Managing Absence Consistently Guidance

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| Version Control | Changes Made | Author |
| Version 1 – April 2023 |  | HR/OD |

Introduction

The purpose of this guidance is so you, as the manager/headteacher, can understand how to manage an employee’s absence consistently, and to provide support to employees to make health and wellbeing improvements, enabling employees to return to work and maintain sustainable attendance thereafter.

The wellbeing and absence procedure is based on a set of five guiding principles, as follows:

**1**. Person Centred

**2.** Prioritising Wellbeing

1. Proactive
2. Flexible and Creative
3. ***Consistent***

These principles have been introduced to recognise the unique challenges you may face when supporting the health and wellbeing of an employee. It is important to recognise each employee may require different support to maintain high levels of wellbeing and sustainable attendance.

In the procedure, consistency means applying the other four guiding principles equally to all employees. This could mean the same actions do not need to be applied to all cases.

You may have doubts about how consistency applies when working with principles rather than rules. Therefore, this guidance looks at a case study involving common ‘real world’ scenarios, with discussion of how consistency has been achieved on a practical level.

You are encouraged to use your own initiative to support an employee with their absence. Where you have any queries on how to apply the above principles consistently, please contact HR/HR Provider for further advice and guidance.

**Case Study**

Two staff members in the same team, Anne and Gill have both had a high number of short-term absences this year, which has caused concern for their manager. The manager has managed both of cases appropriately through the Wellbeing and Absence procedure. Although the levels of absence are similar, the measures taken are different due to the circumstances of the case:

**Anne’s situation:**

Anne has a long-standing mental health issue which has been contributing to her absences. She and her manager have held a first Wellbeing Support Meeting in line with the procedure where they discussed the effect of Anne’s condition on her attendance. They agreed some minor adjustments to Anne’s job design to help reduce her anxiety and to maintain a sustainable attendance. They have agreed to hold another meeting under the procedure in 6 weeks’ time. They will use this meeting to review how the adjustments are working and whether any further changes are needed. In the meantime, with Anne’s agreement, her manager has made an Occupational Health referral, requesting input from a medical perspective about any further support that may aid Anne’s wellbeing /attendance moving forward. This information will also be considered at the next Wellbeing Support Meeting.

Anne’s manager is initially focused on ensuring the correct support and reasonable adjustments are in place to best support improvements to Anne’s wellbeing, and therefore future attendance. There has not been discussion of attendance expectations moving forward. This decision has been taken because Anne’s manager has determined the focus should be on getting the support right, and discussion of specific attendance expectations at this point might put pressure on Anne, adding to her anxieties.

Anne’s manager is mindful that attendance expectations will need to be set at some point and plans to do this at the second Wellbeing Support Meeting. At this meeting Occupational Health advice will be available, which may give an indication of whether a reasonable adjustment to attendance expectations might be appropriate in view of Anne’s health condition. It is also expected if the temporary adjustments have been working well, discussion of attendance expectations may be perceived as less threatening. Even so, Anne’s manager views the plan as provisional and will be guided by the specific circumstances she encounters on the day.

**Gill’s situation:**

Gill has had 6 absences in the last year, 3 due to coughs and colds, 1 headache and 2 stomach upsets. her manager has held a first Wellbeing Support Meeting in line with the procedure and Gill has advised she does not have any underlying health or wellbeing concerns contributing to her absences. She says she has just been unlucky with bugs this year. Her manager has set up a meeting under the short-term procedure and is wanting to ensure she is treated consistently with Anne.

The Wellbeing Support Meeting started with a discussion of Gill’s general health and wellbeing, and the manager enquired whether there might be any underlying reasons contributing to her absences. Gill confirmed there were no such concerns.

Therefore, there was no reason to consider adjustments, support, or temporary arrangements, and also no reason at this point to schedule a meeting to review arrangements.

Instead, the manager reiterated the attendance expectations for Gill moving forward. There were no special circumstances surrounding Gill’s role which make absence more likely, so her manager set an expectation of no more than 3 occasions or 8 days over a rolling 12-month period, as outlined as the recommended minimum in the guidance for short-term absence. Gill’s manager explained to her if her absence falls short of those expectations, then a further meeting would be required to review the situation.

The manager took into consideration there may be an underlying health or wellbeing issue which Gill was not yet aware of, or which she did not feel comfortable to share. For this reason, the manager made sure to continue with regular health and wellbeing check-ins as part of her regular one to one meetings with Gill.

If at any point concerns about an underlying health or wellbeing concern are raised, Gill’s manager is ready to consider appropriate supportive measures at the earliest opportunity, not wait for further absences to occur.

