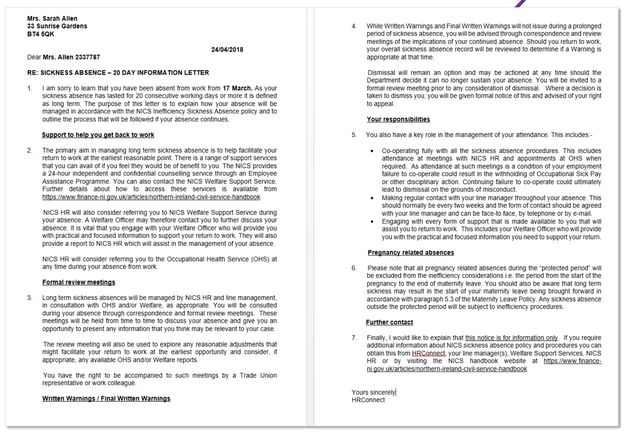
How we used behavioural science to encourage appropriate return to work after illness

Standard 20-day absence letter:



Mrs. Sarah Allen
33 Sunrise Gardens
BT4 5QK

24/04/2018

Dear **Mrs. Allen 2337787**

RE: SICKNESS ABSENCE – 20 DAY INFORMATION LETTER

1. I am sorry to learn that you have been absent from work from **17 March.** As your sickness absence has lasted for 20 consecutive working days or more it is defined as long term. The purpose of this letter is to explain how your absence will be managed in accordance with the NICS Inefficiency Sickness Absence policy and to outline the process that will be followed if your absence continues.

Support to help you get back to work

2. The primary aim in managing long term sickness absence is to help facilitate your return to work at the earliest reasonable point. There is a range of support services that you can avail of if you feel they would be of benefit to you. The NICS provides a 24-hour independent and confidential counselling service through an Employee Assistance Programme. You can also contact the NICS Welfare Support Service. Further details about how to access these services is available from https://www.finance-ni.gov.uk/articles/northern-ireland-civil-service-handbook

NICS HR will also consider referring you to NICS Welfare Support Service during your absence. A Welfare Officer may therefore contact you to further discuss your absence. It is vital that you engage with your Welfare Officer who will provide you with practical and focused information to support your return to work. They will also provide a report to NICS HR which will assist in the management of your absence.

NICS HR will consider referring you to the Occupational Health Service (OHS) at any time during your absence from work.

Formal review meetings

3. Long term sickness absences will be managed by NICS HR and line management, in consultation with OHS and/or Welfare, as appropriate. You will be consulted during your absence through correspondence and formal review meetings. These meetings will be held from time to time to discuss your absence and give you an opportunity to present any information that you think may be relevant to your case.

The review meeting will also be used to explore any reasonable adjustments that might facilitate your return to work at the earliest opportunity and consider, if appropriate, any available OHS and/or Welfare reports.

You have the right to be accompanied to such meetings by a Trade Union representative or work colleague.

Written Warnings / Final Written Warnings

4. While Written Warnings and Final Written Warnings will not issue during a prolonged period of sickness absence, you will be advised through correspondence and review meetings of the implications of your continued absence. Should you return to work, your overall sickness absence record will be reviewed to determine if a Warning is appropriate at that time.

Dismissal will remain an option and may be actioned at any time should the Department decide it can no longer sustain your absence. You will be invited to a formal review meeting prior to any consideration of dismissal. Where a decision is taken to dismiss you, you will be given formal notice of this and advised of your right to appeal.

Your responsibilities

5. You also have a key role in the management of your attendance. This includes:-

- Co-operating fully with all the sickness absence procedures. This includes attendance at meetings with NICS HR and appointments at OHS when required. As attendance at such meetings is a condition of your employment failure to co-operate could result in the withholding of Occupational Sick Pay or other disciplinary action. Continuing failure to co-operate could ultimately lead to dismissal on the grounds of misconduct.
- Making regular contact with your line manager throughout your absence. This should normally be every two weeks and the form of contact should be agreed with your line manager and can be face-to face, by telephone or by e-mail.
- Engaging with every form of support that is made available to you that will assist you to return to work. This includes your Welfare Officer who will provide you with the practical and focused information you need to support your return.

