
HOMEWORKING

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INTRODUCTION

Homeworking has been common in the UK for many years and traditionally has covered a wide range of activities. However, in recent years improvements in information technology have made it possible for an increased number of people to undertake office type work from home. According to government figures, in 2005 2.4 million (8%) of the workforce worked from home as 'tele-workers' (which is defined as a subset of homeworkers specifically dependent on computers and telephones). Whilst it is not the intention of NERC to deploy such a high percentage of its staff as homeworkers, as an employer who recognises the need for flexible employment where, by agreement, staff may be able to combine domestic responsibilities with a career and some staff will have problems in regularly attending a workplace. The spread of relatively cheap networking technology and the need to make more efficient use of conventional workplaces makes it likely there will be an increase in the number of NERC staff working from home in future.

SCOPE

This procedure provides a framework and guidance to cover the health and safety aspects and implications of homeworking as defined below. Should working from home become a frequent activity involving a significant part of the working week, then it should become part of a formal arrangement confirmed on a contractual basis.

Where the homeworking is infrequent and for relatively short durations it will be on an informal basis with no need for a contractual agreement, although the manager's permission should still be sought.

There is a legal duty on NERC to ensure, so far as is reasonably practicable, the safety of its staff when working at home, even where the arrangement is informal. However, where the working is on an informal basis there will be no need to undertake a detailed written risk assessment as described in this procedure. Although it is not the prime intention of this procedure to cover informal working at home in detail, much of the advice and guidance contained in this document may still be of value for such work. Appendix VII has been included to give guidance on informal working at home and includes information on the safe use of laptop computers.

DEFINITIONS

A homeworker under this procedure is defined as an employee who has a formal contractual arrangement in place whereby their home is recognised by NERC as their place of work ie is employed to work at home by their employer on a regular and routine basis for a major part of their working week. A homeworker is owed the same duty of care as any other employee.

Further information on non-health and safety aspects of homeworking can be found in NERC Homeworking Policy 3.4 on the SSC Knowledgebase but it should be noted the definition of homeworking used in this document does not cover all the situations involving working from home described in that document, just the formal, contractual one.

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Acknowledgements: HSE, NERC Safety Management Group, Unison

References:

1. Homeworking – Guidance for Employers and Employees on Health and Safety, HSE, available at www.hse.gov.uk
2. Health and Safety of Homeworkers: Good practise case studies, HSE Research Report 262, available at www.hse.gov.uk
3. Health and Safety and the use Laptop Computers – Guidelines for UNISON branches, UNISON, www.unison.org.uk/acrobat/9147.pdf
4. Work with Display Screen Equipment, Health and Safety (Display Screen Equipment) Regulations 1992, HSE, available at www.hse.gov.uk
5. NERC – Use of Display Screen Equipment, available at http://www.nerc.ac.uk/about/policy/safety/procedures/policy_vdu.pdf
6. NERC - Homeworking Policy 3.4 (SSC Knowledgebase)
7. NERC – Risk Assessment and Risk Management, available at http://www.nerc.ac.uk/about/policy/safety/procedures/procedure_riskassessment.pdf

OPERATIONAL PROCEDURE

It is the responsibility of management to ensure the safety of homeworkers is covered by risk assessments, risk management and safe systems of work.

Management involvement

Where a contract for homeworking has been formally agreed it is the responsibility of the homeworke r's line manager to ensure that the member of staff is aware of the NERC Homeworking Policy 3.4 (SSC Knowledgebase). The member of staff should also be made aware of the contents of this health and safety procedure. Management must ensure that appropriate risk assessment of the home worker's DSE workstation and working environment as detailed in this procedure are carried out and that: these are documented; that the necessary control measures to deal with any significant conclusions are implemented; that the member of staff is advised of the findings and that the risk assessment is reviewed on a regular basis. Details of suitable risk assessments can be found in Appendix III. In addition, attention is drawn to the NERC procedure entitled 'Risk assessment and risk management': http://www.nerc.ac.uk/about/policy/safety/procedures/procedure_riskassessment.pdf which gives general details of how risk assessment and risk management should be undertaken within the organisation.

Contracted Homeworke r duties

Homeworkers should make themselves aware of the NERC Homeworking policy 3.4 (SSC Knowledgebase) and abide by its contents. Homeworkers should also be aware of their personal duties under health and safety legislation to take reasonable care of themselves and other people who may be affected by their work, which might include members of their family or anyone else sharing their homeworking areas. Homeworkers must co-operate with management in the risk assessment process, allowing authorised staff access to their homeworking areas where necessary and helping implement any recommendations deemed necessary to create a safe place of work in the home environment. Homeworkers must also report any accident, incident or near miss involving their work at home to their line-manager or local safety adviser as soon as possible after its occurrence so it may be recorded in the local accident, incident and near miss recording system.

