

Supporting attendance at work

Long-term absence

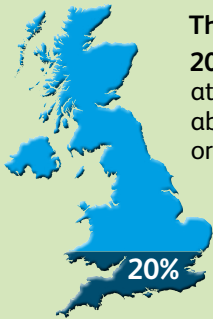


everyone fit
for the future

We know supporting the health and wellbeing of their teams is important to all of our people managers and this brief guide has been developed to provide information on good practice related to health and wellbeing.

Long-term absence can be defined as absence from the workplace lasting more than 20 working days. As a line manager, it's normally one of your key responsibilities to support an employee who is on long-term absence, in order for them to maintain a connection with the workplace, for you to facilitate their return to work, and to keep track of their progress.

Did you know?



That across the UK:

20% of all absence is attributed to long-term absence of four weeks or more.

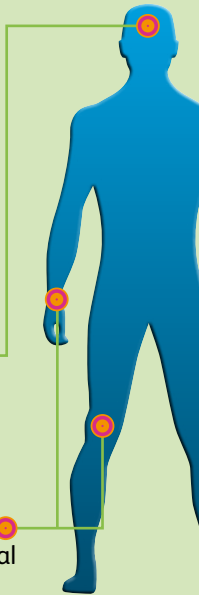
That in Network Rail:

Mental health and musculoskeletal issues are the top two reasons for long-term absence.

32% of known absence relates to mental health with an average duration of **22 days** per episode.

20% of known absence relates to musculoskeletal issues with an average duration of **13.6 days** per episode.

Early intervention by employers significantly increases the chances of people absent returning to work.



What do I need to do?

1 Make and maintain contact during sickness absence

Maintaining regular contact with an employee who is off work will help the employee feel supported and connected to the workplace; and prevent long-term problems from developing.

You will need to:

- Confirm to the employee that you will be staying in touch with them whilst they are off work; contact would be maintained over the phone, with email as a last resort to only be used if the employee is unable to discuss the absence over the phone, for example due to work related stress. The employee should confirm timings that work best.
- Ask the employee how they will keep you updated with any developments in their recovery over time.
- Refrain from asking questions that can be interpreted as an investigation into their absence when you are in contact with them. It's important to be supportive to facilitate their return to work.
- Ask if there is anything you can do to help – the aim is to remind your employee that you are there to support their wellbeing. If the absence is related to a condition that could be classed as a disability, you will need to discuss what kind of reasonable adjustments might be needed on their return.

- If the employee is absent because of a traumatic injury or sudden illness, extend your sympathies and use discretion for remaining in touch with them.

② When the employee is due to return to work

To ease their return to the workplace, the employee can be:

- Invited to join work events, such as team meetings and social activities.
- Given information on events in the workplace that are not specifically linked to their job.
- Brought up to speed on what has happened in their absence.
- Informed of any reasonable adjustments that will be made if needed, for example, changes to workplace, desk or targets.

You may also consider partnering or ‘buddying’ them up with a colleague for their first few days back into the workplace; and whether a phased return to work would be appropriate.

③ Conduct a return to work meeting

The aim of this type of meeting for an employee who has been on long-term absence is to establish what can be done to facilitate and ease their transition back into work. You should be open, supportive and flexible; and prepared to listen to their concerns. Most employees, if treated well, will have a positive commitment to returning to work. It can be helpful to set expectations, from both your and their perspective, at this meeting. If your employee is not used to having regular meetings with you, it will be even more important to emphasise the supportive nature of this meeting.

Information on conducting a return to work meeting:

<https://www.safety.networkrail.co.uk/healthandwellbeing/HelpingOthers/Supporting-wellbeing-at-work/Supporting-attendance-at-work>



④ Reasonable adjustments

These should be discussed again at the return to work meeting. Some adjustments take time to arrange so ideally, they should have been discussed before the return to work.

Reasonable Adjustments Policy:

<http://connectdocs/NetworkRail/Documents/CorporateServices/HR/InformationCentre/EmployeeHandbook/ReasonableAdjustmentPolicy.pdf>

Reasonable adjustments guide:

<http://connectdocs/NetworkRail/Documents/UsefulResources/DisabilityIssues/Everyone-Managing-Disability-in-the-Workplace-Reasonable-Adjustment.pdf>

In these circumstances, reasonable adjustments could take the form of altered duties, a phased return to work or even workplace modifications.

⑤ Refer to support services

Referral processes are in place to appropriate support services, such as occupational health and the Employee Assistance Programme.

Referrals to these types of support services will allow for appropriate reasonable adjustments to be agreed. Line managers are not expected to be medical experts and referrals to these services can help to de-medicalise any issues that may arise.

⑥ Medication advice

Should the employee be on medication, whether prescribed or over the counter, they must phone the medication advice service.

Medication enquiries FAQs:

<http://connectdocs/NetworkRail/Documents/CorporateServices/HR/InformationCentre/OccupationalHealth/Medication%20Enquiries%20FAQ.pdf>

Myth busting

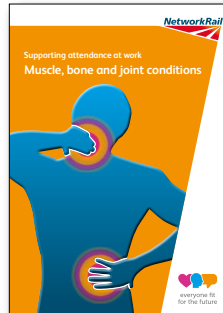
- ✗ **You need to be 100% fit to return to work.**
- ✓ People heal from injury and illness over time and getting back to normal activities, including work, is part of that process.
- ✗ **Light duties are often better than a phased return.**
- ✓ Phased returns allow for tolerance to be built up over time, in order to be able to return to full duties, if possible.
- ✗ **Employees want to stay out of work for as long as possible.**
- ✓ Most employees want to return to work, as it is a strong source of pride and self-esteem for them.

Recap

Conduct a return to work meeting and consider reasonable adjustments: this will identify reasonable adjustments and what support interventions and/or adjustments are necessary for the employee.

Maintain contact with the employee while they are off work: this support will facilitate their return to work.

Refer to appropriate support services, like occupational health and Employee Assistance Programme: to further identify what measures can be put in place for their return.



Supporting attendance at work

At Network Rail there are various resources and support mechanisms available to you if you are concerned about your employees' long-term absence.

1 Employee Assistance Programme

Call 0800 358 4858 or 0330 332 9980
www.validium.com/vclub

2 Occupational health provider

<https://safety.networkrail.co.uk/healthandwellbeing/HelpingOthers/Supporting-wellbeing-at-work/Occupational-Health>

3 HR Direct

Ideally, for all long-term absences you should get in touch with HR Direct to inform them of the absence. Call 0800 0 546 547

4 Flexible Working Policy

<http://connect/CorporateServices/HRonline/WorkingArrangements/flexible-working.aspx>