Between Policy and Practice: Line Manager Discretion in Public Sector Sickness Absence Management

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Abstract

Sickness absence remains a persistent and under-theorised challenge within Human Resource Management (HRM), causing organisational disruption, economic losses, and significant concerns for managers and policymakers. This thesis examines how absence management is enacted, interpreted and negotiated through line manager-employee relationships in a large UK public-sector organisation. Drawing on interviews with current and former line managers, this qualitative study investigates how line managers approach sickness absence, the underlying rationales for their approaches, and the organisational, procedural and interpersonal factors that shape or constrain their practice.

The study identifies a persistent disconnection between formal absence policies and everyday enactment. A central finding concerns the transformation of managerial discretion. Earlier organisational norms afforded line managers autonomy to exercise judgement, adapt procedures and respond to individual circumstances. Over time discretion has been increasingly restricted by formalised HRM systems, intensified oversight and heightened expectations of procedural compliance. The temporally comparative design revealed former line managers described a relational, trust-based approach, contrasting with risk-oriented, compliance-driven environments reported by current managers.

Discretion remains essential to absence management because sickness absence is inherently relational and context-dependent. Line managers' lack of scope to exercise judgement can weaken trust, communication and the psychological contract, with implications for attendance and engagement. These relational dynamics, evident in absence management are especially pronounced in mental-health-related cases, where ambiguity, fluctuating symptoms and the need for psychological safety elevate the importance of interpersonal judgement. Enhancing line managers' capacity to exercise discretion could potentially reduce absence levels, particularly in mental-health cases.

The thesis contributes to managerial discretion theory by drawing on moral agency, paradox theory and the psychological contract to show that discretion is not merely a procedural mechanism, but a form of moral and relational judgement. It highlights organisational barriers that restrict this capacity and helps explain the gap between academic recommendations and organisational practice.

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Chapter 1. Introduction

This thesis critically examines the persistent challenge of sickness absence from a Human Resource Management (HRM) perspective, with a particular focus on how line managers experience and enact absence policy in practice. While the analysis is situated within the study of HRM, it also draws on broader conceptual perspectives on sickness absenteeism, presenteeism, and workplace wellbeing to support a more comprehensive exploration of absence management practice.

The researcher's engagement with this topic is shaped by substantial professional and academic experience. Over a 30-year career in the public sector, including 25 years in roles involving staff management and 10 years as a manager of occupational health in a large public-sector organisation, the researcher developed extensive practical insight into workplace health, sickness absence, employee wellbeing, and the organisational processes surrounding attendance management. This experience is complemented by an MSc in Workplace Health and Wellbeing, which strengthened the researcher's understanding of the theoretical and policy dimensions of the field. Together, this professional and academic background provides a strong foundation for engaging with the subject matter.

The study examines how line managers undertake sickness-absence management in a large UK local government organisation. It investigates how discretion is exercised, constrained, and negotiated in organisational contexts that promote both individualised support and policy compliance, emphasising the structural, interpersonal, and procedural dynamics that shape absence management on the front line. The analysis demonstrates that managerial discretion in absence management is far more structurally constrained than mainstream HRM accounts assume, revealing how institutional oversight, procedural formalisation, and risk-averse organisational policies significantly limit line-managerial agency.

To contextualise the thesis, the next section outlines the scale, persistence, and complexity of sickness absence as a workplace issue, establishing its significance for HRM theory and organisational performance.

1.1. The Challenge of Sickness Absence Management

Sickness absence remains a significant and costly issue for organisations, with far reaching implications for productivity, service continuity, employee wellbeing, and organisational

culture. In 2024 alone, UK employers lost an estimated 149.3 million working days to sickness absence, with the total cost of ill health to the economy reaching approximately £150 billion annually (CIPD, 2025; ONS, 2025). These figures underscore the societal significance of absence management and its status as a central concern within HRM. Despite decades of policy reform, investment in occupational health, an intensified focus on mental health and wellbeing, and sustained strategic attention from successive governments and HRM professionals, absence rates have remained persistently high. This lack of progress suggests that the problem extends beyond operational inefficiency or individual managerial shortcomings, it reflects deeper tensions in how organisations are structured, how responsibility is assigned, and how control is exercised.

Policy frameworks increasingly emphasise early intervention, procedural consistency, and return-to-work strategies, and indicate that the enactment of these policies falls largely to line managers (CIPD, 2018; Kurdi-Nakra et al., 2021; Larsen and Brewster, 2003; Purcell and Hutchinson, 2007; Renwick, 2003; Watson et al., 2006). Within HRM discourse, line managers are consistently identified as the primary actors responsible for managing absence and, by extension, are often positioned as accountable for outcomes that fail to meet organisational expectations. HRM frameworks typically cast line managers as discretionary agents within the absence process, while simultaneously requiring them to exercise procedural consistency and adhere strictly to policy directives (Townsend et al., 2022b). This dual positioning means that line managers are expected to be both flexible decision makers and strict policy enforcers. As a result, they must constantly navigate tensions between adapting to individual circumstances and applying rules consistently, and between responding empathetically to employees and maintaining formal control (Aust et al., 2017; Smith and Lewis, 2011).

Beyond its financial and operational impact, sickness absence presents complex challenges for organisations, particularly in how it is managed on a day to day basis (Miraglia and Johns, 2016a). This thesis was motivated by the need to understand why, despite formal expectations that line managers implement absence policies uniformly, absence management continues to be enacted inconsistently in practice. Drawing on a temporally comparative qualitative study of two cohorts of UK public sector line managers, one historical and one contemporary, the research examines how managerial discretion is exercised, constrained, and negotiated in the context of sickness absence management. It explores how line managers

navigate organisational settings that promote both individualised support and standardised compliance, identifying the institutional, relational, and procedural factors that contribute to variation in managerial practice.

While a limited body of work, including Legge (1995), Dundon (1999), and Townsend et al. (2022b), acknowledges the limits of managerial autonomy, the prevailing literature tends to underplay the structural and institutional constraints that shape how discretion is exercised in practice. The thesis further engages with longstanding debates concerning the relationship between individual managerial capacity and the structural conditions that shape, enable, or constrain it (e.g., Boxall and Purcell, 2016; Brewster and Larsen, 2000; Budhwar, 2000; López-Cotarelo, 2018; Smith and Lewis, 2011), arguing that HRM framings have tended to offer only a partial account of the social and procedural complexities that influence managerial behaviour.

The thesis interrogates mainstream HRM assumptions about managerial agency, challenging the notion that line managers possess meaningful autonomy in managing absence. Drawing on institutional theory, relational HRM, the psychological contract framework, and paradox theory, it demonstrates that discretion is far more constrained than the literature typically acknowledges, shaped by institutional oversight, procedural formalisation, and risk-averse HR and organisational orientations. Paradox theory helps to illuminate the emotional, ethical, and procedural tensions that line managers navigate in enacting absence policy, while the inclusion of both current and former line manager perspectives introduces a temporal dimension that reveals how experiences of constraint and agency shift within organisations over time. By moving beyond deficit-based explanations that attribute inconsistency to line managerial shortcomings, the thesis offers a conceptually grounded and empirically rich account of how absence management is negotiated on the ground, emphasising the structural and interpersonal forces that shape managerial practice and the intersection between formal frameworks and everyday organisational realities.

1.2. Temporal Shifts in HRM Discourse and Managerial Responsibility

To understand how contemporary tensions in absence management have emerged, it is useful to trace the recent evolution of managerial responsibility within HRM discourse. Historically, sickness absence was generally overseen by Personnel departments, with line managers

acting primarily as operational intermediaries. Under this arrangement, Personnel retained formal authority over absence decisions, while line managers escalated cases for procedural handling. The line manager's role was largely administrative, with limited involvement in the relational or strategic dimensions of absence management.

This division of responsibility was significantly reconfigured with the introduction of Human Resource Management into UK organisations during the 1980s and 1990s. Responsibility for absence management, alongside other core people management functions, was formally devolved to line managers. This transition was driven by a broader emphasis on empowerment, responsiveness, and managerial proximity. HRM narratives positioned line managers as ideally placed to manage absence more effectively, drawing on their day-to-day knowledge of staff and their established interpersonal relationships.

From the mid-2000s onwards, HRM discourse began to reflect increased recognition of workplace health and wellbeing, shaped by academic interest and policy interventions (e.g. Black, 2008). Line managers were increasingly expected to engage in early intervention, supportive conversations, and mental health awareness. This shift is exemplified in the CIPD's Health and Wellbeing at Work series, published annually since 2010, which consistently emphasises the role of trust based relationships and empathetic engagement in effective absence management (i.e., CIPD, 2023).

Although HRM discourse has increasingly emphasised empowerment and employee relationships, the assumptions about line managers' freedom to act have remained largely unchanged. Line managers are still positioned as implementers of centrally defined procedures, with little space for contextual judgement or discretion. Line managers are held accountable for absence outcomes, yet operate within structural constraints of policy compliancy, organisational oversight, and digital surveillance that restrict autonomous decision-making. This contradiction is especially evident as line managers are expected to provide trust-based support while simultaneously adhering to rigid frameworks. The result is a clear gap between the expanding expectations placed on line managers and the procedural constraints that govern their practice. While HRM language has shifted toward wellbeing and employee-focused values, the operational reality continues to be dominated by standardisation, compliance, and risk management. This gap highlights the tensions that

shape contemporary absence management and provides the context within which the present research is situated.

1.3. Research Positioning

This thesis is situated within an evolving HRM environment and is motivated by a central concern: how and why contemporary line managers manage sickness absence in the way they do. It examines how absence policy is enacted on the ground and what this reveals about the structural, relational, and procedural conditions that shape managerial practice. The overarching aim is to critically analyse the practices and underlying rationales through which line managers manage sickness absence within organisational constraints, highlighting how policy expectations, social dynamics, and institutional conditions influence managerial behaviour.

While the primary focus is on the lived realities of contemporary line managers, analysis of interview data revealed references to greater discretionary freedom in the past, contrary to dominant assumptions in the literature. This prompted the inclusion of an additional research question to explore whether line managers experienced more or less autonomy prior to the introduction of HRM in the 1980s and 1990s. Drawing on interviews with both former and current line managers, the research reveals a clear contrast between historical and contemporary practice. Although responsibility for absence management has been devolved over time, contemporary line managers operate within increasingly regulated environments. These findings help explain how current managerial practices have been shaped by organisational controls, strict policies, and technological monitoring, factors that limit the capacity for interpersonal or context sensitive action.

The research is therefore concerned with the constraints line managers encounter, the strategies they adopt, and the tensions they navigate in fulfilling their responsibilities. It focuses on the limited discretionary freedom available to line managers and interrogates the gap between formal policy expectations and the realities of managerial practice. Incorporating a historical dimension enables the study to capture perceived changes in autonomy over time, particularly in relation to the formal devolvement of HR responsibilities in the 1980s and 1990s.

Accordingly, the research is guided by the following questions:

1. *How do line managers perceive their role and level of responsibility in managing sickness absence within the organisation?*
2. *What factors shape line managers' interpretation, decision-making, and implementation of absence management policies and procedures?*
3. *How have changes in the approach to managing sickness absence affected line managers' autonomy following the devolvement of HR responsibilities?*

1.4. Contribution

This thesis makes three core contributions. First, it advances the literature by challenging the dominant Human Resource Management (HRM) narrative of devolved managerial autonomy. Through a unique temporal comparison of line managers before and after the formalisation of HRM, it demonstrates that discretion has not been enhanced but systematically eroded by procedural control and oversight. Second, it contributes to theory by reconceptualising managerial discretion not as a technical tool but as a form of moral and relational agency. By integrating paradox theory, the psychological contract, and Townsend et al.'s 'Master-Victim' dynamic, it shows that line managers navigate competing ethical and procedural demands within structurally constrained environments. Third, it informs practice by providing a clear evidence-based warning: the current focus on compliance-driven absence management, often amplified by automated systems, undermines the trust-based relationships essential for managing genuine sickness, particularly mental health. The thesis offers actionable recommendations for redesigning policies to protect and empower managerial judgement as a core competency. To provide a clear overview of these arguments, Table 1 presents the three overarching contributions, the central insight associated with each, and the analytical mechanisms through which they are demonstrated.

Table 1. Overarching Contributions

Contribution Area	Key Contribution	How It is achieved
Literature	***Challenges the HRM assumption that devolved responsibility has increased managerial autonomy.**	**A. Temporal comparison of two managerial cohorts showing the erosion of discretion through formalisation and oversight.**
Theory	**Reconceptualises managerial discretion as moral and relational agency rather than a technical mechanism.**	**B. **Integration of paradox theory, psychological contract theory, institutional perspectives, and the Master–Victim dynamic.**
Practice	**Demonstrates how compliance-driven, automated approaches undermine trust and effective absence management.**	**C. Qualitative analysis of line manager experiences, HR interactions, and employee relationships in real organisational settings.**
***CIPD (2018); Kurdi-Nakra et al. (2021); Larsen and Brewster (2003); Purcell and Hutchinson (2007); Renwick (2003); Watson et al. (2006). ** Aust et al. (2017); Smith and Lewis (2011); Guest, 2004; Rousseau (1995); Smith and Tracey (2016); Greenwood et al. (2011); Townsend et al. (2022b).**		

Empirically, the research offers a grounded explanation of how absence management is enacted in real organisational settings and why line managers often struggle to meet policy expectations. It exposes the persistent mismatch between strategic HRM discourse and operational realities, demonstrating how structural, procedural, and relational constraints limit the discretionary space available to line managers. These insights challenge organisations to reconsider how absence policies are designed, communicated, and supported, calling for a more realistic framing of managerial roles that acknowledges the constraints line managers face and prioritises meaningful organisational support over aspirational narratives of empowerment.

Theoretically, the thesis interrogates the assumptions underpinning managerial agency within HRM. Drawing on paradox theory (Aust et al., 2017; Smith and Lewis, 2011) institutional theory (Greenwood et al., 2011; Smith and Tracey, 2016), relational HRM (Kuvaas, 2008; Purcell and Hutchinson, 2007), and the psychological contract framework (Guest, 2004; Rousseau, 1995), it provides a nuanced account of how discretion is constructed, constrained,

and contested within organisational systems. Incorporating the psychological contract centres on the implicit expectations, obligations, and relational norms that shape how line managers interpret their responsibilities and respond to organisational demands. The research challenges the assumption that devolved responsibility equates to increased autonomy, instead showing how discretion is operationalised under conditions of organisational control, procedural formalisation, and risk-averse orientations. It further enriches the conceptual vocabulary of discretion by distinguishing between formal responsibility, relational discretion, and procedural constraint, offering a more refined framework for future theorising about managerial agency.

Although the primary focus is on organisational practice, the findings also speak to broader societal concerns. Persistent sickness absence carries significant social and economic implications, including risks of labour market detachment, long term worklessness, and increased pressure on public systems. By illuminating how absence is managed on the ground, the research underscores the importance of enabling line managers to exercise context sensitive discretion, particularly in cases involving complex or long term health conditions. In doing so, it contributes to a more socially informed understanding of absence management that recognises the human and economic costs of rigid procedural compliance.

1.5. Methodological Overview

To address the research questions, this thesis adopts a qualitative, inductive approach grounded in interpretivist principles. The study draws on semi-structured interviews with line managers across UK public sector organisational contexts. The initial design focused exclusively on a contemporary cohort, aiming to explore how line managers currently manage sickness absence and what influences their practice. However, as noted earlier, the inclusion of a historical cohort was subsequently introduced, enabling an exploration of managerial discretion before and after the introduction of HRM approaches in the 1990s. This extended design supports a temporally layered understanding of how absence management has been experienced and enacted across different organisational periods, capturing shifts in role expectations, institutional conditions, and policy implementation.

The research is exploratory and context-sensitive, designed to uncover how line managers interpret their responsibilities, respond to organisational expectations, and navigate the

conditions in which absence policy is enacted. Thematic analysis was used to identify patterns across the data, with particular attention to the meanings, constraints, and strategies that shape managerial practice.

While managerial discretion was not the initial focus of the study, it emerged as a significant theme during analysis of the contemporary cohort and was subsequently reinforced through the historical data, where it was explored in greater depth. The combination of contemporary and historical interviews enabled a more comprehensive interrogation of how autonomy, constraint, and management control are experienced and understood across temporal contexts. The methodology is therefore responsive to emergent insights and grounded in the lived accounts of line managers. By accessing these accounts, the thesis offers an empirically rich and contextually situated understanding of absence management, contributing to a more nuanced and practice informed critique of HRM discourse and its practical implications.

1.6. Structure of the Thesis

This thesis is organised into seven chapters, beginning with an introductory chapter that outlines the research problem, establishes the rationale for the study, and presents the research questions. The chapters that follow build cumulatively to investigate how and why line managers undertake sickness-absence management in the ways they do. The analysis is focused on the organisational, procedural, and relational dynamics that shape managerial practice, with particular attention to how HRM discourse and infrastructure influence the enactment of absence management. Across the study, the level of managerial discretion emerges as a key factor shaping how absence is interpreted, negotiated, and operationalised. The thesis examines discretion within a broader set of tensions between formal responsibility, organisational control, and everyday managerial agency. Its structure reflects both the theoretical framing and the empirical design, which combines contemporary and historical data to interrogate temporal shifts in HRM practice and the evolving role of the line manager.

Chapter 2 provides the literature review, examining scholarship on sickness absence, paradox theory, relational HRM, institutional perspectives, and the psychological contract. It highlights how absence management has been framed largely in behavioural and compliance terms, while identifying a gap in HRM research: limited attention has been paid to the factors shaping how line managers actually manage absence in practice. This gap is particularly significant,

especially in the public sector given the higher levels of sickness absence in that sector, which raise questions about the adequacy of managerial skill, the constraints they face, and the assumptions embedded in HRM discourse. By drawing on paradox, relational, and institutional insights, the thesis positions absence management as a multi-level phenomenon shaped by structural constraints, interpersonal dynamics, and enduring tensions between organisational control and employee wellbeing.

Chapter 3 outlines the qualitative research design, including the rationale for using semi-structured interviews and a temporally comparative approach. It details the sampling strategy, which includes both contemporary and historical participants, and explains how this design enables an exploration of shifts in managerial discretion over time. The chapter also discusses the thematic analysis process, ethical considerations, and the researcher's positionality within the HRM field. Particular attention is paid to how the methodology aligns with the research questions and supports the thesis's contribution to HRM theory.

Chapter 4 presents empirical findings from the contemporary dataset from a single organisation, focusing on how current line managers interpret and enact sickness absence policies. Additionally, an overview of the organisational perspective on the absence management strategy is revealed through interviews with Senior Managers in the organisation ('Public One'). The Head of Service emphasised strict adherence to policy, maintaining that line managers should strictly adhere to the Absence Policy, while HR managers recognised that a degree of discretion continues to be permitted in practice. The interpersonal, procedural, and organisational institutional dynamics that shape managerial discretion are explored in present-day HRM contexts. Key themes include the tension between empathy and compliance, the role of HR oversight, and the constraints imposed by litigation risk and policy rigidity. The findings reveal that while relational HRM discourse encourages trust-based engagement, organisational structures often inhibit the exercise of discretion.

Chapter 5 turns to the historical cohort, examining how managerial discretion and absence management practices were experienced prior to and following the introduction of HRM approaches. It traces shifts in policy mechanisms, organisational expectations, and the framing of managerial responsibility from the 1980s through the early 2000s, contextualised by the introduction and consolidation of HRM approaches from the 1990s onwards. The analysis highlights how HRM adopted an increasingly more disciplinary and compliance-driven

management approach, positioning line managers primarily as enforcers of attendance policy rather than relational agents. At the same time, the chapter reveals occurrences of informal discretion and interpersonal engagement, often occurring outside formal policy structures prior to the introduction of HRM approach into organisations.

Chapter 6 synthesises the contemporary and historical findings to examine how line managers have managed sickness absence across different people management regimes and what has influenced their practice. It considers whether the shift toward HRM during the 1980s and 1990s, replacing earlier personnel management approaches, has substantively altered the discretionary space available to line managers. The analysis reveals that this transition introduced increased oversight and more formalised policy frameworks, significantly reconfiguring the power balance and curtailing line manager scope for discretionary judgement. While line managers were tasked with greater responsibility, they were not necessarily granted the discretionary authority to exercise that responsibility in ways that reflected context or personal judgement. Instead, HRM systems often imposed rigid procedural frameworks, emphasising consistency, documentation, and risk mitigation. As a result, line managers found themselves accountable for absence outcomes without the autonomy to tailor their approach. This tension between devolved responsibility and constrained discretion remains a central paradox in contemporary HRM practice and is particularly salient in the management of sickness absence, where interpersonal sensitivity and contextual judgement are often critical to effective outcomes. The chapter reflects on the implications of these patterns for HRM theory, particularly in relation to managerial agency, organisational constraint, and the persistent misalignment between policy expectations and their enactment in practice.

Finally, Chapter 7 draws together the discussion and conclusion, summarising the key contributions of the study, reiterating its challenge to prevailing behavioural framings of line manager inefficiency. It reflects on the implications for HRM policy and scholarship, including the need to reconceptualise discretion as a practice grounded in workplace relationships yet limited by organisational frameworks. The chapter also outlines directions for future research, such as the development of HRM systems that enable discretionary freedom and the exploration of managerial agency in other domains of HRM practice.

Chapter 2. Literature Review

2.1. Introduction

This chapter reviews the literature relevant to understanding sickness absence and the role of line managers in its management. The aim is to situate the thesis within existing scholarship, clarify the conceptual foundations that inform the study, and identify the gaps that the empirical research addresses. Sickness absence is understood here in line with Whitaker's (2001) widely cited definition: "*absence from work attributed to sickness by the employee and accepted as such by the employer*" (p. 420). Workplace absence generates economic losses and operational disruption for organisations and the wider UK economy, while also affecting individual wellbeing (Black and Frost, 2011; HSE, 2006). Despite sustained policy attention, levels of sickness absence in the UK have remained largely unchanged since 2010 (HSE, 2025; ONS, 2025), highlighting the continued relevance of examining how it is managed in practice.

Sickness absence has been explored across multiple disciplinary domains, including economics, occupational health, and human resource management (Whitaker, 2001; Sadhra and Blankenagel, 2024). Within HRM scholarship, particular emphasis is placed on reducing absence levels through effective policy implementation, a responsibility increasingly devolved to line managers (Harney and Jordan, 2008; Ladegaard et al., 2019; Miraglia and Johns, 2016a; Nyberg et al., 2005; White et al., 2013b). Given this shift, the thesis focuses specifically on the role of line managers in the absence management process and the organisational, interpersonal, and institutional factors that shape their practice.

Recent scholarship has highlighted the value of paradox theory in understanding the competing pressures faced by line managers, particularly the simultaneous demands for procedural compliance and interpersonal sensitivity (Aust et al., 2017; Smith and Lewis, 2011). These tensions are embedded within broader institutional HRM dynamics, where managerial behaviour is shaped not only by organisational expectations but also by external pressures from the wider HRM field, including policy discourse, professional norms, and sector level practices (Greenwood et al., 2011; Smith and Tracey, 2016). At the interpersonal level, the psychological contract framework offer insight into how trust, reciprocity, and perceived support influence managerial decision making and employee attendance behaviours (Guest, 2004; Rousseau, 1995).

Alongside these perspectives, scholarship on managerial discretion provides a complementary lens for understanding the scope and limits of line managerial judgement within organisational systems (Hambrick and Finkelstein, 1987; Hiller et al., 2011). Discretion is conceptualised here not simply as a structural resource but as a form of judgement exercised within organisational, relational, and institutional constraints. Closely connected is the notion of moral agency, which highlights the value-laden nature of managerial decision making and the ethical considerations that arise when responding to employee health and attendance issues (May and Luth, 2013). These perspectives reinforce, rather than expand, the conceptual terrain by emphasising that absence management involves navigating competing expectations, interpreting ambiguous situations, and making context-sensitive decisions.

The chapter proceeds by mapping the key bodies of scholarship that shape current understandings of sickness absence and the line manager's role in its management. It begins by outlining national trends in UK sickness absence, establishing the scale and persistence of the issue. The discussion then turns to people management and the implementation of HR policies, before examining the practical difficulties line managers encounter when navigating absence processes. Subsequent sections explore the dynamics of sickness absence and presenteeism and the factors influencing return-to-work practices. Attention then shifts to the formal and informal frameworks that guide managerial action, including organisational absence policies, the influence of unwritten rules and the psychological contract, and the importance of trust in shaping attendance-related interactions. Taken together, these strands establish the conceptual and empirical foundations for the thesis and illuminate the complexities inherent in line managers' enactment of absence management. They also reveal a significant gap in existing scholarship: while the literature identifies the pressures line managers face, it offers limited insight into how they interpret, negotiate, and enact these competing demands in practice. This gap forms the focus of the present thesis, which investigates the social and organisational processes that shape line managers' actions and explores how discretion, policy interpretation, and interpersonal dynamics influence their approach to managing sickness absence.

2.2. Theoretical framing

This thesis draws on a set of interrelated theoretical perspectives, managerial discretion, moral agency, the psychological contract, paradox theory, and institutional perspectives, to analyse how sickness-absence management is enacted in practice. These frameworks were selected to maintain a clear focus on HRM scholarship and the sickness-absence literature. While organisational behaviour theories could have offered additional insight into individual attitudes and behaviours, they were not adopted here in order to preserve conceptual clarity. The intention is to provide a coherent HRM-centred framing rather than an overly dense or diffuse theoretical framework. Together, these frameworks illuminate the organisational, relational, and ethical complexities that shape line managers' actions, moving beyond narrow accounts of policy implementation to a more nuanced understanding of how absence management unfolds in real organisational settings.

Managerial discretion provides the central analytical lens, offering a way to examine the scope and limits of line managers' judgement within organisational systems. Discretion is conceptualised not simply as the latitude to make choices, but as a form of situated judgement exercised within structural, relational, and institutional constraints (Hambrick and Finkelstein, 1987; Hiller et al., 2011). In the context of sickness absence, discretion is shaped by formal policies, digital systems, organisational expectations. This perspective helps to explain why line managers may feel constrained, even when policies ostensibly devolve responsibility to them.

Moral agency extends this analysis by foregrounding the ethical and value-laden nature of managerial decision-making. Responding to employee ill-health requires managers to weigh considerations of fairness, care, responsibility, and organisational compliance. Decisions about when to challenge absence, or how firmly to apply policy are not merely technical choices but moral ones (May and Luth, 2013). This lens highlights the emotional and ethical labour involved in absence management, particularly in cases involving mental health, chronic illness, or complex personal circumstances.

