Advice for employers on Coronavirus (COVID-19)

Peopletime
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As the global spread of the Coronavirus (COVID-19) continues, the impact on the workplace is likely to increase. There are considerations as an employer and also a duty of care to employees that is required in light of this outbreak. The Government has also announced a number of renumeration packages to support employers during this time. Click here for current Budget advice. Below are a number of key points to be aware of:

GENERAL GOOD PRACTICE

1. Communication – be transparent with all your staff about the steps you are taking to ensure their safety and reduce the risk of exposure to the Coronavirus in the workplace.
2. Ensure all employee contact details and emergency numbers are up to date.
3. Ensure all line managers are aware of any relevant policies and procedures in case their staff are affected, such as sickness absence reporting procedure, sick pay policy etc.
4. Encourage employees to follow recommended good hygiene practices e.g. use of sanitising hand gel, appropriate use and disposal of tissues etc. and ensure you have good supplies of all items.
5. Where practicable to do so, support your workforce to stay at least 2 metres (about 3 steps), away from other staff.
6. Consider company travel arrangements and assess the priority/risk of any travel to affected countries.

ADVICE WHEN DEALING WITH INDIVIDUAL EMPLOYEES

- From 13th March 2020 the 14 day self-isolation guidance was withdrawn and replaced with guidance advising that individuals should self-isolate for 7 days if they develop a persistent cough and fever - being the most common symptoms of COVID-19.
- All employees should notify their employer as soon as possible if they are unable to attend work. Your normal policy on sick leave and pay entitlements will apply.
- Statutory Sick Pay (SSP) will be available for eligible individuals diagnosed with COVID-19 or those who are unable to work because they are self-isolating in line with Government advice.
- Statutory Sick Pay (SSP) will be payable from **day 1** instead of day 4 for affected individuals if the employee has to self-isolate for **7 days from when the symptoms start.** Self-isolation may need to continue beyond 7 days if the employee is still unwell.
- Employees are able to self-certify in the usual way that they have COVID-19 symptoms rather than visiting a doctor.
- Employers can request that employees work from home. It is worth considering which roles can be accommodated to work from home before it is needed e.g.: undertake a review of equipment and IT system security.
- Employers have a duty of care to all their employees. Accordingly, individuals wishing to return to work, against advice to self-isolate, could be suspended if they refuse to comply.
- No employee should be singled out as at risk based on their ethnicity or race. Any incidents should be addressed immediately as per the company's equal opportunities policy.
- If an individual is concerned that they may catch the virus in the workplace, the employer should try to understand any specific concerns and make a judgement about how this can be addressed. If the concerns are un-substantiated and the employee refuses to come to work, the employer can consider offering the period of absence as unpaid or holiday, or a combination of both. In worse case scenarios the absence may result in disciplinary action.
- Chinese nationals in the UK who are normally resident in China and whose visas expire between 24 January 2020 and 30 March 2020 will have their visas automatically extended to 31 March 2020
- This is an unusual situation so please do take advice on your particular circumstances as appropriate.

ADVICE WHEN DEALING WITH BUSINESS-WIDE IMPACT

In the event that an employer has to close the workplace (or a particular site), the company's Business Continuity and Disaster Recovery policies and procedures will need to come into play. Employers should ensure:

- Their policies and procedures have been reviewed and up to date.
- All staff are aware of the procedures.
- All staff are aware of the communication channels if the workplace has to close, and all employee contact details are correct.
- Make sure your Sickness Policy is up to date and readily available to all staff.
- No employee should be identified as contracting the virus (other than the necessary steps to contain a potential infection) as this is Special Category Data under Data Protection laws.

REMEMBER

- To maintain normal health and safety hygiene practices for your staff e.g. having anti-bacterial soap available in all washroom facilities.
- Tell all your staff BEFORE you need to apply your policies so they are all aware what the organisation's approach is.
- Record every decision and action taken so you have an audit trail of everything you've done.

USEFUL LINKS

https://www.gov.uk/government/news/coronavirus-covid-19-guidance-for-employees-employers-and-businesses

https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/covid-19-stay-at-home-guidance

https://www.acas.org.uk/coronavirus

Important: Please note this is general guidance which we hope will be useful to you, however the coronavirus situation is evolving so you should be sure to follow the latest health advice given by the Government. Further, every organisation is different so it should not be treated as HR/legal/medical advice on your particular organisations circumstances.