The homeworke r must check that there is cover for contracted homeworking with their house insurance provider. NERC will not reimburse any increased insurance costs incurred by an individual working at home.

Record actions and review risk assessment regularly.

Full records of all risk assessments should be kept and the assessment subject to regular review. This will not normally necessitate home visits by the assessor although it may be necessary if any issues are identified as part of the self risk assessment process (see Appendix III).

Encourage and monitor feedback.

All staff should be encouraged to consider and suggest safety improvements to their working arrangements and discuss this with their managers, if necessary taking advice from their safety advisor.

ROLES AND RESPONSIBILITIES

Director Centre / Survey is responsible for:

- Supporting positive action for safe and healthy homeworking by all management levels
- Delegating responsibility for helping promote safe and healthy homeworking to the responsible person at the appropriate level
- Requesting audits where it is considered necessary

Head of Administration is responsible for:

- Appointing and training competent persons who can follow up and if necessary carry out homeworking risk assessments
- Ensuring risk homeworking assessments are carried out as necessary and arrangements are in place in order to reduce the risks
- Providing resources to correct homeworking problems identified in assessments
- Co-operation with audits
- Informing Research Centre Director of problems and progress with homeworking
- Setting up safe systems of work for homeworking in co-operation with the individuals affected

Line Managers are responsible for:

- Ensuring initial home based self risk assessments are undertaken and that the home-worker has sufficient information to carry out this self risk assessment
- Ensuring homeworkers are given suitable training and supervision with regard to their health and safety whilst at work.
- Ensuring that records of homeworking risk assessments are kept
- Ensuring that any issues identified from a homeworking risk assessment are investigated and that any actions arising from a homeworking risk assessment are implemented
- Establishing clear and regular lines of communication with homeworkers
- Working with Local Safety Advisers / Risk Assessors and staff to investigate any accident, incident or near miss recorded in the local accident, incident and near miss recording system for homeworkers

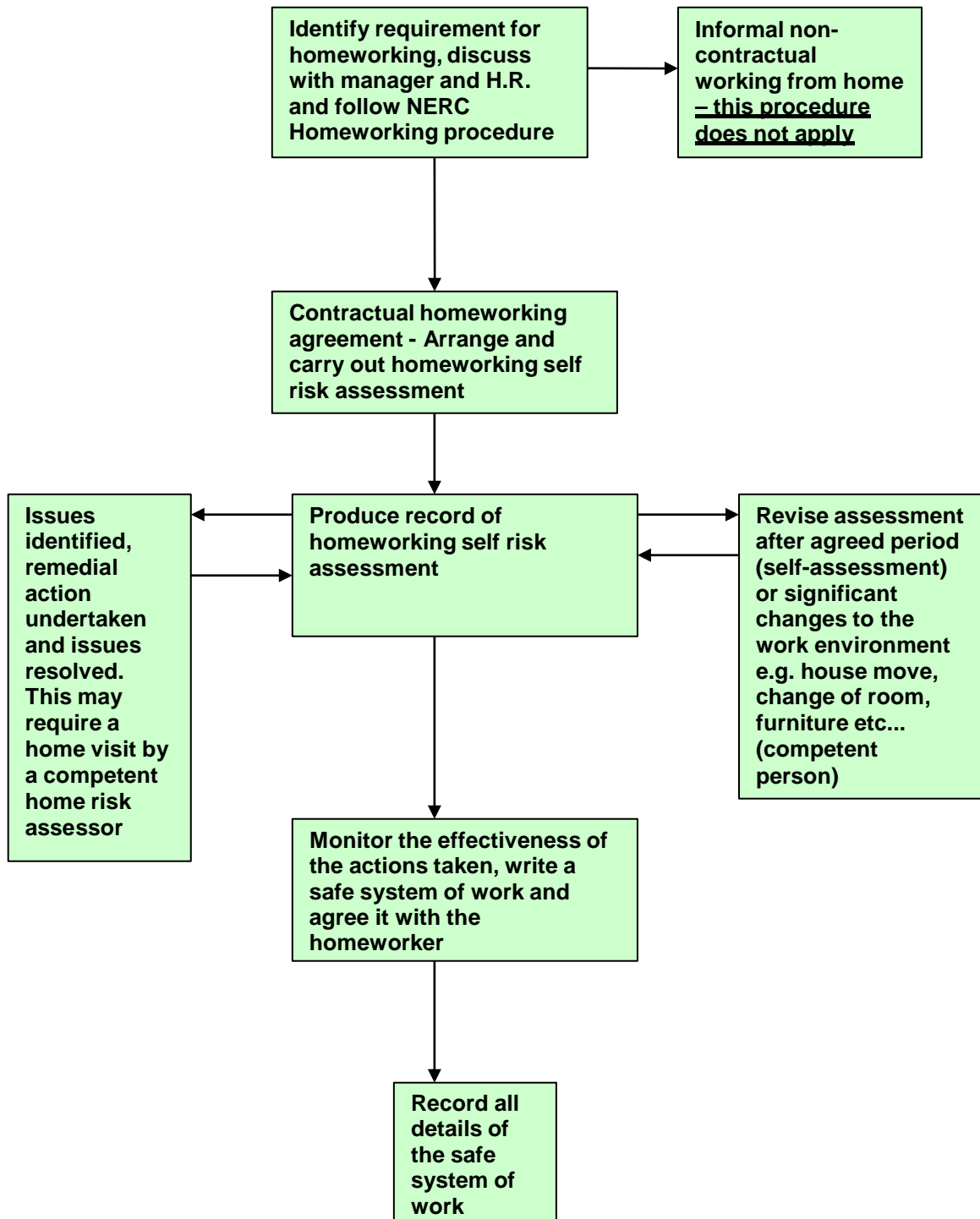
Local Risk Assessors / Local Safety Advisers are responsible for:

- Identifying any significant actions arising from homeworking risk assessments are brought to the attention of the manager and homeworker
- Reviewing homeworking risk assessments as required.
- Working with managers and staff to investigate any homeworking accident, incident or near miss which has occurred.

Staff are responsible for:

- Ensuring they are aware and comply with the NERC Homeworking policy 3.4 and this procedure
- Ensuring initial home working self risk assessment is carried out, documented and agreed with their line manager.
- Ensuring full co-operation with Line Managers and Local Risk Assessors in conducting homeworking risk assessments
- Complying with the conclusions of any risk assessment and co-operating with their employer in implementing the actions arising from a risk assessment to create a safe system of work in the home environment
- Ensuring they have suitable house insurance that covers contracted home-working.

Title – SYSTEM DIAGRAM



MANAGEMENT, MONITORING AND AUDITING

Management:

The management of homeworking requires:

- Clear lines of responsibility
- Commitment to provide facilities and equipment required for safety when homeworking
- Provision of accredited training where a need is identified
- Documentary evidence that tasks have been identified and assessed for risk
- Records for the assessments and agreed dates of revision
- Follow up actions taken as a result of reported problems
- Agreed monitoring and auditing systems
- Provision of staff feedback

Monitoring:

The monitoring of homeworking requires:

- Documentation of the management system
- Written records of the process of assessment
- Documentation of management follow up after introduction of such systems
- The recording of accidents, incidents, injuries, illness and fatigue associated with homeworking
- Documentation of actions taken as a result of follow up and accident, incident and near miss reporting
- Assessment of safety attitudes amongst staff engaged in homeworking
- Documentation of training undertaken
- Maintenance of equipment

Auditing:

The auditing of homeworking requires:

- Checking that the documentation for monitoring homeworking (detailed above) is in place
- Checking that training is suitable and accredited
- Assessing management and staff attitudes by interview
- Assessing the effectiveness of the Safe Systems of Work

APPENDIX I: EXAMPLES OF HEALTH AND SAFETY REGULATIONS RELEVANT TO HOMEWORKING - Summary

1. Health and Safety at Work, etc. Act (HSWA) 1974

- Employers have the same obligations to protect the health, safety and welfare of homeworkers who are employees as they do for employees who are based on-site
- The employer's obligation includes the provision of such information, training and supervision as is necessary to ensure the homeworkers health and safety
- Homeworkers must also take reasonable care of themselves and others who may be affected by their work
- Safety Representatives appointed by a recognised Trade Union can represent homeworkers in consultation with employers about health and safety matters (in NERC trade union representatives can represent all employees on health and safety matters, including those who do not belong to a trade union)

2. The Management of Health and Safety at Work Regulations (1999)

- Employers are required to undertake a risk assessment of the work activities carried out by homeworkers
- The risk assessment must identify any hazards relating to the homeworker's work activities and decide whether sufficient steps have been taken to prevent harm to them or anyone else who may be affected by their work – See Appendix III for details on risk assessment
- When assessing risks to the homeworker the employer must also pay attention to any specific risks to homeworkers who are new or expectant mothers

3. Health and Safety (Display Screen Equipment) Regulations 1992 – as amended in 2002

- Using a computer or other kinds of display screen equipment can give rise to health issues such as back problems, repetitive strain injury or other musculoskeletal disorders. The regulations require employers to assess and minimise the risks in using DSE equipment by ensuring the workplace and job are well designed. This applies regardless of where the work is carried out so includes habitual use of DSE by homeworkers.