The psychological contract provides a complementary interpersonal perspective, illuminating the unwritten expectations, obligations, and trust dynamics that shape line manager–employee relationships (Guest, 2004; Rousseau, 1995). Sickness absence is a time when these expectations become especially salient: employees often anticipate fairness, support, and understanding, while organisations expect reasonable attendance, engagement, and

honesty. How managers interpret and act upon these expectations influences employee perceptions of support, fairness, and legitimacy, with implications for trust, commitment, and future attendance behaviour.

Paradox theory adds a further layer by explaining the competing demands that line managers must navigate. Absence management requires balancing procedural compliance with interpersonal sensitivity, organisational efficiency with employee wellbeing, and consistency with case-by-case judgement. These tensions are not easily resolved; rather, they must be continually managed (Aust et al., 2017; Smith and Lewis, 2011). Paradox theory helps to conceptualise these pressures as enduring and structurally embedded, rather than as temporary dilemmas that can be eliminated through better policy design.

Institutional perspectives situate these dynamics within the wider HRM field, showing how organisational rules, norms, and systems shape and constrain managerial behaviour (Greenwood et al., 2011; Smith and Tracey, 2016). Absence management practices are influenced not only by internal policies but also by sectoral expectations, professional norms, audit cultures. These institutional forces help explain why line managers may feel compelled to prioritise compliance over discretion.

Taken together, these theoretical perspectives provide a framework for understanding sickness absence management as a relational, morally situated, and structurally conditioned process. They highlight that line managers do not simply apply policy; they interpret, negotiate, and enact it within a myriad of organisational expectations, interpersonal relationships, and institutional pressures. This framing underpins the empirical analysis, guiding the exploration of how line managers enact absence management in practice.

2.3. Sickness absence in the UK

Sickness absence continues to pose a significant challenge within the UK, carrying substantial implications for both organisational performance and the wider economy (CIPD, 2025; ONS, 2024). The considerable financial costs associated with staff absence, coupled with the persistence of the issue over many years, underscore the importance of understanding how it is managed in practice. Despite its recognised impact, levels of sickness absence have shown little improvement, a pattern that is particularly striking given the negative consequences for productivity at both organisational and national levels (Black and Frost, 2011; HSE, 2018;

Porter and Ketels, 2003). The effects of prolonged absence extend beyond the workplace: extended periods away from work increase the risk of labour market detachment, long term economic inactivity, and greater reliance on public services (Koopmanschap et al., 2005; Black and Frost, 2011). These broader societal consequences highlight the significance of examining how sickness absence is approached within organisations and the wider implications for individuals, employers, and public systems.

In the UK, datasets from the Office for National Statistics (ONS) and Health and Safety Executive (HSE) provide insights into sickness absence, the HSE focusing on workplace-related sickness absence, and giving advice on best management practices, while the ONS reports on all sickness absence. Workplace-related sickness absence is considered amenable to organisational or management intervention, as the root causes lie within the workplace and adjustments to the work environment can prevent them. Although non-workplace-related sickness factors may not be as amenable to preventative management interventions, management can still play a role in minimising the length of these absences through effective return-to-work processes and workplace adjustments, thereby potentially reducing the number of sickness days lost within an organisation. Therefore, from a sickness absence management perspective, both the HSE's work-related sickness absence data and the ONS's comprehensive sickness absence data provide relevant information.

From 1995 to 2010, sickness absence rates in the UK declined by more than a third, a trend attributed to shifts in employment from heavy manual work to lighter service-sector roles and to improvements in workplace safety following the Health and Safety at Work Act of 1974 (HSE, 2025; ONS, 2025). Between 2010 and 2019, this downward trajectory plateaued, with national absence rates remaining relatively stable and the total number of days lost showing little meaningful change (HSE, 2025; ONS, 2023). However, this national stability masked substantial sectoral variation, particularly the persistently higher levels of sickness absence in public services. The onset of COVID-19 in 2020 further disrupted patterns: although overall absence levels remained broadly steady, the composition of absences shifted, with reductions in some categories offset by increases in COVID-related and respiratory-related absences. Sector-specific pressures also intensified during this period. As homeworking arrangements were withdrawn and employees returned to physical workplaces, absence levels began to rise, with total days lost increasing between 2021 and 2023 and reaching a record 185.6 million days in 2022/23 (HSE, 2025; ONS, 2025).

The financial impact mirrored these trends. The HSE (2025) estimated the cost of work-related sickness absence at £23.2 billion in 2022/23, the highest since 2004, before a modest reduction to £21.6 billion in 2023/24, which the HSE interprets as evidence of stabilisation following post-pandemic fluctuations. These increases were especially pronounced in the public sector, where absence rates continued to climb into 2025.

While the economic impact of sickness absence is well established, recent analyses highlight that presenteeism now imposes an even greater burden on the UK economy. The IPPR (2024) estimates that ill-health costs the UK around £103 billion annually, with the majority arising from reduced productivity among employees who continue working while unwell, a pattern echoed in wider assessments that identify presenteeism as a growing challenge for employers and policymakers (Cardoso and McHayle, 2024; IPPR, 2024).

Mental health-related absences have continually increased since 1998/99, while musculo-skeletal conditions have decreased, keeping overall absence levels broadly flat (HSE, 2025). Workload pressures and a lack of managerial support are consistently identified as primary causes of work-related stress, depression, and anxiety (CIPD, 2023; HSE, 2025). In addition, poor sickness absence management practices can intensify these problems, particularly where line managers lack training or confidence in handling attendance issues (Black and Frost, 2011; HSE, 2006). The consequences of remaining workers covering the workload of absent colleagues create a negative cycle of increased workload pressure and higher mental health-related absence rates. Management style and a lack of skills and confidence among line managers remain top causes of stress-related absence in the UK (CIPD, 2023). A study undertaken by Hammig (2017) highlights the beneficial effects of line manager support on employee well-being, revealing that employees with supportive line managers' report greater job satisfaction and reduced workplace stress.

Public sector organisations have consistently experienced higher sickness absence rates than the private sector since ONS records began in 1995 (HSE, 2025; ONS, 2023) and in relation to mental health-related absence rates, public sector rates are almost double those seen in the private sector (HSE, 2025; ONS, 2024). However, according to the CIPD (2018), public sector organisations are more proactive than the private sector in managing attendance and the promotion of health and wellbeing. Additionally, public sector line managers bear more responsibility for managing absences and have better access to expert support (such as Human Resource Management staff) than those in the private sector (CIPD, 2018). It is

therefore of interest to investigate whether the absence management approach taken by public sector line managers may be contributing to, rather than reducing, the sickness absence levels observed in the public sector.

Successive UK governments have commissioned several influential reviews on workforce health, including Health, Work and Well-Being: Caring for Our Future (Department for Work and Pensions, Department of Health and Health and Safety Executive, 2005), Is Work Good for Your Health and Well-Being? (Waddell and Burton, 2006), and Working for a Healthier Tomorrow (Black, 2008). These reports collectively suggest that sickness absence can be better managed by focusing on health and well-being, encouraging staff to maintain a healthy lifestyle, providing supportive workplace practices, and improvements in the way line managers undertake sickness absence management. The recognition of the pivotal role played by frontline management underscores the importance of examining line managers' strategies and practices in managing sickness absence. This is particularly relevant in the public sector, where higher rates of sickness absence are observed, suggesting the presence of additional significant influences that affect how public sector line managers manage absence.

To better understand the disconnect between recommended practices and actual practices, the next section reviews the literature on how personnel are managed in the workplace and the role line managers play in policy implementation. The following section then examines the challenges faced by line managers in the absence management process, highlighting the key factors that shape their approach to managing sickness absence.

2.4. People management, policy implementation, and the line manager's role

This section aims to explore the Human Resource (HR) role of line managers within organisations, primarily through a review of Human Resource Management (HRM) literature on the management of people in the workplace.

There has been a long research and organisational interest in how to improve organisational performance through better management of employees (Boxall, 2012). Since the late 1980s HRM literature primarily focused on employee contribution to organisational performance and how the effective use of HRM can improve performance, by examining the existence of policies and their coverage among employees (Boxall, 2012; Harney and Jordan, 2008; Purcell and Hutchinson, 2003; Sikora and Ferris, 2014). However, Wright and Haggerty (2005)

observe that this body of work relied heavily on quantitative surveys completed by HR professionals, raising questions about how well these findings capture employees' experiences

Achieving an environment in which organisational goals are communicated clearly and without ambiguity as they move through successive layers of the organisation has long been recognised as challenging (Bowen and Ostroff, 2004; Boxall, 2012). As information travels down the hierarchy, it is subject to differing interpretations, resulting in variable levels of clarity and understanding among employees (Boxall, 2012). This mismatch in meaning captured in the notion of the 'Black Box' (Purcell et al., 2003), has remained a persistent research concern with limited conceptual advancement. Much early HRM process research assumed that problems in policy enactment stemmed primarily from weaknesses in top-down communication, with the expectation that clearer transmission of organisational goals from senior management to line managers and employees would improve consistency in practice. This perspective positioned communication as a technical delivery problem and, in doing so, largely overlooked the interpretive and relational work undertaken by line managers when translating formal HR policies into everyday organisational life (Boxall and Purcell, 2007).

Line managers enact a mediating and sense-giving role that extends beyond the transmission of information: they translate organisational expectations into everyday practice (Hutchinson and Purcell, 2010), filter and frame messages through their own understandings (Nishii, Lepak and Schneider, 2008), and shape how employees make sense of HR requirements through their ongoing relational influence (Renwick, 2003). Although this influence has long been recognised (Renwick, 2003), early HRM-process studies paid limited attention to how these interpersonal dynamics mediate the implementation of HR policies.

Purcell and Hutchinson (2007) defined the role of line managers as, "…*those in the lower echelons of the management hierarchy with immediate responsibility for their subordinates' work and performance*…" (p. 4), and this role has expanded in terms of people management whilst retaining their traditional supervisory role (McConville and Holden, 1999). The HRM approach has led to the devolution of much of the responsibility for people management from HR specialists to line managers and it is now common for line managers to undertake

numerous aspects of traditional HR functions (CIPD, 2018; Kurdi-Nakra et al., 2021; Larsen and Brewster, 2003; Purcell and Hutchinson, 2007; Renwick, 2003; Watson et al., 2006).

Renwick (2003) highlights the emergence of strategic partnerships between HR and line managers in the late 1990s as a mechanism for enhancing organisational effectiveness. This period saw increasing scholarly attention to the potential advantages and limitations of devolving HR responsibilities to line managers, with particular emphasis on their expanded role in decision-making processes (Storey and Sisson, 2000; Storey, 2001). Subsequently, towards the new millennium, academic discourse increasingly engaged with the complexities and challenges inherent in this shift, particularly in relation to its practical implications for managerial autonomy and organisational outcomes (Brewster and Larsen, 2000).

As line managers assume greater responsibility for implementing HR procedures and act as the primary managerial link to employees, their capacity to foster cooperation and shape employees' understanding of HR practices and policies and to align them with organisational goals, has grown significantly (Harney and Jordan, 2008; Xiao and Tsui, 2007). Given that not all aspects of employment can be contractually specified, employees retain latitude in how they engage with their work, thus heightening the importance of the interpretive and relational role of line managers (Boxall and Purcell, 2007; Harney and Jordan, 2008). Through their interpretation of policy requirements and the application of tacit knowledge gained from daily interactions, line managers can substantially affect employee motivation and behaviour (Boxall, 2012; Shipton et al., 2016a; Sikora and Ferris, 2014).

Disparities in HR practice implementation cannot be attributed solely to line managers' willingness or capability, as they can be structurally constrained from enacting the devolved HR role by limited authority, ambiguous role boundaries, or insufficient support from HR professionals. Dunn and Wilkinson (2002a) highlight the persistent ambiguity surrounding the allocation of HR responsibilities, noting that line managers may resist tasks they perceive as outside of their role, while HR departments may simultaneously withhold decision making authority or operational backing. Bainbridge (2015) similarly observes that HR's reluctance to relinquish control can undermine the very decentralisation it promotes, reinforcing tensions over ownership and enactment of people management functions.

Alongside these structural tensions, variation also arises in how line managers respond to the responsibilities they are given. Sikora and Ferris (2014) highlight the variability in line managers' willingness to implement HR practices, which can range from sabotage at one extreme, when line managers did not engage, to full cooperation when they did. This variability is concerning, as full line manager engagement in HR practice positively impacts individual job performance (Alfes et al., 2013; Sikora et al., 2015), transversely line manager resistance can lead to negative organisational outcomes, such as interpersonal conflicts, frustration, poor people management, decreased job satisfaction, and reduced performance (Bainbridge, 2015).

Townsend et al. (2022b) extend this analysis by identifying discrepancies in the level of autonomy afforded to line managers, showing that HR departments may actively restrict the scope of managerial discretion, particularly in areas such as sickness absence, thereby limiting line managers' capacity to enact policy. These constraints are compounded when line managers themselves are reluctant to engage with their HR role, resulting in a dual limitation: one imposed by institutional control, the other by individual disengagement.

The discrepancy between delivery of HR practice implementation and what the policies are set out to achieve is still unresolved in the HRM literature, and despite the key position line managers hold in this chain, their role is little appreciated in the extant literature (Purcell and Hutchinson, 2007; Townend and Hutchinson, 2017; Wilkinson et al., 2015). It is therefore of key significance to investigate the factors contributing to variations in the interpretation and implementation of policy and practice, in order to identify and explore the barriers encountered by line managers in their HR role related to sickness absence management. Through this analysis, insights may be gained into their ability to interpret organisational policies and effectively communicate attendance expectations to employees. This capacity is likely to be shaped by both their willingness to engage with these responsibilities and the extent to which they are granted autonomy in their execution.

Building on this foundation, the next section examines the challenges faced by line managers in managing sickness absence, highlighting the key influences that shape their approach within this aspect of people management.

2.5. Challenges faced by line managers in sickness absence management

Following the preceding discussion, which examines the conflicting pressures and constraints inherent in personnel management, this section reviews the literature to explore the specific difficulties faced by line managers in the management of sickness absence. By reviewing existing research, it aims to identify the key factors that shape line managers' behaviour when undertaking this role, aiming to uncover possible explanations for discrepancies in their adherence to the guidance and rules outlined in the absence policy.

Organisational policies serve as the rules and guidelines that outline recommended management actions based on the specific circumstances of an employee's absence (Higgins et al., 2015; Bramwell et al., 2016c). While the characteristics of absence policies are discussed fully in section 2.7., it is important to emphasise at this point that policies allow for flexibility in their implementation (McDermott et al., 2013). Line managers play a central role in this process, as they are primarily responsible for enacting absence policies while simultaneously serving as intermediaries between senior management and employees (Shipton et al., 2016).

This interpretive flexibility is often framed in terms of managerial discretion, meaning the scope for autonomous decision-making available to line managers within organisational constraints (López-Cotarelo, 2018; Wangrow et al., 2015). In the context of HRM, managerial discretion refers to the degree to which line managers can adapt, interpret, or selectively apply formal policies based on situational factors and relational considerations (López-Cotarelo, 2018). While discretion is frequently positioned as a mechanism for contextual responsiveness, it can be shaped and constrained by institutional expectations, procedural norms, and organisational oversight (Scott, 2008). Within these constraints, line managers still need to interpret policies and make situational judgements about how to respond to employee absences. Their decisions are shaped by organisational boundaries and by their own ethical and moral sense of what constitutes an appropriate and fair course of action. Moral agency highlights this dimension of managerial practice, emphasising that decisions about attendance and employee wellbeing involve value-laden judgements about fairness, responsibility, and appropriate action (May et al., 2014). It draws attention to the ethical character of policy implementation and underscores that line managers navigate absence situations through context-sensitive judgement exercised within organisational systems.

Miraglia and Johns (2016a) stress the importance of finding the right balance in managing sickness absence which involves supporting employees when they feel the need to take sickness absence, while also encouraging those who can remain at work to do so. Both sickness absence from work and presenteeism can represent negative or positive organisational and employee outcomes. Line managers offer support to those who are unwell which can help employees work through their illness which can be beneficial and can in itself lead to higher employee engagement (Johns, 2010). In this context presenteeism can be seen as beneficial to the organisation, reflecting employee motivation which drives employees to exhibit organisational citizenship behaviour and 'go the extra mile' and still attend work even when feeling unwell (Johns, 2010). Yet Johns (2010) also acknowledges a more problematic dimension, arguing that presenteeism may have harmful consequences when strict management practices pressure employees to attend work despite health concerns, a point reinforced by evidence of adverse health effects and reduced workplace performance reported by Schultz and Edington (2007) and Hansen and Andersen (2008).

Sickness absence can also be viewed negatively, representing lowered organisational productivity (Collins et al., 2005); or it can be viewed as beneficial, as a needed break from work for employees to recover from illness, leading to subsequent higher employee engagement upon return to work (Johns, 2010). Taken together, these contrasting perspectives on absence and presenteeism highlight the inherent ambiguity line managers must navigate.

Studies examining line managers' experiences of sickness absence management reveal the emotional and social complexity of the role, particularly when navigating competing pressures from employees they manage and organisational systems. Aas et al. (2008) found that while procedural clarity could offer structure, line managers often felt emotionally burdened when applying uniform absence policies to nuanced individual cases. Their study highlights a desire for greater flexibility and relational responsiveness, especially in cases involving sensitive health concerns, however such discretion is frequently constrained by organisational expectations and limited support. Bramwell et al. (2016a) reinforce these themes in the context of UK social care, where line managers reported feeling caught between empathy for unwell employees and the operational demands of service continuity. However, Bramwell's study places greater emphasis on the impact of institutional workload

pressures, rather than HR-imposed constraints, as the primary barrier to managerial flexibility. In both cases, the findings underscore the importance of discretionary latitude and interpersonal competence in absence management, while illustrating how organisational structures can restrict responsiveness that line managers are expected to provide. These studies also point to the ethical dimension of absence-related decision making, where line managers must weigh organisational requirements against their own sense of fairness and responsibility, reflecting the moral agency inherent in people-management roles.

These challenges can be further illuminated through three intersecting theoretical lenses: institutional theory, paradox theory, and relational HRM. Institutional theory (Greenwood et al., 2011; Scott, 2008) helps explain how line managers' discretion is shaped by structural constraints, including procedural expectations, legitimacy norms, and regulatory oversight. Paradox theory (Lüscher and Lewis, 2008; Smith and Lewis, 2011) focuses on the tensions managers face in balancing competing demands, such as the need for consistency alongside contextual sensitivity, or the imperative to maintain control while demonstrating compassion. Relational HRM (Boxall and Purcell, 2016; Kuvaas, 2008) complements these perspectives by emphasising the importance of trust, authenticity, and the psychological contract (Rousseau, 1995; Guest and Conway, 2002) in shaping managerial practice. Together, these lenses offer a conceptual foundation for understanding why discretion is often experienced as constrained, negotiated, and emotionally complex, despite organisational rhetoric promoting empowerment and flexibility. Despite the organisation's stated desire for flexibility, the enactment of HR policy remains a site of negotiation, where managerial interpretations are shaped by both institutional expectations and line manager-employee interactions.

Managerial interpretations are well established in empirical research, which demonstrates that line managers actively mediate and shape the enactment of HR policies (Boxall and Purcell, 2007). Rather than applying policy in a uniform or automatic manner, line managers often interpret, adapt, or reframe formal guidance in ways that reflect their own priorities and constraints (Boxall and Purcell, 2007). For instance, Ladegaard et al's (2019) study suggests that line managers may attribute employee absences to personal or home-life stress rather than workplace factors. This interpretation allows line managers to avoid appearing incapable of effectively managing workplace stress. Similarly, Bramwell et al. (2016a) found that line managers often strive to be seen as 'doing the right thing' for the employee whose

absence they are managing. However, attempting to appear supportive introduces significant discretion, which can potentially lead to inconsistencies in management practices and prompt tensions among employees because of perceived favouritism.

HRM scholarship has increasingly emphasised a shift from rule-bound, compliance-driven management towards more empowering approaches that foster employee motivation and commitment (Watson et al., 2006). This reorientation is reflected in HR systems that emphasise workplace relationships, with line managers encouraged to build employee engagement rather than enforce behavioural conformity (Boxall and Purcell, 2007; Harney and Jordan, 2008). In the context of sickness absence, Miraglia and Johns (2016a) suggest that motivation, rather than coercion, is a more effective management approach. On this basis, HRM might appear to support greater managerial empowerment. Yet scholars such as Legge (1995) and Dunn and Wilkinson (2002a) caution that these shifts are often rhetorical, noting the internal contradictions of HRM: while "soft" values such as trust, discretion, and employee-centred responsiveness are promoted, organisational practice frequently remains governed by "hard" mechanisms of surveillance, standardisation, and control. Dunn and Wilkinson (2002a) illustrate how line managers are positioned as responsible for policy implementation but are frequently denied the authority and discretion to adapt those policies meaningfully. More recent work by Heffernan and Dundon (2016) reinforces this critique, arguing that line managers remain structurally disempowered yet are expected to deliver strategic HRM outcomes while operating within rigid organisational boundaries.

Townsend et al. (2022b) illustrate this tension through their typology of line managers as either "masters" or "victims" of HRM implementation. "Masters" are those with sufficient autonomy to interpret and enact policy with discretion, while "victims" are so constrained that they merely follow policy as written. Alternatively, some line managers find themselves operating within a combination of these role types, depending on context, policy, and organisational culture. Saundry et al. (2024) offer a compelling example of how HR's lack of trust in line managers' capability can actively interfere with informal resolution processes. Despite organisational intent to promote the informal handling of staff disputes, HR's concern with litigation risk often results in the formalisation of interactions that could otherwise remain discretionary, such as recommending the documentation of informal conversations. This approach not only undermines the intended informality embedded within policy design

but also erodes managerial confidence and constrains their capacity to exercise discretionary judgement.

Boxall and Purcell (2007; 2016) contribute to this discourse by emphasising the importance of HRM-enabling environments, where line managers are supported to exercise judgement and adapt policy to context. Even when organisations claim to empower line managers or promote values such as trust and discretion, in practice they often default to rigid, procedural systems that limit interpersonal judgement. This reflects a paradox where line managers are expected to be both empathetic and compliant, but the system favours the latter. Charlwood and Guenole (2022) extend the critique of constrained managerial discretion by examining its implications within the emerging domain of artificial intelligence (AI) in HRM. They warn that without ethical oversight and stakeholder involvement AI may intensify managerial surveillance and further restrict autonomy. Drawing on paradox theory, they argue that while AI is often framed as a means of promoting fairness and efficiency, it may simultaneously embed systems that resist contextual interpretation and obscure the rationale behind decisions. These technologies risk becoming rigid and impersonal, marginalising human judgement and further diminishing the ethical and interpersonal dimensions of people management. Their analysis highlights the danger that technological innovation may reinforce standardisation at the expense of line manager discretion.

The devolution of HR responsibilities therefore does not necessarily translate into meaningful empowerment and despite their pivotal role in shaping employee experience and influencing behavioural outcomes, line managers' interpretation and enactment of HR policies often lack consistency. This variability reflects a range of factors, including limited support from HR, varying levels of motivation to assume HR responsibilities, and the practical difficulties of implementing complex or sensitive practices (Bainbridge, 2015; Purcell and Hutchinson, 2007; Sikora and Ferris, 2014; Townsend, 2022b). Inconsistency in policy enactment is particularly salient in the context of sickness absence, where line managers must navigate conflicting priorities while managing employee wellbeing and organisational continuity.

The following section examines the factors that influence employee absenteeism and presenteeism, including physical health, psychological wellbeing, job demands, and organisational culture. These dynamics are explored through research on sickness absence, which highlights the complexity of absence-related decision making and the challenges it

poses for line managers (Aronsson and Gustafsson, 2005; Markussen, 2012; Miraglia and Johns, 2016b; Vingard et al., 2004a).

The subsequent section examines return-to-work processes, highlighting how reintegration is shaped by interpersonal dynamics, formal procedures, and broader organisational contexts. Together, these analyses provide a foundation for understanding the practical difficulties line managers encounter in managing absence within organisational settings.

2.6. Sickness absence and presenteeism

Academic literature reveals many factors influencing whether an employee will claim sickness absence from work (Aronsson and Gustafsson, 2005; Markussen, 2012; Miraglia and Johns, 2016a; Vingard et al., 2004b). Sickness absence represents employees being absent from work because of illness (Whitaker, 2001), whereas presenteeism represents when individuals attend work despite being ill (Johns, 2010), therefore, sickness absence and presenteeism are connected through ill health and the individual's attendance decision (Johns, 2010); consequently, a review of both sickness absence and presenteeism literature is relevant.

McEwan (1991) suggests that a combination of job requirements and health problems can render some sickness absences unavoidable; however, this accounts for less than 30% of all sickness absences. For approximately 70% of workers reporting sick, their absence may be preventable as it could hinge on their decision about whether they will make the effort to come to work (Joensuu and Lindström, 2003). This is supported by Steers and Rhodes (1978), whose research suggested that voluntariness, rather than illness, played a larger role in the decision to come to work. This conscious choice to take sickness absence is often influenced by factors unrelated to ill health alone, or even entirely unrelated to ill health (Allegro and Veerman, 1998; Joensuu and Lindström, 2003).

While there is a long history of absenteeism research, presenteeism literature has emerged more recently (in the late 1980s) and shows evidence that individuals attend work whilst ill, further demonstrating that there is a discretionary element to whether an individual choses to work or not when feeling ill (Halbesleben et al., 2014; Miraglia and Johns, 2016a).

Presenteeism is characterised by several detrimental factors, including lower levels of productivity, a decline in work quality, a lack of commitment to work, and inconsistent working (hours such as starting late or finishing early) (Garrow, 2016). Additionally, employees may put in more hours but produce less output (Garrow, 2016).

Johns (2010) observes that much of the health-related research, for instance, studies within the field of Occupational Health, primarily focuses on individual illness (e.g., Schultz and Edington, 2007) and the physical inability to attend work. These studies give comparatively limited attention to the social dynamics related to sickness absence and presenteeism, such as employee motivation and personal circumstances, which is important as factors other than physical inability can instigate or contribute towards sickness absence (Allegro and Veerman, 1998; Joensuu and Lindstrom, 2003; McEwan, 1991; Steers and Rhodes, 1978).

Wikman et al. (2005) support the notion that sickness absence may be only partially related to illness or disease. Their study explored the interrelatedness between the concepts of illness, disease, and sickness absence, demonstrating that most illnesses and diseases do not inevitably lead to absence. In other words, the presence of 'illness' or 'disease' does not necessarily reduce work capacity to the extent that individuals feel unable to attend work.

