

**NORTHERN IRELAND BLOOD TRANSFUSION SERVICE
ABSENCE MANAGEMENT POLICY AND PROCEDURE**

INTRODUCTION

The Agency considers the contribution of its staff to be of paramount importance in the delivery of excellent services to all its customers. As staff are the organisations most important resource, the aims and objectives cannot be met without the full participation and contribution of all staff. The Agency recognises and accepts its responsibility to ensure that the working environment is safe and that the conditions of employment are conducive to good health and wellbeing. It is inevitable that employees will, on occasion, be off work due to ill health and the Agency recognises that its obligations in those circumstances.

A satisfactory level of employee attendance at work is crucial to the success of the Agency, bearing in mind that high absence rates reduce the resources available to provide excellent services to our customers. A non-satisfactory level of staff attendance reduces available resources and can have a negative impact on how we deliver our services. It is the responsibility of each member of staff to be in attendance at work in order to fulfil his/her contract of employment. The Agency will act as a reasonable employer at all times in its dealing with employees who are absent due to ill health. The Agency will seek to ensure, through medical opinion, that staff have sufficient time to recover their health so that on return to work they are able to fulfil the requirements of their job and provide regular and effective service in line with their contract of employment.

Purpose of this Policy

The Absence Management Policy and Procedure (The policy) will assist managers and staff achieve and maintain an optimum level of attendance at work, to ensure that attendance is managed effectively and that the sickness scheme is not abused. It will also ensure that members of staff with genuine illnesses are treated sensitively. The policy details an approach which is designed to ensure consistency and fairness in application across the Agency as a whole. The policy clarifies roles and responsibilities of both managers and staff and highlights the potential penalties, which would be incurred by failure to follow the policy and implement the associated procedures.

The policy is to be used for the sole purpose of managing non attendance due to ill health. Other forms of absence, for example Adoption leave, Paternity leave etc are covered under separate policies.

Aims

The aims of the policy are:

- To assist the management of non-attendance due to ill health.
- To ensure all staff are aware of their responsibilities with regard to absenteeism.
- To help and encourage all employees to achieve and maintain maximum attendance at work.
- To manage sickness and absence problems in a manner that is fair, effective and consistent.
- To offer appropriate support to those who are ill.
- To identify absence patterns which may give cause for concern, in order that they may be investigated appropriately to determine the causes, thus enabling the issues to be resolved.
- To minimise disruption to the provision of service.
- To deal effectively (via the disciplinary procedure) with any abuse of the sick pay scheme.

Objectives:

The objectives of this policy are:

- To reduce absenteeism.
- To investigate, monitor and manage the cost of absenteeism.
- To provide managers with clear guidelines and appropriate awareness on the effective monitoring and management of absenteeism levels.
- To assist staff with sickness related problems through appropriate support and encourage their return to work without undue delay.

1. DEFINITION OF ABSENCE:

Any member of staff who is unable to attend their place of work is absent unless they have prior permission not to attend. If absence is due to sickness or injury and the employee has not adhered to the procedure specified, then this will be considered to be an abuse of the scheme and should be dealt with, as would be the case with any other form of misconduct.

1.1 Categories of Absence

1.1.2 Casual Absence

Casual absence is defined as absence of a short duration lasting one to three days. (Casual absence may sometimes begin to develop into a pattern of absence unique to an individual employee).

1.1.3 Short-term Absence:

Short-term absence can be seen as any absence related to sickness from four days to four weeks duration. Such absences will always require timely certification.

1.1.4 Long-term Absence:

Long-term absence is defined as any certified sickness of four weeks or more duration.

(These absences, always certified, will benefit greatly from efficient medical management of the underlying problems. Close co-operation between the employee, the manager and the Occupational Health Service is essential in the resolution of long-term sickness problems. The Agency will make its best endeavours to rehabilitate staff on long-term sickness back to work but resolution may in certain circumstances ultimately include termination of employment on grounds of incapacity).

