Staff Absence and Attendance –Guidance for managers in respect of staff returning to work following Long COVID

This guidance should be read in conjunction with the Staff Absence and Attendance Policy

Please note that as COVID-19 is a new illness, therefore this is an interim document which will be updated as new information arrives.

Absence from work can have a large impact on how a school performs, the service the school provides, work colleagues, as well as employees themselves. Alongside the Trust's Staff Absence and Attendance policy and guidance a set of additional guidance documents have been created to provide advice and support for senior leaders and managers on managing staff absence and attendance and the various conversations with staff which may need to take place. Conversations regarding absence and attendance may form part of normal line management meetings or could be in the form of informal or formal meetings which are called specifically to discuss the employee's absence and attendance.

It is important that staff absence and attendance is monitored as a whole to help identified whether there are wider issues in place which may need addressing or whether the issues are isolated to a specific individual where targeted and specific support and action may need to be taken. A consistence approach to absence management is beneficial and reviewing absence and attendance as a whole can help achieve this. It is, however important to remember that when it comes to absence management there is no "one size fits all" solution. Advice and guidance can always be sought from your HR Business Partner in regard to specific employee absence and attendance issues or concerns. This may be prior to any meetings or discussions taking place for advice on how to approach something, or following meetings or discussions where an employee has disclosed something to their manager/senior leader which requires further action.

It is also important to remember the Trusts Wellbeing Service is available to all employees as an avenue of support. Their contact details can be sought from our HR Team HRhelpdesk@unitysp.co.uk

Guidance for managers in respect of staff returning to work after Long COVID.

The impacts of COVID-19 and Long COVID are still being learnt with new information and advice coming out at a fairly regularly pace as and when more research is undertaken. For many people, COVID-19 symptoms last a couple of days although symptoms can commonly last two to four weeks (one in five people have COVID-19 symptoms after four weeks). This can sometimes be referred to as acute COVID.

Long COVID is a term often used after four weeks if symptoms are still impacting individuals and affecting them from undertaking their normal day to day activities. One in ten people have symptoms for twelve weeks or longer with some continuing to have symptoms for many months. Long COVID can also be described as "ongoing symptomatic COVID-19" (symptoms from four to twelve weeks) and "post COVID-19 syndrome (twelve weeks or more).

Long COVID symptoms can be unpredictable and symptoms fluctuate over time and can vary for each individual. For some people symptoms are ongoing and for others they can come and go intermittently. Common symptoms of long COVID can include;

- Fatigue – tiredness not improved by rest
- Breathlessness even without exertion
- Muscle and joint pain
- Difficulty with temperature regulation (feeling hot and cold intermittently)
- Palpitations and sharp chest pain
- Cognitive difficulties including reduced focus and also reduced memory
- Mental health concerns including anxiety and depression

Other symptoms may include a persistent cough, headaches, migraines, heart and blood pressure problems, loss of smell, skin rashes, digestive problems, loss of appetite, sore throat and others.

Long COVID can have unusual patterns, relapses and phases with new, sometimes bizarre, symptoms. An initial mild or even asymptomatic case can be followed later by severe symptoms impacting markedly on day-to-day activities. Although recovery from COVID-19 can be slow, many people improve with

time. Returning to work is part of the recover, even if the return to work must be flexible or involve reduced hours and amended duties over weeks or in some cases months.

Points to consider for managers when supporting staff to return to work following Long COVID;

Manager's play a vital role in supporting staff during a period of absence and also upon the member of staff's return. Managers are often the first point of contact for members of staff while they are absent and also upon their return to work. Managers also have the ability to put in place additional support for the member of staff and can also to make amendments or adjustments to the member of staff's role.

The unpredictable and fluctuating nature of Long COVID means that, in some cases a return to work may need to be gradual, over a longer period of time than what would be expected. In most cases a phased return may last anywhere between four to six weeks. In cases where a member of staff is returning to work after Long COVID, a phased return may need to be in place for a number of weeks for example 12 weeks. There may also be cases where a member of staff needs to come back on a therapeutic return to work, which is then followed by a phased return to work or the initial phased return to work plan needs to be amended or even extended depending upon the member of staff's individual circumstances.