In his seminal review, Johns (2008) established absence as a socially embedded behaviour shaped by job satisfaction, organisational commitment, and perceived fairness. This foundational perspective is subsequently reinforced by Johns (2010), with an emphasis on the motivational processes that mediate whether illness translates into absence. Miraglia and Johns (2016a) advance this perspective by conceptualising absenteeism as a relational phenomenon, influenced by normative pressures, social exchange, emotional dynamics, and ethical considerations. These contributions highlight how individual decisions are embedded within broader organisational and social contexts, extending the earlier distinction between illness and absence.

In later work, Miraglia (2020) develops this relational critique into a multi-level analysis of compliance-driven HRM systems, arguing that such frameworks reduce absence management to procedural enforcement and erode managerial discretion. By prioritising surveillance, standardisation, and compliance, these systems marginalise the social and ethical dimensions, leaving little room for contextual sensitivity or discretionary judgement by line managers tasked with implementing absence procedures. This critique reinforces the need for absence management frameworks that move beyond compliance to reflect the interpersonal realities of contemporary workplaces.

While such system-level dynamics shape the organisational environment in which absence decisions are made, the choice to attend work when unwell is also influenced by a wide range

of individual and situational factors. Physical and psychological health conditions, environmental and social pressures, personal and work-related demands, and financial considerations all contribute to considerable variation in sickness absence behaviour (Aronsson and Gustafsson, 2005; Miraglia and Johns, 2016a and b; Vingard et al., 2004a). Employee characteristics such as work ethic and job commitment further play a role, with evidence suggesting that those with higher motivation and organisational commitment are less likely to take sickness absence (Aronsson and Gustafsson, 2005; McKevitt et al., 1997).

Workplace demands, including excessive workloads, time pressures, expectations to work overtime, inadequate staffing, and concerns about unfinished tasks have been identified as key drivers of presenteeism (Aronsson and Gustafsson, 2005; Miraglia and Johns, 2016a). The way sickness absence is managed also varies across organisations, with differing managerial approaches influencing employee decisions. Employees who anticipate negative consequences for themselves or their teams may choose to work while unwell, particularly in contexts of job insecurity or limited welfare support (Benach et al., 2014; Eurofound, 2010; Eurofound, 2023; Hansen and Andersen, 2008).

Miraglia and Johns' (2016a) review of the presenteeism literature identifies two of the strongest positive motivators for attending work while ill: positive affect towards work and a strong sense of organisational commitment. These findings underscore the importance of workplace relationships and employee motivation in shaping absence behaviour. Conversely, one of the most adverse drivers of presenteeism is the severity of absence policies, particularly the use of disciplinary trigger points. Such policies may paradoxically prolong absence, as employees fear that an early return could increase the likelihood of future episodes and hence disciplinary action (Miraglia and Johns, 2016a). Coercive policy environments have also been linked to negative health outcomes and deteriorating employee attitudes (Johns, 2010; Miraglia and Johns, 2016a), with individuals compelling themselves to work despite illness to avoid punitive consequences.

These findings illustrate that, beyond individual motivation and social dynamics, the manner in which line managers interpret and enforce absence policies is pivotal in shaping both absenteeism and presenteeism. A supportive leadership style can foster positive outcomes, whereas coercive or rigid enforcement are more likely to exacerbate health risks and undermine trust. Crucially, the interplay between sickness absence and presenteeism demonstrates that absence management is not simply a matter of compliance but is deeply

embedded in relationships and social interaction. Because line managers are the actors most directly engaged in these social dynamics, restricting their discretion through rigid, compliance-driven frameworks risks undermining the very conditions that shape healthier and more sustainable attendance behaviour.

Taken together, these insights demonstrate that sickness absence and presenteeism are both central to understanding how absence is managed, with individual, organisational, and policy factors shaping whether employees attend work while unwell or withdraw from it. Building on this discussion, the next section considers the duration of absence and the influences on employees' return, examining the conditions that shape return-to-work outcomes. Particular attention is given to the role of line managers in shaping absence outcomes, with long-term sickness recognised as the most financially and operationally costly form of absence due to its extended disruption. Line managers are positioned as key actors in this process, with their interventions often determining whether absence outcomes are shortened or prolonged.

2.7. Return to work after sickness absence

This section examines the return-to-work literature, focusing on the factors that influence the length of sickness absence and the pivotal role of managerial involvement in supporting employee reintegration to work. White et al. (2013a) reviewed the literature on how individuals are best supported in returning to work following sickness absence, identifying line manager support and managerial style consistently among the most critical factors across diverse health conditions. The review found factors such as low supervisory support; perceived injustice; lack of managerial involvement; and poor leadership were associated with poorer outcomes for individuals on sick leave, in that their absence was likely to be longer (White et al., 2013a). Higgins et al's (2015) review of the return-to-work literature found that differing perceptions about the absence and organisational policies and procedural requirements could lead to confusion, poor cooperation and mistrust among line managers and employees, which all impact on the quality of employment relationships, negatively affecting the return-to-work process. This is important because it reflects how different interpretations of organisational policies and procedures can lead to inconsistencies and challenges in managing absent staff.

Higgins et al. (2015) found that organisational resources available to line managers were also key to how they could manage absence, for example, having the authority to make changes

in the workplace to help individuals back into work, as well as the knowledge and training in how to do this. Higgins et al. acknowledged that managing sickness absence was a complex process and getting the balance of available resources and the quality of relationships right was key to promoting trust, openness, and cooperation to enable successful management of returning individuals to work from sick leave. Additionally, Higgins et al. (2015) observed that line manager behaviour reflected both the level of support they received from senior managers, and the accountability demands placed upon them.

Despite the advocacy in the literature for a supportive approach to absence management, Bernstrøm and Kjekshus (2012) found that managerial support can, paradoxically, increase sickness absence levels, suggesting that supportiveness may inadvertently signal permission from the line manager to the employee to take absence. However, this effect was mitigated when line manager support was accompanied by placing clear expectations and obligations upon employees. This aligns with Miraglia and Johns' (2016a) dual-pathway model, which distinguishes between the affective pathway (where support enhances wellbeing and return-to-work motivation) and the regulatory pathway (where clarity of norms and expectations constrain discretionary absence). Their model helps reconcile the apparent contradiction by highlighting that support alone may be insufficient unless paired with role clarity and behavioural guidance. Similarly, Östlund et al. (2001) found that employees valued the quality of the return-to-work interaction with the line manager more than what was contained in the return-to-work plan, underscoring the centrality of the line manager-employee relationship in shaping absence outcomes and highlights the importance absent individuals place on the interaction which takes place between themselves and their line manager during the management of their absence.

The success of negotiating an employee's return to work therefore appears to rest heavily upon the interactions between the line manager and the employee and the individual's perception of how their resources will be maintained if they return to work. Resources in this context refers to an individual's personal resources such as, physical or psychological resilience, ability and motivation, and their work/job resources, which could be increased by providing, for example a temporary or permanent adjustment to an employee's role; ensuring adequate breaks; less pressurised work; reduced workload; and a gradual phased return to work, rather than straight back to full hours. This would normally be negotiated between the line manager and the employee (Hoefsmit et al., 2012).

Line managers play a pivotal role in shaping employee motivation and attitudes of employees, significantly influencing their return-to-work decisions (Ervasti et al., 2017), which is important as facilitating a swift return can have positive financial implications (ACAS, 2013).

Taken together, the preceding section's analysis of sickness absence and presenteeism, alongside the current focus on return-to-work processes, delineates the core dimensions of absence management: why employees take sick leave, how long they remain absent, and how line managers can most effectively influence these outcomes. Central to this is the line manager's capacity to balance relational support with procedural clarity, shaping both the initiation and duration of absence, and the success of reintegration back to the workplace. Timely returns are especially critical, given the escalating financial and operational costs associated with prolonged absence (ACAS, 2013).

Empirical research consistently links high-quality managerial support to increased motivation to attend work (Allegro and Veerman, 1998; Joensuu and Lindström, 2003; Miraglia and Johns, 2016a) and more successful return-to-work experiences (Nyberg et al., 2005; White et al., 2013a; Higgins et al., 2015). Yet despite these findings, a persistent disconnect remains between research-informed recommendations and organisational practice, a disparity that this thesis seeks to interrogate. To understand why supportive managerial behaviours are often constrained in practice, it is useful to examine the formal absence policies and procedural frameworks that govern line managers' actions.

2.8. The role of Absence policies in line management of sickness absence

This section reviews the literature on formal absence policies and procedural frameworks, examining how they shape line management practice across the wider sickness absence management process. It evaluates standard approaches to sickness absence management, outlines the key components of typical policy designs, and assesses the impact of management interventions aimed at minimising absence levels. The objective is to develop a nuanced understanding of the constraints faced by line managers, the regulatory framework governing absence management, and the effectiveness of organisational strategies in reducing sickness absence. In doing so, the discussion helps illuminate disparities between recommended practices for managing staff absence and the realities of implementation within organisations.

The conventional organisational strategy to mitigate the economic impact of employee sickness absence is to implement management interventions aimed at reducing absence levels, predominantly through organisational sickness absence policies (CIPD, 2016; Dunn and Wilkinson, 2002a). Robust organisational policies clarify the relationship between employer and employee and reduce the potential for misunderstanding, and a clearly articulated, consistently applied set of principles and responsibilities is widely seen as promoting fairness and increasing the likelihood that procedures are followed and workplace issues resolved effectively (Guest, 2002; Kirk, 2017a). Policies also aim to help organisations achieve their goals while remaining within social and legal limits (ACAS, 2023; Boxall and Purcell, 2007; Purcell and Hutchinson, 2003). By preventing both line managers and employees from overstepping the boundaries of employment law, policies can reduce the likelihood of disputes escalating into formal processes, such as Employment Tribunal claims, among other possible conflict-related outcomes (CIPD, 2020; Kirk, 2017a).

Absence policies cover a wide range of circumstances, from genuine ill health to motivational issues, with various combinations in between (Evans and Walters, 2002; Hill and Hayday, 2003). It has long been recognised that sickness absence is a complex phenomenon comprising conflicting tensions, and early reviews such as Hill and Hayday (2003) helped establish this recognition by highlighting the diversity of organisational practices. More recent studies provide greater detail and theoretical depth, reflecting how organisational and sectoral differences continue to shape policy development (Hayday, 2005; Johnson et al., 2003). Organisations recognise the importance of written absence policies that are clearly understood by both employers and employees (CIPD, 2016; CIPD 2025). However, formulating and implementing effective policies remains challenging, particularly given the difficulty of delineating acceptable causes of absence (DWP/Ipsos MORI, 2021; Eurofound, 2024).

A further challenge lies in the paradoxical recommendations found in the HRM and absence literature. On one hand, flexible management tailored to individual circumstances is encouraged; on the other, uniform and consistent policy application is advocated (ACAS, 2023; Bramwell et al., 2016c; CIPD, 2016; Dunn and Wilkinson, 2002a; Higgins et al., 2015; Hill and Hayday, 2003). This tension underscores the enduring complexity that line manages face in balancing fairness, consistency, and responsiveness in sickness absence management.

This contradiction between calls for individualised flexibility and demands for consistent policy enforcement reflects a recognised tension within HRM discourse, one increasingly examined through the lens of paradox theory (Lewis et al., 2014; Smith and Lewis, 2011). Conventional HRM approaches often treat such tensions as dilemmas to be solved, typically privileging either strict adherence to procedures or discretionary responsiveness. Paradox theory provides a conceptual framework that repositions these contradictions as enduring and interdependent, requiring ongoing negotiation rather than resolution. Within HRM, it has been applied to examine tensions between control and empowerment, and between standardisation and flexibility, for example, HR's insistence on strategic alignment alongside line managers' commitment to supporting staff through interpersonal responsiveness. In the context of absence management, this perspective illuminates how organisational expectations, communicated and regulated through HR, simultaneously promote and constrain managerial agency, particularly when line managers are tasked with enacting policies that demand both relational judgement and procedural compliance.

Institutional theory adds another layer to this analysis by showing that absence policies are shaped both by internal organisational priorities and by external pressures such as legal requirements, cultural expectations, and sector norms (Boxall and Purcell, 2007; Kirk, 2017a). Organisations may design absence policies primarily with legal defensibility in mind rather than drawing on research evidence about effective absence management practice, and these demands can conflict with one another. From an institutional perspective, this creates a tendency for organisations to favour procedural conformity over interpersonal responsiveness, since adhering to policy is often perceived as easier to justify externally. Organisations' concern with signalling legitimacy can encourage the adoption of formalised procedures, even though these often conflict with evidence emphasising the benefits of flexible, discretionary, and employee-focused practices. This may help account for the persistence of traditional absence management strategies, such as trigger mechanisms, staged disciplinary procedures, and automated monitoring systems, despite research linking high-quality managerial support to improved return-to-work outcomes (Higgins et al., 2015; White et al., 2013a). According to institutional theory (Greenwood et al., 2011; Smith and Tracey, 2016) this organisational tendency can constrain managerial discretion, positioning line managers more as policy enforcers than as supportive managers. These may also help to

explain the gap between academic recommendations and the way absence policies are implemented in practice, a gap this thesis seeks to examine.

The basic structure of organisational absence policies has remained stable for over two decades, reflecting the broader pattern that sickness absence levels have shown little sustained improvement over the same period (HSE, 2025; ONS, 2025). Early analyses, such as CIPD (2001), already outlined the core components that continue to characterise contemporary policies: clear notification requirements, expectations around medical certification, and the routine use of return-to-work interviews. Subsequent CIPD guidance (e.g., 2016; 2025) reiterates these same elements, indicating that while organisational contexts have evolved, the fundamental architecture of absence policies has not. This continuity underscores the enduring challenge of designing policies that meaningfully influence attendance behaviour, despite long-standing recognition of the need for clarity, consistency, and shared understanding between employers and employees.

Alongside these core procedural elements, absence policies also commonly incorporate attendance targets and trigger mechanisms that activate once predefined thresholds of absence are reached, whether measured by the number of episodes or total days lost (Dunn and Wilkinson, 2002a; DWP/Ipsos MORI, 2021; 2024; Eurofound, 2015; Evans and Walters, 2002; Watson et al., 2006). The sanctions associated with these triggers typically follow a staged monitoring process, whereby employees progress through successive levels of formal action, culminating in potential dismissal if expectations continue to be breached (Evans and Walters, 2002). These staged procedures demonstrate how absence policies embed formalised mechanisms of control, reinforcing procedural consistency even when such approaches may sit uneasily alongside evidence emphasising the value of interpersonal, contextual, and discretionary management (Bramwell et al., 2016b; Kirk, 2017b).

The line manager's responsibility predominantly entails administering the absence policy, including monitoring attendance, recording absences, and implementing prescribed procedures when thresholds are breached. While responsibilities vary across organisations, line managers are generally the first point of contact for absent employees. They are required to document sickness details, maintain communication during longer absences, and, where appropriate, explore adjustments to facilitate return to work. Policy guidelines signal when trigger points have been activated and what actions are required (Evans and Walters, 2002).

The responsibilities of line managers and employees in the sickness absence management process are clearly stipulated in policy, yet the extent to which organisations place pressure on line managers to follow procedures rigidly is uncertain. As Kirk (2017b) observes, clearly articulated and strictly followed rules can prompt a hardening of positions unnecessarily at an early stage. Consequently, issues that might otherwise have been resolved informally may escalate as rights and procedures are invoked swiftly, directing matters straight to formal processes. In cases of prolonged absence, line managers are expected to maintain regular contact with the absentee to remain updated on their circumstances and, where possible, to facilitate return to work through supportive measures such as temporary adjustments to working hours. They are also responsible for ensuring that absence details are accurately recorded in organisational systems, which are commonly automated and fed into HR and senior management monitoring (Evans and Walters, 2002).

The approach to absence by means of 'control' via absence policies can have negative connotations, and evidence suggests that methods focused on control alone can increase sickness absence by reducing employee motivation to attend (Evans and Walters, 2002; Nicholson and Johns, 1985). Furthermore, Koopmanschap et al. (2005) caution against pressurised attempts to reduce absenteeism levels, as this may result in an increase in presenteeism, which is associated with negative outcomes such as lowered employee productivity.

Historically, sickness absence research (e.g., Nicholson, 1977; Schott and Markham, 1982) found that most sickness absence was viewed by employers as negative, with the belief that some employees had a 'proneness' to taking absence and a common response from management was to take punitive measures rather than addressing underlying causes. Dunn and Wilkinson (2002a) note that sanctions for employees taking sick leave are one of the most practised absence management methods in organisations. Additionally, the CIPD (2016) survey of HR managers found that over 90% of organisations had a written absence policy, and the most common approach to absence management was to deter absence through trigger mechanisms, return-to-work interviews, and disciplinary procedures for unacceptable absence. Therefore, the traditional approach to managing sickness absence appears to have remained largely unchanged over time.

A longstanding assumption within organisational practice is that lower sickness absence rates indicate a healthier and more productive workforce. Barmby et al. (2001) reflect this view by suggesting that the level of sickness absence signals the effectiveness of an organisation's absence policy, with lower absence interpreted as evidence of stronger policy design. Yet absence policies inherently attempt to balance two conflicting aims: reducing avoidable absence while allowing employees legitimate time off when needed. This tension is mirrored in wider debates within research and government bodies about what sickness absence levels actually represent, from both an economic and employee-health perspective. The Office for National Statistics (ONS, 2018), for example, notes that many organisations continue to use absence rates as a proxy for workforce health, inferring that reductions in absence reflect improved organisational wellbeing. However, this assumption is increasingly challenged by presenteeism research, which demonstrates that employees may continue working while ill, meaning that low absence levels may mask significant underlying health problems and reduced productivity (Christensen et al., 2013). Depending on the interpretive stance adopted, low sickness absence can therefore be understood in contrasting ways: it may reflect genuinely good workforce health, or it may signal high levels of presenteeism, where employees attend work despite ill health and perform sub-optimally (McKevitt et al., 1997). Without measuring both sickness absence and presenteeism, organisations cannot reliably assess the effects of absence management interventions or distinguish genuine wellbeing from unreported ill-health.

Recent economic analysis highlights the scale of this overlooked issue: the Institute for Public Policy Research (IPPR, 2024) reports that presenteeism, although more difficult to quantify, imposes substantially greater costs on UK organisations than sickness absence, largely due to reduced productivity and impaired performance. This aligns with wider presenteeism literature (e.g., Christensen et al., 2013), which consistently shows that the financial burden of employees working while ill far exceeds the costs associated with absence. Therefore, focusing solely on reducing sickness absence may be misguided. Coercive attempts to lower absence rates in order to reduce associated financial burdens risk increasing presenteeism, which can be far more damaging to employee health and can generate significantly higher organisational costs through lowered productivity (IPPR, 2024).

The contradictions between reducing absence and protecting wellbeing, between formal rule adherence and individualised support, and between absenteeism and presenteeism highlight the paradoxical pressures that shape absence management. These tensions are negotiated through both formal policy and everyday interactions, underscoring that written procedures alone cannot explain how absence is managed in practice. While formal frameworks articulate organisational expectations, the realities of everyday practice are shaped by unwritten rules, informal understandings, and day-to-day interactions. To examine how these unwritten expectations influence managerial behaviour, the next section turns to the psychological contract as a framework for understanding these relational dynamics.

2.9. Unwritten rules and the Psychological Contract

A fuller understanding of absence management also requires attention to its informal dimension, particularly the implicit expectations that shape everyday interactions between employees and line managers. The notion of the psychological contract has its roots in early organisational scholarships. Argyris (1960) and Levinson et al. (1962) first articulated the idea of implicit agreements between employees and employers, emphasising unwritten expectations that shaped workplace behaviour. Rousseau (1995) later reframed the concept as an individualised perception of reciprocal obligations, highlighting the subjective nature of contract interpretation. Subsequent debates have distinguished between transactional contracts, focused on economic exchange and performance, and relational contracts, centred on trust, fairness, and long-term commitment (Guest, 2002). The psychological contract's development shows a progression from implicit collective norms to a more nuanced framework that emphasises individual perceptions of employment obligations. As such, the psychological contract provides a suitable framework for understanding how unwritten rules and expectations are communicated through line manager-employee interaction.

Line managers play a central role in interpreting and contextualising formal absence policies, conveying their practical application through day-to-day interactions (Boxall and Purcell, 2008; McDermott et al., 2013; Nicholson and Johns, 1985). Employees often form their understanding of attendance expectations through these informal conversations, which shape how formal rules are perceived and enacted in practice. Decisions about whether to attend work are therefore influenced by health status, motivation, commitment, and the quality of the employment relationship (Allegro and Veerman, 1998; Joensuu and Lindström,

2003; Miraglia and Johns, 2016). This can result in either sickness absence or presenteeism, with the line manager relationship acting as a key influence in the process (Johns, 2010).

The delineation of absence policies is complicated by the multifactorial nature of sickness absence in addition to the ambiguity frequently contained in formal rules, requiring line managers to interpret employee obligations in context. Nicholson (1977) and Nicholson and Johns (1985) observe that absence behaviour is more fluid and situational than many other organisational expectations, making the translation of formal rules into practice particularly challenging and rendering the exercise of discretion especially complex for line managers. This interpretive complexity highlights the relational dimension of absence management, underscoring the importance of social exchange in employment relationships, which can significantly influence employee motivation and contributions to organisational objectives (Cullinane and Dundon, 2006). Relational HRM builds on this by emphasising interpersonal dynamics, trust, and contextual sensitivity in the enactment of HR practices (Boxall and Purcell, 2016; Townsend et al., 2022a). In the context of sickness absence, relational HRM positions line managers as agents whose daily interactions shape employee perceptions of fairness, support, and legitimacy.

Emerging from social exchange theory, the psychological contract captures the understanding of 'unwritten' workplace rules by framing implicit expectations and obligations between employees and employers (Boxall and Purcell, 2008). Rousseau (1995) describes it as the individual's perception of what they owe the organisation and what the organisation owes them, shaped by personality and interpretation of managerial communication. Fulfilment of the psychological contract is associated with increased commitment, while breaches can undermine trust and motivation (Robinson, 1996).

The psychological contract embodies its own paradoxes as transactional expectations around attendance and performance coexist with relational expectations of fairness, support, and trust. Similarly, organisational intentions may emphasise compliance and efficiency, while employees interpret obligations through the lens of personal wellbeing and social equity. These micro-level paradoxes mirror the tensions identified in formal absence policies, reinforcing the argument that absence management is shaped by competing rationales at both organisational and interpersonal levels.

In the context of sickness absence, the psychological contract is particularly salient: employees often hold implicit expectations that they will be treated fairly when ill, supported

during recovery, and not penalised for legitimate absence, while organisations expect employees to demonstrate 'reasonable attendance' and commitment to their work responsibilities. 'Reasonable attendance' is not a fixed or objective standard but an organisationally constructed threshold, shaped by policy design, operational pressures, and managerial interpretation. In practice, most public and private sector organisations operationalise 'reasonable attendance' through trigger points, typically a specified number of absence episodes or days within a defined period, which initiate managerial review. Although presented as neutral measures of attendance, these triggers effectively set the practical boundary of what counts as 'reasonable', embedding organisational priorities and assumptions into the assessment of employee attendance. When these expectations are misaligned, for example, when employees perceive punitive responses to absence or inadequate managerial support, the psychological contract is strained, increasing the likelihood of presenteeism, disengagement, or withdrawal. Absence management therefore exemplifies how the fulfilment or breach of unwritten obligations directly shapes attendance behaviour.

Line managers are often the primary 'contract makers', conveying organisational aims and expectations through daily interaction (CIPD, 2021; McDermott et al., 2013). Their subjective judgement and personal relationships with employees become crucial when policies are ambiguous, influencing how absence behaviour is managed in practice (Hoefsmit et al., 2012; Shipton et al., 2016). In this role, line managers play a decisive part in shaping how employees perceive the fulfilment or breach of the psychological contract. Their discretion in interpreting absence policies determines whether managerial actions are experienced as supportive or coercive. When discretion is curtailed by rigid compliance frameworks, line managers lose the ability to tailor absence decisions, increasing the risk of perceived breach. This underscores the argument that restricting line managers undermines the relational dimension of absence management, weakening the credibility of unwritten obligations and eroding trust.

Guest (2002) argues that the psychological contract should reflect a shared understanding between both parties, yet because expectations are perceptual, employees may interpret obligations differently from line managers (Robinson, 1996). Guest and Conway (2002) found that more explicit expectations tend to strengthen the contract, whereas ambiguity risks misinterpretation and weakened commitment.

Breaches of the psychological contract are widely reported, despite managers' awareness of their negative effects (Boxall and Purcell, 2008; Guest, 2004). Consequences include withdrawal of cooperation, reduced organisational citizenship behaviour, dissatisfaction, and increased absence or turnover (Harrison et al., 2006; Morrison and Robinson, 1997). However, perceptions of fairness and trust can mediate these responses: if plausible reasons for breaches are communicated, employees may react less negatively, provided they trust the motives of their line manager (Guest, 2004).

It is important to consider the perceived reliability of formal versus informal rules. While absence policies are documented and therefore appear more reliable, the psychological contract is constructed through line manager-employee interaction, making it less distinct and harder to assess. This literature provides the foundation for analysing how line manager implementation of absence policy may diverge from HR expectations, and it underscores the centrality of trust in shaping employee responses to perceived obligations and breaches. When line managers communicate obligations and promises verbally, employees evaluate the credibility of these commitments through the trust they place in the line manager, which in turn influences how likely they believe such promises will be honoured.

The psychological contract is not only a lens for understanding unwritten rules but is also a site of tension in its own right. Transactional expectations around attendance coexist with social expectations of fairness and support, and line managers are pivotal in balancing these competing demands. In the context of sickness absence, employees' perceptions of whether the organisation fulfils its implicit obligations often hinge on managerial discretion in interpreting formal rules. The psychological contract therefore acts as a critical bridge between written policy and lived experience, highlighting trust as the mechanism through which unwritten expectations gain credibility or collapse into breach.

Trust is the mechanism through which psychological contracts are sustained or broken as employees evaluate the credibility of managerial promises and obligations based on the trust they place in their line manager, which shapes whether unwritten expectations are believed and acted upon. Building on this discussion, the following section explores trust more directly, positioning it as the foundation of workplace interactions and the communication that occurs between line managers and employees during the sickness absence management process.

2.10. Trust and the Psychological Contract in Absence Management

Trust plays a pivotal role in determining how individuals interpret managerial actions and in assessing the credibility of perceived obligations (Robinson, 1996). It significantly affects behaviour, influencing perceptions of fairness and legitimacy within the employment relationship (Robinson, 1996; Robbins, 2016). This is particularly relevant in sickness absence management, where formal rules are often ambiguous and reliance on unwritten rules becomes pronounced. In such contexts, employees' and line managers' perceptions of trust play a central role in determining how absence policies are enacted in practice.