4. Workplace (Health, Safety and Welfare) Regulations 1992

These regulations make requirements regarding a number of issues related to the workplace which include:

- Maintenance of workplace and of equipment, devices and systems
- Ventilation
- Temperature
- Lighting
- Cleanliness
- Space
- Condition of floors etc
- Welfare including sanitary conveniences, washing facilities, drinking water and facilities for rest and to eat meals

Many of these items will be beyond the control of the employer but will be under the direct control of the homeworker. Nevertheless, the risk assessment should endeavour to ensure that the proposed workplace within the home is suitable and that these items are addressed and able to be complied with, even if it is difficult to ensure they are always being met.

5. Provision and Use of Work Equipment Regulations 1998

- These regulations require risks to health and safety from all work equipment that homeworkers use whilst at work are prevented or controlled

6. Manual Handling Operations Regulations 1992

- Manual handling is transporting or supporting loads by hand or using bodily force. The employer should consider the risks from manual handling to the health and safety of homeworkers and those affected by their work.

7. The Health and Safety (First Aid) Regulations 1981

- Employers are required to supply adequate first aid provision for their employees
- Employers should consider any first aid needs for homeworkers, this is likely to depend on the nature of the work activity and the risks involved.

8. The Reporting of Injuries, Diseases and Dangerous Occurrences Regulations 1995 (RIDDOR)

- Employers must report certain work related injuries, diseases and dangerous occurrences to the enforcing authority
- Employers need to take steps to ensure homeworkers report any accidents, work related ill health, incidents and near misses to the local accident, incident and near miss reporting system

9. Electricity at Work Regulations 1989

- The regulations require employers to maintain electrical equipment that they have provided for work purposes in a safe condition
- Electrical sockets and other parts of the homeworkers' domestic electrical system are the responsibility of the homeworker but the risk assessment should attempt to identify if there are any patent defects in the supply to the workstation

10. Other Regulations

Other regulations may apply to homeworkers but this will depend on the nature of the work undertaken, for example:

1. The Control of Substances Hazardous to Health Regulations 2002 (COSHH)
2. The Noise at Work Regulations 1989
3. Personal Protective Equipment at Work Regulations 1992

APPENDIX II: GENERAL GUIDANCE

The NERC Home-working policy (SSC Knowledgebase) allows all employees the right to request homeworking and such requests should be considered as a form of flexible working.

The organisation has the right to refuse the request for homeworking on reasonable business grounds.

Individuals may be allowed to work at home as part of arrangements that are made to help the individual cope with a medical condition. This can be either a short term or long term arrangement depending on the circumstances of the case.

Homeworking as defined in and covered by this document may only be approved if supported by line management to senior levels as agreed by your Research / Collaborative Centre including Head of Personnel or Head of Administration.

Requirements for Formal Contractual Homeworking

- NERC has a duty of care to individuals who work under a formal contractual homeworking arrangement.
- A risk assessment will be required, undertaken in the first instance by the homeworker on their own homeworking environment. This assessment must be reviewed on a regular basis or if there is a significant change to the homeworking environment.
- The individual will contact their insurance provider to ensure that building and contents insurance is still valid if working from home. Additionally, individuals should inform anyone with an interest in their property of their intention to work from home in order to ensure that the occupation of their home is not subject to terms, conditions and covenants which would prevent this use. NERC will not reimburse the individual for any increased insurance costs which may result from homeworking. NERC will also not reimburse the individual for any change in rateable value and / or council tax that may arise as a result of homeworking.
- It is important that homeworkers have one or two key contacts within their team / group for whom they work in order to maintain regular communication. Telephone numbers and email addresses used for maintaining communication must always be kept up to date.
- Providing and maintaining work equipment by the employer helps ensure that homeworkers work safely as well as efficiently.
- It is important that homeworkers receive the same level of information as staff not working from home. It is also important that managers who have homeworkers reporting to them are provided with information on and, if necessary, training on: how to deal with the issues that may be involved; how to manage high levels of trust and low levels of control; how to empower staff to work independently; information to help line managers support homeworkers and avoid potential consequences of lone-working such as stress and isolation; and the setting of clear goals. A useful starting point for this would be to ensure line managers of homeworkers have read and understood the HSE Homeworking guidance for employers and employees (Appendix IV) as well as this procedure.
- Homeworkers must be given adequate notice of any visit to their home.

