LET'S STOP THE SPREAD

Reference: 3/3/1/1/4 – Re-entry of employees into the workplace

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DIRECTOR-GENERAL CIRCULAR NO.35 OF 2020

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RISK BASED STRATEGY TO PLAN AND ASSIST WITH THE RE-ENTRY OF EMPLOYEES INTO THE WORKPLACE

1   Introduction

1.1   No-one could have predicted the impact of the global COVID-19 pandemic on our lives and livelihoods. Some organisations are living through the difficult realisation that they are not as prepared for disruption as they thought they were.

1.2   Whatever "business as usual" was like before, it does not matter anymore. What is most important right now is getting through this time and preparing for a post-COVID-19 world, where the widely held beliefs about the way we do things no longer apply. This is not a blip on the radar – it will shape the way we work now and in the future.

2   Situation Analysis

2.1   The President has announced on 23 April 2020 that, "*While a nation-wide lockdown is probably the most effective means to contain the spread of the corona virus, it cannot be sustained indefinitely*".

2.2   In balancing economic activity and the need to contain the virus, a risk-adjusted strategy has been put in place. There will be 5 (five) levels of moving out of "lockdown". These levels are as illustrated in figure 1 below.
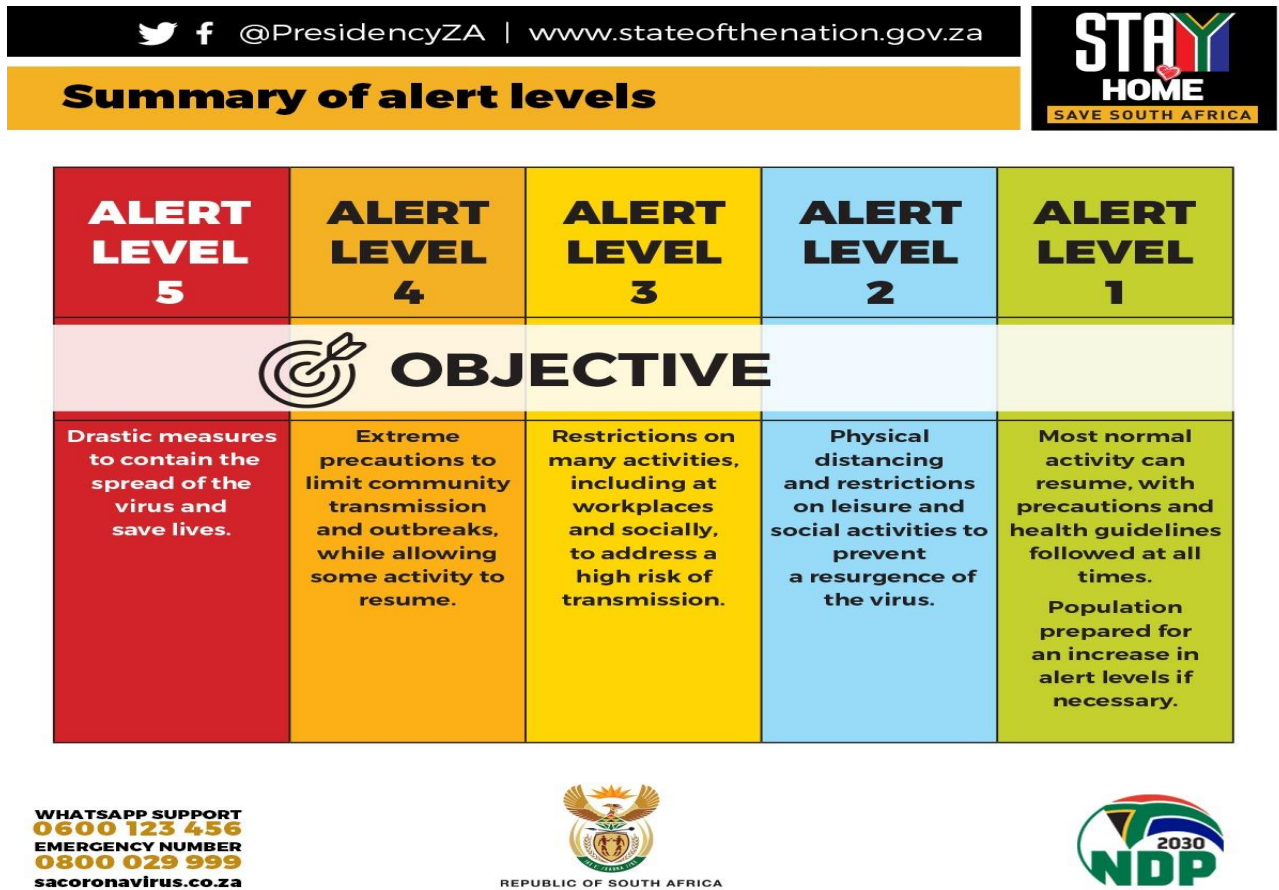

