

# **A MANAGING ATTENDANCE STRATEGY FOR THE EDUCATION SECTOR**

**2019 - 2022**

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## Introduction and Background

The Education Sector has over 50,000 employees. There are over 20,000 teachers and a similar number of support personnel employed in over 1,100 schools. A further 13,000 personnel are employed in a range of arm's length bodies and other organisations providing services to the Sector.

Employees working in the Sector receive a high standard of support when they are unfit for work including occupational sick pay provision. This and other facilities such as line manager support and welfare and occupational health services are of real help to staff in times of need. However, as a collective of public bodies funded by the taxpayer there is a requirement on the Sector to ensure that sickness absence is managed effectively.

This Strategy commits Education Sector employers to seek improved attendance levels across the Education Sector through the following means:

- **Proactive management of health and wellbeing.** This is about providing effective support to staff through preventative measures aimed at keeping staff at work and promoting good health and wellbeing;
- **Support for those who are ill.** This is about the provision of a sympathetic, compassionate, understanding and consistent approach to dealing with staff on sickness absence including offers of appropriate support; and
- **Effective management.** This is about managing attendance through the application of agreed sickness absence procedures and the development of systems and information to support effective management.

The Strategy has the support of the Education Sector employers. It will be supported by three annual action plans covering agreed generic initiatives to support improved attendance. Outcomes against each annual action plan will be evaluated at the end of every year. This evaluation will help gauge progress and shape future priorities within the Strategy period to March 2022.

In addition to this, the individual Employing Authorities and employing organisations will have their own more detailed plans and initiatives to support their managers and employees.

The key success measures for the Strategy and annual action plan evaluations will be:

- An improvement in attendance levels – this will be measured by outturn performance against annual absence targets; and
- Feedback from managers, staff and trade unions on the success of agreed generic initiatives to support improved attendance – this will be captured through e.g. annual surveys and focussed discussions with selected groups.

## **Developing the Strategy – Our Starting Point**

### Absence Levels and Targets

Attendance levels in the Education Sector at the end of the 2017-18 year were:

- An absence rate of 4.8% or an average of 9.3 working days lost for teaching staff
- An absence rate of 6.1% for non- teaching / support staff

For the year immediately preceding the introduction of this strategy (2018-19) Education Sector employers agreed the following targets:

- An absence rate of 4.8% or an average of 9.3 working days lost for teaching staff
- An absence rate of 5.25% for non-teaching / support staff

At the time of publication the estimated outturn against target for 2018-19 is estimated at:

- \*4.9% or an average of \*9.6 working days lost for teaching staff
- \*6.3% for non- teaching / support staff

Absence levels in the Education Sector have been benchmarked against other Northern Ireland Public Sector organisations. While there are factors and measurement issues that make direct comparison with other organisations difficult, current absence levels in the education sector are within those recorded by other public sector bodies in Northern Ireland.

\* A final outturn figure will be available in May 2019.

## **Proactive Management of health and wellbeing**

Since January 2018, Education Sector Employers have been more proactively sharing information and ideas on the promotion of employee health and wellbeing. Examples of the initiatives and actions that have already been implemented by individual employers include:

- The delivery of Health and Wellbeing Seminars to raise awareness of health related issues, their causes and support that is available for employees;
- The provision of access to Inspire Workplaces counselling sessions to help deliver improved mental health and wellbeing.
- The delivery of EA Wellbeing Conferences for School Leaders to highlight the benefits and provide examples of practical measures that could be introduced to improve employee wellbeing in schools.

## **Support for those who are ill**

Education Sector Employers have put in place a range of interventions to support staff who are ill. Examples of the initiatives and actions put in place by employers include:

- Access to flexible working policies, including part-time working, job share, career break, parental/carer's leave etc.;
- The provision of time off for medical and health related appointments in line with managing attendance policies;
- Making reasonable adjustments to accommodate employee health issues and disabilities;
- Offering phased return to work after a long-term sick absence;
- The facilitation of access to external health care organisations such as the Birmingham Hospital Saturday Fund or Benenden; and
- Referring employees to Occupational Health Services for advice and support.

## **Effective management**

This strategy will help with the development and implementation of measures to improve levels of compliance with agreed managing attendance procedures. Examples of the actions have been taken include:

- Quarterly review of sickness absence statistics by the Department and Education Sector Employers;
- The provision of workshops to train employing authorities in the production of management information reports on sickness absence within their organisations;
- Engagement with schools and scheduling of workshops to promote consistent application of Managing Attendance policies; and
- The provision of support to managers in the form of advice and guidance from the employers' HR Function.

We intend to build further on the progress outlined above through our year one action plan covering the period 1 April 2019 – 31 March 2020. This is set out in the following pages.

## **Action Plan 2019-20**

### **Absence Target**

Based on the estimated 2018-19 outturn the following targets have been set for the first year of this Strategy:

- A 2019-20 absence rate of 4.8% or an average of 9.3 working days lost for teaching staff to be achieved by 31 March 2020; and
- A 2019-20 absence rate of 6.0% for non-teaching staff to be achieved by 31 March 2020.

## **Proactive management of health and wellbeing**

The following actions will be taken:

- By 30 September 2019 we will have developed proposals for an Education Sector Health and Wellbeing hub, which will include a well calendar of events and information on health and wellbeing initiatives in the Sector;
- By 31 March 2020 we will have developed advice and guidance for school managers on the inclusion of employee health and wellbeing in School Development Plans;
- By 31 March 2020 we will have delivered at least two Health and Wellbeing events for managers in schools to promote consistency of approach; a better understanding of prevention measures and an awareness of the support that is available.

## **Support for those who are ill**

The following actions will be delivered in 2019-20:

- By 31 December 2019 employing authorities will ensure that the policies and support available to those who are ill, are more easily available to employees; and
- By 30 September 2019 employing authorities will have developed a short step-by-step guide to assist staff with their responsibilities, as public-sector employees, in relation to sick absence, so that they understand what is required of them and their managers if they become unfit for work.

## **Effective management**

The following actions will be delivered in 2019-20:

- By 30 September 2019 we will develop a short step-by-step guide to assist Managers with their responsibilities in relation to managing staff sick absence consistently;
- By 31 March 2020 we will further streamline our management information needs and reporting capability for the sector;
- By 31 March 2020 we will have developed and rolled out methodology for presenting information to Boards of Governors and Principals to help manage attendance.

## **Review of Action Plan**

We will complete a review of our 2019-20 action plan. This will involve:

- An assessment of performance against target in all areas including absence targets; and
- Securing feedback from managers, employees and trade unions on the success of the action plan initiatives in supporting improved performance. This may involve the use of survey and focused discussions with selected groups. The outcome of our review will be produced in a formal report to be produced by 31 May 2020.