APPENDIX III: RISK ASSESSMENT

- Once formal contractual homeworking has been agreed, a full risk assessment of the homeworking arrangements must be undertaken as soon as possible following the agreement being made.
- The initial risk assessment can be undertaken by self assessment. It is important that the individual has been given sufficient information to carry out the self assessment – see example self assessment form on the following page. Any issues that are highlighted from the self assessment may need to be further investigated by a trained risk assessor.
- Risk assessments should be reviewed at regular intervals, unless there are significant changes to the working environment or individual homeworker, and this can normally be undertaken by self-assessment. Homeworkers should receive sufficient information / training in order to carry out this self-assessment.
- Examples of significant change to the working environment would include a house move, change of room, change of type / design of computer and ergonomic interface. A significant change to the homeworker would include an injury or becoming pregnant. In such instances a new risk assessment must be undertaken as soon as possible.
- It is good practice for the risk assessment to include identifying the full range of potential hazards which can range from electrical, manual handling, ventilation, light, lone-working, ergonomics and might include other potential hazards that would not normally be found in a workplace.
- Homeworkers are requested to notify their managers if they become pregnant and in this instance a new risk assessment should be carried out which considers the pregnancy period. The process should be repeated after the child is born and when the homeworker returns to work.
- Centres may wish to devise their own procedure to be followed in completing a suitable and sufficient homeworking risk assessment but the following may be used as a guide.

Example Form for Homeworking Risk Assessment

Name of Homeworker	
Department and contact number	
Type of work activity	
Date of Assessment	
Duration of Homeworking	

Hazard Checklist

Workplace environment	
Is the building where the homeworking will be undertaken suitably constructed and located to allow the work to proceed safely eg of suitable construction, in reasonable repair, insulated and without drafts?	
Is there sufficient ventilation, can windows be opened without risk to employee or others?	
Is there sufficient lighting for the task which does not produce excessive glare on the screen?	
Is there means of securing a suitable temperature? Are heating systems / portable heaters maintained in good working order? (Gas appliances must be maintained by a qualified engineer)	
If portable heaters are used are these positioned to prevent toppling and away from combustible materials?	
Is there sufficient space for all the furniture and equipment used?	
Is the flooring in good condition and free from trip hazards?	
Is there sufficient and safe secure storage spaces for equipment and documents used?	
Is the work area subject to noise at a level which is likely to affect the employee's concentration?	
Is the workplace designed so it may be kept clean and is there means of ensuring the employee can keep it clean?	
Work equipment	
Is all work equipment provided safe and suitable for the purpose for which it will be used?	
Is equipment such as printers, shredders or other specialist devices guarded and provided with suitable instructions and signage to help ensure safe use?	
Materials	
Are all substances or other materials provided by the employer or used as part of the work activity safe and provided with information and instructions for their safe use? Where there are special requirements for safe use eg provision of adequate ventilation or washing facilities, are these assessed as being suitable?	
Electrical safety	
Is the fixed electrical system in good condition e.g. no signs of damage, scorching or arcing on sockets?	
Are there sufficient numbers of sockets to prevent overloading (multiple socket adapters may be acceptable for DSE equipment but not for high powered appliances such as kettles and heaters) ?	
Are any extension leads used of the correct rating, fused, able to be quickly isolated / disconnected with cables positioned so that they are not subject to excessive wear or damage (eg do not run through doorways) and do not present a trip hazard?	
Is the electrical equipment used for homeworking in good condition and free from any visible defects?	
Does the employee undertake regular visual checks of electrical equipment to identify any obvious faults such as worn or damaged leads or plugs?	
If any electrical equipment is provided by the employer, are there arrangements in place for it to be PAT tested? <i>Note: DSE equipment will only need electrical safety testing on an infrequent basis</i>	

