MRC Working Alone Standard of Best Practice

MRC policy is to provide a safe environment and to employ best practice to ensure health, safety and welfare within the workplace. This document sets the expected best practice guidance for working alone under MRC Health and Safety Policy.

Definitions

Working alone is defined in this document as working unaccompanied or without immediate physical access to third party assistance. A member of staff is defined as an MRC employee or anyone not its employee but who works under the managerial control of the MRC. The workplace is defined as any location in which the member of staff is or may be required to work and normal workplace as the registered workplace of the member of staff.

Scope

The MRC has a significant number of staff who could be defined as lone workers. The circumstances are varied but can be considered in three main categories.

- Lone working in the community, usually in surroundings familiar to the subject rather than the researcher (for example, researchers conducting interviews outside of the normal place of work).
- Lone working in the normal place of work either outside of normal working hours or in part of the workplace unfrequented by other staff.
- Working at home.

Further information and advice on each of these areas of work is included in the accompanying guidance.

Responsibilities

Team leaders and supervisors have responsibility for the safety of all members of staff in their respective teams. They are responsible for ensuring that a risk assessment for proposed work is completed, procedures drawn up that ensure the prevention, minimising or control of risk, and that everyone in the team involved in the work is fully aware of and trained in the procedures.

They must also ensure that any reports of incidents or accidents are investigated and, where necessary, action taken.

Members of staff have responsibility for their own safety and that of their colleagues. Measures to be taken by members of staff include following safety procedures and ensuring that all incidents, including near misses, are reported.

Risk management

The risks inherent in the work are exacerbated by the lack of the normal channels of support, so it is very important to ensure that the risks are properly assessed in the context of lone working; that practical workable procedures are in place to eliminate or minimise them before any member of staff is permitted to work alone; that staff are appropriately trained; and that all assessments are refreshed periodically.

MRC Corporate Safety, Security & Resilience

MRC Head Office
Guidance Note 1 - Working alone in the community

This guidance is designed to provide a framework for safe planning, execution and monitoring of projects involving working alone in the community.

Risk assessment

All proposed procedures are subject to systematic risk assessment. For further information, refer to MRC Guidance for Risk Assessment in the Workplace.

A risk assessment is comprised of the following stages:

- analysis of the proposed activity
- identification of the hazards and those who are at risk
- evaluation of the risks, including consideration of both the likelihood of a hazardous event occurring and the extent of possible harm or damage that may be sustained
- judgement on the adequacy of present measures to prevent, minimise or control risk and on any additional measures required.

A proper risk assessment will enable the concurrent development of a procedure that should ensure, as far as is reasonably practicable, the safety of those carrying out the proposed work.

Activity analysis and hazard identification

A major hazard relating to working in the community is that of violence. This has a much wider definition than the obvious one of physical assault. For the purposes of risk assessment violence can be defined as any behaviour which produces damaging or hurtful physical or emotional effects in other people.

Violence thus includes:

- threatening behaviour
- invasion of space
- strange, irrational or intimidating behaviour
- verbal abuse.

Analysis of the following issues during planning should thus be made in the context of the possible threat of violence. It will also facilitate identification of other significant hazards:

- location of work
- access to the location including the proposed means of transport
- nature of the proposed work (i.e., interviewing, obtaining blood samples, etc.)
- any equipment required
- attributes of those who will do the work (e.g., experience, competence, physical and mental capability, etc.)
- history, information relating to the study subjects
- time scale for data, sample collection
- time of the day of the visits.
Development of procedures - risk evaluation and control

It should be always kept in mind that the safety of the researcher is always more important than the successful completion of any part of a project, e.g., any single interview. The MRC, as the employer, carries the prime responsibility for ensuring that safety. In addition any researcher has the right to refuse to undertake an interview if (s)he has reasonable grounds for believing that it will place him or her in danger. In some situations therefore the risk assessment will conclude that it will be necessary for two people to travel together to enable the project to proceed in reasonable safety. In other situations it may be concluded that the project, or identified visits within a project, should not proceed.

The following factors should be considered when evaluating risks and deciding upon procedure:

a) Pre interview/visit
   - include team briefing on any background to the subject which is relevant to safety
   - ensure travel and route is planned if the area is unfamiliar; a reconnoissance visit may be needed
   - inform local police of the study and seek their advice about the area
   - supply researchers with an identity card
   - supply researchers with a basic first-aid kit.

b) Conducting visits in high risk environments
   - conduct visits wherever possible in daylight hours: first visits should always be made in daylight
   - carry as little as possible within reason: female researchers are encouraged not to carry a handbag
   - carry a personal alarm - it may deter an attacker
   - walk purposefully, avoiding eye contact
   - adhere to reporting arrangements.

