



Staff Absence Policy & Procedures

Review Period: 2 yearly **Status:** Non Statutory **Next review Date:** Autumn 2026

Model policy: Surrey County Council

1. Introduction and Purpose

The aim of this policy is to minimise absence levels whilst also providing reasonable support to those absent to assist their return to work at the earliest opportunity.

The policy is designed to provide a clear process to maximise attendance at work, in order to ensure effective service delivery, and minimise any work-related causes of sickness absence. It further aims to ensure all employees are treated reasonably, fairly, consistently and sensitively, and supports the school's intention to ensure an effective, efficient, healthy and safe workforce.

The policy and procedure are designed to enable:

- Appropriate support and medical assistance to be offered to employees through Occupational Health and Employee Assistance Programmes (where available) to enable employees to return to work as soon as practical.
- Reasons for absence to be fully explored to try and help prevent any recurrence wherever possible.
- Organisational and work-related causes of sickness absence to be identified and resolved wherever possible.
- Accurate recording and objective review of levels of sickness absence.

Sickness absence issues that are not resolved through the informal absence management procedure set out in this policy should be progressed using the formal stages of the absence management procedure.

This policy has been taken from Surrey County Council and adapted as necessary for Sunnydown School.

2. Policy Statement

This policy establishes principles that will ensure fair and consistent reviews of short-term sickness absence and long-term sickness absence. It outlines the process which employees, managers and HR should follow in relation to sickness absence.

It also describes the process to be followed in relation to sick leave and returning to work and how the school monitors sickness absence.

3. Roles and Responsibilities

- The Chair of Governors will be responsible for monitoring the absence levels of the Headteacher and will act as the line manager in relation to the management of the Headteacher's absence in accordance with this procedure.
- The Headteacher is responsible for ensuring that those with line management responsibilities are suitably skilled to manage sickness absence and have received appropriate training. The Headteacher will also fulfil the responsibilities of the line manager in respect of certain individuals.
- All line managers (including the Headteacher) are responsible for ensuring that members of staff are familiar with the expectations placed upon them in relation to their attendance at work, for monitoring absence, ensuring that consistent reporting is in place and conducting informal and formal meetings with individuals in accordance with the various stages outlined within the procedure. References in this procedure to actions taken by the line manager are intended to refer either to the Headteacher or the line manager acting in consultation with the Headteacher.

- All employees are expected to comply with reporting and certification procedures outlined in this procedure (or as otherwise notified to them) and to take responsibility for maintaining general health and fitness in order to sustain a high level of attendance.

4. Reporting Sickness Absence

As a general rule, an employee who is unable to attend work because of sickness or injury should report this to the SBM and DHT as soon as they become aware of the inability to attend work, and in any event by no later than the time they would normally start work on the first day of absence.

Reporting should include the reason for absence and the likely duration, as well as any necessary briefing on work commitments so that appropriate arrangements for cover can be made. The employee may ask to discuss the medical reasons for absence with another person, such as a different line manager or occupational health adviser, where they view the information as particularly sensitive.

Employees must attempt to speak in person to their line manager; if it is necessary to leave a message, contact details should be left to enable the manager to make a return call.

If absence continues for longer than initially anticipated, the employee is expected to regularly update the line manager in the same way, confirming the likely duration of absence.

Employees who become unwell during the course of the working day should ensure that a member of the senior leadership team (SLT) has been notified before leaving work early. Any accident or incident at work must be reported as soon as possible in accordance with the school's health and safety procedures so that it can be appropriately recorded and any required action taken at an early stage.

All absences, including part days, should be notified and recorded.

4.1. Certification Requirements

If the absence exceeds, or is likely to exceed 7 calendar days, employees must provide a fit note by their treating specialist stating the reason for absence and confirming they are not fit for work, or that they may be fit for work under certain conditions.

An employee will need to continue submitting fit notes as frequently as necessary and on time. A failure to either obtain, or submit, medical certificates regularly and on time which cover all days of sickness may result in the employee's absence being treated as unauthorised, resulting in loss of pay and/or disciplinary action.