Robbins (2016) defines trust as the perception that another person is likely to act favourably rather than detrimentally, a judgement that underpins how employees respond to managerial communication and commitments. Trust can therefore be understood as the outcome of both rational and experiential assessments of a situation in which individuals weigh potential threats to themselves. Because social interactions are inherently complex and uncertain, every new or ongoing exchange carries an element of unpredictability. In these circumstances, individuals draw upon a combination of logical reasoning and prior experiential knowledge to decide how they will respond or commit to this uncertainty. If the other party is assessed as presenting no threat, trust is fostered; if the assessment suggests danger, doubt and distrust are more likely to occur. This initial judgement can either reduce or heighten perceived threat, and it becomes the interpretive mechanism through which subsequent managerial behaviour is understood, shaping how future interactions are perceived.

Trust also plays a mutually reinforcing role, whereby positive behaviour continually confirms an initial decision to trust, deepening the relationship over time (Solomon, 1960). Conversely, when the initial judgement is one of distrust, subsequent behaviour is more readily interpreted as threatening or coercive. Once trust or distrust is established, it triggers a psychological process that shapes subsequent perceptions, acting as an interpretive filter through which the other party's behaviour is judged (Robbins, 2016). Cognitive research supports this process, showing that individuals interpret situations according to how they believe things should be, using selective attention to align new experiences with existing assumptions (Eagly and Chaiken, 1993). In practice, this means people actively seek evidence that validates their prior beliefs, knowledge, and attitudes, with cognitive coding biased towards confirmation rather than invalidation (Lord et al., 1979). Thus, trust or distrust not

only influences perceived threat in uncertain situations but also frames how future managerial behaviour is interpreted, reinforcing either supportive or coercive perceptions depending on the initial judgement.

This demonstrates how trust plays two critical roles in shaping the employee-line manager relationship. First, it encourages employees to commit to uncertain situations, such as absence management processes, by reducing perceived threat. Second, it influences how employees interpret subsequent managerial behaviour, with trusted line managers more likely to have their actions perceived as supportive rather than coercive.

When a person commits to trusting someone, they believe the other person will act in a positive and helpful manner. Consequently, the actions they subsequently observe are more likely to be perceived as positive, reinforcing and confirming their prior beliefs (Robbins, 2016).

To illustrate, a line manager's regular contact with an employee during their absence can be perceived very differently depending on the employee's level of trust. Wynne-Jones et al.'s (2011) qualitative study demonstrates this clearly: when staff trusted their line managers, frequent contact was interpreted as supportive and caring, reinforcing the belief that the line manager was acting with good intentions. However, when trust was absent, the same behaviour was perceived as intrusive or even harassing, confirming suspicions that the line manager was seeking to 'catch the employee out'. This example highlights how trust fundamentally shapes the meaning attributed to managerial actions in absence management.

The variability in how employees interpret managerial behaviour can be further understood through Leader-Member Exchange (LMX) theory, which emphasises the quality of the one-to-one relationship between leader and employee (Graen and Uhl-Bien, 1995). High quality LMX relationships are characterised by mutual trust, respect, and obligation, fostering open communication and positive attributions of managerial intent. In contrast, low quality exchanges tend to be more transactional and distant, increasing the likelihood that managerial actions are viewed with suspicion or defensiveness. This framework reinforces the earlier argument that initial trust judgements function as an interpretive mechanism: the same managerial behaviour, such as regular contact during an absence, may be perceived as supportive or intrusive depending on the relational context. LMX theory therefore provides a useful lens for understanding how trust or distrust shapes the meaning employees attach to managerial actions in sickness absence management.

Robbins (2016) found that prior trust can minimise the negative effects of psychological contract breach, since damage occurs only when employees perceive promises to have been broken. Thus, the same managerial request, such as asking an employee to increase temporarily reduced hours, may be interpreted as reasonable or as a breach, depending on the employee's trust in the line manager's motives. While relationships built on trust foster engagement and intrinsic motivation (Alfes et al., 2013; Cheung et al., 2017), psychological contract breaches perceived through a lens of distrust can lead to withdrawal of cooperation and commitment (Harrison et al., 2006; Morrison and Robinson, 1997). Communication has traditionally been viewed as a function of role and status (Abrams and Hogg, 1988) and mentoring behaviours and emotional support can strengthen trust and benefit both individuals and organisations (Rofcanin et al., 2017). Conversely, managerial doubt about the legitimacy of absence can undermine trust, prolong absence, and reduce effort (Ferrin et al., 2008).

Boxall (2012) emphasises that employees must trust the motives behind HR practices for them to be effective. Alfes et al. (2013) similarly found that positive day-to-day behaviour by line managers reinforces organisational goals and signals value to employees, whereas misalignment between managerial behaviour and HR practices erodes trust. Lack of trust has been negatively associated with sickness absence (Aas et al., 2008).

Finally, trust is complicated by the inherent power imbalance between line managers and employees. Power differentials can create a perception gap, where managerial dominance reduces employees' willingness to trust (Cullinane and Dundon, 2006; Willemyns et al., 2003). The larger the perceived gap, the lower the trust held by the subordinate, and existing relationship problems can magnify this effect. To build trust, line managers must acknowledge the structural barrier their status represents and make greater efforts to demonstrate support and reduce perceptions of coercion.

Across the literature reviewed in this section, trust emerges as the interpretive foundation through which psychological contracts are sustained, managerial intentions are understood, and absence-related decisions acquire meaning, providing the basis for the chapter's concluding reflections.

2.11. Conclusion

This literature review highlighted the persistent economic and human costs of workplace sickness absence in the UK, where levels vary substantially across sectors. In 2019, the public sector recorded around 8–10 days of sickness absence per employee compared with approximately 5 days in the private sector and 5.8 days nationally (Sinclair and Suff, 2025; ONS, 2020). Absence levels continue to rise across the UK despite sustained organisational efforts to reduce them. The most commonly used approach remains the application of formalised policies and punitive mechanisms, even though interpersonal and supportive approaches are consistently shown to be more effective in sustaining attendance and wellbeing.

The review underscores the pivotal role of line managers in interpreting and enacting absence policies. Their conduct significantly shapes employee motivation, trust, and decisions about absence and return to work. Yet a disconnect persists between recommended practices and managerial behaviour, revealing that policy alone is insufficient without paying attention to how it is experienced and communicated in practice. Psychological contract and trust-based frameworks illuminate this informal dimension, showing how unwritten expectations and social dynamics mediate the impact of formal rules.

At the same time, the literature highlights the conflicting pressures line managers face when responsibility for absence management is formally devolved to them. They are expected to enforce organisational policies, but the boundaries of their authority and discretion are often unclear (Townsend, 2022b). This ambiguity, combined with the emotionally charged nature of judging whether absence is legitimate, complicates their role and contributes to inconsistencies in how policies are applied. Line managers therefore occupy a contradictory position, expected to enforce policy while simultaneously sustaining supportive relationships with employees. This tension illustrates the paradoxical nature of absence management: attempts to enforce consistency can undermine wellbeing, while efforts to build trust are constrained by procedural obligations. Recognising absence management as a paradoxical process underscores the importance of managerial discretion, since limiting it reduces line managers' capacity to address absence through interpersonal depth and trust, both of which are critical in mediating the effects of these tensions. Taken together, these dynamics highlight the need to understand not only the formal policy environment but also the

relational and interpretive processes through which absence management is enacted. Compounding these challenges, the significant organisational costs associated with sickness absence underscore the urgency of addressing these issues.

For clarity, the research questions proposed are restated below:

1. *How do line managers perceive their role and level of responsibility in managing sickness absence within the organisation?*
2. *What factors shape line managers' interpretation, decision-making, and implementation of absence management policies and procedures?*
3. *How have changes in the approach to managing sickness absence affected line managers' autonomy following the devolvement of HR responsibilities?*

Together, these questions position the thesis to contribute new insight into the social processes underpinning absence management, specifically, how line managers interpret and negotiate their responsibilities, how discretion is shaped and constrained, and how organisational and interpersonal dynamics influence the enactment of policy. By focusing on these underexamined processes, the thesis aims to explain why, despite sustained organisational efforts to reduce sickness absence, levels in the public sector remain consistently higher than those in the private sector. The thesis also seeks to illuminate the practical realities that shape line managers' actions in context. This orientation provides a foundation for the empirical chapters that follow, which explore how these dynamics unfold in practice within a large public-sector organisation.

Chapter 3. Methodology

3.1. Introduction

The previous chapter reviewed the literature on sickness absence and its management, revealing the multifaceted interplay of organisational, interpersonal, and structural factors that shape line management effectiveness. It also highlighted persistent tensions between formal policy and practical implementation, showing how psychological contracts, trust relationships, and managerial discretion influence absence management processes. These insights culminated in the development of the research questions for this thesis (Yin, 2003), which seek to understand not only how line managers undertake sickness absence management, but why they adopt particular approaches and interpret policy in the ways they do.

The primary aim of this research is to explain the apparent disconnect between recommended best practice in sickness absence management and the actions line managers take in real organisational settings. While the literature identifies numerous factors influencing employee absence behaviour and acknowledges the central role of line managers, it offers limited insight into the underlying reasons shaping managerial decision-making. This thesis addresses that gap by examining the social processes, tensions, and contextual influences that inform how line managers interpret, negotiate, and enact absence management policy. In doing so, it contributes a deeper understanding of the practical realities of absence management and the organisational conditions that support or constrain effective practice.

To achieve this, the study adopts an exploratory qualitative design within a large UK public sector organisation, employing semi-structured interviews with line managers and senior managers, supported by relevant documentary evidence such as organisational absence data and policy documents.

This approach enables an in-depth examination of the social dynamics surrounding absence management, including the relationships between line managers and their staff, and between line managers and HR personnel. The inductive nature of the research also enables unexpected themes to emerge. A key contradictory finding in the initial interviews prompted the development of a third research question and the inclusion of a further panel of

interviews with former line managers, enabling exploration of the historical context of the line manager's role and how it has evolved over time (Bingham, 2023).

This chapter outlines the methodological approach used to investigate line managers' perspectives on sickness absence management and explains how the research design supports the thesis's contribution. It begins by setting out the philosophical assumptions underpinning the study and the rationale for adopting an intensive qualitative approach. It then reviews methodological considerations within HRM and sickness absence research, highlighting the under-utilisation of qualitative methods in these fields. The research design, data collection methods, and analytical procedures are described, followed by a discussion of issues of generalisation and representativeness, the selection of the research site, and the advantages of semi-structured interviews. The chapter concludes by detailing the research process, the range of data sources used, and the ethical considerations that guided the study. The next section introduces the philosophical foundations underpinning the chosen methodology.

3.2. Philosophical Foundations of Intensive Research

This section provides the reasoning behind the chosen methodology for this research by examining the underlying philosophical foundations of objectivism and subjectivism, two distinct perspectives that address the nature of reality (Guba and Lincoln, 1994). Exploring the appropriateness of various research approaches in addressing the research questions, it examines the significance of intensive research within these philosophical foundations. The discussion concludes by demonstrating why the selected approach is more suitable than alternative methodological options for addressing the research questions.

Objectivist ontology conceptualises social phenomena as existing independently of social actors, suggesting that reality and knowledge are external, objective, and unaffected by individual perspectives (Guba and Lincoln, 1994). Consequently, objectivist epistemology aligns with the principle that facts can be observed, tested, and verified in an unbiased manner, free from the influence of personal perceptions or subjective experiences (Lundberg et al., 2023). In contrast, subjectivist ontology views social actors and phenomena as inherently interconnected, emphasising that reality is interpreted and understood through individual perceptions and experiences (Lundberg et al., 2023) and recognises that social

reality is fluid rather than fixed, shaped by the diverse ways individuals interpret and engage with the world (Bryman and Bell, 2003).

A subjectivist ontology underpins this thesis, which aims to fill the gaps in knowledge about the complex social processes involved in sickness absence management by adopting an interpretivist stance. The subjectivist epistemological stance adopted in this research informs the methodology, directing the researcher to uncover and understand the factors influencing the sickness absence process through the meanings individuals attribute to their experiences. The organisation is viewed as a socially reactive entity, where interpretation depends on the observer's experience and is best captured from the perspective of those involved (Guba and Lincoln, 1994). To accomplish this, the researcher gathers the perceptions and experiences through interviews to elicit personal accounts and identify the nuanced interpretations that shape managerial behaviour. This aligns with Hesse-Biber and Leavy (2004), who contend that certain factors influencing phenomena might remain hidden to quantitative researchers relying on standard indicators, emphasising that capturing individuals' direct experiences can be more effective in revealing unseen influences shaping the phenomenon under investigation.

Therefore, this methodology aims to explore "an aspect of the social world that goes beyond what is empirically known" (Hesse-Biber and Leavy, 2004, p.3) by deriving real-life experiences from line managers', including their environment, interactions, and relationships. By examining perceptions that shape line managers' actions, the research seeks to uncover unseen factors influencing their actions and better understand the apparent disconnect between their actual practices and the behaviours organisations deem optimal. Adopting an exploratory approach, this study captures line managers' insights to uncover their activities within real-world organisational contexts, emphasising the inseparable link between phenomena, context, social interaction, and continuous change (Bryman and Bell, 2003; Sandberg, 2005), thereby aligning the research firmly with a subjectivist view of reality.

The next section provides an overview of the research approaches commonly utilised by Human Resource Management (HRM) and sickness absence scholars, presenting typical methodologies employed in these fields.

3.3. Research approaches in HRM and sickness absence

Following on from the previous section outlining the philosophical stance and exploratory approach adopted in this research, this section discusses various research foci and approaches in HRM and sickness absence studies and highlights the scope for further qualitative inquiry to deepen understanding in both fields.

While the fields of HRM and sickness absence are distinct, they intersect in their shared interest in enhancing employee well-being and minimising absence from work (Allebeck and Mastekaasa, 2004). Sickness absence literature predominantly focuses on understanding the causes and solutions for managing absence (Allebeck and Mastekaasa, 2004), whereas HRM literature covers a broader spectrum of people management practices, with sickness absence management being one aspect, concentrating on implementing policies aimed at reducing employee absenteeism and sustaining organisational performance (Boxall, 2012; Dunn and Wilkinson, 2002a).

The long-standing positivist and quantitative inclinations in the fields of HRM and sickness absence have resulted in an underrepresentation of qualitative research in these fields (Allebeck and Mastekaasa, 2004; Hunziker and Blankenagel, 2024; Negt and Haunschild, 2024; Wall and Wood, 2005). The relative scarcity of qualitative research in both fields implies that the potential to gain nuanced insights into the complexities of social interactions involved in sickness absence management by line managers may be limited. While HR literature acknowledges the crucial role of line managers in policy implementation (Purcell and Hutchinson, 2007; Wilkinson et al., 2015), it also highlights the challenges in understanding the discrepancies between intended policy implementation and actual practices (Bos-Nehles et al., 2021; Hewett et al., 2024). Sickness absence research also recognises the importance of the line manager role, underscoring the impact they can have on employees and their potential for reducing sickness absence. However, the adoption of supportive line manager roles in organisations remains inconsistent, and the levels of sickness absence persist, indicating the underlying reasons for these gaps remain insufficiently understood.

The critical role of line managers is underscored by Xiao and Tsui (2007) who highlight the potential line managers hold in enhancing cooperation between employers and employees by aligning employee commitment with organisational goals. Moreover, comprehensive engagement of line managers in HR practices can positively impact employee job performance

(Alfes et al., 2013; Sikora et al., 2015). Conversely, resistance from line managers to adopt and implement HR policies can result in adverse organisational outcomes, including interpersonal conflicts, frustration, suboptimal people management, decreased job satisfaction, and diminished performance (Bainbridge, 2015). The effectiveness of HRM practices in achieving organisational goals may be better understood by examining their implementation by line managers (Purcell and Hutchinson, 2007; Steffensen et al., 2019), however, despite the crucial role line managers play in HR processes, their importance is often underappreciated in the literature (Purcell and Hutchinson, 2007; Townsend and Hutchinson, 2017; Townsend et al., 2022a; Wilkinson et al., 2015). This is particularly relevant as Kurdi-Nakra et al. (2021) note the recent increasing trend of devolving HR responsibilities to line managers, emphasising their enhanced role in HRM processes. Boxall and Purcell (2007) highlight the need for more in-depth qualitative research to explore policy implementation complexities, arguing that understanding HRM practices requires examining contextual factors and the experiences of employees and line managers as such an approach allows exploration of alignment issues between line managers and HR processes.

Literature in the field of sickness absence management similarly recognises supportive line management styles can reduce absence rates, while poor relationships with line managers can contribute to higher sickness levels, particularly stress-related absences. (Holmlund et al., 2022; Nielsen and Yarker, 2023), which is currently one of the most prevalent reasons for absence in the UK (HSE, 2025; ONS, 2025). Furthermore, ineffective sickness absence management practices can exacerbate work-related stress, and a lack of managerial support plays a critical role in elevating sickness absence levels (Black and Frost, 2011; CIPD, 2023; HSE, 2006; HSE, 2025). Reviews of return-to-work literature highlight the importance of line manager support, managerial style, authority to implement workplace changes, relationships, and trust, in successful return-to-work management (Higgins et al., 2015; White et al., 2013a). Qualitative research in sickness absence management has provided valuable insights into absence management. For example, Östlund et al. (2001) found that employees value supportive management over procedural implementation, emphasising the significant influence line managers can have on employee motivation and return-to-work decisions (Ervasti et al., 2017). Holmlund et al. (2022) examined the views of employees and line managers on returning to work after absence due to common mental disorders, finding that

supportive management approaches are crucial to successful implementation of return-to-work plans.

While existing qualitative sickness absence research provides meaningful insights, many studies focus on specific conditions, and there is a paucity of studies examining how line managers approach and implement sickness absence management from a general process perspective (Saundry, et al., 2024). Such research could reveal the intricacies of line manager-employee relationships and provide insights into real-world absence management practices and policy implementation from an HRM perspective.

Scholars have noted the potential of qualitative research to provide a richer and more nuanced understanding of social phenomena in HRM research (Gubbins and Rousseau, 2015; Hunziker and Blankenagel, 2024; Negt and Haunschild, 2024; Truss and Gill, 2004). Its key merit is its ability to uncover the complexities of human behaviour and organisational processes, and to demonstrate elements of HRM policy implementation using real life examples from specific organisations. For example, Wachira and Odongo's (2013) study demonstrates the applicability of qualitative research by assessing the impact of various motivational strategies on employee performance and organisational outcomes. Similarly, Coaker (2011) employed a qualitative approach to examine the results of specific HR practices, offering valuable insights into the practical implementation of HRM policies and their influence on organisational outcomes.

This thesis focuses on sickness absence management, just one aspect of HRM processes, aiming to illuminate how and why line managers take their chosen approach to policy implementation. Understanding their motivations and actions could enhance current concepts and offer new insights to the HRM and sickness absence literature. The primary focus is on generating new knowledge about sickness absence management by examining the nuanced social processes involved in the practical implementation of absence procedures by line managers. There remains scope for further qualitative research in these areas, and this study responds to calls within HRM scholarship to examine how line managers implement policy in practice. It focuses specifically on how sickness absence processes are enacted in real-world organisational settings, an aspect that remains underexplored in both HRM and absence management research. To address the research questions and bridge this gap, the study undertakes intensive, inductive qualitative research within a single department of a

large public sector organisation. Additional data is gathered from a further interview panel to explore sickness absence focusing on line manager autonomy in terms of how it has differed over time. The supplementary data aims to address a newly emerged research question while adding depth to the study. This is explained in more detail in the following section which delineates the research design.

3.4. Qualitative research design

To address the original research questions, this study employs an inductive qualitative research design, initially concentrating on a large public sector organisation to investigate how line managers implement sickness absence management in practice. This is achieved through semi-structured interviews and the collection of organisational data from a single organisation. A supplementary panel of semi-structured interviews with former line managers from a variety of public sector organisations is subsequently conducted to delve into a newly emerged research question (question 3.) regarding line manager autonomy, which surfaced during the analysis of the initial interviews.

The choice of this design is guided by its suitability for addressing the research questions (Morse, 2003; Thurston et al., 2008) and the necessity for a flexible methodology capable of extracting meaningful insights from participants. Rooted in subjectivist ontological and epistemological principles, an intensive inductive approach was determined to be the most effective for uncovering the complexities of sickness absence management, allowing participants' interpretations to shape the analysis. This design enables the collection of detailed insights into the processes, relationships, and nuances of line management in sickness absence within a specific context. It further supports a deeper exploration of line manager autonomy in absence management, clarifying any perceived shifts over time, providing valuable temporal insights into the experiences and perspectives of line managers, as well as implications for HR practices. This integrated approach captures the perspectives of line managers, the environment they operate in, and the control mechanisms they adhere to, providing qualitative insights into sickness absence management practices, and enhancing the study's depth.

Despite assumptions that proactive sickness-absence management reduces absence levels, the literature reveals that public-sector line managers are more proactive than their

private-sector counterparts yet consistently report higher sickness-absence levels (CIPD, 2016, 2018; ONS, 2023

Furthermore, the HRM 'Black box' quandary (Townsend et al., 2019) highlights a disconnect between organisational policy objectives and their actual implementation by line managers, for which clear explanations remain elusive (Bos-Nehles et al., 2021; Hewett et al., 2024). This research undertakes a thorough examination of relationships, environmental factors, processes, and challenges (Hunziker and Blankenagel, 2024) associated with line managers' sickness absence management. This method facilitates detailed analysis to uncover unanticipated insights, generating new concepts for future research and is particularly suited for addressing the complexities of sickness absence management processes within HRM.

The rationale for choosing an inductive qualitative research approach is rooted in the research objectives which require a detailed investigation of a real-life phenomenon within its environmental context (Yin, 2016a). When the objective is to develop a deeper understanding of a phenomenon without preconceived assumptions regarding similarities or differences, an exploratory investigation is particularly suitable, as it enables an in-depth examination of reality as experienced by individuals with first-hand knowledge of the phenomenon. While single case study research offers depth, its scope is constrained by the boundaries of the case definition, which may restrict exploratory flexibility. This limitation can discourage engagement with relevant participants beyond the initial case, yet such engagement was essential for this study's aims. Conversely, multiple case studies prioritise cross-case analysis to identify patterns and variations, thereby enhancing robustness. However, this approach often comes at the expense of depth (Yin, 2016a) and is typically employed when predefined factors are being systematically investigated and compared.

The objective of this research is to identify underlying factors influencing line managers' actions, examine social processes, and critically engage with contradictions and gaps in the existing literature. As a result, this study prioritises depth and exploration over breadth and does not primarily focus on literal or theoretical replication commonly associated with multiple case study designs. Furthermore, given its exploratory nature, this research aims to remain flexible and unrestricted by single case boundaries, allowing for further investigations as necessary to refine and expand its findings

Given the distinct strengths of exploratory qualitative research and their alignment with the research objectives, this approach is considered the most appropriate for examining how a specific system operates and the underlying reasons for its behaviour.

Having established the research design, the generalisation of the research findings is now discussed.

3.5. Generalisability

This section explains the research's aim to achieve analytical generalisability, as outlined by Yin (2016b). The ability to generalise research findings is crucial, as it enhances the applicability of knowledge to a broader audience (Osbeck and Antczak, 2021). A lack of generalisability significantly limits a study's contribution because findings that cannot be applied to other contexts or populations risk reduced relevance and usefulness (Osbeck and Antczak, 2021).

Knowledge generation in academic research is supported by a variety of data-collection techniques, such as interviews, surveys, and observations (Popovic, 2023). Although achieved differently, both qualitative and quantitative research methods aim to produce findings that extend beyond the specific study context (Osbeck and Antczak, 2021). Quantitative research focuses on measuring and quantifying phenomena to establish patterns and relationships between variables, whereas qualitative research explores patterns and relationships to uncover underlying meanings and interpretations, identifying themes, trends, and connections that provide a rich, detailed understanding of the subject matter (Brannan et al., 2017; Osbeck and Antczak, 2021).

Questions have been raised about the viability of qualitative research to achieve generalisability, thereby challenging its credibility (Drisko, 2025). Schofield (1990) notes that prior to the 1990s, generalisability received little attention in qualitative research, as it was often viewed as unattainable or unnecessary. However, Osbeck and Antczak (2021) dispute the traditional view that generalisability applies only to quantitative research and highlight its importance for qualitative inquiry. Generalisability in qualitative research can be challenging because its epistemological stance requires consideration of multiple perspectives (Johnson and Christensen, 2004). Qualitative studies are sometimes criticised for subjective

interpretation and the potential influence of researchers' preconceived views (Schofield, 1990).

Quantitative research adopts a single-reality perspective aimed at producing statistics that can be universally generalised across populations, settings, and time periods; statistical generalisability is therefore central to its validity. In contrast, qualitative research cannot reliably represent broader populations and does not aim for statistical generalisability (Schofield, 1990). Despite these challenges, qualitative methods can explain processes that extend beyond the specific phenomenon under examination, offering what Yin (2016b) describes as analytic generalisability. This research seeks to enable theoretical predictions regarding how findings from qualitative studies might apply to similar situations (Yin, 2016b). Analytical generalisability can extend to both established and newly developed concepts or theories related to social processes, in this case, line managers' implementation of sickness-absence management. It offers relevance across comparable contexts and populations, facilitating integration into broader literature and theoretical frameworks (Smith, 2018; Yin, 2016b).

Clearly outlining the research process, including data-collection and analysis methods, is essential for ensuring the trustworthiness of findings and their applicability to other research settings (Drisko, 2025). The robust methodology adopted in this study is well suited to generating meaningful insights into the phenomenon under investigation (Yin, 2016b), providing detailed descriptions of participants, context, and setting to support understanding by others engaging with the findings.

A notable strength of this research is its use of purposive sampling of participants and setting (Ahmad and Wilkins, 2024). By focusing on well-informed participants, a deeper understanding of the phenomenon can be achieved, enhancing the validity and reliability of the findings. Although purposive sampling is discussed in more detail in the next section, its relevance here lies in its ability to identify knowledgeable participants who can provide information that reveals patterns and relationships not evident in a more generalised sample. This nuanced understanding of underlying causal mechanisms and theoretical constructs can then be applied to broader contexts with greater confidence, facilitating analytical generalisability (Ahmad and Wilkins, 2024).

In this study, the inclusion of a historical investigation into sickness-absence management by line managers offered a detailed understanding of past practices. This exploration, driven by the emergence of the third research question, enabled the integration of historical insights with contemporary data, creating a more comprehensive and nuanced perspective on absence management.

