

**Managing Sickness and Absence – Guidance for Managers**

***Further to the Sickness Absence Policy please see additional guidance notes for Senior Leaders and Line Managers.***

1. **Informal handling of short-term sickness absence**

Managers should normally hold an informal meeting with an employee when they have reached one of the trigger points listed in the section *‘Procedure for managing sickness absence under the Disciplinary policy’* of the procedure.

However, there may be cases where the Manager does not consider this necessary or appropriate, for example, where the employee has a high level of sickness absence caused by a known underlying cause and where the level of absence is expected to return to a satisfactory level within an acceptable timescale. The Manager should record the reasons for not holding an informal meeting.

Informal handling of sickness absence issues should be positive and supportive, with the aim of finding ways to support the employee in improving their attendance to an acceptable level. In preparation for holding a meeting the Manager should review any information that they already have about the employee’s absences, without prejudging the situation. This will help identify any potential areas to explore with the employee.

The Manager should consider:

Information on any self-certificates or doctor’s statements – are the reasons the same or could they be linked?

* The proportion of absence covered by a statement of fitness to work.
* Any further information given at return-to-work interviews.
* Any other evidence about possible underlying causes for the absence.
* Are any patterns of absence emerging?
* Is the employee taking their annual leave entitlement?

Meetings should be held in private, and the employee should be encouraged to talk openly about their absence.

The Manager should raise their concerns about the employee’s absence levels and/or patterns of absence.

The employee should be asked to explain the reasons for their unacceptable absence and explore whether there could be any underlying health issues, workplace or external factors that are contributing to their absence. The Manager may decide to adjourn the meeting to investigate these further.

Where the Manager suspects that periods of absence may have been caused by family or similar factors, rather than genuine personal sickness/injury they may decide it is appropriate to declare an ‘amnesty’ on previous incidents so as to encourage the employee to talk about the reasons for their absence without fear of disciplinary action. Having discussed the issues the Manager should restate the boundaries of the sick pay scheme and make it clear that future abuse of the scheme would lead to disciplinary action. The Manager can direct the employee to the Planned, Emergency and Special Leave scheme where appropriate.

The employee should be asked to suggest ways that they can improve their attendance and any reasonable support that the school could provide to help him/her improve attendance.

The Manager should be supportive in identifying reasonable ways of assisting the employee in improving their attendance. This may include considering:

* Providing medical/other support e.g. confidential counselling (Employee Assistance Programme) or seeking advice from occupational health about whether there could be an underlying health problem.
* Encouraging and supporting changes in lifestyle e.g. support in giving up smoking
* Supporting the employee finding external sources of support (e.g. help groups), where appropriate
* Practical support to assist attendance e.g. change of hours, flexible working, support with resolving domestic or travel to work issues.
* Addressing work related issues e.g. equipment, workload, work processes
* Reviewing the nature and level of the employee’s role

Whilst being reasonable in providing support to the employee, the Manager should also consider the operational needs of the school.

The Manager should also explain the impact the employee’s absence is having on the school, the employee’s responsibility for attending work, set targets and timescales for improved attendance and, where appropriate, expectations for reporting and certificating absence.

The Manager may decide to ask the employee to supply statements of fitness to work from a GP for each period of absence or where absence may be falling into an unacceptable pattern, e.g. for absences immediately before or after annual leave. Permission from the head teacher should be sought before requiring this as the employee will be entitled to reclaim charges for statements from the school. The Manager should inform the employee of how they can claim this.

The Manager should explain how the employee’s attendance levels will be reviewed and that if the specified improvement is not made that formal action may be taken under the procedure.

Following informal meetings, the Manager should:

* Investigate and, where reasonable, take action to resolve any workplace factors identified.
* Implement support measures and actions agreed in the meeting e.g., asking the school’s HR provider to refer the employee to occupational health.
* Make a file note of actions and targets set and provide a copy of the file note to the employee.
* Where the Manager decides, no further action is required following the informal meeting, they should keep a note of the reasons for this.
* Continue to review attendance and the support measures.

1. **Formal handling of short-term sickness absence**

Formal meetings should consider:

Informal and formal action taken so far and whether any targets set have been met within the specified timescales and sustained.

* Any new medical advice or information received since the last meeting
* Whether medical advice indicates that the employee has an underlying health issue or disability.
* The effectiveness of any support put in place.
* Whether redeployment should be considered.

The employee should be asked to comment on these points.

The Manager may wish to adjourn the meeting to consider the employee’s response and reach a decision.

The Manager holding a first formal meeting may decide that:

* No further action is required.
* The matter should continue to be handled informally. The Manager should inform the employee of the reason(s) for this decision, targets for attendance required, timescales and any support that will be put in place to help the employee to achieve targets set. The employee should be informed that formal action may be taken in future if these targets are not met, and an acceptable level of attendance maintained. The Manager should keep notes of the key points of the meeting and should give a copy of these to the employee.
* A warning should be issued specifying targets, timescales and support (if appropriate) for achieving an acceptable level of attendance. The employee should be warned that their employment may be at risk if they do not reach the targets set and maintain a satisfactory standard of attendance. The warning should be provided in writing and be effective for 12 months.

Where a warning is issued the Manager will meet informally with the employee during the specified period in order to discuss progress.

