transmission. Without becoming complacent, given the greater understanding we now have regarding COVID-19, together with the additional control measures in place and lower level of risk within our community, particular consideration should now be given to the transition of vulnerable employees back to the workplace. Where a phased transition is planned, agencies may consider adopting a more flexible approach to vulnerable employees and when this group may be able to return. Rather than having a blanket rule or direction regarding all vulnerable employees as may have previously been the case, a risk based approach is appropriate. Risk

needs to be assessed in line with Public Health advice and mitigated with consideration of the characteristics of the employee, the workplace and the work.

Agencies should consider undertaking individual risk assessments for vulnerable employees. Risk assessments should consider whether the risk to the vulnerable employee can be reasonably managed in the workplace. Where relevant, consider exploring whether vulnerable employees can be assigned to non-customer or client facing roles, or assigned alternative duties, or whether there may be options to adapt the workplace to address any safety concerns. In such scenarios, the employee may not be able to return to their regular workplace immediately but may be able to explore working from home, or alternate duties or working locations.

The outcomes of these risk assessments will likely look different at different stages of the phased transition, as the situation progresses and as Public Health move forward with the easing of restrictions and/or issue new advice regarding this group. Agencies are responsible for keeping up to date with all relevant Public Health advice.

2.2 Business Continuity in the event of further outbreaks



Suggested Actions

- Review your existing business continuity or response plans, and update or amend as required in line with current public health advice
- Ensure that effective plans remain in place that guide the agency's response to potential cases of COVID-19 in the workplace or community
- Remain up to date with relevant advice/direction from Public Health

Introduction

While Tasmania is showing promising signs in terms of COVID-19 case numbers, the virus has not gone away. As restrictions are eased, the risk of further cases or outbreaks remains. It is important to consider continuity planning in the event that this occurs and impacts our workplaces.

Planning for Further Outbreaks

Agencies may already have business continuity or response plans in place that outline processes that will be followed in the case of COVID-19 at the workplace. These should be reviewed when planning through transition and beyond.

Agencies may consider things like:

- a. What action will be taken if one of our employees, or one of their close contacts, tests positive for COVID-19?
- b. How will service delivery be maintained in the event of workplace closures, where large numbers of employees are required to self-isolate, or where an outbreak occurs in close proximity to a workplace?
- c. How will employees be communicated with in such event?
- d. How can we learn from our previous experience?

Where there are further COVID-19 outbreaks, agencies may consider facilitating and planning for wide-scale working from home arrangements, where it is practical to do so. The ability for employees to work from home may depend on the type of work they undertake and for operational reasons some employees may need to attend or return to their normal workplace.

Agencies may consider and establish processes that ensure operational requirements continue to be met, and services continue to be delivered in these scenarios as they have done throughout the COVID-19 response.

2.3 Effective Communication in Transition



Suggested Actions

- Create a communications strategy or plan that outlines how and when employees will be communicated with during the development and implementation of the transition
- Use communications to pre-empt or address issues or concerns that employees may have about the transition

Introduction

Active, meaningful and ongoing communication with employees is an important element of the transition. Employees should thoroughly understand workplace expectations prior to returning to the workplace, including those regarding COVID-19 safety measures including hygiene, personal health and physical distancing.

Communication Plan

Agencies may support the implementation of their transition with a communication plan or strategy that clearly outlines the purpose of the transition to employees including roles/responsibilities, what this means for them and how the different phases will be implemented. In doing so, agencies will need to clearly communicate their transition plans to managers and employees to effectively support implementation. In addition, agencies might also consider broader stakeholders (such as customers, clients, contractors, suppliers etc.) who are affected and who may need to know about the transition plan.

Effective communication strategies or plans are important in pre-empting and proactively managing issues raised by employees about the safety of returning to the workplace. Employees should be aware that there are strategies in place to facilitate a safe workplace, including COVID Safety Plans that have been developed in accordance with advice from Safe Work Australia, WorkSafe Tasmania, and Public Health.

Employee Feedback

Employees should be supported in the transition and given the opportunity to ask questions. Employees should be engaged in the process in order to identify and control risks; adapt and promote safe work practices; actively control against the transmission of COVID-19 in the workplace; and respond to any cases of COVID-19 in the workplace.

