

Employment Matters Committee

1 May 2025

Revised Managing Sickness and Absence Policy

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Summary

This report seeks to outline and inform the Committee of the revisions made during the review of the current Managing Sickness Absence Policy. Managing absence is a key area of focus and an organisational priority to support the health and wellbeing of the Council's workforce. A review of the policy and supporting guidance was required to further support employees both when they are absent and when they return.

In addition to the review, and subsequent revision of the policy (attached as Appendix A to the report), a suite of guidance and a programme of training for managers on identified key areas will be implemented alongside the launch of the revised policy which is planned for May 2025.

1. Recommendations

- 1.1 The Committee is asked to agree the adoption of the revised Managing Sickness and Absence Policy set out at Appendix A to the report, and the implementation of a programme of training across the Council as set out in section 5.6. of the report.

2. Budget and policy framework

- 2.1 The adoption of the revised policy is within the purview of the Employment Matters Committee and the decision is within the Council's policy and budget framework.
- 2.2 The Managing Absence Policy does not have a direct impact on the overall Council frameworks and strategies. However, the policy does support the relevant strategies indirectly as the adoption of the policy, guidance and training across the Council will help to influence and improve the physical and mental wellbeing of employees. Ensuring that employees are supported will help them to perform to the best of their abilities to deliver services and outcomes both for the Council and the communities of Medway.

3. Background

- 3.1 The overall sickness absence rate per employee at Medway Council in the financial (and annual leave) year 2023/24 was 10.0 days per full time equivalent (FTE). This aligns with 2024/5 data where overall sickness absence per FTE had been reported as 10.74 days.
- 3.2 The Local Government Association (LGA) workforce summary data 2021/22 states that the average sickness absence rate per FTE employee (in the public sector) is 8.7 days (LGA workforce summary data 2021/22). Although due to the date of the Local Government Association data we cannot draw a direct comparison, it is possible to show that our absence rates will likely be comparable to other similar public sector organisations. This is reinforced by the CIPD Health and Wellbeing at Work report (CIPD, 2023) which states that the highest sickness absence rates for over a decade have been reported across all sectors in 2023 with the public sector averaging 10.6 days per employee. It is noted that the CIPD data is from 2023 and the findings found that covid was still a significant cause of short term absence for 37% of organisations, this may not necessarily be as significant in 2025 so a direct comparison with Medway Council data cannot be made.
- 3.3 Medway Council is not an outlier in terms of needing to focus on reducing the number of working days lost due to sickness absence. There are several support mechanisms the Council has in place already which include:
- Care First – the Council's employee assistance programme.
 - A network of employee Wellbeing Champions, of which a number have been supported to complete Mental Health First Aider training.
 - An Occupational Health (OH) referral service.
 - An improved dashboard for Directorate reporting to identify sickness absence trends and areas that may need additional support.
 - The Healthy Mind and Wellbeing Group, a voluntary group of staff, established to review the staff survey results in relation to wellbeing and identify actions to improve health and wellbeing.
- 3.4 Although not part of the policy or the guidance/training, it is important to note that other work is being carried out to improve access and analysis of absence. To address the delay in data being available, absence reporting will be migrating to the MyView platform in the next financial year which will allow instant recording of absence and reporting. The reports will cover areas such as types of illness and can indicate where there may be patterns or trends. The data can then be further interrogated to provide an informed strategy to assist.
- 3.5 Alongside current support mechanisms the Managing Sickness and Absence Policy, along with the accompanying guidance and training, is a step forward to provide both managers and employees with the information, processes and consistent guidance to support with all types of absence.

3.6 The policy received a light review in October 2023, however a full review of not only the policy but also guidance documents, was warranted to ensure that both managers and employees have meaningful guidance available to them. This covers areas such as how to record absence, conduct a return-to-work meeting and generally convey the expectations for employees and managers in relation to managing absence.

3.7 The policy review has been informed by feedback from the Employee Relations and wider HR Team on how the policy and processes may be improved. In addition, feedback from the staff survey has been taken into account and will continue to inform any further changes/training that need to be put in place.

4. Options

4.1 The adoption of the revised policy and a commitment to a rolling programme of training will help to further support our staff, not only when they are absent but also when they return.

4.2 If this is not adopted then there will likely be no improvement to the current trajectory of absence rates. Inconsistent application of support could impact morale, productivity, retention rates, the success of teams and services to meet objectives and, ultimately, have a negative impact on the overall health and wellbeing of those employed by the council.

5. Advice and analysis

5.1 This is a revised policy which will be communicated to all employees.

5.2 A Diversity Impact Assessment (DIA) has been undertaken in relation to any changes that are made because of this policy and is attached as Appendix D.

5.3 This revised policy and the creation of dedicated guidance and training will support the overarching aim to improve how absence is managed across the council.

5.4 One element identified as requiring improvement is the availability of absence data. This data can be up to three months old before it can become available for analysis. Work is underway to improve the collection of data to enable more accurate and timely analysis.