Pregnancy related absences

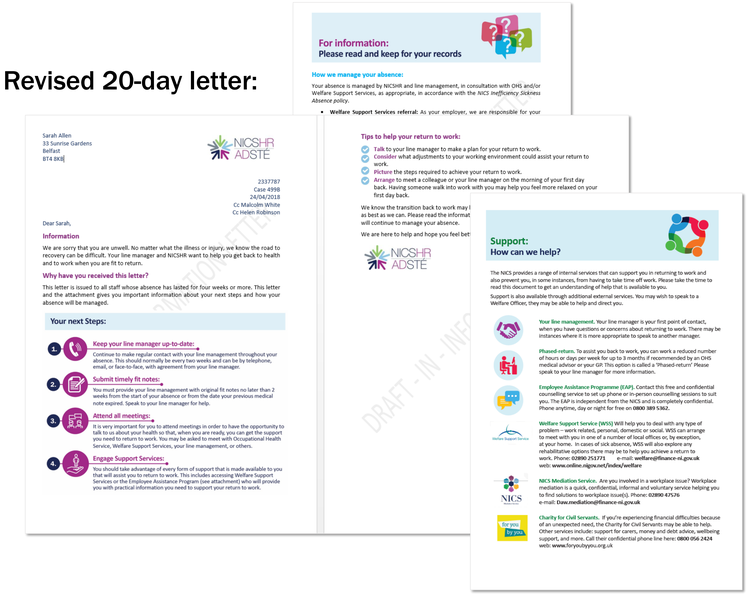
6. Please note that all pregnancy related absences during the "protected period" will be excluded from the inefficiency considerations i.e. the period from the start of the pregnancy to the end of maternity leave. You should also be aware that long term sickness may result in the start of your maternity leave being brought forward in accordance with paragraph 5.3 of the Maternity Leave Policy. Any sickness absence outside the protected period will be subject to inefficiency procedures.

Further contact

7. Finally, I would like to explain that this notice is for information only. If you require additional information about NICS sickness absence policy and procedures you can obtain this from HRConnect, your line manager(s), Welfare Support Services, NICS HR or by visiting the NICS handbook website at https://www.finance-ni.gov.uk/articles/northern-ireland-civil-service-handbook

Yours sincerely|
HRConnect

Revised 20-day letter:



For information:
Please read and keep for your records

How we manage your absence:

Your absence is managed by NICSHR and line management, in consultation with OHS and/or Welfare Support Services, as appropriate, in accordance with the *NICS Inefficiency Sickness Absence policy.*

- **Welfare Support Services referral:** As your employer, we are responsible for your

Sarah Allen
33 Sunrise Gardens
Belfast
BT4 8KB

NICSHR ADSTE

2337787
Case 4998
24/04/2018
Cc Malcolm White
Cc Helen Robinson

Dear Sarah,

Information

We are sorry that you are unwell. No matter what the illness or injury, we know the road to recovery can be difficult. Your line manager and NICSHR want to help you get back to health and to work when you are fit to return.

Why have you received this letter?

This letter is issued to all staff whose absence has lasted for four weeks or more. This letter and the attachment gives you important information about your next steps and how your absence will be managed.

Your next Steps:

1. **Keep your line manager up-to-date:** Continue to make regular contact with your line management throughout your absence. This should normally be every two weeks and can be by telephone, email, or face-to-face, with agreement from your line manager.
2. **Submit timely fit notes:** You must provide your line management with original fit notes no later than 2 weeks from the start of your absence or from the date your previous medical note expired. Speak to your line manager for help.
3. **Attend all meetings:** It is very important for you to attend meetings in order to have the opportunity to talk to us about your health so that, when you are ready, you can get the support you need to return to work. You may be asked to meet with Occupational Health Service, Welfare Support Services, your line management, or others.
4. **Engage Support Services:** You should take advantage of every form of support that is made available to you that will assist you to return to work. This includes accessing Welfare Support Services or the Employee Assistance Program (see attachment) who will provide you with practical information you need to support your return to work.

Tips to help your return to work:

- **Talk** to your line manager to make a plan for your return to work.
- **Consider** what adjustments to your working environment could assist your return to work.
- **Picture** the steps required to achieve your return to work.
- **Arrange** to meet a colleague or your line manager on the morning of your first day back. Having someone walk into work with you may help you feel more relaxed on your first day back.

We know the transition back to work may
as best as we can. Please read the informat
will continue to manage your absence.

We are here to help and hope you feel bet

NICSHR ADSTE

Support:
How can we help?

