

How to guide

How to manage staff absences at your trust



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Every HR leader in a Multi-Academy Trust knows the daily reality of managing staff absence. Beyond the logistical challenges of the frantic search for cover, the added strain on colleagues, and the unavoidable disruption to pupil learning, the financial toll can be huge.

In the academic year 23/24 alone, UK schools spent £757.6 million on supply teaching costs, an 8.5% increase from 2022-23.¹

Using our absence cost calculator, staff absences could be costing medium-sized trusts around £374,868 a year! (350 staff)

This guide provides a practical framework to help you build a robust and supportive absence management strategy, and tips on how to manage them day-to-day. Building an effective absence management process enables you to fulfil your duty of care to your employees and also fulfil your legal obligations, including Health & Safety at Work Act 1974.



The main focus areas in this guide are:

- Using data to drive your strategy
- Proactive approaches to wellbeing
- Working out the cost of staff absence in your trust
- Building a fair and consistent framework for absence management
- Making the most of education HR software

Using data to drive your strategy

For a Multi-Academy Trust, managing absence isn't just an operational task for individual schools; it's a strategic one for the entire trust. Monitoring absence data, alongside regular wellbeing surveys, is a key indicator of staff wellbeing and morale.

What to measure

Quantitative data

- **Overview of absence statistics:** Total days lost to absence, absence rate, average duration, frequency and reasons
- **Absence by role/department/school:** See which departments, roles and schools might require additional support and share best practice
- **Absence by day of the week, time of year, term:** Identify patterns and hidden reasons for absence
- **Cost of absence:** Direct and indirect (see tips on working this out, below)
- **Return-to-Work interview completion rates:** Make sure supportive conversations are happening
- **Employee turnover/retention rates:** Highlights staff satisfaction levels, but can also signify a lack of skills and support in roles
- **Training & development uptake rates** (e.g. Mental Health First Aid, Stress Management): Are preventative and supportive measures resonating with staff?

Qualitative data

- **Exit interview data:** Analyse reasons for leaving to improve internal operations and support
- **Staff wellbeing survey data:** Gauge stress levels, workload satisfaction, work-life balance, perceived support from management, and mental health indicators
- **Referrals to Occupational Health (OH) / Employee Assistance Programmes (EAP):** Track reasons for referrals to see where most support is required
- **Grievance and disciplinary data** (especially related to workload or bullying/harassment): Particularly stressful cases may trigger an increase in staff absence. Is their absence because of a hard time with a student or a colleague?
- **Performance management data** (related to workload and support): Are there regular reports of high stress and workload? Are certain departments undersupported?
- **Feedback from line managers:** This can build invaluable qualitative data on staff wellbeing by line manager, department, etc.

By effectively recording, monitoring, and reporting on absence, you can identify patterns and the causes of both short and long-term illness. Regular reviews of this data allow you to see if your management strategies are working and can help you tackle issues before they grow.

Supporting a proactive approach to wellbeing

The foundation of any good absence management strategy is a proactive approach to staff wellbeing. Supporting your employees' health can prevent many absences before they happen.

Understand the 'Why'

Assess how your employees are doing using a wellbeing survey. You might wish to ask questions around key areas, such as:

- **Managerial relationships:** Poor relationships remain a top reason for exit in schools. 51% of teachers and leaders cited a lack of support from superiors as a reason for leaving the sector¹
- **Engagement & satisfaction:** Beyond just attendance, are staff happy at work?
- **Career development and growth:** A study by Ofsted in 2021 shared that less than half of the teachers surveyed suggested they were receiving a high-quality and relevant programme of teacher development²
- **Recognition and performance:** Feeling valued and making an impact
- **Work-life balance:** In a 2024 Education Support survey, 78% of school staff reported feeling stressed, with senior leaders even more likely to report burnout symptoms³
- **A sense of belonging and alignment to the organisation's purpose:** Engagement soars when staff feel connected to the mission

Anonymous survey results can help you dig deeper into the reasons behind absence, such as excessive workload, high pressure, or feeling unsupported.

Continuously assessing how your employees are doing and completing wellbeing surveys at agreed intervals means you can adjust your wellbeing strategies regularly. Regular meetings with line managers are a great way to assess staff wellbeing regularly.