b) Contacting
   - as far as is reasonably practicable introduce a system to ensure that the whereabouts of the researcher is known: to that end -
     - as far as practicable lists of each day's visits should be prepared in advance and kept at the Unit
     - the list should contain approximate timings
     - provision is made for periodic reporting in
     - each researcher should sign off at the end of the day.
   - the reporting-in procedure should be as simple as practicable
   - as far as possible the message should be to a 'live' contact, i.e. not to an answerphone
   - no ad hoc visit should be undertaken unless it is possible to ensure that someone, preferably a member of the team, knows where and for how long, and that the researcher checks in when it is over
   - the project leader should take responsibility for ensuring contact arrangements are made: ideally contact will be a member of the team; if contact is a personal friend or family member then the contact must be briefed on procedure if there is a problem (see next section)
   - full details of vehicles used by the researchers should be maintained and be readily accessible to the police.

c) Emergency procedures
   - researcher should have pre-planned 'get out sentences' for any interview where they feel uncomfortable or threatened
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- researchers should leave the moment they feel at risk
- there must be a clear procedure on what to do if someone does not report in; e.g., attempt to contact researcher, when should the police be involved, etc.
- ensure that everyone involved in the project is familiar with this procedure.

d) Equipment
- compile an inventory of all equipment required
- make sure all equipment is in full working order before going out (i.e. mobile phone batteries fully charged, car checked, petrol, etc.)
- carry any equipment in a normal shopping bag rather than a briefcase
- try to carry as little in the way of valuables as possible
- only use a mobile phone for a 999 call where a land line is not readily accessible; the call may not be transmitted to the nearest emergency centre. If one is used, ensure the operator is given the location at the earliest opportunity.

f) Accident and incident reporting
- all accidents and incidents should be reported and investigated.

g) Monitoring and review
- procedures should be regularly monitored during the study to ensure they are working properly
- procedures should be periodically reviewed in the light of experience to judge if improvements can be made.

Training
Lone workers must receive sufficient training to enable them to undertake their work in reasonable safety and for the most part unsupervised. The potential hazards and risks associated with this work suggest that training of researchers in the community should be subject to formal competence assurance procedures (MRC Health and Safety Policy).

All training programmes should instruct community researchers that they should recognise their own responsibilities to take reasonable care of themselves and to co-operate with the MRC by following set procedures and codes.

Interviewers need to be trained how to:
- deal with difficult interviewees, and sensitive subjects
- recognise possible danger signs
- handle terminating an interview
- handle a threatening situation.

Note: it is generally not recommended that training in self-defence is included. Training programmes should focus on avoidance of conflict and confrontation, and self-defence training may create a false sense of self-confidence.

Nominated supervisors should ensure that interviewers are supervised until they have gained sufficient experience to work alone and the supervisor is assured of their competence to do so.

Review
The Unit/team must ensure that proper accident and incident reporting procedures are in place. Full guidance is found in the reporting and investigation of accidents and incidents best practice guide. Specifically, it should be noted that the Reporting of Injuries, Diseases and Dangerous Occurrences Regulations (RIDDOR) 2013 require 'acts of non-consensual violence' to employees to be reported to the Health and Safety Executive.
All incidents should be reported. This means that in addition to the reporting of personal injuries all incidents relating to near-misses, including incidents relating to threats of physical violence should be reported, regardless if actual physical harm has or has not been sustained. Sufficient details should be recorded to enable a thorough analysis of the incident (who, what, why, when, where and how).

**Analysis of events**

Each incident can be learned from and potentially will give an opportunity to improve existing procedures. Good communication between individuals and teams is essential and should be encouraged. On a local level this can be done in part through team meetings which provide a forum to discuss any incidents that may have occurred to members of staff. Meetings enable the sharing of ideas and experiences and give the opportunity to debate different methods of tackling similar situations.

**Procedure review**

In addition to any changes that may be made following specific incidents, procedures should be reviewed regularly. All interviewers should be encouraged to contribute to the review. This leads to a feeling of ‘ownership’ which leads in turn to greater staff co-operation with the resulting procedures.

**Counselling**

Incidents of violence are thankfully very rare. Even so, each unit or team must have in place arrangements for counselling of staff following an incident. Many establishments will have skilled counsellors on the staff but the arrangements should include access to someone outside the immediate work circle. Further advice on support and counselling is available from the Welfare Officer at Headquarters Office.
Flexibility of working hours is a valuable and necessary component of the research environment. But the argument for working outside normal working hours should not be used to justify poor planning and undisciplined working arrangements. Wherever reasonably practicable work should be contained within recognised working hours.

