

Supporting Parents and Carers Through Furlough: Resource

Overview

Many of our Charter Partners are accessing the Government's Coronavirus Job Retention Scheme, furloughing a number of employees. This is occurring significantly for employees who are unable to work full time because of their increased caring responsibilities resulting from COVID-19. Through our work enabling performing arts organisations to support their parent and carer workforce through transitions, parental and caring related leave, and returning to the workplace after a period of absence, there are a number of good practice examples that are transferable to this new situation, for both employees with caring responsibilities and the wider workforce. This resource pulls together some good practice guidance for how performing arts organisations can support their staff through the furlough process, both in preparation, during and after; aiming to avoid the experience detailed in a case study at the end of this resource, and to ensure that your workforce can return at its strongest.

As well as the examples of good practice we have received from our various Charter Partners, we have interviewed *Theatre Royal Wakefield* and *Liverpool Everyman and Playhouse* to gain their insights too.

Before

The Coronavirus Job Retention Scheme is intended to support business survival through this difficult period, and subsequently support the future employment of the workforce. This process should be as transparent as possible and as well as making decisions on who to furlough based on organisational impact, should incorporate the needs, challenges and concerns of the individual employee where possible. Many employees with caring responsibilities currently struggle to fully meet work and caring demands, especially single parents and those with partners who are key workers.

- Consider the most beneficial structure of furloughing, now that the scheme has been extended. For example, there is an option to furlough for three weeks, return staff members for one or two weeks, and furlough for a further three weeks (minimum period of furlough). If this was an option for your organisation, it could be discussed with staff, so that both the organisation and the individual can benefit from this process.
- Communicate the intention to and reasons for furlough one-to-one with each member of staff (these conversations can be virtual), to ensure consistency of message and to

answer any questions the individual may have. Many parents and carers at this time have additional anxieties about income and being able to support their family, both now and in the future.

“I had one-to-one conversations with every furloughed colleague. This meant I knew everyone had the same information. I could also reassure them about how valued their contribution was to the theatre and that they were still a valued member of the team” Theatre Royal Wakefield.

- Clearly outline the process, including dates, tasks to be completed before beginning the furlough, and channels of communication. Parents and carers already have additional responsibilities during this period, so clarity of their work situation will mitigate further uncertainty.
- Produce a Furlough Agreement which states the start date of furlough, how much the furloughed employee will be paid, when this will be reviewed and how to keep in contact with the organisation during this period. This provides clear communication, expectations and a clarity of process during this uncertain period. This agreement should also provide reassurance that an employee’s terms of contract will not be changed during this time. A [Furlough Agreement Template](#) can be downloaded from ACAS.
- Avoid making assumptions about staff who may respond positively or negatively to the potential of being furloughed, especially employees with caring responsibilities. You may otherwise unintentionally risk inconsistency of message and information provided, as well as limiting opportunities for staff to raise questions.

“During the lead up, the important thing was that we asked all the line managers to phone or contact their teams before we sent the furlough agreement email through. It was a pretty big task for some people, but it definitely offered some reassurance, and meant it didn’t come out of the blue. There were a lot of different reactions – some people really wanted to be furloughed (especially some of our parents who were struggling to juggle looking after children at home once the schools closed), and some really didn’t (because they wanted the social interaction of work) but because of the calls, everyone really understood why it was important for the company. I think it also helped to reassure people and to try to manage their anxieties about what the future might hold.”

Liverpool Everyman and Playhouse

- **Liverpool Everyman and Playhouse** produced and circulated an FAQ sheet based on all of the queries they had received from staff in regard to furloughing, including clarity over the situation for employees on Maternity, Paternity, Adoption and Shared Parental Leave, as well as trying to break down the government guidance at the time.
- Agree on the way in which an employee will communicate their furloughing to colleagues, freelancers and other stakeholders. Many of our Charter Partners have opted for an organisation-wide automatic reply on emails, which informs recipients and

directs them to the appropriate interim contact. An automatic reply is also a useful method to communicate reply times and expectations during this period. For example, a number of our Charter Partners are including statements about working from home, working flexible or reduced hours, as well as honest statements about their current caring responsibilities, and how all of that might contribute to slower response times or changes in communication.

- Agree the preferred method of keeping contact between line manager and furloughed staff. These need to be flexible to work around many parents and carers's additional responsibilities. Suggested methods of contact are explored in the following section.

During

Government guidelines on the Coronavirus Job Retention Scheme prevent furloughed employees from carrying out any work for your organisation. An employee can undertake training or volunteer, subject to public health guidance. All guidance on this can be found on the [GOV.UK](https://www.gov.uk) website. However, it is important to remember that furloughed individuals are employees of the organisation, and supportive working practices still need to be considered, as the same duty of care remains between organisation and employee.