In addition to a phased or therapeutic return to work. Consideration may also need to be given to amending or adjustments the member of staff's role to help support and facilitate a return to work. Below are some examples of amendments or adjustments which could be considered;

- Alterations to the timing of work for example the start, finish and break times.
- Alterations of hours worked for example shorter days, days off between workdays.
- Alterations to work load including fewer roles tasks and responsibilities, or more time to complete tasks and responsibilities.
- Alterations to work locations e.g. moving working location or allowing working from home.
- Additional support in place for the member of staff, for example a buddy system, time off for healthcare appointments, not allowing the member of staff to work in isolation.

Any amendments or adjustments made to the role should be kept under review throughout the return to work period. Managers need to be mindful that, due to the unpredictable and fluctuating nature of Long COVID, different adjustments or amendments may need to be considered and implemented throughout the return to work period depending upon the member of staff's individual circumstances.

It is recommended that the specific details of the member of staff's return to work is documented and a copy shared with the member of staff. This will ensure that both sides are aware of what has been put in place and it will also provide a useful document to refer back to throughout the return to work period. The specific details will be based upon the individual circumstances of the member of staff and any medical advice received from their GP or medical team. It is also important to consider a referral to occupational health, who can provide further advice, guidance and recommendations on how to support and facilitate a return to work. The Trust's HR team will be able to help and assist with referring a member of staff to occupational health and can help to interrupt the advice, guidance and recommendations received.

There are a number of important steps to follow when supporting a member of staffs return to work. These steps are important regardless of the reason for staff absence and form part of the managers role in respect of supporting staff to return to work;

- Keep in touch and maintain contact throughout the period of absence. Managers can contact staff who are absent and can agree a method and frequency of contact throughout the absence – phone call/video calls are the preferred method of contact, rather than email or message.

- Prepare for the member of staffs return to work including seeking advice from HR/occupational health if required, prepare for the return to work meeting (held on the first day back), have details of any support or adjustments/amendments to the member of staff's role ready.

- Hold the return to work meeting using the Trust's return to work meeting template. Further guidance on conducting return to work meetings can be found here.

- Agree a return to work plan during the return to work meeting – record the details of the plan, any agreed actions, regular review points and share a copy with the member of staff. Ask the member of staff to sign and date a copy of the return to work plan and keep a signed copy on the member of staff's file.

- Ensure any agreed actions are followed up and completed in a timely manner with an update being provided to the member of staff

- Ensure the member of staff has support throughout the return to work period and build in regular catch ups with the member of staff to review and check progress during the return to work period. Ensure the member of staff knows who they should speak to if they have any questions or needs further support should their circumstances change.

- Be willing to consider further adjustments or an extension to the return to work plan should the member of staff's circumstances require it. If there are any adjustments made to the return to work plan, ensure these are recorded and an update copy of the return to work plan is provided to the member of staff and is also held on file.

- Seek advice and guidance from the Trust's HR team at any point throughout the return to work period if there are any questions raised or concerns in respect to how the return to work is going.

If you are unsure on any of the above steps or something comes up during the return to work period/plan please seek advice and guidance from the Trust's HR team. The NHS has produced advice and guidance for individuals who have had COVID-19. "NHS Your COVID Recovery website" - https://www.yourcovidrecovery.nhs.uk/ which may also be a useful place to signpost staff to if they would like further advice and guidance. It is also useful to remind staff of the Trust's Wellbeing Service which can provide support for employees. The Trist's Trust's Wellbeing service can be contacted via the telephone number 08081 682143 or by visiting the website www.carefirst-lifestyle.co.uk (you will need to use the username: ssc001 and the password: oice1234).

Further advice

For further advice or assistance can be sought from your HR Business Partner or by contacting the HR Helpdesk at hrhelpdesk@unitysp.co.uk or telephone on 01440 333401.