Managing pregnancy and maternity at work

A conversation guide for line managers
As a line manager, you have an important part to play in the smooth running of your organisation and a significant impact on the day-to-day experience of the people you manage. This includes employees who may be pregnant, on maternity, or preparing to come back to work.

Whatever the situation, it is important to continue to have regular, honest and open conversations with your team member during this period to ensure the most positive and productive experience for you both.

This guide has been created to help ensure you feel comfortable about the conversations you will need to have and when. It includes practical guidance and advice, as well as key considerations. A corresponding guide has also been created for employees.

We’ve kept it simple and straightforward, and while we cover some important points, it’s best to check your company’s policies and contact your HR team or senior management team for more information, especially if you have any queries or concerns. Also, see if there are any employee schemes, benefits and support networks that you can both benefit from.

You can find further guidance, advice and helpful tools including checklists, letter templates and a Maternity Date Planner on the Equality and Human Rights commission website: www.equalityhumanrights.com/workingforward

For health and safety assessments, the Health and Safety Executive (HSE) has a useful flow chart which sets out the steps an employer must take to protect pregnant women and new mothers in the workplace: hse.gov.uk/mothers/docs/pregnant-workers-flow-chart.pdf

You may also wish to undertake this short, free ACAS training module for line managers: elearning.acas.org.uk/
When you learn that your employee is pregnant

One of the best things you can do when someone in your team tells you they are pregnant is to congratulate them. There will be plenty of time between now and when their maternity leave starts to discuss how their work will be covered.

Then, it’s time to do some fact finding. Firstly, you should find out about your company’s pregnancy and maternity policies. Also, be aware of any statutory entitlements and, when you next catch up about her pregnancy, let her know where she can find this information (if she hasn’t already done some fact finding of her own).

It’s best to have a talk with the individual as early as possible, ideally face to face, to discuss her pregnancy and forthcoming maternity leave. The research you’ve done will come in handy as you talk through things such as her rights, your company’s existing health and safety risk assessment, concerns she may have about health and safety, and when she wants to let her other colleagues know.

This may be your first time dealing with pregnancy and maternity at work so take advantage of any available support and be proactive in dealing with any issues. For example, if there isn’t already a buddy system for pregnant employees and their line managers at your company, together you could set one up.
Have a conversation in whatever way is most natural to the both of you. It doesn’t have to be a formal meeting. It could take place over a coffee, if that’s what works for you.

When it comes to having a conversation about pregnancy and maternity at work, it’s best to be open and honest. Encourage the person in your team to be open with any concerns in order to get the support that she needs. She will hold many of the answers and should feel comfortable making recommendations about how best to manage things.

Share your company policies and highlight anything that you think might be useful; for example the policy regarding time off for antenatal care.

See the Maternity Date Planner on the Equality and Human Rights website to understand what will be coming up.

It’s a good idea to put any discussion points and agreements in writing; this helps avoid any confusion down the line.
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When you learn that your employee is pregnant

Conversation checklist
You may want to refer to these discussion points to ensure that key issues are covered at the right time. It is advisable to include the following:

☐ Time off for antenatal care – let her know what your internal policy is and be aware that you must allow pregnant employees to take reasonable paid time off for appointments.

☐ Health and safety considerations – including your organisation’s health and safety assessment and any risks that have been identified for pregnant women. The individual should feel able to discuss any specific risks identified by her or her doctor that have not been captured on your assessment.

☐ Annual leave – encourage her to plan when to take annual leave. You could explain that some employees have found it useful to use the leave accumulated while they’re on maternity leave to phase their return to work.

☐ When to give notice – your employee must tell you when she wants to start her maternity leave by the 15th week before the baby is due (that is when she is about six months pregnant).
Managing someone who is pregnant and preparing for maternity leave

As the individual’s pregnancy develops, so might her needs. She will need to attend antenatal appointments and classes, as recommended by a doctor, midwife or health visitor, and it may help you to keep a note of these so that you can plan around them.

As the due date gets nearer, she will start to make decisions around her maternity, including a likely leave date, as well as preparing to hand over her workload. It’s best to talk through these plans with her as soon as possible. It helps to allow plenty of time to prepare for things such as how you intend to cover her role, whether she might have some input and how to organise her handover.

You can do this in whatever way is best for the both of you. You may choose to have regular meetings in the run-up to her going on leave, or keep in contact via email.
2.1 Managing someone who is pregnant and preparing for maternity leave

To help the both of you keep on top of any antenatal appointments, you could suggest that she adds these to your diary or schedule.

Flag any support either of you might need early on. Organise a handover period and think ahead to anything both of you will need to do immediately on her return to work, such as any mandatory training.

It would be useful to remind her about taking annual leave. For instance, she could use it in the lead-up to her maternity leave, or even on her return to work.

You should schedule regular catch-ups with your employee as her leave date gets nearer, and agree how you’ll stay in touch while she’s away. It’s advisable to have a more formal meeting before she goes on maternity leave.

Top tips for productive conversations:

1. To help the both of you keep on top of any antenatal appointments, you could suggest that she adds these to your diary or schedule.

2. Flag any support either of you might need early on. Organise a handover period and think ahead to anything both of you will need to do immediately on her return to work, such as any mandatory training.

3. It would be useful to remind her about taking annual leave. For instance, she could use it in the lead-up to her maternity leave, or even on her return to work.

