

Aberdeen City Council: Guidance for Managers on Phased Returns to Work

Introduction

The Council is committed to providing a safe and healthy working environment for its workforce. It recognises that, for those employees who have experienced a prolonged period of sickness absence, returning to work can be difficult. In order to ensure that their return to work is supportive and rehabilitative, a phased return may be appropriate to allow employees to reacquaint themselves with the workplace and get into the routine of being back at work.

A phased return will normally only apply to those who have been off on a long-term sickness absence (i.e. for more than 4 calendar weeks).

Employees on a phased return will be reinstated onto their full normal salary and sick pay will no longer apply. Any contractual hours not worked during the phased return will be deemed paid recuperative leave.

Guidance Overview

- All phased returns will be managed in line with the Council's Maximising Attendance policy and in line with the Equality Act 2010.
- All phased returns will normally be agreed following advice from the Council's Occupational Health provider, or on the recommendation made by a GP on a Fitnote.
- All phased returns will be mutually agreed between the manager and the employee.
- The duration of all phased returns will be time-limited and will not normally exceed a period of 4 weeks.
- Employees on a phased return will be paid their full contractual pay and **will not be** recorded as off sick.
- Employees who become unwell during a period of phased return **will** be recorded as off sick.

How to plan for a phased return

Occupational Health and the GP Fitnote

At the time when it becomes clear that your employee is medically fit to return to work, a recommendation on the GP's Fitnote or advice from the Council's Occupational Health Adviser may suggest a phased return to work for the employee. Should the employee's GP have provided them with a Fitnote indicating a phased return, you do not need to refer the employee to Occupational Health.

Normally, you should accept the GP recommendation, meet with the employee and agree an appropriate phased arrangement. Should you be unclear on the requirement for a phased return, it may be appropriate to seek advice from occupational Health, to supplement the recommendation on the GP's Fitnote.

The employee's GP may not always state 'phased return' on the Fitnote, but you or the employee may feel a phased return would be of benefit. In cases such as these, you should seek guidance from Occupational Health and an HR Adviser.

If you do seek information from Occupational Health, this should be done in advance of the employee's return to work. Until they have been seen and a plan agreed, they will still be required to be off sick. Obtaining an occupational health report can take a couple of weeks and the employee will be required to continue to be covered by a GP Fitnote until the phased return can start. Assistance with completing the Occupational Health referral form is available from AskHR.

Meeting your employee

Once you have a recommendation from either the GP (on the Fitnote) or Occupational Health, you should arrange to meet with your employee to discuss a phased return plan in advance of them returning to work. This discussion should cover

- When the phased return will start
- What hours and/or days the employee will work
- When the phased return will end and the employee will return to full contractual hours.

It is important that the plan is reasonable; this means it starts at a level which the employee can cope with and the work commitment increases weekly over the period of the phased return.

For example, for a full-time worker it is reasonable for the employee to start the phased arrangement by working a minimum of at least 40% (two out of five days) and for this to be increased by at least 20% (1 day) for each week of the phased period.

The phased return must also be operationally viable in that it can be easily accommodated and will not adversely affect service delivery. The GP, Occupational Health and/or the employee may have suggested recommendations that cannot be accommodated for service reasons. In situations where the return cannot be agreed, the employee must remain off sick, until agreement on a suitable return to work can be reached. Advice can also be sought from an HR Adviser.

Consequently, all phased returns must be mutually agreed by both the Line Manager and the employee. At the end of the meeting you should therefore write to the employee, using the template letter at Appendix 1, to confirm the agreed phased return plan.

Please note that employees do not have an **automatic right** to a phased return.

Paperwork

As detailed above, you will have either a GP Fitnote or an Occupational Health report that recommends a phased return is appropriate. Once the plan is mutually agreed, you should forward the GP Fitnote and/or Occupational Health form, along with a copy of the letter confirming the phased return plan to AskHR so that they can be placed in the employee's personal file.

An employee on a phased return will not require any additional Fitnotes throughout this period as they will no longer be recorded as off sick.

Return to Work Notification

On the first day of their phased return you should notify your absence team or the HR Service Centre (depending on your normal directorate procedures) of their return. **It is important you do this so that the sickness absence can be closed on the payroll system.**

You are no longer required to complete and return a phased return pro-forma. However, as a manager, it is good practice to record the progress the employee is making during and following their phased return to work. This may be important information for the future, particularly where the employee is unable to sustain a return to work. A template phased return plan is included at the end of this guidance note, should you wish to use it.

