

Remaining in Control – Sickness Absence

During 2019/20 and pre COVID-19 MIAA undertook reviews of sickness absence systems at NHS Trusts/Foundation Trusts focusing on the arrangements in place for the documenting, monitoring, reporting and assuring policy compliance.

Sickness absence can reduce an organisation's ability to deliver its objectives, and has a range of potential consequences including compromising financial position and impacting quality of care. Staffing issues associated with low attendance are often cited alongside poor staff satisfaction. Staff absence associated with COVID-19 has put further pressure on organisations and it important that robust controls are in place to manage sickness absence throughout the COVID- 19 pandemic response and beyond.

Areas of Good Practice

- ✓ **Sickness Absence Policies** were in place and they largely included appropriate version control
- ✓ **Policies and procedures** were widely available on organisations' websites and/or intranet sites; in some cases staff are made aware of this at their induction
- ✓ **Roles and Responsibilities** of staff involved in the sickness absence management process were clearly defined in policies
- ✓ **Training** was provided at some organisations regarding the management of sickness absence
- ✓ **Staff wellbeing** support was included at some organisations who offered wellbeing programmes including stress management, mindfulness and health checks.

Areas for Enhancement

- × **Return to Work Interview documentation** was not completed consistently or in a timely manner
- × Management did not consistently follow **defined processes** (e.g. activating appropriate trigger actions) for managing sickness absence or clearly document why processes had not been adhered to
- × Sickness absence details were not input onto the **Electronic Staff Record (ESR)** consistently or in a timely manner
- × Organisation Boards did not always have **clear and reliable assurance** that sickness absence performance issues were being addressed
- × Not all staff with management responsibilities have had **relevant training**.

Challenge Questions

1. What assurance are you receiving that sickness absence processes are being fully complied with?
2. Have staff received appropriate training on sickness absence management?
3. Have return to work interviews and relevant documentation been completed for all staff returning from sickness absence and shielding?
4. Are non COVID-19 sickness absence cases being dealt with separately to COVID-19 related sickness absence?
5. Are programmes in place to support staff wellbeing? Have these been reviewed for adequacy in light of the impact of COVID-19?
6. Has the increase in absences in relation to COVID-19 been factored into sickness absence targets?

This Insight provides information to support organisations in reviewing their sickness absence processes. It is intended to prompt and inform discussions in this area.