

# **Blended Working**

## **Guidance and Frequently Asked Questions**

This information is for guidance purposes only and has been prepared by Meath County Council and the Local Government Management Agency (LGMA). Further details are outlined in Meath County Council's Blended Working Policy & Procedure (2022).



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## **1. About Blended Working**

### **What is blended working?**

Blended working means you will be able to work from home, or a working hub, certain days of the week and will be office based the rest of the working week.

### **Is blended working a Council policy?**

Yes. Blended working is now part of the Council's flexible working policies such as work sharing. Similar to existing policies, it will be a matter of choice for the employee if they wish to apply for blended working and similar to these policies, will be reviewed on a specific period basis.

### **Is there a right to request blended working?**

Employees have the right to request the option of blended working in accordance with the policy of Meath County Council.

### **How has the Council's blended working policy been developed?**

In developing its own Blended Working Policy, Meath County Council has been guided by the agreed local government sector's national Blended Working Framework, developed by the LGMA. The policy has been drafted taking into account the functional and operational needs of the Council.

### **How has the Council deemed what roles are suitable for blended working?**

Given the nature of local government services, a significant proportion of the Council's services must be delivered within a specific workplace on a full-time basis and therefore, would not be suitable for blended working.

The Council has identified the roles that are deemed suitable for a blended working approach using the following criteria set out in the national framework:

- requirements for customer-facing service delivery at local authority premises.
- performance of tasks that have a high degree of manual work requiring attendance at a physical work location.
- Ongoing requirements to supervise and manage staff at physical work locations.
- requirements to access particular technologies/equipment/data accessible only on-site.
- performance of support tasks that must be provided on-site.
- performance of tasks that are more efficiently carried out on-site.
- operational issues, or other issues related to the local authority as a whole.



## **2. Applying for Blended Working**

### **How do I apply for blended working?**

You must in the first instance discuss the potential for blended working for your role with your Line Manager. You will be able to apply using the online Blended Working application system. Applications will only be accepted via the Council's online system.

### **How many days can I apply to work from home?**

It is for the Council to consider what will be the appropriate attendance model vis a vis attendance in the office and remote working. The Council has agreed a policy that for a 5-day week, you must be office based three days per week, with a maximum of two days working from home/remotely.

### **Can I choose which days to work from home?**

You should discuss your requirements with your Line Manager, in the first instance, prior to submitting an online application. All applications will be considered in accordance with the operational need of your Team/Department to ensure on site business continuity.

### **What if I wish to work-from-home only occasionally, not every week?**

This will require an application through the Blended Working online portal and the completion of the Health and Safety assessment.

In making an application, the portal permits 3 options of applying for 2 days or 1 day per week remote working. The third option of 'intermittent' is not defined but intended for employees and roles that are deemed to be suitable for blended working but infrequently and outside a weekly structured arrangement.

If you are approved for intermittent remote working, you will require the approval of your line manager in advance of each time you wish to exercise this option.

### **What Eligibility Criteria will be used to assess applications?**

All of the following criteria must be satisfied for any blended working arrangement to be approved, none of which, may be excluded, from consideration:



- Business needs and role suitability
- Employee Suitability
- Designated Workstation Requirements
- Location

Please see the Council's Policy and Procedure for more information on the eligibility criteria.

### **Do I have to apply every year?**

Yes, similar to other flexible working policies.

### **Who will decide whether or not I am granted blended working?**

Your Grade 8 (or equivalent) manager will be the decision-maker on your application.

### **Who decides the locations from which blended working will operate?**

It will be solely a matter for Meath County Council to determine the locations from which blended working will operate. The application of blended working requires that the employee must remain available, whilst working remotely, to attend the workplace at short notice, therefore the remote working location must facilitate this and with the exception of persons residing in Northern Ireland, remote working outside of the state will not be facilitated.

Where digital hubs are utilised, these will be determined and agreed by the Council.

### **Will my home workspace be inspected?**

You will undergo online training which will allow you to undertake a self-assessment of your proposed remote workstation. The Council's H&S Section will review these assessments and will undertake a virtual inspection in due course.