During the phased return

It is important that you maintain contact with the employee during the period of their phased return. This should be done very informally, either face to face, on the telephone or even by email, if appropriate.

By keeping in touch with your employee you will be able to identify any changes or additional support needs that they may have. The employee may be doing better than expected and can return to full duties earlier than planned, or they may not be doing as well as they hoped and need further support so you will ensure that, at the end of the phased return, you will both be aware of the progress made.

End of the phased return

In most circumstances the employee will be ready to return to their full working hours and duties by the end of their phased return. If this is the case, you do not need to take any further action.

If it is identified that at the end of the phased return, the employee is not ready to return to their normal contractual hours, you should contact an HR Adviser for further advice.

In some circumstances, an employee may not be able to return to their normal contractual arrangements within a reasonable timescale despite the support measure of a phased return. If this is the case, you may need to consider a temporary or permanent reduction in working hours with the agreement of the employee, or an arrangement by which the employee uses a combination of working hours, annual leave, flexi time, unpaid leave etc.

If the employee does not agree to vary their contractual arrangements and they are unable to resume their normal house and duties, they will be required to be signed off sick, until they are able to return to work. In the event that the employee is unable to return to work, it may be that further Occupational Health advice is required with a view to redeployment or applying the capability provisions within the Maximising Attendance policy. This should be discussed with an HR Adviser.

Phased return for short-term absences

In exceptional circumstances an employee who has been of sick for only a short period may benefit from a phased return and could be considered under these provisions. Such an arrangement will not be appropriate for employees returning from viral ailments or infections such as colds, flu, headaches, stomach upsets or stress etc.

An employee who has an accident and suffers a muscular-skeletal injury (e.g. broken limbs or significant ligament damage etc.), for example, may find it difficult to travel to the office every day. By putting in place a phased return, the employee can attend work and contribute thereby preventing an otherwise protracted period of absence. If you believe an employee may benefit from a phased return following a short-term absence, you should contact an HR Adviser for guidance.

Long-Term Work Place Rehabilitation

There may be some circumstances where a 'normal' phased return will not be appropriate for your employee. Instead, they may require a temporary or permanent adjustment to their duties or working arrangements, particularly if covered by the Equality Act 2010.

In situations where the normal provisions of the phased return are not suitable, you should contact an HR Adviser for guidance.

Advice and Guidance

If you have any questions about phased returns, please contact AskHR on 01224 81 4545 or email askhr@aberdeencity.gov.uk

Appendices

Appendix 1: Template Letter to Confirm Phased Return Plan

Appendix 2: Template Phased Return Plan

Appendix 1

Our Ref.
Your Ref.
Contact
Email @aberdeencity.gov.uk
Direct Dial
Direct Fax

Date

<Name>
<Address>

Dear

CONFIRMATION OF PHASED RETURN PLAN

I write following our meeting on <DATE> during which we discussed your return to work and your phased return plan. The purpose of this letter is to confirm the details of your plan.

As agreed, your first day back to work will be <DAY> <DATE>. From that date your working patten will be as follows:

Week	Mon	Tue	Wed	Thur	Fri	Sat	Sun
1							
2							
3							
4							

I trust the above reflects the agreement we reached during the meeting.

I look forward to your return to work and hope the above plan will provide the necessary support for you to make a full return to the team. If, at any time, you have concerns about the plan, or you feel the phased return is not providing the support you require, please contact me so it can be discussed and reviewed, if necessary.

Yours sincerely,

NAME

Copy to: Personal File
 HR Adviser

Appendix 2

Record of Phased Return Plan

PERSONAL DETAILS							
Employee Name:				Employee Job Title:			
Normal Working Location:				Normal Contractual Hours:			
ABSENCE DETAILS							
Absence Start Date:				Date of OH Report/Fit Note:			
Reason for Absence:							
Brief Summary of OH/GP Recommendations:							
PHASED RETURN PLAN							
Phased Return Start Date:				Phased Return End Date:			
WORK PATTERN							
Week	Mon	Tue	Wed	Thur	Fri	Sat	Sun
1							
2							
3							
4							
If you require an extension to the normal maximum 4 weeks, please attach a new form							
ADDITIONAL COMMENTS							
Signed (Employee)						Date	
Signed (Manager)						Date	