Figure 1: Summary of Alert Levels

2.3   On 1 May 2020 the country moved from level 5 to level 4. Further to this, separate levels for each province, district and metro in the country could also be announced. This means that some activity will be allowed to resume subject to extreme precautions to limit community transmission and outbreaks.

2.4   Detailed measures on how operations will resume were announced. It is required to do so **in a phased manner** where **workplaces first need to be prepared** for a return to operations where after the **workforce may return.**

          "If people do not travel, the virus does not travel."

2.5   Understanding that the coronavirus is spread by contact between people, the President encouraged all businesses to, where possible, adopt a work-from-home strategy, allowing all staff who can work remotely to do so.

2.6   The current reality is however that many of government services cannot be provided from home.

2.7   Although the health of employees is a shared responsibility, we should be prepared that some employees may express reluctance to return to the workplace due to the impact of the pandemic and the concern of being infected or infecting their loved ones. The Chief Directorate Organisation Development will provide a Guide to People Managers on how to assist employees from a psycho-social perspective.

STEPS TO PLAN AND ASSIST IN THE RE-ENTRY OF EMPLOYEES INTO THE WORKPLACE

2.8   It is important to note that the Western Cape Government (WCG) has never shut down. Essential and critical services and jobs were identified to ensure service and business continuity during the lockdown.

2.9   In addressing the COVID-19 pandemic within the workplace departments should at all times adhere to the relevant applicable prescripts including, but not limited to the Regulations issued by the Minister of CoGTA on 29 of April 2020, the Occupational Health and Safety (OHS) Directive issued by the Minister of Employment and Labour on 28 April 2020 as far as possible the DPSA Circular 18 of 2020 dated 1 May 2020.

2.10   The following steps are proposed, as a guideline, to facilitate the planning of re-entering employees into the workplace:

Step 1:   Ensure governance arrangements are in place

2.11   Heads of Department takes accountability for the departmental response, given their specific circumstances, to the COVID-19 pandemic and needs to ensure that the following measures are put in place:

2.11.1 Assign the health and safety committee to address the departmental COVID-19 responsiveness.

2.11.2 In view of the COVID-19 pandemic review and update the departmental risk assessment.

2.11.3 Appoint a Compliance Officer (preferably the senior manager assigned with OHS).

2.11.4   Develop a plan for a phased-approach in allowing employees to return to the workplace (refer to OHS directive)

Step 2:   Preparing the workplace for re-entering of employees

2.12   Due to the nature of the COVID-19 virus, the workplace where employees will be returning must be prepared (considering the Public Health protocols from the Department of Health) in line with the workplace plan as developed in terms of paragraph 2.14.2 below.
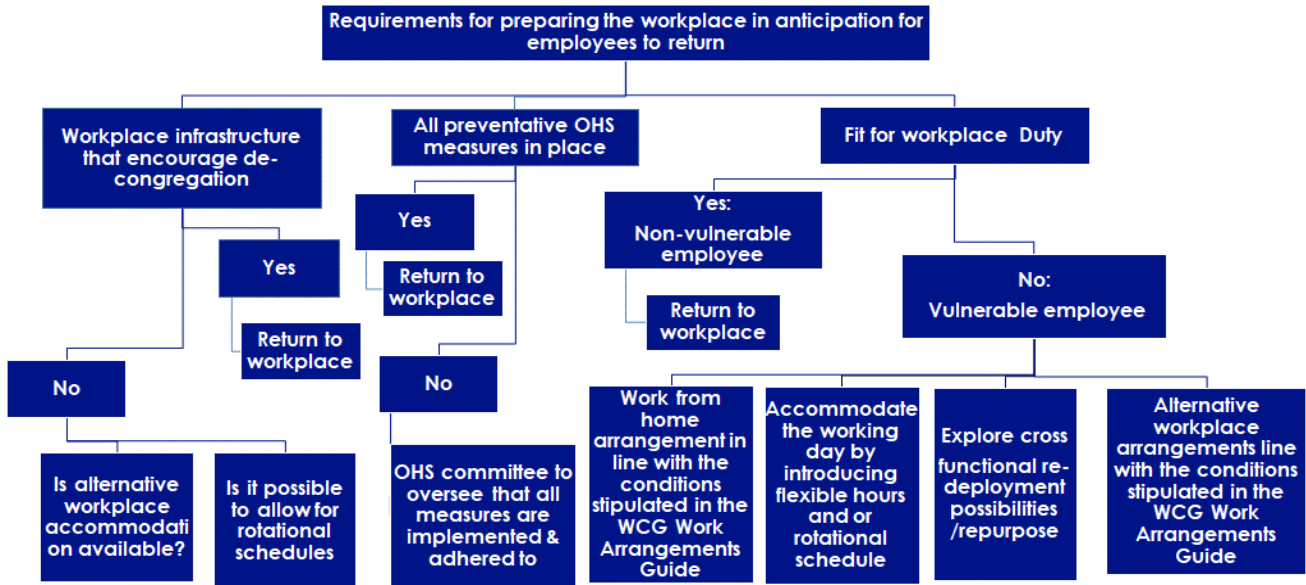
Illustration 1: Additional requirements to take into consideration to prepare the workplace for to the re-entry of employees

2.13   <u>Workplace infrastructure</u>.

2.13.1   The principle of de-congregation must be maintained in the workplace, in line with the provisions of the regulations, for the foreseeable future/until otherwise determined. For example, the employer must ensure that workstations of employees are spaced at least 1.5m (metre) apart before employees can be re-entered into the workplace.

2.13.2   In instances where the workplace infrastructure does not allow for sufficient re-organisation of the workplace to ensure de-congregation and to ensure the minimum number of employees in the workplace at any given time, the following options might be considered:

a)   Is alternative workplace accommodation available in the building, e.g. a board room or at another venue?

b)   Various rotation systems can be introduced for employees to assist in achieving de-congregation, e.g. employees working on a rotational basis, or staggered working hours, etc.

c)   Arrange physical barriers to be placed between work stations or on work stations to form a solid physical barrier between workers while they are working.

d)   If necessary, supply the employee with appropriate Personal Protective Equipment (PPE) based on the risk assessment of the workplace.

2.13.3 Employees who currently have a work-from-home-arrangement, should as far as possible be accommodated with such a continued arrangement. This arrangement will "free up" space in the workplace to ensure de-congregation in the workplace for those employees who are not able to work from home.

2.13.4 Practical guidance on the management of a working-from-home arrangement can be accessed on MyGov using the following link: Policy Advisory Note 10/2020 – Practical Guidance on the management of a working-from home arrangement: Coronavirus Disease 2019 (Covid-19 Virus) 20200321).

