Planning for return to COVID-safe workplaces

Overview

- Queensland public sector agencies activated business continuity plans to support the Queensland Government's response to COVID-19, including working remotely where appropriate to deliver priorities.
- As COVID-19 restrictions across the community and economy begin to relax, planning for gradual return of employees to workplaces should commence.
- Public sector agencies will need to carefully prepare for this transition, to protect the health and wellbeing of employees, while balancing the importance of returning to normal business operations.
- Agencies should develop transition plans to support the return to COVID-safe workplaces.
- Agency transition plans need to be consistent with Chief Health Officer directions, Workplace Health and Safety Queensland guidelines and the National COVID-19 Safe Workplaces Principles.
- Transition plans will vary, based on each agency's business needs, operating environment and regional footprint.
- Agency transition plans should include planning for individual sites, sites where there are multiple co-located agencies, and place-based arrangements for specific locations.
- Plans must include how the agency will respond to potential further outbreaks of COVID-19, and be flexible enough to adapt to changes in advice from the Chief Health Officer and Queensland Government.
- Transition plans should consider the lessons learned from the agency's response to COVID-19, including the benefits of adopting different and flexible ways of working.
- Agencies must consult employees and unions when developing transition plans. This may be undertaken through existing work health and safety consultation mechanisms.
- Transition plans should be supported with appropriate communication strategies that clearly outline to employees and managers the agency's proposed way forward.

Duties under the *Work Health and Safety Act 2011* to respond to COVID-19

Employer responsibilities

- Employers have a duty of care to provide employees with a safe and healthy work environment and to protect the health and safety of others that might be affected by their work.
- Employers must assess risks and implement and review control measures to prevent or minimise exposure to these risks.
- Put in place a **plan** to respond to COVID-19, and to any directives issued by Queensland Health.

Employee responsibilities

- Employees have a duty to take reasonable care for their own health and safety and that of others who may be affected by their actions or omissions.
- Employees must co-operate with any reasonable policy or procedure that relates to health or safety at the workplace, including in relation to COVID-19.

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Risk assessment

- Ahead of the gradual return to workplaces, a risk assessment must be completed to inform transition planning. Employers must:

  — identify workplace hazards (such as potential for transmission in the workplace, hazards resulting from a worker who tests positive for COVID-19 infection or hazards from a worker in respect to the activity of entering a changed work environment)
  — determine who might be harmed and how (including workers and any other individuals in the workplace)
  — decide on control measures (including considering a hierarchy of controls to prevent the spread of infection, where applicable)
  — put controls in place
  — review the controls regularly.

- Detailed information regarding COVID-19 workplace risk management has been published online by **Workplace Health and Safety Queensland** and **Safe Work Australia**.

Consulting with workers on health and safety

- A safe workplace is achieved when everyone involved in the work communicates with each other to identify hazards and risks, talks about health and safety concerns, and works together to find solutions.
- Employers must consult with workers on health and safety matters relating to COVID-19 in the workplace, including (but not limited to):

  — identifying tasks and processes that could result in the spread of COVID-19
  — developing a plan in response to COVID-19
  — identifying tasks and processes that could result in increased risk of psychological harm as a result of COVID-19
  — making decisions about the workplace facilities
  — making changes to processes or procedures to protect workers from the spread of COVID-19
  — making changes to processes or procedures to prevent or minimise the risk of psychological harm as result of COVID-19
  — providing information and training for workers.

- Under section 48 of the *Work Health and Safety Act 2011,* consultation requires that:

  — relevant work health and safety information is shared with workers;
  — workers are given a reasonable opportunity to express their views and to raise health or safety issues;
  — workers are given a reasonable opportunity to contribute to the decision-making process relating to the health and safety matter;
  — the views of workers are taken into account; and
  — workers are advised of the outcome of any consultation in a timely manner.

- Agencies may consider using existing work health and safety consultation mechanisms to develop their transition plans, and should also continue to consult with relevant unions.

For more information, refer to the **Work health and safety during COVID-19: guide to keeping your workplace safe, clean and healthy**

Preparing your transition plan to support the return to COVID-safe workplaces

- Transition plans must outline how the **physical workplace** is being prepared, in accordance with Queensland Government Accommodation Office advice (link to physical workplaces guide):
  — preparing buildings in terms of physical distancing (mapping square meterage), installing any markers on the floor
  — incorporating advice on common areas (such as lifts, entrances/exits, meeting rooms, lunch areas) from multi-agency site plans or location-specific plans
  — preparing signage to reinforce room occupancy, distancing, hygiene practices
  — implementing increased cleaning regimes, particularly in high traffic areas
  — preparing other workplaces such as fleet vehicles in line with health and safety requirements

- Plans must also outline how the agency will manage and support the **workforce** during the transition:
  — how the agency will manage employees, based on maximum number of people able to be present in line with physical distancing requirements:
    - rostering
    - staggering start/finish times
    - hybrid model of short shifts in the workplace, complemented by working from home
  — how the agency, through management planning and practices, will support people to travel to workplaces outside of peak times, to reduce patronage on public transport at peak times and increase the ease of maintaining distancing while using public transport
  — how the benefits of flexible and remote working arrangements and workforce innovations developed in response to COVID-19 can be retained
  — the workforce transition plan must:
    - be scalable, based on anticipated increases to physical attendance
    - be flexible, and account for potential interruptions to services such as transport, schools and child care facilities
    - account for pre-existing flexible work arrangements and the potential for increased absences due to ongoing health directions (e.g. isolation, vulnerable employees).

- Plans must also outline how the agency will continue to provide additional support to employees who may have increased vulnerability to COVID-19.
- Plans should be flexible to respond and adapt to changes, including any local restrictions in the event of an identified local cluster of COVID-19 cases.

Implementing transition plans

- Agencies will be advised when to implement transition plans.
- Agencies will be responsible for providing support to employees by:
  — developing employee communications, including emphasis that employees must stay home if they are sick.
  — providing information or training that is necessary to protect employees from the risk of exposure to COVID-19 arising from their work. This includes training on personal hygiene responsibilities (under development by PSC).
  — continuing to manage vulnerable employees in line with Queensland Health advice

- developing advice on arrangements to support employees with caring responsibilities, considering the availability and accessibility of schools, childcare centres or other caring arrangements
- identifying an appropriate mechanism for employees to raise any related concerns or seek advice

- PSC will support agencies to provide HR advice to managers on:
  - effectively managing hybrid teams
  - supporting vulnerable employees and employees caring for vulnerable people
  - managing expectations of employees
  - supporting health and wellbeing (particularly mental wellbeing) during the transition
  - consulting about proposed changes to ways of working.

Preparing for the future

Agencies should consider any lessons learned from the response to COVID-19, including successful remote work strategies, and how this could continue to feature in transition planning.

This may include consideration of how changed working practices have produced benefits, and how these may be integrated into current and/or future operating environments to improve workplaces.

Related resources

PSC will support agencies and managers with resources including:

- **Support employees during COVID-19**
- Managing hybrid (to come) and **remote teams**
- **Guide to identifying and supporting vulnerable employees (COVID-19)**
- **Implementation guide – directive 01/20**

Documents and legislation referenced within this framework:

- *Work Health and Safety Act 2011 (Qld)*
- *Work Health and Safety Regulation 2011*
- **Work health and safety during COVID-19: guide to keeping your workplace safe, clean and healthy**