- Communication with furloughed staff is key. This will ensure that the employee does not feel completely disconnected from the organisation during this time and will support an effective return to work, post furlough. Learning from parents and carers returning from extended periods highlights that feeling removed from a place of work can have negative effects on an individual's wellbeing; furloughing may evoke feelings of missing out and anxieties about returning.

“We’re keeping in touch with furloughed colleagues with an official company email, which we plan to do every 2 or 3 weeks – depending on how much news/certainty we have to share. With line managers keeping more in touch with staff as appropriate depending on the staff member – we’ve got some employees who’d like to check in on a weekly basis, others that find the official company emails sufficient communication.” **Theatre Royal Wakefield.**

- Many of our Charter Partners are providing voluntary, full staff virtual meetings to facilitate key updates and consistency of contact, whilst others are encouraging online social meetings so that staff can maintain valued connections with their colleagues. It is important to stress that these are optional and not work, and that there is no pressure to attend any of these.

“We’ve set up a virtual Green Room on Facebook, for both furloughed and non-furloughed staff, and we’re encouraging people to share activities there –so far we’ve had a lot of content including an online drag cabaret; yoga classes; sewing lessons; dance classes; online local delivery information and an online

storytelling group. Some departments have also set up Whatsapp groups for their teams so they can share social chat whether they're working or not. We have a daily (voluntary) Zoom catch up for the people who are still working, which again is more about recreating the Green Room, and weekly (voluntary) Zoom lunch on Friday which is for anyone, working or on furlough. We're also sending out a weekly newsletter to those people working, and people on furlough who opted in, with a video message from our Chief Exec, and a mix of practical and less-practical info." **Liverpool Everyman and Playhouse**

- You may want to think about provisions and resources that could be put in place specifically for you furloughed employees with caring responsibilities, such as online meetings.

"We have a group of parents who have what they've called an 'online crèche'. They started this when they were still working, and it was a group of people who work in a similar area, who agreed that they'd take thirty minutes each morning to catch up on Zoom, and it wouldn't matter if their little people were screaming in the background or throwing things. I think they've carried on doing that while they're on furlough, and are finding it quite helpful to be able to talk to other parents and share experiences." **Liverpool Everyman and Playhouse**
- This period of furlough, alongside all of the other national COVID-19 measures can have a negative impact on an employee's mental health. [Mental Health UK](#) have published a blog on how to support furloughed staff, [Mental Health Foundation](#) have provided guidance on how to look after your own wellbeing during COVID-19, and [ArtsMind](#) offers a variety of support which may be useful to direct furloughed employees towards. As well as producing a Furlough Pack with useful information and resources, **Sadler's Wells** have also adopted Mind's [Wellness Action Plans](#) to support their staff's mental health through this difficult period.
- If your organisation has an Employee Assistance Programme (EAP), direct your furloughed employees to this, should they require additional support.
- If you are a line-manager, consider your style and approach. Keeping interactions similar and recognisable to the relationship you have already established with those you are responsible for can provide familiarity and consistency for employees in this uncertain time.

After

- Just as you would create a Return-to-Work Plan for those on parental leave, it will be good practice to consider how to support furloughed employees to return to the workplace, given their time away and the changes that may have been made to business plans and staffing.

“We do know that we plan to have a staggered return, as workload requires, rather than going from current staffing straight back to full strength. We are also very aware that as furloughed staff return we will have a lot of information to update them about, as business operations have had some radical changes during the last month. We’ve already started documenting things, so hopefully we can get everyone returning up to speed quickly and we won’t forget important information we need to tell them.” **Theatre Royal Wakefield.**

- Review your parental and caring related policies, which may need to be accessed during and after furlough, or could provide examples of working practices that could be adopted when staff are returning to work. Just as when an employee with caring responsibilities returns from parental leave, in the time a furloughed employee has been away from the organisation a number of things could have occurred or changed for them, including changes in their caring responsibilities, the support available to them and even bereavements. Useful policies to consider include Time off for Dependents, Adjustment Leave, Compassionate Leave and Bereavement Policy and Children in the Workplace Policy.