The research findings may be relevant to other large public-sector organisations with elevated sickness-absence levels, offering insights that extend beyond the specific case to explain how sickness-absence processes are implemented. Observations from carefully selected participants may be analytically generalisable to line managers in other large organisations, particularly regarding the management of sickness absence. Additionally, the findings may apply to other types of HR policy implementation by line managers, beyond sickness-absence management, as the study examines the influences and challenges encountered during policy implementation. By extending the applicability of these insights to other contexts, the research aims to provide analytical generalisability and contribute to a deeper understanding of the phenomenon explored.

The following section outlines the participant sampling strategy and the location of the research.

3.6. Sampling strategy and research location

Having addressed analytical generalisability as a key aim of this research, this section now outlines the sampling strategy and chosen research location. The quality of qualitative research depends heavily on the justification for selecting a specific site, making the rationale for these choices central to the study's credibility (Hunziker and Blankenagel, 2024).

This study adopts an inductive qualitative approach to provide rich, contextual insights into sickness-absence management by line managers in a large organisation. A second panel of interviews was included to strengthen the findings by exploring contradictions identified during the initial analysis, thereby adding a temporal dimension to the investigation.

The research location was a large UK public-sector organisation, pseudonymised as Public One. Public-sector organisations are characterised by formalised policies, accountability pressures, and structured reporting lines, making them a suitable setting for examining how line managers interpret and enact absence policies.

A public-sector organisation was selected for this study because the public sector consistently records higher sickness-absence levels than the private sector, averaging around 8–10 days per employee in 2019 compared with approximately 5 days in private-sector services and around 5.8 days per employee nationally (Sinclair and Suff, 2025; ONS, 2020). Public One, a local-government agency serving a population of approximately 800,000 and employing over 14,000 staff, has consistently recorded higher than national local government average levels of sickness absence. The department from which participants were drawn reported an absence rate of 11.8 days per employee in 2019, placing it above the local-government benchmark of 8–10 days (LGA, 2024) and above the broader publicadministration rate of 6–7 days reported by the ONS (ONS, 2020). The department therefore operated at a level higher than the national average for comparable services, highlighting the relevance of this organisational context for understanding how absence-management practices function in high-absence public-sector environments.

As participants were drawn from the same department, line managers operated under a shared policy framework and similar working arrangements, meaning that any variation in their accounts could be attributed more to differences in managerial interpretation than to organisational or departmental policy differences. This sampling strategy also enhanced feasibility and supported the depth of qualitative inquiry.

Purposive participant selection was employed to ensure that individuals with the most relevant experience were included (Ahmad and Wilkins, 2024). In qualitative research, purposive sampling is a non-random technique used to select participants with specific expertise or characteristics aligned with the study objectives. In this case, line managers with direct experience of managing sickness absence were identified within Public One, ensuring participants possessed the knowledge and insights necessary to address the research questions.

For the first cohort of interviews, participants were required to be current line managers directly responsible for managing staff absence, regularly engaged in absence practices within an organisation experiencing elevated absence levels, and drawn from a single department operating under the same policy framework. These criteria ensured access to multiple line managers with firsthand experience of absence management while limiting the influence of departmental or policy variation on the findings.

The second cohort was purposively selected to explore historical practices, guided by an emerging theme from the first interviews that challenged a central assumption in HRM literature: that line managers today have increased responsibility and autonomy in HR policy implementation (e.g., Kurdi-Nakra et al., 2021). To investigate this contradiction, it was necessary to examine the experiences of those who managed absence in the past. The literature indicates a trend of increasing HR responsibility devolved to line managers beginning in the 1990s (Kurdi-Nakra et al., 2021; Purcell and Hutchinson, 2007; Renwick, 2003; Townsend et al., 2022a; Watson et al., 2006).

The second cohort therefore consisted of former line managers who managed staff between 1980 and 2000, a period identified as pivotal in the devolution of HR responsibilities. These individuals were purposively selected by the researcher, who had professional associations with many ex-line managers fitting the criteria, ensuring access to participants with relevant historical experience. This supplementary panel enhanced the study's potential for capturing valuable historical insights. Their firsthand accounts provided a temporal perspective on past practices, strengthening the depth and validity of the research while enabling a more comprehensive examination of changes over time in absence-management strategies.

The purposive inclusion of both cohorts strengthened the study's capacity to capture contemporary and historical perspectives on absence management. With the sampling strategy and research location now established, the next section considers the interview design, outlining the semi-structured style adopted and the approach to questioning.

3.7. The structure and style of interviews

A semi-structured style of interview was employed as the primary method of inquiry for this research. This section outlines the appropriateness of this approach and describes the manner in which questions were posed to interviewees.

Exploratory research inherently involves navigating areas that are not yet fully understood in order to uncover underlying dynamics. Within the context of sickness-absence management, an exploratory approach is particularly valuable, as it facilitates the identification of nuanced patterns and behaviours that other methodologies may overlook. The core of exploratory research lies in posing broad, open-ended questions that provide the flexibility to adapt as

findings emerge. Rather than adhering to rigidly predefined queries, the methodology embraces uncertainty, allowing evolving insights to guide the direction of the research.

Semi-structured interviews are well suited to exploratory research because they provide the flexibility to adapt and explore emerging themes while enabling a comprehensive understanding of complex phenomena (Horton et al., 2004; Magaldi and Berler, 2020). This adaptability is instrumental in addressing multifaceted issues such as sickness-absence management, where in-depth insights often require open-ended inquiry. Drawing on the main areas of interest identified in the literature review, foundational interview questions were developed into a flexible framework that guided the interviews while allowing participants to introduce perspectives not anticipated by the researcher (McCracken, 1988; Rubin and Rubin, 1995). The interview guide is provided in Appendix B.

Such openness can yield richer data and, consistent with grounded theory principles, can lead to the inclusion of new questions in subsequent interviews (Glaser and Strauss, 1967). To illustrate the contrast, structured interviews typically involve precise questions with limited response options, such as: “Do you have full decision-making autonomy to apply sanctions when absentees breach policy targets?” with response choices such as “yes”, “somewhat”, “rarely”, or “never”. While structured interviews can gather standardised data, they restrict participants’ responses and limit exploration of complex topics. In contrast, semi-structured interviews utilise open-ended questions, offering interviewees the opportunity to provide detailed and nuanced answers. For example, a question such as, “Can you describe the general level of input HR personnel have in the decision-making process for absence management?” allows interviewees to elaborate freely.

Subjects raised by interviewees during semi-structured questioning can reveal unexpected themes during analysis. In this research, open-ended questioning prompted recollections about historical practices, with some participants expressing the belief that line managers had greater autonomy in the past than they do today. This perspective contradicted the HR literature reviewed by the researcher and led to the formulation of an additional research question: “*Did changes in the approach to managing sickness absence impact the autonomy of line managers following the devolvement of HR responsibilities to them?*” This prompted a further panel of interviews with former public-sector line managers to explore changes in autonomy over time.

In addition to supporting flexibility, the semi-structured interview approach promotes a more natural flow of conversation by allowing topics to unfold organically rather than following a rigid sequence. Barrett and Twycross (2018) and Bearman (2019) emphasise that fostering a natural conversational flow enables the collection of more comprehensive and nuanced data. Creating a comfortable and relaxed environment encourages interviewees to share genuine insights, while avoiding abrupt shifts between topics minimises distraction and preserves the depth of responses.

Another important consideration influencing the style of questioning was the potential for interviewees to feel compelled to defend their personal position, driven by a perception that the interviewer might judge their responses. This research carried a risk of embarrassment or defensiveness, as it involved asking how interviewees carried out specific aspects of their job and questioning the reasoning behind their methods. The concept of social desirability bias, originally introduced by Edwards (1953) and further developed by Crowne and Marlowe (1960), highlights how individuals may tailor their responses to conform to perceived expectations rather than providing genuine answers.

To reduce the likelihood of socially desirable responses, sensitive questions were framed in the third person, using an indirect questioning style (Kumar, 1999). This technique poses questions more generally about a wider population rather than directly to the interviewee. For example, instead of asking, “Do you sometimes get frustrated with staff when they take sickness absence?”, the question posed might be, “Do you think line managers sometimes feel frustrated when staff take sickness absence?” This approach alleviates personal discomfort by making respondents feel less scrutinised and more at ease, thereby reducing bias and enhancing the quality of the data.

3.8. Conducting the research

The previous section outlined the suitability of semi-structured interviewing for this study. This section now describes how the research was conducted.

A total of thirty-two line managers and three senior managers participated in the research. The first cohort comprised sixteen line managers and three senior managers, while the second cohort included sixteen former line managers. Each line manager participated in a single

interview, while senior managers took part in eight interviews in total, as some were interviewed more than once.

The researcher conducted an initial interview at the organisation's head office with the head of the department in which the research was to be undertaken. During this meeting, the head of department agreed to act as a gatekeeper, supporting the research process by supplying relevant documentation and facilitating communication with the participant group and senior managers. The gatekeeper was fully engaged in this role, sending emails to line managers encouraging participation while emphasising that involvement was voluntary. It was made clear that the gatekeeper would not know who chose to participate, as all names were kept anonymous. The content of the recruitment emails was agreed jointly by the researcher and the gatekeeper.

Documentary evidence collected for this study included the organisation's sickness-absence policy, documentation on health and wellbeing initiatives, training requirements for line managers, staff handbooks, and sickness-absence statistics covering the current and preceding two years. These materials provided important contextual understanding of departmental operations and supported triangulation of findings from the senior-manager and line-manager interviews. The statistics revealed a rising absence trend over the preceding two years, culminating in 11.8 days per employee in 2019, which positioned the organisation above national and sectoral averages. Policy and wellbeing documents outlined the organisation's formal commitments and procedures, while training requirements and staff handbooks clarified the expectations placed on line managers. Taken together, these sources were used to situate the case study within its organisational context, to compare formal policy with managerial accounts, and to highlight tensions between stated principles and everyday practice.

The gatekeeper provided a list of all sixty line managers in the department. From this list, twenty were invited to participate, and sixteen agreed to be interviewed. One had left the organisation, and three were unavailable during the interview period. Only the researcher knew the identities of participants, ensuring anonymity. The gatekeeper authorised the release of employees from duties for interview purposes and remained available to answer questions and provide information as required. Communication between the researcher and

gatekeeper took place through face-to-face meetings, video calls, telephone calls, and email correspondence.

Initially, face-to-face interviews with line managers at their workplace were planned. However, due to the Covid-19 lockdown restrictions implemented in the UK in March 2020, interviews were conducted by telephone with the gatekeeper's approval. Although telephone interviews lack visual cues such as body language and facial expressions, which can make rapport-building more challenging (Fielding and Thomas, 2008), they can also reduce embarrassment and encourage more candid responses when discussing sensitive topics (Novick, 2008). Telephone interviews also eliminate visual distractions, such as note-taking, allowing participants to focus more fully on the questions. On balance, telephone interviews were deemed a suitable alternative, and this change was approved by the University of Leeds AREA Ethics Committee, as discussed in the ethical considerations section.

For the second set of interviews, the researcher contacted participants directly by telephone. These individuals were identified through the researcher's past professional or social connections and through referrals. Before scheduling interviews, the researcher conducted a brief preliminary call to confirm that each participant met the criteria, including the relevant time period of employment and experience of managing sickness absence.

3.9. Interviews

A total of forty interviews were conducted with current line managers, former line managers, and senior managers between 2019 and 2023. These interviews provided insight into both the operational and strategic dimensions of sickness-absence management within the organisation and across participants' wider professional experience. All participants received an information sheet in advance and were briefed on the purpose of the research, the importance of candid reflection, and the confidentiality and anonymity of their contributions. With consent, interviews were digitally recorded or documented through detailed notes.

Thirty-two interviews were conducted with line managers: sixteen current and sixteen former. Semi-structured questions, informed by the literature review, explored how line managers understood and implemented sickness-absence procedures, how they handled day-to-day absence situations, and how they interpreted the purpose and value of organisational policies. The flexible format allowed new areas of interest to emerge during the interviews.

The first cohort of current line managers was interviewed in May-June 2020 by telephone during Covid-19 lockdowns. Interviews lasted approximately one hour. Participants managed teams of four to twenty staff, were aged between 27 and 63, and had between six months and twenty-four years of managerial experience. These interviews examined their practical approaches to managing sickness absence, including how they responded to initial absence notifications and how they navigated policy requirements in everyday practice.

The second cohort comprised former line managers interviewed in May-June 2023, either in person or by telephone. These participants had worked across sectors such as education, healthcare, and social services, with managerial experience dating from the 1980s to the early 2000s. Interviews followed the same semi-structured format but focused on historical practices and changes over time, including reflections on how organisational expectations, policy frameworks, and managerial discretion had evolved.

Eight interviews were undertaken with senior managers, including the head of department and two senior HR managers. Conducted between April 2019 and March 2021, these interviews lasted 60–90 minutes and took place face-to-face prior to Covid-19 restrictions and subsequently through video or telephone discussions. Early conversations helped refine the research proposal, clarify departmental operations, and secure access to organisational documentation, including the absence policy. Later interviews explored senior managers' interpretations of high absence levels, initiatives aimed at reducing absence, and perceived barriers to improvement. A final meeting, held after the completion of line manager interviews, enabled discussion of preliminary findings and provided additional organisational context.

Taken together, the participants offered complementary insights that strengthened the study's analytical depth. Current line managers provided detailed accounts of contemporary practice, former line managers contributed a valuable historical perspective, and senior managers offered strategic context regarding organisational priorities and policy intentions. This combination ensured that the research design was informed by operational, temporal, and strategic understandings of sickness-absence management. A summary of participant characteristics is provided in Appendix A.

3.10. Analysis of the Qualitative Data

A total of forty interviews were undertaken between April 2019 and June 2023. The first round of interviews, conducted within Public One, comprised twenty-four interviews involving three senior managers and sixteen line managers. These interviews were digitally recorded and transcribed verbatim by the researcher, with the exception of some senior manager interviews, which combined digital recordings with handwritten notes. Personally undertaking the transcription enabled early immersion in the data (Bingham, 2023). Each transcript was reviewed again after typing, as it is difficult to absorb all information while transcribing (Bailey, 2008). Reading transcripts in full is an important step in familiarisation and can prompt initial impressions of the data (Creswell, 2014). Handwritten notes were typed up as soon as practicable after each interview.

As interviewing progressed, transcripts were uploaded to NVivo on an ongoing basis, allowing continuous coding. Coding began after the first interview, enabling early insights to inform subsequent questioning. Each transcript was systematically reviewed, and words, sentences, or paragraphs were coded within NVivo. Data were coded and themes were generated and refined; these themes then informed the analytic interpretation and presentation of findings.

Recurring patterns, connections, and categories identified during coding were grouped into broad themes through inductive analysis. Sub-themes were also identified within each main theme. For example, the theme “Awareness of Policy” included three sub-themes: “employee awareness of policy”, “return-to-work interview”, and “line manager awareness of policy”. Themes and sub-themes were refined as further interviews were coded. Consistent with Glaser and Strauss’s (1967) constant-comparison method, new data were compared with previously analysed material to determine whether existing codes remained appropriate or whether new codes were required. This iterative process deepened understanding of the data and ensured that codes and themes remained relevant, accurate, and consistent.

Refining themes involved reassigning coded items, renaming themes, and reclassifying some main themes as sub-themes under related categories. As the dataset expanded, adjustments were continually made, resulting in a more integrated thematic structure. For example, an early theme labelled “Discretion” overlapped with “HR influence” and “Asking HR for advice”; this was refined into a single theme, “Discretion-HR influence”, with associated sub-themes. After initial coding, the researcher examined themes in greater depth, exploring nuances and

commonalities. This led to further reclassification and some theme labels were adjusted to more accurately reflect their content (Bingham, 2023).

NVivo facilitated the rearrangement of coded items, enabling groups of coded extracts to be easily shifted and compared. The software's ability to retrieve original data quickly allowed the researcher to review multiple coded excerpts from different transcripts in one place, supporting checks on context and alignment. Some coded data did not fit neatly within existing themes and were used to develop new themes. These were checked for congruence with the main research concepts and retained for later consideration. Unusual or unique data items were attended to as potential sources of insight, highlighting exceptions, contradictions, or unanticipated findings; some outlier themes were later discarded as irrelevant, while others influenced the direction of the research (Patton, 2015). For example, a minor theme concerning past HR involvement, initially appearing insignificant, later became a point of interest.

During further refinement, it became evident that line manager autonomy appeared limited. As noted earlier, a small number of participants suggested that line managers had greater autonomy in the past. Although mentioned by only three participants, this observation gained significance when considered alongside the limited autonomy evident in contemporary accounts. The two observations appeared interconnected, prompting the researcher to identify this as a critical area for further inquiry and to formulate a third research question.

To address this additional question, a supplementary panel of semi-structured interviews was conducted to capture the experiences and perspectives of line managers regarding past practices. This included insights from individuals with diverse levels of line management experience in the public sector, providing a nuanced understanding of changes in sickness-absence management over time. The second panel of interviews was conducted in a similar manner to the first. Interviews were transcribed in full and uploaded to NVivo for analysis. As with the first dataset, an inductive, iterative approach allowed themes and patterns to emerge organically from the data, ensuring that findings were grounded in participants' experiences.

Patterns were identified through systematic comparison, enabling the detection of themes and variations. This allowed the researcher to explore how changes in organisational policies,

practices, and external factors influenced the autonomy and responsibilities of line managers over time.

The empirical analysis is presented in three chapters. The first empirical chapter draws on the thematic findings from the first set of interviews, providing an in-depth analysis of the primary case. The second empirical chapter focuses on the thematic findings from the second panel of interviews. The third empirical chapter synthesises insights from both phases, drawing on the identified themes to present an integrated and comprehensive narrative. This approach provides well-structured and contextually detailed empirical chapters that address the research questions.

3.11. Ethical considerations

Sensitive data, including discussions about workplace challenges and tensions, was collected during the research process. To address potential ethical concerns, all participants were anonymised in the reporting. The research site was given a pseudonym, and the organisation's activities and services were described in general terms to prevent identification. Participants were explicitly informed that their data would remain confidential and would not be shared with anyone beyond the researcher or relevant academics at the University of Leeds. They were also assured that their responses and identities would be anonymised in all written or published materials.

Following these assurances of confidentiality and anonymity, participants provided informed consent to be recorded. Telephone interviews were conducted in participants' own environments, predominantly in their homes. All interviews took place during regular working hours, ensuring that participants did not lose pay as a result of taking part. All data was securely stored on university-approved media to maintain its integrity and confidentiality.

The second round of interviews adopted a different recruitment process from the initial cohort, where participants had been selected anonymously through the workplace organisation. The revised strategy, which involved directly contacting participants, was considered appropriate and practical given the researcher's extensive professional experience as a line and senior manager. This change was approved as an amendment to the original ethics application.

Before commencing each interview, participants were asked whether they were comfortable being recorded. In line with ethical best practice, they were reminded that their names, locations, and the organisation's name would remain anonymous in all research outputs. Participants were also informed of their right to decline answering any question or to avoid topics that made them uncomfortable. They were further assured of their right to withdraw from the interview at any point. These measures adhered to established ethical standards (Stake, 1995).

The research project underwent full ethical review and received approval from the University of Leeds AREA Ethics Committee, ensuring compliance with ethical guidelines throughout the study (see appendix C).

3.12. Conclusion

This chapter has outlined the methodological foundations of the study, demonstrating how the chosen qualitative approach was designed to address the research questions concerning line managers' implementation of sickness-absence management. By situating the research within a subjectivist paradigm and adopting semi-structured interviews, the study was positioned to capture the complexity of organisational processes and managerial perspectives. These methodological choices were essential for generating the depth of insight required to examine how discretion is exercised, how policies are interpreted, and how organisational structures shape managerial behaviour, all of which underpin the thesis's wider contribution to understanding how sickness absence is managed in practice.

The chapter has also explained the rationale for the research setting and sampling strategy, ensuring access to participants with both contemporary and historical experience of absence management. This design enabled the study to explore changes over time and to compare how different managerial generations navigated the same organisational processes. In doing so, the methodology provides a coherent framework for producing rich, contextual data and for analysing patterns through thematic analysis. Ethical considerations were integrated throughout to safeguard participants and maintain research integrity.

These methodological decisions establish a strong foundation for the empirical chapters that follow. The temporal design supports the thesis's broader aim of explaining how line managers interpret, negotiate, and enact sickness-absence policy in practice, enabling the study to

capture both continuity and change in managerial experience. The next three chapters present the findings, beginning with insights from interviews conducted with employees of the organisation pseudonymised as “Public One”.

Chapter 4. Contemporary sickness absence management

4.1. Introduction

This chapter advances the thesis's contribution by opening up the 'black box' of policy implementation (Boxall et al., 2011) to examine how line managers in a large public sector organisation (pseudonym 'Public One') enact sickness absence management in practice.

Responding to longstanding calls for qualitative research that illuminates the hidden mechanisms shaping HR policy enactment, the chapter provides a detailed account of the organisational, interpersonal, and procedural factors that influence how absence management is conducted on the ground. In doing so, it offers new insight into the complex and often conflicting demands placed on line managers, and the ways these demands shape both their decision-making and their capacity to exercise discretion.

This study was undertaken in a local-government organisation which consistently records higher levels of sickness absence than the national average. Public One reported an absence rate of 11.8 days per employee in 2019, and the department examined in this thesis recorded the highest sickness-absence levels within this local-government organisation. This context underscores the relevance of examining how absence-management practices operate in high-absence public-sector environments.

Public One's sickness-absence policy sets out clear requirements for reporting procedures, return-to-work interviews, documentation standards, and organisational trigger points. References to flexibility are brief and non-prescriptive, encouraging managers to use informal approaches where possible and to consider individual circumstances, but without detailed guidance on how discretion should operate. Return-to-work meetings are presented as both formal processes and opportunities for informal discussion, reflecting the dual emphasis within the policy.

The analysis draws on interviews with sixteen contemporary line managers working within a single department, supplemented by eight interviews with senior managers responsible for overseeing absence policy and organisational expectations. Line managers were asked about their understanding of absence policies, their day-to-day practices, and the organisational

pressures that shape their actions. To preserve anonymity, participant quotes are coded; C1 to C16 indicate current line managers.

Their accounts reveal a persistent disconnect between the autonomy they believe they possess and the constraints imposed by HR through policy design, automated systems, and expectations of continual consultation. Although line managers viewed themselves as best placed to handle staff absence due to their close working relationships, their narratives show how HR influence, both overt and subtle, often reduced them to administrative actors rather than autonomous decision makers.

Senior management interviews add an important organisational layer, clarifying how policies are framed, how expectations are communicated, and how managerial discretion is shaped by the broader governance environment. Together, these perspectives demonstrate that effective absence management is shaped not simply by policy implementation, but by the underlying power dynamics between HR, senior leaders, and line managers.

The key themes emerging from these perspectives, along with their associated subthemes, are summarised in table 2, below.

Table 2. Key themes and sub-themes – current line managers

Theme	**Sub-themes**
Line manager absence management role	Policy awareness; first-day absence calls; return-to-work interviews; communicating procedures
Dual-purpose absence policy	Disciplinary use; supportive use; enforcement versus empathy; legitimacy of absence
Perceived sickness absence abuse	"Playing the system"; using thresholds strategically; repeated short-term absence; managerial frustration
Supporting genuine absence	Flexibility needed for bereavement, mental health, long-term illness; avoiding unfair escalation; compassion and fairness
Theme	**Sub-themes**

Relational knowledge and personalised management	Knowing staff personally; trust-based relationships; tailored support; openness and disclosure; Line Manager better positioned than HR
Constrained discretion	Reliance on HR approval; fear of blame; responsibility without authority; limited independent action
HR influence and dependency	HR as expert support; HR validation; dependence on HR advice; tension over rigidity
Automated monitoring and procedural control	Automated reminders; compliance tracking; overdue prompts; surveillance of line managers
Organisational pressure and senior management expectations	Pressure to tackle absence; compliance targets; visible action; senior management influence

The chapter is structured as follows. It begins by outlining the HR-related responsibilities undertaken by line managers in Public One and their understanding of the policy process. It then examines line managers' interpretations of the purpose of the absence policy, which they viewed as operating a dual approach: supportive for those believed to be genuinely ill, and more punitive for those suspected of abusing the system. The prevalence and challenges of managing perceived non-genuine sickness are then explored, followed by an examination of why line managers consider themselves better placed than HR to manage absence due to their interpersonal relationships with staff. The chapter then considers the extent to which line managers feel able to deviate from policy guidelines, highlighting their reliance on HR for decision-making in practice. This is followed by an analysis of the line manager-HR relationship, characterised by both helpfulness and, at times, perceived harshness. The final section examines the influence of the automated HR absence system, which monitors and shapes managerial actions throughout the process.

4.2. The line managers absence management role

Public One's sickness-absence policy sets out guiding principles that advocate a supportive approach to absence management while emphasising the need to maintain service provision. Reporting procedures, return-to-work interviews, documentation standards and organisational trigger points are all specified in detail, indicating when formal action should

begin. References to flexibility are brief and non-prescriptive, encouraging managers to use informal approaches when possible and to consider individual circumstances, but without clear guidance on how this might operate or the extent to which the process can be adapted. Additionally there is an expectation that managers should tailor responses to individual needs while at the same time applying the policy consistently. Return-to-work meetings further illustrate these opposing features, as they are formal, documented processes that the policy also presents as opportunities for informal discussion. Overall, the policy provides clarity on procedural compliance but gives only limited indication of how managers might depart from the formal framework.

Public One's absence policy assigns responsibility for managing sickness absence to line managers, and all line managers interviewed confirmed that they undertook this as part of their role in managing their own teams. Line managers appeared to have a good understanding of their organisation's sickness absence process and their role in its implementation. This included good overall knowledge of the monitoring process, what circumstances breached the standard expected targets in the policy, the need to input all information regarding absences into the online HR reporting system, and to follow instructions sent out to them via the online system.

