

We remain acutely aware of the level of concern about the risks from the coronavirus (COVID-19) and the unrest that this is causing within the firm and the wider community.

We continue to keep the situation under continual review and are regularly updating ourselves on the advice being issued by Public Health England (PHE) and the NHS, and will adapt our approach based on the official advice as it is released, and will inform you as changes and updates are applied. The main sources of information that we are relying on are:

[ACAS guidance](#)

[UK government response to the coronavirus](#)

[UK government guidance to employers](#)

[World Health Organisation \(WHO\) Guidance](#)

[HSE guidance on working safely during the coronavirus outbreak](#)

It is recommended that you all keep abreast of the changing situation by reading the official guidance [here](#).

The firm is committed to managing the risks created by the virus. The health and wellbeing of all of us is paramount. This risk has to be managed effectively, and we must work together to ensure that we all stay safe and wherever possible the firm's business, and our service to our clients, does not suffer. Whilst it is inevitable that we will suffer disruption to the business, it is important that such disruption is mitigated by us all, whilst maintaining our health and safety and that of those around us. This will require us all to be flexible in our approaches as the impact of the virus continues.

A COVID-19 working team was set up at the outset and has been in consultation since the outbreak. This team consists of Kevin McGrath (Managing Partner), Clare Buchanan (Chief Financial Officer), James Johnson (Employment Partner), Stephen Banks (IT) and Christine Watkins (HR).

The following notes set out our current updated advice and guidance, based on the current guidance issued by PHE, NHS, HSE and the government, and the discussions of the working group. The guidance should be considered in conjunction with our risk assessment which has been sent to all staff and is available on our website. We recognise that our offices are very different in terms of size and lay out and it will be the responsibility of branch managers to ensure that this guidance is applied across the firm.

The situation is subject to rapid change and we are monitoring the guidance regularly to ensure that our approach remains consistent with the expert advice available. If the agency guidance changes then we will update this note accordingly and you are likely to receive numerous updates over the next few months.

We have received some very good practical solutions from staff over the last few weeks and we do encourage anyone who has any practical suggestions or any questions that are not answered below, to email: covid-19@smithpartnership.co.uk in order that these are collectively collated and can be considered by the working group.

It will be evident that this outbreak is one of the most significant threats to our health and our business, and we thank you in advance for your co-operation.

Advice and guidance

What are the symptoms?

Based on current evidence, coronavirus (COVID-19) presents with flu-like symptoms including a high temperature, a new continuous cough, difficulty breathing and a loss of or change to the sense of smell or taste (anosmia). The current evidence is that most cases remain mild but there are undoubtedly cases which are very serious as is evident from the government's daily updates and we must all treat the threat as very serious.

How is the virus transmitted?

Current advice is that the virus is likely to be transmitted through cough or sneeze droplets. These droplets can fall on people in the close vicinity and can be directly inhaled or picked up on hands from surfaces and transferred when someone touches their face.

What steps can I take to protect myself?

The NHS and PHE advise on using good levels of hygiene with the specific advice being:

- wash your hands with soap and water often – do this for at least 20 seconds
- always wash your hands when you get home or into work, have close contact with others, eat/ handle food, sneeze or cough
- use hand sanitiser gel if soap and water are not available
- cover your mouth and nose with a tissue or your sleeve (not your hands) when you cough or sneeze
- put used tissues in the bin straight away and wash your hands afterwards
- avoid close contact with people who are unwell
- do not touch your eyes, nose or mouth if your hands are not clean
- Wear face masks in shops and on public transport.

What should I do if I feel unwell and believe I have been exposed to COVID-19?

In these circumstances, we advise you to move to an area which is at least 2 metres away from anyone else and call NHS 111 from your mobile, or 999 in an emergency (if you are seriously ill) and explain why you feel you may have been exposed to COVID-19 and what your symptoms are. Whilst you await advice from NHS 111 or for an ambulance to arrive, you should remain at least 2 metres away from others. You should avoid touching other people, surfaces and objects and cover your nose and mouth with a disposable tissue when you cough or sneeze and put the tissue in a bag, pocket or bin and ensure it is disposed of. If you need to use the bathroom, you should try to use a separate bathroom where available. You should contact your head of department or HR as soon as possible to advise them of the situation. You should then follow the advice issued to you by NHS 111.

What should I do if I have symptoms (a new continuous cough, high temperature, breathing difficulties, loss or change to sense of taste or smell)?

You should follow the [guidance](#). This includes:

- staying away from work until your symptoms have eased and for a minimum of 10 days (see self-isolating/ homeworking below) unless you receive a negative test result during that period (see NHS test and trace below)
- getting plenty of rest and sleep
- keeping warm
- taking paracetamol or ibuprofen to lower your temperature and treat aches and pains
- drinking plenty of water to avoid dehydration

If you are pregnant, have a long-term underlying health condition or have a weakened immune system then you should contact the NHS non-emergency helpline 111 for advice. You should also contact this number if your symptoms do not improve after 10 days.

