

Statutory sick pay reforms – time to review short-term absence management training

With important changes to statutory sick pay arrangements, now is the moment to train line managers on the effective management of short-term absence to help them to adapt smoothly to the new rules and keep any increase in absence to a minimum.





Employees are currently eligible for statutory sick pay (SSP) only if they are sick for a period of four days or more, while low-paid employees who earn less than the lower earnings limit are not eligible for it at all.

However, this is about to change. From April 2026, under the Employment Rights Act 2025:

- SSP will be available to employees from day one of their incapacity for work.
- All employees will be eligible, regardless of their earnings.

The change will have the biggest implications for employers that do not already provide contractual sick pay from the first day of illness. These organisations should prepare for:

- a potential increase in sickness absence; and
- higher sick pay costs.

That being the case, it is vital for organisations to review their line manager training to deal efficiently with the expected uptick in workplace absences.

Benefits of absence management

Many managers are apprehensive about the prospect of tackling an employee's absenteeism, or uncertain as to what action they can reasonably and lawfully take.

While these doubts and fears are understandable, doing nothing can lead to further problems, including a possible general increase in absenteeism.

On the other hand, active management intervention can often help to:

- identify the cause or causes of an individual's poor level of attendance, allowing you to deal with the matter effectively;
- provide support to the employee, where appropriate, thus potentially increasing their motivation and loyalty;
- deter casual absences;
- establish whether an employee's level of attendance is likely to improve within a reasonable time frame;
- identify whether there are any problems inherent in the workplace that are contributing to employee absenteeism generally and, if there are, ensure that they are addressed;
- improve morale and motivation; and
- lead to a reduction in rates of absenteeism within the organisation and an associated reduction in costs and improvement in productivity.

Common causes of frequent absenteeism



You should always strive to remain open-minded about an employee's absences rather than jumping to the conclusion that the employee is taking time off work without good reason. It may be that the cause of the employee's absences is something outside their control.

Frequent spells of short-term absence can have any one of a number of root causes, including:

- an underlying medical condition that flares up from time to time;
- an unusually high, but genuine, vulnerability to colds, flu, etc;
- excessive tiredness, for example because the employee stays out late at night or has a second job;
- personal or family problems;
- specific problems in the workplace; or
- demotivation.

Until the root cause of the absenteeism is correctly identified, it will not be possible to identify an appropriate course of action to remedy it.

Possible impact of workplace factors on absenteeism

You should be alert to the possibility that employee absences might be caused or exacerbated by factors in the workplace. For example:

- the volume of work or pressure of deadlines being too much for a particular employee to cope with;
- unhappy working relationships or outright conflict with colleagues;
- bullying or harassment;
- perceived ineffective management or an authoritarian management style;
- an employee's inability to cope with change or fear of inadequacy; or
- other factors causing dissatisfaction, for example ineffective procedures or equipment, or having no clear goals or targets.



Discussing the problem with the employee

You should always be alert to issues such as those listed above and make sympathetic enquiries of any employee who has had a high rate of short-term absences as to whether there is anything in the workplace that is causing or contributing to the absences.

If a workplace problem is identified, you should take steps to remove or reduce the factor that is causing the problem, if this is possible.

Bear in mind that a failure to take steps to support an employee who is known to be experiencing health problems as a result of factors in the workplace may have serious consequences. The employer could be held liable in law if the employee subsequently has a mental breakdown as a result.

Monitoring short-term absences

There is a great deal that you can do to manage short-term absenteeism effectively with a view to reducing its frequency. It is therefore sound practice for you to take positive steps to monitor and control employees' periods of absence from work.

There are two stages to this, the first being the action that you should take each time an employee has a spell of absence. The second stage kicks in if and when the employee's absences exceed a defined threshold in terms of their number and/or duration within a given period of time.

Initiating the procedure

The effective management of short-term sickness absence should start when the employee contacts you to say that they are sick and unable to attend work.

There should be a procedure in place requiring the employee to contact a named person, for example notifying their line manager by telephone as soon as reasonably practicable. The same approach should apply to remote and hybrid workers.

You should maintain a record of sickness absences by completing an absence record form for each employee that you manage, detailing the reason given for the absence.

Return-to-work meetings

Irrespective of the length of the absence, when the employee returns to work, you should hold a return-to-work meeting (also known as a "return-to-work interview") with the employee. The very fact that such a procedure is carried out will tend to deter casual absences, because employees will know that monitoring of absences is taken seriously and that they will have to account to you for each absence.

At the meeting, you may wish to ask the employee whether or not they visited a GP, and how they are feeling now. It will also be appropriate for you to enquire if there is anything that you can do to support them.



Certification

You should make sure that whenever an employee is absent for up to one week they are required to complete and sign a self-certification form on return to work.

This should be done in front of you, ideally at the return-to-work meeting, and you should countersign the form. There should be no exceptions. Even absences of one day should be monitored and recorded in this way.