When describing how they manage sickness absence, participants consistently emphasised the importance of gathering key information during the initial phone call. This includes understanding the reason for the absence, estimating how long the employee expects to be off, and determining whether any immediate support is needed. One line manager explained:

> *"Just generally, why are they not coming in. You know, how long do they think they're going to be off. Are they going to be seeking medical advice, is there anything I need to do to support them?" (C4)*

The tone of the call often appeared deliberately empathetic and supportive, with line managers typically beginning by expressing concern for the employee's wellbeing before moving into more practical matters. As one participant described:

> *"The first thing we'd obviously ask would be say, sorry to hear you're not well and I'm quite sympathetic in a way… And then we'd ask them if it's ok to discuss with me what's wrong with them." (C3)*

Line managers also tailor their responses depending on the nature of the illness. For example, when the absence relates to a short-term physical condition, the interaction is typically concise and pragmatic. In such cases, line managers may advise straightforward self-care measures, encourage the employee to monitor their symptoms, seek medical attention if necessary, and keep the organisation updated on their recovery and availability. In contrast, if the absence is related to stress or a more complex issue, the line manager may explore further, asking more probing questions. One line manager, for example, described how they might respond by asking:

> *"Right, have you been to see your GP? Has he put you on medication? Is there anything we need to be doing at this end? What support do you need from us?" (C4)*

This more exploratory approach highlights how conversations extend beyond immediate reassurance to consider medical involvement and organisational support. Building on this, another key aspect of such calls is clarifying the expected duration of the absence and any documentation required. Line managers often ask whether the employee has consulted a doctor and whether a self-certification or sick note will be provided. In practice, they may request daily updates until formal documentation is received, though if a self-certification covers several days, managers typically do not insist on contact every day.

Alongside these procedural checks, the call often includes a discussion of next steps and reassurance that the employee can reach out if they need further support. This might involve confirming that the employee understands the sickness reporting process or simply offering a continued line of communication. As one participant explained, the emphasis is on:

> *"…just having a conversation that I'm happy for them to contact me, whenever they needed to talk to me or anything." (C1)*

Such openness is particularly significant when the stated reason for absence may conceal deeper issues. As another line manager observed, employees sometimes attribute their absence to a minor illness, when in reality the underlying cause relates to personal or domestic difficulties:

> *"Often people might cover things up and say that they've got a stomach bug but actually there's something going on at home." (C14)*

Beyond these more supportive exchanges, line managers highlighted the importance of adhering to the formal requirements of the absence policy. The 'rules' of the policy were frequently cited, including the number of episodes or length of sickness absence that would trigger progression to stage one, two, or three of monitoring, and the recommended period for ongoing review. Knowledge of these procedures appeared well-established, reinforced through prompts received via automated HR emails and the 'return to work' (RTW) interview template, which line managers consistently referred to when describing their practice.

These automated communications provided detailed instructions, for example reminding line managers to issue monitoring letters within a specified timeframe and alerting them if deadlines were missed. Line managers spoke with confidence about how such prompts structured their actions, ensuring that meetings were scheduled correctly and correspondence sent on time. There was a notable fluency in the way they described the HR process, coupled with an overall acceptance that managing absence in this procedural manner was part of their role rather than HR's. The process was generally regarded as clear, and line managers appeared confident about what was expected of them.

Line managers also outlined that they proactively informed employees about the sickness monitoring process and the possibility of being placed under monitoring, emphasising the importance of ensuring employees were aware when their absence levels approached the threshold. The purpose of this approach was to prevent any 'surprise' when an employee's absence triggered their inclusion in the monitoring process, allowing them to anticipate potential outcomes. Discussions were described as straightforward, noting that employees were consistently made aware of how the process operated and understood the implications of sickness absence. It was evident that line managers recognised the significance of clear communication regarding policy guidelines and the potential consequences and made a point of ensuring staff understood the guidelines and procedures contained in the absence management policy.

Some line managers choose to mention policy and monitoring procedures during an employee's absence; however, this could be interpreted by the employee in different ways depending on the context. On one hand, this approach can come across as uncaring or even threatening, particularly if the employee is already feeling vulnerable. One line manager reflected on this, stating:

> *"You're looking then at setting a target… if they're doing this on a regular basis it's something you would discuss on the sickness monitoring anyway… if you said to them at the point of them ringing up, they probably wouldn't come in for the five days. They'd probably think, 'well I might as well have all five off, if that's what she thinks.'" (C3)*

This illustrates how referencing policy too early, while the employee is still off sick, can inadvertently make them feel scrutinised or distrusted. Rather than encouraging a quicker return to work, it may have the opposite effect, prompting the employee to extend their absence if they believe sanctions are inevitable regardless of their actions. Many line managers are aware of this risk and are cautious about the timing of such conversations. As one participant reflected:

> *"I also wouldn't want to use a trigger point as a nudge to make someone come to work when they shouldn't be coming to work when they're poorly." (C9)*

This highlights a conscious effort to avoid creating a situation where an employee feels compelled to return to work prematurely out of fear of disciplinary action or formal review. Conversely, mentioning policy can also serve a protective function, helping employees understand their options and avoid unnecessary sanctions. In practice, line managers described how they sometimes explored alternative arrangements, such as the use of flexitime or annual leave to ensure that an absence did not need to be formally recorded and therefore would not escalate the employee onto a monitoring stage unnecessarily. Importantly, these options sat outside the boundaries of the formal absence management policy and, in theory, should not have been offered. Line managers nonetheless presented them as pragmatic solutions, reflecting a discretionary approach that sought to balance strict procedural rules with employee wellbeing.

Because of these complexities, many line managers chose to delay more detailed discussions about the absence and any potential implications until the employee had returned to work. Upon recommencing work after an absence, line managers were required to undertake a return-to-work (RTW) meeting with the employee and complete a formal record of the discussion. This meeting provides an opportunity to explore the reasons for the absence in more depth, assess whether any support or adjustments are needed, and, where necessary,

explain how the absence may relate to future attendance monitoring. The RTW form is designed to document the absence and ensure that employees are fully informed about their position within the organisation's attendance policy. As one line manager explained, it would be difficult to overlook this step due to the structure of the form itself:

> *"When you complete their return to work, the first question you are asked on the form is, 'have you explained the improving attendance policy to the staff member?', so, you can't not really, unless you skip things on a very simple document, you can't not explain it." (C9)*

The accounts provided by line managers indicate that they assume a substantial HR function in the management of sickness absence, a finding that aligns with existing literature highlighting the devolved nature of HR responsibilities to line management (CIPD, 2018; Kurdi-Nakra et al., 2021; Purcell and Hutchinson, 2007). Their narratives also demonstrated a good understanding of the procedures set in the organisation's absence policy, suggesting clear knowledge of both the formal requirements and the practical application of policy in day-to-day management.

When considered jointly, these accounts suggest a common approach to managing absence: brief and pragmatic responses to short-term illness, more probing and supportive conversations in complex cases, and adherence to procedural rules. At the same time, line managers were observed to exercise discretion beyond the boundaries of policy, though the extent of this practice is difficult to determine. This nonetheless revealed a tension between formal compliance and informal adjustments. Having established participants' comprehension of the formal absence procedures, the next section shifts focus to how line managers perceived the broader purpose of the absence policy, with their perspectives indicating that it served a dual role.

4.3. The purpose of the Absence Policy

This section examines line managers' perceptions of the underlying purpose of the organisation's absence policy. Rather than focusing on procedural detail, line managers were invited to reflect on what the policy was intended to achieve. Open-ended questions elicited views on its aims, perceived effectiveness, and the ways in which it was applied in everyday management.

Public One's written Absence Policy sets out the aims, objective, and key principles regarding the organisation's desired approach to managing absences, this includes the need for a positive approach to health and the requirement to minimise absence rates. The importance of employee attendance is outlined, which is to ensure the organisation operates successfully and fulfills the needs of their customers. Importance is placed on the necessity to investigate all absences, which primarily took the form of a return-to-work interview conducted by the line manager to establish the following: reasons for absence; explore support options; and to outline required standards of behaviour expected of employees. Further emphasised, was the need for consistency in managing employees. However, the policy simultaneously acknowledges that each case must be assessed individually, advising line managers to "*balance the need for consistency with an appreciation that individual circumstances will differ and require a personalised approach" (Public One's Absence Policy)*. Consequently, line managers are expected to apply uniform standards while also tailoring their approach to the unique needs of each employee.

Line managers in Public One perceived the absence policy as serving two distinct purposes which led to varied approaches in its implementation. On one hand, the policy was viewed as a punitive tool, used to discipline employees suspected of abusing sick leave, those perceived as "*swinging the lead."* In such cases, line managers were quick to initiate formal sickness monitoring procedures, treating the policy as a mechanism for enforcing compliance. On the other hand, the policy was also seen as a supportive tool for employees with legitimate health concerns. In these instances, line managers believed discretion should be exercised, where deviation from standard procedures could facilitate flexibility and support. This dual perception created a tension between enforcement and empathy, shaping how absence management was applied in practice:

> *"I think the discretion tends to be more for people who are like, genuinely ill [he laughs], if you understand what I mean. But for the people that, you know, that do like to take the odd day off here and there on sick, that's where the policy comes in." (C7)*

Discretion, as described by Public One line managers, referred to their ability to override procedural guidelines when they felt it was warranted. They emphasised their "flexibility" in

policy implementation, including refraining from placing an employee under monitoring when policy dictated or adjusting monitoring targets suggested by HR personnel.

Line managers often framed the absence policy as a disciplinary tool for addressing undesirable behaviour. As one explained:

> *"…there's a policy there that will sort 'em out if they take too many days off." (C3).*

The process was perceived as a net, enabling line managers to "catch" employees they viewed as exploiting sick leave. Boundaries were seen as necessary to control behaviour, with monitoring stages acting as a threat or punishment. As one line manager explained, the sickness process would, "*bite you in the backside*" (C7) if boundaries were crossed employees were escalated through the policy stages which could then lead to further sanctions. Another emphasised the seriousness of stage two of the policy process, noting:

> *"…if someone is on stage two, I have to remind people that, 'if you have any more time off you could lose your job'. (C15)*

Line managers often justified strict enforcement as fair when applied to employees perceived as non-genuine in their absence claims. As one put it, "…it can appear fairly strict, but you can't let people run a mockery." (C11). In contrast, when employees were believed to be genuinely unwell, line managers frequently deviated from, ignored, or circumvented procedures to protect them from punitive measures and provide support.

This discretionary approach meant the policy was not applied uniformly but strategically, shaped by perceptions of authenticity. As one line manager summarised his stance on non-genuine sickness absence:

> "[*I would] want to go through the gears, move them onto the final stage of the sickness procedure." (*C12)

Perceptions of authenticity therefore played a central role in determining whether the absence policy was enforced rigidly or flexibly. Building on this, the next section looks in greater depth at line managers' views of misuse, particularly the belief that some staff intentionally leveraged the policy to their advantage.

4.4. Abuse of the Absence Policy

Assessing the true extent of 'deviant' sickness behaviour in Public One is challenging, however, line managers consistently reported that "*playing the system"* was present to some degree across all teams. This perception was shaped by their own experiences as well as discussions with other managers:

> *"…we [line managers] have management meetings and we do know that there are certain members, they do know how to push it, and…they never leave the attendance management procedure, but they always go backwards and forwards." (C16)*

The problem was seen as a *"common theme*", one line manager referred to the prevalence of this saying, *"there's one in every office" (C5),* another estimation was that 10% were non-genuine and another line manager estimated that a fifth of employees manipulated the policy in this way:

> *"…probably about 20% element that do play it, play the system, erm. Yeah, they know the policy inside out" (C4)*

In Public One, like most public sector organisations, dependent on tenure, employees are entitled to six months full pay, followed by 6 months half pay if they are absent due to ill health, therefore when they take sick leave, they continue to receive full pay whilst they are absent for a significant length of time.

The line managers interviewed took the view that a proportion of employees used their sick leave entitlement as a way of gaining extra days off work, safe in the knowledge that they would receive full pay whilst absent. There was a belief that employees manipulated the policy, knowing how much sick leave they could take without breaching targets:

> *"I think, you know there is people out there who kind of look at sickness almost as like leave allocation, they know the policy, so they know how many days they are allowed to have." (C7).*

Whilst line managers thought the boundaries outlined in the policy were necessary, they also believed that the clarity it provided meant that staff aiming to abuse the system knew exactly how far they could push without fear of losing their job. This is consistent with Dunn and Wilkinson's (2002b) research, which found that sickness target levels could be interpreted by

employees as the number of days absence deemed acceptable by the organisation, with the unintended effect of encouraging staff to take those days as if they were extra annual leave. In other words, if employees are told that 8.5 days is the threshold before triggering concern, this can be read as implied permission to take that amount.

In Public One, some employees were seen to push their sick leave to the limit, carefully meeting the requirements of each monitoring stage while still taking the maximum days permitted. Line managers described this as a cycle in which staff moved up through the stages of monitoring, met the requirements to de-escalate, and then repeated the process, creating what was perceived as a "never-ending circle" without serious consequences for the employee.

The effectiveness of the policy was therefore frequently questioned, as procedures could be manipulated to allow substantial amounts of sick leave to be taken strategically, without escalation to the point of sanction. As one line manager explained, the amount of extra time off accumulated in this way was not insignificant, yet the risk of dismissal was no greater than for employees with perfect attendance:

> *"So, over the course of a ten-year career, they could have had one or two years equivalent time off. But in any given year they are at no more risk than any others, even those with 100% attendance record. So that does strike me as a little bit…[fades off]." (C12).*

Line managers frequently referenced how well certain employees understood the absence policy and procedures, reinforcing the belief that the transparency of the guidelines allowed the system to be exploited for their benefit. In some cases, line managers even expressed that these employees had a more thorough knowledge of the policy than those responsible for enforcing it, further complicating efforts to regulate attendance and deter perceived misuse.

There was a strong sense of powerlessness amongst line managers in dealing with employees who knew the system and took large or frequent amounts of time off without falling foul of the policy, and who were perceived as not genuinely ill. This repetitive cycle of moving in and out of monitoring led to significant frustration. Line managers felt unable to take effective action and were hesitant to voice doubts about the genuineness of absences, as doing so risked accusations of dishonesty. Because employees carefully stayed within the set

boundaries of the policy, line managers concluded that "*there's nothing that you can do*," and, as one line manager described, the process was ultimately "*in their favour so to speak."*

Although line managers viewed the absence policy as a kind of threat or punishment, those employees determined to secure extra days off through manipulating sick leave did not appear to feel threatened or worried. As one line manager pointed out regarding such individuals:

> *"…they don't really seem fazed by the conversations that you have with them… it's sort of the 'regulars', if you like, who sort of know the system." (C6)*

This resignation was reinforced by the belief that, according to another line manager:

> *"…nothing's fool proof… you're always going to get individuals who will push it and who will use it as a bit of a tool to get more time off." (C16)*

The reasons offered for doubting the genuineness of certain absences often centred on employees' established histories of illness. Line managers explained that when an employee had a long record of repeated sickness, they were more likely to escalate the case, interpreting such patterns as indicative of non-genuine absence. These employees were seen to meet the targets set, while simultaneously taking the maximum sick days before dropping back down to a lower stage of monitoring. Line managers believed they knew their staff well enough to distinguish genuine illness from non-genuine, and once employees had established a pattern of meeting minimum requirements without incurring penalties, subsequent sick leave was often assumed to be non-genuine.

Irritation was particularly directed at employees who regularly reported sick, with line managers expressing exasperation at familiar names phoning in. As one line manager recalled:

> *"I think, 'god it's her again ringing in'. I'm still sort of, 'oo, I'm really sorry' you know, 'sorry you're not well', and, 'oh it must be awful', when really I'm thinking, 'for god's sake, just get yourself out of bed'" (C3)*

Such "regulars" were viewed as well enough to work, and their repeated short absences were interpreted as opportunistic rather than legitimate. Line managers described how these individuals often took frequent short absences for minor ailments, such as a couple of days

off with flu, followed by a day for a bad knee, then a few days for a headache or sickness and diarrhoea. This pattern of varied, short-term illnesses was perceived as evidence of opportunism rather than genuine incapacity.

This perception aligns with research by Notenbomer et al. (2016) and Marmot et al. (1995), which suggests that frequent short-term absences may indicate non-genuine or avoidable sickness. According to these studies, the mildness of symptoms means employees have a choice about attendance, whereas serious or long-term illness removes that option. Further reinforcing managerial concerns, McEwan (1991) highlights that a doctor's certificate serves as a legitimising factor for absence, meaning that in cases of short-term sickness where no sicknote is required, line managers were left to rely solely on employees' claims, "*taking their word for it*." The absence of formal verification contributed to suspicions of misuse.

Moreover, research has linked frequent absences to lowered motivation, workplace withdrawal, and strained relationships with line managers (Halbesleben et al., 2014; MacLean, 2008). Rather than being incapacitated, employees may choose to be absent, with disengagement from work playing a role in their decision-making. Taking sick leave for a headache, for example, might not considered a sufficient reason to be off work if it was a one-off symptom. As one line manager reflected:

> *"…she had got a headache… it wasn't something that I would personally think of as a real illness, there was no ongoing illness with her." (C16)*

In relation to long-term sickness (episodes of approximately four weeks or more), the requirement for a doctor's note stating the reason for illness confirmed the genuineness of the absence, making it more credible as "evidence based." Academic literature often assumes that short-term sickness absence is of a more voluntary nature, and therefore more receptive to intervention, as there is an element of choice by the employee (Marmot et al., 1995; Notenbomer et al., 2016). By contrast, unavoidable absence due to incapacity offers little scope for managerial influence.

Despite line managers feeling that some employees could have attended work but instead chose to take time off for minor ailments, they struggled to persuade staff to remain at work and felt powerless to intervene beyond the formal absence management procedures. These

procedures were, in their view, ineffective against employees who repeatedly exploited the system, leaving line managers frustrated and resigned to the limitations of their role.

Having explored how line managers perceived certain employees as exploiting sickness absence entitlements for additional time off work, leading to strict adherence to formal procedures, the following section shifts focus to the supportive aspect of the absence policy. Focusing on managerial autonomy in applying absence policy guidelines, it highlights line managers' justification in deviating from strict enforcement when addressing legitimate health concerns. Rather than rigidly following policy, line managers described the desire to adapt their approach to accommodate individual circumstances, ensuring fairness and flexibility where strict adherence appeared inappropriate or unjust.

4.5. Genuine absences: Adapting management approaches

The Absence Policy was understood as serving two purposes, as mentioned previously, necessitating two distinct approaches in its implementation. The first approach involved adherence to policy guidelines when absences were perceived to lack genuine cause. In contrast, the second approach focused on managing absences with flexibility, allowing line managers to deviate from formal procedures when they believed the absentee was genuinely ill.

Line managers in Public One referred to deviating from policy as exercising 'discretion', emphasising the level of choice and authority they had in implementing the absence policy. They explained that this discretion allowed them to deviate from or even ignore the written guidelines when deemed appropriate. This flexibility was viewed as crucial for supporting genuinely ill staff, enabling line managers to shield such employees from the potential consequences of the policy. As described by one line manager, "you should use your discretion to give people that chance and that extra support" (C12).

In practice this meant that if the illness was thought to be genuine it would be considered inappropriate to escalate employees through the monitoring process, as this was seen as too harsh. Line managers explained that in such cases they often chose not to move staff onto stage II of monitoring, preferring instead to avoid escalation where the condition was regarded as legitimate.

For example, if an employee needed to take two weeks sick leave after a bereavement, then as it exceeded the 8.5 day limit in the policy, the guidelines would suggest placing the person on sickness monitoring. However, as one line manager reflected:

> *"…she had not had sick leave in 12 months…somebody very close passes away, you take 2 weeks off, which isn't unreasonable, you know, and then they come back, you've triggered, you've had more than 8 days off I'm going to put you on stage one, I don't think that's very fair". (C6).*

There were also instances where line managers perceived HR practices to be unfair, particularly when an employee returned to work too soon after an illness and, still unwell, had to take further sick leave. This could result in two separate episodes of absence being recorded, rather than one, thereby escalating the employee further along the monitoring process. Line managers asserted that discretion should be applied in such cases, as the employee's illness had not fully cleared and their early return had inadvertently penalised them.

While some employees elongated their absence to avoid triggering additional monitoring, line managers pointed out that employees making the effort to return early risked being penalised if they had to go off sick again. This example underscores the importance of discretion in such cases, yet here it was overridden by HR policy, prioritising rigid adherence over flexibility and fairness. This aligns with Dunn and Wilkinson's (2002b) findings that policies designed to lower absence levels, by counting separate episodes of sick leave, could unintentionally lead employees to extend their sick leave 'just in case' to avoid triggering multiple occurrences and associated consequences. Dunn and Wilkinson's study highlights how rigid enforcement can have unintended repercussions, reinforcing the value of discretionary intervention.

Line managers in Public One were often hesitant to place employees with mental health conditions under formal monitoring, as they believed the additional stress could be detrimental to the individual's well-being. This reluctance stemmed from a concern that such measures might exacerbate existing challenges faced by the absentee, rather than support their recovery. However, as one line manager noted, they felt pressure by the organisation to follow policy, since senior managers wanted to show that they were taking action when employees took sick leave: "*…it's like, we need to be seen to be tackling this…"* (C16). In their

view, this took precedence over considering the circumstances surrounding why that person took sick leave.

Despite facing pressure from senior management to visibly address sickness absence and uphold procedural standards, line managers demonstrated a strong understanding of the need for flexibility in its application and felt it was important to exercise discretion and deviate from the guidelines when necessary. The tension between complying with organisational directives from senior management and HR and providing tailored support to staff added complexity to managing absence, creating internal conflict for line managers. It was clear that if line managers accepted that an employee's illness was genuine, they believed it was important to use discretion to shield them from punishment, as such measures would not be seen as appropriate. This approach underscored their commitment to fairness and the need to protect staff who genuinely required time off work, ensuring they were being supported rather than penalised for their circumstances. The challenge of navigating these competing priorities intensified the pressures placed on line managers by senior management and HR and underscored the difficulties of balancing policy compliance with the exercise of managerial discretion.

Building on the discussion around discretion and the authority to deviate from policy guidelines, the next section examines line managers' perspectives, particularly their belief that they are better equipped than HR personnel to manage sickness absence and make discretionary decisions.

4.6. Line Managers as Best Positioned to Manage Absence

Participants were asked to evaluate whether HR or line managers were better suited to manage sickness absence. A consistent theme emerged in which line managers emphasised that they were best placed to undertake this role. Their justification centred on their close knowledge of their teams, which enabled them to understand individual needs, provide appropriate support, and exercise discretion in applying absence management policies. Line managers believed that the trust and strong working relationships they had built with their employees encouraged more open communication, allowing for a deeper understanding of how best to support staff during sickness absence. Their familiarity with their team was particularly valuable when addressing 'delicate' or 'sensitive' situations, as employees who felt embarrassed might not share the full context of their absence. By fostering trust and

maintaining close relationships, line managers were more likely to gain a comprehensive understanding of the circumstances surrounding an absence, providing them with greater scope to offer tailored support and assistance. It was clear the employment relationship played a large role in how much information would be divulged from employees and the level of trust they had in their line manager.

Routine conversations between line managers and their team, coupled with regular one-to-one meetings, fostered a personal connection that allowed managers to know their team members on an individual level. As one line manager explained:

> *"I know my staff members very well and I know their family backgrounds…I know their foibles; I know their quirks" (C9).*

This familiarity guided how line managers approached absence-related discussions, resulting in interactions that were perceived to be more relaxed and supportive. In contrast, according to line managers, conversations between HR and employees were more formal in nature, reflecting the structured and procedural role of HR in absence management. The openness that close employment relationships fostered could potentially help inform line managers about how adjustments could be put in place and how best to encourage employees back to work, or help to keep them from going absent in the first instance. As one line manager described;

> *"…we know the people, we know them personally, we can be a bit more personal to them in terms of providing them with that 'on the job' support" (C6).*

Line managers felt that HR were unable to exercise discretion fairly due to their remoteness from staff and clearly positioned themselves as better suited to applying discretion. This was particularly significant in cases involving employees' mental health concerns, such as anxiety and depression. Line managers illustrated how their familiarity with their team allowed them to recognise when an employee was not themselves and showing signs of heightened anxiety. By identifying these trigger signs, which they had observed previously, line managers were able to tailor their approach to support the employee.

In contrast, HR's absence of personal interaction with employees meant there was a lack of human connection to the person, rather than seeing an individual with unique problems.

Because of HR's lack of knowledge about employees, there was a tendency to follow the rules and implement policy to the letter, which line managers argued could result in unfair treatment. For instance, line managers highlighted that even if an employee had not been off sick for 12 months, taking two weeks of absence would automatically trigger stage one monitoring under HR's rigid application of the policy. Line managers felt this was inappropriate and unfair, as it failed to take account of the employee's prior attendance record and the genuine nature of their absence.

This section has outlined the perception that HR adopted a rigid, policy-driven approach to people management, which stood in contrast to the flexibility and discretion that line managers associated with their own management style. Line managers emphasised their ability to adapt policies based on close relationships with their teams, which they saw as a key reason they were better positioned than HR to exercise discretion effectively.

4.7. Permission to use discretion.

This section explores the realities of how line managers sought to apply discretion, highlighting the decision-making processes they relied upon and the ways in which they navigated the boundaries of formal policy. While line managers valued the principle of discretion, in practice they often looked to HR for reassurance, rarely exercising discretion independently.

This reliance on HR consultations to validate their decisions appeared to stem from several underlying factors. Line managers expressed insecurity about deviating from policy guidelines, perceiving strict adherence to policy as a safer and more defensible course of action. Seeking advice from HR was viewed as a protective measure, allowing them to minimise the risk of making errors that could lead to scrutiny, perceiving this would 'cover their backs'. Additionally, line managers noted that transferring decisions to HR effectively shifted the responsibility to HR.

For instance, the prospect of deviating from policy by refraining from placing an employee on monitoring when guidelines suggested otherwise appeared prompt anxiety for line managers, leading them to seek permission from HR before making such decisions. As one participant explained:

"If I'm gonna go away from policy and use my own personal judgement against somebody to escalate, then I'd always get backup from HR because to me it just doesn't make sense not to." (C11)

Their reliance on HR was underpinned by the belief that HR held expert knowledge on policy implementation, which offered reassurance and validation. Line managers felt that involving HR ensured they were adhering to correct procedures as they could provide specialist guidance to line managers. This belief is illustrated in the narrative of one line manager:

"*I'd rather refer this to the people who are experts in this field who deal with the finer points of the policy on a daily basis. It's not that I'm a chicken, it's not because, you know, I don't want to do my job, but I just feel it's a lot fairer for the staff member to have someone with 100% up on knowledge on the process of the policy." Line manager, C9)*

Line managers emphasised the importance of discretion in managing sickness absence, asserting their belief that they were best suited to exercise it due to their familiarity with their staff. However, this confidence appeared at odds with their tendency to consult HR before exercising discretion, revealing a contradiction in their approach. This reliance on HR was further influenced by a sense of insufficient authority to make independent decisions:

"I wouldn't, because I'm not a senior manager, I'm just like a middle manager, I would seek advice on that". (C6)

This perspective illuminates line managers' cautious approach to decision-making and reinforces their dependency on HR as a source of guidance and the desire to minimise personal risk. By consulting HR, line managers reported feeling a sense of reassurance, as they believed the responsibility and potential criticism for the decision would shift to HR. This dependency was rooted in the view of HR as experts, whose approval provided validation for line managers' actions. Consequently, the act of consulting HR not only offered guidance but also transferred accountability, highlighting a lack of confidence in autonomous decision-making.

