



EUROPEAN COMMISSION  
DIRECTORATE-GENERAL  
HUMAN RESOURCES AND SECURITY

# **GUIDELINES ON TELEWORKING IN COMMISSION DEPARTMENTS DURING THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC**

**19 May 2020**

**Replaces version 2 with effect from 25 May 2020**

## 1. INTRODUCTION

The Commission's decision to put almost its entire staff into telework mode in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic, in line with the drastic containment measures adopted by the host Member States, was unprecedented.

By doing so, the Commission has been fulfilling its responsibility to help bend the curve and prevent the virus spreading further, while ensuring business continuity and adopting solutions to efficiently and effectively perform our work remotely.

As Member States have started to announce and implement strategies to lift confinement, the Commission devised an action plan in several phases<sup>1</sup> to allow a gradual and secure return to a "new normal" over the coming months. The action plan has progressive phases, which will be triggered in line with the measures taken by the host Member State and the recommendations of the relevant health authorities (WHO, ECDC) and of our Medical Services.

The guidelines are applicable during phase 1 of the action plan communicated to Commission staff by the Director-General of DG HR on 29 April, which corresponds to a careful first lifting of confinement. The main principle is voluntary shift work in the office – while teleworking remains the norm for all staff who can perform their tasks remotely. All units and services are to be divided into two teams. Staff willing to come back to the office alternate presence in the office and telework according to weekly shifts. This applies to all staff, irrespective of the tasks performed.

The guidelines are adopted pursuant to Article 4(5) of Decision C (2015)9151 on the implementation of telework in Commission Departments (hereinafter 'the Decision on telework') and Article 9 of Decision C (2014)2502 on Working Time (hereinafter 'the Decision on Working Time'). They replace the guidelines of 30 March on teleworking in Commission departments during the COVID-19 pandemic with effect from 25 May and apply during phase 1 (the "period concerned"). They are subject to review depending on the evolution of the situation.

## 2. SCOPE

These guidelines set out the principles common to all Commission departments during the period concerned. It applies to officials, temporary agents, and contract agents. It also applies *mutatis mutandis* to seconded national experts and, without prejudice of specific rules applicable to them, bluebook trainees.

These guidelines do not apply to staff working in EU Delegations, as they fall under the competence of the European External Action Service for such matters.

The guidelines do not apply to contractors (*intra muros* service providers, cleaning staff, security guards, staff working in the canteens/cafeterias, etc.). Specific provisions will be communicated to them by responsible services.

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<sup>1</sup> See <https://myintracomm.ec.europa.eu/coronavirus/Pages/summary-action-plan.aspx>

### **3. BACKGROUND**

The guidelines have been drawn up by the Directorate-General for Human Resources and Security to guide Commission departments in implementing the weekly shift system (rotation between telework and presence in the office). The shift system is part of the return to the office policy to significantly reduce the incidence of infections during the COVID-19 pandemic.

The transitory and protective measures needed for a gradual and safe return to the workplace require adaptations to working arrangements. This qualifies as a situation of force majeure in the meaning of Article 4(5) of the Decision C (2015)9151 on the implementation of telework in Commission departments (hereinafter 'the Decision on telework'). Pursuant to this provision, DG HR is empowered to request staff members to telework according to the specific arrangements defined in the guidelines.

Likewise, under the Decision C(2014)2502 on Working Time (hereinafter 'the Decision on Working Time'), DG HR is competent to adopt detailed provisions and practical procedures to adjust or complement working time provisions.

### **4. APPLICABLE ARRANGEMENTS**

The arrangements defined under the present Guidelines shall apply during the period concerned.

The present Guidelines shall supersede, or where relevant complement, already existing structural teleworking agreements or already approved specific occasional teleworking days concluded on the basis of Commission Decision C(2015) 9151 on the implementation of telework in Commission Departments<sup>2</sup>. Practical implications relating to encoding of hours for staff under pre-existing teleworking arrangements are detailed under point 5.2.a.

#### **4.1. Return to the office**

The following rules apply to return to the office during phase one, subject to the organisation of weekly shift as provided in point 4.2. and without prejudice to the self-quarantine measures provided in point 4.3.

