



EFFECTIVELY MANAGING STAFF ABSENCE

TIPS FROM THE EDUCATION COMMUNITY

MARCH 2020

TIPS FOR EFFECTIVELY MANAGING STAFF ABSENCE

The absence of any staff member will have an impact on everyone else in a school; frequent absences and subsequent supply cover can threaten a school's financial stability, affect other staff members' workloads and team morale, and lead to a lack of consistency in the teaching that pupils receive, which impacts negatively on pupils' outcomes and the overall standards of the school.

To lessen this impact, it's important that staff absence is managed as effectively as possible.

Using responses that we have collected from you, the Education community, we have collated some good practice recommendations into this report to help you to effectively manage staff absenteeism.

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BE CONSISTENT WITH YOUR APPROACH

It's important to implement a policy that outlines your approach to managing staff attendance – this should be adhered to for all absences, no matter the reason or length of time taken off.

Your policy should detail information including, but not limited to, the following:

- Your aims
- How the policy will be applied
- The procedure for attendance management
- The sick pay that staff are entitled to
- Opportunities for occupational health
- Return to work processes, including interviews
- Short term absence management
- How attendance will be reviewed
- Attendance concern meetings
- Processes for appeals
- Long term sickness management
- Managing SLT absences
- Ill health retirement
- Accrual of annual leave during sick leave

“If there is a procedure in your school, use it!”

By following your school's procedures consistently, you will demonstrate to staff that absence is being managed and that you are trying to support staff at the same time.

Be sure to monitor staff absence patterns so that you can identify where issues may be developing and address them before they get worse.

Review your data on a regular basis, e.g. termly and annually, and, for any staff that exceed the threshold for absence, consider preparing a report and arranging a meeting with the employee to discuss the length of time they're having off and how frequently absences occur.

One respondent told us that during attendance concern meetings, staff are informed of how their absence impacts the school financially – this will ensure they are aware of the effect their absence is having and could deter people from taking unnecessary time off in the future. They also set targets for staff attendance, similar to the national pupil attendance targets.

The school has also trialled a procedure which recognises good attendance by sending letters and gift vouchers to members of staff with good attendance. Initially, they thought this may be perceived as unfair; however, in the first year, staff attendance improved significantly, and there were clear financial savings. The school's return to work interviews also ran more consistently, with positive feedback from staff and timely support for those who were absent.



REQUESTING ABSENCE

Make sure that all staff are aware of your procedures for requesting time off – all staff should be required to follow the same process should they plan to be absent, e.g. for a medical appointment. Consider providing easy access to an absence request form which allows staff to detail the length of time they require off and the reasons behind the absence.

One respondent told us that the school tries to be as flexible as possible in allowing people to have time off to attend family events or medical appointments – this flexibility means that, unless they are genuinely unwell, staff are rarely absent.

Another explained that their policy is family-friendly and permits staff to take up to three days per year for childcare reasons.

Allowing this flexibility can relieve the pressure faced by staff who are struggling to balance their work and personal life, resulting in fewer absences in the future.

CONDUCT RETURN TO WORK INTERVIEWS

Return to work interviews were suggested by the majority of our respondents. A return to work interview involves checking in on a returning employee who has been absent, before they get back into their work.

As an employer, you are not legally required to conduct return to work interviews; however, it is highly recommended that you do due to the numerous benefits.

The most important benefit is that return to work interviews often deter any sickness absences that are not genuine and reduce the level of absence overall. They can also be used to:

- Confirm that the employee is well enough to be at work.
- Show employees that you have noticed their absence and that they were missed.
- Ensure the employee is told about any work-related updates that they missed during their absence.
- Identify any patterns or trends in staff absences.
- Identify any underlying conditions or disabilities, and whether there are any steps you can take as an employer to prevent future absences of a similar nature or make any reasonable adjustments that are required.
- Identify whether anything work-related might be triggering absences, e.g. stress.
- Ensure your records are accurate and agreed by the employee – this can help if you start any formal absence management, and provide accurate reporting data.
- Make staff aware if they are approaching, or have hit, a trigger point for formal absence management.

TIPS FOR CONDUCTING THE INTERVIEW

- ✓ Interviews should be conducted as soon as possible after the employee has returned – ideally, during their first shift back.
- ✓ Hold the interview in a private room, as the conversation is likely to touch on personal issues that should be dealt with sensitively.
- ✓ Conduct return to work interviews for every absence, no matter how short, and follow the same format for every interview. Everyone must be treated fairly and asked the same set of questions – having a return to work form to work through is helpful here.
- ✓ Don't put pressure on the employee or make them feel uncomfortable – they aren't obliged to reveal details about their absence that they may not wish to.
- ✓ The meeting doesn't have to be formal – by having an informal chat, you can put the employee at ease and make it easier for them to share details with you about how you might be able to support their return to work.
- ✓ The legitimacy of the absence should not be challenged unless you have solid evidence to indicate that the reason the employee has provided is inaccurate.
- ✓ Be sure to record notes of the entire conversation and ensure these are signed, to avoid any disputes over the information in the future.
- ✓ For longer absences, use the interview to agree on a plan that will phase the employee back into work gradually, to help them work towards getting back to full speed.
- ✓ Let the employee ask any questions that might be on their mind.

