**Welfare Meeting Guide**

**Introduction**

A welfare meeting is an initial conversation an employer has with an employee during a period of sickness absence.

Welfare meetings play a useful role in absence management procedures, helping to identify issues relating to an employee’s absence at an early stage. Employee sickness absence can negatively impact operations, while employers are also under a duty to ensure the health, safety and welfare of their staff. This requires employers to take a proactive approach to absence management.

In this guide for employers, we examine the role of the welfare meeting at work, to what type of welfare meeting questions need to be asked — not only to help support an employee’s recovery but, where appropriate, to facilitate a speedier return to the workplace.

**What is a welfare meeting at work?**

Employees who are off work sick through either illness or injury for in excess of one month may be considered on [long-term sick leave](http://www.davidsonmorris.com/long-term-sickness-absence/). At this stage, it’s prudent to arrange a welfare meeting. This meeting can be used to help you gain a better understanding of the employee’s current health situation, to establish how long they’re likely to be absent from work, how likely they’re going to be able to perform their job role on their return, and what steps can be taken to support them.

Having robust procedures in place in the context of long-term sick leave is vital to discharging your statutory duty to ensure the health, safety and welfare of your employees. Providing suitable support for an employee suffering from ongoing illness or injury is also vital to the success of your business. Any failure to put in place measures to help an employee in their return to work, or in performing their job role, is likely to lead to increased rates of absenteeism and even, in some cases, the loss of valuable members of staff.

**How should a welfare meeting at work be arranged?**

At the point at which a welfare meeting is deemed appropriate, the employee should be notified in writing to advise them of the meeting, with sufficient notice to allow them to make arrangements to attend. Depending on the reason for their absence(s), holding the meeting in the workplace may feel uncomfortable for them. It’s recommended that the employee be given the option to attend the welfare meeting at work, at home or at a neutral venue.

In some cases, depending on the severity of their condition, they may need more time to recover, although you could agree to conduct the meeting remotely. In either case, whether the meeting is to be held face-to-face or via video link, this must be held in private, although the employee may want to be accompanied for moral support, for example, by a trusted colleague. As a welfare meeting is relatively informal, you’re not legally obligated to allow an employee to be accompanied, but it’s advised to accommodate any such reasonable requests.

The employee should be informed in advance of the purpose of the meeting, providing them with reassurance that this is not in any way designed to force them back into work, nor to [discipline them for being off work](http://www.davidsonmorris.com/disciplinary-procedure/), but rather solely intended to support them.

An outline of the issues to be discussed should also be explained to the employee in writing, for example, the nature and extent of their ill health, any medical prognosis given, whether treatment is needed, and what steps can be taken to support them on their return to work. It can even be worth stating that the employee is missed at work, and that the meeting is an opportunity for you to offer your support in their recovery process.

**What welfare meeting questions could be asked?**

Knowing how to effectively lead a welfare meeting at work, and what questions to ask, will go a long way to ensuring that the meeting is productive and supportive.

Whilst it’s difficult to predict how open and upfront an employee will be, where a degree of flexibility may be needed in your format, the following welfare meeting questions can be used to structure your conversation so that the most pertinent issues are covered:

* How’s your recovery progressing?
* What symptoms are you currently experiencing?
* Are you undergoing a course of treatment?
* If not, has a course of treatment been recommended?
* What’s the most recent prognosis from your doctor?
* How long do you think you’re likely to be off work?
* How do you feel about returning to work?
* Do you think you’ll be able to perform all aspects of your job role?
* Do you think you might need some support in performing your job role?
* What steps can we take to support you in your recovery?
* What steps can we take to support you in your return to work?

All welfare meeting questions should be approached sensitively. The employee may be feeling unwell or, at the very least, vulnerable and anxious. They may also feel uncomfortable discussing personal details about their condition, especially for those suffering from mental health issues. It’s therefore important to reassure them of the purpose of the meeting — to provide them with support — and to be empathic and understanding at all times. It’s also important to not be too formal in your approach when asking welfare meeting questions. The whole idea is to get an employee to open up, and not to feel interrogated or pressured. These are extremely delicate situations and acting rashly may risk a claim under the equality acts. It is important to remember that the employee is under no obligation to disclose sensitive personal information and so can decline to answer any questions they wish.

**How should a welfare meeting at work be followed up?**

At the end of a welfare meeting at work, it’s important to put in place some form of action plan, whether this be the need for a further meeting to review the employee’s condition where the prognosis is unclear or, for those who may be fit for work, to think about what steps can be taken to support their return. A referral to an occupational health specialist may be needed to look at the requirements of the employee’s job role against their current limitations, and what adjustments can be made to their working conditions in the context of that role.

Provided the welfare meeting is well-led, this can be used to keep the lines of communication open, help to unlock any concerns and enable both parties to map out a way moving forward.

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