

# **Laptops and Other Portable Computing Devices**

## **Health and Safety Guidance for Managers**

**Issued by Occupational Safety Team**

**Originally Issued: May 2010**

**Last Revised: April 2020**

## Manager's Responsibilities

### What are your responsibilities as a manager?

To ensure that you: -

- Carry out suitable and sufficient risk assessments regarding the use of laptops and other portable computing devices (PCDs).
- Ensure employees are aware of their own safety responsibilities.
- Provide suitable and safe equipment.
- Ensure employees are aware of how to report incidents, hazards and problems, and who to.
- Ensure provision of suitable and appropriate training to employees.
- Have regular 1:1s and supervision sessions with staff, ensuring health safety and wellbeing are a discussion topic. Record the details discussed.

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### 1. Introduction

This guidance document is to help managers of employees who use laptops or other portable computing devices (PCDs) as part of their work activities.

Managers have a duty to protect the health, safety and welfare of their employees.

The potential for injury and ill health among laptop/PCD users can be increased by poor working conditions, the need to carry equipment, exposure to the general public, social isolation and the lack of supervision.

Managers are required by law to do suitable and sufficient risk assessments and health and safety issues have to be considered for all aspects of laptop /PCD use i.e. suitability for the task and employee, suitability of workspace and working environment, training requirements, procedures and equipment required.

Managers should also talk to their employees about the health and safety issues they perceive to be significant risks. Record the findings of risk assessments and review and revise them annually or when significant changes occur.

Guidance and checklists have been produced to help managers undertake these risk assessments and can be used as part of the laptop/PCD users health and safety risk assessment process.

These are available on the Occupational Safety Website  
<http://www.bradford.gov.uk/hands/>

This guidance is not exhaustive and the risk assessments may highlight the need for other requirements, procedures, information or training.

### 2. Health Risks

Laptop/PCD users should have information and training on the safe use of the equipment, the specific hazards and risks, and controls put in place to reduce the risk of injury.

Common health issues that can arise, include:

**Aches and pains**-particularly in the back, neck, shoulders, arms, wrists and hands. These can occur if awkward postures are adopted or making the same movements repeatedly, e.g.

- Neck or eye problems from trying to see the screen at an awkward angle
- Wrist and hand problems from bending wrists to use the keys, or from overusing the other input devices (nipple mouse, rollerball, pad etc)
- Shoulder or back problems from carrying the equipment, or from reaching too far to use it, or from using it extensively in an unusual posture such as slouching, bending over or lying down.
- Over-heating of the groin due to supporting the hot laptop on your lap (despite its name!)

**Visual discomfort**- blurring and sore eyes, and headaches. Causes include long periods of time looking at the screen, reflections on the screen, characters being too small, and inappropriate colours or inadequate contrast.

**Stress** - adverse reaction to excessive pressures and demands. Flexible working can add to this if not implemented with care and monitored.

### 3. Disability issues

When carrying out risk assessments managers must take into account the health and disabilities of individual employees and where necessary make reasonable adjustments to enable them to carry out their work safely.

### 4. Training

Employees need to have the information and ability to do 'on the spot' assessments to ensure their own health and safety – refer employees to the guidance documents on this subject on the [Occupational Safety Website](#). Managers must ensure that users of this equipment are able to recognise early warning signs of common work related ill-health conditions, and know how and who to report the problem.

### 5. Working at home

If employees work at home for a significant amount of time, the manager must consider the home workstation set-up as part of the risk assessment **Home Working Safely Guidance and Assessment Checklist of Home Environment** on the [Occupational Safety Website](#).

### 6. Laptop/Portable Computer Devices

Laptops/PCDs are not designed for intensive or prolonged use and should not be provided for such use without assessing the risks. There is no prescriptive definition of 'prolonged use', but portable equipment that is habitually in use for a significant part of normal work should be regarded as covered by the DSE regulations [DSE Guidance for Managers](#). Frequent breaks or changes of activity or tasks are particularly important for portable computer users as often poor postures are adopted when in use. Best practice recommends separate keyboard, mouse and screen when using this equipment for a prolonged period. It is advisable that its use is restricted to spells of 30-40 minutes with significant task breaks between.

