



# Schools Themed Audit - Absence Management

## City of York Council

### Internal Audit Report

Business Unit: Children and Education Directorate  
Responsible Officer: Assistant Director for Education  
Service Manager: School Business Support Manager  
Date Issued: 24<sup>th</sup> February 2023  
Status: Final  
Reference: A3060/003

	P1	P2	P3
Actions	0	3	0
Overall Audit Opinion	Reasonable Assurance		

# Summary and Overall Conclusions

## Introduction

There are 24 local authority maintained schools remaining in York. Four school themed audits were agreed as part of the internal audit plan for the council's Children and Education directorate.

Since March 2020, the Coronavirus pandemic has led to unprecedented levels of staff absences in schools as a result of both illness and isolation. Following an audit of three City of York (CYC) maintained schools in 20/21 audit year, it was identified that a number of absences, unrelated to Covid-19, are not being managed correctly. Now that absences related to the pandemic are reducing, this themed audit will review the current procedures for absence management across six council maintained schools.

## Objectives and Scope of the Audit

The purpose of this audit was to provide assurance to management that procedures and controls within the system ensured that:

- All schools had adopted an absence management policy and this had been recently reviewed.
- Schools were seeking any relevant documentation required to support absences and were following the correct return to work procedures.
- Schools were accurately recording absences and any patterns of absence were identified and followed-up accordingly.
- Any phased returns to work were managed correctly and were documented.

## Key Findings

The six schools included in this review have all adopted the model absence management policy developed and made available by City of York Council (CYC). There was evidence to confirm that all schools had reviewed the policy within the last two years and this had been circulated to staff through induction, handbooks and during staff training. In line with the model policy, all schools confirmed they had adopted and communicated a standardised approach for reporting absences, to ensure the school was made aware of any absences promptly and cover could be arranged accordingly.

One school did not provide any evidence to support the testing of a sample of sickness absence that followed an initial discussion with staff. A review of sickness absence was undertaken at the remaining schools and this confirmed inconsistencies in the supporting evidence obtained in relation to an employee's fitness for work. A number of absences exceeded the self-certification period, however fit notes were not consistently available and one document provided did not match the dates of the absence. The forms for self-certification had generally been completed fully and promptly, however it was identified that two self-certifications had been completed four months after the absence had taken place.

The absence management policy adopted by all schools specifies that return to work discussions should be held following every period of absence and ideally on the first day back. However, testing confirmed that there were a number of return to work interviews that had not taken place and where these discussions had occurred, there were often long delays between an employee's return to work and these meetings.

All schools were able to evidence a form of absence management log, where sickness could be recorded and monitored. However, although a number of absences reviewed had met absence trigger points, there were a number of gaps in the information available to confirm that the policy had been followed. It was identified that return to work interviews are not being used consistently to review any patterns in absence and there was an overall lack of evidence to support any action being taken to manage and prevent ongoing issues with absence.

The processes for managing phased returns were reviewed in those schools where these had occurred. It was confirmed that phased returns are well managed with risk assessments undertaken and the correct health advice and support accessed when necessary. Schools stated that meetings with those members of staff returning to work on a phased basis take place frequently, however all schools should be reminded that these meetings and the phased return process as a whole should be documented.

## **Overall Conclusions**

There is a generally sound system of governance, risk management and control in place. Some issues, non-compliance or scope for improvement were identified which may put at risk the achievement of objectives in the area audited. Our overall opinion of the controls within the system at the time of the audit was that they provided Reasonable Assurance.

# 1 Self-Certification and Return to Work Processes

## Issue/Control Weakness

Return to work processes are not being followed consistently across all schools.

## Risk

The statutory duty of care to employees is breached and the school faces litigation.

## Findings

A review of return to work processes confirmed that self-certification documents had generally been completed fully and promptly, however it was identified that two self-certification forms had been completed four months after the absence had taken place.

The absence management policy, adopted for use by all schools included in this review, outlines the requirements for all members of staff returning to work following any period of sickness absence to participate in a return to work meeting. This meeting should be used to document reasons for absence and give the employee an opportunity to discuss any amendments or adjustments that may need to be made, for example, to their working environment. Testing confirmed that there were a number of return to work interviews that had not taken place and where these discussions had occurred, there were often delays between an employee's return to work and the dates of these meetings. Best practice states that return to work discussions should be held ideally on the employee's first day back at work to ensure any additional needs are recorded promptly.