The narrative therefore was conflicting, as Line managers believed they were in a better position than HR to manage sickness absence due to their familiarity with staff, however, they

often transferred discretion back to HR by seeking approval before making decisions. This reliance not only limited their autonomy but also underscored a dependency on HR, even when their decisions were viewed as inflexible. Several line managers recounted instances where HR's suggestions to strictly follow absence procedures appeared unjust and indifferent to individual circumstances. One extreme example shared involved a staff member who was dismissed due to ill health following the amputation of her leg. Despite having an exemplary sickness record in the past, the line manager felt the individual was escalated quickly through the policy process, stating, *"...she had never had any time off before. It just felt so brutal." (C4)*

Such experiences highlight the tension between procedural compliancy and the need for empathetic, context-sensitive decision-making.

Despite the general reluctance among line managers to deviate from established policies, a minority of participants shared instances of providing staff with additional flexibility through informal arrangements, effectively concealed from HR oversight. Line managers provided examples, such as one line manager who allowed employees occasional unrecorded days off at short notice, referred to as a "*duvet day*". Other examples involved approving short-notice absences due to illness, with the understanding that the employee either made up the time later or used annual leave, therefore avoiding the need to officially record the absence as sick leave. Line managers who acknowledged these "*off the record*" approaches to absence management justified their actions by emphasising the importance of a supportive approach to managing their team, noting the resulting increase in respect and appreciation from their staff. Furthermore, this approach was perceived to enhance morale, which some felt ultimately contributed to a reduction in sickness absences within their teams.

While discussing discretionary decisions in the implementation of sickness absence policies, four line managers, despite not being prompted on this topic, spontaneously raised and explored the issue of the historical level of discretion granted to individuals in their role, *"in the old days*". Among these participants, one suggested that line managers previously had less autonomy, whereas the other three believed there was greater freedom and flexibility in the past. This theme serves as the foundation for the empirical chapter (five) that follows, where it is explored in greater detail, however it is pertinent to provide a brief explanation it at this point to provide its context and relevancy to the research.

The theme of autonomy emerged as a significant factor in this research in shaping how line managers implemented and interpreted HR policies. Notably, the suggestion by three participants that greater autonomy characterised the pre-devolution period appeared to contradict the literature review, which implies constrained managerial discretion in the past, which emphasised the need for further investigation. To address this, an additional panel of interviews was conducted with line managers who had operated during the period of HR function devolution. This historical analysis was essential for understanding the practical implications of autonomy during that time and offers a nuanced perspective to enhance and provide greater clarity to the interpretation of the initial set of contemporary interviews

This section has examined how line managers exercised discretion, shedding light on their perceived autonomy and their reluctance to fully accept their discretionary decision-making role. Although line managers acknowledged having a degree of freedom in implementing the absence process, their role in practice appeared largely confined to administering HR-directed policies. Most deviations from these processes were subject to HR influence, which effectively centralised power and authority over sickness absence management within the HR function. The apparent reluctance exhibited by line managers appeared to be driven by the fear of being subjected to scrutiny and facing repercussions. The underlying reasons for these fears remain ambiguous, and the next section delves into the underlying relationships between line managers and HR, focusing on the availability of guidance and the mechanisms through which line managers sought and accessed support.

4.8. HR-Line manager relationship

To further explore the lack of confidence exhibited by line managers in making independent decisions, this section shifts focus to examine their relationship with HR, analysing the ways in which HR support and guidance shape the degree of discretion exercised by line managers.

Line managers reported having reliable access to HR personnel and were actively encouraged to seek guidance on a wide range of issues. HR were viewed as experts, and their accessibility was appreciated as it offered reassurance about whether their decisions were acceptable. HR's advice was particularly valued in guiding line managers through specific absence management cases, alleviating their concerns about making incorrect decisions. HR introduced themselves to line managers when they first started their role and informed them that they were available to give advice on any matter and that it was their job to support them:

"I got an introduction to her [HR manager] within the first week that I was there. And she was really, really quite keen and if you've got any questions, any problems, it is anything that you don't understand, and she said, "don't feel stupid in ringing up and asking a question, it's what my job is"". (C9)

The appreciation of HR's availability as a resource for advice was suggestive of a good relationship between them, however, at the same time, line managers were apprehensive of reprisals if they deviated from the Absence Policy and procedures. The combination of a fear of scrutiny and the readily available advice offered by HR resulted in line managers mostly asking HR if they wanted to exercise any kind of discretionary decisions during the absence management process. One line manager described a typical conversation with HR about what targets should be set for a staff member, including timescales and future attendance expectations:

"*…when you're not sure, should I move them along?', 'should I be escalating them?' the advice might be [from HR], 'just do a short target for a lesser period', 'just move them back, take them out of the process'. You might then give them a more stringent target, next time*." (C4)

There was a culture of dependency to the degree that line managers got into the habit of routinely asking for advice, which in turn made them feel safe, one participant referring to HR as a *"comfort blanket",* knowing that the decision was ultimately taken by HR they felt absolved of responsibility. The tendency to seek HR advice due to self-doubt in handling responsibility appeared to be very much encouraged by HR, but this meant HR were essentially in control of the process through making most of the discretionary decisions and effectively taking away the responsibility for managing absence from line managers:

"*…usually, HR will send you a recommendation of a target, they'll say, 'here we would suggest that you put this target in place'". (C3)*

Relevant to the notion of HR dependency, a study by Purcell and Kinnie (2007) illustrates the impact of reliance on HR in shaping line manager decisions. The study examines a company that implemented measures to increase the accountability of line managers in their HR responsibilities and decision-making processes and reduce their dependence on HR for guidance or authorisation:

> *"…forcing the team leaders to be more disciplined, more planned and forcing them to be less reactive... partly because the HR team are no longer available on-site to wipe their back sides!" (Purcell and Kinnie, 2007, p. 546).*

The study reported that the changes implemented in the organisation resulted in increased employee satisfaction and improved organisational performance. This example underscores how requiring line managers to take ownership of decision-making processes, can contribute to enhanced organisational outcomes. However, the situation at Public One appeared to be the opposite, with HR encouraging line managers to be dependent on them. As one participant described HR's helpful approach:

> *"anything you need, any help that you need, you need any advice, you've got somebody in HR you can go to". (C6)*

Despite line managers' positive portrayals of HR, these sentiments sharply contrasted with their frustrations over HR's rigid approach to decision-making. They believed that their close relationships with their teams uniquely positioned them to manage absences effectively, particularly when it came to exercising discretion, which was consistently portrayed in their narratives as a highly important aspect of their absence management role. However, they appeared constrained by HR, limiting their ability to exercise their managerial autonomy. The cultivation of a strong reliance on HR for absence management decisions, coupled with their fear of repercussions for deviating from HR guidance, significantly influenced line managers' actions and decision-making in a somewhat covert way.

Townsend et al.'s (2022b) study on policy implementation further provides insights into the factors shaping the discretionary freedom of line managers. Unlike the subtle encouragement of reliance on HR observed in Public One, this study emphasises distinct contrasts between restriction and autonomy in line managers' roles. Focusing on the level of responsibility granted to or exercised by line managers and the degree of HR involvement in people management processes, the study reveals a spectrum of managerial autonomy, ranging from minimal power to substantial freedom, or a combination of these.

The study identifies instances when HR constrained line managers' authority and decision-making capacity, retaining control over key processes. The model presented in the research positions line managers on a continuum of managerial discretion, assessing their ability or

willingness to incorporate HR advice into their decision-making. Townsend et al. describe line managers as either “masters” or “victims,” with masters exercising autonomy in policy implementation, while victims are restricted to following prescribed policies, suggestive of devolution of administrative tasks without empowering line managers to make independent decisions.

The findings of this study, together with Purcell and Kinnie’s (2007) work and observations from Public One, reveal that while policies and procedures establish clear expectations, line managers’ behaviour is shaped by a complex array of underlying factors, some overt and easily recognised, others more subtle. Regardless of their visibility, these influences significantly affect how line managers perceive their responsibilities and implement policies. Within Public One, subtle influences were evident in the limited awareness line managers displayed regarding the extent of HR’s impact. Their accounts often appeared contradictory, they expressed appreciation for HR as helpful and knowledgeable experts, yet simultaneously emphasised their own close relationships with staff as positioning them best to manage absence and exercise discretion. Moreover, although line managers frequently criticised HR for being overly rigid, their reluctance to shield staff from this rigidity suggested that HR’s authority continued to shape their actions indirectly. In this sense, HR exerted a subtle, often unacknowledged influence on line managers’ behaviour, guiding their decisions even when they believed they were acting independently.

Faced with the prospect of scrutiny or penalties, Public One line managers often prioritised compliance over their moral inclination to show leniency to employees they believed deserved it. Consequently, they hesitated to assume personal accountability for their staff, fearing potential consequences. This highlights the ongoing tension between what they perceived as their responsibilities and the practical constraints imposed by their apprehensions and HR influence.

While the relationship between HR and line managers played a pivotal role, another significant factor influencing the absence management process is the HR automated sickness absence monitoring system. The inclination towards strict policy compliance appears further reinforced by the organisation’s automated sickness absence monitoring system, which acts as a prompting mechanism. Through emails, it reminds line managers of policy procedures and their responsibilities, serving as a tool for ensuring adherence to guidelines while also

adding a further influential factor to their decision-making. This system not only tracks line managers' actions in managing staff absences but also appears to shape their approach to policy implementation and restrict their autonomy.

The next section examines the system's impact on absence management practices in greater detail.

4.9. HR's Automated sickness absence monitoring system

The HR automated sickness absence monitoring system implemented by Public One tracks both staff absences and the actions of line managers in managing these absences. Line managers are required to record all relevant information regarding staff sickness directly into the system, ensuring compliance with organisational procedures. All line managers demonstrated full awareness of the system's requirements, noting that they were expected to log each absence from the first day and assign it to the appropriate code.

Once periods of sickness were entered into the system, it automatically calculated when employees had exceeded the thresholds set by the Absence Policy. As one line manager explained, the system would flag when staff had triggered stage I monitoring, prompting a formal meeting:

> "*So, it might say, for example, for this person had three periods of sick, they've triggered stage I, you need to have a meeting with them.*" (C7)

While the Policy formally presented absence thresholds as guidelines, line managers generally interpreted them as rules to be followed. At the same time, they recognised that some discretion could be exercised in practice. Nevertheless, the automated system prompted managerial action by issuing emails when an employee had exceeded the absence targets, suggesting that the individual should be placed under monitoring. These emails also required line managers to provide a formal account of the actions taken, typically by writing a short paragraph outlining the steps they had undertaken and submitting it to HR, ensuring that all activity was tracked. This tracking system made absence management activities visible to HR, reinforcing accountability while at the same time constraining the extent to which line managers could exercise their discretion.

Line managers received automated emails when a staff member was due a return-to-work or monitoring interview, typically a week before the interview deadline. If line managers failed to confirm completion of the task, they would receive a follow-up email requiring an explanation for non-compliance. While some line managers acknowledged that this acted as a useful reminder, the majority perceived it as an encroachment on their autonomy. They explained that when they chose to deviate from established policies, they were required to provide a justification for their decision, which they felt undermined their discretion and added pressure to conform to HR expectations.

The restriction on managerial freedom was further emphasised by the inability of line managers to independently remove staff from monitoring early or outside the prescribed policy guidelines within the online system. Such actions required authorisation from HR, which line managers perceived as an unnecessary limitation on their autonomy. As one line manager noted:

> *"Why can't I just map it? Why does HR have to take them off [the system]? We can't, it should be our discretion but I'm guessing they're making sure that people are being progressed. But again, that's part of that micromanagement culture." (C5)*

If a line manager failed to record the actions taken after a staff member reached a Policy target, the HR system would send an email to remind them of their overdue task. Line managers described how these automated prompts instructed them to conduct meetings once an employee had triggered a stage of monitoring, reinforcing the expectation that they follow the prescribed process. These routine automated system reminders are sent both a week before a task was due and a week after it was overdue if the necessary actions had not been logged in the automated HR system. As described by one line manager:

> *"…you do get chased up, cos, as I said before, if for instance let's just say that you might complete a meeting, but then you might forget to send your email to HR, with the documents on. You will then get an email a week later saying, you know, are you aware that this is still overdue?" (C9)*

The consistent follow-up process appeared to create pressure on line managers to comply with organisational policies, reinforcing their accountability for absence management tasks. HR, supported by an automated email system, closely monitored line manager activity

throughout every stage of the sickness absence process. This oversight shaped the behaviour of most line managers, who tended to follow HR's guidance rather than deviate from it.

As one line manager explained, although the automated system technically allowed adjustments to suggested timescales and procedures, in practice she had never modified them and instead accepted HR's advice, remarking:

"No, I've not altered it. Generally speaking, I'll go with what they say" (C3).

This response illustrates the extent to which the monitoring system shaped managerial decision-making and curtailed the exercise of discretion.

This combination of oversight through the automated absence monitoring system discussed in this section, alongside the style of HR support, highlighted in the previous section, appeared to exert pressure on line managers to adhere to the absence policy guidelines rather than deviate from them. One line manager succinctly summarised the automated system: *"And that's how it works. It's all about the target." (C10)*

With this context in mind, the next section explores the perspectives of senior management and senior HR managers on sickness absence management within Public One, providing a broader view of procedural compliance and how these practices are perceived at more strategic level.

4.10. Senior management and HR views on absence management

This section presents the collective insights from eight interviews with three senior managers employed at Public One, in the department where the line manager participants were based. These comprised the Head of Service and two senior HR managers responsible for HR operations within that department.

The Head of Service provided an overview of the organisational approach to managing sickness absence, highlighting ongoing efforts to address high absence levels. At the time of the interview (January 2020), the organisation's chief executive was actively driving initiatives to reduce absenteeism, reflecting a concerted push from senior leadership. This organisation-wide emphasis placed considerable pressure on senior managers, particularly those in high-absence departments, to devise strategies for improvement.

The Head of Service expressed considerable frustration with what she perceived as unnecessary or extended periods of absence, attributing these to line managers' inconsistent compliance with policy. In her view, managerial inaction was a key driver of persistent absence problems. While acknowledging genuine illness, she suggested that some absences were used as resistance to organisational change, particularly among older employees, framing stress-related absence as a form of protest against workplace change:

> *"I can't understand why they [line managers] don't just follow the policy…"*
>
> *(Head of Service)*

This perspective illustrates a senior management tendency to interpret absence not only as a health issue but also as a cultural phenomenon. It also highlights a preference for procedural compliance over interpersonal discretion, reflecting a belief that absence management should be centrally controlled rather than adapted to individual circumstances.

Her frustration extended to external actors, particularly general practitioners issuing lengthy sick notes and the prevailing belief that employees should only return when fully fit. She advocated for earlier returns on adjusted or reduced hours and criticised the lack of proactive management in facilitating such reintegration. This stance underscores the tension between medical authority, organisational policy, and managerial practice.

During discussions about line manager adherence to policy, the HR Manager explained that responsibility for absence management, historically overseen by HR, had been delegated to line managers. Stages one and two of the absence management process are now managed by line managers, while HR retains oversight for Stage three, which addresses more serious and complex cases, including potential dismissals. Many Public One employees have long tenures, giving them historical knowledge of the organisation, which the HR Manager believed shaped cultural perceptions of HR's role:

> *"…older staff were used to HR managing all sickness absence many years ago, but HR have devolved much of their role to line managers. Line managers often look back in time and still feel that HR should be doing HR and all the sickness absence management, and that work is not their role to do." (HR Manager 1)*

This observation highlights the enduring influence of HR's former role, showing how historical practices can continue to shape perceptions of responsibility and resistance to devolved management and can also constrain the acceptance of new managerial responsibilities, reinforcing tensions between past and present expectations.

The Head of Service raised concerns about the discretion afforded to line managers, arguing that discretionary decisions should not rest with them, as failing to escalate cases could result in indefinite staff absences. Instead, she contended that responsibility should lie with senior management and HR. While she emphasised strict compliance with minimal discretion, the Senior HR Manager presented a contrasting perspective, clarifying that line managers are required to initiate monitoring but retain discretion over how and when to progress cases.

This divergence of views highlights ongoing tensions surrounding the balance of control between line managers, senior management, and HR. The Head of Service's position reflects a belief in the necessity of centralised control, while HR's account acknowledges the practical realities of devolved responsibility and the persistence of historical traditions. Taken together, these accounts reveal a continuing tension, senior leadership's emphasis on strict compliance and centralised oversight contrasts with HR's acknowledgement of the need for line manager-level discretion. The Head of Service's frustration illustrates how organisational targets and performance pressures can indirectly narrow the scope for managerial flexibility, while HR's perspective highlights the cultural and practical legacies that continue to shape line managers' behaviour. More broadly, these contrasting views show how absence management is simultaneously framed as a rule-bound system and a practice requiring situational judgement. Importantly, the organisational drive to demonstrate compliance, reinforced by the chief executive's emphasis on reducing sickness absence, places pressure on senior leaders, such as the Head of Service, who then adopt a more directive position which may then shape how line managers approach absence management.

4.11. Conclusion

This chapter has examined how sickness-absence management operates in practice at Public One, showing that line managers play a central and demanding role in applying organisational policy while responding to the varied circumstances of individual employees. The findings demonstrate that their work involves a continual balancing act: when absence is perceived as non-genuine, line managers tend to apply policy strictly; when absence is viewed as

legitimate, they seek to reduce the punitive impact by exercising discretion. However, this discretion is not exercised freely. Line managers frequently seek HR approval before acting, reflecting both reliance on HR guidance and apprehension about deviating from expected procedures. The Automated HR system reinforces this caution by monitoring actions and prompting policy-aligned responses, further narrowing the discretionary space available to line managers.

Although relationships with HR were generally positive, line managers expressed uncertainty about the consistency and fairness of HR decisions. This contributed to a gap between the formal devolution of absence-management responsibilities and the practical reality of HR oversight. Senior HR managers acknowledged that line managers could diverge from policy, whereas the Head of Service emphasised strict adherence, arguing that inconsistent discretion contributed to high absence levels. These differing expectations, combined with organisational performance targets, created competing pressures that shaped how line managers approached absence cases and influenced their confidence in using discretion.

Taken together, the findings in this chapter contribute to the thesis in several important ways. They deepen empirical understanding of how absence management is enacted in organisational settings, revealing the persistent gap between policy expectations and the realities of managerial practice. They challenge dominant assumptions in HRM by demonstrating that devolved responsibility does not necessarily translate into meaningful autonomy, and by showing how discretion is shaped and constrained through organisational structures, procedural controls, and relational expectations. They also highlight the broader implications of how sickness absence is governed, illustrating how policy design and organisational cultures influence both managerial behaviour and employee experience. These contributions provide a clear and robust basis for the thesis's wider engagement with debates on managerial agency and the governance of workplace health. They also point to the need for a deeper temporal perspective, as understanding how managerial autonomy has evolved over time is essential for strengthening and contextualising the patterns identified in this chapter.

Autonomy emerged as a significant theme, with some current line managers recalling greater freedom in earlier periods and others suggesting the opposite. These contrasting accounts prompted a temporal exploration of managerial discretion, informed by literature identifying

the 1990s as a pivotal period in the devolution of HR responsibilities. Research by Renwick (2003), Watson et al. (2006), Purcell and Hutchinson (2007), Townsend et al. (2022a), and Kurdi-Nakra et al. (2021) consistently situates the 1990s as a key phase in which managerial autonomy was formally expanded. Recognising this, a second cohort of former line managers was included to illuminate how autonomy was experienced during this earlier period and to clarify how organisational expectations have shifted over time. Their insights form the basis of the next chapter, which examines these historical accounts to contextualise and deepen the findings presented here.

Chapter 5. Former Line Managers' perspective on Absence management

5.1. Introduction

This chapter extends the thesis's contribution by deepening understanding of how managerial autonomy in absence management has evolved over time. The previous chapter demonstrated that contemporary practice is shaped by tensions between policy expectations, organisational oversight, and the constrained discretion available to line managers. To strengthen and contextualise these findings, this chapter examines changes in the public sector working environment during a period of transformation in people management practices. Drawing on 16 interviews with former public sector line managers, it explores how evolving approaches to absence management shaped their experiences. To preserve anonymity, participants are coded; H1 to H16 indicate former line managers.

Although participants' careers spanned from the 1970s to 2020, they were selected specifically for their experience in the 1990s, a period consistently identified in the literature as pivotal in the decentralisation of HR responsibilities to line managers.

This historical perspective captures firsthand accounts of individuals as they reflect on their careers, the key changes they encountered, their absence management responsibilities, and the integration of Human Resources departments into their organisations. Their reflections contribute to a deeper historical understanding of absence management practices and their evolution, highlighting the ways in which past experiences have shaped current managerial approaches. The main themes arising from this historical perspective, and the subthemes that underpin them, are presented in table 3, below.

Table 3. Key themes and sub-themes – former line managers

Theme	Sub-themes
From workplace fulfilment to disillusionment	Earlier pride and commitment; declining morale; reduced staff wellbeing; organisational dissatisfaction

Changing management culture and "new style management"	Shift away from people-centred management; less experienced managers; devaluation of long service/experience
Financial cutbacks and restructuring	Austerity pressures; instability; reduced resources; impact on morale and security
Transition from Personnel to Human Resources	Move from personal to formal systems; standardisation; rise of HRM procedures
From relational management to procedural control	Humane management replaced by bureaucracy; rules over judgement; standardised sickness processes; earlier flexibility; use of personal judgement; reduced autonomy under formal HRM

This chapter is structured as follows. The opening section sets the scene by discussing participants' perceived decline in service quality within the public sector and their growing belief that senior management no longer prioritised staff well-being or the delivery of high-quality public services. Participants' reflections contrast earlier experiences with later years in their careers, highlighting a decline in workplace commitment and morale, largely attributed to shifts in management approaches.

The next section explores changes in attitudes toward employees with extensive expertise and experience. Participants described a shift in organisational values, where long-standing staff were perceived as less valued, and new-style managers were introduced, often with little or no logistical experience in the departments they were assigned to lead.

The section that follows examines the impact of financial cutbacks and restructuring on employees, detailing the consequences of these changes for workplace stability, job security, and overall morale. The final section highlights the perceived differences in management approaches upon the introduction of Human Resource Management, which participants viewed as effectively replacing the former Personnel Department. The earlier emphasis on personal relationships and managerial discretion gave way to standardised policies with increasing formalisation of procedures in the management of sickness absence. Participants

describe a stark contrast between how absence was initially handled and how, over time, it became a more rigid, process-driven system.

5.2. A Journey from workplace fulfilment to disillusionment

Participants were asked to provide a brief overview of their working lives. While the enquiry did not explicitly seek reflections on their organisational climate or cultural environment, all spontaneously highlighted a clear pattern, their early years in the workplace were positive, marked by job satisfaction and a sense of purpose, however, as time progressed, they described a noticeable decline in their enjoyment of work.

Recollections of working in in the public sector included a mixture of nostalgia and disappointment. In their early careers participants began their roles with a sense of purpose, motivated by the desire to provide a good service to the public, in a stable environment characterised by camaraderie and supportive management. However, the aspects of work that they valued began to be eroded which impacted on their enjoyments of work as financial cutbacks and restructuring created uncertainty and senior management decisions appeared more driven by budgets than by the needs of the public or indeed the wellbeing of their staff. The enthusiasm about the workplace in the earlier years of their careers was evident in recollections of their initial experience of job satisfaction, camaraderie, and a strong sense of belonging, *"The first ten years were absolutely brilliant," (H1).* Participants described feeling motivated by their roles and the people around them, with many expressing pleasure in their daily work.

A key aspect of this positive experience was the strong workplace relationships with team members working together and supporting one another: The strong culture of teamwork, fostered a sense of belonging, *"always feel as though you're really a part of that team".* The atmosphere was seen as light-hearted but at the same time productive with a shared purpose in their daily interactions:

> *"I loved going to work. I enjoyed it really, and we had a good laugh. We all got the work done, and it was a nice atmosphere." (H5)*

The mutual support and camaraderie in the public sector's work culture was viewed as integral to the enjoyment of work. Senior management was also described as empathetic and non-pressurising, fostering an environment where employees felt respected and understood*:*

"Managers were lovely people, they weren't draconian, they were caring." (H2)

Flexible and supportive management approaches contributed to a workplace built on trust and cooperation, reinforcing positive working relationships, with trust playing a central role in workplace dynamics, *"Everything was done on trust."* Line managers were seen as knowing their staff well, believing in their abilities. A strong sense of self-belief in their professional capabilities further contributed to high morale in the earlier years of employment. Employees felt proud of their work and aligned with the organisation's values:

"The morale was good. People felt that they were doing a good job." (H10)

Long-term employment was common, with many often spending their entire careers within the same organization and this longevity resulted in expertise and a comprehensive understanding of how their workplace functioned. Their commitment to the organisation was tied to a sense of social responsibility, with many taking pride in serving their communities, working in the public sector was about more than financial rewards, it was about service and dedication:

> *"Public sector is a different thing. You're not necessarily well paid, but you do it because you want to feel that you're helping your community." (H11)*

In the early years of their careers, participants recalled a workplace defined by positivity and shared purpose, describing that not only for themselves, but for most employees, there was genuine satisfaction in working within the public sector. There was a prevailing sense that their roles were valued, and that management appreciated their efforts.

As their careers progressed, a stark contrast emerged in their reflections on the later years as the workplace saw substantial change, shifting toward a more business-oriented managerial approach that aligned more traditionally with the private sector. This decline was described from their own personal point of view, but they also believed it was experienced by much of the workforce, i.e. work colleagues, friends and family, who also felt the same way:

> "*I used to love going to work…, but my two children [in their forties], they both hate work. Everybody seems to hate it now because its changed."* (H8)

This transition was perceived by participants as a move away from the traditional ethos of the public sector, with financial control taking precedence over both the quality of services

provided to the public and the well-being of employees as senior management increasingly focused on accountability, prioritising efficiency, targets and budget constraints.

Participants observed a gradual shift toward cost-cutting measures which contributed to a workplace environment marked by uncertainty and instability. From the initial stability they had associated with public sector, the increasing state of flux in later years left many feeling disillusioned. The feeling of job stability was clearly important for public sector staff as it had an influence on their decision to work in that sector as well as the belief that they were serving the community.