The major significant hazards and risks are likely to be related to work involving the use of hazardous substances or potentially dangerous equipment or plant. Groups affected will include laboratory staff and maintenance staff. Many points will also apply to service engineers and cleaners. Work activities in offices or similar environments present lower risks and thus require less stringent risk control measures. Even so, questions relating to the safety of the individual and the workplace must be addressed for all lone working, with consideration given to those issues of relevance to the work included in the following paragraphs.

All lone working must therefore be subject to suitable and sufficient risk assessment.

**Risk assessment**

Lone working is prohibited by law in certain defined circumstances. These include working with live electrical equipment and working in confined spaces.

Most laboratory activities will have already been subject to risk assessment following the guidance included in MRC Health and Safety Policy. Such risk assessments would normally be made on the assumption that the work is to be done in the workplace during normal working hours, when assistance is readily accessible. It is therefore important that these risk assessments are reviewed to assess their suitability for the work being done by a member of staff working alone.

Other aspects of the work may not have been subject to formal risk assessment. For the work to proceed all relevant issues must be considered to determine if and how the work should be permitted to be done.

The following questions should be addressed.

**For all work**

- safe access to and egress from the place of work
- direct accessibility to emergency assistance
  - within laboratory
  - within building
  - on site
- remote access to assistance
  - telephone
  - personal alarm
- location of work
- security of premises

**Task-related - Nature of work**

- potential for task-related injury
  - chemical/ biological/ radiological spillage
  - splashing to eye
  - risk of loss of consciousness (e.g., oxygen deprivation from liquid N\textsubscript{2} in confined space)
  - machinery
Worker-related

- who will do the work
  - experience
  - competence
  - physical and mental capability

Development and approval of procedures

The decision on whether the work should proceed should then be based on the following criteria:

- are the premises sufficiently secure?
- is there adequate access to emergency assistance?
- can the work be properly monitored?
- does the work present any significant additional risk to that if the work were to be done when assistance is immediately available in normal working hours?
- can these additional risks be eliminated, minimised or controlled to an acceptable level
  - through changes to procedures?
  - applying additional conditions/restrictions?
  - additional training of staff?

Assessment of the proposed work for risks may lead therefore to either a decision that the work should not be done by members of staff working alone or that additional measures are necessary to reduce the risk to an acceptable level.

Relationship with Host Institution and other employers

Many MRC units and teams are housed within host institutions and aspects of security and access to assistance in emergencies are likely to be dependent upon the host. The responsibility for the staff remains however with the unit director or ESS team leader who must ensure arrangements are in place to safeguard their health and safety. Thus risk assessments and any necessary modifications to procedures must take into account those arrangements.

In addition, all staff working alone within a host institution have the responsibility to follow the arrangements agreed with the host and not prejudice the security of the building or the health and safety of the host’s staff.

Although each employer retains the ultimate responsibility for its own staff, visiting personnel who may work alone or outside normal working hours (e.g. visiting workers, service engineers, contract cleaners) should follow the host's rules and arrangements for lone working. Where appropriate these local arrangements will reflect the relationship between the unit or team and the host institution and their respective responsibilities.

Training

Induction training programmes should include the provision of information on normal working hours and the criteria for sanctioning work outside those hours. Instruction should also be given on monitoring of the work (see next section).

Any possible requirement to work outside normal working hours or in remote locations in the normal workplace should be included in the analysis of training needs for each individual. Additional training may be necessary in emergency procedures and any additional procedures deemed necessary through the risk assessment. Examples may include the wearing of personal alarms (movement detection), the use of additional controls or personal protective equipment (use of eye protection when handling all hazardous substances) and avoidance of...
working in enclosed areas such as cold rooms and dark rooms unless continuous monitoring is in place.

**Monitoring**

All work out of hours should be subject to monitoring through a logging in and out procedure. Where there are multiple access points to the premises and logging in is dependent on manual records, access outside normal working hours should be restricted to one point, at which logging in and out should take place. Where there is electronic means of logging entry then other entrances can be used.

Where the building is not covered by manned security out of normal working hours, careful consideration should be given to the type of work activity permitted by lone workers. Restriction of activities should be according to risk, following the guidelines set out above. All lone working is dependent upon the authority of team leaders, who should consider if additional monitoring is required.

**Review**

Additional risk assessments made for lone working should be reviewed regularly. An annual frequency is recommended but units are reminded that a review should take place whenever there is a substantial change in the work or when there is reason to believe the assessment is no longer valid.

Rigorous reporting of incidents will enable a proper review of procedure to take place and a judgement to be made on any changes required. Part of the training given to those who propose to work out of hours should include emphasis on the responsibility of the lone worker to report all incidents, not only those that result in physical injury but also those where on another occasion damage to people or property may occur.

