

CASTLEREAGH BOROUGH COUNCIL

ATTENDANCE POLICY



1. INTRODUCTION

- 1.1 Councils are currently under pressure to improve performance and ensure that they deliver cost effective quality services. Within this context, the Council recognises that high levels of attendance at work make a significant contribution to the planning and provision of effective Local Authority services and are a major factor in maintaining employee morale.
- 1.2 This policy is part of the Council's commitment to the provision of quality services through a well-motivated workforce.
- 1.3 Responsibility for effective attendance control lies with the line manager and particularly first line supervisors who are responsible for handling absence from work. The Council is committed to analysing its absenteeism and encouraging and assisting employees to improve attendance.
- 1.4 Review periods for attendance under this policy will be a rolling 12 months in respect of line managers initially reviewing employee absence records in terms of short-term sick absence.
- 1.5 At the informal (see section 8.2) and formal stages (see sections 8.3 to 8.6) line managers (in communication with the Human Resource section) will use their discretion to apply appropriate targets and review periods.
- 1.6 At all stages of the Attendance Policy the Human Resource section is available for advice and guidance.

2. AIMS

- 2.1 The principle aims of the policy are:
 - a) to achieve a consistent approach in dealing with absenteeism.
 - b) to ensure that employees are treated fairly, consistently, sympathetically and with dignity.
 - c) to ensure that managers take appropriate action in respect of unacceptable levels of absence.
 - d) to provide employees with a welfare service (to include a confidential counselling service) which is, prompt and which assists them to overcome their illness and integrate smoothly back into the workplace.
 - e) through the manager, to provide employees with information in relation to the extent and pattern of their absence levels and to encourage them to improve their attendance.

- f) to ensure that absenteeism is monitored on a continuing basis and where excessive absences are identified that these be brought to the employee's attention for improvement.
- g) to recognise 100% attendance in any annual leave year (01 April to 31 March) by rewarding 2 additional annual leave days (pro rata for part-time employees) through the NASA (Not A Single Absence) system.

3. EMPLOYEES ROLE

Employees are responsible for:

- 3.1 ensuring, as far as possible, regular attendance at work
- 3.2 immediately notifying their line manager/supervisor of an absence in accordance with Appendix 1 of this policy.
- 3.3 not undertaking any activity, which might be detrimental to his/her return to work.
- 3.4 complying with any reasonable treatment of any medical condition to ensure the earliest possible recovery
- 3.5 co-operating with the implementation of this policy to achieve an acceptable level of attendance

4. MANAGER/SUPERVISOR'S ROLE

The manager/supervisor will have a responsibility to exercise leadership within his/her work group and as such be expected to monitor and control his/her staff work attendance. He/she should therefore ensure that all employees understand what is expected of them and that their contribution to the service provided by the Council is valued.

In exercising his/her responsibility account should be taken of the following: -

- a) Employees must be made aware of the notification procedures for absence of any kind.
- b) All employees must be made aware that their attendance will be monitored.
- c) The absence reporting mechanisms must be implemented and notification of absence must be forwarded to Human Resources and Salaries & Wages.
- d) All employees should be treated in a fair and consistent manner and be encouraged to seek help with any problems, which might result in non-attendance at work.
- e) Employees should be made aware of relevant policies and welfare services (including the confidential counselling service), which are available and may be of assistance to them.
- f) Employees who suffer ill health should be treated sympathetically and with dignity.

- g) In cases of persistent absence the situation must be carefully monitored, assessed and appropriate action taken, which may include the use of written notifications that an employee's job may be at risk.

5. REPORTING OF SICKNESS

Refer to Appendix 1, which details the Council's Absence Reporting mechanism.