“What we are aware of is that maybe a huge “hurrah – we’re back” isn’t what people will necessarily want if they’ve had bereavements, or if they feel they’re unable to go to the theatre until they feel safe, and I think we’ll need to reflect that when we talk to people about coming back to work. Some will naturally be anxious about coming into the buildings if they have vulnerable people at home, for example, and probably many people will feel really unsettled for a variety of reasons.” **Liverpool Everyman and Playhouse**

- In the same way that Keep in Touch days (KIT days) can be implemented during parental leave, it may be beneficial to explore a similar provision for furloughed staff returning to the organisation. Under usual parental leave, best practice would be to use KIT days to facilitate a return to work through familiarization of the organisation and strategy, completing time-limited tasks, and to undertake training to benefit both the employee and organisation. The KIT day model cannot be used to undertake paid work, but could be used for training to support re-entry to work.
- There may be some benefit in establishing a buddy scheme between non-furloughed staff and furloughed staff returning to work; this can connect two distanced cohorts of the workforce, whilst also providing the opportunity for the employee returning to work to be informed of the different changes.
- Again, using good practice found within Maternity Policies, a recommendation could be arranging a meeting and discussing the dates of returning before sending any official correspondence.
- A phased return (on full pay, on an agreed pattern, over an agreed maximum number of weeks) might be beneficial for both the furloughed employee and the organisation.

Adjustments will need to be made for parents and carers in regard to the staggered lifting of COVID-19 measures in areas such as childcare, schools reopening, commuting, and the level of safety required if an employee has caring responsibilities for someone who is deemed vulnerable or high risk. The organisation might not be at full operation either.

- Explore ways in which you can instill a sense of collective return to work, with an event, series of workshops or development opportunities for your workforce.

“I’m thinking about how we get the full team united when we come back. As well as supporting our furloughed colleagues, this is also about how we support non-furloughed colleagues, both now and when we return, so they are not completely burnt out. I think this will need some careful management, so the organisation does not feel as though there is a permanent rupture between furloughed and not.” Theatre Royal Wakefield.

Case Study - When Furloughing Goes Wrong

This is a difficult and unprecedented situation for both organisations and individuals, with decisions needing to be made quickly, in the best interests of all involved. With constantly changing information, an absence of sufficient preparatory time for a situation of this magnitude, and processes needing to be put into action rapidly to safeguard survival of organisations, it is understandable that practices we may have prided ourselves on cannot be fully attained, and some mistakes may be made. With this in mind, we have obtained a case study, from a performing arts organisation outside of the Charter Programme, which illustrates the experience of a parent that we are all trying to avoid. This example aims to strengthen the case for the good practice considerations explored throughout this resource. This case study is an example of a furloughing process to avoid.

“The whole process of furloughing happened so quickly for me that I’m still digesting it a few weeks on. I was told of the possibility of staff from my theatre being furloughed at the end of the working day on Friday. I received the confirmation that it would be happening for me on the Saturday (which I missed as I wasn’t working) and then had a phone call with my manager on Monday morning to tell me that I would be furloughed until further notice. An email followed in the next few days, outlining the government’s guidelines of what furloughing meant and how I couldn’t carry out work for the organisation. For the first week I received daily text messages from my line manager asking me work related questions, as well as being told that I could not tell anyone that I had been furloughed, including the team of freelancers that I manage. It put me in an extremely awkward position. In fact, I only know anecdotally who is still working and who has been furloughed at my organisation.”

We have been invited for regular, optional full staff meetings, and whilst these are good for social aspects, I am yet to receive any update on the organisation's position or plans. I've stopped attending out of anger.

I know this is a difficult time for everyone and tough decisions need to be made to save organisations, but this process has had a significant impact on my mental health; not having sufficient time to plan or ability to communicate with those I am responsible for, having unreliable messages from line-management, and, something that I know a number of my furloughed peers are grappling with, the feeling of value or not being a necessity to the organisation. Add onto that unexpectant homeschooling of my children and a decrease in income; this is not just being paid to sit at home.”

Furloughed employee from a performing arts organisation.

Further Resources

- Government update - [Furloughed workers to receive full parental leave entitlement](#)
- [CIPD Coronavirus \(COVID-19\): furlough guide](#)
- Directory of Social Change - [Supporting Furloughed Staff](#)
- Wellbeing coach Tahirih McLaren-Brown's blog on [ensuring the wellbeing of furloughed staff](#)
- [Coronavirus Job Retention Scheme](#)
- Mind's [Wellness Action Plans](#)
- [Mental Health UK](#)'s blog on how to support furloughed staff
- [Mental Health Foundation](#)'s guidance on how to look after your own wellbeing during COVID-19
- [ArtsMind](#) - Supporting performers and creative practitioners in need
- PiPA's [Home Working Guidance](#)
- PiPA's [Reduced Working Guidance](#)
- PiPA's [Working From Home With Children](#)
- [Parenting Under Covid-19](#) - Recent article by PiPA Board Member and Music Industry Expert Vick Bain