In addition to the investigation of single incidents, which may lead to recommendations for improvements, all procedures should be reviewed regularly. Team leaders should include discussion of the potential problems associated with working alone and be assured that procedures are working effectively.
Guidance Note 3 - Working at home

One result of the advances in information technology has been a significant increase in the number of people working at or from home. Most of those MRC members of staff working at home do so on an ad hoc basis, but there are those who do so on a regular basis, some of whom are contracted to do so. This guidance is directed predominantly toward those who work at home regularly and complements advice contained in the MRC Remote and Home Working Guidance. Where the MRC provides equipment for use at home however, its responsibilities for the safety of that equipment apply in all circumstances, including for those who only occasionally work at home.

During periods of work at home, the home is the workplace. Thus in those circumstances the MRC’s duties under legislation relating to display screen equipment, workplace safety and manual handling apply equally at home. The MRC retains responsibility for the safety of equipment provided for home use and the health and safety of the homeworker whilst ‘at work’.

Risk assessment

As with all work-related activities, the process of proper health and safety management for work activities carried out at home is based on risk assessment. This assessment will lead to a judgement on whether or not the activity can be sanctioned and if so, which safe procedures should be applied.

Hazard identification and those at risk

Management has a duty to identify what may cause harm to homeworkers. In addition it has a duty of care to those who may be affected by the work activities, which in the case of homeworking will predominantly be members of the family or others resident at the same address. This may include young children, so there is a requirement to ensure that hazardous substances and any equipment that may present a danger to others are kept out of their reach or made secure.

Assessment of risk

Most homeworkers are involved in office-type activities (e.g., use of personal computers, reading and drafting of papers) and these normally present the same risks at home as in the normal workplace. The major risks to health are thus likely to be from faulty electrical equipment, trip hazards including trailing wires, failure to follow guidelines on working with display screen equipment and occasional requirements for manual handling. In exceptional circumstances it may be possible to sanction other work to be undertaken at home of a more practical nature (e.g., in a properly equipped workshop) but this would require rigorous assessment and training (see below).

In some cases, according to the activity being done and whether the member of staff is contracted to work at home, it may be necessary for the team leader or nominated supervisor to visit the home to carry out the risk assessment. In all situations the co-operation of the home worker is paramount.

Manual handling

Full guidance on proper manual handling is contained in MRC Ergonomics Guidance. The risk of injury whilst at home should be low, but some domestic situations where there is limited space may require workstations to be set up each day. This may involve the lifting of computer equipment.

Electrical hazards

Full guidance on electrical safety is contained in MRC Electrical safety best practice guidance. The MRC retains the responsibility for the maintenance and testing of electrical equipment it supplies for use in the home. It is not responsible for the safety of the electrical sockets or...
the domestic electrical system, which remain the responsibility of the homeworker. It should be the responsibility of the homeworker to carry out those visual checks recommended in electrical safety best practice guidance. In addition the domestic system should be checked for its adequacy for the provided electrical equipment. Where the unit or team provides electrical equipment for use at home, it may wish to consider the provision of residual current devices which can be plugged into the appropriate sockets to aid the protection of the homeworker from both unsafe equipment and faulty electrical supplies.

**Display screen equipment**

Where the worker is contracted to work at home and is designated a user of display screen equipment, the unit or team will need to assess the workstation used, whether or not the equipment is provided by the MRC. Full guidance on conducting a workstation assessment is included in MRC Ergonomics Guidance, and manual handling best practice guide. In summary, the issues that are to be addressed are:

- the intrinsic safety of the equipment
- the quality of the screen image
- keyboard positioning
- work desk layout and space
- fully adjustable chair
- satisfactory lighting and absence of glare and reflection
- environmental factors affecting comfort.

**Training**

In many situations it is both convenient and acceptable to train homeworkers to conduct their own risk assessments, specifically of workstations. They should also be instructed on the need for monitoring and review. Team leaders must be satisfied that the homeworker is competent to carry out the relevant assessments. They should also receive instruction on proper working practices, especially the requirement for users of display screen equipment to take regular breaks either by stopping the work or changing the work activity.

Homeworkers can also be trained in conducting visual inspections of electrical equipment and recording 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 practicable to management. Training should also include a reminder of the requirement for homeworkers to report any accident or incident relating to a work activity.

**Monitoring**

Wherever staff are permitted to work at home regularly, the arrangements should be monitored by the team leader. This may include checks to establish inspections and testing of equipment has been done at the agreed intervals and to the required standards.

In addition to considering the physical hazards and risks discussed in the preceding paragraphs, management should be aware of the possible harmful effect of the homeworker feeling isolated after prolonged periods of working at home. This effect can be eliminated or minimised through regular contact and monitoring.

**Review**

All risk assessments are subject to regular review and the opportunity should be taken at that time for team leaders to review the working arrangements with the homeworker and be reassured that those arrangements are working satisfactorily whilst ensuring the health and safety of the homeworker and those who may be affected by the work.