What should I do when I attend the office?

Under no circumstances should you visit the office if you or a member of your household are exhibiting symptoms of Covid 19.

If you travel to work on public transport you must wear a face mask during your journey.

Your head of department will determine whether you are required to attend the office

Other than when sat at your desk you are required to wear a face mask at all times unless exempt.. Guidance regarding the use of face masks can be found here:

<https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/face-coverings-when-to-wear-one-and-how-to-make-your-own/face-coverings-when-to-wear-one-and-how-to-make-your-own>. We do require you to wear a face mask when meeting with clients and other third parties – see below.

You must avoid leaving the office to visit shops etc. unless it is required for essential work purposes. For the avoidance of doubt this includes leaving the office to purchase lunch.

If your entrance door has a keypad and fob, please make sure you use your fob to gain entry rather than touching the keypad. Please make sure you are wearing your face mask before entering.

Immediately on arrival you must use the hand sanitiser provided and ideally follow up by washing your hands.

Whilst in the office you should make sure that you maintain social distancing with your colleagues at all times. Current PHE guidance suggests you are between ten and thirty times more likely to be infected if you are within one metre of someone who is infected. Do not be afraid to remind others of the need to maintain social distancing, this form of policing is necessary to ensure that we are all protected and feel comfortable in the working environment. Where appropriate floor-tape and other signage will be used to provide guidance on maintaining the appropriate level of distance from others.

We recognise that it is tempting to engage in conversation with colleagues during these challenging times, but you must make sure to keep unnecessary contact with others to an absolute minimum.

In circumstances where it is not possible to maintain social distancing, you should keep any contact as short as is possible.

Sharing of desks at this time is not permitted. You should only sit at the desk that has been allocated to you. Do not sit at other peoples desks even for a short time Your head of department is responsible for configuring desks to make sure social distancing is maintained, but in the current circumstances where it is not possible to know who will be in an office at any particular time, all staff have a responsibility to make sure social distancing is maintained. Avoid sitting face to face with other members of staff whenever possible

You should keep movement around the office to a minimum and when you do have to move around you should make sure that you take the opportunity to wash your hands. We have put posters in the bathrooms setting out how to wash your hands effectively to combat the virus.

You should be particularly careful in high risk areas such as entrances/ exits, reception, WCs, kitchens, post-rooms, copiers and on stairs

In offices with multiple printing/scanning units, branch managers will be responsible for allocating units to particular teams. Please make sure you only use your designated unit and avoid frequent visits to the copier units. Try and use an item such as a pen to operate the keyboard but not the nib end as this may damage the copiers. Where necessary floor tape will be used to ensure social distancing is maintained around copiers.

Kitchen facilities and shared toilet facilities should be operated strictly on a “one in, one out” basis .

All staff should eat at their desks and not in any communal facilities provided. For now the kitchen facilities are not to be used for food preparation. Do not make drinks for other

members of staff. Clean down any surfaces you have used. Wash your hands before entering the kitchen facilities and again before returning to your desk.

When using the toilet facilities, you should wash your hands both on entering and again on leaving. Please put the lid down on the toilet before flushing.

We have provided hand sanitisers at multiple locations within the offices and we would encourage you all to ensure you have personal access to hand sanitisers. However, the current PHE advice is that using soap and water is the most effective method.

If you need to leave the office for work purposes, please make sure to keep such trips to a minimum and take appropriate precautions. You must maintain social distancing, avoid touching your face, eyes and mouth and remember to wash your hands/use sanitiser when you return. In places such as banks and the post office social distancing can be difficult so please wear the gloves and face masks provided.

Report any concerns you have to a member of the COVID-19 working team.

Can we see clients and third parties in the office?

Such meetings should only take place where there is no possible alternative. Phone and video conferencing must always be used wherever possible.

If such meetings are necessary and no alternative can be found, the meetings should be planned carefully in advance to mitigate against any risk. Every effort should be made to ensure that only one meeting takes place at a branch at any one time. Care should be taken to ensure that the number of people attending such a meeting is kept to a minimum.

All attendees, whether clients or third parties, will be required to complete our Covid – 19 questionnaire in advance of attending. This can be done by post, email or over the telephone and ideally should be completed the day before any meeting. For clients requiring an interpreter, arrangements should be made to enlist the interpreter's help with completing the questionnaire.

Under no circumstances should attendees be admitted to a meeting unless the questionnaire has been completed. If any responses to the questions raise concerns these should be discussed with a member of the COVID – 19 working team.

