



How we supported a business with short term absence management through triggers

HR

Case Study



Client Overview

Sector:
Waste Management

Size:
150 employees over multiple sites in the UK

HR Setup:
Part of a global Group Company, with a Group HR Manager driving alignment of HR practices across entities

Key Employment Context:
Sites had historically operated in silos; the Group HR Manager has introduced a focus on shared ways of working and aligned processes across the group



The Challenge

Across the UK business, each site was managing absence inconsistently. Sites set their own benchmarks and approached absence in very different ways. In some places, absence was barely managed at all; in others, conversations were poor or jumped to disciplinary action without exploring underlying long-term conditions. This created risk for both employees and the business.

We were asked to introduce consistency to how absence is managed across the sites – equipping managers to have better, fairer conversations and reducing avoidable absence where possible.





OUR APPROACH

Our Approach

Initial Assessment:

- Reviewed the benchmarks (triggers) each site was working to
- Reviewed absence data over the past 12 months
- Reviewed the current sickness absence policy
- Assessed HR system capabilities
- Discussed the project at board level
- Engaged with Production Managers (operations is the largest part of the business)

Findings:

- 50% of sites had no consistent way of managing short-term absence, yet most expressed frustration with sickness absence levels
- 50% of sites had created their own benchmarks for high absence – and they were all different
- The business was keen to reduce short-term absence ahead of changes to SSP from April 2026 (including the removal of waiting days)
- The Board was concerned about absence levels and the lack of consistency, and welcomed feedback on which triggers to introduce and how best to support managers

OUR APPROACH

Advice & Guidance

Our recommendation: build a single company-wide approach for managing sickness absence that could be rolled out at every site. It needed to be simple to follow, practical, commercial, and supported by ongoing manager coaching for it to land.

Support Provided:

- Wrote a new sickness absence policy with clear, consistent trigger points
- Updated the HR system to drive workflows and prompts for the management team
- Updated the return-to-work form so managers could see at a glance when a trigger had been reached
- Coached managers on next-step options – Occupational Health, GP referral, company benefits, or formal action – not just disciplinary



OUR APPROACH

Our Approach

Communication & Engagement:



Created a communication plan to launch the new approach to managers



Delivered a toolbox talk to staff so they understood the new triggers and what to expect going forward



Reviewed each completed return-to-work form and coached managers through the conversations that followed when a trigger was hit



Supported managers on next steps – Occupational Health, use of company benefits, or formal action where appropriate





RESULTS

Outcome & Impact

Confident managers

Managers became noticeably more confident in handling absence – clear trigger points gave them reassurance and a starting point for timely, appropriate conversations.

Earlier supportive interventions

More open use of Occupational Health, GP advice and the company Health Cash Plan, rather than defaulting to formal action.

Better quality conversations

Employees with historically high absence were managed more effectively, leading to a sustained reduction in absence over the longer term.





RESULTS

Outcome & Impact (continued)

Long-term improvement

While short-term absence didn't fall overnight, levels improved over a longer timeframe as the new approach embedded.

Easier to operate

Trigger points built into the HR system and return-to-work form reduced admin and surfaced key information at the point of need.

Lower business risk

Consistent application across sites reduced the risk of inconsistent decisions or unfair treatment claims.



TAKEAWAYS

Lessons & Next Steps

What the client learnt about their own people management approach:

- 1** Managers became more confident in holding absence-management conversations. Consistent triggers across sites created a more unified approach, and managers began sharing learning and collaborating more effectively.
- 2** There was a stronger understanding of proportionality and reasonableness – initially managers only counted absences from policy launch, rather than considering a defined reference period. Embedding this view created a fairer, more balanced approach.
- 3** The work prompted broader conversations about other types of absence – for example carer or dependant emergency leave – and helped managers handle these more constructively.
- 4** The Company was able to share best practice, policies and documentation with Group HR and other entities in the wider group, positioning itself positively and demonstrating leadership to its peers.



RISK ANALYSIS

What Could Have Happened Without Support?

If the business had carried on with inconsistent, site-led approaches to absence, several things could have unravelled:

Introducing clear triggers, supportive conversations and aligned policies has given the business a fair, defensible and commercially focused way to manage absence – protecting both employees and the organisation.

- Continued inconsistency between sites – with some absences barely managed and others escalated too quickly to disciplinary action.
- Missed opportunities to support employees through Occupational Health, GP referral or company benefits – keeping people in work rather than out of it.
- A poor employee experience and weakened trust in management – particularly for those with genuine ongoing health conditions.
- Increased risk of unfair treatment, grievances and tribunal claims, particularly where long-term conditions weren't explored before formal action was considered.
- No reduction in short-term absence ahead of the SSP changes from April 2026, with the cost burden remaining squarely on the business.
- A missed opportunity for the UK business to demonstrate leadership and share good practice with Group HR and the wider group.



GET IN TOUCH

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