

**Return to Work Guidance**

Introduction

The purpose of this guidance is so you, as the manager/headteacher, can understand the process of welcoming an employee back to work after a period of absence, and to provide support to employees to make health and wellbeing improvements, enabling employees to return to work and maintain sustainable attendance thereafter.

**Maintaining contact with employee**

You are encouraged to maintain regular contact with the employee throughout their absence, as the Return-to-Work Process (RTW) starts from the moment an employee is absent and not the day before they are due to return. You should use your own judgement as to which method of contact as each case will differ. A record of all contact should be recorded on the [**AP1 Wellbeing Absence Contact Sheet**](https://cumbria.gov.uk/elibrary/Content/Internet/536/5901/6049/44853161742.docx) and made available to employees if requested.

If you are unable to make direct contact with an employee, please use [**AP2 Wellbeing Contact Letter**.](https://cumbria.gov.uk/elibrary/Content/Internet/536/5901/6049/44853161922.docx)

What do I need to do to plan an employee’s return to work?

It is important during a period of absence you are constructive and positive when encouraging an employee to return to work. This may involve employees reflecting on their needs when the time arrives and thinking about any adjustments, skills and/or updates needed. For some employees it may be appropriate for them to visit socially, before the return to work, so they can become reacquainted with colleagues and the workplace.

In some cases, it may be appropriate to agree a return-to-work plan with the employee and reduce any anxieties they have about returning. You should arrange a suitable date and time to meet with the employee to discuss. Updates from the Occupational Health Service and/or specialist should be used in conjunction with other information about the employee’s circumstances to determine what support is required for their return to work. If Occupational Health aren’t involved and you feel their advice would support an employee’s return to work, a referral should be made at the earliest opportunity.

The following options would be considered and discussed when planning an employee’s return to work. However, please note some of these options may not be relevant to an employee's return and therefore would not need to be discussed:

* 1. **Return to /continuation in existing post** - If the employee is well enough to consider a return to work, there should also be discussion of any measures that may be appropriate to best support the employee’s health and wellbeing on their return. This may be with a phased return to work – see below. In these circumstances, you may consider setting a monitoring period and have a formal meeting with the employee and their representative to consider this.
  2. **Return to post with reasonable adjustments** - Adjustments may include changes to hours, duties or location of the role, the use of equipment or improving access or facilities. Such adjustments can be made on a temporary or permanent basis. You will need to assess whether these changes can reasonably be accommodated without having a detrimental effect on the service.

As part of the consideration of such adjustments, further specialist advice may be sought from the Occupational Health Service or outside organisations such as the disability advisory service offered by Job Centre Plus, Able Futures, the RNIB or the Shaw Trust. This additional advice may be referred from the Occupational Health Service or approached directly by the Manager/Head Teacher. Further information can be sought from People Management /HR Provider.

* 1. **Phased return to work -** Where an employee is returning to work to their own post (with or without reasonable adjustments) or is being redeployed into another post, the Occupational Health Service may advise that they should return on a phased return to work, where their hours are increased week by week until they reach the level of their usual contractual hours. Advice from People Management/HR Provider should be obtained to ensure fair and consistent treatment of all employees.

The phased return to work arrangements can normally be agreed to be in place for anytime between 2-6 weeks. Phased hours should be reviewed weekly to ensure the employee is supported and to agree if the phased return should be extended. During a phased return the employee will suffer no financial detriment by returning to work on this basis, providing they adhere to the agreed arrangements.

If the employee had pre booked annual leave during a phased return to work programme, the phased return arrangement will be reviewed on the employees return from annual leave and may be extended by a period of time equal to the period of annual leave.

If sickness absence occurs during a phased return to work programme sick pay entitlements will commence. On the employee’s return to work the phased return arrangement will be reviewed and either continued, extended, or ended as appropriate.

* 1. **Risk assessment** - if an absence relates to a disability, pregnancy, stress, or a work-related accident, you should undertake a risk assessment – seek HR advice on this if necessary. If required, contact People Management/HR Provider for further clarification and guidance.
  2. **Redeployment (AEP) -** If it is not possible for the employee to return to their post either with or without adjustments, the manager/head teacher should consider placing them on the Alternative Employment Programme. For Cumbria County Council employees this would relate to existing posts within the Council which become vacant but would not require the Council to create a post specifically for the purposes of redeployment. The employee may however be offered training to enable them to fulfil an alternative role.

When considering the Alternative Employment Programme, advice from the Occupational Health Service must be obtained in relation to the tasks the employee is capable of undertaking and on the type of posts the employee would be fit to be redeployed into. It is also important to consult with the employee on such matters.

You would then set a timescale (usually up to 12 weeks) during which the employee would seek alternative employment. During the redeployment search the employee would have priority status and be considered before other applicants for a post (other than other candidates on the AEP for either health or redundancy reasons). For more information, please see the Alternative Employment Programme guidance.

Return to Work Meeting

When an employee is planning to return to work, you should arrange a Return-to-Work Meeting at the earliest opportunity. This meeting needs to be before the employee begins to pick up work again. The purpose and focus of this meeting is to discuss an employee’s health and wellbeing and fitness for work. The meeting location should be agreed with the employee, as they can often feel daunted and overwhelmed at the thought of returning to work.

You should treat each case with sensitivity, patience and ensure thought is given to expectations around quality and quantity of initial work outcomes. Whilst you are required to complete a Return-to-Work Checklist, this is not the key focus of the return, but to be used as a supportive measure to ensure a record is kept of the process. A copy should be attached/inserted to iTrent/Personnel file.

What can I do to support an employee on their first day back?

You are encouraged to use your initiative when planning an employee’s first day back to work.

* **Meet and greet** - it may be helpful for you to be available to meet with the employee to welcome them back to work, avoiding busy times. To be taken into consideration is the work location for the employee, and yourself, and whether this is done face-to-face or virtually.
* **Length of absence** – depending on the length of time an employee has been absent from work, they may require additional support and/or an induction style return, including introduction to new members of the team.
* **Workload** – an employee may require support to manage their time to catch up on their workload.
* **Employee preference** – each employee will require different levels and types of support on their return to work. It is recommended you ask your employee and factor in their preferences when planning their first day back.

Continuing support

You should discuss and agree with your employee what ongoing support will be provided once they have returned to work. This may involve monitoring and reviewing the Wellbeing Absence Action Plan, in line with updates from the Occupational Health Service and/or specialist in conjunction with other information about the employee’s circumstances.

Please refer to **Managing Wellbeing Guidance** for additional support.