2. EMPLOYEE COMMENCING EMPLOYMENT

2.1 Contract of Employment

The contract provides information of the sickness absence scheme as per the NHS Terms and Conditions of Service Handbook (See section 14).

2.2 Induction

On the first day of appointment and throughout planned induction programmes, managers must make sure that employees are made aware of and understand the Absence Management Policy and Procedure.

Managers should give particular emphasis to:

- Promoting maximum attendance at work.
- The notification procedure and certification of absence required.
- The procedure for dealing with casual, short and long-term absences.
- What the employee is **required to do** or **should not do** when absent on sick leave.
- The consequences for the employee of failing to adhere to the Absenteeism Procedure.
- The role of the Occupational Health Service.

2.3 Probationary period

The probationary period of the contract of employment should be used constructively to assess, amongst other things, an employee's attendance record. If the attendance is poor or gives cause for concern, managers must make the employee aware at the very earliest opportunity of that concern during the probationary period and of the actions that will be taken should there be no improvement. This may include an extension of the probationary period and where appropriate the initiation of the disciplinary procedure.

3. SICKNESS ABSENCE ROLES & RESPONSIBILITIES

3.1 Managerial Responsibilities:

The management of absenteeism is a core responsibility of all managers. Each manager is responsible for the management of absence and for the sensitive, fair and consistent treatment of staff who are ill. Each manager has the following general responsibilities in this regard:

- Ensure the sickness absence procedure is implemented in full.
- Ensure absence is never ignored.
- Ensure confidentiality of information at all times.
- Ensure consistency in implementation of the procedure.

- Monitor the attendance of all members of staff for whom they have responsibility.
- Keep accurate and up-to-date records of absence for own use and for submission to the NIBTS Human Resources Department.
- Identify patterns of absenteeism that may give reasonable cause for concern.
- Treat employees who suffer ill health sympathetically, fairly and consistently.
- Ensure as part of induction of new staff that the importance of this procedure is emphasised and that all new appointees have the procedure explained to them and their obligation identified.
- Ensure that the probationary period of each new member of staff is used appropriately, that attendance records are monitored and that appropriate action is taken as soon as any problems emerge.
- Ensure that regular contact is maintained by the member of staff throughout a period of absence in line with the employee's responsibilities.
- Conduct with mutual agreement "home visits" for staff on long term sick leave.
- Be responsible for involving Human Resources and Occupational Health for advice when necessary and supply information as to the reason for any referral to Occupational Health and detail the specific advice sought.
- Conduct 'back to work' interviews and maintain records.
- Consider reasonable adjustments as recommended by Occupational Health. (See 6.4, page 12)

ABSENCE MANAGEMENT IS AN IMPORTANT ON-GOING RESOPNSIBILITY OF MANAGERS AND MUST BE GIVEN A HIGH PRIORITY AT ALL TIMES.

3.2 Employee's Responsibilities:

Employees are expected to demonstrate their commitment to the Agency and to discharge the obligations of their contract of employment by regular attendance at work and efficient completion of all tasks allocated by management. Employees should only be absent from work when it is essential or when permission has been given. Employees have a responsibility not to abuse any procedures covering attendance at work. Employees are expected to:

- Insure they have read and fully understand this procedure.
- Report absence to line managers in accordance with the procedure as outlined in Section 5, Page 8.
- Make sure managers receive self and medical certificates as necessary and on time, and all certificates cover the entire period of absence.

- Keep in regular contact with their manager as laid down in this procedure, engage in meetings and appointments with Occupational Health when arranged.
- Do not participate in other paid, voluntary work, social or sporting activities which may be prejudicial to recovery.
- On return to work, attend and participate in a "return to work" interview with their manager.

FAILURE BY EMPLOYEES TO DISCHARGE THEIR RESPONSIBILITIES MAY LEAD TO DISCIPLINARY ACTION UNDER THE AGENCY'S DISCIPLINARY PROCEDURE.