##### ***a. Voluntary return***

While teleworking remains the rule, staff who have been on continuous teleworking during phase 0, may return to the office during phase 1 on a voluntary basis, subject to physical distancing<sup>3</sup> measures in place outlined under point 4.2.

The voluntary return to the office does not apply to staff who have to remain in self-quarantine (see point 4.3 below).

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<sup>2</sup> Specific occasional teleworking arrangements implemented for staff based in Ispra prior to 16th March remain applicable until their normal expiry date. After that date, the teleworking arrangements defined in the present Guidelines shall apply.

<sup>3</sup> Also called "social distancing".

## ***b. Mandatory return***

Mandatory return applies to the following staff:

- i. Staff who have been under special leave regime because their tasks cannot be performed remotely have to come back to the office, under a weekly shift regime (see point 4.2 below), even when they are not qualified as critical staff.
- ii. Staff performing critical/essential tasks may be required to come to the office when necessary (while respecting their shift), as was the case pursuant to the previously applicable Guidelines.
- iii. Staff referred to in point 4.2, under iv), may be required to come to the office at all times, as was the case pursuant to the previously applicable Guidelines.

By exception, this mandatory return to the office does not apply:

- To staff who have a condition that increases the risk of adverse outcomes of COVID-19<sup>4</sup>;
- To staff who have children under 13 years who are not able to attend school or go to kindergartens, because these facilities are not open yet;
- In exceptional circumstances, based on an opinion of the medical service and provided that it is compatible with the interests of the service, for staff who live with a person who has a condition that increases the risk of adverse outcome of COVID-19.

In these cases, staff remain on teleworking. If they cannot perform their tasks remotely, they are granted special leave.

## **4.2. Organisation of weekly shifts**

In order to ensure physical distancing, all staff are divided into two teams. Each DG or service shall determine the appropriate level for this division, which may be, for instance, a unit, team or sector having due regard to physical distancing.

In this context, no distinction is made anymore between critical/essential and non-critical tasks: the shift arrangements **apply irrespective of the nature of the tasks performed**.

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<sup>4</sup> This includes the following conditions:

- a. pregnancy (regardless of gestational week);
- b. adults over the age of 65, as recommended by the inter-institutional medical board.
- c. chronic cardiovascular disease (coronary heart disease, congestive heart failure, cardiomyopathy, stroke);
- d. chronic obstructive or restrictive lung disease, severe asthma, obstructive sleep apnoea;
- e. immunosuppressive conditions (with active malignancy, or receiving chemotherapy or long-term steroids or other immune-modifying treatment);
- f. hypertension or diabetes, when accompanied by complications (i.e. simple diabetes or hypertension, well controlled under medication, are not included);
- g. chronic kidney or liver or hematologic or neuromuscular or autoimmune disease; infectious diseases: chronic hepatitis B, chronic hepatitis C that has not responded to treatment;
- h. people who are very obese, with a Body Mass Index (BMI) of 40 or higher, or significantly underweight (BMI < 18.5).

Staff performing critical/essential tasks that cannot be carried out from home and who have been working in teams A and B are integrated in the shift teams as explained below.

In practice, this means that part of the colleagues may work in the office one week while the other colleagues telework. The following week, the colleagues switch. The weekly working shifts are subject to the following principles:

- i. When dividing staff members into teams, priority shall be given to separating colleagues sharing the same office or, in open spaces, colleagues sitting directly next to each other.

For critical staff who have already been divided into two teams (A and B), the same division should be kept and they should be integrated in teams A and B of all staff, with due regard to ensuring physical distancing.

- ii. To ensure effectiveness of the measure, staff should **not enter the Commission premises** during the weekly shift during which they are requested to telework.
- iii. The number of staff of a Directorate-General coming to the office **at the same time** during phase 1 shall not go beyond 10% of the total staff of this Directorate-General<sup>5</sup>. This rule shall be enforced at unit/team/sector level<sup>6</sup> and it is the responsibility of the line manager to monitor the maximum number of staff present. Staff need to inform their hierarchy of their intention to come back to the office.