5.5 A suite of guidance documents and training content aims to build on current support to assist both managers and employees regarding sickness absence. The aim is to make the process of absence management less stressful for those involved, ensure the correct support is put in place, produce better quality data and ultimately ensure that the policy is implemented fairly and consistently across the organisation. All guidance will sit alongside the policy published on Medspace on a dedicated page for clarity and ease of use for managers and employees.

- 5.6 Training will be developed based on feedback from managers, HR, Employee Forums and Trade Unions. Bitesize training modules which cover areas of absence management such as Occupational Health referrals, return to work meetings and managing phased returns to work have been tested with a small cohort of managers. Amendments have been made following feedback, and the modules are ready to be communicated and launched from May 2025 with sessions available following the communication of the revised policy.
- 5.7 Changes to the policy are summarised in Appendix B to the report.
- 5.8 A summary of the guidance documents and training modules in development as part of the implementation strategy can be found in Appendix C to the report. These may be subject to change as further feedback is gained (i.e. more modules may be added).

6. Risk management

- 6.1 Risk management is an integral part of good governance. The council has a responsibility to identify and manage threats and risks to achieve its strategic objectives and enhance the value of services it provides to the community.

Risk	Description	Action to avoid or mitigate risk	Risk rating
Support is not put in place to increase knowledge and awareness of managing absence.	If measures are not taken to improve how absence is managed consistently across the organisation the cost of absence is likely to increase. This cost is not only financial as it could have a knock-on effect where teams with reduced resources struggle with workload – potentially having a negative impact on their health leading to further absence.	By clearly communicating the reasons why we are implementing further support and focusing on absence will help to mitigate the risk. All managers will be encouraged to attend training and refresh knowledge of council procedures.	BIII
Increase in absence rates	Absence rates may increase further if support is not provided to managers	Guidance and Training provided as part of an implementation programme will help to mitigate risk.	BIII

Risk	Description	Action to avoid or mitigate risk	Risk rating
Disability related absences not supported adequately	Without knowledge and training on areas such as reasonable adjustments managers may have low confidence in supporting those with disabilities. This could lead to complaints/grievances/legal action.	Dedicated guidance and training on areas such as reasonable adjustments, occupational health referrals and return to work meetings will help to mitigate this risk.	BIII

For risk rating, please refer to the following table:

Likelihood	Impact:
A Very likely B Likely C Unlikely D Rare	I Catastrophic II Major III Moderate IV Minor

7. Consultation

- 7.1 To inform the revision of the Managing Sickness and Absence Policy and supporting guidance, drafts were shared with the Trade Unions, Employee Forums and the Medway Makers. During these consultations, feedback was sought on the revised policy. This feedback has been incorporated into the policy where appropriate and has helped to inform the subject matter of the training and further guidance that is to be developed. Following the consultation window closing there was a proposal to simplify the triggers table. This was discussed at the regular HR and TU meeting on 8 January 2025 and no objections were put forward at this meeting to the change.
- 7.2 The revised policy will be communicated to all staff and managers who will be kept informed of any proposed changes to practice. They will be invited to comment and provide feedback directly on the accompanying programme of training, guidance and support, through Medway Makers, and other employee forums as the implementation programme is rolled out.

8. Climate change implications

- 8.1 There are no climate change implications directly arising from this report.

9. Financial implications

- 9.1 There are no direct financial implications from this report. Financial benefit may be made through a reduction in absence rates where possible, however

this is not guaranteed, and absence rates will need to be measured during and following the implementation of the revised policy, guidance and dedicated training.

- 9.2 The removal of reference to statutory annual leave being accrued whilst absent and replaced with contractual leave being accrued will not have a financial impact. This is due to current practice and processes not being able to uphold the current policy terms and as such this is an alignment to how this is currently processed.

10. Legal implications

- 10.1 The Equality Act 2010 includes a requirement for organisations to provide reasonable adjustments to employees who are considered to have a disability as defined within the Act to support them at work.
- 10.2 The revised policy and supporting guidance will provide more detailed information on reasonable adjustments with the aim to make managers more confident when dealing with this aspect of absence management. This will help employees to be clear on their rights and how the Council will aim to support them to return to work and support them whilst they are at work.
- 10.3 A Diversity Impact Assessment has been carried out in relation to the revised policy and is attached as Appendix D to the report.

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Appendices

Appendix A: Reviewed Managing Sickness and Absence Policy (2025)

Appendix B: Changes and Revision Considerations to the Managing Sickness and Absence Policy

Appendix C: Summary of Managing Sickness and Absence guidance and content of training modules.

Appendix D: Diversity Impact Assessment

Background papers

CIPD Health and Wellbeing at Work survey (2023):

<https://www.cipd.org/uk/knowledge/reports/health-well-being-work/>

LGA Workforce Summary data – [Sickness Absence 2021/22](#)