3.3 Human Resources Responsibilities:

The Agency's Human Resources specialists have a responsibility to:

- Provide training and awareness to managers, as well as advice and support in absence situations, to help improve attendance.
- Assist in identifying patterns of absenteeism. Assist managers in the identification and resolution of short-term absence and in the sensitive treatment of long-term health problems.
- Produce absenteeism level percentages for the organisation as a whole for reporting purposes to the Agency's Board. Provide departmental summaries and individual information on request.
- Monitor the implementation of the procedure.
- Review the procedure and update when necessary.
- Provide comparative data with other HPSS organisations.

3.4 Occupational Health Responsibilities:

The Agency has engaged an Occupational Health Service to assist staff and managers with professional work-related health advice. The Occupational Health Service should:

- Assess ill-health conditions and the effects it may have on the employee's ability to do their job – short and long-term.
- Facilitate management on how to deal with medical conditions.
- Encourage and support employees with long-term or major illnesses and return to work.
- To identify work related ill health and advise on hazards and prevention.
- To recommend adaptations to current working duties where appropriate.
- Give advice on health promotion.
- Identify underlying medical conditions and determine whether the work place has caused or aggravated the problem.

4. CONDUCT DURING SICKNESS ABSENCE

The purpose of paid and unpaid sickness absence is to facilitate the employees' full and proper recovery from an illness or injury. This includes activities, which are part of an agreed programme of rehabilitation. If staff are suspected to be using the scheme for purposes other than recovery, the Agency will regard this as a matter of misconduct and disciplinary action will be invoked.

Activities that would normally be considered by the Agency to be inconsistent with genuine sickness or injury or contravene this procedure include:

- Participation in any sport, hobby, social or other activity which could aggravate the injury or which could delay recovery.
- Undertake any other employment during sickness absence.
- Engaging in any other activity, which is inconsistent with the nature of the identified illness or injury.
- Altering or causing to have altered any of the details on a medical certificate, e.g. date, signature, reason for absence etc.
- Providing the Agency with inaccurate or misleading information about any period of absence.

5. PROCEDURE FOR MANAGING SICKNESS ABSENCE

Employees who find themselves unable to attend work due to illness should follow the procedure set out below:

5.1 Procedures for Employees:

If an employee is unfit for work due to ill health **he/she must personally notify their line manager** of their intended absence. Notification should be via telephone and should be at least half an hour before he/she is due to commence duty and certainly no later than 10.00am on the first day of absence. If the employee does not contact their manager on the first day of absence this will be taken as unauthorised absence. In the absence of the employees line manager he/she must contact their manager's deputy or senior member of staff within the department.

Session staff should contact their Unit Leader or designated person at least one hour prior to session leave time.

Messages must not be left at switchboard.

The employee must make every effort to personally report their inability to attend work, unless their condition makes it impossible to do so e.g. if he/she has been hospitalised. Relatives or other people should make the call **only** if the employee cannot do so personally.

When notifying the manager/supervisor on the first day of absence, the employee must provide information on the general nature of his/her illness, and, if possible, some indication of the expected duration of the illness. The manager will need to obtain this information in order that arrangements may, if necessary, be made to cover the absent employee from work.

If an employee continues to be absent beyond the initial period of time indicated to a line manager, the employee will be expected to advise of the new anticipated date of return to work. Again this is necessary so that the line manager can continue to organise the work necessary to be completed during the employee's absence.

If an employee becomes ill during working hours, the employee must report to their manager/supervisor, who will discuss with the employee the most appropriate course of action. **Under no circumstances must an employee leave his/her place of work without consulting their manager/supervisor.** Failure to comply with this procedure will result in classification as absent without consent. Any employee absent from work without consent may face disciplinary action.

5.2 Documentation and Certificates Required

If an employee is absent from work for more than three days but no more than seven calendar days then he/she must complete a self-certificate of sickness (SC2), which can be obtained from most GP surgeries. This form must be completed and submitted to the employees line manager no later than the fourth day of absence. Failure to do so may result in the employees' pay being amended accordingly.