Derogations to the 10% rule of physical presence may be possible to enable essential meetings, especially of senior managers or critical staff managing the coronavirus crisis. These derogations are to be decided at Directorate-General /service level.

- iv. In very exceptional and well-defined circumstances, for **tasks linked to the management of the coronavirus crisis or in services where the number of staff coming to the office would not materially allow to put a shift in place**, the above shift arrangements (rotation between telework and physical presence) may not apply and certain staff members be required to come to the office at all times. The decision on derogations from the shift arrangements will be taken by the Director-General for Human Resources & Security. No new request is needed for staff members already authorised to come to the office at all times under the guidelines on teleworking in Commission departments during the COVID-19 pandemic. Already existing authorisations are automatically extended under the present guidelines for the duration of their period of implementation.
- v. As of two months after the entry into force of these Guidelines, line managers may decide to re-organise the teams for teleworking shifts in order for staff that have been in one team to be able to meet and work at the office with staff that have been on the other team. This measure may be implemented only where physical distancing is respected.

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<sup>5</sup> This corresponds to 20% of staff of a DG over a 2-week period.

<sup>6</sup> Based on the level at which division in team A and team B has been implemented.

### 4.3. Self-quarantine measures

Staff members falling into one of the below categories shall not come to the office and shall self-quarantine at home:

- Staff presenting any symptoms compatible with COVID-19 (whose list is found [on this page](#)) must stay at home. The [usual rules on sick leave apply](#).
- Staff who have been in close contact with a confirmed COVID-19 patient<sup>7</sup>. Telework applies, as a rule, for 14 days (the incubation period) or for a longer period if medically necessary.
- Staff (even if asymptomatic) living with a person (e.g. spouse, child, roommate...) with all COVID-19 related symptoms. Telework applies for the period required, based on medical advice.

### 4.4. Special leave

The time without presence in the office for staff referred to under 4.1, point b.i. whose tasks are not compatible with teleworking, will be covered by special leave. In addition, staff members with a dependent child with disability<sup>8</sup> at home may request special leave if and as far as they are unable to telework due to the care they need to provide to their child with disability and the unavailability of usual schooling/care arrangements.

## 5. IMPLEMENTATION OF THE SHIFTS

### 5.1. Telework Shift

#### *a. Principles*

Under these guidelines, no request for teleworking is needed in Sysper to telework during the weekly shift concerned.

Teleworking is performing at home the tasks that are normally carried out at the office and it relies on staff being reachable by phone. To this end, staff must transfer their office telephone line (unless they use Skype for Business).

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<sup>7</sup> A 'close contact' is defined by the European Centre for Disease Prevention and Control as:

- A person living in the same household as a COVID-19 case;
- A person who had direct physical contact with a COVID-19 case (e.g. shaking hands);
- A person who had unprotected, direct contact with the infectious secretions of a COVID-19 case (e.g. being coughed on, touching used paper tissues with their bare hand);
- A person who had face-to-face contact with a COVID-19 case, within 2 metres for 15 minutes or more;
- A person who was in a closed environment (e.g. a classroom, meeting room, hospital waiting room, etc.) with a COVID-19 case for 15 minutes or more and at a distance of less than 2 metres;
- A person providing direct care for a COVID-19 case, or laboratory workers handling specimens from a COVID-19 case without the recommended personal protective equipment (PPE) or with a possible breach in the PPE;
- Sitting in an aircraft within two seats (in any direction) of the COVID-19 case.

<sup>8</sup> In principle, this applies to children for which double child allowance has been granted. However, in duly justified circumstances, special leave may be granted to staff who have not been granted double child allowance for their child with disability.

Teleworking does not imply, however, that staff members should be permanently online during working hours. It is acceptable that work is performed offline (for example, drafting a document or reading a file). The time spent will count as working hours.

### ***b. Place of telework***

Telework shall in principle be carried at the place of employment and staff should, in principle, telework from home, i.e. their usual place of residence. Although it is not strictly forbidden to telework from somewhere other than the usual place of residence, staff should be able to **physically come back to their workplace in a reasonable time (within a couple of hours)** if their presence is required at the office due to an emergency or an unforeseen need of the service.