Agencies should maintain regular discussions with employees regarding the transition back to the usual workplace, and continue to seek feedback at all stages, rather than solely at the outset of the process.

3. Working Arrangements



Suggested Actions

- Consider your broader agency approach to flexible work, and encourage managers to discuss individual arrangements within their teams
- Review existing agency policy (including work from home policies), or any current workplace flexibility arrangements to incorporate lessons learned from the experience of COVID-19, and to determine if they continue to meet the needs of employees and the agency

Introduction

Working arrangements across the TSS have changed during the COVID-19 outbreak, and we have seen large numbers of employees working from home. However that does not mean that things have to return to their pre-COVID state as restrictions ease. Agencies may reconsider their existing arrangements and how these may shift in line with and to support a phased transition to the new normal workplace. When employees do return to regular workplaces, they should be reminded to stay home if they are unwell or to go home if they become unwell during the day.

Working from Home

In some instances, working from home may be a major part of the new normal workplace, and represent a key component of our way of working into the future. Working from home may have been occurring effectively throughout the pandemic period, and employees and agencies may seek to maintain these arrangements to some extent. A number of employees have found it beneficial to combine working from home with working from their regular workplace, so for example, this may involve arrangements where employees regularly work from home for part of the week, while working from their regular workplace for the remainder.

While in some instances agencies and employees may be keen to return to regular workplaces, it is suggested that for employees with established agreed working from home arrangements, agencies consider their transition, and ensure appropriate control measures or protocols have been put in place as may be required by COVID-19 Safety Plans, prior to their return.

Approach to Flexible Working

Agencies and employees are encouraged to continue to utilise flexible ways of working (including working from home). Heads of Agency should make broad decisions regarding workplace flexibility, within award and/or agreement provisions, in their agencies which then guides individual arrangements. Relevant factors to be considered in decision making include relevant Award provisions, the ability to meet operational requirements, as well as security, health considerations, IT, cybersecurity and remote working capacity, as well as the individual circumstances of employees. Clear boundaries should be set for managers to implement. It is noted that this is not intended to include formal Workplace Flexibility Arrangements that vary award terms, but rather be a consideration of flexibility available within our existing frameworks.

Once these boundaries have been established, managers should discuss the working arrangements for members of their teams (within the parameters set by the Head of Agency) with individual employees,

and conduct genuine consultation regarding the employee's return to the physical workplace or other arrangements moving forward. Working arrangements may vary for individuals based on the requirements of their role, and their personal circumstances or preferences.

Agencies may continue to consider how work could be redesigned and flexibility provided to suit working flexibly as necessary – for instance, by facilitating working from home, different working hours, or providing other reasonable flexibilities.

Supporting Employees

Arrangements to support employees who are working from home or remotely should be considered. These may include regular check in arrangements, teleconferences, and other mechanisms to maintain regular communication between employees and their managers. More information is provided on this in Attachment 1, Scenario 2. In line with safety plans, agencies should ensure employees are adhering to relevant health requirements.

Regular Workplace Attendance

While there may be employees that are able and wish to continue working from home arrangements in some shape or form, there will continue to be roles that undertake functions that cannot be performed remotely. These employees may not be able to undertake working from home. Further, there may be employees who could be required to attend their regular workplace for at least part of their working week. Where employees are returning to their regular workplace in any capacity, the workplace must be meeting the standards set within their COVID-19 Safety Plan, and have measures in place to effectively manage issues and risks. Employees may still feel apprehension about being at their regular workplace with larger groups of people, and should be supported throughout the transition process and beyond.

Employees with a Mild Illness

Importantly, sick employees must not attend the workplace (even if only mildly unwell). Employees should be reminded to remain home if mildly unwell, even when they would have (prior to COVID-19) still attended work. In these situations, depending on the severity of the illness, they may be able to work from home, noting that they may have previously been in the workplace performing their duties.