2.14   Adherence to OHS COVID-19 Directives.

2.14.1 In line with the WCG being a caring employer, the Head of Department (HOD) shall ensure that all requirements in terms of OHS legislation, and specifically, including the Directives issued by the Minister of Employment and Labour dated 28 April 2020 are adhered to, before employees re-enter the workplace.

2.14.2 The relevant senior manager responsible for OHS, as the Compliance Officer, must ensure-

a)   the development of a plan, taking into account the provisions of Regulation 16(6)(b) and Annexure E of the Regulations issued by the Minister of CoGTA dated 29 April 2020 (repeated in clause 2.1.5 of the DPSA Circular dated 01 May 2020) as a guideline to the development of such plan ("The Plan");

b)   compliance with the OHS measures as required by the COVID-19 related regulations; and

c)   that all directions in respect of hygienic conditions and limitation of exposure to persons with COVID-19 are adhered to. (The Department of Community Safety will provide a comprehensive OHS Guideline in this regard).

2.14.3 For the purposes of employee information required by The Plan, the current COVID-19 reporting template, issued by People Management has been adjusted to accommodate the requirements as it relates to The Plan.

2.14.4 In terms of the Basic Conditions of Employment Act, 1997 the Department of Employment and Labour has the authority to inspect workplaces to ensure that reasonable safety standards have been put in place.

2.15 <u>"Fit for workplace"- employee</u>

2.15.1 A "fit for workplace" employee is a non-vulnerable employee who can be re-entered into the workplace with minimal risk to self or others.

2.15.2 Vulnerable employees are employees who are fit for duty, but should not work at the workplace during the COVID-19 outbreak, (subject to the Public Health protocols issued by the Department of Health). Alternative working arrangements should be considered for the following:

   a)   Employees of age 60 and older.

   b)   Employees who have been diagnosed with an immune system disorder (immunodeficiency), chronic respiratory/pulmonary disease and/or dreaded disease e.g. cancer and or comorbidity. If required, an employee may be requested to provide a medical certificate to confirm the medical condition.

   c)   Pregnant women should not perform work with very high or high-risk exposure.

   d)   Parents with dependent children who do not have a support structure in place.

   e)   Employees on whom a sick dependent solely relies on for constant care.

2.15.3 Employees who are elderly, and those with underlying medical conditions (as explained above), must remain at home and take additional precautions to protect themselves. In these instances, alternative options may include -:

   a)   entering into a work-from-home arrangement; or

   b)   explore functional deployment opportunities (re-assignment) where the employee may be requested to assist in other areas, e.g. offer relief to personnel working at online call -centres.

2.15.4 Employees who do not have an underlying medical condition (see above) might, in addition to the options mentioned above, be allowed to enter into a more flexible work arrangement as explained in paragraph 2.13.2 (b).

   Step 3: Identify the categories of employees to be prioritised to return to the workplace.

2.16   Subject to further announcement on how to re-integrate employees into the workplace it is recognised that in the interest of service delivery, government must remain functional. Factors such as business continuity, critical and core services as well as annual performance and operational plans should also be considered.

2.17   Employees that should be considered as a priority for re-entry into the workplace, would be those employees who **were not able** to-

2.17.1   continue their work outside of the workplace; or

2.17.2   demonstrate consistent delivery of the agreed to tasks, outputs or deliverables from home.

2.18   Employees who have been able to demonstrate consistent service delivery in terms of the required standard while in a **work from home agreement** (refer to policy advisory note 10/2020 for an example) provided that their absence from the workplace does not hinder service delivery in other areas, should as far as possible be accommodated with a work-from-home agreement in line with the conditions stipulated for in the WCG Alternative Work Arrangements Guide. Such employees may be required to attend the workplace to receive instructions or documents, access office infrastructure or to submit completed work.