Teleworking from outside the place of employment, notably from the place of origin, is in principle forbidden, unless this is a neighbouring country in a location that is close to the place of employment.

By way of exception:

- Staff whose spouse, recognised partner and/or underage dependent child(ren) or adult dependent child(ren) with disability reside permanently in another Member State may telework from there in order to be with their family.
- Staff who have been granted special leave for serious illness of a family member may be allowed to telework from the place of residence of the relative who needs their care, immediately after the end of the special leave.

These two exceptions have to be approved by the line manager.

In general, the Commission counts on staff's individual sense of responsibility when deciding to travel. Staff should be well informed of and strictly abide by any instructions issued by the competent authorities of the countries of departure and arrival.

Staff who are unable to return to their place of employment due to travel restrictions that continue to be imposed by the national authorities of the country of destination or of arrival should telework from this location to the extent possible. They shall take annual leave if teleworking is not possible. Those staff members shall take all reasonable steps to return to their place of employment as soon as the national travel restrictions are waived.

## **5.2. Time recording**

### ***a. Recording working hours***

Identical rules on recording working hours apply during the entire period concerned, irrespective of the shift (telework or presence in the office).

In practical terms, this implies the following:

- Staff have to record their daily working hours in SYSPER by selecting 'work at the workplace', even during the weekly telework shift.

- Work done outside the bandwidth<sup>9</sup> is to be considered as work at the workplace, implying that it is considered as working time, unless the line manager objects.
- Under the present circumstances, which continue to qualify as *force majeure*, the limitation to 8 working hours for a teleworking day does not apply. A total of 10 working hours per day may be recorded, including for staff working part-time. Staff who had already been granted structural or occasional teleworking days under the normal teleworking regime may also register more than 8 and up to 10 working hours, including during their weekly shift of telework. However, this requires that they (i) withdraw the teleworking arrangements for the specific day(s) with more than 8 working hours and (ii) manually encode the hours actually performed as “work at the workplace”. Staff with structural teleworking agreements should only withdraw the specific days they wish to manually encode and not request to ‘withdraw’ from the entire agreed arrangements.
- In the event of connectivity issues still arising during the telework shift, staff should conduct tasks that can be performed offline, which shall fully count as working time. If, due to connectivity issues, they have not worked a standard 8-hour working day, staff are exceptionally authorised to fill in their timesheet as if they had worked 8 hours.

#### ***b. Core time***

Core time, i.e. the period during which as a general rule staff must be present remains from 9:30 to 12:00 and from 15:00 to 16:30 (16:00 on Wednesdays and Fridays)<sup>10</sup>. This applies even during the weekly shift where staff telework.

In individual cases, the hierarchical superior may adjust core time at the request of a staff member, if the interest of the service is upheld. In doing so, the hierarchical superior shall take into consideration the current specific circumstances.

In particular, for staff whose child(ren)’s school/*garderie*/kindergarten facility remain closed, line managers shall offer derogations to the core time to the extent needed for the staff member to care for his/her child(ren).

#### ***c. Offsetting of excess of working time, carry-over and caring for children***

While in principle, any credit balance exceeding 20 hours at the end of the month is automatically reduced to 20 hours, and carry-over may only be used during the following month, maximum flexibility will be given to staff working a lot of extra hours because of the COVID-19 crisis. Line managers shall authorise their credit balance to exceed 20 hours, and staff will be able to adjust the balance over a period of 6 months as of the notification of the end of the specific working arrangements due to the COVID-19 pandemic.

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<sup>9</sup> The bandwidth is between 7:00 and 20:30 Monday to Friday.

<sup>10</sup> With certain exceptions already implemented for certain sites or DGs/Services.

Staff whose child(ren)'s school/kindergarten/*crèche* are closed, and who thus need time during the day to home-school their child(ren)/or care for young child(ren), need to inform their line manager. The line manager and the staff should agree on the core tasks the staff need to perform during this period and on the extent to which they need to be available. Specific consideration will continue to be given to staff who need to care for a child with special needs/a disability.