**Frequency of Wellbeing Support Meetings & contact:**

**Anne** – second meeting date already set, 6 weeks after the first.

**Gill** – only hold another meeting if attendance expectations not met

Both arrangements are person centred and based on the specific circumstances of the individual employee. In Anne’s case a second meeting is required to review the temporary supportive measures, which proactively supports wellbeing. In Gill’s case there are no wellbeing concerns raised and the conversation is around attendance expectations, so a further meeting would only be required if expectations are not met. Scheduling a second Wellbeing Support Meeting before further absences may be perceived as unnecessary in this case.

**General consistency considerations:**

* Meetings are intended to be supportive, not punitive. So, there is no reason to delay further meetings which may support health, wellbeing, and attendance.
* The frequency and number of the meetings should reflect the needs and circumstances of the employee; a manager can hold as many or few as necessary to fully explore appropriate support.
* The appropriate timing and number of meetings will vary depending on the specifics of the case.

**Reasonable adjustments and supportive measures**

In Anne’s case an underlying health condition was identified as contributing to her absences at the beginning of her case. Therefore, consideration was given to appropriate supportive arrangements at this point. Advice from Occupational Health was outstanding and now a change to job design has been proposed. The manager put this in place as a temporary arrangement in the first instance, demonstrating proactivity, flexibility, and creativity.

In Gill’s case, no health or wellbeing issues were identified, therefore no adjustments were proposed. However, Gill’s manager made sure to ask about health and wellbeing at the start of the meeting and continues to check this through one to one’s. This allows a proactive response with appropriate support to be put in place as and when any such concerns arise.

**General consistency considerations**:

* Appropriate supportive measures should be implemented at the earliest opportunity in all cases.
* The suggestions for reasonable adjustments in manager guidance are only examples. In specific cases appropriate and creative suggestions for adjustments may come from a variety of sources (e.g., employee, manager, TU representatives). All suggestions should be given thorough consideration.
* Temporary arrangements are encouraged if effectiveness or workability is in doubt.
* Adjustments need to be sustainable for both the employee and the service long term. Consideration of this should be documented in all cases where support arrangements/adjustments are proposed.
* You should be open to amending arrangements if circumstances change or new information comes to light (e.g., change to health condition or new information from Occupational Health).
* You should also give consideration for minor adjustments to the job role that are non-core duty aspects for the purpose of health and wellbeing only.

**Attendance expectations**

In Anne’s case, her manager has focussed on her wellbeing and arranged another meeting for 6 weeks’ time. The managers focus here is to concentrate on Anne’s wellbeing and setting expectations at this point will only cause Anne further stress. Consideration has been given from a person-centred view in light of Anne’s mental health at the time.

In Gill’s case, the manager has considered if there are any underlying health and wellbeing concerns with Gill that could have contributed to her frequent absences before making any further decisions. By checking this first it has allowed her manager to understand whether adjustments need to be considered and how best to deal with Gill’s absence specifically. The manager focussed on Gill’s attendance and what was expected of her whilst considering if her role had any special circumstances that would see a greater sickness level. After all these person-centred points had been considered the manager set an appropriate level for Gill and explained what this would mean if those expectations were exceeded.

**General consistency considerations**

* You are encouraged to prioritise actions to support health and wellbeing before setting or adjusting attendance expectations.
* Any allowances to attendance expectations should be made in view of evidence that other adjustments are unlikely to fully mitigate impact of a health condition on an employee’s attendance.
* When considering allowances, you are encouraged to use evidence from Occupational Health in conjunction with information from any other appropriate sources (including the employee, GP, specialist, etc.)
* You will need to consider the impact of any allowances on service delivery.
* Allowances to attendance expectations need to be sustainable for both the employee and the service long term. Consideration of this should be documented in all cases where changes to attendance expectations are proposed.

**Occupational Health involvement**

As Anne has a long-standing mental health issue and has consented to Occupational Health involvement, this will allow her manager to work together with Anne to further support her health and wellbeing whilst at work. Using the advice from Occupational Health has contributed towards a positive and person-centred approach in dealing with Anne’s mental health.

As Gill has explained to her manager there are no health and wellbeing concerns at present, a referral to Occupational Health at this time would not be needed. If this changed for Gill, then the manager could submit a referral to Occupational Health for their medical advice.

**General consistency considerations:**

* You need to consider if there is a health and wellbeing requirement for the referral to be made.
* It is important to consider any questions that are specific to the individual and their job role.
* A referral may not be required at the beginning of the absence but can be made at any time during the absence if the employees’ health changes.