4. You should schedule regular catch-ups with your employee as her leave date gets nearer, and agree how you’ll stay in touch while she’s away. It’s advisable to have a more formal meeting before she goes on maternity leave.
Managing someone who is pregnant and preparing for maternity leave

Conversation checklist
You may want to refer to these discussion points during this period to ensure that key issues are covered at the right time. Throughout her pregnancy, you should catch up regularly to discuss:

☐ Any new health and safety risks identified by your employee or her doctor.
☐ Any changes to her work patterns due to pregnancy.
☐ Additional support she may need to fulfil her role.
☐ Ideas you both may have had on how best to cover her role while she is on maternity leave.
☐ A handover as she prepares to go on maternity leave.
☐ How long she thinks she’ll be on maternity leave (making it clear she can change her mind but that she can take a full 52 weeks).

There are also key things that should ideally be discussed and agreed before your team member goes on maternity leave:

☐ Confirmation of payment of Statutory Maternity Pay and/or contractual maternity pay.
☐ How and when she wants to keep in touch, and what about. (In addition to legally required communication, e.g. reorganisations or promotion opportunities)
☐ Plans for returning to work, e.g. if she will be requesting flexible working.
☐ Notice periods required for early return to work, Shared Parental Leave and pay, and if she decides to extend her maternity leave.
Keeping in touch during maternity leave

While your team member is away on maternity leave, you should agree how you’re going to stay in touch as well as her anticipated return date. Different people keep in touch in different ways. This can be the occasional email or text or more formal structured contact; whatever you have agreed between you is fine.

It’s best to let your team member know your company policy on Keeping In Touch (KIT) days. These are up to 10 working days during maternity leave that your team member can use without affecting her entitlement to Statutory Maternity Pay.

It is important to plan KIT days in order to ensure that both your team member and the business benefit from them. Team members on maternity leave should be offered the chance to re-engage with colleagues and actively catch up with business developments. Some companies offer employees the opportunity to undertake training during this time in order to upskill or refresh existing skills.
Keeping in touch during maternity leave

1. Keep her up to date with any company developments, e.g. redundancy situations, a reorganisation that would impact on her job, the possibility of a pay rise, job opportunity or promotions that she needs to apply for.

2. It might be that she wants to change her working pattern, maybe start to work part-time. Encourage her to share her thoughts about this and then you can look into a possible flexible working request, and what support might be available from both your company and yourself.

3. Discuss with her if she would like a phased return to work, what this might look like and how you could both make it work. You could suggest she use her annual leave to start working a few days a week, and build back up gradually from there.
3.2 Keeping in touch during maternity leave

You must communicate the following
If there are promotions or other job opportunities that she needs to apply for, a redundancy situation, a reorganisation that would impact on her job or the possibility of a pay rise.

Conversation checklist
You may want to refer to these discussion points during this period to ensure that key issues are covered at the right time. It is advisable to discuss the following:

☑️ If your team member intends to take the full 52 weeks off work.
☑️ If she wants to return earlier – in which case, she will need to give you eight weeks’ notice before the date she plans to return.
☑️ If she chooses to end maternity leave and take Shared Parental Leave instead.
☐ Keeping In Touch days and Shared Parental Leave In Touch days.
Preparing for a successful return to work

Your team member has completed her maternity leave and is preparing to come back to work.

At this stage, it’s best to have a conversation before as well as immediately on her return to work to discuss any plans and expectations. It would be a good idea to encourage her to be open and clear with how she’d like to make the transition. This helps ensure things are as smooth as possible. Take a moment to remind yourself of your company’s policies beforehand, and encourage her to do the same.

She might require some practical support too. For instance, if she’s breastfeeding and wants to express milk then she’ll need access to a fridge to store it.

The first few weeks following the return to work can be the most challenging for a new mother so be mindful of any difficulties that your team member may be experiencing during this time. Remain in regular contact with her throughout this period to discuss any challenges she is facing and how you could address them together.

Postnatal depression is not an uncommon issue for new mothers: indeed, it affects more than 1 in every 10 women within a year of giving birth. Your company policy should provide guidance on how to approach the issue with any employees. However, if you would like to find out more about the symptoms of postnatal depression and the support that may be available, please visit: www.nhs.uk/Conditions/Postnataldepression/Pages/Introduction.aspx
4.1 Preparing for a successful return to work

Top tips for productive conversations

1. As soon as she’s returned to work, you should have a chat or a meeting to discuss her return as well as updates, suggestions or concerns that either of you may have.

2. You could encourage your team member to rebuild her own professional network as a good way of settling back in and reconnecting with colleagues and contacts.

3. Don’t be afraid to check in with her along the way and ask how she’s feeling or if she needs help with anything.

4. You may also want to ask about any practical needs; for instance, if she is breastfeeding, she may need access to a fridge to be able to store any expressed milk.

5. You might want to encourage her to take some time to review her professional development plans and ambitions.
Preparing for a successful return to work

Conversation checklist
You may want to refer to these discussion points during this period to ensure that key issues are covered at the right time. It is advisable to include the following:

☐ Changes to the workplace or team since your team member left.
☐ If/how to phase her return.
☐ Flexible working options.
☐ Her immediate and long-term career plans; this will help you assign her tasks in line with her plans.
Finally

We hope this guide has been useful and given you the information, tips and advice needed to help you and your team member make a success of managing pregnancy and maternity at work.

For more information, resources and training, please visit: www.equalityhumanrights.com/workingforward