<i>possibly only every four or five years so should be tested before issue and will probably not require re-testing before renewal unless subject to damage or repair.</i>	
Safe Posture / Ergonomics DSE self assessment forms that are normally used for the office environment can be substituted at this point	
Has the employee received training / information on how to set up their workstation to void poor posture?	
Does the chair used to provide sufficient lumbar support?	
Can the chair be adjusted so that the employee can sit with their shoulders in a relaxed position and their elbows at a 90° angle, with the upper arms vertical and forearms horizontal whilst making key strokes and using the mouse?	
Is the work surface of a sufficient size to accommodate all the equipment to be used?	
Is there sufficient space in front of the keyboard for the employee to rest their hands in between keying?	
Does the employee have to read / refer to / copy from documents placed flat on the desk? (This is likely to lead to awkward neck movements and should be avoided by using a document holder.)	
Is there sufficient space below the work surface for the employee's legs to enable them to stretch and change position?	
Can the employee's feet rest on the floor or do they need a footrest?	
If the employee has to use a laptop for extended periods do they use a docking station and or separate screen / keyboard?	
Is the employee likely to regularly use the telephone whilst using the keyboard or mouse? (If yes, a headset should be considered)	
Is the employee aware of the importance of taking regular breaks from computer based work before fatigue sets in?	
Has the employee experienced pain or discomfort when using the computer at home?	
Visual fatigue	
Is the screen positioned at the correct height and viewing distance? (The employee's eye-line should be just below the top of the screen and the screen should be positioned directly in front of the user at approximately an arm's length away).	
Is the screen free from glare or reflections? (Ideally the screen should be at a right angle to windows, windows should be provided with blinds or curtains to prevent glare from falling onto the screen).	
Is the screen free from flicker and are images clear and stable? (The screen settings can be adjusted to suit the needs of the user).	
Has the employee had a recent eye-sight test?	
Has the employee suffered from headaches or visual discomfort when working at the computer at home?	
Stress	
Is there sufficient segregation from disruptions e.g. children, pets, other family members?	
Are there arrangements for keeping in contact with the homeworker?	
Are there arrangements in place to conduct regular supervision / personal development reviews with the homeworker?	
Is support / advice readily available to the homeworker to deal with either IT problems or other specific work queries?	
Does the homeworker have access to sufficient training, information and instruction to enable them to undertake their work safely?	
What arrangements are in place to help prevent excessive hours being worked?	
Emergency arrangements	
Does the accommodation used for homeworking have a smoke detector and is there a battery in place and is the battery tested weekly? (unless wired in to mains supply)?	
Has the homeworker identified what they will do in the event of a fire and is the means of escape sufficient? (They should plan their escape route and what they would do if the route was unavailable due to the fire / smoke, e.g. having tools to break double-glazed windows etc..)	
Does the homeworker have access to a first aid kit?	
What arrangements are in place for summoning assistance and regular contact if or	

when the homeworker is working alone? A lone working risk assessment would not normally be required for office or computer based work but might be necessary if hazardous equipment or materials were being used as part of the work activity.	
Welfare	
Are suitable and sufficient toilet and washing facilities with running hot and cold water readily accessible?	
Are there readily accessible and suitable facilities for eating, drinking and resting available, along with a supply of drinking water?	
Action taken by employee to adress any issues	
Signed by employee:	Date:
Action taken by the Manager to address any issues	
Signed by Manager:	Date:

List of Equipment supplied by the Employer

APPENDIX IV: **SPECIFIC HSE GUIDANCE**

HSE have a specific guidance document which can be found at :

www.hse.gov.uk/pubns/indg226.pdf

Further useful information can be obtained by going to the home web page for the HSE and typing the word homeworking in the search facility.

APPENDIX V: TRAINING

- Homeworkers should have the same opportunities as other employees to undertake safety training
- Health and Safety Information should be given to homeworkers regarding using display screen equipment, including advice on resting eyes, lighting levels and direction and the position of the screen.
- It is important to train homeworkers to conduct their own self risk assessments and line managers and safety advisers must be satisfied that the homeworker is competent to carry out self risk assessments.
- Homeworkers can also be trained in conducting visual inspections of electrical equipment and record their findings. They should also be informed of their right to stop working if they consider they are at significant risk, coupled with their obligation to report any problems relating to safety as soon as possible to their line manager.
- Training should also include a reminder of the requirement for homeworkers to report any accident or incident relating to a work activity.

APPENDIX VI: What might go wrong?

Probable sources of system and individual failure

Management:

Lack of Management Commitment: Poor safety culture placing homeworkers as a low priority – ‘Out of sight out of mind’.

Remedy – Managers must be alert to any inconsistencies and take immediate action to counter any examples of treating homeworkers inequitably. Management must lead by example.