Where a manager has specific concerns, an employee who has taken frequent self-certified absence may be required to submit medical certificates on the first day of the absence from then on. In any case, where short-term absence reaches more than 15 working days within any twelve month period, the employee will need to provide a medical certificate for the first day of any subsequent absence. If a certificate is not provided the employee will not be paid occupational sick pay for the period of sickness over the respective period. The school will repay the employee the cost of the medical certificate upon receiving a receipt.

4.2. Return to Work Discussions

The SBM will conduct return to work discussions following every period of absence (including part days) to ensure that the employee is well enough to be back at work, to support their return and ensure that they are updated on work matters. After a short period of absence (generally less than one working week) a brief meeting will usually be sufficient.

For longer periods, or otherwise where there is concern about the nature or frequency of the absence, a more structured discussion will be appropriate. This discussion will be recorded on a return to work form, a copy of which should be given to the employee. The SBM is responsible for ensuring that they have all relevant information to hand, such as risk assessments and/or occupational health reports.

Return to work discussions are informal in nature but will be documented, as noted above. If there are grounds to believe that formal action is required under this – or any alternative – procedure, the individual should be informed of this and arrangements made to hold a formal meeting. The HT and SBM will discuss and consider reasonable adjustments to assist the employee to return to work where this is appropriate.

4.3. Occupational Health Referrals

The involvement of the school's occupational health ('OH') provider in individual cases can be crucial to understanding the impact of a medical condition upon an individual's ability to perform their normal duties and to support an employee's return to work; it is in the best interests of both the school and the employee. Referrals to OH will be made at the schools discretion, involving the individual and informed by the following criteria:

- Where the absence appears to be related to stress, anxiety or depression;
- Where the absence has lasted (or is likely to last) for at least four weeks;
- Where an employee has been absent on a frequent, short-term basis (a useful indicator would be when the trigger point, defined in section 5, has been reached);
- Where discussions with the employee indicate that the employee's health may be having an impact on his/her ability to carry out the job;
- Where ill health follows an accident that has either caused, or is likely to cause, a significant absence from work or otherwise impact on work or attendance;
- Where the individual may be suffering from an industrial or occupational disease or condition, or where there has been an injury at work, physical or non-physical;
- Where it is suspected that the employee has a notifiable disease;
- When the absence appears to have been triggered by the instigation of other procedures (such as the disciplinary and capability procedure).

The contents of the referral form and the subsequent report must be shared with the employee, preferably face-to-face where circumstances permit. In considering the referral, OH may wish to obtain a report from the employee's own doctor(s) but will obtain the employee's written consent before doing so. In the event of a refusal, decisions about the employee's future employment will be made on the basis of the information available at the time.

Occupational Health will send a report to the SBM. On receipt of the Occupational Health report the SBM should consider the most appropriate course of action. The SBM can obtain advice and guidance from the school's HR consultant.

Occupational Health advice will not disclose medical details, unless already known to the manager, but will advise that the employee:

- Is fit to return to work, either on their previous contracted hours or on a progressive return to work plan; or
- Needs to have their case reviewed; or
- Is incapable of carrying out the full duties of their post, but they will outline the kind of work the employee should be capable of performing; any particular tasks or duties that should be avoided and for how long so that a judgement can be made about whether they should be temporarily or permanently redeployed; or
- Is permanently incapable of performing their normal job and the school may therefore consider ill health retirement options.

Managers should discuss the Occupational Health advice with the employee and provide them with a copy of the medical report from Occupational Health.

The school may request employees to undergo a medical examination at the school's expense and to authorise the disclosure of any resulting report to the school. The school will comply with the provisions of the Access to Medical Reports Act 1988 with regard to any report.

Employees are contractually obliged to attend OH appointments. However they do have the right under the Access to Medical Records Act 1988 to refuse to cooperate with an employer's attempt to gain information from their GP. In such cases, they must be made aware that decisions will be taken in the light of the information available.

5. Managing Short-Term Absence

Definitions	
A day's absence	A day's absence refers to a standard working day for the individual concerned (and the equivalent half day, multiple days etc)
Short-term absence	'Short-term absence' is intended to refer to absences which typically last for between one day and up to one calendar week and which are sporadic and attributable to minor ailments, often unrelated.
Trigger Point	The trigger point represents the stage at which referral to the informal procedure will usually be considered. This is: <ul style="list-style-type: none">• Where an employee reaches 10 working days absence within any twelve month period; or• Where there are concerns about an employee's absences, absence levels or absence patterns.

