

Forestry Commission
Personnel Division
231 Corstorphine Rd
Edinburgh
EH12 7AT

PERSONNEL MEMORANDUM 5

MANAGING ATTENDANCE

Scope and Purpose of Personnel Memoranda (PMs)

1. PMs set out personnel procedures for managers to follow or give guidance on personnel related or people-management issues. Managers are advised to make themselves aware of the content of PMs and use them for future reference.
2. FDMs/Conservators/Heads of Branches/Business Unit Managers should ensure that managers see new PMs and discuss them, where appropriate, at management meetings.

Scope and Purpose: PM 5

3. The purpose of this Notice is to give managers information on guidance that has been put on Personnel's Intranet site to support the management of sickness absence in the Forestry Commission, and to highlight some key themes from the guidance.

Background

4. Staff Notice 101, issued on 24 May 2001, gave background information to staff on the initiative within the Civil Service to reduce the generally higher rates of sickness absence that exist in the public sector in comparison with the private sector.
5. The Cabinet Office has carried out a review, ***Working Well Together: Managing Attendance in the Public Sector*** and has given departments guidance on the kind of management practices that, when used effectively, are known to help reduce rates of absence. Departments have signed up to Cabinet Office targets to reduce levels of absence.

Action

6. This PM and the accompanying guidance on the Intranet should be referred to by all managers.

Contacts

7. Please contact Fiona Wright (0131-314-6204) for policy advice or Personnel Service contacts for advice on cases involving individual staff.

W J Anderson
20 August 2001

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Main Themes

1. Management of sickness absence is not aimed at making people feel guilty about being ill or making anyone feel they have to come into work when they are unable to do so.

It is about recognising that:

- Managers hold the key to successfully reducing absence rates;
- Sickness represents a huge cost. Apart from the cost of sick pay, there is the cost of lower productivity, reduced quality, additional management and administrative costs, increased stress on colleagues, missed targets and costs of replacement staff. Further down the line, medical retirements represent a significant additional cost. The Government is concerned about the much higher rates of medical retirements that exist in the public sector and are asking departments to put much more effort into rehabilitation and considering options for alternative work when someone becomes unable to do their present job;
- There are links between work and health. Much research has been and is being carried out in this area. As managers you may be able to change working practices or your own approach in fairly simple ways that could have an impact. Job re-design, for example, can help when people have become bored with their job or believe that it does not offer sufficient challenge. Low motivation can be a factor in absence rates for some individuals;
- Using tools such as **'back to work interviews'** when people come back from a period of sickness absence and **'keeping in touch'** with people on longer periods of absence are known to help in reducing absence levels;
- Absence management applies to staff at all levels. It is not just about tackling absence in some staff groups;
- Absence policies should also be aimed at helping people come back to work, giving them the support that they need during rehabilitation and looking at all options (including training for different work) before medical retirement is considered;
- The Disability Discrimination Act 1995 introduced requirements for 'reasonable adjustments' in the workplace to support disabled staff. Our Medical Advisors can give advice on what this means in practice in individual cases.

Key Factors in Sickness Absence Levels

2. Research with a range of employers has shown that there are some factors not related to the health of the individual that can help reduce absence rates:

- ***Working Hours***

Organisations that give employees more freedom to vary their working hours (for example, through the use of a flexitime system which allows flexibility in starting and finishing times) are likely to see lower rates of absence. Part time work, job sharing, and compressed weeks/fortnights can all help in managing work and home responsibilities in some cases. If you have doubts about how to introduce flexible working, consult Personnel staff.

- ***Caring/Social Responsibilities***

Some sickness absence is known to be due to reasons other than illness. If people have children or care for elderly relatives it may sometimes prove extremely difficult to come to work, for example when care arrangements fall through at short notice. The Commission offers special paid leave in some circumstances, and annual leave can be approved by you at short notice, but if you think that someone is having difficulty coping, explore this directly with the individual and seek advice if necessary from Personnel Services or Welfare.

- ***Health and Safety Services and Health Awareness***

The Commission has robust systems for managing the health and safety of employees. Health promotion has been less used, though in HQ we have supported staff trying to give up smoking by giving free supplies of nicotine patches for set periods. Other departments have promoted healthy eating options in their canteens.

Wider and earlier referrals to Medical Advisors are also known to help in individual cases and this can be done quickly and easily, with the individual's consent, through Personnel Services.

- ***Motivation***

People who are highly motivated are less likely to take time off sick. Three key 'motivating factors' that can make the difference between someone coming into work or not when they feel slightly unwell but are quite able to work are:

- Feeling valued by their employer and/or line manager (feeling valued is usually underpinned by an approachable management style though other factors come into play);
- Knowing that there is work that they have to do that day;
- Understanding that their absence would have an adverse effect on colleagues.

These are factors over which managers can have a significant influence by their own management style and by the development of teams that work well together and are kept informed of issues that affect them and their work.

- ***Long Term Illness***

If a member of your staff is absent for a longer period, it is essential to understand how the nature of their illness affects their prospects of returning to work. Early referrals to the Medical Advisor (via Personnel Services) are important to provide the information needed to help support a return to work.

Earlier referrals are now recommended, particularly in the case of illnesses such as depression.

- **Management of Change**

The public sector generally has been subject to substantial change due to re-structuring, contracting out, creation of agencies, IT developments and an increased focus on customer service and service delivery. Whilst these changes may have benefited the sector, they have added to the pressures on staff and change itself can be a source of stress.

When any change is planned, it makes sense for you to consider the effects on your staff as part of your planning, make efforts to find out if they are under pressure and find ways to help them deal with those pressures. Communicating the reasons for change on an ongoing basis is known to help.

Management Practices

3. The following two practices can be used by line managers and are known to help reduce levels of absence. Some managers already use them, but they are not universal practice within the Commission.

- **Return to work interviews/discussions** are short chats with staff following a period of sickness absence. They are used by many organisations. Handled sensitively, they demonstrate personal concern for the individual, help a manager decide if further action needs to be taken, and give the signal that even short periods of absence have an impact on the organisation and colleagues. They normally take 5-10 minutes. They can be handled over the phone for remote staff.

Many organisations use these interviews after every period of absence. We have opted not to make them compulsory for all periods of absence but to recommend them as 'best practice'. Training can help managers carry them out effectively and more information is given about this in paragraph 6.

- **Keeping in Touch** with staff on longer-term sickness simply means maintaining regular contact. It is known to help make the transition back to work easier, but it also allows a manager to show that the person is missed and find out if there is any action that he/she can take to help him/her return to work. For example, part-time work for a limited period can help someone make a graduated return to full time attendance and this is the kind of discussion that can take place whilst keeping in touch.

Guidance on the Intranet

4. More detailed guidance on the management of attendance has been placed on Personnel's Intranet site. We would like managers to take time to read this. It contains more advice on conducting return to work interviews and keeping in touch. It also gives advice on what to do when you are concerned about someone's absence record and gives more information on those factors, apart from ill-health, that are known to contribute to absence levels.

5. We have also published on the site an analysis of the Commission's sickness record for 2000. This includes a breakdown of the major illnesses causing absence.

Training

6. The Commission offers a training course covering challenging staff management issues. The course includes a session on conducting return to work interviews. It is in the People

Management series and is called 'The Challenges' (FTS reference 1.66). Bookings should be made via FTS.

Feedback

7. We would welcome feedback on any aspect of the guidance, particularly if you feel that more guidance would be welcome on any particular area. Please contact Fiona Wright in Personnel Policy (extension 6204 or by e-mail) if you have any comments.

W J Anderson
Director Personnel
20 August 2001