

Branch Briefing REVENUE & CUSTOMS GROUP

To: **All PCS representatives**

cc: **Branch Chairs, Branch Organisers, Group Executive Committee, Equality Chairs, VOAC** (for information)

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HMRC Gives Notice on Restricting the Use of the Pandemic Sickness Absence Code

- ***PCS Members are Affected by the Change of Policy***
- ***Mitigation Measures for Current Absences to Apply for 3 Months***
- ***Branches are Requested to Support Members Affected by the Policy Change & Report Any Issues of Concern***

Covid-19 Absence Management

Throughout the pandemic workers employed by HMRC have been required to follow the procedures agreed between the employer & PCS. For absences that have been directly related to Covid-19 workers & their managers have been instructed to use the pandemic absence code. Using this code ensures that Covid-19 absences are discounted for pay & absence management purposes. HMRC are changing these arrangements so that the pandemic absence code is used only for an initial absence. Where a worker is not well enough to work & is expected to self-isolate under government guidance, the Pandemic Absence Code will be used for a minimum of 10 days unless they are able to return sooner. Any additional absence beyond this period would be recorded using the "main symptom" that is preventing a return to work. For any additional absence the usual arrangements for self-certification followed by the provision of a Fit Note will apply.

PCS Position & Negotiated Mitigations

PCS negotiators have argued that this approach is problematic & moving away from the simplified approach will potentially put vulnerable workers at risk. With emerging evidence on the effects of "Long Covid", the move to record absences under an alternative absence code removes the current protections & risks losing evidence on longer term effect of the virus. The timing on this move is also problematic noting the recent announcements on the expectation for people to return to an HMRC workplace.

The employer's rationale comes in three parts: The pandemic absence code was only meant to be an emergency temporary measure; HMRC is looking to align with civil service employers that are not using the absence code to cover all Covid-19 absences; other serious long-term illnesses are not afforded the dispensation provided to Covid-19 related absences.

HMRC have agreed to put protections on pay in place for anyone currently absent & covered by the pandemic absence code. Anyone in this category who may potentially suffer an impact on their pay, due to their current level of absence & proximity to moving onto reduced pay as a result of the policy change, will receive ongoing protection for 3 months from the 7th February.

HMRC HR Policy have now started to introduce the changes to the recording of Covid-19 related absences in a staged fashion. The first stage has been information gathering & assessment of potential impacts during the latter half of January. Having completed the first stage HMRC will now be contacting the managers of jobholders impacted by the changed arrangements. We are therefore alerting branches to expect contact from members who have been contacted by their manager.

The policy changes will not be generally announced until after the first two stages have been completed. HMRC intends to provide an update to everyone in the form of an intranet article on the 7th February. A new Managing Covid-19 Absences Help card will be published & other relevant Helpcards will be updated to reflect the policy change on the same day. A Manager's Bulletin will then be issued on the 16th February.

Further Action on Supporting Sickness Absence

The principal policies introduced in 2020 as a result of the Respect at Work process; including the Supporting your Attendance Policy are currently being evaluated & reviewed. PCS has agreed with HMRC that the support for people with longer term medical conditions; including Long Covid, will be considered as an additional piece of work. PCS is also proposing the adoption of a specific absence code to cover longer term Covid absences. We will provide an update on the progress of those proposals & the policy review in further Briefings.

In the meantime, branches are requested to provide support to members affected by the policy changes & escalate any emerging issues to the DTUS via the DTUS in box: pcsdтус@hmrc.gov.uk

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