2.19   Heads of department need to ensure that all employees who are working at the workplace are issued with a permit as per the CoGTA regulations dated 29 April 2020 to allow them to travel to the workplace when required to do so. Employees who are working from home who may also need to be issued with permits should they need to attend the workplace to receive instructions or documents, access office infrastructure or to submit completed work.

2.20   In re-introducing employees into the workplace, the following decision tree is recommended to guide decision-making (as portrayed in illustration 2 below).
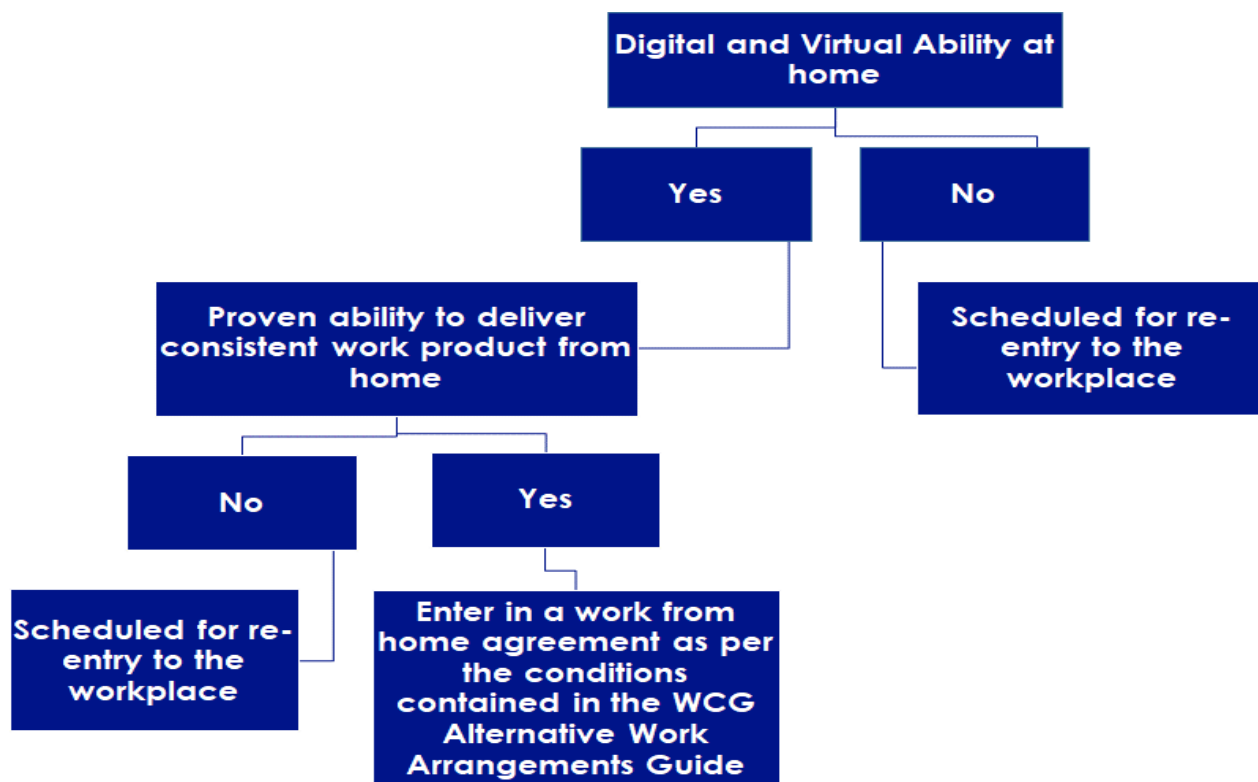
Illustration 2: Criteria to guide decision-making

Step 4: Showing visible commitment by the employer

2.21   The World Health Organisation, amongst others, has issued the following explanation in terms of how the COVID-19 virus is spread.

"When someone who has COVID-19 coughs or exhales they release droplets of infected fluid. Most of these droplets fall on nearby surfaces and objects, such as desks, tables or telephones. People could catch COVID-19 by touching contaminated surfaces or objects, and then touching their eyes, nose, or mouth.