Financial Constraints: Budgets are tight, perhaps we can delay carrying out homeworking risk assessments and / or carrying out the resulting recommendations.

Remedy – Management must ensure that homeworkers are not treated as a lower priority. Management are to make funds available to ensure full implementation of the recommendations from the risk assessment. Management must be aware that their responsibility toward homeworkers under health and safety legislation is just the same as if they worked in the normal workplace environment. Indeed management must recognise that homeworkers are potentially more vulnerable in terms of health and safety by working at home, very often on their own, and take the necessary steps to mitigate that potential vulnerability.

Inadequate / unsuitable training: Lack of formal training for staff who are delegated to undertake homeworking risk assessments.

Remedy – Delegated staff to attend accredited assessor training course prior to taking up responsibilities.

MAKE SURE THE MESSAGE IS CONVINCING, CONSISTENT AND ENFORCED

Staff:

Over-commitment to the job: There is evidence which suggests that individuals working alone are less prone to taking breaks due to a lack of social contact and working alongside and close to other colleagues.

Remedy – Ensure staff are aware of the need to take breaks on a regular basis. There is evidence that suggests this approach is more productive in any case.

Poor safety culture: It is sometimes easier for individuals not to bother with regard to following the Safe Systems of Work that have been agreed when they are remote from their manager and colleagues.

Remedy – Ensure there is regular contact between the homeworker, line manager and colleagues and checks put in place that ensure compliance to the agreed Safe Systems of Work.

Poor or non-reporting of accidents, incidents and near misses: There is a danger that homeworkers will not feel the need to report minor accidents, incidents and near misses as their perception is that they are of no significance to others and may reflect negatively on them and their agreement to work at home.

Remedy – Encourage a positive safety culture and encourage homeworkers to complete reports into the local accident, incident and near miss reporting system.

When working at home as part of an informal arrangement on an infrequent basis for short duration the individual's main place of work remains their office or laboratory. This type of work does not require any changes to the individual's contract of employment. No support, other than advice on best practice, will be provided by the employer for computing equipment that is owned by the employee, consumables, telephone and internet costs or indeed any workplace or furniture issues associated with undertaking this form of home-working.

Individuals should note that they still have a duty to ensure their own safety when operating outside the office environment and should abide by good ergonomic and workplace practice. They may find information in this document and other H&S procedures, such as for DSE, may help them in meeting this duty, especially in use of lap top computers

Informal non-contractual working at home can be undertaken following discussion with relevant management whereby such agreement is secured for standing or ad hoc arrangements to work at home for short term reasons such as :

- Focus without distractions from an office environment for a specified period of time, for example, report writing.
- Where an individual has to remain at home in order to undertake care duties in the short term.
- Part of a phased period of rehabilitation to the workplace following a long absence.
- Where individuals are allowed to work from home as part of the arrangements to assist in coping with a medical condition or where an individual is temporarily confined due to an injury.

It is important to note that, if the frequency of informal working at home begins to increase or impacts on the effectiveness of the group, then consideration will need to be given to gaining agreement on moving this to a formal, contractual agreement to work at home.

Not everyone's employment situation is amenable to home-working and managers must recognise that in individual cases there is clear organisational benefit in allowing and agreeing to informal non contractual home-working.

Managers must monitor the amount of time individuals spend working from home and be aware of how this is being undertaken. If laptops are being used or provided then the manager must discuss and make aware the guidance given for the use of laptops in the DSE procedure which is summarised below.

Often work at home on NERC business using information technology will involve laptop computers. Advice on use of Blackberries, i-phones or i-pads which use unconventional, non- keyboard input is contained in the NERC procedure on DSE. Use of personally owned computers for NERC work may involve issues other than health and safety and should be discussed with local IT professionals. If a personally owned computer is used, the ergonomic principles expected for any DSE set-up within NERC are expected to be applied. A written risk assessment for the set-up will not be required for informal work at home as the use is not considered to be 'habitual' within the meaning of the DSE Regulations as it will be infrequent and of short duration. DSE Regulations 2002 defines habitual use as being 'DSE used for a significant part of his or her normal work'. If the informal DSE work at home becomes of sufficient duration to be considered 'habitual' a more formal risk assessment will be required.

Laptop computers are subject to the DSE Regulations just as any other DSE equipment. NERC still recommends that, even for laptops which are used for only short periods of time and not for a significant part of normal work, the ergonomic risks are considered and taken into account.

Ergonomic issues at laptops

It is only appropriate to use a laptop computer where the use is occasional and then only for short periods of activity.

