



**Workforce**

**Career Break Policy: guide for  
managers**

This guide will help managers understand the process to be followed when employees make an application for a career break. It also covers the implications of a career break for employees and useful information to consider if approving or declining an application.

The following guide forms part of the standard for workforce policies. These policies apply to all eligible staff within NHSScotland, regardless of the board they are employed by.

NHSScotland wants to create an inclusive workplace where employees can thrive and feel confident about their ability to balance their personal and professional responsibilities.

It is recognised that policies to support this are particularly important in NHSScotland given the predominantly female workforce who largely take on primary caring roles within the family. The guide covers the following:

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# What is the purpose of the Career Break Policy?

A career break is a flexible working option. It can support employees at various times in their lives and their employment journey. The intent behind the policy is to support employees with their work-life balance commitments or personal development opportunities on a longer-term basis. This may support workforce retention at a time of workforce pressures. It also has the potential to benefit the organisation due to the additional skills and experience employees may gain during their career break.

## Who is covered by this policy?

The career break policy applies to all employees with at least 12 months of continuous service with one or more NHS employers. Bank and agency staff are not eligible for a career break.

## Reasons for a career break

An employee may request a career break for a variety of reasons, including the following:

- caring for a dependant
- continuing childcare following a period of maternity or adoption leave
- education and training
- voluntary work
- [NHS Global Citizenship participation](#)

## Alternative employment

A career break should not be used to take up alternative employment. However, alternative employment may be appropriate in some circumstances, depending on the reason for the career break. For example:

- moving abroad for a fixed period
- undertaking bank work to maintain clinical skills
- work while undertaking further education to achieve professional qualifications

You should make the employee aware that any alternative employment which conflicts with their substantive post or the principles and values of NHSScotland is not allowed. On that basis, the employee should discuss any planned alternative employment either before or during their career break with you.

## Request for a career break

The first step in any application for a career break should be early informal discussions. These should include the following:

- providing advice about eligibility
- reviewing the employee's reasons, needs, and rationale for their career break application as [a flexible working option may be more appropriate](#)

The maximum timeframe a career break can last is 5 years across all NHS employment.

Employees currently under UK immigration control should contact human resources to discuss how a career break may impact their visa conditions.

## Application

Where an employee has decided to proceed with a career break application, they should give at least 3 months' notice. If the employee gives less than 3 months' notice, you should apply this policy if you can arrange appropriate cover. Employees must submit their request in writing using the [Career break application form](#).

Once you have received the completed form, you should:

- acknowledge receipt of the application within 7 days
- arrange a discussion with the employee within 28 days of receipt

Timescales can be extended by mutual agreement.

## Meeting

The meeting is an opportunity to discuss the following:

- feasibility of a career break
- reasons or rationale for their career break request
- contractual implications for the employee

- how the employee would maintain professional registration, if applicable
- proposed means and frequency of keeping in touch
- the option of keeping in touch (KIT) days
- signpost to the Scottish Public Pensions Agency (SPPA) to discuss pension implications whilst on career break
- any intentions of undertaking alternate work during the career break

One of the most important implications for the employee is that there is no guarantee of a post being available for the employee at the end of their career break. Every effort should be made to identify a suitable alternative post for the employee to return to using the redeployment process. This must be made clear to the employee if their request is approved.

## **Management considerations**

When considering any career break request, you should make sure that each request is considered on its own merits and not automatically approved or declined. You should assess the needs of the post, the service, and colleagues, taking current and future workforce requirements into account. You must also consider:

- ability to backfill the post on a temporary basis
- specialist skills and experience of the role
- turnover in the department
- absence within the department
- planned service redesigns and the timing of these

## **Career break less than 12 months**

If the employee intends to return within 12 months, they should be advised that the same job will be available as far as reasonably possible.

## **Career break more than 12 months**

The employee may request a career break of more than one year. They must be advised that every effort will be made to place them in a post at the same grade and level of responsibility they held before their career break. You should also start the redeployment process 3 months before the employee is due to return to allow them the opportunity to find a suitable alternative post.

Employees may request an extension of their original application with 3 months' notice to allow you time to arrange further cover. Where there is less than 3 months' notice given, you should accommodate an early return to work if you can.

## **Contractual issues**

### **Sick leave**

In the early stages of a career break, the employee may be entitled to statutory sick pay if they are unwell and meet the earnings threshold. The employee is not entitled to occupational sick pay.

