

How to manage long-term absence

The purpose of this information is for guidance only. The Manager will require to consider each absence on a case-by-case basis to determine the most appropriate measure. The Human Resources Officer should be made aware of any employee, regardless of position or level, who is long-term absent. Human Resources will offer support and guidance, where requested, at any point of the Sickness Absence Management Procedure.

It is essential all correspondence, meeting notes, occupational health reports and medical documentation is retained confidentially within the employees' file at every stage of the absence process.

Introduction

Long-term absence is recognised by the University of Dundee as a continuous period of four weeks or more. Managers play a central role in the effective management of absence and its impact on work performance and delivery.

Prompt absence management by the nominated person or school/discipline Manager is expected when an employees' absence has extended over four consecutive weeks or likely to extend over four consecutive weeks in one single occasion.

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Communication plan

Contact via a communication plan should be established between the Manager and employee by the four week indicator; if one is not already in place. This can be an informal discussion confirming current state of health and next contact date or a more formal face to face meeting discussion based on the absence review process.

In exceptional situations where the employee is unable to make contact due to their state of health contact with a family member or close friend will be sourced to provide regular health updates. Where employees are unable to attend absence reviews this contact may be requested to attend in their absence.

Purpose of a communication plan:

- Encouraging regular communication;
- Retaining regular updates on current state of health and anticipated length of continued absence;
- Reducing feelings of isolation whilst maintaining contact with work team;
- Updating the employee with work/university developments.

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Absence review meeting

The University recognises long-term absence can be formed from different definitions. Managers will require to take guidance from Occupational Health and in some cases Human Resources during the period, considering the best option on a case-by-case basis for potential resolutions.

This may be:

- Return to work no phased return;
- Phased return or “May be fit for work” with temporary reasonable adjustments;

The following resolutions must be discussed with Human Resources in advance of any decisions:

- Redeployment
- Continued absence
- Capability hearing.

An absence review should always be held prior to the employee returning to work or at regular intervals during a long-term absence. Refer to the how to conduct an absence review for guidance.

Return to work

Where an employee returns to work following a long-term absence, a return to work form requires to be completed on the first day of their return and Payroll notified of their return to close off the absence. Refer to how to conduct a return to work for guidance.

Phased return or reasonable adjustments

An employee “may be fit to return” to work if their role is reviewed and modified to suit their current capability.

Examples of this may be:

- Working hours;
- Restricted duties;
- Additional support.

The Manager, having received signed consent from the employee, will forward a referral form to the University’s occupational health (OH) service, who in turn will provide guidance within a written report to the employee; duplicating copies to the Manager and relevant Human Resources Officer.

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The referral form must be completed as fully as possible. The Manager must detail absence history, including dates and absence reasons. Managers should also take time to complete their reason for referral, this provides OH providers with the understanding of why the report has been requested and what information is required from the report.

Further absence reviews should continue until the employee is fit to resume to normal duties or where the individual formally requests (Flexible Working application) a permanent change to their role, for example, reduced working hours. Consultation with the Human Resources Officer prior to any decision being made is encouraged.

OH will provide guidance as to whether the individual should attend further appointments or if they consider the case to be closed. If OH close the case the employee will be recognised as fit to work or fit to work following adjustments.

Notes referring to absence reviews should be taken and retained confidentially on the employee's file. Content and agreed action should be forwarded, in writing, to the employee, with a copy retained on the employee's file for future reference.

Phased returns should not extend over six weeks.

Redeployment

Where feedback relating to an employee's health indicates the individual will be incapable of returning to their role, an alternative role within the appropriate school/department should be explored. The Manager and Dean/Director are responsible for sourcing alternative roles within the appropriate school/department. Human Resources will also be involved sourcing in other areas of the University. Permanent changes will require a new Contract of Employment to be issued.

Continued absence

Where medical intervention identifies it is unlikely for an employee to be able to return to work within a reasonable timeframe (determined in a case-by-case basis, but no longer than six months) the Manager is required to consider carefully the long-term implication to their team and employee's role.

During the six month period it is expected the Manager will have made regular contact or held absence reviews to appreciate the employees' current state of health. Discussion should already have taken place relating to reasonable adjustments and/or phased return, if OH have encouraged.

Those employees who remain unable to attend work regardless of medical or OH intervention must still be supported by their Manager. It is recognised in exceptional circumstances a recuperation period may continue well after the "reasonable timeframe" has passed. In exceptional situations

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where the employee is unable to make contact due to their state of health a contact should be sourced who can provide regular health updates and may, if agreed by Manager and HR Officer, act on the employees' behalf at absence reviews.

Managers must not delay in the formal discussion relating to permanent or temporary resolutions. The six month timeline should be used as an indicator, if not already done so, to introduce an absence review where the case will be reviewed at length for possible resolutions, encouraging a return to work. All previous correspondence, documents and notes will be reviewed and discussed at this point between the employee and Manager. The Human Resources Officer must attend this meeting, highlighting the formal significance.

Consideration should be given as to how recent the last OH report was and whether an update would be beneficial. The employee should be encouraged to attend in advance of the meeting.

The employee must be advised of their right to have a colleague or union representative attend their absence review.

A formal invitation should be forwarded, in writing, to the employee including the following information which will be discussed during the meeting:

- absence dates, duration and cause of absence
- occupational health reports
- adjustments implemented following previous meetings
- copies of fit notes, and
- potential resolutions if the employee continues to be unable to do their job including:
 - Reasonable adjustments;
 - Redeployment;
 - Ill-health retirement; or
 - Capability hearing.

Ill-health retirement

Any employee who is a member of a pension scheme wishing to be considered for Ill-health retirement must apply **directly** in writing to the Pensions Officer as soon as possible. *Applications can only be made whilst the employee is in current employment.*

An employee dismissed on the grounds of capability, due to ill-health, does not have an automatic right to ill-health retirement. Applications are subject to meeting the appropriate pension criteria. The required criteria and process will be specified by the individual pension company.

The Pension Officer shall provide detailed information relating to the relevant pension scheme on request.

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Capability hearing / dismissal grounds based on ill-health

When the absence period has reached the point where all options have been fully explored but have been unsuccessful in achieving the employee's return to work the next step would be to consider the employee's future employment within the University. A hearing considering capability dismissal due to ill-health will be held as a last resort.

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