

Using display screen equipment to support remote education

Employers have the same health and safety responsibilities for employees working from home as for any other employees. Where staff work at home, the employer must still manage the risks to their health, and this includes from display screen equipment (DSE), as well as lone working and stress and mental health issues. The Health and Safety Executive (HSE) has produced guidance on protecting home workers, which is also referenced by the Health and Safety Executive Northern Ireland (HSENI).

The Health and Safety (Display Screen Equipment) Regulations (Northern Ireland) apply to workers who use DSE daily, for an hour or more at a time.

Incorrect use of DSE, or poorly designed workstations or work environments, can lead to pain in necks, shoulders, backs, arms, wrists and hands, as well as fatigue and eye strain. The causes may not always be obvious. In law, employers must carry out a risk assessment for home working, and part of this must consider the working arrangements and use of DSE, which includes:

- completing a **DSE workstation assessment**;
- reducing risks, including by making sure workers **take breaks from DSE work** or do something different;
- provide an eye test if a worker asks for one;
- provide training and information for workers.

Whilst a full assessment is not required for temporary home working, a basic assessment using the **workstation checklist** is still required. For teachers expecting to be home working on a long-term basis, the full assessment would be required.

As a result of the coronavirus pandemic, many teachers are increasingly and routinely expected to undertake work using computers and other visual display equipment; for example, to support some aspects of remote education. As this is highly likely to be continuous for an hour or more, a **workstation assessment should be undertaken**, which should include looking at:

- the whole workstation, including equipment, furniture and work conditions;
- the job being done;
- any special requirements of a member of staff; for example, a user with a disability;
- where there are risks, they should take steps to reduce them.

Any issues resulting from the assessment should be reported to your employer.

DSE work does not cause permanent damage to eyes. But long spells of DSE work can lead to:

- tired eyes;
- discomfort;
- temporary short-sightedness;
- headaches.

An employer must provide an eyesight test for a **DSE user** if they request one. The employer must also pay for the test. This should be a full eye and eyesight test by an optometrist or doctor, including a vision test and an eye examination.

Employers are not permitted to charge for things done or provided pursuant to specific requirements, such as those identified in the risk assessment.

The law also states that employers must plan work so there are breaks or changes of activity for employees who are **DSE users**. Irrespective of the current situation, teachers' contractual entitlements remain, including planning, preparation and assessment (PPA) time and a reasonable lunch break.

There is no legal guidance about how long and how often breaks should be for DSE work. It depends on the kind of work being done. However, the HSE recommends short breaks often, rather than longer breaks less often. For example, five to ten minutes every hour is better than 20 minutes every two hours. Ideally, users should be able to choose when to take breaks.

It is likely that, currently teachers are unable to stop DSE work to do other tasks, such as paper-based marking. The HSE states that if there are no natural changes of activity in a job, employers should plan rest breaks. Breaks or changes of activity should allow users to get up from their workstations and move around, or at least stretch and change posture.

Advice for Members

Members should use the workstation checklist to assess their working environment, and report any issue to the employer.

Members should also ask their employer to confirm what risk assessment has been undertaken regarding the use of DSE and how safe working practices will be ensured. Risk assessments should be undertaken in consultation with staff and unions.

It is important that any issues arising from the use of DSE are reported immediately to the employer, in writing, especially if you develop pain or discomfort as a result of home working, as this may constitute an industrial injury. Members should also notify their employer if they are concerned that the equipment they have been provided with is not adequate or safe for the work to be undertaken.

Members should seek medical advice if they are concerned about any adverse impact to their health.

If members have concerns that have not been addressed by their employer, they should contact the NASUWT for further advice.



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