

# Absence Management

## How to 4: Planning a return to work

Advice for line managers

<b>Contents:</b>	<b>Page</b>
Introduction .....	1
Background .....	1
When is the right time to discuss an employee's return to work? .....	2
The return to work plan .....	2
Closing the plan .....	4
How to deal with the employee's concerns .....	5
Pay While Off Sick	7

### Introduction

This guide helps you support an employee back to work following a period of sickness absence. It has particular relevance for longer sickness absences. Managing a return to work can be difficult but taking early action to support the employee during the sickness absence can help ensure a positive outcome.

### Background

The way managers interact with employees during their sickness absence is key to helping them return to work.

Keeping in touch with employees during their sickness absence can help them feel more connected with work. Without this contact, they can feel increasingly out of touch and undervalued. This can cause them to lose confidence, which can make a return to work more difficult.

## **When is the right time to discuss an employee's return to work?**

The right time to talk about a return to work will depend on the employee and the nature of their illness. For example:

- you can proactively discuss the employee's situation from the start of the absence without pressurising them into thinking they have to come back to work before they are ready
- receipt of a 'Fit Note' containing return to work advice from the employee's GP or receipt of Occupational Health advice is a good time to start the discussion
- the employee may tell you that they are ready to think about returning to work
- you will talk to the employee about when they think they will be able to return to work and the support they may need to achieve this.
- ideally the discussion will be face to face and be carried out in the workplace. This can help the employee maintain their connection to work. If this is not possible, you should agree a suitable, alternative location.
- A telephone discussion may be appropriate if an employee's circumstances or health issues make a face to face meeting difficult.

## **The Return to Work Plan**

A Return to Work Plan will help you and the employee to plan and document what needs to be done to support them back to work as soon as they are well enough to do so.

It will detail current and future actions to be taken by the employee, yourself, and any other party.

Having a structured plan in place can help the employee to see there is a commitment to helping them back to work and they are making progress.

The plan has four elements:

Return to work advice	Clear goals
Actions	Regular reviews

**Return to work advice:**

This will set out what the employee can and cannot do, or might be able to do with help. This information can be provided either by Occupational Health or by the employee's GP on the 'Fit Note'. Further advice is to be obtained from the HR Team.

**Clear goals:**

These clarify where the employee is now in their readiness to return to work and where they are aiming to be. The goals should help them move towards being ready to return and will include any of the following:

- developing the belief, they will make a successful return to work
- identifying any barriers and how they can be overcome
- establishing and strengthening links to work (by attending work social events, or meeting managers/colleagues in or out of work)
- having the confidence to contemplate returning to work
- returning to work
- doing more work for longer periods (as part of a phased return to work)
- remaining at work
- increasing performance, e.g. completing tasks end to end.
- Should an employee have any concerns about the return to work process, these can be discussed at a mutually agreed place with the line manager ahead of the return to work.

**Actions:**

The plan will identify clear and specific actions which will enable the goals to be met.

These will include any of the following:

- referral to Occupational Health
- undergoing NHS or other medical treatment

- changes to working patterns or hours, including temporary changes or working part time on medical grounds
- the provision of supportive equipment
- physical workplace adjustments
- retraining
- being mentored.

The plan will state who is responsible for carrying out each action and by when. This could be you, the employee or someone else.

Goals are distinct from actions; a goal is a clear target to aim for, whilst an action is something that can be done to help achieve this goal.

### **Regular reviews:**

You and the employee will agree a review date to discuss:

- how the employee is feeling, physically and emotionally
- the employee's achievements against the plan
- progress and any indication of when they will be ready to return
- an update on any work-related issues
- any adjustments/adaptations to the work place which need to be made in advance.

### **Closing the plan**

A Return to Work Plan would normally be closed once you and the employee agree they are achieving and maintaining satisfactory performance and attendance.

If the employee is unable to achieve or maintain satisfactory attendance or performance, or is unable to return to work within a reasonable timeframe, you will need to consider action under the appropriate procedure.

## How to deal with the employee's concerns

The longer an employee is absent from work the harder it can be for them to contemplate a return.

Employees may experience a number of concerns which you will need to address as part of the planning for a return.

The issues outlined below can act as a prompt for you during your discussions with an employee during their sickness absence.

<b>Issue for employee</b>	<b>Possible solution/action</b>
<b>Not being able to catch up with their work</b>	<p>Reassure the employee.</p> <p>A carefully planned return to work and/or phased resumption of duties will help them feel more in control of their working situation.</p>
<b>Concerns about a particular colleague or situation at work</b>	<p>Explore what the specific issues are.</p> <p>Consider whether mediation or changes to the workplace environment might help to achieve a return to work.</p>
<b>Fears that colleagues might be resentful because they had to cover their work</b>	<p>Be prepared to acknowledge this if it is true.</p> <p>Reassure the employee that early arrangements for a supportive and well-planned handover of work will be made.</p>
<b>Worry that colleagues will not think them capable</b>	<p>Reassurance about tasks the employee has done particularly well before their illness will help allay these fears.</p>
<b>Worry about how colleagues will react on returning to work</b>	<p>Discuss how the employee would like their return to be treated by colleagues.</p>
<b>Concerns about confidentiality</b>	<p>Ask the employee if colleagues know why they are off and what, if anything, they want them to know about.</p> <p>Respect their confidentiality at all times.</p>

<p><b>Worry about re-engaging in work where an employee believes it made them ill</b></p>	<p>Take time to develop a supportive Return to Work Plan with the employee. Carry out stress risk assessment to identify potential triggers to be aware of.</p>
<p><b>Concern that symptoms will recur or the condition might relapse</b></p>	<p>Acknowledge the employee's concerns.</p> <p>Allow the employee to fully discuss their condition before they return so that ways to manage symptoms or allow medication to be taken at work can be explored.</p> <p>This will give the employee greater control and help them feel more secure in the workplace.</p>
<p><b>Anxiety about current work performance or workload pressures</b></p>	<p>Remind the employee of previous examples of good performance.</p> <p>Consider temporary or reasonable adjustments and establish whether a change can be made to support the employee (How to: 8)</p> <p>If the employee feels the manager believes in their ability to handle tasks well, this can have a very powerful influence on their level of self-confidence.</p>

## **Pay While Off Sick**

The amount of sick pay employees receive will depend on their service and compliance with the expectations set out in this Policy:

During 1 <sup>st</sup> year of service	1 months' full pay
During 2 <sup>nd</sup> year of service	2 months' full pay
During 3 <sup>rd</sup> year of service	4 months' full pay
During 4 <sup>th</sup> and 5 <sup>th</sup> year of service	5 months' full pay
After 5 years' service	6 months' full pay

Shropshire Council reserves the right to refuse to pay sick pay (including SSP) if there is evidence that an employee is/has abused the sick pay scheme. This decision is subject to a right of appeal. Repeated or serious abuse of the scheme will be dealt with as a disciplinary matter.

To aid flexibility for long term, serious absence cases; Employees, or their representative, may request, in writing to the Assistant Director - Workforce, an extension to their sick pay stating the reasons for the request. A half pay extension will be agreed, in conjunction with the relevant Director, if on the basis of medical opinion(s) there is every likelihood of an employee's return to work, within a period of three months. Any payment of half pay will be in accordance with the employees service entitlement as outlined above.

All requests of this nature will be dealt with on a case by case basis.

Where a phased return to work is agreed, employees will return to their normal full pay upon their return to work. Any agreed phased return to work shall not exceed 4 weeks in duration.

If any of the above requests are refused, a written appeal must be sent to the Chief Executive as Head of Paid Service.