Staff will normally use a laptop because of the advantages offered by its portability, i.e. on the train. It should be recognised their use will increase the risk of problems caused by poor posture and a laptop will never be a satisfactory alternative in safety terms to a correctly arranged personal computer set-up unless part of a suitable docking station arrangement with a separate screen and keyboard..

It must be recognised both by the individual using the laptop and their manager that there are a number of hazards associated with design and use of laptop computers. A laptop's compact design means it cannot meet the ergonomic standards required for standard desktop equipment and therefore it will not be possible for users to achieve an ideal working posture.

Screens are typically small and less easy to read and because of the limited movement of the screen it may not be possible to use it without a certain amount of glare.

Keyboards also tend to be small with function keys squashed into the remaining space which results in hands feeling cramped during use. Although it may be possible to use the laptop with a separate keyboard or mouse which will reduce these problems it must be appreciated that this will increase the total weight being carried.

The principal hazards from the use of laptops are musculo-skeletal disorders such as back pain, neck pain and work-related upper limb disorders (WRULDs) which may include pain in the fingers, hand, wrist (carpel tunnel) arm or shoulder. Other hazards include visual fatigue, sore eyes and headaches, stress and physical fatigue.

It is important to avoid using a laptop for long periods of time. Users should receive instructions in order to minimise the associated risks. This should include sitting with a good posture, angling the screen so it can be seen clearly with minimal reflections and taking frequent and regular breaks. Wherever possible the laptop should be placed on a firm surface at the right height for keying. Ideally a fully adjustable chair should be used. The lighting should be sufficient and the ability to reduce glare should not be compromised if at all possible.

Under no circumstances should an individual who is being managed with WRULDs in the normal workplace environment use a laptop at home, at work or when travelling for work purposes.

Manual Handling

When choosing a laptop for use when travelling its design and weight should be taken into consideration to minimise the risk of a musculo-skeletal or back injury. Staff should:

- Try to reduce the total load that they have to carry to meetings.
- Try to reduce the distance that loads have to be carried.
- Receive training in safe lifting and handling techniques.
- Avoid carrying excessive loads in addition to the laptop (such as a printer, paper, files etc.).
- Ask for a carrying aid which better distributes the load carried (such as a backpack rather than a shoulder bag) or removes it altogether (such as a trolley case with wheels) if you need one.
- Make sure you have been shown safe lifting and handling techniques.

Assaults and theft

Staff should be cautious when travelling as laptop computers are a prime target for theft, and if you are travelling alone this will make you more vulnerable.

Checklist for Laptop users

If you use a laptop, use this checklist to help you minimise the risks to your health & safety.

- Discuss laptop use and agree with your manager.
- Try to avoid use of laptops for prolonged DSE work.
- Remember to take regular breaks.
- Make sure the health and safety risks, including manual handling and violence and ergonomic issues such as the workplace and seating arrangement have been considered and assessed, if only mentally.
- Make sure you have received information and training about what the risks are and how you can minimise them.
- Make sure that you have received training in good posture and its importance.
- Make sure that you are provided with a proper eyesight test and appropriate glasses if you need them for screen work.
- Try to do as much of the inputting as possible at a PC in the office, and particularly if large amounts of data input are required.
- Try to use a laptop docking station with a separate keyboard and screen whenever possible.
- Take frequent breaks to change activity, moving around and flexing/stretching your muscles.
- Do simple exercises, especially stretching, at regular intervals.
- Use the laptop on a firm surface at the right height for keying.
- Get into a comfortable position that suits you.
- Sit square on to the keyboard and screen and angle the screen to minimise reflections and glare and to avoid the need to bend your neck excessively.
- Make sure your wrists are not bent upwards or sideways when keying.
- Use a separate keyboard if this helps posture problems but don't overload yourself with equipment (lightweight roll-up keyboards are available).
- Learn to be aware of your body so that you can recognise unnecessary muscle tension and release it.
- Check your posture at regular intervals – you may start in a good position but it's easy to change once you become engrossed in the work.
- Don't use the laptop on your lap, in the car, or at a low coffee table.
- Make sure you know what to do in the event of threats or a violent attack.
- Don't try to resist or pursue a thief – your safety is more important than the laptop.
- Check laptop leads and plugs visually before you connect it and don't use them if they look worn or damaged.
- Let your local safety adviser and manager know about any problems.
- Report any ill-health symptoms (aches and pains, tingling, numbness etc.).
- Report any accident, injury or ill health to the local accident reporting system as soon as possible, however minor it appears.
- Report any incident of violence.