

STAFF NOTICE 101

THE MANAGEMENT OF SICKNESS ABSENCE IN THE FORESTRY COMMISSION AND THE CIVIL SERVICE

Introduction

1. The purpose of this Notice is to give staff information about plans to improve the management of sickness absence in the public sector generally and measures we aim to use in the Forestry Commission.

Background

2. Everyone feels the impact of ill health and sickness absence. It can affect how we perform as individuals and it can hamper the Commission's ability to carry out its business effectively, including the quality of service we give to our customers.
3. Most of us will, from time to time, be absent from work through illness, but we will also be directly affected by sickness absence in other ways. We may be line managers attempting to manage and monitor the absence of our staff. Or we may be colleagues trying to do our own work while also covering for absent work-mates. Health, welfare and sickness absence are important issues for all of us.
4. Sickness absence rates in the public sector vary quite considerably but in many public bodies the rates are higher than in the private sector. The Commission's average rate of absence per staff year was better than in many other Government Departments:

- an average of 8 working days sickness over the course of 2000

However, this rate is above the targets that have been set for the Civil Service for the next two years.

5. This average figure also disguises the fact that most staff had fewer than 8 days off, just over a third had no absences recorded at all, whilst some staff had considerably more.

The Public Sector Review

6. There are ways to reduce sickness absence rates. The Cabinet Office has carried out a review, ***Working Well Together: Managing Attendance in the Public Sector*** and has presented departments with a proposed Action Plan. This includes techniques for monitoring and managing sickness absence in a way that includes 'best practice' but also takes account of organisational differences.
7. It would be very exceptional for anyone to go through working life without a period of sickness and there is no question of making anyone come to work when they are too ill to do so. The

Commission's sick pay policy reflects this by ensuring that individuals do not need to worry about the financial implications of ill health for a significant period whilst they are sick.

If you are a staff manager.....

8. Research shows that managers can do much to influence and improve absence levels. For example, something as simple as '**keeping in touch**' with someone during a longer period of absence is known to make it easier for an individual to return to work with fewer concerns about adapting back to working life.
9. We will be issuing guidance shortly on this and other practices that we would like managers to use. Many managers may already be using some or all of these techniques, but the guidance will also try to raise awareness of some key factors that can influence absence levels, such as:
 - Family-care responsibilities
 - Management style and management of change
 - Job content and design
 - Lack of flexibility in working hours
 - Conflicting pressures at work
 - Lack of recognition and its effect on motivation
 - Low team morale

Health Issues

10. Wider health issues can also have a bearing on absence rates, and departments are being encouraged to do what they can to promote healthy lifestyles by, for example:
 - Helping people to give up smoking
 - Encouraging healthier eating in work canteens

For all members of staff.....

11. Absence policies and procedures in the Commission apply to all staff, whatever level he/she works at. All staff are expected to do the following:
 - If you are ill you are required to phone your line manager on the first day of absence by the time that you would normally come to work. It is best that you do this yourself, but if this is impossible, then arrange for your partner, parent or a friend to do so on your behalf;
 - You should explain to your manager why you are unable to attend work, whether you plan to visit your GP and when you expect to be able to return to work.
12. Your manager has to complete a form **OR2** and send it to the local pay input officer (in Forest Districts or Forest Research) or Personnel Services for every period of sickness absence. OR2s are needed for sick pay purposes.
13. If you do not notify your manager that you are off sick, and your manager tries but fails to get in touch with you at home, the absence is likely to be logged as an unauthorised absence and your pay may be stopped.
14. If you are a senior member of staff, we expect you to make sure that your Personal Secretary or a colleague notifies your absence to Personnel in the same way. Make clear arrangements with this person so that he/she does understand that you wish them to undertake this role for you.

Keeping in Touch.....

15. Managers will be encouraged to keep in touch with you if you are sick and off work for more than a few days. Do not think that the aim of this is to be intrusive or to put you under pressure; your manager will try to be supportive. The aim is to let you know that:

- you are missed;
- to find out how you are; and
- to find out if there is anything that we can do to help you get back to work.

Returning to work

16. When you return to work from a period of sick leave not covered by a doctor's certificate, you must complete a form **OR4** in which you record the illness that caused your sick absence. This should be forwarded to the local pay input officer (Forest Districts or Forest Research) or Personnel Services on the day you come back to work.

17. Your manager is likely to have a short chat with you when you return; this may be face to face if you work in the same office or may be by phone for those working remotely. The aim of this is to find out how you are, bring you up to date with anything important in the job that has happened in your absence and help your manager decide if he/she can do anything to help you.

Where sickness absence begins to cause concern.....

18. Managers are expected to review potential absence problems at an early stage. This may happen, for example, when you have taken a number of short-term absences that begin to accumulate or where you have had a longer period of absence.

19. Your manager will discuss the absences with you and try to find out if there are any work related factors or any difficulty that he/she can help with. You may also use the services of a Welfare Officer if you have a family related or personal problem that is affecting your work or health.

20. Your manager will decide if further action needs to be taken, such as a referral to our Medical Advisor for specialist health advice or a formal monitoring period. If the latter, your manager will tell you what kind of improvement is expected.

Summary

21. As an organisation we continue to learn from experience and research about the links between work and health. Through our risk assessment procedures and the work of our Health and Safety Officers we already take many measures to address the obvious link between forestry work and potential ill health or injury. Like many employers, however, we are still learning about the potential links between health and factors such as working relationships, job design and social factors.

22. By providing our managers with the necessary knowledge and expertise to manage absence we aim to ensure that sound and sympathetic sickness absence policies reflect both:

- our duty of care to staff; and
- the need to operate as effectively as we can.

23. Like other departments, we have agreed with the Cabinet Office that we will try to reduce our levels of absence through better management practice. Guidance for staff managers will be put on the

Personnel Intranet site in the near future. We will, of course, let people know when it is available. We will also be making available some analysis of the Commission's 2000 sickness absence record. If you would like further information in the meantime, please contact Fiona Wright (extension 6204) in Personnel Policy Branch.

W J Anderson
Director Personnel
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