If an employee is absent for a period of more than seven calendar days, he/she must submit a medical certificate to the manager/supervisor. Further medical certificates required when the sickness continues, must be supplied **within two days of expiration of previous certificates.** As a result of notification, the line manager may ask the employee to keep him/her informed by telephoning at agreed times throughout the employees absence. Failure to submit timely and regular certificates may result in action being taken under the disciplinary procedure.

Any employee who fraudulently claims to be sick or whose behaviour away from work whilst on sick leave is incompatible with the reason for absence will be subject to the Agency's Disciplinary Procedure.

5.3 Medical Referral to Occupational Health

Employees may be required to attend the Occupational Health Service at any time. This is a contractual requirement and all employees must attend. If an employee wilfully decides not to attend Occupational Health Service they may be subject to disciplinary procedures. When referring

an employee, managers should complete a referral form. The purpose of this form is to provide Occupational Health Service staff with appropriate background information as to why the individual employee is being referred, and what information the line manager needs to facilitate the individuals return to work. It is important that managers provide as much information as is known to them.

5.4 Stress Related Absence – Management Responsibilities and Actions

If an employee is absent due to stress related illness, anxiety or depression, as determined by the medical certificate, it is essential that immediate action is taken to determine if any of the above are related to their job. The appropriate action on receipt of such a certificate is, for the Manager/Supervisor to immediately notify Human Resources and then to make an appointment with the Occupational Health Service. The line manager must then complete the Occupational Health Service referral documentation and process immediately. Adequate and proper support for reasons of absence due to stress, anxiety or depression cannot be adequately and appropriately managed without medical opinion and advice.

5.5 Sickness Absence and Annual Leave

In the event of an employee falling sick whilst on annual leave, annual leave entitlement will only be reinstated on production of a medical certificate, confirming that the employee was not fit for work during the period in question.

Similarly, in the event that an employee falls sick prior to pre-booked annual leave and does not return to work prior to that annual leave period, then the employee's continued absence will be recorded as annual leave, except on production of a medical certificate, confirming that the employee was not fit for work during the period in question.

Employees should remain aware of their responsibilities if taking holidays for medical reasons during periods of sickness absence.

Should an employee wish to go on holiday during a period of long-term sickness absence, then provided a current medical certificate has been received, the leave would be classed as sick leave. The medical practitioner must state that the employee was not fit to be at work during the period in question and that the holiday period would not have had a detrimental effect on the employee's rate of recovery. Where necessary the Agency will also be guided by the expert opinion of medical practitioners within the Occupational Health Department.

6. RETURN TO WORK

When returning to work, the employee must report directly to their line manager/deputy prior to resuming duty. If the employee has been absent from work for more than seven calendar days, a medical certificate must be submitted, with a return to work date, which states that the employee is fit to return.

6.1 Return to Work Interview

After each episode of absence, whether casual, short-term or long term, the employee must be interviewed by his/her supervisor/manager. The purpose of this interview is:

- To demonstrate genuine interest in and concern for the individual's well being.
- To gain awareness of all the circumstances relating to the absence.
- Discuss the extent of sick leave absences.
- Agree, where possible, support and help to deal with problems/concerns relating to both home/work circumstances.
- Agree arrangements for re-orientation into the workplace, if, for example, the individual is returning to work following a lengthy period of absence.

The return to work interview should take place on the individual's first day back at work, or if this is not possible, within the first week of return. This form should be signed by both parties and placed on the individual's personal file.

6.2 Approach for Carrying out a Return to Work Interview:

Managers should:

- Meet with the individual member of staff in private and adopt an approach that is as positive and informal as possible.
- Welcome the individual back to work and ensure they know their contribution to the department has been missed.
- Complete a 'return to work interview' form and record the reason for absence. Completion demonstrates that all staff are treated consistently and in accordance with the Agency's Absenteeism Policy.
- Identify whether any further action or support needs to be taken.

6.3 Confidentiality

Discussing absenteeism issues with specific staff will enable the manager to gain useful information and confirm any views he/she may have. It is vital that any details divulged by employees are treated as confidential. Managers should offer support and assistance when necessary and provide advice on the consequences of poor attendance (which may include disciplinary action). Encouraging staff to thoroughly read the Absenteeism Policy and Procedure may improve attendance to some extent.

