

WILTSHIRE COUNCIL

STAFFING POLICY COMMITTEE

19th May 2010

Employee Absence – Volcanic Ash

Purpose of Report

1. The purpose of this report is for Staffing Policy Committee to consider a policy for the payment of staff who have been unable to attend work due to the disruption to air travel following the volcanic ash incident.

Background

2. The recent disruption to air travel resulted in some staff being unable to attend work due to being prevented from returning from holidays and trips overseas. Whilst the number of staff absences has been low in non-schools, a significant number of teaching staff were affected as the disruption occurred during the school holidays.
3. Staff who were stranded abroad were expected to make all reasonable attempts to return to their place of work as soon as was reasonably practicable in their own particular circumstances.
4. The numbers of staff affected week commencing 19th April were as follows: -
 - 42 in non-schools
 - 250 (minimum) in schools
5. The numbers of staff who had returned to work week commencing 26th April were as below: -
 - 35 in non-schools
 - 238 in schools

Main Considerations for the Council

6. Wiltshire Council has a Severe Weather Policy. This policy is in place to guide staff where they are unable to attend work due to adverse weather conditions and could be applied to staff who are unable to attend work due to the air travel disruption. This policy advises staff to work from home, or remotely, wherever possible and where this is not an option the policy states that managers have the discretion to authorise one of the following: -
 - a. Take a days leave, where the entitlement allows; or
 - b. Make up the lost time within the next accounting period; or
 - c. Take unpaid leave
7. The volcanic ash situation is unprecedented. Staff have not had the option to work from home or remotely. In addition the delays have meant that staff would have to take a significant amount of their annual leave entitlement, which may impact on any annual leave arrangements they have made for later in the year. It would also be difficult for the lost time to be made up and there would be a significant financial impact to the employee

if the leave is unpaid. As a result it is proposed that the Council applies a more flexible approach by incorporating an element of additional paid leave.

Environmental Impact of the Proposal

8. None.

Equalities Impact of the Proposal

9. This policy would apply to those staff who were stranded overseas and therefore does not discriminate against any employee.

Risk Assessment

10. If an element of paid additional leave is granted to this group of staff there is a risk that staff will expect this policy to be available during other emergency situations e.g. extreme severe weather. It would need to be clear that this policy applies only to the volcanic ash incident – and any future incidents of this nature.

11. If additional leave is granted there is a cost to the organisation /school if it is necessary to cover that absence. In non schools the cost for 42 employees to be absent for a week is approximately £16,500.

12. It is possible that this incident could re-occur, and the numbers stranded could be higher and therefore more costly in the future.

Options Considered

13. There are three options for consideration as below. It is worth noting that in respect of schools, the council can only advise on the procedure to be followed. Schools can choose to follow that advice or refer to the advice given by LGE.

- a. Allow a period of 5 days additional paid leave for both schools and non-schools staff. The daily cost per person for this option for non-schools staff is on average £80. For absences beyond that the Severe Weather Policy detailed in point 6 would apply.

This approach (a) has been implemented by at least 5 other local authorities, including Hampshire, Brighton and Hove, Derbyshire, Northamptonshire and Buckinghamshire. This is the option that CLT support, as it demonstrates a consistent approach for both schools and non-schools.

- b. Implement a different approach for non schools and schools staff as below: -

- Non schools
Do not offer additional paid leave, but treat this incident in line with our Severe Weather policy. This option is nil cost to the council.
- Schools
For schools staff, recognise that teachers generally do not have as much flexibility as other staff in terms of their working arrangements. Schools and local authorities should determine the scope for teachers to make up any lost time, perhaps through the use of additional twilight sessions.

This approach (b) is in line with advice from LGE, and is the approach adopted by a high number of other local authorities, including Devon and Somerset.

c. Implement a combination of (a) and (b) as below: -

- Non schools
Allow a period of 5 days additional paid leave. The daily cost per person for this option for non-schools staff is on average £80. For absences beyond that the Severe Weather Policy detailed in point 6 would apply.
- Schools
For schools staff, recognise that teachers generally do not have as much flexibility as other staff in terms of their working arrangements. Schools and local authorities should determine the scope for teachers to make up any lost time, perhaps through the use of additional twilight sessions.

This approach (c) is in line with advice from LGE in respect of schools, and allows some flexibility for non-schools staff.

Recommendation

- i) As this situation is unprecedented, some degree of flexibility is required. CLT have supported option (a) which treats staff in schools and non-schools consistently. However, LGE advice for schools suggests that schools should be treated differently as these staff have little or no scope to make up lost time.
- ii) It is recommended that the council adopts option (c). This option allows an element of 5 days paid leave for non-schools staff. This will mean that in the majority of cases, staff who may have already used their annual leave entitlement will not be financially affected. This option also follows LGE advice for schools staff, which recognises that teachers do not have as much flexibility as other staff in terms of their working arrangements.

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The following unpublished documents have been relied on in the preparation of this Report: None