Provide targeted support

Use these deeper insights to develop a wellbeing programme that offers targeted support. This could include:

- **An Employee Assistance Programme (EAP)** to assist with work-related and personal issues. EAPs generally offer support such as counselling, GP appointments and signposts to specific family and legal support.
- **An effective Occupational Health service** that provides timely and useful information. Timely referrals can prevent extended absences, mitigate workplace risks and strengthen employer-employee relationships.
- **Counselling services and self-help resources** can be useful when budgets are limited. Education Support offers a free helpline for anyone working in education and has lots of great resources to share across your trust.

Our HR team have seen an increase in mental health-related absences in 2025. Consider whether your absence management procedures are supporting mental health-related absences. Review other policies such as flexible working, leave of absence procedures and the type of support you are providing through your Employee Assistance Programme. Are these programmes and policies fit for purpose to support employees suffering from mental health-related absences?

Upskill managers

Make sure your line managers are aware of the wellbeing services you offer so they can promote them to their teams, helping staff stay well and in work.

Working out the cost of staff absences

If you're making the case for reviewing or updating your absence management processes, here's how you can work out total cost of absences across your trust. Alternatively, our calculator below does it for you

There are four elements of the equation to take into consideration:

- Employee Sick Pay (Occupational and Statutory)
- Cover Costs (Bringing in supply, engaging a zero-hours employee, instructing an employee to step up either HLTA or Cover Supervisor)
- Length of absence, i.e., half-days, part-days, full-days, part weeks, etc.
- Rate of Pay for staff involved

Sick pay

Sick pay is a large cost, especially as staff are entitled to Occupational Sick Pay (OSP) as well as Statutory Sick Pay (SSP). Step one is to calculate what proportion of OSP your staff are entitled to. Record the percentage of staff who get occupational sick pay as FIGURE A.

Cover costs

Many schools/academies have at least some proportion of absent employees' timetable covered. The slack will usually be picked up by colleagues working overtime or agency workers, and there is a cost involved.

Step two is to calculate what proportion of the absentees' timetable needs to be covered. Record the percentage of staff as FIGURE B.

Length of a working day

This part is easy. What is the normal length of a working day at your school? The common length of a school day in the UK is 6.5 hours. Record the length of a working day as FIGURE C.

Rates of pay

To complete the calculation, you need to know the average rate of pay for both Occupational Sick Pay and agency staff or overtime. In the formula below, we use hourly pay rates rather than annualised salaries because it makes more sense in calculating a cost per absence day. To convert an annual salary to an hourly rate:

Teachers

$\text{£Annual Salary} / 195 / 6.5$ OR $\text{£Annual Salary} / 1265 = \text{£Average hourly pay} = \text{Figure D}$

Support Staff

$\text{£Actual Annual salary} / \text{Contracted Weeks (incl Holiday)} / \text{Contracted hours} = \text{£Average hourly pay} = \text{Figure D}$

Do the same calculation for cover staff, or use their specified hourly rate and record this as Figure E.

Calculation

$(A * D * C) + (B * E * C) = \text{Average cost per absence day}$

Then multiply this by the number of days the employee is absent. Be sure to make amendments when the employee drops to SSP only, half or nil pay.

For ease, use our absence cost calculator that does it all for you!



Building a fair and consistent framework for absence management

To manage attendance effectively and fairly across your trust, it's essential to stay consistent. Not only does this protect you from claims of discrimination or unfair dismissal, it makes sure all staff are treated equitably and are clear on what the process is.

Consistent processes and policies also make it easier for central teams to build a clear understanding of staff absences, as everyone is measured on the same thing.



Free template
Download our free attendance policy template to inform your frameworks.

Highlight employee responsibilities for reporting absence

Your attendance policy should clearly outline the employee's role in reporting their absence. Explain this as part of a new employee's induction, with regular policy reminders for staff each new academic year. Why not set up a reminder annually on the first inset day?

It is the employee's responsibility to notify the school as soon as possible on the first day they are unable to work. Encouraging a telephone call, rather than a message, allows for a supportive conversation about the nature of their absence and their likely return. Having this information early means you can implement appropriate cover or an OH referral, if necessary.

Establish clear trigger points

Trigger points are a pre-determined, non-discriminatory tool to alert managers when a level of absence may be a concern. They signal to the employee that their attendance is a focus for the trust and act as a basis for supportive intervention.