6. RETURN TO WORK INTERVIEWS

Following every period of absence from work due to illness, the Line Manager/Supervisor will carry out a return to work interview with the employee. This should take place within 2 days of the return to work, except in extenuating circumstances. The purpose of this is as follows:

- to confirm the reason for absence
- to confirm the duration of absence
- to investigate if there are any underlying reasons or likelihood of recurrence of illness and any assistance required by the employer
- in the case of long-term absence, to inform the employee of changes and developments and to offer support on his/her return to work

Managers will have to exercise some discretion in the nature and content of the return to work interview. For example where an officer is rarely absent and is only away for a few days, a brief enquiry will suffice.

A pro-forma for return to work interviews is attached as Appendix 2.

Where the Line Manger determines that the condition may be of a sensitive nature, he/she may refer to Human Resources for advice.

7. TRIGGERS

The Council will use trigger points to indicate to management that a particular employee's pattern of absence has reached a point where there may be a cause for concern and need to investigate. This is necessary to ensure consistency. The triggers may be reviewed and amended if considered appropriate by the Council. The triggers will be as follows.

Where, in any rolling 12 months, any of the following criteria are met:

- I. 8 days or more absence due to illness (even if self-certified or medically certified)
- II. 3 or more separate periods of absence
- III. an unacceptable pattern of absence (e.g. regular Fridays and Mondays)
- IV. continuous absence of more than 20 working days

Action to be taken in relation to the above triggers is outlined below.

Employees will have the right to be represented by their Trade Union representative or fellow employee at any FORMAL stage of the absence procedure if a problem is identified.

The outcome of the meeting will be confirmed in writing within 5 working days of the meeting taking place.

8. SHORT-TERM ABSENCES, (WHETHER SELF-CERTIFIED OR MEDICALLY CERTIFIED)

8.1 Short-term absences are normally those absences as set out in the section 7, numbers I to III.

INFORMAL STAGE:

8.2 Informal Counselling Interview

This will take place immediately after the return to work interview, where a Line Manager has identified that a trigger has been met. It will be conducted between the employee and the Line Manager/Supervisor. This will take account of the employee's attendance record. A medical certificate does not stop action being taken at this stage. The review must qualify the absence, in terms of frequency and duration.

The review will be done confidentially in consultation with the employee at the place of work. The purpose of the review is to enable the Line Manager/Supervisor to: -

- a) establish the current position in relation to the employee's health (where the Line Manger determines that the condition may be of a sensitive nature, he/she may refer to Human Resources for advice)
- b) indicate concern about the employee's attendance record
- c) ascertain what steps the employee and/or employer can take to improve attendance.
- d) inform the employee that absence is being monitored
- e) file record of interview review with Human Resources
- f) monitor absence

The Line Manager/Supervisor may decide as a result of the review on one or more of the following options: -

- a) Take no action (eg if pregnancy related)
- b) Set targets to reduce absence over a period of time (this will always occur where there is no underlying medical condition).
- c) Ask the employee to consult their GP (e.g. if treatment is needed)

- d) Where there is any indication, either from the employee or from the Line Managers, that there may be an underlying medical condition, the employee must be referred in the first instance through the Human Resources Section to the Council's Occupational Health Service/Employee Counselling Services and/or a report sought from the employee's GP or specialist. In cases where there is no apparent underlying medical condition, this process may still be followed.
- e) Consider and address, if appropriate, any occupational or domestic problems raised by the employee affecting the employee's health or welfare.

FORMAL STAGE:

8.3 First Absence Interview

A further review will be carried out in consultation with the employee within the time scale specified above, were targets for improvement have been set. This will normally be at the end of the review period, but where targets are not met, a meeting will be convened immediately, with appropriate notice being given as above.

In determining what action to be taken at this stage, the line manager/supervisor should take into account: -

- a) Whether there has been a satisfactory improvement in the employee's record.
- b) The employee's age, length of service and performance.
- c) The likelihood of a change in the attendance record.
- d) The degree of disruption caused by the absence.
- e) In consultation with Human Resources, advice received by the Occupational Health Service, and/or any other medical evidence available.