A laptop should not be used where a standard DSE workstation set up can be reasonably provided.

Additional equipment or accessories are required to make laptops safer to use e.g.

- separate monitor screens
- laptop/PCD stands
- tilt adjustable keyboard that are separate from the rest of the laptop/PCD.
- mice and trackball or pads
- sufficient memory and processor speed

Portables in prolonged use can become very hot, especially underneath. Care should be taken when using them especially when on the lap.

Managers must consider possible risks from violent theft.

Around one in 10 laptops are lost or stolen each year. Managers should ensure that employees:

- are aware of the risk of theft or attack and told to give their laptops and other equipment up immediately and not 'have a go', i.e. retaliate against their attacker
- are instructed to store electronic equipment out of sight when not in use, and not to leave it unattended, even briefly, at third-party sites
- are instructed not store information on the C:drive of the equipment
- are advised not to leave laptops unattended on public transport
- do not introduce measures that may secure the laptop but put them at greater risk of personal injury, such as using lockable cables in risky situations
- carrying cases or rucksacks provided for laptops do not advertise themselves as computer bags
- consider any particular hazards associated with their travelling hours – particularly outside normal 'rush hours'

Managers must also assess any manual handling hazards that arise from carrying laptops/PCDs and associated equipment. Risk-reduction measures include:

- taking into account the shape and size of a laptop and/or portable device. Lighter models will often be best – the HSE suggests laptops of 3 kilograms or less – but this should not be at the expense of good ergonomic design
- carrying portable computers and associated equipment, papers etc. can present a manual handling risk to employees. The use of specially designed laptop rucksack-style bags help reduce the risk of injury. These spread the weight across both shoulders and the upper body. These bags should also have a carrying handle. Some employees may prefer to use wheeled cases.
- If practicable, employees can avoid carrying heavy papers by sending them in advance by email or accessing them via the Council's secured IT access protocols

### **7. PCDs Tablets and Handheld Device (Smartphones)**

Flexible workers are making increasing use of portable DSE other than laptops, such as tablets and handheld devices. These units are likely to present similar risks to those associated with laptops. The smaller size means that the ergonomic limitations of the equipment, their use in unsuitable environments and the risk of theft will all be increased, though manual handling problems will be reduced.

Data entry via a stylus, touch-sensitive screen and handwriting recognition software may be preferable to using an under-sized keyboard, but extended use of these is not recommended (even where battery life permits) as they may present the same opportunities for eyestrain and musculoskeletal problems as any other DSE. Employees must also be warned not to use handheld equipment while walking, to reduce the risks of slips, trips and falls.

Managers should ensure that no one habitually uses hand-held equipment for a significant part of their normal work. Such equipment has uses in the field or on the move, but the bulk of the daily DSE work should be carried out on a desktop computer, or using a laptop with suitable, additional equipment.

### 8. Selecting portable computers

Practical points to consider when selecting portable computers:

- Look for as low a weight as possible (for example 3 kg or less), and keep accessories as few and as light as possible.
- Screen - as large and as clear as possible, considering the task to be done. Where available, opt for a detachable or height-adjustable screen.
- Specify as long a battery life as possible.
- Choose portables capable of being used with an external mouse, keyboard and/or numeric keypad, where these are likely to help the user to work comfortably.
- To cut working time and user stress, ensure the portable has sufficient memory and speed for the applications to be used.
- For applications requiring use of a non-keyboard input device, opt for a portable with a touch pad, rollerball or external mouse rather than a 'nipple' trackpoint or isometric joystick device.
- Many users find it more comfortable to use portables whose casing incorporates a space (wrist pad) between the keyboard and front edge.
- Ensure that handheld devices and tablets to be used for prolonged periods are carefully selected for ergonomic features which match the requirements of the tasks undertaken. For example equipment to be used outdoors should be adequately waterproof, legible in bright sunlight, and keyboards and screens should be large enough to be used comfortably.

**For further advice and support contact the Occupational Safety Team or Employee Health and Wellbeing service.**

Visit our website <http://www.bradford.gov.uk/hands/>