Examples of common trigger points used by schools are:

- Three or more instances of sickness absence in a 6-month period
- Seven or more days of sickness absence in a 12-month period
- Any pattern of absence that causes concern, such as regular Monday or Friday absences
- A period of long-term sickness, such as 4 weeks or more

These triggers should be applied consistently to all staff, though the steps following a trigger alert may differ to make sure employees with disabilities or who are pregnant are not discriminated against.



How to work out absence triggers

Absence triggers can be decided by the trust, usually in line with the industry average for sickness absence. School-level teacher sickness absence data is available on the government website.¹

A staged approach to absence meetings

When an employee hits a trigger point, a supportive meeting should be held to discuss the situation with their line manager. This can form part of the return to work meeting.

Stage 1 Absence Review Meeting



This is the first formal step and an opportunity for the employee to explain their absences. You will be able to discuss supportive measures to enable the employee to return to work and improve their attendance, such as Occupational Health and Employee Assistance Programmes. You might also discuss reasonable adjustments if the employee has any disabilities. This meeting could lead to a formal warning and targets for attendance, subject to your policy.

Stage 2 Absence Review Meeting



If attendance doesn't improve after the first meeting and agreed-upon targets are missed, a Stage 2 meeting is held. Review any supportive measures in place and whether they are still effective. Explore reasons for their absences in further detail. This meeting could lead to a second formal warning and further targets for attendance, subject to your own policy.

Stage 2 Meeting



This stage is used to consider if the employee is capable of continuing in their role, given their attendance level and whether the school can sustain it. This could lead to dismissal. An outcome from this meeting could be a dismissal from employment – refer to your own policies for this.

The employee is entitled to be accompanied by a trade union representative or a work colleague at all meetings.

Throughout this process, it is vital to consider the specific circumstances and make reasonable adjustments where necessary to avoid discrimination claims.

Download a copy of our How to Guide – Holding a Return to Work meeting;



(1) Teacher sickness absence – school level, School Workforce in England, 2025

Making the most of education HR software

Pulling together and analysing detailed people data from multiple schools can be incredibly difficult without the right system in place. A dedicated education HR software tool, with staff absence management features, can save your trust huge amounts of time and money. It gives you, as trust leaders, the power to:

Have a trust-wide view

Easily monitor sickness absence information across all your schools, identify patterns, and pinpoint areas that need further support.

Automate and alert

Receive flags when action is required, helping you manage casework efficiently and consistently.

Report with ease

Quickly generate customisable reports for leadership and governors, making it simple to prepare for meetings and demonstrate effective management.

Create consistent processes and policies

Built-in workflows and automated reminders make it quick and easy to implement consistent processes across the trust. Absence management and return to work meetings are handled consistently from school to school, making sure employees are treated fairly. Share policies trust wide and communicate changes to employees at the touch of a button.

"We're very proud of where we are with our staff absence management, thanks to SAMpeople,"