Copies of completed questionnaires must be retained on the relevant file and will be subject to audit. Reception staff are encouraged to check with staff in advance of any meeting that satisfactory responses have been received to the questionnaire.

Attendees should be referred to an extract of this guidance which appears on our website for details on how the meeting will be conducted and that we reserve the right to exclude them from a meeting if they do not comply.

At times when the occupancy levels of our offices are low, you should take care not to hold meetings in situations which might compromise your personal safety.

All attendees and staff are required to wear face masks for all face to face meetings unless exempt. Be sure to wash your hands thoroughly before use, avoid touching your face while wearing your mask and dispose of your mask carefully and hygienically.

Branch managers should designate appropriate meeting rooms and where possible meeting rooms in staff areas are not to be used. Meeting rooms should be large enough for social distancing to be maintained wherever possible. Screens are available and should be used whenever possible. You should try to make sure meeting rooms are well ventilated. Visitors should be provided with hand sanitiser to use on entry and exit. You should ensure that meeting rooms have hand sanitiser in them.

For essential meetings:

- be ready for your visitors- do not keep them waiting
- ensure all attendees are wearing face masks
- avoid all forms of physical contact including shaking hands
- do not share pens
- wash your hands/use hand sanitiser before and after any meeting.
- during meetings avoid touching your face, eyes and mouth.
- plan the meeting carefully and keep the length of the meeting to a minimum.

Visitors to the office will be advised that we reserve the right to turn them away if they attend without an appointment or are exhibiting symptoms of COVID-19 or fail to comply with instructions.

Can we have team meetings?

As with client meetings, face to face meetings should only take place where there is no possible alternative. When face to face meetings are required, the guidance in relation to seeing clients and third parties at the office should be followed where applicable.

How do we deal with deliveries to the office?

Deliveries of post, supplies etc to the offices will continue. Most if not all of our delivery providers will have issued their own guidance to their staff to ensure their safety and ours. Be respectful of their requests and follow instructions to the extent that they are consistent with the guidance on social distancing etc. Do not be afraid to raise any concerns you have with them. If delivery staff have to enter our offices they must wear face masks.

Where possible deliveries should not be opened until 72 hours after receipt.

Post must be opened daily. Hands should be washed/ sanitised before and after opening post and care taken not to touch your face, eyes or mouth while it is being processed.

Can we visit clients in their own home?

This should be an absolute last resort and is only permitted where remote facilities or a visit to the office is not possible. Home visits must be authorised in advance by your Head of Department and the justification for the visit must be endorsed on the file.

Such visits need to be planned with great care in the same way as visits to the office and where applicable the same guidance must be followed. The questionnaire in relation to office visits should be adapted for individual home visits but still completed.

Face masks must be worn when visiting clients in their own home.

Can we still attend the police station or court?

Lawyers involved in the administration of justice are considered as key workers and are required to attend the police station and court when necessary.

Wherever possible such attendance should be carried out remotely. Where remote attendance is not possible, all such steps as can be taken to follow government guidance on issues such as social distancing handwashing etc should be followed. HMCTS and the police have obligations to provide a safe environment for visitors. Where you have concerns for your safety when attending court or the police station you should raise them immediately with your head of department who will discuss the way forward and then raise them with the appropriate authorities

Should we avoid networking and training events?

Attendance at face to face networking and training events is not permitted at the current time until further notice. Attendance at free online networking and training is encouraged.

What action is the firm taking?

We are following all PHE, HSE and NHS advice and guidance.

Our working groups and management teams are meeting regularly to ensure that we have appropriate procedures and arrangements in place. We are monitoring the situation closely and we will continue to provide as much advice, care and support as we can to our staff.

We will update this document and our risk assessment whenever necessary.

How can I help?

The best way you can help is by acknowledging the importance of this guidance and adhering to it.

In addition to engaging in good hygiene practices and being vigilant to risk, we ask that you:

- be mindful that colleagues may be particularly concerned about the outbreak and its impact, and we'd ask all staff members to be supportive of one another at this time
- ensure that any discussions held at work regarding the outbreak are appropriate and are in line with our equality policies
- remember that we have a business to run and that subject to the practices we are implementing to seek to mitigate risk, it is important that we work together to minimise the impact to the firm and our service levels and reputation.

Support service- Healthshield

Please remember that our Healthshield helpline is available to anyone who feels they might need someone to talk to. Trained counsellors are available to speak with immediately to provide you with emotional support and practical information.

The service is available 24 hours a day, 7 days a week and is 100% private and confidential - we will never know who has contacted the helpline.

If you feel the service may be of use to you - please call the Healthshield helpline on 0800 028 1963 and quote Smith Partnership/ Smiths LLP.

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