

TITLE	Absence Management Policy Concepts
FOR CONSIDERATION BY	Personnel Board on 21 st June 2023
WARD	None Specific
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OUTCOME / BENEFITS TO THE COMMUNITY

A key aim of Wokingham is to provide efficient and effective services within our financial constraints. The management of sickness absence through a fair and systematic framework aims to improve attendance across all areas reducing the absence rates we have in place and cost the Council less.

The policy will aim to

- Promote the health, safety and welfare of all employees
- Provide the best possible service to our Customers
- Improve productivity
- Comply with the Equality Act 2010 and all other relevant equality and employment legislation by identifying changes where necessary in working practices or environment to encourage and support full attendance

RECOMMENDATION

Personnel Board to comment and agree the concepts for the Absence Management Policy.

BACKGROUND

This report is to introduce the concept and some of the key highlights of the Absence Management policy that is currently being drafted for consultation, approval and implementation in Wokingham Borough Council.

At present there is no formal policy, and therefore processes, in place that allows for the council to manage absence. We need to recognise the benefits of employee health and wellbeing whilst at the same time having a robust, detailed and clearly understood procedure for managing absence that ensures employees are treated fairly and compassionately when they are absent due to illness.

It will allow us to formulate pathways to support people back into work, when they are fit to do so, along with minimise the impact that absence, whether long term or short term, has on the business and service delivery.

Scope

The policy will apply to all Colleagues, employed by the Council. Including those on fixed term contracts. It will not apply to agency workers, contractors or casually engaged staff. The policy does not automatically cover teachers, however, Headteachers and Governing bodies of maintained schools will be able to adopt this policy in the absence of their own.

Key Highlights

There will be several defined sections within the policy that will provide robust and clear guidance to all colleagues about their part in managing absence from the workplace.

- Clear expectations of Colleagues in terms of reporting absence, maintaining contact, attendance at meetings when requested to do so along with the requirement to attend Occupational Health when requested to do so
- Clear expectations of Managers and how they will be expected to manage absence within their teams including the support they must provide, referrals to Occupational Health, maintaining contact with absent colleagues, the recording of information relating to absence, the undertaking of return to work interviews and managing absence period within the framework of the policy whether that be short term absence, frequent absence, patterns of absence or long term sick
- An expansion of the Occupational Health provision which will include more detailed support when making referrals, the delivery of 'Quality In V Quality Out' sessions to aid Managers in best practice when making referrals
- Unauthorised absence and a clear defined procedure to follow when a colleague does not meet the required expectations of them during a period of absence including the triggering of pay being suspended and possible Disciplinary proceedings for failing to adhere to the guidance
- Defined and clear guidance on sickness and annual leave which will include when a colleague falls unwell whilst on annual leave and abuse of absence management and associated sick pay during annual leave
- Defined and clear guidance on time off for health appointments and adjustments under the Equality Act 2010
- Defined and clear guidance on absence that is related to a disability and how this would be managed, within the framework of the policy, with consideration being given to reasonable adjustment the service can accommodate
- Attendance at Occupational Health will become mandatory when a manager makes a referral and there will be guidance for when a colleague fails to adhere to this reasonable request
- Defined and clear guidance on sick pay entitlement but also the abuse of sick pay
- Defined and clear guidance on return to work interviews
- Defined and clear guidance on phased return work and a standard timescale of 4 weeks rather than it being open ended, unless an exceptional situation
- Defined and clear guidance on medical capability and how we would manage someone who is not able to carry out the full remit of their role, after being absent from work, due to a health condition
- Full training and support will be given to embed this policy into the Council

Introduction of trigger points for the managing of absence

The use of trigger will allow the Council to monitor the levels of absence within the Council but also services and to ensure that action is taken in a consistent and appropriate manner.

The use of triggers will also highlight to managers when levels of absence, repeated and frequent, become unacceptable. Absence will be monitored over a rolling 12 month period, it will not re-set at the end of a 12 month period.