2.22   The WCG recognises that some employees may be reluctant to re-enter the workplace as they fear exposure to the COVID-19 virus (especially as a person might be infecting colleagues during the incubation period). Reluctant employees need to be engaged on an individual level to provide the necessary guidance and be informed of what measures have been put in place.

2.23   It is also accepted that both the employee and employer have a shared responsibility towards the employee's health and that it is not only an employer's responsibility. Employees must familiarise themselves with, and adhere to, the new health and safety protocols in relation to COVID-19 implemented in their place of work. Incidents where employees do not comply with the relevant protocols and prescripts, must be investigated and subsequent relevant disciplinary action taken if it is found that they have been in breach of the required OHS measures. Where employees notice a breach/shortcoming in the implementation of the COVID19 measures, it should be brought to the immediate attention of their supervisor, who must in turn report to the compliance officer.

2.24   Illustration 3 below aims to highlight some of the WCG's safety commitments toward its employees
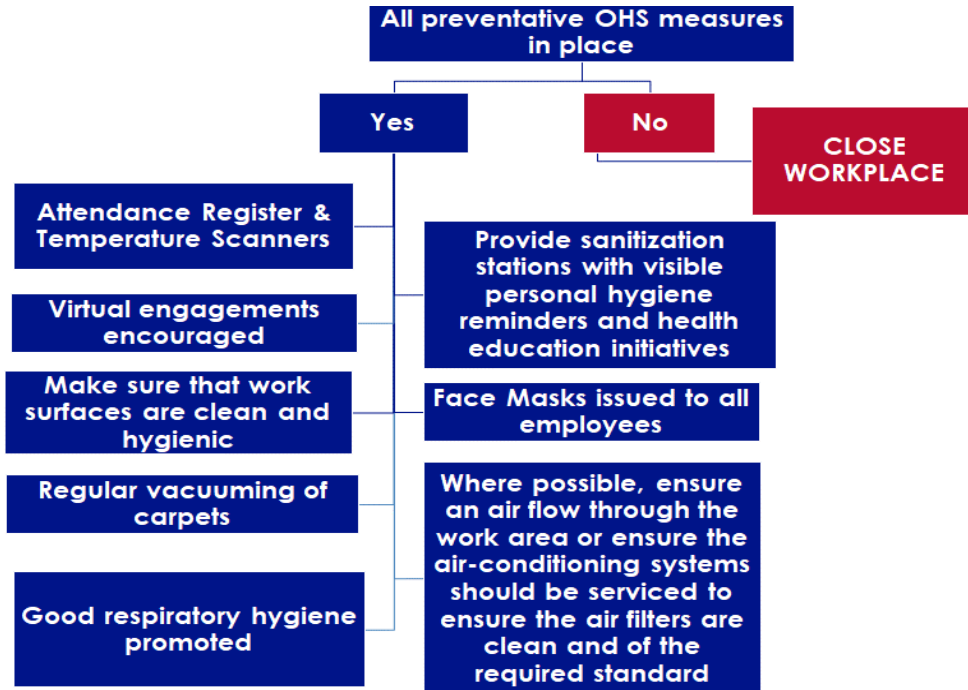
Illustration 3: Demonstration of COVID-19 Safety commitments

2.25   It is imperative that the psychological contract of care and trust between us and our employees be visible and that leaders, walk the talk, now more than ever. As a caring employer, the following OHS measures are to be strictly observed by management and employees to ensure a visible demonstration of the WCG's commitment to the safety of our employees:

2.25.1 Employees must be screened, as required by the OHS Directive before entering the workplace.

2.25.2 Due record must be kept of all people entering the building - employees must use their access cards. No unnecessary public walk-throughs should be allowed.

2.25.3 Virtual engagements must be encouraged. If a face to face meeting is merited, all OHS protocols and social distancing must be adhered to.