Genuine short-term absences which occur over a limited period of time are usually best managed through discussion with the individual at return-to-work interviews, which may include consideration of advice from occupational health.

Where, however genuine, the number and/or frequency of absences becomes detrimental to the normal operation of the school, the SBM will set up a sickness absence discussion with the employee and headteacher. This will typically happen if an employee is absent for 10 days or more in any 12-month period (the trigger point) or there are concerns over perceived patterns of absence. The school will begin an informal stage discussion (section 5.1). If attendance levels still fail to improve, the school will progress to a formal stage (section 5.2).

Where short-term absence reaches more than 15 working days within any 12 month period, the employee will need to provide a fit note for the first day of any subsequent absence.

The school will notify employees of their total absences taken at the start of each term.

Where the effects of an employee's disability results in a need to be absent from work due to illness or where an employee requires leave which is directly associated with their disability this will need to be accommodated within the terms of the Equality Act 2010. Any such absence needs to be clearly recorded. This will prevent management judging the individual's attendance record in exactly the same way as other employees and will avoid unnecessary 'triggering' of formal action under the Absence Procedure. This does not prevent management intervention or action related to the absence but a failure to acknowledge these needs could amount to a failure to make a 'reasonable adjustment'. The same is true for the recording and management of menopause related sickness absence.

Maternity related sickness absence during protected periods must not be taken into account as grounds for subsequent dismissal, but should still be recorded. The protected period is from notification of inception of pregnancy to the end of maternity leave.

All action taken under this policy will be taken with due regard to the Equality Act 2010 and the Code of Practice on Disability in Employment, where the reasons for absence are related to an underlying medical condition or disability, this extends to maternity and menopause related absence.

5.1. Informal Stage - Sickness Absence Discussion

The line manager/SBM is required to hold a separate meeting with an employee as soon as they become concerned about their level and/or pattern of sickness absence. The purpose of the meeting is to examine the reasons, pattern and nature of the absence with a view to finding out whether there is an underlying medical condition or other issues contributing to the level of absence and to support the employee to work. Managers are encouraged to be considerate when dealing with absences related to sensitive personal issues. Any reasonable request for trade union representation should not be refused. The meeting should be held in private and, depending on the particular circumstances of the case, it may include a discussion on:

- The levels and pattern of attendance.
- The underlying causes of the absence. If the underlying cause relates to stress or depression the manager should in all cases make a referral to Occupational Health. If it concerns a disability, advice should be sought from the school's HR consultant.
- The likelihood of a recurrence of the illness, if known.
- What absence monitoring, in the form of Return to Work Discussions, has taken place previously.
- Whether any Occupational Health or other medical advice has been sought.
- Suggestions from the employee on managing and improving the situation.
- Whether management action or other support is needed e.g. referral to Occupational Health, Employee Assistance (if available), training or development opportunities, workplace equipment, flexible working arrangements, or other reasonable adjustments if the employee has a disability.
- Whether an individual wellbeing assessment is appropriate.
- Agreement on what needs to be put in place.
- The timescale for review - normally no more than 12 weeks.
- Monitoring arrangements.
- The likely action that may follow if the level or pattern of absence continues to give cause for concern.
- That the employee may need to consult their GP and obtain a medical certificate if their absence reaches 15 working days in a 12 month period.
- The manager should keep written notes of the discussion for future reference and forward a copy to the employee.

If monitoring during the review period shows that the employee's attendance is no longer a cause for concern, the employee should be notified.

If monitoring during the review period shows that the employee's level and/or pattern of sickness absence continues, an Occupational Health report should be obtained if one has not already been received. The employee must be informed of the reasons, benefits and possible outcomes of an Occupational Health referral and be given a copy of the referral form.

If there are still concerns over the level or pattern of sickness absence following receipt of an Occupational Health report, the manager should seek and act on guidance from the school's HR consultant. Where appropriate the manager should advise the employee that the formal stages of the Absence Procedure (section 5.2) will be followed.