INTERVIEWS FOLLOWING LONG-TERM ABSENCES

It can be challenging and stressful for some employees to return to work after a long-term sickness, especially if the individual is still compromised by their illness.

They may feel less confident in their abilities to carry out their role, or anxious about how they might fit back into the school or any changes that may have occurred in their absence. Because of this, you should use the return to work interview to enable them to feel supported and welcome them back.

While it is likely that you'll have kept in regular contact with the employee during their absence, you should still conduct the interview to:

- Confirm any details that have been agreed regarding reasonable adjustments.
- Provide the employee with an opportunity to express any concerns.
- Inform the employee of any changes they may need to be aware of.

“Do the return to work interviews, they take time but show staff that you care and follow up”

In some cases, a ‘phased return to work’ may be required, such as for long-term illness, serious injuries or bereavement. This is when someone who is absent might need to come back to work on reduced hours, or be given lighter or different duties.

You should agree with the employee on a plan for how long the phased return will be for. For example, you could agree to review how things are going after a month and then decide to increase the working hours or duties, or they may decide they need to stay reduced for longer.

QUESTIONS TO ASK DURING A RETURN TO WORK INTERVIEW

- How are you feeling now?
- Are you well enough to be back in work?
- Did you speak to your GP or a pharmacist?
- Have you been given any medication and are there any side effects I should be aware of?
- Is this an ongoing or recurring condition?
- Has anything work-related contributed to your absence?
- Are there any adjustments that could help with your attendance?
- Do you have any questions for me?

If the employee returns to their normal duties, but on reduced hours, ACAS advises that they should receive their normal rate of pay for the hours they work. For hours they are not able to work, they should receive sick pay if they are entitled to it.

If the employee returns to lighter duties, it is up to you to agree on a suitable rate of pay and ensure this agreement is put in writing.

If an employee has any issues regarding how their return to work interview was conducted, they must bring these up with their line manager.

More information from ACAS about absence from work can be found [here](#).



FOCUS ON STAFF WELLBEING

Focussing on staff wellbeing was a common theme among the responses we received. There are many ways of ensuring wellbeing is prioritised in your school, to ensure staff feel supported and are less likely to take time off due to work-related stress or other mental health issues.

EMPLOYEE ASSISTANCE PROGRAMMES

Employee assistance programmes (EAPs) are employee benefit programmes that are offered by many employers. They help employees to deal with any personal problems that may impact adversely on their work performance, health and wellbeing.

EAPs, such as that offered by [Health Assured](#), usually include an assessment, short-term counselling and referral services for employees and their immediate family.

When balancing the pressures of work with the needs of home and personal life, staff may become overwhelmed and need to take time off with stress. EAPs provide additional support for employees and managers during times like this, reducing the need for people to take time off.

SIGNPOST STAFF IN THE RIGHT DIRECTION

It's important to promote the services or resources that are available to help staff who are experiencing work-related stress, anxiety or other mental health issues. Consider displaying posters in staff rooms or sending information to staff via email.

“If you can help someone at the earliest opportunity, this may prevent them from going off sick”

OCCUPATIONAL HEALTH SERVICES

Consider providing staff with access to an occupational health service – this is a type of medical service that supports employees and helps wellbeing in the workplace. It can be used for both physical and mental health.

For employees returning from a period of absence, an occupational health adviser can carry out an assessment of the employee and report back to their manager. This assessment can help the employer understand what their employee needs to feel better, return to work, do their job and address any problems that could cause further health or absence issues.

INTRODUCE MENTAL HEALTH FIRST AIDERS

While not a requirement, it is recommended that you introduce first aiders for mental health to ensure a safe working environment.

You should try to have as many first aiders for mental health as you do for physical health. Consider undertaking a needs assessment and putting in place strategies to address any risks and needs highlighted.

Taking part in a mental health first aid course has many benefits, including having a raised awareness of mental illness and increased confidence in dealing with mental illness. It also helps to reduce stigma around mental health issues. Some organisations will offer courses for free, so have a look around to find the right course for your staff.

BE OPEN TO TALKING ABOUT MENTAL HEALTH

You should always be prepared to listen and not be afraid to talk about stress or anxiety. To find the root cause of someone's absence, you may need to discuss sensitive topics. One respondent suggested always asking people twice if they are alright.

