Long COVID - Guidance
All Employees

This Guidance has been reviewed due to changes in the Absence Management arrangements for COVID-19 related absences.

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Strategic Alignment
Improving the Council's Resource Base – A Workforce Strategy that is built around the needs of the Council (as a single resource base) to deliver the priority outcomes, ensuring future workforce requirements, new skills and innovative approaches, and succession planning are recognised.

Consultation process	*Joint Trade Unions*	
Stakeholders	Contacts identified for each service	
	Managers *Employees*	*Joint Trade Unions*
Distribution	*myNL*	

Change record

Date	*27 July 2022*	Author	*Tracy Simpson*
Change made		*Update to Absence Management Arrangements inc removal of Section 7 - Retrospective Pay Arrangements* *Additional Symptoms of Long COVID*	

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Related Policies and Procedures	Supporting Attendance Policy and Procedure – My NL Managing Your Attendance for Teachers & Associated Professionals – My NL Smarter Working – My NL Smarter Working Policies for Teachers & Associated Professionals – My NL Special Leave – My NL

1. Introduction

The Council recognises that there are employees who will suffer from longer term symptoms due to coronavirus (COVID-19) that will impact on their ability to attend work. This can be called 'post COVID-19 syndrome', Ongoing Symptomatic COVID-19, 'long-tail COVID' or 'long COVID' but for the purposes of this guidance it will be referred to as 'long COVID'.

'Long COVID' is a term which is used after four weeks if symptoms continue and prevent someone from doing normal activities, including attending work. Whilst the data that the medical profession have on 'long COVID' is still limited The Office for National Statistics estimates that one in five people have symptoms after five weeks, and one in ten have symptoms for twelve weeks or longer after acute COVID-19 infection.

As the Council continues to recover from the impact of the 'COVID' pandemic there is a need to balance the needs of the business and the Health & Wellbeing of our employees.

This guidance which has been developed taking guidance from ACAS, CIPD, SOM, and Health Improvement Scotland into account will assist managers in supporting employees who are experiencing symptoms of 'long COVID' and seeks to:

- Ensure managers and HR are aware of the common symptoms of 'long COVID' and the impact these may have on an employee's ability to attend work.

- Ensure that employees are offered appropriate advice and support to help them manage the symptoms of 'long COVID' and encourage them to engage with this.

- Ensure that managers and employees work together in managing a return to work and that appropriate support is put in place to help facilitate a return.

- Ensure that longer term absences due to 'long COVID' are dealt with in a fair and consistent manner across all services.

2. What is 'long COVID'

As stated above 'long COVID' is a term which is used after four weeks if symptoms continue and prevent someone from doing normal activities, including attending work. However, healthcare professionals have categorised 'long COVID' into the following two categories.

1. **Ongoing symptomatic COVID-19**: signs and symptoms of COVID-19 from four weeks up to 12 weeks.

2. **Post-COVID-19 syndrome**: signs and symptoms that develop during or after an infection consistent with COVID-19, continue for more than 12 weeks and are not explained by an alternative diagnosis.

The process for how 'long COVID 'sickness absences should be managed will depend on what category the employees fall into and further guidance on this is provided at Section 5.

3. Common Symptoms of 'long COVID'

While most employees will recover quickly from coronavirus (COVID-19), some may have ongoing symptoms. These can last for a few weeks or longer, those lasting more than 4 weeks is referred to as 'long COVID'.

These symptoms are not limited to people who were seriously unwell or hospitalised when they first caught the virus. As this is a new condition, the healthcare professionals understanding of it is developing all the time. It can't be said exactly how long coronavirus symptoms will last. The reassuring evidence is that symptoms improve over time in most cases. There can be different symptoms, which often overlap. These may change over time and can affect anywhere in the body. The most reported ones include:

Respiratory symptoms	General symptoms
• Breathlessness • Cough	• Fatigue • Fever • Pain
Mental Health **(Psychological/psychiatric symptoms)** • Symptoms of depression (for example low mood, poor sleep, lack of concentration and feeling helpless) • Symptoms of anxiety (for example feeling on edge, excessive worry and difficulties sleeping • Symptoms of post-traumatic stress disorder, especially in people with more severe coronavirus (COVID-19) symptoms that needed intensive care in hospital	**Neurological symptoms** • Cognitive impairment ('brain fog', loss of concentration, or memory issues) • Headache • Sleep disturbance • Peripheral neuropathy symptoms (pins and needles, and numbness) • Dizziness • Delirium (in older people) • Difficulties moving around (mobility impairment) • Difficulties with or changes to your sight (visual disturbance)
Cardiovascular symptoms (heart and circulation) • Chest tightness • Chest pain • Palpitations	**Ear, nose, and throat symptoms** • Tinnitus (ringing in the ears) • Earache • Sore throat • Dizziness • Loss of taste and/or smell
Dermatological symptoms • Skin rashes	**Musculoskeletal symptoms** • Joint pain

• Hair loss	• Muscle pain
Gastrointestinal symptoms (digestive system) • Abdominal pain • Nausea • Diarrhoea • Weight loss and reduced appetite (in older people)	Note: Some people with long COVID may have symptoms of postural tachycardia syndrome (PoTS) which may need further investigation. PoTS is an abnormal increase in heart rate that happens after standing up. Symptoms include light-headedness, palpitations, and fatigue.

4. Impact of 'long COVID'

No one case of 'long COVID' will be the same as another. Managers therefore need to be aware of the various ways that 'long COVID' may impact on an employee. When assessing someone to determine if they are suffering from 'long COVID' a healthcare professional will consider the following.

- Physical symptoms
- Any difficulties with memory or thinking
- How the person is managing with day-to-day activities, for example, work, education, getting about,
- General wellbeing, looking after themselves or feeling isolated
- Any changes in your behaviour, emotions, and mood.

As assessment to determine if someone has 'long COVID will normally be carried out by a health care professional where someone still have symptoms after four weeks, or new symptoms four weeks, after the start of COVID-19.

It is important to note that you do not need a positive test for the diagnosis of COVID-19. It can be diagnosed by symptoms alone.

5. Recovery from 'long COVID'

Although recovery from 'long COVID' can be slow, many people improve with time, and treatments are improving as more is known. Returning to work is part of the recovery even if it must be flexible or on a phased return at first.

Managers must also be aware that the effects of 'long COVID' can come and go. On some days the employee might seem well, but on others their symptoms can be worse, and they might need to be off work again and such managers may need to be more flexible than normal.

There are several resources (see links below) available to employees that provide them with information on 'long COVID' and how to manage the impact of this and plan for returning to work. Whilst this guidance has been developed for managers it is also available to employees, and managers should signpost employees to the information sources below as appropriate.

NHS Inform

www.nhsinform.scot/illnesses-and-conditions/infections-and-poisoning/coronavirus-covid-19/

NHS inform is a national health information service for Scotland. The website provides a range of information and advice about COVID-19, for example self-care guides.

NHS Inform – Long term effects of COVID-19 (long COVID)

Long-term effects of COVID-19 (nhsinform.scot)

Information and support if you have ongoing symptoms after coronavirus

NHS Your Covid Recovery

www.yourcovidrecovery.nhs.uk

NHS Your COVID Recovery can help employees understand what has happened and what they might expect as part of their recovery. The website also provides information for family, friends, and carers

SOM - COVID-19 return to work guide: For recovering workers

https://www.som.org.uk/COVID-19_return_to_work_guide_for_recovering_workers.pdf

This leaflet offers guidance for workers from Occupational Health Professionals on how to manage getting back to work after COVID-19 infection and Long COVID.

Health Improvement Scotland - SIGN

https://www.sign.ac.uk/patient-and-public-involvement/patient-publications/long-covid/

This booklet provides useful information for people who have new or ongoing symptoms after having COVID-19, including advise on assessment, common symptoms, self-management, and rehabilitation.

Chest Heart & Stroke Scotland's 'Long COVID Support Service'

Long Covid - Advice & Information - Chest Heart & Stroke Scotland (chss.org.uk)

This service, which complements the support being provided by NHS Scotland and will see Chest Heart & Stroke Scotland's Nurses and Community Support Teams providing information and advice to people living with Long COVID, to support their recovery and help address social isolation. The free Advice Line Nurses **0808 801 0899** can help to signpost people to services and support in their local area.

