

## 5.3 Right to Disconnect Policy

### 1. Introduction & Background

In April 2021, a [Code of Practice for Employers and Employees on the Right to Disconnect](#), was published by the Workplace Relations Commission (WRC). In response to this Code, Teagasc has devised a Right to Disconnect Policy. This Policy has been developed in consultation with staff and unions via the National Partnership Committee with the purpose of setting out staff member's rights to disconnect from work, and to refrain from engaging in work related communications, outside of normal working hours. This policy builds on the Agile Working Policy which was developed by Partnership in 2020. The Agile Working policy already demonstrated commitment to the principles of work life balance.

### 2. Staff Wellbeing

Staff wellbeing is of the utmost importance and Teagasc actively encourages staff to prioritise their own health and wellbeing. In addition to providing staff wellbeing supports and initiatives through the Employee Assistance Programme, Teagasc supports work life balance in various ways. Staff wellbeing was identified as one of the key priorities in the Teagasc People Strategy. As part of the People Strategy, a staff health screening programme, a new wellbeing app, staff wellbeing webinars, the Agile Working Programme and mid-career retirement planning have already been introduced.

Teagasc policies and procedures are underpinned by various legislation including the Organisation of Working Time Act, and the Health Safety and Welfare at Work Act, and great care is taken to ensure that Teagasc provides a safe place of work for all staff members'. The Right to Disconnect Policy will further safeguard staff wellbeing by protecting the rights of all staff member's to disconnect and disengage from work, outside of normal working hours. Disconnecting from work is vital for staff wellbeing, and to help staff achieve a healthy and sustainable work life balance.

### 3. Policy Aim & Objectives

Teagasc recognises the right of all staff to disengage and switch off outside normal working hours. This means that all staff have the right to enjoy free time without interruption, save in the event of an emergency or in exceptional circumstances. The Teagasc Right to Disconnect Policy has three objectives:

- To protect the right of staff member's to **not** routinely perform work outside of the normal working hours
- To protect the right of staff member's to **not** be penalised for refusing to attend to work matters outside of normal working hours
- To ensure that all staff member's (including managers) respect another person's right to disconnect (e.g. by not routinely emailing or calling outside normal working hours)

### 4. Responsibilities of Managers and Staff

In order to achieve the Policy objectives, a unified approach will be required. Managers will play a central role in the successful implementation of this Policy and must ensure that:

- They demonstrate a clear commitment to the Policy through leadership and active role modelling of its principles
- The tone and sense of urgency in any communications remains proportionate
- They respect the rights of colleagues and team members to disconnect
- They take action where staff appear reluctant or unable to disconnect (due to excessive workloads, culture or personal preference)

Staff should be mindful of their responsibilities in line with the Safety Health & Welfare at Work Act (Section 13. 1(a)) to take reasonable care to protect their own safety, health and welfare at work. Staff should actively engage with this Policy by:

- Monitoring their working hours and taking appropriate rest breaks (away from electronic devices)
- Switching off technological devices out of hours or during periods of annual leave
- Actively making people aware of their working hours (e.g. email footer, out of office reply/voice mail)
- Creating a separation/transition at the end of each working day, this is particularly important where staff are working from home

All staff and managers should be conscious of both the purpose and timing of meetings, and ensure that all attendees have an active role in any meetings to which they are invited. Where possible, meeting times should accommodate the start and finish times of attendees. It is accepted that it will not always be possible to accommodate the start/finish times of all attendees. In such cases, attendees who are due to finish work before the meetings finishes, have the right to disconnect upon reaching their normal finishing time.

Both managers and staff must exercise flexibility in how such instances will be managed on an individual basis. It is acknowledged that there may be exceptional circumstances where the presence of the staff member is essential and in such cases, alternative arrangements should be discussed and agreed. This should be the exception rather than the standard way of working (see paragraph 6 below).

Both managers and staff should endeavour to avoid out of hours contact. This can be aided by the use of the 'delay delivery' function on emails, or by saving emails as drafts which can later be sent at an appropriate time. In addition, both managers and staff should be conscious that the timing of emails will provide the recipient with sufficient time to respond (e.g. avoid sending large reports on a Friday evening, or with a short deadline for response).