The Council will expect managers to monitor absence and take appropriate action should unacceptable patterns of absence emerge e.g same day each week, absence during busy periods or absent during school holidays.

Discretion can and will be applied in exceptional circumstances, but these would be infrequent, but consideration will be given when an employee has an underlying medical condition that is likely to be covered by the Equality Act 2010. Trigger points would not be relaxed or amended within this situation, but adjustments can be considered on a case by case basis depending on the situation and the health condition.

When a trigger point is breached

When a colleague breaches a trigger, the manager will undertake an attendance review meeting allowing for the absences to be discussed in detail and the support that the Council can offer to help improve absence. Where sickness absence triggers are breached there is potential for an 'improvement notice' to be issued to the colleague. This would encourage an employee to improve their attendance levels and remind them of the attendance standard expected of them. There would be a review period set and managers would need to review this in accordance with the framework.

There will be staged processes if a colleague is unable to reach and sustain the expected levels of attendance which may result in their dismissal from the Council if continual absence occurs as outlined above.

Management of long-term absence

Long term sickness is regarded as a prolonged absence where employees are absent from work for a period of 28 calendar days or for recurrent periods with a health problem.

Research indicates that long-term absence is generally handled most effectively through early intervention and actions. The longer the period of absence, the less likely the employee is to return to work. It is therefore vital that managers maintain close contact with employees on long term sickness. The line manager should keep a written record of any 'keeping in touch' activities including where attempts were made to keep in touch, but where no contact was made.

As with short term there will be expectations of both the colleague and manager to maintain and informal attendance reviews will be held during long term absence periods.

Case management approaches will be introduced which will involve Occupational Health, HR, line manager and colleague and this is a collaborative approach to discuss the ongoing absence. This is a multi-disciplinary approach which is supportive and the end result should be a return to work plan is put into place.

In some cases where there is no prospect of a colleague returning to work other options can be considered which may include ill health retirement.

The outcome of the management of long-term absence may result in dismissal from the Council if a return to work is not achievable within a satisfactory timeframe.

Appeals

There will be a full appeals process to both the management of triggers and any improvement notices being issued but also against the decision to dismiss, which is after all other options have been exhausted.

The appeals process will be clear on what basis an appeal can be submitted, who will hear the appeal and the timescales for the appeals.

Policy Development / Consultation

The policy is currently in draft and is with the team for feedback. As part of the consultation process a number of key managers have been engaged across different services and they have confirmed that the above concepts will assist them with improving absence management, we intend include these managers in the launch of the policy. The feedback collated from this group has been fed into the policy development. The policy will be shared with CLT for feedback before consultation with Unions and Staff Network groups. The final version shared with Personnel Board Approval on 18th July 23.

NEXT STEPS

- Personnel Board to comment and agree the concepts for the Absence Management Policy.
- Policy shared at Personnel Board on 18th July 2023

FINANCIAL IMPLICATIONS OF THE RECOMMENDATION

The Council faces severe funding pressures, particularly in the face of the COVID-19 crisis. It is therefore imperative that Council resources are focused on the vulnerable and on its highest priorities.

	How much will it Cost/ (Save)	Is there sufficient funding – if not quantify the Shortfall	Revenue or Capital?
Current Financial Year (Year 1)	N/A	N/A	N/A
Next Financial Year (Year 2)	N/A	N/A	N/A
Following Financial Year (Year 3)	N/A	N/A	N/A

Other financial information relevant to the Recommendation/Decision

With a stronger policy in place there will be a more consistent approach which normally sees a drop in sickness absence. This is measured quarterly through the Councils key performance indicators.

Cross-Council Implications

This policy is relevant to all directorates in the Council

Public Sector Equality Duty

Due regard to the Public Sector Equality Duty has been taken in respect of the policy changes and a EIA will be completed when the policy is written

Climate Emergency – <i>This Council has declared a climate emergency and is committed to playing as full a role as possible – leading by example as well as by exhortation – in achieving a carbon neutral Wokingham Borough by 2030</i>
N/A

Reasons for considering the report in Part 2
.N/A

List of Background Papers
None

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