6. Absence Management Arrangements

The absence arrangements changed as of 1 July 2022, and all COVID-19 related absences will now be recorded as sickness absence except for Asymptomatic testing for Health and social care employees (and other limited groups), pregnant employees who unable to attend the workplace safely due to COVID-19 risks, and employees that are required to self-isolate prior to having non-elective surgery.

Further information on how COVID-19 absences should be recorded and managed can be found [here](#)

6.1 Management Support during an absence

It is important that managers maintain contact with the employee during a Long COVID absence as they would with any other long-term absence and apply the requirements of the relevant attendance policy. However, as detailed at Section 4, managers must take into consideration that no one case of 'long COVID' will be the same as another, and the ways that 'long COVID' may impact on an employee will vary.

As such managers need to ensure that the right support is offered at the right time. Adjustments to timescales for absence meetings etc may need to be made to ensure that the employee is afforded a reasonable amount of time for their symptoms to improve and/or to undertake any treatments, to support them in returning to work in some capacity.

Referrals to occupational health should still be made at the earliest opportunity (this will depend on how unwell the employee is) to obtain up-to-date medical advice on the impact of the 'long covid' on the employees' ability to attend work and importantly recommendations on what can be done to support them in returning to the workplace and the likely timescales for this. Obtaining this information will also allow managers to determine what level of contact during this period is appropriate and allow them to put arrangements in place to cover any operational requirements.

Managers should also encourage employees to keep in contact with their colleagues if they feel well enough to do so and can make the arrangements for this on the employees' behalf if they wish.

6.2 Supporting a Return to Work

Managers must ensure that they work with the employee to agree a return-to-work plan that is productive for everyone concerned. Whilst returning to work plays an important part in the recovery process it is important that employees are medically fit to return in some capacity and do not overexert themselves as this is likely to cause a relapse in the symptoms 'long COVID' which may not manifest itself until days later,

Therefore, before the employee returns to work the manager must discuss what support they may need to help facilitate their return to work. Depending on how long the employee has been absent for and any ongoing impact of their symptoms, support may include:

- A referral to occupational health to obtain advise on the impact of the symptoms on the employees' ability to undertake their work activities and what adjustments may be beneficial.
- Making changes to the workplace or to how the employee works ('reasonable adjustments'), adjustments may include but not limited to.

  - Changes to working hours e.g., start/finish times, more regular breaks shorter days, additional day off between workdays.
  - Changes to workload e.g., Fewer tasks than normal within the working day/week. more time to complete usual tasks.
  - Changes to work location e.g., working from home for all or some of the time (this will be dependent on the job role)
  - Temporary changes to duties or tasks ('altered tasks')
  - Additional Support e.g., Clear line of supervision - someone to ask or check with, a 'buddy' system, time off for healthcare appointments, not working in isolation.
  - Equipment adjustments e.g., blue light screen filters, voice activated software, ergonomic office chairs, enhanced moving/handling equipment.

- Phased return to work - whilst both the teaching and SJC absence policies state that phased returns should be for no more than 4 weeks, there is scope to extend this to 6 weeks in exceptional circumstances. Given that the full extent of how Long COVID impacts on someone is still unclear there may be some cases that require longer than 6 weeks. If the employee feels that they will require longer than 4 weeks advise should be sought from occupational health.
- What the employees wants to tell others at work about their illness and how you as the manager can support them with this

As stated above some employees may be experience symptoms that come and go and on some days the employee might seem well, but on others their symptoms can be worse.

Managers will need to try to be as flexible as possible, whilst taking operational requirements into account. Where an employee advises that their symptoms fluctuate from day-to-day advice should be sought from Occupational Health on the impact of this and what adjustments may be required.

6.3 Workplace Risk Assessment

As part of the return to work plan the managers must also review the existing risk assessment/s relevant to the employee's role/environment and if required make any adjustments specific to the employee's needs.