A return to work interview to discuss poor attendance enables the manager to consider whether or not the employee's absence is acceptable in relation to this policy.

Having met the employee it may be appropriate to consider a number of options. For example:

- 1 Refer the employee to the Occupational Health Department for further advice.
- 2 Consider if appropriate, a reduction in hours, time off, or lighter duties.
- 3 Consider disciplinary action if appropriate in the circumstances.

6.4 Consideration of Reasonable Adjustments

Employers are required in certain circumstances under the Disability Discrimination Order to make reasonable adjustments to employee's duties.

A supportive approach should be adopted when managing the return of an employee to the workplace following a long period of sickness absence. Consideration must be given to the employee's physical and emotional capacity in the early days of their return. Advice on when there may be a need to consider reasonable adjustments can be sought from the HR department, NIBTS.

Immediately prior to an employee's return to work following a period of long-term absence, advice and guidance should be sought from Occupational Health, regarding temporary or permanent reasonable adjustments to working practices to help rehabilitate an employees return.

Such recommendations may include: -

- Altering/Reducing working hours.
- Reassessing workload.
- Acquiring or modifying equipment.
- Making adjustments to premises.
- Redeployment.
- Retraining.
- Allowing absence during working hours for assessment or treatment.

Managers must consider whether or not adjustments made to retain staff are reasonable. Factors to consider in this circumstance are:

- Disruption to normal services/working practices
- Practicality of change
- Financial implications

6.5 Failure to Return to Work if Found fit by Occupational Health

Once an employee is deemed fit they will be expected to return to work unless an exceptional circumstance has arisen, e.g. a new illness/injury. If the manager is in any doubt about the situation he/she must contact the Human Resource Department for further advice.

7. DEALING WITH CASUAL / SHORT-TERM ABSENCE

After the fourth episode of absence within a twelve-month rolling period the manager should expand the return to work interview and carry out a formal review with the employee concerned. The conduct of the interview will follow the same lines as an informal return to work interview.

The formal interview can be attended by up to four people:

1. Senior Manager / Senior Nurse / Laboratory Head
2. Supervisor/Line Manager
3. Employee
4. Trade Union Representative or Work Colleague

The content of this meeting should include:

- The employee's current state of health and causes of absenteeism.
- The accuracy of the sickness absence record and the reasons for absence.
- The circumstances that may be contributing to the level of absenteeism.
- If necessary or appropriate, what assistance can management give to rectify the issue.

The role of the manager is not to question whether on medical grounds, illnesses are genuine, but rather to advise unacceptable levels of absence cannot be sustained.

If there is ongoing non-attendance without underlying medical reasons, then the matter may have to be referred to Human Resources Department to discuss whether this is an issue of genuine incapacity or misconduct.

If there is ongoing non-attendance and there is an underlying condition, which is unlikely to be cured or relieved, then the capability procedure will be initiated.

NOTE: Consistency and fairness is crucially important, however managers must also consider the individual circumstances of each employee. If a manager is also unsure of how to proceed with regards to the nature of the individual's circumstances he/she should contact the Human Resource Department, NIBTS as soon as possible.

8. DEALING WITH LONG-TERM ABSENCE

The Agency recognises that long-term absence due to ill health is a distressing time for the employee concerned. The Agency is committed to ensuring that all appropriate help and support is offered to the employee to alleviate concerns, which naturally arise under such circumstances, and to facilitate the employee's recovery. In the event that an employee may be unable to return to their original post, or may be unable to return to work at all, the Agency will do all that it reasonably can to accommodate the wishes of the employee, whilst taking into account the needs of the service and recognising the importance of making decisions in a timely manner.

Where an employee has been absent on sick leave for a period of four weeks, it is particularly important that regular communication between the employee and manager is maintained throughout the period of absence.

