

Agenda Item No:

Report No:

Report Title: Sickness Procedure

Report To: Employment Committee Date: 7 June 2010

Ward(s) Affected: All

Report By: Head of Business Services

Contact Officer(s): John Clark, Head of Business Services

Purpose of Report:

To seek agreement on a number of changes to the Council's sickness absence procedure.

Officers Recommendation(s):

- 1 That the guidance in the sickness absence procedure about welfare visits to employees be changed so that references to "four weeks" are replaced by "three weeks".
- 2 That the wording at paragraph 6 be added to the sickness absence procedure

Information

- 1 February's meeting considered a report on the growing problem of sickness absence within the Council. Since then a number of practical steps have been put in place to help tackle the problem including:
 - Payroll now update the payroll system with absences as they come in, rather than monthly.
 - Payroll now tell Personnel which departments or sections are late submitting sickness returns so they can be reminded.
 - Departments have been asked to send the records of all Return to Work and 2nd stage absence interviews to Personnel
 - The self certification form for absences between 4 and 7 days has been scrapped as it is not needed for SSP purposes and the information it provides is on the Return to Work interview form.
 - As from 6 April, staff now send the new style "fit notes" to Personnel instead of Payroll.
- 2 All of these changes mean that Personnel can identify potential long term absences earlier and start the actions needed to get staff back to work earlier than before. However, there are a number of additional actions for the committee to agree.

- 3 The current procedure states that a welfare visit must be carried out a line manager or Personnel when someone has been absent from work or is anticipated to be absent from work for four weeks or more. In line with the other actions taken so far it is proposed that this is shortened to 3 weeks so that any necessary steps can be taken sooner than is currently possible now.
- 4 It has been suggested in the past when contacting sick employees has been discussed that somehow this could be unnecessary and at worst harassment. As a result there have been suggestions that we should only contact sick employees when told by them it is alright to do so. However, employers have a duty to contact absent staff on a range of employment issues and it is far more common for staff to complain of being “forgotten” than to complain of being bothered by the occasional contact from their managers. Not all contacts will be a visit, but a visit is thought necessary at the start of potential long term absences so that the employee is fully aware of how his or her absence might be managed and how they can tell their department of any concerns they have.
- 5 One of the purposes behind the introduction of the “fit notes” to replace the old style “sick notes” was to allow doctors to give advice on adaptations that would allow a speedier return to work than would otherwise be possible. One of the most common adaptations is the “phased return” where it is agreed that the employee comes back for fewer hours than normal for a period to help them adjust back to work.
- 6 We have been managing those phased returns for many years, but they are likely to be suggested more often with the new “fit note” arrangements. Up to now the pay implications have been dealt with on a case by case basis, but we probably now need more formal guidance included in the sickness absence procedure. It is recommended that the following wording be added:

Temporary phased returns to work may be agreed by your line manager where it has been recommended by a medical practitioner to help your return to work on a permanent basis. They may last up to four weeks and you will be regarded as being back at work and will receive your normal weekly pay for those weeks.

Phased returns are not automatic and departments may refuse them where they may cause operational difficulties.

Phased returns over 4 weeks may be agreed only by your Head of Department in consultation with the Head of Business Services. Such cases are unusual, but not unknown and generally start with very few hours being worked. In such cases, the pay arrangements may be agreed on an individual basis, but at minimum, you will be paid the higher of the sick pay you would otherwise receive or the normal pay for the actual hours worked.