

Managing the wellbeing of furloughed staff during the COVID-19 pandemic

Employer's guide

June 2020



Purpose

As part of its response to the COVID-19 pandemic, the government introduced the Coronavirus Job Retention Scheme.

This scheme allows UK employers to furlough, or temporarily lay-off, employees with government support to continue to pay the employees' salaries and protect these employees from redundancy.

Local authorities can use the scheme in certain specific circumstances. We have more information on the details of applying the scheme on our website¹ and our coronavirus employment law FAQs.²

This guide will help local authorities to consider how to manage the wellbeing of their employees who have been furloughed under the scheme.

¹ <https://local.gov.uk/our-support/workforce-and-hr-support/wellbeing>

² <https://www.local.gov.uk/covid-19-employment-law-faqs>

Background

'Furlough' is a word most people hadn't heard before the COVID-19 pandemic, so for those affected it might be a strange and difficult time.

The Job Retention Scheme provides that employers can furlough (temporarily lay-off) employees. However, employers must remember that even though furloughed staff are not working, they are still your employees. Their employment remains in place and so does your relationship and your duty of care, so line managers must make sure they keep in touch.

However, you might wonder what to talk about? You can't ask them to do work for you while they are on furlough, but it's important to maintain contact and see how they are doing. You need to make time to ask these employees about their health and wellbeing and respond to their questions and concerns.

Keeping in touch

You will probably have different conversations with each furloughed employee. Some staff might love being on furlough and take to it like a duck to water. Some might have a list of things they've always wanted to do. Some staff might be relieved to be on extended leave to look after children or provide care to other family members. However, other staff may be worried about job security or feel guilty about how busy other colleagues are. Or they may feel isolated or feel a loss of purpose and identify from not working.

Every member of staff on furlough will be adjusting to this significant change in different ways. Line managers and their furloughed staff will need to figure out what support and ways of keeping in touch works for that person. You should figure it out together and agree how often this will happen and how.

There are many ways to communicate, including sending emails or setting up a specific temporary intranet page for keeping in touch, video conferencing, producing newsletters and well-being communications, phone calls or a combination of all these methods.

Furloughed employees can check over their work emails from time to time, even take part in meetings online, so that when they return to work, they'll be up to speed from day one. However, it's important that these communications should not involve the employee providing any work or generating any money for the organisation.

If employees have work laptops or telephones, then they can keep these devices to stay in touch with their line manager. If employees are normally allowed some use of these for personal calls and emails this is still ok, but organisations must make it very clear that furloughed employees cannot send or respond to any work-related messages while they are on furlough.

Social contact with work colleagues is allowed and should be encouraged. Working in and feeling part of a team is important to most people in their jobs and is the main way most of us get work done. This sense of belonging is important to staff morale and wellbeing at work. Lack of this may affect the wellbeing of furloughed staff. It is therefore important to create opportunities and ways for them to reach out to colleagues, managers and peers for social support. Hearing from team members who are on furlough and who may be having similar experiences may help them to feel less isolated.

Things to discuss

Being furloughed

The employee might have some specific technical questions about being furloughed and the impact on their terms and conditions and it's important for line managers to respond to these (more information on that below). However, line managers may also need to offer some reassurance about why the employee was furloughed.

Employees may need to be reminded that they are still valued members of the team and that they haven't been forgotten. The decision to furlough some members of staff and not others was not because of performance issues, but because of the effect that responding to and managing the coronavirus in line with government guidelines has had on the organisation. The furlough scheme is in place and being used to help people keep their jobs and is a temporary measure.

To offer reassurance, you could talk about the important work the employee has been doing for the local authority, or how valuable their skills are to the team, or any thoughts about future projects the employee may be involved in when it's possible to return to work.

Terms and conditions during furlough

The provisions of the scheme are subject to regular updating and changes by the Government so it important to keep up to date with current details by reading the Local Government Association (LGA) coronavirus Job Retention Scheme advice.³

Here are some key elements of the scheme to discuss with your furloughed employees:

- Furloughed employees still accrue and can take annual leave in the same way as if they were at work. That leave gets paid at the 'normal rate of pay' and the usual leave rules apply.
- Hopefully your furloughed staff won't get ill but just in case, it is worth reminding them that the usual sickness reporting procedures and sick pay rules apply.
- For some furloughed staff you might need to talk about maternity and paternity leave and pay provisions.

Their wellbeing

Line managers should ask about the furloughed employee's physical and mental health.

Questions such as:

- How they are feeling? How are their family and friends?
- Do they know how to access any services and advice that the local authority provides for employees, should they need them?
- Do they want to be included in team virtual social activities and updates?

You need to lead the way in talking about the wellbeing of furloughed staff. Furloughed staff may not feel comfortable talking about mental health problems caused by being on furlough. They might be worried that they are letting people down by 'not coping', or fear that colleagues or managers may think badly of them, either now or in the future, but acknowledging emotions is important to good mental health.

³ <https://www.local.gov.uk/lga-workforce-coronavirus-job-retention-scheme>

Empathetic communication with staff acknowledging their fears and anxieties together with messages about how to recognise the signs of distress will ensure it is not an issue that is overlooked during the furlough. It is important to emphasise that every employee matters.

To help you, the LGA website has lots of great advice and guidance on supporting the wellbeing of your staff.⁴

Organisational support and benefits available

Have a look at your employee assistance programme and your employee benefits package. Are there elements of these that could be used to provide additional help during this period? Are there online shopping incentives or wellbeing support?

Some occupational healthcare providers offer advice on a wide range of issues for the whole family including financial advice or help with mental health counselling which may be of interest. It is a good idea to highlight any particular benefits that may be of interest or benefit to that your furloughed employees.

Staying active during furlough

Without work, some furloughed staff may have an opportunity to do other activities. It may be a good idea to talk to your furloughed staff about planning how to use their leave and any goals they want to achieve while they have additional time.

For example, furloughed staff might want to become volunteers (but remind them that this can't be with their usual employer or any of its linked or associated organisations). Or they could use the time for self-development and training, for this job or the next! The internet has exploded with a vast array of online training tools, from learning a foreign language and playing a musical instrument through to more career development focused courses such as data analysis or mastering Microsoft Excel.

The Department for Education and Skills has some high-quality digital and numeracy online training and careers support which might be of interest to your staff.⁵

You may have some furloughed staff who would like to explore more creative pastimes and there are a number of online resources you can share. For example, the 64 Million Artists website⁶ and the Get Creative page of Facebook⁷ have opportunities for people to get involved in creative activities.

There is also a huge amount of online fitness advice that's available and your furloughed staff may be able to join in classes or activities with other staff who are working remotely.

Your organisation's learning and development programme may also be able to offer support for the professional development of furloughed staff as a way of gaining new skills and boosting their confidence while they stay at home.

⁴ <https://local.gov.uk/our-support/workforce-and-hr-support/wellbeing>

⁵ <https://theskillstoolkit.campaign.gov.uk/> and <https://nationalcareers.service.gov.uk/>

⁶ <https://64millionartists.com/>

⁷ <https://www.facebook.com/getcreativeuk/>

Summary

Being furloughed can be stressful and employers must be mindful of this and take steps to address it. The first step is to keep in touch, support your staff, let them tell you what works for them.

This is new and hard for everyone. It might feel messy and uncomfortable, but the key is to be open, compassionate and inclusive and to keep communicating.