The NICS provides a range of internal services that can support you in returning to work and also prevent you, in some instances, from having to take time off work. Please take the time to read this document to get an understanding of help that is available to you.

Support is also available through additional external services. You may wish to speak to a Welfare Officer, they may be able to help and direct you.

Your line management. Your line manager is your first point of contact, when you have questions or concerns about returning to work. There may be instances where it is more appropriate to speak to another manager.

Phased-return. To assist you back to work, you can work a reduced number of hours or days per week for up to 3 months if recommended by an OHS medical adviser or your GP. This option is called a 'Phased-return' Please speak to your line manager for more information.

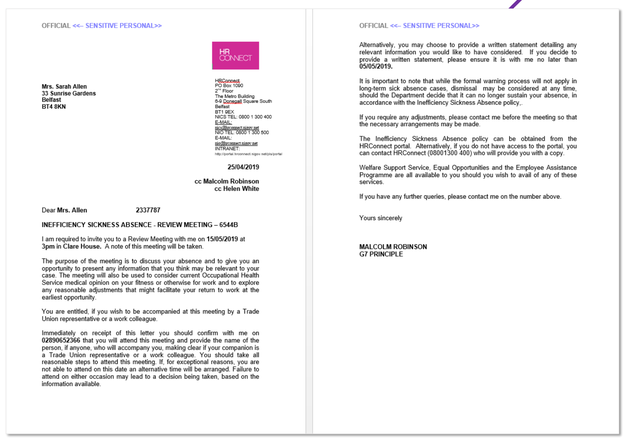
Employee Assistance Programme (EAP). Contact this free and confidential counselling service to set up phone or in-person counselling sessions to suit you. The EAP is independent from the NICS and is completely confidential. Phone anytime, day or night for free on **0800 389 5362.**

Welfare Support Service (WSS) Will help you to deal with any type of problem – work related, personal, domestic or social. WSS can arrange to meet with you in one of a number of local offices or, by exception, at your home. In cases of sick absence, WSS will also explore any rehabilitative options there may be to help you achieve a return to work. Phone: **02890 251771** e-mail: **welfare@finance-ni.gov.uk** web: **www.online.nigov.net/index/welfare**

NICS Mediation Service. Are you involved in a workplace issue? Workplace mediation is a quick, confidential, informal and voluntary service helping you to find solutions to workplace issue(s). Phone: **02890 475276** e-mail: **Dave.mediation@finance-ni.gov.uk**

Charity for Civil Servants. If you're experiencing financial difficulties because of an unexpected need, the Charity for Civil Servants may be able to help. Other services include: support for carers, money and debt advice, wellbeing support, and more. Call their confidential phone line here: **0800 056 2424** web: **www.foryoubyyou.org.uk**

Standard invitation to meeting letter:



OFFICIAL <<- SENSITIVE PERSONAL>>

HR CONNECT

Mrs. Sarah Allen
33 Sunrise Gardens
Belfast
BT4 8KN

HRConnect
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The Metro Building
6-9 Donegall Square South
Belfast
BT1 9EX
NICS TEL: 0800 1 300 400
E-MAIL:
hrconnect@nigov.net
NON TEL: 0300 1 300 900
E-MAIL:
hrconnect@nigov.net
INTRANET:
http://portal.hrconnect.nigov.net/pls/portal/

25/04/2019

cc Malcolm Robinson
cc Helen White

Dear **Mrs. Allen** 2337787

INEFFICIENCY SICKNESS ABSENCE - REVIEW MEETING – 6544B

I am required to invite you to a Review Meeting with me on **15/05/2019** at **3pm in Clare House.** A note of this meeting will be taken.

The purpose of the meeting is to discuss your absence and to give you an opportunity to present any information that you think may be relevant to your case. The meeting will also be used to consider current Occupational Health Service medical opinion on your fitness or otherwise for work and to explore any reasonable adjustments that might facilitate your return to work at the earliest opportunity.

You are entitled, if you wish to be accompanied at this meeting by a Trade Union representative or a work colleague.

Immediately on receipt of this letter you should confirm with me on **02890652366** that you will attend this meeting and provide the name of the person, if anyone, who will accompany you, making clear if your companion is a Trade Union representative or a work colleague. You should take all reasonable steps to attend this meeting. If, for exceptional reasons, you are not able to attend on this date an alternative time will be arranged. Failure to attend on either occasion may lead to a decision being taken, based on the information available.