### **3. Approval of Application for Blended Working**

#### **Blended Working Agreement**

If blended working is approved, a Blended Working Agreement will be put in writing and the specific conditions that apply to the agreement will be set out. When applying, you will also be required to sign a declaration to abide by the terms of the policy.

#### **Do terms and conditions of employment change if approved for blended working?**

Terms and conditions of employment are not altered by virtue of blended working. Existing contractual arrangements will continue to apply to employees under blended working arrangements, including the application of all policies and procedures.

#### **Is there a trial period?**

Blended working arrangements are not an entitlement nor are they guaranteed on a permanent basis. Rotating blended working opportunities among employees may be required in order to support employee mobility and career development.

A blended working arrangement will, in the first instance, be granted for a trial period (in general, no less than 6 months and no more than 12 months). The trial period is an opportunity for the employee and the manager through regular contact, to evaluate the success, and ongoing suitability, of the arrangement.

#### **What happens after the trial period?**

After the trial period, the suitability of the arrangement will continue to be assessed, through regular feedback conversations with the line manager. Where performance issues arise, the manager should discuss the issues with the employee as soon as practical and give them the opportunity to rectify the issue. A record should be kept of such discussions and the agreed outcome.

A formal review of the blended working arrangements will also form part of the PMDS process. The manager and the organisation will need to assess if the blended working arrangement continues to suit the business needs of the organisation.



## **4. Refusal of Application for Blended Working**

### **Does the Council have the right to refuse a blended working application?**

Yes, the Council having given the application due consideration, may decline a request for remote working based on the criteria for assessment of applications. The Council will communicate the grounds for refusal, when returning a decision. The following grounds for refusal may include (but are not limited to):

- Employee suitability criteria not met.
- Ability to meet the business needs of the organisation.
- Ability to maintain the required level of service quality.
- Team performance and team collaboration.
- Operational issues, or other issues related to the organisation as a whole.
- Organisational costs.
- The extent of blended working arrangements available in the organisation.

### **Where an application is refused, do I have a right to request a review?**

Yes, you can appeal the decision, in accordance with the steps outlined in the appeal process.

### **Who undertakes the formal review?**

The review will be undertaken by a senior manager in the Council, designated by the Director of Services for HR Management, who has not been involved in the original decision-making process and who will be designated as the Review Officer.

### **Who communicates the outcome of the formal review and when?**

The decision of the Review Officer will be communicated in writing to the applicant, line manager and Decision-Maker and the HR Department. In general, this will occur within 10 working days of receipt of the formal request for a review. The Review Officer may:

- Affirm the decision to refuse the application; or
- Recommend that the original decision be reconsidered by the Recommender/Decision-Maker, taking into account any issues identified by the Review Officer.
- Make other recommendations related to blended working, where appropriate.



## **5. Some Key Requirements**

### **Do I need a separate office space, or can I work from my kitchen table?**

You must be able to fulfil the Health and Safety requirements set out in the Policy and ensure your workspace meets various requirements, including GDPR, as set out in the Policy.

### **I have specific access needs due to a disability/medical condition. Will these be considered when assessing the suitability of my home workspace?**

Yes. Your line manager will discuss these with you as part of the application process.

### **If I don't have Broadband at home will the Council provide a Dongle?**

No, the Council will not be providing a dongle. You will be required to have reliable broadband at home, as set out in the policy, to enable you to undertake your work effectively.

### **Will office furniture be provided by Meath County Council?**

As part of the online application process, you will be able to request the required IT equipment and office chair.

### **If I purchase the office furniture, can I claim the cost back from the Council?**

No, as the Council is prepared to provide the necessary equipment.

### **Can I apply to work from home or a hub as part of my application?**

When engaged in blended working you must be based in a location that enables you to undertake the full functions of your role which will include immediate attendance at the Council's onsite location, if required.

The Council's work premises will continue to be the primary workplace for all employees and will be the formal base location for all administrative purposes. Attending the Council's work premises, will remain the default arrangement and all employees availing of blended working, will be required to attend the office the specified full days per week and also as required, for example for meetings, training and key events, ICT failure/ issues, operational reasons (e.g., staff absences or vacancies).



## **6. Staff on Probation**

### **Can an employee, on probation, apply for blended working?**

Probationary employees may apply, where blended working is appropriate, taking into account the general criteria, and specific further factors relevant in the context of probationers.