### **Maternity leave**

If the employee becomes pregnant during their career break, they will be entitled to access maternity leave and potentially statutory or occupational maternity pay. To do so, they would need to end their career break and start maternity leave.

### **Pension contributions**

During a career break, the employee can still participate in the NHS pension scheme for a time-limited period. Further information is available on the [SPPA website](#).

### **Professional registration**

The employee is required to maintain their professional registration during a career break as they continue to be employed by the organisation. It is the employee's responsibility to consider how they will maintain their professional competence. However, you should support them in this through access to KIT days and bank work.

### **Reckonable service**

While on a career break, the employee's reckonable service is paused for service-related benefits such as incremental credit, sick pay, redundancy, and annual leave entitlements. KIT days worked count for additional service.

This means that when the employee returns their incremental point, annual leave and sick pay entitlements will be the same as they were before their break.

## **Salary sacrifice schemes**

The employee is not entitled to access certain benefits of employment which would have applied had they not been absent. Examples include:

- cycle to work scheme
- credit union arrangement

The employee should seek advice from the payroll department regarding the implications of any arrangement they have in place.

## **Organisational change**

If you decide to start an organisational change process while an employee is on a career break, you must discuss it with them. They must also be given the opportunity to be considered within the cohort for any posts they may be eligible for. If they indicate that they do not wish to be considered, they should be advised that this may affect the scope for a post at the end of their career break. If the substantive post no longer exists, they may be considered to be redundant.

## **Career break request approved**

If you make the decision to approve the employee's request for career break, you and the employee should complete the [Career break agreement](#). This will detail the duration of the career break and must be signed by both you and the employee.

You must make sure that all relevant systems and payroll are updated on this change. All equipment should be returned to you before the employee starts their career break.

## **Career break declined**

If you are unable to approve the employee's career break request, you must detail your rationale in writing within 7 days of your meeting. Any rationale for declining the request must be based on fact and supported with evidence.

## **Appeal process**

The employee has a right to appeal the decision to reject their application or any request to change the length of the career break

within 14 calendar days of receiving the outcome. They must provide the reason for their appeal in writing.

It would normally be your manager who will hear the appeal, supported by an HR adviser who has not been involved in the process to date. They will inform the employee that their appeal has been received.

The appeal panel will consider the following:

- the reasons you gave for refusing the request
- any alternative options explored
- other points discussed and documented in the outcome letter

The Chair will make sure you and the employee are advised in writing of the arrangements no later than 14 calendar days before the hearing.

As the manager, you must provide a written statement detailing your considerations and decision. If the employee has not done so, they should provide their case document. These documents should be submitted no later than 7 calendar days before the appeal hearing. They will be shared with all other parties.

## **Appeal outcome**

Following the hearing, the Chair will write to all parties with the outcome of the appeal hearing. The letter will be issued within 7 calendar days following the appeal hearing.

If the appeal is successful, the outcome letter will specify the agreed changes and the date these will take effect.

Where the appeal is unsuccessful, the outcome letter will provide a clear and detailed explanation of the reasons for the decision. The outcome of the appeal will be final.

You are responsible for completing the appropriate paperwork to instruct any changes, including a signed career break agreement, should your decision be overturned.

## **Returning to work**

You should plan in advance with the employee for their return to work.

If the employee is returning to their former post, the plan should include arrangements for equipment, systems access, and any major changes



they need to be aware of. It may be appropriate to have a period of induction to support their re-integration into the workplace.

If the employee's break has been for more than 12 months, you should meet with them 4 months before their return date to complete any redeployment paperwork to ensure they are considered for any suitable posts in the 3 months leading up to their return. If a post does not become available within that time, this should be managed within the requirements of the redeployment policy.

The employee may wish to be supported back to work on a phased basis, or they may wish to review their work pattern. They will be paid in line with the hours worked by them. You should refer the employee to the [Flexible Work Pattern Policy](#).

You should have agreed contact with the employee during their career break. If the employee has not engaged with you toward the end of their career break regarding a return to work, you should write to them. You should advise that their career break is about to end and that you want to make arrangements for their return to work.

If there is no response to this, you should send follow-up correspondence, checking if the employee intends to return to work or if they wish to resign.

If there is no response, you should seek local HR advice about which workforce policy to follow.