OFFICIAL <<- SENSITIVE PERSONAL>>

Alternatively, you may choose to provide a written statement detailing any relevant information you would like to have considered. If you decide to provide a written statement, please ensure it is with me no later than **05/05/2019.**

It is important to note that while the formal warning process will not apply in long-term sick absence cases, dismissal may be considered at any time, should the Department decide that it can no longer sustain your absence, in accordance with the Inefficiency Sickness Absence policy.

If you require any adjustments, please contact me before the meeting so that the necessary arrangements may be made.

The Inefficiency Sickness Absence policy can be obtained from the HRConnect portal. Alternatively, if you do not have access to the portal, you can contact HRConnect (08001300 400) who will provide you with a copy.

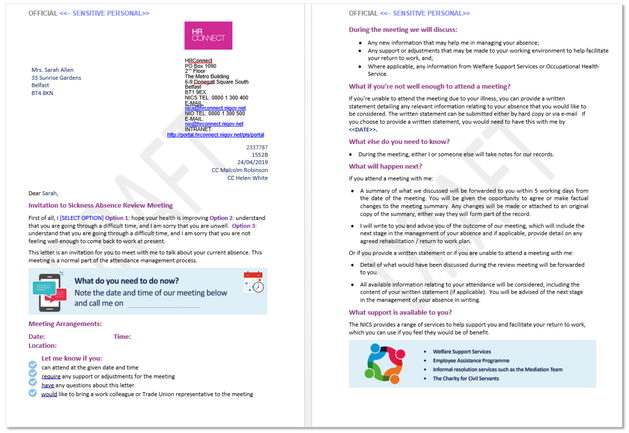
Welfare Support Service, Equal Opportunities and the Employee Assistance Programme are all available to you should you wish to avail of any of these services.

If you have any further queries, please contact me on the number above.

Yours sincerely

MALCOLM ROBINSON
G7 PRINCIPLE

Revised invitation to meeting letter:



OFFICIAL <<- SENSITIVE PERSONAL>>

HR CONNECT

Mrs. Sarah Allen
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E-MAIL:
hrconnect@nigov.net
NON TEL: 0300 1 300 900
E-MAIL:
hrconnect@nigov.net
INTRANET:
http://portal.hrconnect.nigov.net/pls/portal

2337787
1552B
24/04/2019
CC Malcolm Robinson
CC Helen White

Dear Sarah,

Invitation to Sickness Absence Review Meeting

First of all, I **[SELECT OPTION]** **Option 1:** hope your health is improving **Option 2:** understand that you are going through a difficult time, and I am sorry that you are unwell. **Option 3:** understand that you are going through a difficult time, and I am sorry that you are not feeling well enough to come back to work at present.

This letter is an invitation for you to meet with me to talk about your current absence. This meeting is a normal part of the attendance management process.

What do you need to do now?
Note the date and time of our meeting below and call me on _____

Meeting Arrangements:

Date: **Time:**
Location:

Let me know if you:
can attend at the given date and time
require any support or adjustments for the meeting
have any questions about this letter
would like to bring a work colleague or Trade Union representative to the meeting

OFFICIAL <<- SENSITIVE PERSONAL>>

During the meeting we will discuss:

- Any new information that may help me in managing your absence;
- Any support or adjustments that may be made to your working environment to help facilitate your return to work, and;
- Where applicable, any information from Welfare Support Services or Occupational Health Service.

What if you're not well enough to attend a meeting?

If you're unable to attend the meeting due to your illness, you can provide a written statement detailing any relevant information relating to your absence that you would like to be considered. The written statement can be submitted either by hard copy or via e-mail. If you choose to provide a written statement, you would need to have this with me by <<DATE>>.

What else do you need to know?

- During the meeting, either I or someone else will take notes for our records.

What will happen next?

If you attend a meeting with me:

- A summary of what we discussed will be forwarded to you within 5 working days from the date of the meeting. You will be given the opportunity to agree or make factual changes to the meeting summary. Any changes will be made or attached to an original copy of the summary, either way they will form part of the record.
- I will write to you and advise you of the outcome of our meeting, which will include the next stage in the management of your absence and if applicable, provide detail on any agreed rehabilitation / return to work plan.