However, a line manager may require that a probationer attend the office during the probationary period:

- to assist with adapting to their new role and work environment.
- to facilitate ongoing engagement with line managers, and with team members.
- to facilitate team bonding and collaboration.
- to facilitate face-to-face meetings and training where required; and/or
- to assist with the assessment of the probationer's performance during the probationary period.

## **7. Staff on Existing Flexible Policies**

### **If I'm on Work Share or Parental Leave can I apply?**

Employees already availing of work sharing or similar policies may make an application for blended working. As with all applications, these will be considered in the context of business needs and operational requirements and minimum office attendance requirements.

It is for the Council to consider what will be the appropriate attendance model vis a vis attendance in the office and remote working.

Some existing flexible working arrangements do not qualify for blended working, given the requirement of being present in the office 3 days per week.

While a full day attendance in the office is required under the blended working policy, the specific weekly attendance pattern of an employee engaged in work sharing or other similar policy will be considered when deciding on applications for blended working.

As part of the trial period, the Council will assess how Blended Working and the other flexible working policies complement each other and may review how the policies are implemented with a view to simplifying their application within the Council and providing greater clarity for line managers and employees.



## **8. Blended Working – Some Terms and Conditions**

### **If I am granted blended working, can I still avail of the Flexi Scheme?**

In the initial implementation of blended working, flexitime accrual will only be allowed for all blended working employees while in the office only that is, those days where an employee is in attendance in the office.

### **Do I have to clock-in when working remotely?**

Yes, you must clock-in and clock-out when working remotely, via the Core portal. Registering your remote working as a Business Absence is not sufficient. There is a requirement under the Organisation of Working Time Act to record the times when employees are working.

### **Can I work my own hours while working from home?**

No. The Attendance Management Policy and Procedure will continue to apply.

### **Can I work half day in the office and half day at home?**

No.

### **If I am granted blending working, will I have set office days or will I be expected to come in to cover annual leave and so on?**

You will be office based on agreed days. However, you may be asked to be office based on any day in accordance with the operational needs of the Department. This requirement to be in the office could be at short notice.

### **If I am required to come to the office on one of my working from home days can I use another day for working from home in lieu?**

No, you may only work from home on the days agreed.

### **If I am unable to work from home on one of my agreed days because of a problem with my electricity supply or broadband service or other such reason what do I do?**

You should inform your line manager immediately. If it is unlikely that the situation will improve quickly, within 30mins, then you should arrange to work from the office.



**Can I change my blended working arrangement during the year?**

In exceptional circumstances you may be permitted to submit an application to amend your approved work pattern during the year.

**Do I get to keep my office workstation if I am approved for Blended Working?**

If you are approved for blended working there will be no automatic right to a dedicated workstation in the Council's offices. Instead, the Council may move to using shared workspaces which will be available when you are required to attend the office.

**If I am approved for blended working for a particular year, can my Department change this decision mid-year?**

Yes, if required for operational reasons or to ensure on-site business continuity with appropriate notice as per the Council's Policy.

**If I am approved for blended working and I am re-assigned/promoted, do I have to re-apply?**

Yes, as your new role or work location may or may not be suited to a blended working arrangement.

**Can I swap my remote working day if I am on annual leave or other leave type?**

No. Blended working cannot be used as a substitute for annual or other type of leave.

**Will working remotely help with caring responsibilities?**

While blended working may have benefits for persons with caring responsibilities, any caring responsibilities must take place outside of working time.



## **9. Costs and Expenses**

### **Are expenses available when working remotely (working from home)?**

Employees availing of blended working arrangements may make claims directly from the Revenue Commissioners in respect of tax relief for certain costs when working from home. The application can be made at the end of the relevant tax year, in accordance with the relevant tax laws. Any claim made in this regard is solely a matter for the individual concerned. Further details on eWorking and tax are available at: [Revenue Information on eWorking and Tax](#)

No expenses will be paid or reimbursed in respect of costs accruing to an employee who makes changes to their home, or purchases equipment in order to avail of a blended working opportunity.

### **Can I claim travel expenses from my home when I must go on site visits but working remotely?**

The Council's Travel and Subsistence Policy will continue to apply and employees should be aware of the requirements under the policy, which is available on the intranet. Revenue rules regarding travel expenses continue to apply.