4. Future Workplace Strategies



Suggested Actions

- Start to consider your longer-term future workplace strategy, acknowledging that COVID-19 may continue to impact our way of working well into the future
- Look at your “lessons learned” from the COVID response, and consider whether any of these learnings or changed practices can be maintained or adopted into business as usual moving forward

Introduction

Longer-term planning should be undertaken where possible, noting that COVID-19 will potentially be something we need to learn to live with for the foreseeable future, rather than something we “overcome” and can forget about. It is acknowledged that COVID-19 may have changed some of our ways of working for the foreseeable future.

Lessons Learned and Looking Forward

Agencies should consider whether any changed practices have produced benefits and how these can be integrated into their current and/or future operating environments to improve workplaces and employee wellbeing.

Ways of working effectively and efficiently within the new normal workplace need to be explored. The progress toward collaborative online working environments, and review of working practices for efficiency through the reduction, automation or digitisation of processes, should be continued. This includes agencies considering whether any changed practices have produced benefits and how these can be integrated into their current and/or future operating environments to improve workplaces.

In adapting a continuous improvement and growth mindset, agencies should also encourage the continued creativity of employees as we come out of the pandemic, harnessing our demonstrated capacity for change and renewal.

Attachment I – Practical Scenarios

Scenario	Consider	Key Messages
Vulnerable employees		
<p>I</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Vulnerable employees have previously been directed not to attend work. • Restrictions are now easing and Public Health advice changing. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Public Health advice • Work, Health and Safety requirements arising from COVID-Safety Plans and minimum requirements, as well as existing legislation and frameworks 	<p>Consider adopting a more flexible approach. Rather than having a blanket rule regarding these employees, a risk based approach is appropriate.</p> <p>Risk needs to be assessed, taking note of current Public Health advice regarding vulnerable people and general restrictions, and mitigated with consideration of the characteristics of the employee, the workplace and the work.</p> <p>Consider exploring whether the employee can be assigned to non-customer or client facing roles, or transfer to alternative duties where possible and appropriate. Where risk cannot be appropriately mitigated, consider alternate arrangements to accommodate a workplace absence.</p> <p>Where the risk cannot be sufficiently mitigated, these employees should not work in high risk settings. In such scenarios, the employee may not be able to return to their regular workplace immediately but may be able to explore or continue alternate duties, working locations or work from home, as may already be occurring.</p> <p>Where the employee is pushing back on this and are requesting to return to the workplace, open, honest and ongoing communication is important in maintaining the relationship with the employee, and ensuring that they understand steps are being taken to protect their health and safety. Communicate next steps or timeframes where possible regarding the current situation or when they may be able to return to the workplace. Ensure they have access to duties from home in the interim where possible.</p> <p>The outcomes of these risk assessments will likely look different as the situation progresses and as Public Health move forward with the easing of restrictions and/or issue new advice regarding this group.</p>

Scenario	Consider	Key Messages
Transition back to the workplace		
<p>2</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Employee has been working from home during COVID-19 Employee wishes to continue to work from home part of the time. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Does this arrangement suit the agency, as well as the employee? How can we best manage the arrangement and maximise operational effectiveness? Asking employees how and when they would like to transition. Consider the “Managing remote teams: a guideline for managers” document - while established specifically for COVID-19, this document has some valuable information that can be carried forward more generally. Consider your agency working from home/remotely policy 	<p>In many cases, COVID-19 has enabled parties to consider working from home arrangements in a more ongoing way, as both employees and agencies have been able to experience the benefits they bring first hand.</p> <p>Where employees and agencies have had effective working from home arrangements in place, they may agree to continue this in some form.</p> <p>To make the most of these arrangements, employees and agencies should establish or continue measures to maximise their effectiveness, such as:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Create the systems of work: Managers and employees should discuss the way in which any ongoing work from home arrangements will operate. Consideration should be given to how work will be performed from home, how and when performance will be assessed, and if variation to standard process (e.g. changes to existing work procedures or workflows, or to the performance process) is required, how this can best be supported and achieved. While the way in which employees work from home may differ to working at their regular workplace, lessons learned during COVID-19 have highlighted the positives and benefits to working from home, including the positive impact on productivity in some instances. Structured check-ins: this may involve a short daily video chat with the employee and manager to discuss priorities and clarify output/outcome requirements regularly. Provide different communication technology options: reliance on email may not be sufficient. Ideally, remotely located employees will have access to video calling and instant message technology to increase their connectivity to the workplace. Establish expectations for contact and availability: employees should be confident in their understanding of the expectations their managers have of them with regard to how often they should be making contact throughout the day, hours they need to be contactable etc. Often people working from home can feel an unjustified need to be available at all times, and take shorter breaks while still checking emails. Setting clear expectations and boundaries can help to

