

## **Need a Cure for the Christmas Party HR Hangover?**

Christmas is a time for merriment, festive lunches and partying until dawn. It is a fantastic opportunity for employers to reward staff and recognise the previous 12 months hard work.

**Helen Taylor**, Head of Employment at award winning and leading regional law firm Pictons Solicitors says, “Staff engagement and a time to socialise is usually the main driver for any work’s Christmas party. Getting it right can have a positive impact on staff morale. If however it all goes wrong, the aftermath can involve costly legal consequences and a damaged business reputation.”

“The wise employer will have planned carefully and taken steps to minimise these risks. The ground rules will have been set with reminders being issued concerning expected standards of behaviour. The celebrations will be inclusive; absent employees will have been invited, adjustments made for staff with disabilities and those who do not celebrate Christmas, consume alcohol or certain foods due to their religion or belief. On the big day, management safeguards will be in place behind the scenes to deal with bad behaviour particularly fuelled by excessive alcohol consumption.”

### **Even the best laid plans may go wrong, so what steps should be taken if they do?**

#### **Take all complaints seriously**

Do not dismiss any complaint as “banter” or a “joke”; all concerns should be dealt with seriously and sympathetically. Employers should not forget that they can be held responsible for the actions of their employees at a work’s social event.

#### **Act immediately**

The problem should not be left until the New Year. Most complaints can be dealt with quickly and easily. Delay can exacerbate the complaint and undermine your internal procedures.

## **Investigate**

A thorough investigation will minimise any legal risks. Where appropriate, talk to all parties involved, get statements from witnesses and gather evidence.

## **Be proactive in taking advice**

If in doubt as to what to do or if the issues appear complex take advice about managing any process and the legal and financial considerations. Advice from the outset can put you on the right track and ensure any legal issues are addressed before it is too late.

## **Follow your policies and procedures**

The complaint will determine which policies and procedures need to be considered. A variety of policies may have been breached, such as Equal Opportunities, Bullying and Harassment, Drugs and Alcohol, Social Media and the Disciplinary Code.

## **Take formal action**

Any concern must be dealt with under your Grievance Procedure. Any cases of misconduct should be addressed under your Disciplinary Procedure. Always ensure that the procedure is fair and impartial and be mindful of the ACAS Code of Practice on Disciplinary and Grievance Procedures.

## **Check social media activity**

Promoting your social media policy in advance may minimise the risk of disparaging or embarrassing postings, but it is worthwhile keeping an eye on any postings. Steps may need to be taken to control the situation to avoid further disputes between colleagues and any damage to the organisation's reputation.

## **Learn**

Arrange a debriefing meeting once the concern has been resolved and use this to positively affect your working practices for the future.

Helen adds, "Simple safeguards in advance can lead to a trouble free event, which allows everyone to have a fantastic time and you may not have to resort to the steps above; instead, your focus will be on preparing for a prosperous and dispute free New Year".

**For more information about the issues contained in this article or you need assistance in managing a Christmas party complaint, contact Helen on [helen.taylor@pictons.co.uk](mailto:helen.taylor@pictons.co.uk) or call 0800 302 9448**