Where an employee is required to travel in the performance of their duties, they will be entitled to reclaim travel expenses based on the distance travelled. The Council's policy has not changed, in that a travel expense is normally calculated from an employee's place of work. However, where a journey originates from an employee's home then the 'mileage' will be calculated using the lower of the distances from home or the place of work, in line with Revenue rules.



## **10. Blended Working Good Practice**

### **Do I have to check-in with my Line Manager each day when working remotely?**

Line Managers and employee are encouraged to maintain regular business contact to support the delivery of priorities and services, to maintain the line management function, support the individual employee and foster improved team dynamics. This may be through virtual one-to-one or regular organised team meetings.

### **Will I be expected to put my camera on while in meetings?**

Meetings should be conducted exactly as they are when you are in the office. Staff will be expected to keep their camera on during meetings.

### **Can I bring Files and other Records home with me?**

You should never remove any paper files/records that contain personal data from the Council's offices. If such data is required whilst working remotely then suitable and secure arrangements must be made for online access. Each Department should ensure that these arrangements comply with the Council's Data Protection policies and liaise with the Data Protection Unit where there may be doubt.

### **What's the balance between work/personal life while working from home?**

The Council has also adopted a Right to Disconnect Policy to support employees in balancing their working and personal lives, whether working in the workplace or remotely. This policy includes guidance on good communications practices.



## **11. Health & Safety Considerations**

This section contains information based on current guidance and includes information on the legal requirements, policy considerations, options for completing assessments, specifics on equipment, the competence of assessors and training requirements.

This is for guidance purpose only and is non-exhaustive. Details of the health and safety process outlined below are detailed in Appendix 3 of the Council's Blended Working Policy & Procedure.

### **What are the health and safety responsibilities when working remotely?**

Under the Safety, Health and Welfare at Work Act 2005 employers have a duty to ensure, so far as is reasonably practicable, the safety, health and welfare at work of their employees. This applies to all workplaces whether office, hub or home.

#### *Employer responsibilities*

Key duties that apply to the work activity and workspace include ensuring that:

- the employee is aware of any specific risks regarding remote working.
- the work activity and the workspace are suitable.
- that they provide suitable equipment to enable the work to be done
- that there is an agreed arrangement between the employee and line manager to maintain contact and to keep contact details readily accessible.

#### *Employee responsibilities*

If you are an employee working remotely, you have a responsibility to take reasonable care of yourself and other people who may be affected by the work you are doing.

Employees must:

- cooperate with their employer and follow their instructions
- protect themselves and others from harm during the course of their work, e.g., take care of any equipment provided and report any defects immediately to the employer
- report any injury arising from work activity to their employer immediately
- follow procedures that have been put in place by their employer.

### **What legislation covers Display Screen Equipment?**

The Safety, Health and Welfare at Work (General Application) Regulations 2007, Chapter 5 of Part 2 outline the requirements that must be adhered to in relation to Display Screen Equipment.



## **What do I need to do to comply with the Display Screen Equipment Regulation 2007?**

As an employer there are a number of duties set down in these regulations, the key requirements are to:

- Carry out an analysis or risk assessment of employee workstations
- Provide information to employees in relation to measures which have been implemented
- Provide training to employees in the use of workstations before commencing work with display screen equipment and whenever the organisation of the workstation is modified
- Perform a further analysis or risk assessment where an employee transfers to a new workstation or significant new work equipment, change of equipment or new technology is introduced an individual's workstation
- Ensure that the provision of an appropriate eye and eyesight test with the support of the Council's optical benefit scheme.

## **What are the requirements for DSE/VDU workstation assessments?**

The Safety, Health & Welfare at Work (General Application) Regulations 2007, chapter 5, outlines the requirements for an *"analysis of the workstation in order to evaluate the safety and health conditions"* (workstation assessment). The minimum requirements for Display Screen Equipment are detailed in Schedule 4 of these regulations.

## **Do remote workstation assessments require a 'visit' to the home to complete them?**

No, they can be done remotely through the use of video calls ideally with a smartphone so that the employee can move freely around the specific work location so as to help the assessor identify and direct the employee to areas that need to be addressed.

