Sickness absence

The symptoms of sickness extend not only to affected employees but also to employers. Costing billions of pounds each year to the UK economy, sickness absence, whether short or long term, can lead to disruption and decreased productivity in the workplace.

With sickness absence being an inevitable occurrence, employers need to be aware of how best to address and manage the issue. Devising and implementing a comprehensive sickness absence policy, which is then consistently applied, is a good place to start.

Short term sickness absence

This absence can take many forms. It can range from the one off events to a persistent pattern of behaviour. When managing this type of sickness absence, the following are some important factors to take into account:

- Has the employee followed the absence reporting procedure properly?
- Has a comprehensive return to work interview been carried out?
- Is there an identifiable pattern of absence, for example, every Monday or Friday?
- Has the actual reason for the absence been explained?
- Is there a serious underlying health issue that needs to be considered?
- Is disciplinary action to be a consideration?

Longer term sickness absence

This type of absence is normally supported by doctor's certificates, and can in some circumstances be for an indefinite period of time. When managing this type of sickness absence, the following are some important factors to take into account:

- Is the employee following the absence reporting procedure properly, and providing appropriate medical certificates?
- Is the actual reason for the absence properly known?
- What is the underlying health issue and how should this be considered?
- Should an employee welfare meeting be carried out?
- When should expert medical opinion be instructed, who should this be and what information should be obtained?
- To what extent is the employee incapable of doing their role?
- Is there a duty under the Equality Act to make reasonable adjustments, and what does this mean to the company has to do?
- In what circumstances can the employee’s contract be terminated?

Action can and should always be taken to reduce the extent and impact of sickness absence in the workplace. However, what form of action to be taken needs to be carefully considered in each case. For example, disciplining or dismissing an employee for the time they have taken off can, in some situations, expose the employer to liability for costly unfair dismissal and/or disability discrimination claims.