At the end of the specified period the line Manager will meet informally with the employee. Where targets have been achieved and sustained improvement is expected the employee should be informed of this. The employee should be informed that they are expected to maintain a satisfactory standard of attendance and that the warning issued at stage one will remain effective for the remainder of the12 months from the date of the stage one meeting and that if the employee’s attendance becomes of concern within that period a final formal meeting will be convened.

Where targets have not been reached the Manager should inform the employee that a second formal stage meeting will be arranged.

**2.1 Second formal stage meeting – short term sickness**

At the second formal stage meeting the Manager will consider the facts of the case and having listened to the employee’s comments, will decide on whether a dismissal hearing should be arranged or to take another course of action.

Where the Manager believes that there is good reason to extend the timescales for achieving the targets, they may do so, and adjourn the second formal stage meeting until the end of the extended time.

**3.0 Long term sickness absence**

Keeping in touch during long term sickness absence

It is important to keep in regular contact with the employee so the line Manager can stay informed about their progress and so that the employee feels in touch with the workplace and valued. Lack of contact can make it harder for the employee to return to work. The Manager should agree with the employee how, and how frequently you will keep in contact. This will depend upon the nature of the employee’s condition. The Manager can seek further advice from the school’s HR provider.

Contact needs to be sensitive, so the employee does not feel pressurised into returning to work before/he she is fit to do so.

Depending upon the reason for absence, contact early on may simply be to find out how the employee is and to show concern about him/her. As appropriate the Manager may also need to discuss their prognosis, when they are likely to be able to return to work, and whether there is anything the Manager can do to support their return to work.

An employee can only be visited at home with their consent, and they may wish to have a trade union representative or work colleague present. As with any visit to someone’s home the Manager should take steps to ensure their own safety. You can seek further advice from the school’s HR provider.

The Manager should keep notes of when they contact the employee and key points that discussed.

**3.1 Informal handling of long-term sickness absence**

When handling long term sickness absence Managers should be sensitive to the employee and their condition and to the needs of the service. Managers should consider:

* Whether it is clear when the employee is likely to return to work
* Whether there is a clear prognosis (Managers can seek advice from the school’s HR provider about referring the employee to occupational health or seeking a report from the employee’s GP or consultant
* Whether there are there any supportive steps that the Manager can take to enable the employee to return to work.

The Manager will normally hold an informal meeting with the employee when the employee has been absent for a period of 28 calendar days.  However, there may be cases where the Manager does not consider it appropriate to hold a meeting at that stage. For example, where the employee is recovering from an operation and the normal recovery time is longer than 28 days and the employee is expected to return within a reasonable timescale. The Manager should record the reasons for a decision to delay the informal meeting and should continue to keep in touch with the employee.

The Manager should keep the employee’s case under review and seek further medical advice as necessary.

Where the employee’s continuing absence becomes of concern to the Manager, they should discuss this with the employee and explain where it becomes necessary to convene a formal meeting under the procedure.

Where the employee appears to have made a snap decision to resign the Manager should seek advice from the school’s HR provider before accepting the resignation.

1. **Supporting a return to work**

The Manager should consider medical advice and ask the employee what support they feels he needs to help him/her return to work.

Making reasonable adjustments on a temporary or permanent basis may enable an employee to return to work earlier. Managers must comply with the requirements of the Equality Act. Reasonable adjustments must be made to support employees with disabilities (as defined by the Equality Act 2010), including seeking redeployment where appropriate.

Examples of adjustments include:

* Providing a phased return – this could be on a part time or incremental basis.
* Modifying an employee’s work activities, equipment, or location on a temporary or permanent basis
* Providing special equipment e.g., modified IT equipment or reference material
* Modifying work patterns or management systems to reduce pressure and give the employee more control.
* Providing refresher training or buddy/mentor until the employee regains confidence at work Providing more supervision.
* Altering working times
* Working at home
* Providing alternative parking
* Modifying access to the workplace
* Reallocate work amongst the team.
* Allow time off for further medical appointments.

Once appropriate measures have been identified the Manager should draw up a return-to-work plan. This should include:

* The date the employee will return to work.
* The goal for the plan e.g., supporting the employee in making a successful return to full time work after a gradual return to work.
* The time period of the return-to-work plan
* What impact it will have on the employee’s terms and conditions.
* When the plan will be reviewed
* Signatures of the employee and Manager.

The Manager will need to keep the plan under regular review. The frequency of this will depend upon the circumstances of the case but should be sufficient to ensure that the plan is supporting the employee and to review their progress.

Where appropriate the Manager should complete a risk assessment, for example to assess any adjustments, the effects of any medication, and any implications for equipment made or lone working.

The Manager should also consider how to update the employee about what has happened during their absence e.g. changes in practices and procedures, training, new equipment.

1. **Formal handling of long-term sickness absence**

At each stage of the formal process the Manager should

* review the case to date.
* consider the implications of any new medical information received and the need to seek further medical advice.
* review any support and/or reasonable adjustments that can be made to enable the employee to return to work.
* the likelihood of the employee making a successful return to work within a reasonable period.
* the effect of the employee’s continuing absence upon the school.
* the appropriateness of seeking redeployment.
* the employee’s views.
* Ill health retirement.

In some circumstances an employee who is a member of the pension scheme may meet the criteria for ill-health retirement. Where this may be the case, the head teacher should contact their HR Manager for further information.