If there is still no satisfactory improvement in the employee's record the employee may be verbally warned that his/her employment is at risk, in line with First Formal Stage of this Attendance Policy and new targets and review period set. This warning will remain on the employee's file for 6 months.

An employee who is dissatisfied with the outcome may ask for it to be reconsidered by a more senior officer. This will normally be the Line Manager/Supervisor's manager. The request must be made in writing to the Senior Officer within 5 working days of receiving notification. The senior officer will discuss the outcome with both parties separately and make a recommendation as appropriate. This will be final at this stage in the procedure.

8.4 Second Absence Interview

A further review will take place as outlined at 8.3. If there is still no satisfactory improvement in the employee's record, the employee will receive a written

warning that his/her employment is at risk, in line with Second Formal Stage of this Attendance Policy and new targets and review period set. This warning will remain on the employee's file for one year.

If there is still no satisfactory improvement in the employee's record the employee may be verbally warned that his/her employment is at risk, 6 months.

An employee who is dissatisfied with the outcome may ask for it to be reconsidered by a more senior officer. This will normally be the Section manager. The request must be made in writing to the Senior Officer within 5 working days of receiving notification. The senior officer will discuss the outcome with both parties separately and make a recommendation as appropriate. This will be final at this stage in the procedure.

8.5 Final Absence Interview

A further review will take place as outlined in 8.4. If there is still no satisfactory improvement in the employee's record, the employee will receive a written warning that his/her employment is at risk, in line with Final Formal Stage of this Attendance Policy and new targets and review period set. This warning will remain on the employee's file for one year.

An employee who is dissatisfied with the outcome may ask for it to be reconsidered by a more senior officer. This will normally be the Line Manager/Supervisor's manager. The request must be made in writing to the Senior Officer within 5 working days of receiving notification. The senior officer will discuss the outcome with both parties separately and make a recommendation as appropriate. This will be final at this stage in the procedure.

8.6 Dismissal

At the end of the review period, if it is considered that there is no prospect of a satisfactory improvement within a reasonable period of time, the Council may proceed to a Formal Case Review hearing.

In the case of dismissal, the normal period of notice will be given (although the Council at its discretion may give pay in lieu of notice). The advice of the Human Resources Section should be sought before the discretion is taken to dismiss. The employee will have recourse to the normal appeals procedure regarding dismissal, under the Council's Disciplinary Procedure.

9. LONG TERM ABSENCE

9.1 Long-term absence means 20 working days or more of continuous absence.

9.2 The line manager/supervisor should maintain regular contact with an employee who is absent due to long-term sickness.

9.3 A home visit (or alternative venue suitable to the employee) will be arranged through human resources by week 6 of the period of long-term sick to;

a) provide appropriate support regarding the employee's health and welfare

- b) establish the current position in relation to the employee's health. (The line manager/supervisor, because of the sensitive or personal nature of the information, may choose instead to be referred to an officer within the Human Resources Section or to the Council's Occupational Health Services).
- c) establish when the employee may be able to resume work.
- d) ascertain what steps the employee and/or employer can take to aid recovery.
- e) where appropriate, advise employee of availability of confidential counselling service
- g) due to the level of the post and the operational exigencies of the department, the council may consider it appropriate to explain the problems in connection with the employee's absence and measures that may need to be implemented as a result.
- h) determine what action, if any, needs to be taken.

9.3 Referral to Occupational Health Services and/or employee's own doctor or specialist

An employee with absence of between 4 and 6 weeks, will normally be referred to the Council's occupational Health Services and/or a report sought from his/her own doctor/specialist in order to establish:-

- a) the likely duration of the absence.
- b) whether there are likely to be any alterations to duties required taking account of individual's medical condition when they return to work.
- c) whether such alterations are likely to be temporary or permanent.
- d) whether there is anything that can be done to assist with the individual's recovery and return to work.
- e) whether grounds exist or are likely to exist to terminate the employee's service on the grounds of ill health.