Consider introducing a staff health and wellbeing programme – there are many free options available that you can organise in-house, such as exercise groups, mindfulness sessions, and talks on relevant issues, e.g. alcohol abuse.

HELPFUL RESOURCES FROM THESCHOOLBUS

TheSchoolBus has a number of resources that can help you to effectively manage staff absence. We have categorised these below to help you with the good practice recommendations made in this report.

BE CONSISTENT WITH YOUR APPROACH

- **Staff Attendance Management Policy** – this policy, created by our HR experts, FusionHR, contains procedures for managing the attendance and absence of staff.
- **Individual Staff Absence Tracker** – this tool can help you track staff absence, spot patterns and administrate next steps.
- **Conducting a Stage One Absence Review Meeting** – this article provides advice on how to conduct an absence review meeting for employees who have reached the trigger point for formal absence management.
- **Invite to First Absence Review Meeting Letter** – this letter, created by FusionHR, can be used to invite an employee to an initial meeting to discuss concerns regarding their absence from work.
- **Outcome Letter for First Absence Review Meeting** – this letter can be used to discuss the outcome of consideration meetings regarding an employee's absence from work.

RETURN TO WORK INTERVIEWS

- **Return to Work Interview Form** – this form can be used as part of an employee's return to work interview. It should be used to help summarise absence over the past 6-12 months.
- **Return to Work Interview Guidance** – this article, created by our HR experts, FusionHR, can help your school manage a staff member's return to work.
- **Return to Work Risk Assessment** – this template explores the possible risks concerning a member of staff returning to work, and the control measures that can be introduced to mitigate those risks.

FOCUS ON STAFF WELLBEING

- **Dealing with Stress at Work Flyer** – you can distribute this flyer to staff to ensure they know how to respond to work-related stress, who they can talk to and how to handle the pressures of work.
- **Staff Stress Leaflet** – this leaflet explores the symptoms of stress, tips for managing stress and where help can be sought from. It can be given to staff members to help them identify if they, or their colleagues, may be experiencing stress and how this can be managed.
- **Work-Related Stress and Mental Wellbeing Meet and Brief Pack** – this pack can be used to bring school leaders up-to-speed with understanding how to prevent work-related stress and how it links to mental wellbeing.
- **Staff Wellbeing Resource Pack** – our resource pack contains more resources, including guidance, templates and model policies, to help you adopt a whole-school approach to promoting staff wellbeing.

USEFUL LINKS

Throughout this guide we have linked to relevant resources and websites to assist you with managing staff absence. We understand that you may wish to print this guide for future reference or distribute copies to relevant members of staff. So, to ensure everyone continues to have quick access to the useful links, we have listed each one below in the order that they appear within this guide.

EXTERNAL RESOURCES

- **ACAS Absence from work information:** <https://www.acas.org.uk/absence-from-work>
- **Health Assured EAP services:** <https://www.healthassured.org/employee-assistance-programmes/>

TheSchoolBus RESOURCES

- **Staff Attendance Management Policy:** <https://www.theschoolbus.net/article/staff-attendance-management-policy/2436>
- **Individual Staff Absence Tracker:** <https://www.theschoolbus.net/article/individual-staff-absence-tracker/896>
- **Conducting a Stage One Absence Review Meeting:** <https://www.theschoolbus.net/article/conducting-a-stage-one-absence-review-meeting/3646>
- **Invite to First Absence Review Meeting Letter:** <https://www.theschoolbus.net/article/invite-to-first-absence-review-meeting-letter/1120>
- **Outcome Letter for First Absence Review Meeting:** <https://www.theschoolbus.net/article/outcome-letter-for-first-absence-review-meeting/1124>
- **Return to Work Interview Form:** <https://www.theschoolbus.net/article/return-to-work-interview-form/1126>
- **Return to Work Interview Guidance:** <https://www.theschoolbus.net/article/return-to-work-interview-guidance/1214>
- **Return to Work Risk Assessment:** <https://www.theschoolbus.net/article/return-to-work-risk-assessment/806>
- **Dealing with Stress at Work Flyer:** <https://www.theschoolbus.net/article/dealing-with-stress-at-work-flyer/5600>
- **Staff Stress Leaflet:** <https://www.theschoolbus.net/article/staff-stress-leaflet/5437>
- **Work-Related Stress and Mental Wellbeing Meet and Brief Pack:** <https://www.theschoolbus.net/feature/workrelated-stress-and-mental-wellbeing-meet-and-brief-pack/5379>
- **Staff Wellbeing Resource Pack:** <https://www.theschoolbus.net/feature/staff-wellbeing-resource-pack/5487>

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