Or if you provide a written statement or if you are unable to attend a meeting with me:

- Detail of what would have been discussed during the review meeting will be forwarded to you;
- All available information relating to your attendance will be considered, including the content of your written statement (if applicable). You will be advised of the next stage in the management of your absence in writing.

What support is available to you?

The NICS provides a range of services to help support you and facilitate your return to work, which you can use if you feel they would be of benefit.

- **Welfare Support Services**
- **Employee Assistance Programme**
- **Informal resolution services such as the Mediation Team**
- **The Charity for Civil Servants**

Behavioural Science principles:

- **Simplifying** the content and messages
- **Personalisation** – removing references to case number in the "To" field and replacing the surname with first name
- Minimizing 'legal speak' and using **plain language**
- **Framing** all content in terms of "return to work" and "recovery" rather than "inefficiency" and "sickness"
- Making the design **attractive** and professional with help from DoF comms team
- **Adding structure** with the use of headings, colour coordination, bullet points, **chunking**, and white space
- **Consider the messenger:** for each letter, we considered who was signing off the letter and what impact that may have. Where possible the messenger was a person, not just a system (HRConnect)
- Removing potentially anxiety-provoking but important information from the main body of the letter, carefully making the wording as empathetic as possible, and incorporating the information into a separate **"Information Sheet"**
- Effective **signposting of support** services – consolidating all forms of support in a separate leaflet that could be attached to any letter
- Encouraging staff member to seek **social support** on day one of return to work
- **Implementation Intentions:** visualizing the steps needed to return to work; noting date and time of meeting
- Clearly **indicating what to do next**

The letters also emphasized themes of:

- **Empathy**, compassion, and understanding
- **Accountability of employee** – clear emphasis on the steps, if any, that the employee needed to take to be sure they were complying with the policy
- **Line manager** as primary support mechanism

What did staff and line managers think about the new letter?

Staff:

- *I feel supported by the organisation*
- *The absence is handled in a respectful and understanding manor*
- *It shows case management which is reassuring*
- *It's informative and well laid out and covers key questions*
- *Comes from a place of support rather than guilt/fear mongering*
- *Not threatening in any way*
- *It explains a lot as it can be an anxious time if someone has never gone through the process before*

Line Managers:

- *Informative and explains the situation without making me feel pressured to return*
- *understand the process and everyone is treated equally*
- *Once I read it I felt like pressure was off and I was valued as a person*
- *An improvement on the original letter sent*
- *I liked this letter. Very good overall*
- *Support mechanisms comprehensive and should cater to most scenarios*

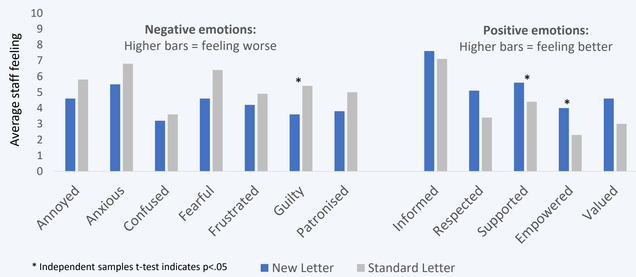
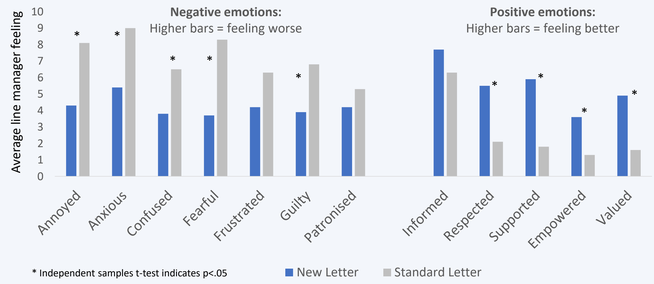
The Experiment

Staff and Line Managers were given either the standard letter OR the revised letter and asked to consider how they would feel if they received the letter after being off sick.

The Results

Both Staff and Line Managers who received the new letter (blue bars) thought it would make them feel **more positive emotions** and **less negative emotions** than those who received the standard letter (grey bars).

Graph 1: Average **Staff** response to the statement: "To what extent to you think this [Information] letter would make you feel:" on a scale from 0 (not at all) to 10 (Very).



Graph 2: Average **Line Manager** response to the statement: "To what extent to you think this [Information] letter would make you feel:" on a scale from 0 (not at all) to 10 (Very).