Most cases of long-term sickness will fall into one of the following three categories;

- Physical Ailment – attempts should be made to secure the earliest possible return of employees who are absent due to a physical ailment. If the injury prevents the employee returning to work, the Human Resource Manger should, through consultation with the Line Manager, consider altering the duties or work pattern of the employee, for example, placing the employee on part-time work for a short period or altering of duties. The alternative working pattern should last for a short period only and the circumstances should be reviewed regularly.
- Work Related Illness – where a medical certificate indicates that the employee is absent due to a work related illness, the causes of the illness should be investigated.

- Mental Ill Health – in situations where the employee is suffering from a mental health disorder, the employee should in the first instance, be referred to the Council's Occupational Health Physician and /or other professional services, for example counselling services.

If the medical report(s) advise that the employee is no longer capable of providing regular and reliable service, the Human Resource Manager and the Line Manager should arrange to visit the employee to discuss the options available, for example, suitable alternative employment or termination due to ill health. During the visit the employee has the right to be represented by a trade union representative.

9.4 Redeployment

Staff who become incapacitated should be retained if possible, in the same or similar jobs. If this is not possible, every effort should be made to find a suitable post in another area. If appropriate, the possibilities of job restructuring, flexible working arrangements and part-time working should be considered in consultation with the employee concerned and their trade union or fellow employee representative, the Occupational Health Service and the line manager/supervisor. In addition, the Council will ensure compliance with the Disability Discrimination Act 1995.

9.5 Dismissal

In determining what action to take and how long it is reasonable to wait before the employee is able to return to work the line manager/supervisor should take into account: -

- I. the employee's age, length of service.
- II. the likelihood of a change in the attendance record.
- III. the availability of suitable alternative work.
- IV. the degree of disruption caused by the absence.
- V. advice from the Occupational Health Service and any other available medical evidence.

If the line manager/supervisor considers, in the light of these factors, that there is no prospect of a satisfactory improvement within a reasonable period of time or a transfer to alternative work, the circumstances must be discussed with the Human Resources Section. At this stage a Formal Case Review should be carried out, due consideration having first been given to the Disability Discrimination Act (1995), the Sex Discrimination (NI) Order, and Section 75 of the Northern Ireland Act (1998), and the procedures which surround ill health retirement.

Before taking a decision to dismiss on the grounds of ill-health, consideration must be given to the following: -

- a) Have offers of alternative types of employment for the employee been considered by management, whether or not an offer has been made?

- b) Has the employee been sufficiently consulted about his/her problem and prospects in the light of his/her interests and the organisations interests, including the possibility of dismissal?
- c) Has advice been sought from the Council's medical adviser about the employee's condition and future prospects?
- d) Has the employee been consulted and given an opportunity to give his/her own views on the matter since medical advice has been received?
- e) Have all aspects of the matter relevant to a decision to dismiss been investigated and considered?
- f) Can a reasonable employer be expected to wait any longer for the employee's attendance record to improve, bearing in mind the interests of the organisation, the position that the employee holds and the need to be fair to him/her?
- g) Has the employee been consulted as the final step in the procedure?

In control of long-term absenteeism, medical opinion will form the main basis of the management decision.

In instances of ill health dismissal, the employee has the right of appeal in accordance with the Council's Disciplinary Procedures.

10. PREGNANCY

It must be noted that none of the advice given above is intended to apply to pregnancy-related illnesses during pregnancy or maternity leave. To take action against an employee in those circumstances is likely to be regarded as unfair if the employee is dismissed for a pregnancy-related reason, and as unlawful discrimination on the grounds of sex.

11. UNAUTHORISED ABSENCES

Unauthorised absences occur when an employee is absent from his/her place of work: -

- a) Without authorisation.
- b) Without informing his/her line manager/supervisor before 10.00am.
- c) Failing to complete a self-certification form.
- d) Failing to submit regular medical certificates when appropriate.

Unauthorised absence is misconduct and should be dealt with through the disciplinary procedure.