

## **NHS Wales Employers**

### **Long COVID - Post virus sickness absence – Health & Wellbeing and rehabilitation support arrangements**

Specific arrangements were put in place in March 2020, in response to the exceptional sickness absence situation prevailing as the COVID-19 outbreak took hold across Wales. To support NHS Wales staff both from a control of infection measure and to facilitate recovery, open ended sickness absence arrangements were put in place which provided for full pay from day one.

This was an immediate response and provided staff, managers and organisations with a clear and unambiguous categorisation of the absence. It also enabled NHS Wales organisations and Welsh Government time to understand how the infection was impacting on the workforce and to assess the emerging consequences on individuals following infection and the extent to which recovery and rehabilitation were compromised.

The term and categorisation of “Long-COVID” emerged during 2020 and it was felt that while the system of an open ended measure had been appropriate at the start of the pandemic, the arrangements needed to be within the agreed terms and conditions of service for both AfC and Medical and Dental staff. At the same time it was recognised that we were only beginning to understand the impact of Long COVID and the different approaches individuals required to support the management of their condition and their rehabilitation. Accordingly, it was felt that individuals would need time, to support their recovery and for interventions to be in place to support, enable and facilitate a return to work.

Since the 1<sup>st</sup> December 2020 normal sickness absence arrangements with enhanced provisions have been in place and these are set out in the *COVID – 19 (Coronavirus) Frequently Asked Questions for NHS Managers and Employees*. As part of this change, it was agreed in partnership, that with effect from 1<sup>st</sup> December 2020 the absence timeline for all individuals absent with COVID sickness absence would be re-started, so as to provide for up to 12 months sickness absence on full pay (irrespective of an individual’s normal entitlement to contractual sick pay) i.e. up until 30<sup>th</sup> November 2021. All cases of long COVID, post virus sickness absence commencing after this date have been treated in the same way, with sick pay being “topped up” to full pay when an individual would ordinarily have moved into a half pay or no pay situation, thereby providing all individuals, irrespective of their length of service, with 12 months full pay if they were unable to return to work.

The first anniversary of this change is approaching and there are still a considerable number of individuals who remain absent from work with a COVID-19 sickness absence as their reason for absence and whose sickness absence commenced before 1<sup>st</sup> December 2020. We are concerned that the arrangements as currently set out in the *COVID – 19 (Coronavirus) Frequently Asked Questions for NHS Managers and Employees* would provide a “cliff edge”, if the safety net of full pay was removed. We are also conscious that everyone in this situation requires individual bespoke

support regarding their current health situation, to work towards, so far as is possible, a return to work.

To facilitate the development of a comprehensive approach to case management and to maximise the rehabilitation opportunities, the current arrangements for the full pay “top up” will be extended by 4 months to the 31<sup>st</sup> March 2022. This will apply to all individuals whose full pay was extended to 30<sup>th</sup> November 2021 and for any individual with a 12 month full pay “top up” end date, between 1<sup>st</sup> December 2021 and 31<sup>st</sup> March 2022.

To assist staff to return to the workplace following a lengthy period of COVID-19 related sickness absence, a programme of bespoke support will be put in place. This will be supported by the development of a framework which will build on the arrangements set out in the Managing Attendance at Work Policy (MAAW). The aim is to facilitate a pragmatic and flexible application of the current support arrangements, as set out in the policy, in the light of the specific needs and requirements which individuals are experiencing post-COVID infection. The Sickness Absence Operational Group will work in partnership on the development of this framework which will outline a number of elements to support staff in returning to work. These will include:

- highlighting the importance of regular communication with the individual and arranging for them to visit the workplace to keep in touch with colleagues;
- increased access to health and wellbeing/occupational health services for the individual;
- the development of bespoke phased return plans which may enhance the provisions currently outlined in the MAAW policy, e.g. multiple phased returns if an individual needs to combine their return with several episodes of sickness absence as part of their managing and sustaining their return to work;
- arranging refresher skills courses and;
- holding career conversations.

The arrangements for sick pay after 1<sup>st</sup> April 2022 are set out in the [\*\*COVID sickness absence - transition from enhanced provisions to application of regular sickness absence arrangements with effect from 1<sup>st</sup> April 2022\*\*](#) document.