## **5. Normal Working Hours**

Teagasc is a large organisation with staff working across a number of disciplines. In this regard, some roles will have different start and finish times. Teagasc also facilitates a number of work life balance arrangements via the Agile Working Programme, statutory leaves (e.g. Parental Leave) and discretionary leave such as Shorter Working Year and Job Sharing.

In this context, it is accepted that staff may have widely varying patterns of work and attendance. For this reason, staff may send communications at times which are inopportune for some recipients. This cannot be avoided. However, recipients should understand that they are not expected to reply to communications until such time as their normal working time recommences. Senders should also be mindful as to the reason for a delayed response.

Where staff are availing of an alternative working pattern or reduced hours, it will be helpful to include an out of office reply (stating your working hours) when not at work, and also to include an email footer, stating your hours of work. It may also be helpful for voice mail greetings to state your hours of work. Below are some sample statements that may be adopted for use:

- *My normal working hours are 8am to 4pm, Monday to Wednesday. I will reply to your email on my return to the office (out of office email reply)*
- *You have reached John Doe, my normal working hours are 8am to 4pm, Monday to Wednesday. I will return your call as soon as possible (voice mail greeting)*
- *I am currently working flexibly, so while it may suit me to send an email at this time, I do not expect any response or action outside of your normal working hours (email footer)*

## **6. Exceptional Circumstances**

It is recognised that occasionally, there may be legitimate reasons to contact staff members outside of the normal working hours, for example:

- Where there is an emergency
- Where there is a change to the roster (e.g. due to sick leave)
- Where essential information, immediately relevant to the staff member must be communicated

## **7. Raising a Concern**

All managers and staff have a responsibility to commit to this Policy, and to be mindful and respectful of one another in the context of the right to disconnect. While it is accepted that circumstances may occasionally arise that necessitate communications outside of normal working hours, this should be the exception as opposed to the standard way of working.

Situations may arise where an individual feels that their right to disconnect has not been respected, or their workload is such that they feel unable to disconnect, for example:

- Being expected to work through rest breaks or outside of normal working hours
- Being contacted regularly outside of normal working hours
- Being penalised for unavailability outside of normal working hours

Should this situation arise, the individual should contact the relevant colleague or manager directly to raise their concern informally, noting the relevant incidences. Where such an attempt has been unsuccessful, or where the individual does not feel confident in this approach, they can seek the assistance of HR in an attempt to resolve the matter informally. A full list of HR Department members, and their roles, is available [here](#).

Where informal attempts to resolve the issue have been unsuccessful, any staff member has the right to lodge a grievance as per the [Teagasc Grievance Policy & Procedure](#).

## 8. Implementation & Review

This Policy will be promoted throughout all areas of the organisation, in electronic format supported by appropriate awareness material, and in person for those staff whose role does not allow them to readily access online material.

Poster presentations/infographics summarising the key principles of the policy will be prominently displayed on Workvivo and in office spaces. As part of the awareness campaign, HR Partners will table the Right to Disconnect Policy at all manager meetings following its launch.

This Policy will be reviewed after 12 months. As part of that review, consultation will take place via the National Partnership Committee to identify what, if any, issues are arising with regard to its implementation. Where any issues are identified, the relevant steps will be taken to rectify same. This may involve additions, or amendments to the existing policy.

### Relevant Resources/Legislation

- [Code of Practice for Employers & Employees on the Right to Disconnect](#)
- [Organisation of Working Time Act, 1997](#)
- [Safety, Health & Welfare at Work Act, 2005](#)
- [The Employment \(Miscellaneous Provisions\) Act, 2018](#)
- [The Terms of Employment \(Information\) Act, 1994](#)
- [Guidance for Working Remotely](#)
- [Teagasc Guidance for Home Working](#)
- [Hints/tips for using outlook/skype](#)

Version	Revision Date	Summary of Changes	Policy Owner
1.0	May 2021	New Policy	HR
2.0	October 2021	Feedback from NPC incorporated	HR