



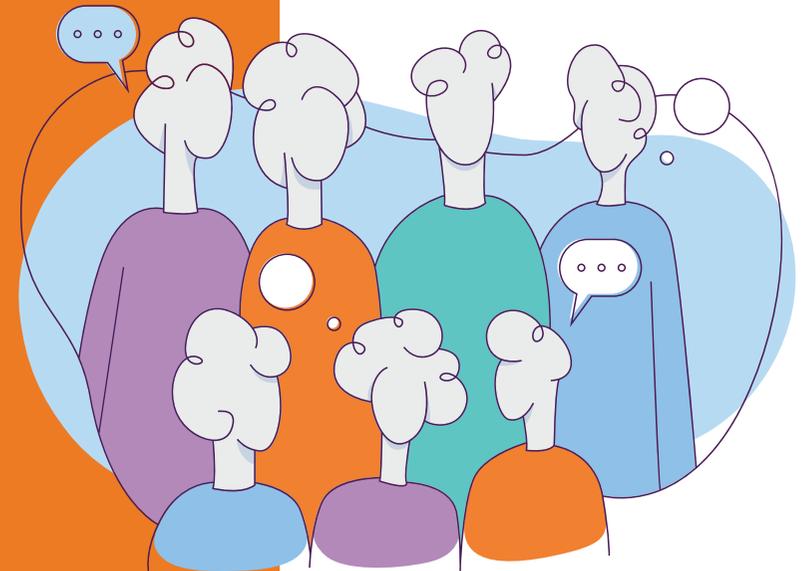
Supporting your employees through furlough: Keeping connected and looking after wellbeing



At Heart of the City we believe every business can be a force for good. We're a charity and we run a two-year programme to support small to medium sized businesses (SMEs) in London to develop responsible business programmes to help them do well by doing good.

We're able to offer this programme thanks to the generous ambassadors that support us. They're a network of responsible business experts who host our events, write our resources (which you can find for free [on our website](#)) and mentor our small business members.

SMEs are facing big challenges as a result of Coronavirus restrictions, and we want to continue our proud history of supporting them. One of the biggest issues Heart of the City members have told us they're facing is navigating placing employees on furlough. They had questions around staying in touch with furloughed employees and looking after their mental health and wellbeing. With the kind help of our ambassadors, we've put together this document which has best practice for SMEs around communicating furlough and supporting mental health.



THE VIEW FROM HR

We asked HR Director Katie Boots your questions about furloughing employees and staying in touch with them.

Katie is the HR Director of a London SME. She's a Chartered Member of the CIPD with over 25 years of HR experience.



How should I decide how to furlough?

// It's important that your criteria for selection are fair and objective, and that you consider the potential discriminatory impact of that criteria. This is particularly the case where you may be taking into account the personal circumstances of individual employees. Relevant considerations for selection may include identifying key workers in your business and those in business-critical roles which the company can't manage without at this time. Alternatively, you might want to ask for volunteers so that employees can consider whether furlough may suit their circumstances. You may also wish to consider rotating employees on furlough so that all employees in a role where there's a reduced need to work spend some time working. Such a rotation would need to take account of the minimum three-week furlough period required by the government's Coronavirus Job Retention Scheme (CJRS). This approach may be particularly relevant where you're not topping up pay above that which may be reimbursed by HMRC under the CJRS or where employees' skills may decline over time."

How should I tell people they're being furloughed?

// If you'll be making applying to HMRC under the CJRS, HMRC guidance requires written notification of furlough and the HM Treasury Direction indicates that the employer and employee must have agreed in writing that the employee will cease all work in relation to their employment. This is an area of uncertainty in the government's guidance and you should take your own legal advice. As a matter of employment law, employee consent is required to make any changes to the terms and conditions of employment. Any such changes should be agreed in writing; for example, if you were to seek to reduce pay to the amount reimbursed by HMRC under the CJRS. As always, good communication is crucial - give your employees clear guidelines and timeframes as far as is possible."

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Am I allowed to keep in touch with employees who've been furloughed?

// Yes, and you should keep in touch from a duty of care perspective. During furlough these individuals are still your employees and communication will be important, but take care in the frequency and content of such communications. Any communications should be purely social or specific to the terms of their furlough and not work related. As furloughed employees mustn't provide any work during the period of furlough they shouldn't be asked or expected to read or respond to emails or other communications from work."

Can I keep furloughed employees updated about what's going on at work?

// Sharing detailed information about the business or communicating with furloughed employees about work even in a general sense may appear to be engaging them in work. This could affect your prospects of claiming under the CJRS, as well as putting further stress on the individual. Communications from the CEO to all employees on the COVID-19 situation may be acceptable (depending on frequency and content as above) but you should be cautious as the government guidance on what may amount to work isn't clear. Perhaps the CEO could do a more tailored email to the furloughed employees."

Can furloughed employees still use work email addresses?

// Work email addresses and phones shouldn't be used during furlough. Best practice is to freeze work email accounts for this period and instruct furloughed employees not to use them. This helps to ensure that they're not engaged in any work during the period. However, you will need to have some agreed means of contacting furloughed employees."