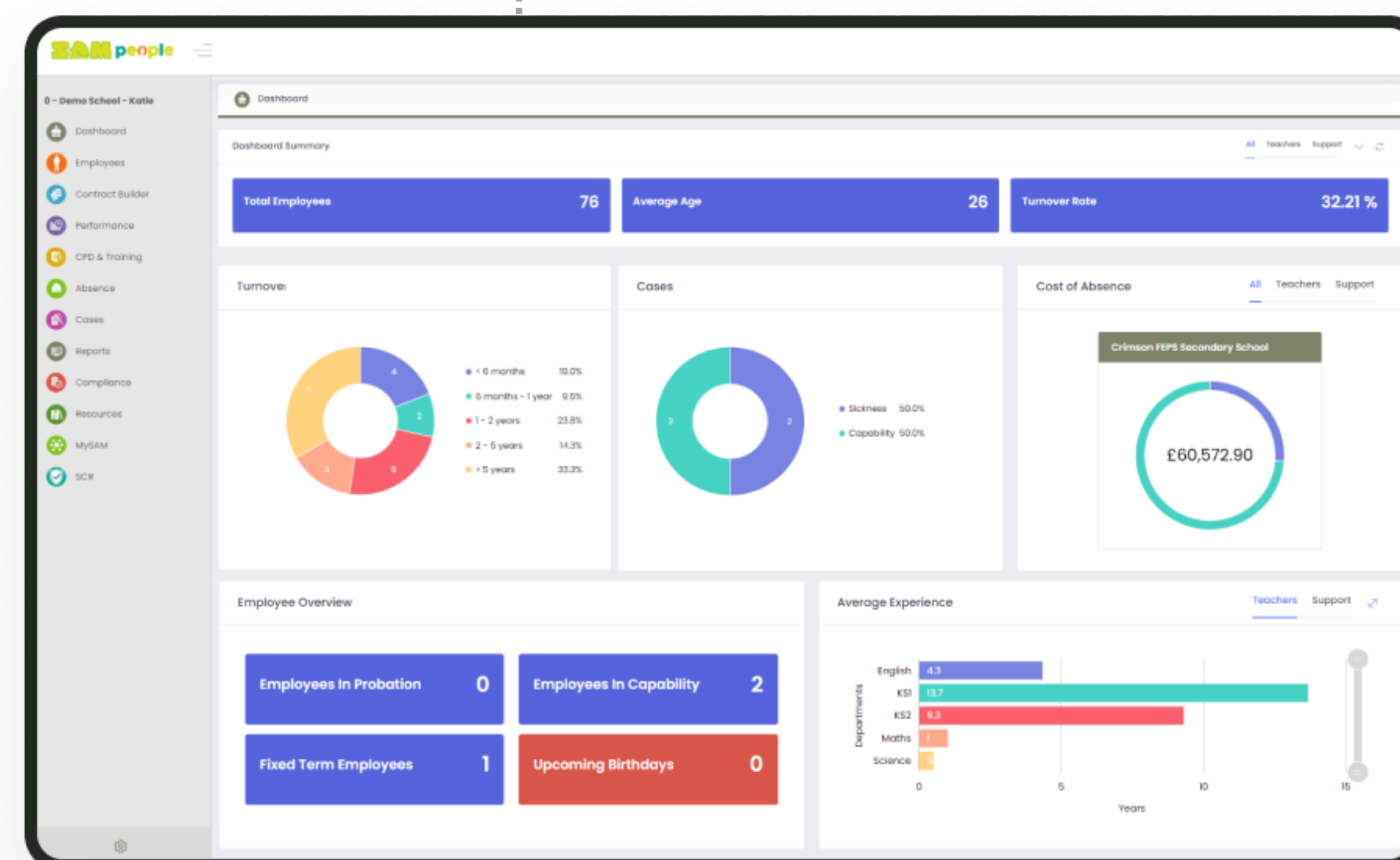
Hazel Macey, HR Officer at Penk Valley Academy Trust.

Read more of Hazel's case study, which includes how they streamlined staff absence management for over 300 members of staff.



SAMpeople is an HR system designed specifically for the challenges of education.

Created by education HR specialists, it joins up all your staff data to turn scattered information into clear insights on absence, wellbeing, and retention, so you know exactly where to focus your attention.



To see how a dedicated HR system can help you build a robust absence management strategy across your trust, find out more on our website.



About SAMpeople

From hiring to payroll to case management – our suite of integrated products and services help you streamline, support and join up every aspect of people management in education.

"The impact has been amazing, we are seeing change and we are seeing each school engaging with the systems. It's helping build an inclusive culture."

Sally Boaden, Chief Finance & Operating Officer, Raleigh Education Trust



We help over 2,600 schools and trusts to:

Finally understand the complete picture of their staff

Our products join up all your staff data, so you can track every interaction. Turn scattered touchpoints into clear insights about absences, recruitment, retention and wellbeing, and know exactly where to focus your attention.

Scale HR without increasing headcount

With a strong HR infrastructure, it's easy to roll out consistent processes and policies and treat everyone the same way. And with our people services team at FusionHR, HR advice, consultancy and strategy is only a phone call away.

Dramatically reduce HR admin for everyone

With self-service tools for employees, and helpful reports, automations, alerts and templates for managers, HR quickly becomes less of a mountain.

We're education people, people

We created SAMpeople because we've been there.

Founded by former school staff and our education HR specialists at FusionHR, we're bringing together decades of HR expertise with the latest in people management technology.

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