One return to work interview had not taken place as the person returning from a period of sickness was the member of staff responsible for coordinating these return to work discussions. Where this is the case, alternative arrangements should be in place to ensure these employees still receive the correct level of engagement and care.

## Agreed Action 1.1

We will share the findings of the audit with maintained schools, highlighting the risks and control weaknesses identified. We will ask them to review their practices to ensure these follow their absence management policy. We will remind schools of their responsibilities to complete return to work interviews and that these should be completed ideally on the employee's first day back to work.

**Priority**

2

**Responsible Officer**

School Business Support Manager

**Timescale**

30<sup>th</sup> June 2023

## 2. Statements of Fitness for Work

### Issue/Control Weakness

Fitness for Work information was not consistently available for absences exceeding 7 working days.

### Risk

Employees remain absent and do not return to work when fit to do so.

### Findings

A review of sickness identified a number of absences where the self-certification period had been exceeded and therefore Statements of Fitness for Work (fit notes) were required to support the continued period of absence. One school did not provide any evidence in response to this testing. From those five schools who did respond to testing, there were inconsistencies identified in two schools. Two fit notes were not available to support absences of 10 and 14 calendar days and one fit note was supplied in relation to an absence, however this fit note did not correctly cover the period of absence recorded.

### Agreed Action 2.1

We will share the findings of the audit with maintained schools, highlighting the risks and control weaknesses identified. We will ask them to review their practices to ensure these follow their absence management policy.

**Priority**

2

**Responsible Officer**

School Business Support Manager

**Timescale**

30<sup>th</sup> June 2023

### 3. Managing and Repsonding to Absence Triggers

#### Issue/Control Weakness

Absence triggers are not being managed or responded to consistently across the schools.

#### Risk

Patterns in absence are not identified and issues among staff are not highlighted. The school fails to deliver in its duty of care to staff and faces litigation as a result.

#### Findings

Further to the inconsistencies identified in relation to the completion of return to work interviews, it was also identified that these meetings are not always used to review any absence triggers that may have been met. The absence management policy outlines the steps to be taken at various stages of recurring absences. Further testing highlighted several cases where triggers had been met, however for many of these there was no evidence available to support that further action had been taken in line with the policy.

Where discussions have been held in relation to absence triggers, but no further action taken, these conversations and decisions should still be recorded and held on the relevant personnel file.

#### Agreed Action 3.1

We will share the findings of the audit with maintained schools, highlighting the risks and control weaknesses identified. We will ask them to review their practices to ensure these follow their absence management policy.

We will ask schools to consider if they may wish to provide assurance to Governors that the absence management policy is being followed. This could be by providing high level reports on absence levels and by exception reporting on if any trigger points have been reached and action taken.

**Priority**

2

**Responsible Officer**

School Business Support Manager

**Timescale**

30<sup>th</sup> June 2023

## Audit Opinions and Priorities for Actions

### Audit Opinions

Our work is based on using a variety of audit techniques to test the operation of systems. This may include sampling and data analysis of wider populations. It cannot guarantee the elimination of fraud or error. Our opinion relates only to the objectives set out in the audit scope and is based on risks related to those objectives that we identify at the time of the audit.

Our overall audit opinion is based on 4 grades of opinion, as set out below.

### Opinion Assessment of internal control

Substantial Assurance	A sound system of governance, risk management and control exists, with internal controls operating effectively and being consistently applied to support the achievement of objectives in the area audited.
Reasonable Assurance	There is a generally sound system of governance, risk management and control in place. Some issues, non-compliance or scope for improvement were identified which may put at risk the achievement of objectives in the area audited.
Limited Assurance	Significant gaps, weaknesses or non-compliance were identified. Improvement is required to the system of governance, risk management and control to effectively manage risks to the achievement of objectives in the area audited.
No Assurance	Immediate action is required to address fundamental gaps, weaknesses or non-compliance identified. The system of governance, risk management and control is inadequate to effectively manage risks to the achievement of objectives in the area audited.

### Priorities for Actions

Priority 1	A fundamental system weakness, which presents unacceptable risk to the system objectives and requires urgent attention by management.
Priority 2	A significant system weakness, whose impact or frequency presents risks to the system objectives, which needs to be addressed by management.
Priority 3	The system objectives are not exposed to significant risk, but the issue merits attention by management.

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