

M I L B A N K G R O U P

Sickness and Absence

A Guide for Managers

Supporting colleagues through illness, managing absence fairly, and knowing when to escalate.

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Why this guide exists

People get ill. That is not a performance issue. How you handle sickness absence - with care, consistency and common sense - makes the difference between a colleague who feels supported and one who feels punished for being human.

At the same time, you have a responsibility to manage absence fairly. Patterns that suggest a problem need addressing, long-term absence needs active support, and the business needs to keep running.

This guide helps you balance both. Support the person. Manage the absence.

When someone calls in sick

Step by step - short-term absence

1. **Take the call.** Be kind. Ask how they are. Do not interrogate them. If they are unwell, they are unwell.
2. **Ask what they need.** Do they need to see a doctor? Do they have what they need at home? Is there anything you can do?
3. **Record it.** Note the date, reason given, and expected return date. Log it in whatever system your business uses.
4. **Sort cover.** Redistribute work as needed. Do not make the absent colleague feel guilty about this.
5. **Stay in touch proportionately.** A brief text on day 2 or 3 is fine. Do not call every day.
6. **Fit note.** If they are off for more than 7 calendar days, they will need a fit note from their GP. Remind them gently.
7. **Return-to-work conversation.** When they come back, have a private conversation. Welcome them back. Check they are well enough. Update them on anything they missed. Document and follow the return-to-work process.

Say this	Not this
<i>I hope you feel better soon. Take the time you need.</i>	<i>You always seem to be off on Mondays.</i>
<i>Is there anything I can do to help?</i>	<i>Can you not just push through it?</i>
<i>No need to worry about work - we will manage.</i>	<i>We really needed you today.</i>
<i>Welcome back. How are you feeling?</i>	<i>You do not look that ill to me.</i>

Is there anything we can adjust to help you settle back in?

I had the same thing and I still came in.

Long-term absence

If a colleague has been off for more than two weeks, or it is clear they will be off for a significant period, the approach changes. You need to stay close - not to monitor, but to support.

Managing long-term absence

Regular contact: agree with the colleague how often you will be in touch and by what method (call, text, visit). Follow their preference. Contact should feel supportive, not surveillance.

Fit notes: ensure they are providing fit notes for the duration. If a fit note says 'may be fit for work' with adjustments, talk to them and the People Team about what is possible.

Occupational health: for complex or extended absence, we may suggest a referral to an occupational health provider. This is about understanding how to support the colleague - not about catching them out.

Welfare meetings: arrange periodic welfare meetings (in person or by video/phone). Keep them informal and supportive. Focus on how they are, not when they are coming back.

Pay: SSP applies for up to 28 weeks. Company Sick Pay (where applicable) is set out in individual contracts. If pay is about to change, give the colleague as much notice as possible so they can plan and we can send out the paperwork.

Supporting the return after long-term absence

Getting the return right

Plan ahead: before they come back, meet (or call) to discuss what a good return looks like. Phased return? Adjusted hours? Temporary change of duties?

Phased return: a gradual build-up over 2-4 weeks is common. Agree hours and duties in advance. Review weekly.

Reasonable adjustments: if the colleague has a disability or long-term health condition, we have a duty to look at adjustments. Speak to the People Team and we can help to review.

First day back: Follow the return to work process and manager guide. Document and follow the return-to-work process.

Follow-up: check in regularly for the first few weeks. Not every day - but enough that they know you have not forgotten.

Return to work protocol (four weeks or more)

When a colleague has been off for four weeks or more, the return needs to be planned and structured. Use the RTW Check Sheet to track every phase. This is not a tick-box exercise – it is how you make sure the return actually works.

There are four phases. Each one matters. None is optional.

Phase 1 – Pre-return planning (10–5 working days before)

Before they come back

Planning call: arrange a call with the returning colleague (and HR if needed). Agree the return date, what duties they will start with, any OH recommendations still outstanding, who they will report to on day one, and whether equipment, access and systems are ready.

OH assessment review: check the most recent OH assessment covers all relevant aspects of health. After a prolonged or traumatic absence, confirm mental wellbeing has been assessed. If there are gaps, request a supplementary assessment before the return date.

Operational readiness: confirm workstation and equipment are available, system access is active, the rota is updated, and any temporary cover is aligned with the handover plan.