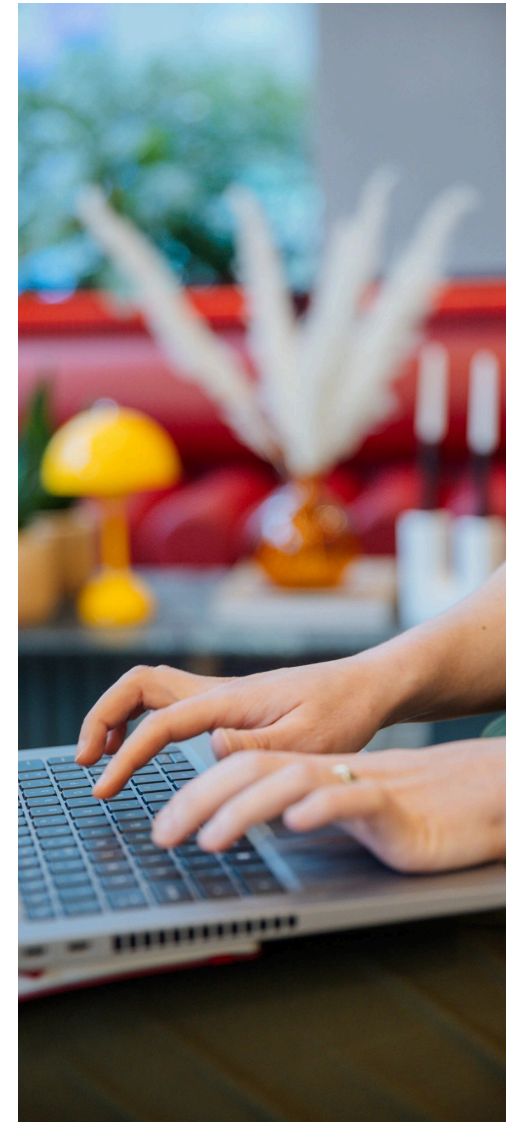
Fit notes

If an employee is absent for eight days or more, you should ensure that the employee obtains a fit note. The purpose of the fit note scheme is to facilitate return to work in circumstances where adjustments by the employer would help the employee resume working sooner than might otherwise be the case, as the healthcare professional will be able to suggest ways that the employer can help the employee return to work.

Absence reviews

The second stage of managing short-term absences will be activated once an employee's absences have reached a defined threshold set out in the employer's short-term absence procedure.

For example, action may be triggered whenever an employee has had five separate periods of absence in any 12-month period, or absences totalling more than 12 working days in the same period. Exceeding the trigger point should activate a review of the employee's attendance.



Looking for patterns

When reviewing an individual employee's absence record, you should make a point of examining whether there might be a pattern to the absences.

If such a pattern is apparent, you should speak to the employee about it. This should be done in a factual way. Take care not to make assumptions and to remain open-minded.

Don't say

You're always off on Mondays - that's very strange, don't you think?

I suppose you'll have some excuse or other.

You always seem to be off when some important job has to be done. We can never rely on you.

You are no use to us if you can't cope with the shift cycle. We need you at work and not off sick.

Do say

I have noticed that six out of your 10 absences have been on Mondays.

Would you like to comment on that apparent pattern?

Is there any reason why nearly all your absences have been in the final week of the month?

The records show that you tend to be absent towards the end of your shift cycle. Is there any problem we can help you with in relation to shift working?

The main aim of speaking to an employee about a pattern of absences should be to try to establish the underlying reason or reasons for the frequent absenteeism.

Even if the employee is unable or unwilling to put forward any explanation, such a discussion will have the advantage of alerting them to the fact that you have noticed the pattern. This in turn may deter further casual absences.

If it comes to light that an employee's absences from work are being caused wholly or partly by family problems, be supportive, while at the same time explaining clearly that frequent absences are unacceptable from the point of view of the employer.

If at any stage you have reasonable grounds to believe that the reasons given for an employee's absences are not genuine, you are entitled to put these doubts directly to the employee in a factual way.



Instigating formal action

Although it is important for you to be supportive in the first instance towards employees who, for genuine reasons, have frequent absences from work, you also need to ensure that the work of your team is done efficiently. You should check with your HR department to clarify what internal procedure is appropriate, and make sure that you follow any such procedure fully.

Keeping records

Full records should always be kept of employees' absences and of all discussions held with an employee about absence and attendance, whether formal or informal. Self-certificates and medical certificates should also be retained. In line with the UK General Data Protection Regulation (UK GDPR), these records should be held confidentially, disclosed only to those who need to see them for the purposes of managing or processing the employee's absence, and kept for no longer than necessary.

Remote and hybrid workers

Where people work remotely or in a hybrid way, they may wish to continue working even though they are unwell. The fact that some people do not have to commute or work alongside their colleagues may mean they can continue to work. However, it is important that employees do not work when they genuinely should not be working, and you need to be clear about that when you have conversations with them - just because someone can work, does not mean they should.

Presenteeism

You may have heard of the term "presenteeism". This refers to employees who continue to work despite being unwell. Often, this is down to:

- a concern around workload;
- a wish not to be seen as someone who takes time off; or
- where the person is unwell due to a mental health reason, a concern around revealing the reason for their absence.

It is important that you create an environment where people feel that they can take time off sick when they need to. Not only is someone who is working while sick unlikely to be able to perform at their best and take longer to recover, there can be an impact on other people too:

- Colleagues may get sick if the illness is contagious, leading to an increase in sickness absence overall.
- People are less likely to consider the organisation as a good place to work, one in which the organisation cares about the health and wellbeing of its employees.



Dos and don'ts

- **Do** role model the behaviours you wish to see - make sure you take time off sick when you are ill.
- **Do** create an environment where people feel it is okay to be themselves - this will not happen overnight, but having regular conversations with your team members where you show some vulnerability will go a long way towards encouraging them to be open with you when they are unwell.
- **Do** create a relationship with your team members based on trust by showing them that you trust them to do their job without managing every aspect of their work - again, this will go some way towards encouraging them to be open with you when they are sick.
- **Don't**, during a conversation when a team member is reporting in sick, mention the amount of work waiting for them when they get back to work.



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