Scenario	Consider	Key Messages	
		<p>overcome this. Employees should also ensure that they take breaks as they would if they were in the regular workplace.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Provide opportunities for remote social interaction: remotely located employees often miss out on the more social elements of working life, and can feel that they miss out on these benefits of the workplace. The opportunity for social interaction can help to address this. • Offer encouragement and emotional support: managers should strive to provide a high level of support to remotely located employees. It can often be “out of sight out of mind” when team members are at home, however steps should be taken to ensure that this is not the case, and to ensure that appropriate levels of support are being provided. 	
3	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The agency has requested that an employee return to their usual workplace. • The employee is refusing to return and is insisting on remaining at home. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Why is the employee reluctant to return to the workplace? • Can their concerns be adequately addressed to enable them to return? • Can we facilitate working from home in some shape or form to create an effective transition back? 	<p>There may be instances where employees do not feel comfortable in returning to the workplace.</p> <p>Employees should be given the opportunity to raise their concerns, and these concerns should then be addressed where possible or appropriate. Employees should be reassured that the workplace is safe.</p> <p>Where possible, a staged approach could be considered, where the employee gradually increases their number of days at their regular workplace while reducing their number of working from home days over a period of time.</p> <p>In some instances, some level of working from home may continue longer-term if the arrangement has been effective for the employee and for the agency.</p>
4	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • An employee is requesting to come back to work immediately as their children are now going back to school • The agency does not yet have safety measures and 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Consider your transition plan and communicate likely timeframes to employees • Consider whether there are any individual circumstances that 	<p>Employee safety remains our first priority.</p> <p>The return of employees to the workplace should only occur when safety requirements have been addressed and physical distancing, hygiene requirements etc. can be effectively managed.</p> <p>It is recommended that a staged approach to transitioning employees back to their regular workplaces be taken.</p>

Scenario	Consider	Key Messages	
controls in place for immediate return.	require the particular employee's return to be prioritised	Employees should be communicated with and given clear expectations and approximate timeframes regarding this transition.	
5	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> An employee is reporting that their mental health is suffering due to the isolation and change associated with working from home The agency cannot yet accommodate them to return to the workplace. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Work, Health and Safety Requirements Consider your transition plan and determine whether the employee's return could be expedited Consider support measures outlined in scenario 3 Encourage EAP usage 	<p>This type of scenario may factor into your transition planning, noting that some employees or categories of employees may have a greater need to be in the workplace than others, and should be prioritised.</p> <p>To this end, personal circumstances of individual employees should be considered, for example, whether they are classified as a vulnerable person, whether they are experiencing potential feelings of isolation or loneliness working from home, whether they are productive when working remotely etc.</p> <p>Employees that are struggling when working from home may be prioritised in terms of a return to the workplace.</p> <p>Alternate duties to enable an earlier return may be considered if appropriate.</p> <p>If there is a period of time before a return can occur, all measures to support them while at home should be taken, including the provision of encouragement and emotional support; the provision of opportunity for remote social interaction; and clear expectations and channels of communication.</p>
Other scenarios			
6	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Agency is transitioning employees back to regular workplaces COVID-19 impacts mean that workloads within certain areas or teams has decreased and there is not enough of their pre-COVID work to allocate to employees 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Are there any alternate duties that employees could undertake, such as planning? Are there other areas across the agency that require additional resources? 	<p>Where COVID-19 is still having an impact on the level of pre-COVID work available within teams, agencies may consider exploring opportunities to assign alternate duties, facilitate internal transfers, or encourage participation in interoperability.</p> <p>When exploring these options, agencies should be mindful of the requirements outlined in Employment Direction 1, and in relevant industrial agreements or awards.</p>