If you cannot be there: appoint a named deputy now – not on the day. Brief them fully and give them a copy of the planning call summary. If your availability changes later, update the deputy and re-send written confirmation to the colleague straight away.

Written confirmation: send the colleague a written summary confirming return date, start time, who to report to, scope of duties on day one, and any agreed adjustments. File a copy on the HR record.

Phase 2 – Day one

Making day one count

Welcome meeting: meet the colleague within the first 30 minutes – before any work begins. Welcome them back, run through the day, update them on anything that has changed, and confirm what they will be doing.

Workspace walk-through: show them round the working environment and point out any changes to equipment, layout or procedures.

Agreed duties only: do not ask them to take on full duties unless this was specifically agreed and documented in the planning call. Day one is about settling in, not catching up.

Mid-shift check-in: check in during the day – not just at the end. Ask how they are getting on and whether anything needs adjusting.

End-of-day debrief: a short conversation at the end of the day. How did it go? Any issues? What to expect tomorrow? Any adjustments needed before day two?

Phase 3 – Reintegration (days 2–10)

Building back gradually

Phased duties: where OH or the fit note supports it, increase hours or duties gradually rather than all at once. Document the plan and agree it with the colleague before they return.

Check-ins: brief daily check-ins (10–15 minutes) during week one. Step down to every other day in week two, unless there is a reason to continue daily. These are informal – not performance conversations.

Handover from cover: if someone has been covering the role, arrange a structured handover of up to five working days. Resource this in advance – do not leave it to chance. If the original cover is unavailable, find an alternative.

End-of-reintegration review: at the end of week two, hold a formal review. Is the colleague ready for full duties? Are further adjustments needed? Are there issues to escalate? Document the outcome and file it on the HR record.

Phase 4 – Ongoing support (months 1–3)

Ongoing support

Monthly one-to-ones: include a standing wellbeing agenda item in your monthly one-to-ones for the first three months post-return. Not a formal review – just a check that they are settling in and that nothing needs attention.

Named HR contact: at the start of this phase, give the colleague the name of their HR contact in writing. This should be someone in Group HR – not you. They need a route to raise concerns that does not go through their line manager.

Three-month review: hold a formal review at the end of month three to close the return-to-work process or agree any continuing support. Document the outcome and file it on the HR record.

Use the RTW Check Sheet to record every phase.

When absence becomes a pattern

Sometimes absence is frequent, or it follows a pattern (always Mondays, always around shifts, always after holidays). You have a responsibility to address this - but always with curiosity before judgement.

How to approach it

Start with concern, not accusation. "I have noticed you have had a few absences recently. I wanted to check in and see if everything is OK - is there anything going on that we can help with?"

Look for underlying causes. Frequent short-term absence can be a sign of a chronic condition, mental health issue, caring responsibility, workplace problem, or personal difficulty. Ask before you assume.

Follow the policy. If informal conversations do not resolve the issue, the Sickness & Capability policy sets out a formal process with trigger points. The People Team will guide you through this - you do not need to go it alone.

Document everything. Keep a record of conversations, dates, and agreed actions. This protects you and the colleague.

Looking after yourself

Managing absence can be draining - especially long-term cases, or when you are carrying extra workload to cover for someone. It is OK to find it hard.

If you are struggling talk to your own manager. Managing absence is a shared responsibility, not yours alone.

Quick reference

Keep this page somewhere you can find it quickly.

Your checklist

1. When they call in: be kind, record it, sort cover.
2. Fit note needed after 7 calendar days.
3. Return-to-work conversation for every absence - brief, private, welcoming.
4. Long-term absence: regular supportive contact, welfare meetings, OH referral if needed.
5. Returning after 4+ weeks: follow the four-phase RTW protocol – plan ahead, day one, reintegration, ongoing support.

5. Returning after long absence: plan the return, consider phased hours, adjust as needed.
6. Patterns: address with curiosity first, follow the policy if unresolved.
7. Always document conversations and agreed actions.
8. If you are unsure about anything - peopleteam@milbank.co.uk.

This guide does not form part of any employee's contract of employment and may be amended from time to time.

Policies referenced: Sickness and Capability Policy / Sickness and Capability Procedure / Return to Work Procedure / Disciplinary Policy