For example, an MS Teams or Zoom call can be set up and the assessor will go through the standard list of questions / criteria as outlined in the template DSE Assessment Form.

The employee's camera can be moved around to show the desk, chair and the space available. Recommendations can be made if needed, and actions tracked. This process can be done efficiently and should take between 15-30 minutes.

## **How is the remote working environment assessed to ensure compliance with health and safety requirements?**



Each employee's remote working environment will be different, whether it is the individual, the type of work to be carried out, workstation location or equipment required. Employers are required to ensure an assessment of an employee's workstation is carried out.

The process is outlined below (and is documented in Appendix III of the Blended Working Policy and Procedure)

- **Stage 1: Display Screen Equipment (DSE) and Workstation Assessment Awareness Training**

Where no objections are raised by the line manager in advance of a formal decision, the applicant completes the online DSE and Workstation Assessment Awareness Training. The applicant should also be provided with guidance on how to set up workstation (included in Appendix III of the Blended Working Policy and Procedure) to ensure the employee is made aware of the risks associated with working remotely and to ensure the employee is provided with instruction on setting up the workspace and using the equipment correctly.

An online awareness module has been prepared by the LGMA for this purpose. The aim of this training video is to provide employees with information on the safe use and correct set up of display screen equipment and workstation. This will enable employees to identify potential issues and any improvements that need to be made to their workstation to ensure the protection of the musculoskeletal health of employees.

The learning objectives of the awareness module are as follows:

- To provide a brief overview of key health and safety responsibilities when working remotely.
- To look at the correct ergonomic setup.
- To provide information on using the workstation equipment appropriately.
- To provide information on eye and eyesight tests; and
- To provide information on how to plan for regular breaks or changes in work activity while at the computer workstation.

Each person completing the module, will be requested to complete a short assessment at the end, following which a certificate of completion will be provided.

- **Stage 2: Employee completes DSE and Workstation Assessment Form**

The DSE and Workstation Assessment form is sent to the applicant to confirm that their proposed remote workspace is suitable and meets the minimum requirements detailed in Schedule 4 of the Display Screen Equipment Regulations. These requirements are incorporated into the assessment form as a checklist and individuals can indicate



compliance or non-compliance as appropriate. IT equipment / resources required will be identified as part of this process.

This form is completed by the employee and returned to the Line Manager as part of the Blended Working application. Employees will be asked to submit a photograph of their workstation along with the assessment form. This will then be submitted to the designated competent person for review as determined by the Council.

A standard assessment form has been prepared for this purpose and is available in Appendix III of the Blended Working Policy & Procedure document.

- **Stage 3: Completed DSE and Workstation Assessments are reviewed and a one-to-one assessment is carried out by a competent ergonomic assessor.**

Once the form is submitted, it is reviewed and, on a priority needs basis, a one-to-one assessment of the designated workstation is carried out by a competent ergonomic assessor. The competent assessor will review any potential risks highlighted by the self-assessment form.

The assessment will be done online for example through the use of video calls ideally with a smartphone so that the employee can move freely around the specific work location so as to help the assessor identify and direct the employee to areas that need to be addressed.

- **Additional corrective / preventative actions are processed.**

The assessor must record any specific issues identified at an employee's workspace and agree on corrective actions with the employee. If risks are identified, the applicant has the opportunity to address these risks (e.g., through training, advice, provision of equipment etc). Once any corrective actions have been actioned and where the designated workstation meets the required health and safety standards then the assessment can be signed off by the assessor and the employee.

Where risks cannot be mitigated and / or the designated workstation fails to meet the required health and safety standards, the blended working arrangement will not be approved.

Note: The Council reserves the right to audit the workstation to ensure compliance with health and safety standards.

## **Who are the competent ergonomic assessors and what is their role?**



A competent person must carry out the risk assessment of an employee's workstation. A person is deemed to be competent if he or she possesses sufficient training, experience and knowledge appropriate to conducting a risk assessment of a workstation.

The DSE-VDU Assessor role is to assess the workstation of a user and to impart the knowledge required to work safely at a Display Screen Equipment (DSE) / Visual Display Units (VDU) workstation in accordance with the requirements of the 2007 General Application Regulations.