2.25.4 The wearing of a non-medical (fabric) mask or a homemade or another appropriate item that covers the nose and mouth, is now a requirement for everyone when in a public place or utilising public transport.   All departments will provide each employee with two cloth masks that complies with the Guidelines issued by the Department of Trade and Industry dated 24 April 2020 as it is also mandatory for all employees to wear a mask in the workplace.   Employees must be duly educated in the correct and responsible way of the handling, caring and cleaning of their masks.

2.25.5 Employees must constantly be encouraged and reminded to practise good hygiene e.g. wash hands regularly with soap and water, sanitization of their desk/workspaces/copiers and printers, etc. By implementing the following, employees will be prompted to adopt good hygiene habits:

a) Place sanitizing hand rub dispensers in prominent places such as at the entrance and around the workplace. Make sure these dispensers are regularly refilled.

b) Display posters promoting handwashing and where possible arrange practical demonstrations to demonstrate the correct method of washing hands.

c) Make sure that employees, contractors, and customers have access to places where they can wash their hands with soap and water.

d) Display protocols as they pertain to the use of shared office equipment and common areas in prominent places.

2.25.6 In minimising the risk associated with the spread of the COVID-19 via handling of documents, departments should consider alternative approaches to reduce the dependency on paper. In instances where a paper based system is continued, protocols must be implemented on how documents are handled, conveyed, disposed and stored.

2.25.7 Where possible, departments should provide services through online platforms and encourage citizens to utilise such platforms rather than visiting physical service points.

2.25.8 A "clean desk" policy should be advocated to reduce the risk of surface transmission of COVID-19 and to enable thorough cleaning.

2.25.9 Promote good respiratory hygiene habits in the workplace by implementing the following:

a) Display posters promoting respiratory hygiene. Combine this with other communication measures such as guidance from occupational health and safety officers, briefing at meetings, and information on the intranet, etc.

b) Ensure that FFP1 surgical masks (ordinary medical masks rather than N95 masks) or paper tissues are available at your workplaces, for those who develop a runny nose or cough at work, along with closed bins for hygienically disposing of them.

2.25.10 To ensure that work surfaces are clean and hygienic -

a) employees must ensure that their working surfaces (e.g. desks and tables) and objects (e.g. telephones, keyboards) are wiped with disinfectant regularly; and

b)   the employer should, where practically possible, consider providing disposable disinfectant cloths to employees so that they are able to clean shared objects, such as printers, water coolers, fridge doors, door handles, etc., (Also refer to DTPW standards that has been set in the WCG Office cleaning and disinfecting protocol):

2.25.11 Workplaces with carpets should, where possible, be vacuumed on a regular basis, e.g. every second day/twice a week.

2.25.12 Contractors that provide cleaning services must be approached to educate their employees on the importance to clean surfaces appropriately to curb the spread of the COVID-19 virus and to ensure their employees are provided with Personal Protective Equipment (PPE).

2.25.13 Where possible, promote air flow of fresh air through the workplace or the servicing of air-conditioning systems to ensure air filters are clean and of the required standard.

2.25.14 Entry and exit points to buildings must be limited and controlled. Where absolutely necessary, visits to the workplace by non-employees must be by prior arrangement. This excludes service recipients at service delivery points.

The nature of the pandemic may give rise to stigma which may lead to potential bias, discrimination and harassment. Departments must ensure that where complaints are received, such are promptly investigated and addressed effectively.

Keep promoting the message that people need to stay at home even if they have only mild symptoms of flu or are taking medication for such symptoms. Anyone with even a mild cough or low-grade fever (37.5° C or more) needs to inform their supervisor and work from home– if symptoms persist medical attention should be sought. Sick leave should be granted to employees who have flu-like symptoms, but cannot work from home.

If you have any concerns on the content, please contact the writer.

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DATE: 17 MAY 2020