6.4   Equality Act 2010

A disability is defined in the Equality Act 2010 as a mental or physical impairment which has a long term substantial adverse impact on someone's ability to carry out normal day to day activities, and that the impact has lasted for 12 months, or is likely to last 12 months. However, it is for a tribunal or court to officially determine whether an individual is considered to have a disability that would be protected by the Equality Act 2010.

Currently 'long' covid itself is not deemed a disability in terms of the Equality Act, but that is not to say that this position won't change as more is known about the longer term impact of 'long covid' symptoms. However, a recent tribunal case determined that the symptoms suffered by the employee amounted to a disability and therefore managers should err on the side of caution in this regard, and seek advice from Occupational Health to gain a better understanding of the impact of the employees symptoms on their ability to carry out normal day to day activities and the short or long term nature of this.

Employees who are suffering from 'long COVID' may also already have other underlying health conditions, which are likely to be considered a disability, that have been aggravated by COVID-19, therefore the manager may need to consider additional reasonable adjustments over and above those directly relating to the 'long COVID' and again advise should be sought from Occupational Health.

6.5   Monitoring Absence after a Return to Work

When an employee has returned after an absence due to 'long' COVID their absence should be monitored in accordance with the Supporting Attendance Policy and Procedure or Managing Attendance Policy for Teachers, considering any flexibility with attendance that has been agreed as part of the return to work plan.

Where a manager is concerned that an employee is requesting more time off than what was agreed or having frequent absence either directly or indirectly due to 'long COVID' they should discuss their concerns with the employee in the first instance to see if there is any other support that can be offered. Advise may need to be sought from Occupational Health if the absence is having an impact on the employee's ability to attend work or carry out their duties efficiently.

Managers should seek advice from Employee Relations if these circumstances arise.

If the employee has an absence not relating to 'long' COVID this should be managed as per normal absence procedures.

6.6   Managing an Employee who is unable to Return to Work

Where an employee feels unable to return to work due to the impact of their symptoms of 'long COVID, managers should address this in accordance with the Supporting Attendance Policy and Procedure or Managing Attendance Policy for Teachers.

Given that 'long COVID' is still a new illness and that it will take time for the Healthcare professionals to understand it fully and what the longer term impact may be on some individuals, managers must ensure that they have done everything they can before considering moving to capability (Stage 3 of the Supporting Attendance Policy & Procedure and Capability Level 2 of the Managing Attendance Policy for Teachers) to avoid claims of unfair dismissal.

As referenced above managers must err on the side of caution as to whether the symptoms that the employee is suffering from would likely be considered a disability, to prevent claims of discrimination, and focus on ensuring that all reasonable adjustments have been fully explored to try and facilitate a return to work (this may include exploring redeployment, albeit the employee needs to agree to this, temporary longer-term change to working hours).

As well as disability discrimination implications, managers must be careful to avoid other types of discrimination when considering 'long COVID'. Long COVID has been found to affect older people, ethnic minorities, and women more severely. Therefore, additional considerations should be given to these categories of employees to avoid discrimination claims in relation to age, race or sex.

Before making any final decisions, managers may also wish to explore the possibility of a career break with the employee, if appropriate. This would allow additional time for the employees' symptoms of Long COVID to improve whilst providing re-assurance to the employee that a position will be available to them when they can return. Managers should discuss this with HR before discussing with the employee.

6.7   Long COVID Workplace Rehabilitation Programme

To support employees experiencing symptoms of long COVID to return to work, with job-focused case management and workplace rehabilitation, Health Management Limited have developed a bespoke 8-week rehabilitation programme. Managers can refer employees who have been absent for more than 12 weeks due to long COVID symptoms which are causing long term or repeat absence, or which are impacting their performance at work to this service.

Employees must consent to this referral and services will need to meet the additional cost of the programme, which would be considered a reasonable adjustment. It should be noted that not all employees will be suitable for this programme and an initial assessment will be carried by an occupational health advisor to determine whether the programme is appropriate for the employee at that time.

Information on the programme is available from Employee Relations, who will make the referrals where appropriate, following a discussion between the manager and the employee.

Should you require any clarification or further information on any of the above please contact Employee Relations at employeerelationsteam@northlan.gov.uk or speak to your designated Employee Relations Advisor.