The competent assessor will be a member of the Council's H+S team, who will also provide the employee with guidance and information on what they can do to ensure they are taking responsibility for their own comfort, by taking breaks at regular intervals, changing position and how to recognise the early signs of musculoskeletal discomfort.

### **What approach should assessors take when completing workstation assessments?**

Schedule 4 of the General Application Regulations outlines the minimum requirements for equipment, the environment and the employee/computer interface. The assessment should focus on making the individual more comfortable and take into consideration that there will be a variety of workstation set ups that may be suitable and meet the requirements.

### **How often is the assessment required to be completed?**

The assessment will be required to be undertaken when there are any significant changes to the remote working environment e.g., new work location / work arrangements / workstation. The employee will be asked to resubmit the assessment form to the line manager.

### **What equipment is provided by the employer?**

All workplaces whether office, hub or home will require obligations to be met under Health & Safety this includes provision of equipment where necessary.

The Safety, Health and Welfare at Work (General Application) Regulations 2007 Chapter 5 of Part 2: Display Screen Equipment sets out the Minimum Requirements for all Display Screen Equipment).

Required equipment can be identified as part of the risk assessment process / display screen equipment assessment. Such equipment may include if required (as per HSA guidance):

- IT equipment, for example monitor, keyboard, mouse



- Laptop should be connected to a separate monitor or stand and separate keyboard and mouse.
- A suitable surface to work from (this must be provided by the employee)
- Adjustable chair
- A headset if dealing with frequent phone calls.

## **What are the standards for the type of equipment to be provided?**

The General Application Regulations - Schedule 4 Regulation 72 Minimum Requirements for Equipment

### **(a) Display screen**

- The characters on the screen shall be well defined and clearly formed, of adequate size and with adequate spacing between the characters and lines.
- The image on the screen shall be stable, with no flickering or other forms of instability.
- The brightness or the contrast (or both) between the characters and the background shall be easily adjustable by the employee and easily adjustable to ambient conditions.
- The screen shall be free of reflective glare and reflections liable to cause discomfort to a user.
- The screen shall be able to swivel and tilt easily and freely to suit the needs of the user.
- It shall be possible to use either a separate base for the screen or an adjustable table.

A laptop should be connected to a separate monitor / riser and keyboard and mouse.

### **(b) Keyboard**

- The keyboard shall have a matt surface to avoid reflective glare.
- The arrangement of the keyboard and the characteristics of the keys shall be such as to facilitate the use of the keyboard
- The symbols on the keys shall be adequately contrasted and legible from the design working position.
- The keyboard shall be tiltable and separate from the screen so as to allow the user to find a comfortable working position which avoids fatigue in the arms or hands.
- The space in front of the keyboard shall be sufficient to provide support for the hands and arms of the user.

### **(c) Work desk or work surface**



- (i) The work desk or work surface shall have a sufficiently large, low reflectance surface and allow a flexible arrangement of the screen, keyboard, documents and related equipment.
- (ii) There shall be adequate space for users to find a comfortable position.

Note: There is no legal requirement to provide a specific type of desk, as long as whatever worksurface is being used meets the guidelines to include adequate space for equipment and allowing the person to adopt a comfortable position. The main issue to be aware of is around knee clearance underneath the table for the person to sit comfortably.

**(d) Work chair**

- (i) The work chair shall be stable and allow the user easy freedom of movement and a comfortable position.
- (ii) The seat shall be adjustable in height.
- (iii) The seat back shall be adjustable in both height and tilt.
- (iv) A footrest shall be made available to any user who requires one.

### **What training should be provided for employees working remotely?**

Employees should be given instruction and information to make them aware of the risks associated when working from home, for example:

- homeworking policy.
- using the equipment provided for use at the workstation.
- instruction on using the workstation appropriately.
- information on the types of musculoskeletal disorders, the symptoms and the systems in place on how to report suspected musculoskeletal disorders to your employer.
- how the risk assessment/checklist process will be conducted.

Note: Training can be carried out in a variety of ways for example eLearning, online meeting/training or in-house training and records should be kept.

Note: Display Screen Equipment (DSE) and Workstation Assessment Awareness Training has been developed for this purpose as outlined above.