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Is it ok to invite furloughed employees to join virtual social events?

// Yes, but if invitations are sent to the furloughed employee's personal contact details then please check your company privacy policy and the use of such personal contact details. Attendance should be optional."

Can furloughed employees get in touch with their colleagues, managers and employers?

// Yes, but you should inform them that this should be only from a social or keeping in touch perspective, or in relation to their terms of furlough or employment. Conversations shouldn't concern work."

What good news stories can we share?

// Many companies who are furloughing employees are encouraging them to use this time as an opportunity to volunteer in the community and enhance their skill set. Encouraging your furloughed employees to stay busy and share what they've been doing will support their mental wellbeing. If you're applying to HMRC under the CJRS there are parameters around what other activities an employee may participate in and you should take legal advice on this point."

How should I manage the impact on employees who haven't been furloughed?

// The impact on employees still in the business will vary by role and the level of additional work needing to be covered. It's good practice to acknowledge the current change in workplace, workload, working style. Again, good communication is key; regular messages of thanks to those still working from senior leaders is crucial because it's important to share success stories and keep morale up. As with your furloughed employees, take time to look out for the mental health of yourself and all your colleagues."

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THE VIEW ON MENTAL HEALTH

We asked workplace wellbeing and mental health specialist Noa Burger what you should consider about mental health in relation to furlough.

Noa is a workplace wellbeing and mental health specialist. Through a combination of training, consultancy and mentoring services, Noa works with organisations to build resilient, productive and compassionate teams. She's accredited as a trainer by the Royal Society for Public Health and holds an MSc in Psychoanalytic Theory. Noa is also currently training to become a psychotherapist.



Why is it important to consider the mental health of furloughed employees?

// Implementing furlough policies may affect the emotional wellbeing of those furloughed, those continuing to work, and those having to make these challenging decisions. Even if they can't work for you now, furloughed employees remain part of your team. You have an ongoing duty of care to all employees and may also feel a sense of social responsibility to help people stay well during this crisis. Taking a proactive approach to the potential mental health effects of furlough benefits your organisation in the longer term. It can:

- 1. Create a deep sense of loyalty and engagement.** When restrictions lift, you'll want returning employees to give their all to rebuilding the business.
- 2. Differentiate your brand and safeguard your reputation** at a time when the wider public (your customer/client base) is eager to see values of solidarity and kindness.
- 3. Grow the skills and confidence of your employees.** Periods out of work knock people's self-esteem, making it harder to return to previous levels of performance. Supporting furloughed employees to use the time to develop skills in a voluntary or personal capacity will help keep them agile.
- 4. Save money at a time when budgets are extremely tight.** Mental health issues were costing UK businesses more than £35 billion per year before the crisis began. Investing in mental health support for all your employees will reduce costs related to absenteeism, presenteeism and employee turnover."

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What's the potential impact of furlough on employee mental health?

// Employees may experience a broad range of emotions in response to furlough policies. These responses are not in and of themselves a sign of mental illness, but if significant stress and anxiety persist over time without respite, longer-term issues can develop. This will also be compounded by any existing mental health issues and COVID-19 concerns. Furloughed employees may be feeling:

1. Rejected and ashamed that they've been selected for furlough. This may be particularly challenging for younger, less experienced employees, or those coming towards the end of their working lives. These feelings may also lead to anger towards those who haven't been furloughed.
2. Fearful about their job security and prospects.
3. Anxious, abandoned and excluded from workplace relationships, activities and information.
4. Desperate about the financial impact of (in some cases) losing 20% of their pay. Many people budget their monthly expenditure to exactly match their regular income. Any loss of income may then make it challenging to cover essential costs. The IFS has [recently reported](#) that young people, those in low paid jobs and women are most likely to be affected by business shutdown measures.
5. Unmoored and bored by a lack of purpose, structure and meaning to their day. Many people gain a sense of value and self-worth from the contributions they make at work. Furloughed employees may feel disappointed that they're not part of the efforts to sustain the business.
6. Worried about the loss of distraction in what may be a domestically difficult context. For some, work offers relief from challenging or even dangerous home lives.

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Non-furloughed employees may be feeling:

1. Jealous of furloughed colleagues who've been given what is being called 'the gift of time' to spend their days away from work, engaging in projects they've always dreamed about.
2. Resentful that furloughed colleagues are receiving at least 80% of their pay (up to £2,500/month) for doing 0% of their work. They may feel angry that they're seen as the 'lucky' ones when they continue to work at full pay.
3. Stressed about the increased workload and pressure that may be caused by significantly shrunken teams or lost expertise.
4. Afraid of burn out and letting the team down. Some employees will be acutely aware of the burden on their employers and will put pressure on themselves to perform, possibly at the expense of their own physical and mental health.
5. Worried for their colleagues who've been furloughed and guilty that they haven't been. This may put a strain on relationships and could also lead to a sense of anger at employers for, in their eyes, putting them in this situation."

What are the signs that employees are struggling?

