ADVICE FROM THE SENIOR MANAGERS' ADVISORY PANEL TO HEAD TEACHER AND DEPUTE HEAD TEACHER MEMBERS ON ABSENCE MANAGEMENT PROCEDURES

Attendance Management Policies are now a fact of life, with every authority having a policy in place designed to maximise teacher attendance. Some of these allow the Senior Manager a degree of discretion and permit a degree of flexibility; others, however do not. **It is essential that a Senior Manager be fully aware of his/her employer's policy and act according to the authority's/employer's guidelines.**

Nonetheless, a senior Manager should make clear to his/her employer, the need for training in order to carry out such policies. He or she should also know when to seek advice, including advice from SSTA.

Properly conducted attendance Management Policies should ensure that not only is attendance maximised, but also that staff with health, or any other problems affecting their attendance, are properly supported. These policies can be an effective means by which an empathetic and sensitive manager can ensure that the 'Duty of Care' towards staff is properly implemented and existing or potential problems are mitigated or avoided altogether.

1. GENERAL

1.1 It is a legitimate management task to monitor absence levels, and to offer/ provide support for staff with health or other problems which lead to high levels of absence. Authorities which manage absence well provide a range of support including referral to Occupational Health. Its important that this is used fully and Senior Managers NEVER be tempted to make medical judgements.

1.2 Beware of the more draconian elements of some policies. For example mentioning the "inconvenience" that absence has caused. This may constitute harassment rather than being acceptable absence management procedures. Seek union advice if necessary.

1.3 Ensure that steps are taken to remove any contributory factors or cause of illness in the work place/working environment, in accordance with Health and Safety Regulations. It is important that senior managers develop relationship with Health and Safety Representatives.

2. RECORD KEEPING

2.1 Records must be properly kept and monitored. These may assist teachers in maintaining an accurate record of illness.

2.2 Strict confidentiality according to Authority guidelines must be observed, especially regarding medical certificates. Details of the reason for absence should not be revealed to other staff without good reason, and the employee's consent. In particular Senior Managers must make clear to clerical staff that confidentiality is paramount.

2.3 Employees have right of access to all information recorded in personal files, including managers' comments on the reasons for their absences. Employees also have the right to be informed that such files exist. No comments, other than verifiable facts, should be recorded.

2.4 Targets and Triggers

Where Authorities have strict numerical formulaes for triggering certain procedures then Senior Managers **MUST** comply with them. Senior Managers should remember that staff may feel vulnerable at times of illness and stress and should bear this in mind.

3. CONTACT DURING PERIODS OF ABSENCE

3.1 Early contact with an employee can be helpful in delivering duty of care by providing support. Senior Managers should be careful to follow the Employer's guidelines in such cases.

3.2 Home Visits

Interviews with absent colleagues need not be conducted only in school. It can be beneficial to meet in a neutral environment by mutual agreement. A friendly visit is entirely different from one which is part of the official monitoring process.

4. RETURN TO WORK PROCEDURES

4.1 Self Certificates

4.1.1 Employees must complete self certificates for absences of between four and seven days. For shorter absences this is not mandatory. After seven days, a Fitness for Work Certificate is required.

4.1.2 Senior Managers should not comment on whether they believe the reason given for absence is correct or genuine.

4.2 Return to Work Meetings

4.2.1 Return to work meetings are supportive meetings. They should provide support and re-assurance.

4.3 Sickness Absence Meeting

4.3.1 More formal meetings may be required to discuss patterns of absence and reason for absence

4.3.2 Senior Managers should always inform the employee of his/her right to be accompanied at such meetings.

4.3.3. Occupational health referrals are positive and useful and often generate access to supportive services such as Counselling, Cognitive Behaviour Therapy, and Physiotherapy. It is a useful mechanism for activating "Access to Work" procedures. It may be helpful for Senior Managers to remind staff that they themselves may self-refer to Occupational Health.

4.4 Phased Return

The practice of phasing an employee's return after a lengthy illness may be extremely helpful. The precise arrangements should be agreed in advance, in consultation with the employee and, if appropriate, with the Personnel/ Human Resources Department.

5. DISCIPLINARY PROCEDURES

5.1 Senior Managers must be satisfied that there is sufficient evidence before recommending or initiating a disciplinary process. The authority's Personnel or Human Resources Department must be consulted and, where appropriate, involved.

5.2 The authority's agreed procedures must be adhered to precisely.

6. DISMISSAL ON THE GROUNDS OF INCAPABILITY

This should be handled at authority level.