

Revised Sickness Absence Management (SAM) Policy & Guidance

Briefing note for Headteachers

Background

The current sickness absence management policy has been in place since 2014 and sickness absence across the Council has continued to increase despite the support arrangements and wellbeing initiatives that have been put in place, e.g. Employee Assistance Programme and the introduction of fast track referrals to Occupational Health in cases of stress-related absence.

Extensive discussions have been taking place with the teaching and support staff trade unions. Following NASUWT and NEU being unable to agree to section 7.1 on trigger points, the matter was referred to the Disputes Panel who endorsed the revised policy. The policy will be reviewed after 12 months.

The new policy provides a framework to enable a reduction in sickness absence.

Key changes

- Greater attention to mental ill health, which accounts for nearly 30% of total absence, and the prevention of absence.
- One of the trigger points in the existing policy for managing short term/intermittent absence is three periods of absence over the previous six months. This has been replaced with a revised trigger point of **4 occasions of absence within a 12 month rolling period** (pro-rata for part-time staff). This will mean more employees will reach this trigger point and therefore required to attend a Stage 1 sickness absence review meeting. This will ensure the correct support is provided at the earliest opportunity. (The other short term trigger point of 10 days or more in the last 12 months is unchanged.)
- Clarity on Stage 1 of the sickness absence review meeting. This is the formal part of the sickness absence management policy that focusses on identifying underlying causes of absence and providing meaningful support to improve attendance. (A separate guidance note has been produced for this purpose at the end of this document on page 4).
- Discretion in deciding not to use the formal process should only be used in exceptional circumstances and after agreement by the Headteacher and HR. This will also need to be recorded.
- Clearer timeframes to move through the formal stages of the process to reduce situations of long-term absence.
- More clarity on linking improvement targets to trigger points.
- Stage 3 meetings should normally be considered after 6 months continuous absence (but will depend on individual's circumstances).

- Clarifying the school's responsibility to record absences and upload fit notes onto Oracle.
- Formal stages are progressive but there is the right to enter the process at any stage if appropriate.
- 'Rights of representation' to include a representative from an appropriate charity to support an employee in some circumstances (e.g. Solihull MIND rep.)
- New statement on SMBC commitment to employees with a terminal illness.

Key changes to the Guidance Notes:

- Additional information added to the 'Employees with a disability' section including a definition of a disability, use of trigger points, reference to Remploy, Access to Work and signposting to other organisations.
- Inclusion of fast track referrals to Occupational Health.
- More detail of situations when an employee is absent through sickness during a disciplinary process.
- New sections added on working from home when ill, substance misuse, medical suspension, terminal illness, ill health retirement, employees with multiple contracts, accidents at work and Musculoskeletal absences.
- Additional information on annual leave accrual and taking paid annual leave whilst off ill.
- Additional information/signposting to other organisations that can assist in absence cases – e.g. Remploy, Access to Work, MIND etc.
- Addition of a flow chart explaining the processes to be followed when managing short and long term absence.
- The codes/descriptors for types of absence have been updated on Oracle to assist users in choosing the correct reason and to ensure more accurate recording of absence.

Next steps

This new policy will be implemented in the Council on 1 September 2018. Within schools, this new policy will need to be ratified by the Governing Body during the first half term, with the aim of being implemented by **1 November 2018**. Schools will also need to make arrangements to ensure all employees are familiar with the policy and have access to it.

After this date, Headteachers and line managers will identify employees who have met these new trigger points and, therefore, will be required to attend a Stage 1 sickness absence review meeting with their manager. It is recognised that whilst this may come as a surprise to some employees, managers should still embark on this course of action, recognising that

there will be a transitional period for those already in the formal processes and therefore discretion exercised before employees are progressed to Stage 2 and 3 during this period.

All associated invite letters, outcome letters and line manager scripts for each stage of the process have been updated by HR and are available from your HR Advisor.

The new policy (and supporting Guidance notes for managers) is available on the HR school's Extranet site. You should continue to liaise with your HR Advisor about any long-term sickness absences cases in your schools and to ensure any employees meeting the new short-term trigger points are identified and supported accordingly.

Please contact your HR Advisor should you require any further guidance on the application of the new SAM policy, or if you wish to attend a future SAM training session.

Policy Development Team - Human Resources

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Guidance for Headteachers & line managers: Stage One Meeting

What it is	What it is not
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Although part of the formal process, it is primarily a supportive meeting to assist an employee with their absence from work, their recovery from illness or injury and improving their attendance record; - An opportunity to engage in a sensitive discussion about any relevant issues (work or personal) that may be contributing to the employee's absences; - A meeting to help to pinpoint any underlying pattern of or cause of absence, which can then be discussed and tackled with relevant support put in place; - An opportunity to signpost the individual to any internal/external support, e.g. Employee Assistance Programme, help groups, charities etc.; - A discussion about any reasonable adjustments that can be put in place at work to aid a return to work/improve attendance for employees with a disability; - For frequent absences, an opportunity to determine a realistic target and time period for improvement in a non-threatening way; - An opportunity to reduce any anxieties employees are experiencing regarding their long-term absence, e.g. by providing reassurance about their job, telling them they have been missed by colleagues and mutually agree how to keep in regular contact etc.; - An opportunity to determine the need for obtaining further medical advice; - A time to listen and reflect. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - A meeting to make an employee feel guilty or intimidated for being absent; - A 'hearing' with punitive outcomes and verbatim minutes taken (notes need to be taken however to accurately reflect the meeting); - An opportunity to exaggerate the difficulties the absence(s) are causing, especially with long term or mental health related absence; - An opportunity to commence a process to exit an employee; - A time to pre-judge the meeting outcome (the purpose of following a formal procedure and meetings is to listen to the employee and consider anything new they have to say, even if what they say will require you to investigate further or obtain new medical evidence); - A discussion to ask intrusive medical questions; - A disciplinary process.