8.1 Communication

The purpose of regular contact is to ensure the employee is receiving appropriate support, and to keep the manager updated on progress towards recovery to enable effective planning of staffing levels to facilitate service delivery. Communication is also important to ensure that appropriate arrangements are in place to facilitate the employee's return to work or to enable timely decisions to be made, should it become apparent that the employee is not likely to return to work.

8.2 Referral to Occupational Health

Where an employee's absence continues beyond four weeks, (or if known to at the outset) it is the line manager's responsibility to write a referral letter to the Occupational Health Department. Referral letters should

include a concise but comprehensive account of the circumstances leading to the referral and clearly indicate the specific information or advice required from the Occupational Health Physician to enable the manager to make informed decisions back in the workplace. Such advice may include: -

- Estimated date of return to work / Long term prognosis
- Limitations on the work carried out.
- Deployment in other duties.
- Possibility of retirement due to ill health.

NB. It is also good practice to advise the employee that they are being referred to the Occupational Health Department. Standard letters can be obtained from HR, NIBTS.

On receipt of the report from Occupational Health, it is generally good practice for a face-to-face meeting between the employee and the line manager. Every effort should be made to accommodate the employee's circumstances and the arrangements should be confirmed in writing prior to the meeting. If the meeting is to occur away from the Agency, such as a home visit, an appropriate colleague or a Human Resource Representative must accompany the manager and the employee must be made aware in advance of who will be attending.

The manager must detail the discussions that take place and any agreed action points, in writing to the employee within one week of the meeting. A copy should be kept on the employees personnel file.

9. MISCELLANEOUS

9.1 Absence Related to Disability

It is recognised that disability does not always equate to increased sickness absence. However, some conditions may present particular requirements impacting upon attendance at work.

In such circumstances, a flexible approach to managing disability is required. For example, flexibility in leave/working patterns, or use of management discretion when applying trigger points for the management of attendance procedures, should be considered. Please note that failure to make reasonable adjustments in the application of sickness absence policies and procedures in relation to employees with disabilities may amount to unlawful discrimination, and due consideration must be given to obligations for employees contained within the Disability Discrimination Order. Further advice can be obtained from the HR Department, NIBTS.

Use of special leave to enable disabled employees to be absent during working hours without financial penalty, to attend rehabilitation etc, may be considered as a reasonable adjustment to make.

Open and constructive dialogue between manager and employee is essential to ensure that arrangements are in place, which take account of the needs of both employee and the service.

9.2 Terminal Illness

The Agency is committed to ensuring that an employee who is diagnosed with a terminal illness is given both practical and compassionate assistance with their circumstances. Every effort should be made to ensure that the employee and their family members are given all the support, information and advice appropriate to their circumstances and that their queries and concerns are addressed appropriately and in a timely manner.

It is imperative that the employee's right to confidentiality is not breached. The manager should first discuss and agree with the employee, which members of staff may be informed. The employee's wishes in this regard are paramount. Human Resources are able to provide advice and support to all parties involved and, with the employee's consent, should be informed.

The manager must ensure that, if appropriate, support is given to the employee's colleagues, if the employee has chosen to share their circumstances with them.

It is the manager's responsibility to ensure that communication continues appropriately and takes into consideration the wishes of the employee.

Equality And Human Rights Statement:

This policy has been drawn up and reviewed in light of the statutory obligations contained within Section 75 of the Northern Ireland Act (1998). In line with this statutory duty of equality this policy has been screened against particular criteria. If at any stage of the life of the policy there are any issues within the policy which are perceived by any party as creating adverse impacts on any of the groups under Section 75 that party should bring these to the attention of the HR & Corporate Services Manager.

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Written by: Ivan Ritchie

Enquiries:

Any enquiries regarding the application of this procedure or advice or clarification on any matter therein should be referred to the Human Resources Department, NIBTS.

Review:

This policy will be kept under review by the organisation.

Written by: Ivan Ritchie, HR & Corporate Services Manager

Signature: _____

Date: _____

Approved by: Dr W.M McClelland, Chief Executive/Medical Director

Signature: _____

Date: _____