Where an employee has been unable to improve their level of attendance, or where arrangements to manage the level and/or pattern of attendance have proved unsuccessful, the employee will be reviewed through the remaining formal stages of this policy. If after all formal stages have been exhausted, the manager believes the required performance improvement to be unattainable by the employee in their current post, and there is no suitable alternative work to offer the employee or the employee has declined an offer of suitable alternative work, consideration will be given as to whether dismissal is the appropriate option. Where an employee is dismissed, they will have the right to appeal.

5.2. Formal Stage

5.2.1. Stage One Meeting – First Formal Discussion (Short-Term Absence)

Where the SBM or Headteacher determines that the employee's attendance levels need to be reviewed on a formal basis, the school will arrange a formal meeting, giving at least 5 working days' notice in writing to the employee. The employee has the right to be accompanied at this meeting, and any subsequent formal meetings, by a work colleague or trade union representative and should be provided with a copy of the procedure in order to understand the context of the meeting.

At the formal meeting under Stage One, SBM or Headteacher will:

- Outline the employee's absence record and the outcome of any OH referral(s) made;
- Invite the employee and/or their companion to clarify any factual matters, explain their attendance levels and to question or comment on the information presented;
- Seek to identify whether there are any relevant personal, domestic or work circumstances that have impacted on their attendance;
- Encourage the employee, if appropriate, to seek medical advice;
- Discuss, if appropriate, changes in working arrangements;
- Discuss the implications of the absence for the school;
- Consider whether there is any further support the school may reasonably be able to give to the individual;
- Explain that attendance will be closely monitored and discuss what is considered to be an acceptable level of attendance;
- Explain the consequences of a failure to improve attendance levels and confirm the date of the next review meeting.

Where the school decides that the absence levels/patterns remain a concern, it will be necessary to outline an action plan and timescale where an opportunity will be given to the employee to improve their attendance. This will include:

- Setting up a time period for improvement usually no more than three months
- Providing the employee with additional assistance, as appropriate
- Where applicable, exploring flexible working options, or reasonable adjustments to the employee's work environment
- Outlining performance standards, targets, volume of work to be achieved
- Monitoring absence records

The school will make the employee aware that a failure to improve their absence levels by the end of the agreed timescale could result in invoking stage two of the formal absence procedure (section 5.2.2), which could result in the employee's dismissal. The school will then confirm in writing the arrangements, timescales, targets and consequences of not correcting the attendance shortfalls.

At the end of the review period the school will prepare a report on the employee's progress against the agreed targets. A review meeting will be convened to consider, discuss and act upon this report. At the review meeting, the school will ascertain:

If sufficient improvement has been achieved

- If yes, then the employee will be informed and written confirmation will be given that no further formal action will be taken and the employee's records will be suitably updated.

If targets have not been achieved and there has not been sufficient improvement

- In such a situation the employee will be informed immediately and a written confirmation will be sent to the employee informing them that they have entered stage two of the formal procedure.

5.2.2. Stage Two Meeting – Second Formal Discussion (Short-Term Absence)

Typically, the stage two meeting will be heard by a panel of governors along with the headteacher, SBM and employee. Before the decision to dismiss an employee is made, the school will discuss the matter with the local authority. The local authority is entitled to attend any meetings where dismissal of an employee is involved. The school's HR consultant will provide advice about this.

A stage two meeting will be called to discuss the continuing concerns around the employee's attendance levels and/or patterns. The stage two meeting is also used in managing incidences of ill health retirement.

The employee will be:

- informed in writing of the date and time of the meeting with a minimum of 5 working days' notice. Where possible the date should be mutually agreed to allow for the employee to arrange for representation.
- Informed of the purpose of the meeting
- Informed of their right to be accompanied by a work colleague or their trade union representative
- Informed that they will have the opportunity at the meeting to put forward an explanation, either personally or through a representative
- Informed that one of the potential outcomes of the meeting could be dismissal/termination of their contract of employment
- The employee will be advised of the school's Employee Assistance Programme (EAP)

Potential Outcomes

The governor panel needs to decide whether the arrangements to manage the level and or pattern of attendance have proved to be successful and the employee has improved their level of attendance sufficiently. If the panel considers that the employee's attendance remains less than satisfactory, it must decide:

1. Whether it is necessary to refer the employee back to Occupational Health. If this is deemed necessary the stage two meeting will be reconvened after receipt of the report.
2. To allow more time for improvement, with a warning if considered necessary
3. To dismiss the employee from the current role but seek to find suitable alternative work during the notice period
4. To dismiss the employee without recourse to seeking alternative employment

Following a decision to dismiss in a foundation or voluntary aided school, the school will issue notice of dismissal in accordance with the employee's contractual or statutory notice period (whichever is greater). In community and voluntary controlled schools the school will confirm the decision to dismiss the employee and the local authority, as the employer of staff, will give effect to the dismissal within 14 days of notification.

6. Appeals

Employees have the right to appeal following an outcome at stage two. If an employee wishes to exercise their right of appeal, they must do so by lodging a notice stating the grounds of appeal in writing to the Clerk to the Governors of the Governor Panel. The appeal should be filed within 10 working days of being notified of the decision made at the given stage of the procedure.

Receipt of the employee's notice of appeal in writing will be acknowledged by the Clerk to the Governors.

Decisions made by the chair of the appeal procedure will be final for that particular stage of the procedure.

Procedure for Appeals

The Clerk to the Governors will identify a suitable panel, not previously involved in the detail of the case of the absence meeting, to hear the appeal on behalf of the school and give a final decision.

This is the final stage of appeal within the school. Where the appeal is against a decision to dismiss in a community school, an HR consultant from the local authority who has not previously been involved in the detail of the case will advise the chairperson of the appeals panel.

The employee shall be given notice in writing at least five working days in advance of the time and place of the hearing. Once again where possible the date should be mutually agreed to allow for the employee to arrange for representation.

The appeal will take the form of considering the employee's grounds for appeal, with both sides being entitled to call witnesses and to produce such documentary evidence, as they require. Any such documentation should normally be exchanged at least three working days prior to the hearing date.

Any question as to the procedure to be followed at the appeal will be determined by the chairperson and their decision is final. The purpose of an appeal hearing is not to re-hear all the evidence presented at the initial meeting but to consider the

employee’s grounds for appeal, whether the initial decision was reasonable and consistent with other decisions made by the school in similar circumstances.

The employee will present their case first and once both sides have presented their case, the panel and their advisor will adjourn to consider the decision. The panel’s decision will normally be given orally to the two sides and confirmed in writing within five working days of the appeal hearing.

7. Managing Long Term Absence

Definition	
Long-term absence	Long-term absence is intended to refer to absences that have lasted, or are expected to last, for a period of at least four weeks (20 working days)

Long-term absence will occur for different reasons and is therefore best managed according to the individual circumstances of the case. The key principle in managing long-term absence is ensuring that a balance is struck between the needs of the employee and the needs of the school.

It is expected that the employee keeps in touch with their line manager/SBM and inform them of any developments relating to their condition.

On an ongoing basis, it is the employee’s responsibility to provide their line manager with updated doctor’s certificates to cover the ongoing period of absence.

It is important that the right documentation is provided, as not doing so can impact pay.

Where it becomes apparent that absence is likely to be long term, an appropriate strategy should be put in place to ensure that the individual does not become isolated from work and that timely OH advice is received about the prognosis. Maintaining regular contact is essential although managers are expected to act considerately to avoid the employee feeling that he/she is being put under undue pressure. Where possible, the mechanism and regularity of contact will be agreed with the individual or their nominated representative. Where the employee is a member of a union, they may also wish to involve their union representative as a source of support and as a means of facilitating communication.

OH advice should be sought as soon as it becomes likely that the absence will be long term and periodically thereafter as necessary to support the employee’s return to work, which will often include consideration of a phased return. Where OH advice indicates that there is no realistic prospect of a return to normal duties within the reasonably foreseeable future, consideration will be given to whether temporary or permanent redeployment might impact positively on the employee’s ability to return to work. Where this is not possible, ill-health retirement or dismissal on the grounds of capability will ultimately be considered. These options are explained in more detail as follows:

Options for Managing Long Term Absence	
Phased Return	<p>After a period of long-term absence, the employee’s doctor and/or OH will often recommend a phased return programme to support the employee’s return to full duties. Whilst the duration and nature of a phased return will depend on the individual circumstances, it is expected that, in general, this will not exceed a period of 6 weeks. Changes to an employee’s working hours, pattern or duties on a longer term basis will be considered as a temporary redeployment (see below). Where a phased return can be supported by the school, the employee will remain on (or return to) full pay.</p> <p>For cases where further advice from Occupational Health is needed, they will arrange for a review meeting with the employee and notify line managers of the outcome of that review meeting. There may be times where a case has been reviewed one or more times and the line manager will need to consider the effects on the school of an employee’s continuing absence and therefore the continued employment of the employee. The line manager should act on further advice from Occupational Health and HR and may wish to consider an Occupational Health case conference for complex cases. An Occupational Health case conference is a forum to allow a manager and employee to discuss complex cases of sickness capability and rehabilitation with the Occupational Health professional to increase understanding between the parties. It is not a decision making forum but can be helpful to progress a case. A manager may decide, following the further advice and discussions with HR and Occupational Health, that a Stage 2 Absence Capability Hearing should be held.</p>

<p>Temporary Redeployment Adjustments or</p>	<p>Where the employee is deemed currently unfit to carry out the full duties of his/her post but could be temporarily redeployed to alternative work (or adjustments made to the role or working hours on a temporary basis), the school will consider what options might be realistic and reasonable, taking into account the advice of OH and the employee's doctor(s). Unless such arrangements are short term and therefore being treated as a phased return (see above), the ramifications in relation to salary, pension and any other affected terms and conditions, must be explained to the member of staff and confirmed in writing. Where temporary redeployment cannot be facilitated, the employee will remain on sick leave until he/she is either fit to return to normal duties or whilst the remaining options are considered.</p>
<p>Permanent Redeployment Adjustments or</p>	<p>Where the employee is deemed permanently incapable of carrying out the duties of his/her current post but may be fit to return to work in another capacity (or permanent adjustments could be made to the role or working hours), the school will consider what posts or adjustments might be available and suitable, taking into account the advice of OH and the employee's doctor(s).</p> <p>The likelihood of a successful redeployment will depend on a number of factors, including the employee's skills, abilities and flexibility over hours and work location. Each situation will be treated individually according to the circumstances. The employee will remain on sick leave pending consideration of the adjustments or redeployment options available. An employee permanently redeployed into another role will be appointed on the terms and conditions applicable to the new post.</p> <p>Sometimes the likelihood of suitable alternative posts arising is simply not a realistic prospect and the employee's expectations will be managed accordingly.</p>
<p>Ill-Health Retirement or Dismissal</p>	<p>Where the employee is deemed unfit to carry out the duties of his/her present post in the reasonably foreseeable future and redeployment has already been explored and failed to secure an alternative post, the matter will be referred for consideration at a Stage Two meeting in accordance with the procedure outlined above.</p> <p>Retirement on the grounds of ill health may be an option to be investigated under certain conditions, as an alternative to dismissal (in the case of teachers, the application process for ill-health retirement is initiated by the individual).</p> <p>In determining the point at which it becomes appropriate to refer the matter to a Stage Two meeting, the manager will seek HR advice and further OH advice as necessary, and take into consideration the following factors:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● The length of absence to date and the prognosis for a return to work; ● The nature of the illness and the medical advice obtained; ● Whether the individual's absence is related to a disability; ● The effect of the absence on the school; ● What options, as alternatives to dismissal, have already been considered; ● Any relevant personal circumstances pertaining to the individual that may be impacting on their attendance. <p>The employee should be given the opportunity to input into this consideration before a formal meeting is called. This may be a meeting in person, if circumstances permit, or via another agreed mechanism, such as communication via the employee's union representative. The purpose of this exchange is to ensure that all relevant factors and options have been taken into account before a recommendation is made to terminate employment on the grounds of incapability through ill health.</p>

8. Disability Related Cases

This procedure may need to be adjusted where the attendance of the employee may be affected by a disability. Managers should be aware of the duty to make reasonable adjustments under the Equality Act 2010 and be ready to make adjustments both to the procedure itself and, if necessary, the requirements of a particular job where these may cause a particular disadvantage to people with a specific disability.