// There'll be a combination of emotional, physical and behavioural signs that provide clues to how employees are feeling. These will be different for everyone, so this list is a guide and shouldn't be applied to people without first understanding their personal context. What's most important is to identify changes in what is normal behaviour for a particular individual, and to act quickly if you're concerned about them. Evidence shows that early intervention makes recovery more probable. Examples may include:

Emotional

Angry
Panicked
Agitated
Numb

Disconnected
On edge
Despondant

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Physical

Panic symptoms such as shortness of breath, increased heart rate, clammy hands, increased sweating, inability to keep still, nausea and frequent urination

Tearful

Weight and appetite changes such as increases and decreases

Behavioural

Avoidant, hard to get hold of or withdrawn

Uncooperative, aggressive, quick to snap or combative

Communicating incessantly, not at all or at odd times"

Sleep changes such as sleeping more, less or with disturbances

Nervous 'tics' such as leg shaking, pen tapping, nail biting and teeth clenching

Appearance changes such as looking unkempt or immaculate

Lethargic and listless

Impulsive, making what appear to be rash decisions

Over-compensating such as working significant over-time or without breaks

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What can I do to mitigate negative impacts and encourage greater wellbeing?

// For furloughed employees:

Stay in touch and include furloughed employees in social news and team social activities. You may wish to set up (optional) social activities specifically for furloughed staff such as book clubs. Take care when thinking about the frequency and content of your communications. They should stick to social items or any updates to the terms of their furlough, rather than anything work-related. Furloughed employees shouldn't be asked or expected to read or respond to emails or other communications from work.

Provide clear communications, with certainty wherever possible. Explain why the company is furloughing employees, why they were selected for furlough, and share wider changes and sacrifices that others are making. Employees will fill the gaps where you don't provide information, and what they imagine is often far worse than the truth.

Encourage and support them to keep busy at home. Acknowledge that the situation is difficult, but that we can work on trying to focus on what we can control. Both volunteering and learning new things are proven ways of increasing our wellbeing. They provide purpose, structure and boost self-esteem.

For non- furloughed employees:

Provide clear communications, with certainty wherever possible. Explain why the company is furloughing employees, the importance of their contribution in the short-term, and share wider changes and sacrifices that others are making.

Acknowledge the difficulties specific to their situation but encourage empathy. Explain that there are challenges for those on furlough as well.

If the team shrinks considerably, there may be added pressure on non-furloughed workers. Monitor and manage this proactively through a company-wide process of reprioritisation. Where individuals may need to be asked to carry out new or changed

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responsibilities, seek their agreement.

Provide training and support for any new and changed responsibilities employees need to undertake. Try to play to people's strengths to get the right people on these adapted tasks.

Share strategies for managing stress and maintaining boundaries. Encourage regular breaks, agree working hours and help employees protect their personal time. This needs to be role-modelled by leadership.

For all employees:

Ask twice to find out how they're really feeling. Share your own challenges and how you're managing these in order to reduce any shame or guilt. Personality and culture play a part in how easy someone finds it to ask for help, as does the way we listen to them.

Where employees volunteer how they're feeling, listen actively and without interruption. Don't make assumptions about how others are feeling or judge what they tell you. Treat any information you learn consistently with any internal policy relating to personal data and/or ill health/wellbeing. With that person's agreement, you may seek additional support for them through the agreed channels.

Share the [Five Ways to Wellbeing](#) as a reminder of five things we can build into our everyday routines to feel better, stronger and more positive."

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Where can I signpost employees for additional resources or support?

// If someone's struggling emotionally, being listened to by a colleague may be enough to help them feel better.

If you have access to Mental Health First Aiders, HR, Occupational Health or Employee Assistance Programmes you should communicate about these resources regularly, giving examples of how they're being used. Organisations without these internal resources can signpost to the multiple helplines that are available to the public on the [NHS website](#).

Employees who need more support should contact their GPs who can refer them for specialist help, if appropriate. Those willing and able to seek private counselling should look for a practitioner on an accredited site such as the BACP or UKCP registers. Many are providing services online.

There are a range of online help groups, as well as meditation, resilience and mindfulness resources. Employees can also create their own groups based around shared interests. Encourage teams to pool together their favourite resources and share these more widely.

There are many ways to volunteer, including through local groups and the NHS Responder roles. Many educational institutions offer online courses in a vast range of topics that furloughed employees may want to explore to pursue personal interests. There are also a number of apps for learning a new language or skill."

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This document was created on 29 April 2020 and correct at the time of writing based on government guidance in relation to furloughing employees as at that date. The government guidance is regularly being updated and may change. For up-to-date guidance on furloughing visit www.gov.uk. Employers should seek independent legal advice in relation to furloughing employees.

Thank you to Slaughter and May for contributing to and reviewing this resource. Slaughter and May is a truly collegiate international law firm, with an ambition to be the best at looking after its clients, wherever they operate in the world. They bring a creative, quality and business-aware approach to all of their work, however complex. The firm also works hard to be a responsible business. Leveraging legal skills through pro bono support for increased and sustainable impact is a key element of Slaughter and May's responsible business approach. The firm's pro bono work ranges from giving specialist legal advice to charities and non-profit organisations to supporting community outreach and programmes to assist individuals in need.