> *"…historically, it was more of a job for life, is the general feeling you get in the public sector." (H15)*

This evolving workplace dynamic not only influenced employees' perceptions of their roles but also reshaped their views on senior management priorities. The job security that had long been a defining characteristic of public sector employment gave way to an organisational shift that appeared to prioritise financial efficiency over the communities they served.

A significant factor identified by participants was a perceived change in senior management attitudes, particularly regarding the appointment of external managers to lead departments in which they had little or no prior experience. This approach, viewed by participants as undermining the value of organisational expertise and institutional knowledge, contributed to a broader sense of disengagement and declining trust in leadership. The impact of these changes is examined in the following section.

5.3. New style management

This section explores the perceived shift in organisational attitudes regarding the value of employee experience. Participants expressed strong views on the importance of employees and managers possessing comprehensive knowledge of their respective work areas, emphasising that such expertise was essential for staff to perform their roles effectively. The importance of longevity in employment and having many years of experience in an organisation with the perceived benefits that would bring to an organisation was evident in the earlier years of their employment, with a clear belief that work experience and specialised knowledge were highly valued by management:

"…employees felt valued, and management made it clear they were valued." (H9)

In the later years of their careers, participants observed that their organisations no longer prioritised extensive experience but instead favoured candidates with diverse job histories or formal educational qualifications, particularly in managerial positions. This shift was viewed as demoralising for experienced staff, reinforcing the perception that the organisation had become less invested in its employees and the expertise they had developed over time.

A prevailing belief among participants was that effective management required line managers with a strong understanding of departmental operations, gained through firsthand experience. They emphasised that competent managers should have deep experiential knowledge, acquired by progressing through various lower-level roles before assuming supervisory or managerial positions:

> *"…years ago, you started at the bottom, and then you worked your way up, and those people knew it all... Well, if you do that, you can go into management, if you want it, because you know how everything works." (H8)*

This emphasis on operational knowledge was unsurprising, given that public sector employees often remained within the same organisation for many years, leading naturally to a workplace culture that valued accumulated expertise. Managers with extensive operational experience were perceived as better equipped to navigate departmental challenges and make informed decisions:

> *"To me, a manager really needs to know what [their staff] do, and be able to do what [they] do, the same as if you are a first line manager you need to know what everybody does…to me you should be able to step into their job and do it." (H5)*

In the early years the public sector was viewed as a workplace where all workers knew their job well, and if they managed staff, they were likely to have done that job in the past and be fully knowledgeable in the tasks they were delegating. A manager's in depth understanding of the work that staff were undertaking enabled managers to approach day-to-day management from a commonsense stance, drawing on their expert knowledge and the tacit understanding of what they were expecting their staff to do. In addition to having gained experience, working at lower levels of the organisation it was important that managers also

continued to keep their operational knowledge up to date by ensuring their continued involvement in the day-to-day work that staff at more junior levels undertook. This was not a requirement of their role; however, participants believed it was a strong indication to their staff that managers were competent.

Undertaking some of the tasks of subordinates was also felt to be also good for staff morale and enhanced managers' relationships with their staff. One line manager described the importance of demonstrating to his staff that he was able to do the job himself, but also it was important to show that he was part of the team that he managed:

> *"It was like we're all workers in one pot. I'm not going to sit behind a desk...I get my hands dirty and work with you." (H14)*

It was clearly seen as unacceptable for managers not to get involved in the basic work of the department, as participants recalled, not all managers were willing to undertake tasks which were not a requirement of their role and only displayed a very "*superficial*" interest in the basic work of their department. This was perceived as effectively telling staff that the work was too menial for a manager; as one manager explained, some managers would only undertake the obligatory elements of their role and were reluctant to "*actually roll their sleeves up and do anything*". (H7)

Involvement in the basic tasks in the area for which mangers had managerial responsibility was equally important at more senior positions to ensure a full understanding of the everyday running of their area of responsibility was retained:

> *"…even as a CEO, I wasn't teaching then obviously because I wasn't aligned to a particular school, but occasionally … I'd just step in to cover the lesson." (H2)*

Around the late 1990s and early 2000s, participants recalled a gradual introduction of managers who lacked prior experience in the work areas they were assigned to lead. These new managerial appointments included graduate managers who had not previously worked within the organisation, managers with backgrounds in private-sector leadership, and managers transferred from other public sector departments or organisations with little knowledge of their newly assigned divisions:

"…they [managers] can be anybody. This is the trouble; the standards have slipped. And so many managers manage in areas of which they've not really got any experience." (H10)

The introduction of these managers was met with resistance by existing employees, who strongly believed that effective leadership necessitated a thorough understanding of departmental operations. Employees with many years of experience in the organisation and very knowledgeable in their field of work resented the new style 'outsider' manager. The idea of a manager with no operational knowledge instructing experienced workers how they should undertake their duties caused resistance in workers:

"…and they might be managing twenty hairy arsed workers who'd been there for 30 years and knew the job inside out, and a twenty-three-year-old comes in who thought he or she knew it all, I mean that caused a lot of hassles really." (H5)

The move towards employing managers with no operational experience indicated to workers that experience was unnecessary, which appeared to cause insult to workers who themselves placed great value on their acquired knowledge, one line manager noting he felt that extensive experience was a barrier to career prospects:

"…in fact, I felt that it went against you really to say, 'Ive been here for thirty years', even with senior jobs." (H5)

The appointment of external managers with limited operational knowledge was widely perceived as undermining workplace efficiency and eroding trust in senior management. Participants opposed the idea of generalist managers being viable or effective, asserting that the absence of relevant expertise would hinder their ability to manage staff and organisational processes effectively:

"…the modern idea of management is you don't need to know anything about whatever it is you're doing… Which I think is utter rubbish." (H7)

The introduction of 'generalist' managers coincided with a prolonged period of financial cutbacks and restructuring across both the public and private sectors. As organisations adapted to these changes, staff movement between departments and institutions became

increasingly common, reflecting a fundamental shift from the long-standing expectation of public sector employment as a secure, lifelong career.

The following section examines the gradual depletion of resources and the far-reaching impact of restructuring on staff within public sector organisations

5.4. Financial cutbacks and restructuring

This section explores the perceptions of participants during a time of considerable upheaval during a prolonged period of restructuring prompted by financial cutbacks in the public sector and the resulting feelings of insecurity.

Diminished resources in the public sector necessitated a reduction in staffing levels at a time when the demand for public services continued to rise. This created a 'double whammy' effect, where staff were expected to deliver more with fewer resources. Public sector organisations typically avoided compulsory redundancies, instead opting to redeploy employees to different roles or departments, often requiring them to formally reapply for their own positions. The effects of this restructuring were far-reaching as even those who were not directly affected, the uncertainty surrounding their colleagues' jobs created an atmosphere of widespread insecurity. Some participants had to apply for positions in other departments themselves, while others witnessed the disruption and distress of their friends or colleagues, leading to a perception of a decrease in job stability. As one participant described the impact of this process on a colleague:

> *"…like Caroline, like my friend, she's having to do it [reapply for her job] every two years. I mean, she's completely demoralised." (H11)*

In some cases, whole areas of work areas in a particular location could be shut down altogether, forcing staff to either relocate to another area or to look for another job:

> *"They weren't making compulsory redundancies but sort of later on you never knew… they sort of could move the work from Wolverhampton to Oswestry or to London or anywhere." (H5)*

Staff felt disrespected and insecure as they were required to reapply for a job role they had undertaken for many years, or their job could disappear without notice and they would find themselves having to find somewhere else in the organisation, which was very unsettling:

“they're constantly merging departments, and you're having to reapply for your job, or when your job goes, you have to go somewhere else”. (H10)

Cutback were seen as relentless and emotive language about staffing being reduced were expressed, *“Youth Services have been slaughtered”.* Another line manager detailed the gradual decline in staffing levels within her department, from the original 30 staff down to only two:

“…they didn’t actually close it [the department] but they cut it down, they just sliced and sliced and sliced, until there was only about two people on the training team.” (H4)

This collective uncertainty reshaped perceptions of public sector employment, which had historically been viewed as secure and stable. The process of restructuring and merging of departments and organisations continued over several years, to try and improve efficiency and reduce costs, along with the offer of voluntary redundancy packages to encourage staff to leave. These packages were often particularly advantageous for older employees, as they allowed them to retain full pension benefits, enabling retirement at 50 with a complete pension entitlement. As a result, many highly experienced staff took the opportunity to leave, leading to a significant loss of expertise, *“So, all that experience went”. (H5)*

The loss of experienced staff led to additional repercussions as it coincided with a decline in formal training for staff due to of cost cutting, exacerbating challenges for remaining employees. The reduction in staff training was also widely perceived as having contributed to a decline in the overall quality of service provided to the public. This was viewed as detrimental to employees, who faced increasing pressure to perform tasks without adequate knowledge. The absence of structured training led to an environment where corner-cutting practices became commonplace, eroding standards of service provision, as one participant described the consequences of these changes:

"…because they're doing the shortcuts. The professional standards have been reduced. There's not enough professionals because … they haven't done the training and the standards have gone.” (H10)

Rather than receiving structured training, many were thrust into their roles with minimal guidance, expected to learn on the job. However, with fewer experienced staff, who had traditionally provided informal mentorship and support, the reduction in formal training was

even more pronounced, as often the expectation was for existing staff to teach new staff 'on the job', placing extra pressures on their already demanding workloads.

> "*And then they would say, 'right, you've all got to move and do this job', and whoever was sitting there had to train them, there was no sort of formal training. That's the way it went…"* (H5)

One participant described his anxiety about how standards had markedly reduced, "*they've lost all their skills",* recalling his personal experience in the later years of his employment, of feeling stressed about the marked decline in training standard for staff and the feeling that managers no longer appeared to care about standards:

> *"…That was one of the big things with me, that got me stressed, I'm not really like a stressed-out person, but that got me." (H5)*

The stress he felt compelled him to leave the organisation, taking the voluntary redundancy offered to him by his organisation in his early fifties.

During the period of financial cutbacks and restructuring in the public sector, participants recalled the introduction of Human Resources as a newly established department, effectively replacing the former Personnel Department. This transition marked a significant shift in the approach to staff management, including the introduction of a more formalised and standardised framework. The implications of these changes, along with participants' reflections on the evolving role of Human Resources, are explored in the next section.

5.5. Human resources and the formal absence policy

Financial austerity and the resulting cutbacks in the workplace, as discussed in the previous section, had a particularly pronounced impact on participants and amidst this restructuring, Human Resources emerged as a distinct department, replacing the traditional Personnel model. This section examines three dominant themes that emerged from participants' reflections on the replacement of Personnel by Human Resources, including the perceived shift in managerial approaches, the increasing formalisation of workplace policies, and the changes in workplace relationships within their organisations.

Participants were asked about their recollections of the emergence of Human Resources into their organisations, all remembered the disappearance of the former Personnel Department

and its subsequent re-naming as the Human Resources Department. There was a strong belief that the Personnel Department had traditionally been concerned with the welfare of their staff, transversely, Human Resources was perceived as having little regard for employees, instead prioritising the enforcement of formal policies and procedures. This change was not merely perceived as a superficial name change of a department, but rather as a precursor to a significant transformation in staff management practices, especially in sickness absence management where HR came to be viewed as an instrument of senior management, curbing the managerial autonomy of line managers and reducing the discretion they had previously exercised in handling staff absence matters.

This fundamental shift in the approach to workforce management was viewed as negatively impacting on workplace relationships. No official explanation had been provided to employees or line managers regarding the reasons for this transition, yet the effects were clearly felt in the increasingly rigid and policy-driven management approach that followed. The former Personnel department was perceived as having minimal involvement in the direct management of staff, allowing line managers to handle day-to-day workplace issues with a degree of autonomy. While organisational policies were in place, they were seldom rigidly enforced, and line managers primarily relied on discretion and common sense rather than formalised procedures, as one manager described, line managers were able to *"give you a bit of leeway". (H1)*

Over time, participants observed a distinct shift from this informal, intuitive style of staff management associated with the 'Personnel-era' to the more authoritarian approach associated with the introduction of Human Resources*, "…and this whole idea of being someone to help you had gone." (H8)*

The implementation of formal policies introduced a significant shift in how sickness absence was managed and was widely regarded as having a detrimental effect on relationships between line managers and their staff, while also fostering distrust toward senior management and HR, who were seen as the driving forces behind these changes.

Participants consistently reflected on the negative impact of this transition, noting that the increasing formalisation of policies and the rigid enforcement of procedures gradually eroded the previously and trust-based relationships within the workplace. As managerial discretion

diminished, interactions between line managers and employees became more compliance-driven, reducing opportunities for flexibility and supportiveness. In the early years, line managers absence management practices involved exercising discretion and informally checking on employees' well-being upon their return to work, however, with the new policy requirements, line managers were obligated to conduct structured 'return-to-work' interviews. During these interviews employees were informed of the potential consequences of further absences, such as being placed under formal attendance monitoring. This procedural shift created an atmosphere where policy enforcement was perceived to take precedence over personal support.

As adherence to formal policies became mandatory, it meant line managers who had previously been flexible were now constrained by rigid sickness absence management procedures. The fear of repercussions from HR prompted line managers to adopt a stricter approach to employee oversight, as participants noted:

> *"…they [HR] would come down heavily on the managers if they weren't following the policies..." (H3)*

Employees increasingly viewed HR as policy enforcers which fostered a climate of distrust and the heightened scrutiny surrounding sickness absences reinforced perceptions that HR was no longer supportive but rather a system of procedural control:

> *"…you're suddenly being scrutinised by HR, and HR in my opinion has become more of a bogeyman, you know you're going to be somehow exposed, if you don't behave HR are going to be involved…a threat in a way…" (H15)*

This shift in workplace culture, characterised by line management constraint, and increased employee apprehension was a marked contrast from the more discretionary and people-centred management style of earlier years. Employees now saw their managers enforcing policies and procedures upon them when they took sick leave, which is likely to have damaged trust in the employee-line manager relationship:

> *"…some of the managers then just started getting a bit dictatorial with the staff." (H12)*

The introduction of rigid sickness absence policies could lead to tensions between line managers and staff, as line managers were encouraged to identify patterns in employee

absences and challenge staff accordingly. For instance, if an employee was absent on a Monday twice within the same month, their line manager might question the legitimacy of their absence. However, this increased scrutiny was often perceived negatively by employees, many of whom saw it as an indication that their line manager did not trust them. The emphasis on monitoring and questioning absence patterns left employees felt increasingly scrutinised rather than supported:

> "*…the really picky managers, the ones who are sort of like the bullying managers, they would be the ones who would do the work. They were the ones religiously going down the list to see if they can find a pattern*." (H11)

Another illustration of mandatory policy implementation was the requirement for line managers to undertake a 'return-to-work' interview when an absent employee returned after taking sick leave, during which the line manager would explain to absentees what would happen if they took further sick leave, such as being put on formal monitoring of their attendance. Rather than prioritising employee well-being, strict adherence to standardised rules placed pressure on staff to return prematurely, potentially worsening their condition:

> *"He'd been ill for five days, had to come back, went back, got pneumonia, ended up in hospital. So, these rules that are designed to help can often make things worse. Forcing people in because of the rigidness really." (H13)*

This account illustrates how rigid policy enforcement failed to account for the complexities of individual health situations and contrasted significantly with the previous approach where the line manager might just ask if the absentee was fully recovered from their illness:

> *"I mean, as long as the manager was happy that you'd been ill...there was no problem…Yeah, more common sense than following those five days." (former line manager) (H10)*

The new return-to-work interview was perceived to adopt a tone that emphasised potential consequences if the absence policy was breached, described by one participant as carrying "*undertones of consequences*." (H3). This framing left employees feeling monitored rather than reassured upon their return, generating resentment towards the new approach to sickness absence management.

There was a firm belief that this change in approach to absence management was largely driven by HR, as one manager recalled his line manager being instructed by HR to undertake a return-to-work interview with him:

> *"I still got this thing from HR to my manager saying that, you know, I'd been off and, you know, you've got to do this full interview. He wanted to know why I'd been off and what you'd been up to, and could you prove that you weren't well and why hadn't you been well."* (H10)

This account illustrates the increasingly formal nature of absence management, where line managers were required to follow strict protocols rather than exercising discretion. The emphasis on verification and formalised questioning reinforced perceptions that HR prioritised compliance over employee wellbeing, which was a significant shift from previous practices and prompted an increasing distrust trust between staff and management (as summarised in Table 1, box C (p. 7)).

5.6. Conclusion

This chapter explores the transition from an informal, trust-based approach to sickness absence management, where both employees and line managers were supported by a Personnel department, to a rigid, compliance-driven system under a newly introduced Human Resource Management approach.

Participants' reflections of the early part of their careers highlight an initially motivated workforce, characterised by strong organisational commitment and a shared belief that their experience and contributions were valued by their employer. They recalled a stable operational environment within their organisation and a sense that employees were delivering a high-quality service to the public. This sense of stability was largely attributed to a workforce composed of long-tenured employees with extensive expertise, operating within an environment perceived as secure, many believing they had a 'job for life,' provided by their organisation.

The Personnel Department was widely regarded as adopting an enabling approach, supporting both staff and line managers while maintaining autonomy from senior management. This independence created space for line managers to exercise discretion in

handling sickness absence, thereby reinforcing positive workplace relationships that were sustained through regular employee-line manager interactions. These relationships were frequently described as well-established, underpinned by long-standing employment, and facilitated an informal yet effective approach to staff management built on mutual trust.

The personalised, trust-based approach to employee management practiced in the early years aligned well with line manager's preferred approach to sickness absence management practices, which were predominantly handled through exercising managerial discretion. Line managers relied on their familiarity with employees to assess absence cases intuitively, tailoring responses to individual circumstances. This flexibility fostered a supportive environment in which sickness absence was managed with understanding and consideration, emphasising a supportive management style.

The introduction of Human Resources, together with the increasing formalisation of policies and procedures, marked a significant shift in workplace management and was met with resistance and distrust by both line managers and their staff (as summarised in Table 1, box C (p. 7)). The new HR framework was widely perceived as impersonal and overly bureaucratic, replacing earlier relational approaches with a more prescriptive system that diminished managerial autonomy. What had previously been characterised by close, supportive relationships between line managers and employees became increasingly focused on strict policy adherence and the need to justify absence-related decisions. Central to this shift was the extensive questioning required during return-to-work interviews and pattern monitoring. Although the Absence Policy framed such questioning as a means of identifying underlying issues and enabling support, employees often interpreted it as intrusive and indicative of managerial distrust. As a result, formalised procedures that were intended to facilitate open discussion instead heightened feelings of scrutiny and discouraged disclosure of health or personal difficulties. Former line managers described these changes as generating dissatisfaction among both line managers and staff, with absence management practices increasingly viewed as intrusive and primarily oriented toward reducing absence levels. Inadvertently, the negative perceptions of HR and absence management protocols appeared to create additional barriers for both employees and line managers, contributing to workplace tension, diminished morale, and, paradoxically, higher sickness absence levels, exacerbating the very challenges that strict procedures sought to resolve. The cumulative effects of these

changes, alongside broader concerns associated with public sector transformations, such as declines in job satisfaction and increased job insecurity, contributed to feelings of employment instability, weakened organisational commitment, deteriorating employee- line manager relationships and restricted managerial autonomy.

Considering the themes explored throughout this chapter, the findings illustrate how the imposition of rigid policies, contributed to negative workplace experiences (as summarised in Table 1, box C (p. 7)). As research suggests, the manner in which policies and procedures are communicated by line managers significantly influences employees' perceptions and reactions to them (Harney and Jordan, 2008). The negative responses conveyed by former line managers suggest that the intentions underpinning these policies were misinterpreted, producing unintended consequences that undermined their effectiveness (Bainbridge, 2015; Sikora and Ferris, 2014). Line managers' dissatisfaction with the revised approach appeared to influence employees' perceptions, fostering scepticism and resistance towards the new sickness absence management practices.

Chapter 6. Comparative Analysis of Sickness Absence Management approaches of current and former line managers

6.1. Introduction

This chapter builds on the preceding empirical chapters (4 and 5), which investigate the approaches of line managers in their sickness absence management practices in the public sector from both historical and contemporary perspectives.

The first empirical chapter examines the reasoning behind contemporary line managers' approach to absence management practices through an analysis of the rationales provided by line managers for their chosen management methods. This analysis offers insight into the factors that shape line managers' effectiveness in implementing absence management policies within the public sector. The use of managerial discretion emerges as an essential component of effective absence management yet appears markedly restricted in practice among contemporary line managers. A limited number of references indicating that line managers possessed greater flexibility in managing their staff in the past, as opposed to contemporary times, prompted an examination into the nature of these differences. Consequently, interviews were conducted with a cohort of former line managers, the findings of which constitute the data for the second empirical chapter.

The second empirical chapter examines the historical reflections of former line managers revealing a stark contrast in sickness absence management practices before and after the adoption of a more formalised HRM approach. Most notably this contrast highlights shifts in the balance of power between line managers and HR, with findings indicating that contemporary line managers retain less authority than their historical counterparts, contrary to common assumptions in the extant literature (CIPD, 2018; Kurdi-Nakra et al., 2021; Larsen and Brewster, 2003; Purcell and Hutchinson, 2007; Renwick, 2003; Watson et al., 2006) (as outlined in Table 1, box A (p. 7)). Nonetheless, critical perspective within the HRM literature (e.g., Dundon, 1999; Legge, 1995) challenge the rhetoric of devolution, arguing that managerial authority remains more constrained than commonly portrayed.

This third empirical chapter deepens and extends the thesis's contribution by examining how sickness absence management has been shaped across two distinct managerial generations: former line managers who worked through both pre-HRM and post-HRM environments, and

contemporary line managers whose practice has been formed almost entirely within the HRM paradigm. By comparing these cohorts, the chapter reveals how institutional change has reconfigured managerial discretion, reshaped expectations of the line manager role, and altered the practical realities of absence management. Participants are anonymised and coded; C1 to C16 indicate current line managers and H1 to H16 indicate former line managers. The analysis highlights both continuity and divergence in managerial experience, demonstrating how shifts in organisational structures and people-management philosophies have influenced the governance of sickness absence over time. Organised thematically, the chapter begins by tracing the transition from a relational, discretionary approach to a more formalised, policy-driven HRM framework, using the lived experiences of both cohorts to illuminate how managerial practice has evolved. In doing so, the chapter provides a historically grounded perspective that strengthens, contextualises, and broadens the patterns identified in the previous chapter, reinforcing the thesis's wider contribution to understanding managerial agency and the changing governance of workplace health. The following table (4) summarises the main themes and sub-themes, highlighting the key points of comparison between former and contemporary line managers.

Table 4. Key themes and sub-themes – Comparative (current and former line managers)

Main Theme	Subthemes
Shift from Discretionary Personnel Practices to HRM Formalisation	Move from discretionary to policy-driven systems; influence of public-sector reforms; erosion of trust-based practice; former managers' resistance to HRM rigidity; current managers' limited awareness of constrained autonomy
Changing Experiences of Autonomy and Managerial Power	Former managers' perceived loss of autonomy; current managers' normalised constraint; compliance embedded as standard; differing views of HR (supportive vs restrictive)
Organisational Conditioning and the Normalisation of HRM Control	Acceptance of procedural oversight; reduced visibility of constraint; HRM shaping expectations of fairness and behaviour; erosion of discretion as an organisational condition

Main Theme	Subthemes
Relational Practice, Fairness, and Workplace Trust	Weakened relational foundations; shifts in fairness and reciprocity; impact on psychological contract; relational/context-driven discretion

The first section considers the degree and nature of resistance to procedural rigidity, drawing on reflections from both groups. The line managers' response to the increasing dominance of HRM in the absence management system is investigated, paying particular attention to the historical cohort's explicit opposition and the contemporary cohort's more covert discomfort.

The next section examines concerns surrounding the authenticity of sickness absence claims, investigating how trust, managerial judgement, and workplace relationships appear to have been reshaped by the formalisation of the absence management system. This discussion focusses on the contrasting relational conditions in which each cohort operated and the implications for staff relationships and managerial discretion. Next the theme of risk-aversion traits is introduced, which is apparent in the contemporary cohort's approach to absence management, contrasting with former line managers' confidence to manage autonomously. The following section turns to workplace relationships characterised by diminished trust, reflecting the heightened HRM oversight of line manager practices. The final section evaluates perceptions of absence policy effectiveness. Contemporary line managers questioned both the utility and limitations of the formalised framework, expressing concern that its rigidity hindered their ability to respond flexibly to individual cases while simultaneously enabling system misuse by employees. In contrast, former line managers historically rarely engaged with the policy mechanisms and appeared largely ambivalent toward its role, which may reflect the peripheral status of formal policy within their managerial practice. This section reflects on how each cohort conceptualised effectiveness, whether through procedural consistency or relational outcomes, and considers what these reveal about the evolving nature of managerial agency.

Taken together, the comparative insights presented in this chapter demonstrate how sickness absence management has been shaped by shifting organisational structures, evolving people-management philosophies, and the changing boundaries of managerial discretion.

The contrasts between former and contemporary line managers show how HRM formalisation has reconfigured managerial authority, altered workplace relationships, reshaped trust dynamics, and transformed the practical realities of implementing absence policy. By situating contemporary practices within a broader historical context, the chapter strengthens the thesis's broader argument that managerial agency in absence management is neither static nor solely determined by formal policy design, but is continually negotiated within organisational, interpersonal, and institutional constraints. These findings provide a critical foundation for the subsequent discussion chapter, which integrates the empirical evidence across all three chapters to evaluate its theoretical implications and to consider how the evolving governance of workplace health reshapes the role and expectations of the line manager.

6.2. Resistance to HRM Control Mechanisms

Across both current and former line manager groups, numerous examples highlighted the perceived appropriateness of line managers rather than HR as the primary decision-makers in managing sickness absence. The line managers' close working relationships with staff were consistently viewed as placing them in the best position to exercise informed judgement and tailor responses to individual circumstances. One line manager illustrated how proximity and personal knowledge positioned them to manage mental health-related absence more effectively. They emphasised the importance of understanding individual histories and behavioural patterns, noting:

> *"I just think we know the staff little bit better and we know there kind of history a little bit better, especially with things like anxiety and depression, I think, I mean, for example, there's one person in my team who has quite bad anxiety, and when I'm in the office I can spot when he has good days and bad days, And things like that. I think if it's handed off to a HR Department, trust the kind of totally away from it*." (C3)

This view shared by both current and former line managers corresponds with findings in HRM literature, including Boxall and Purcell (2007) and Shipton et al. (2016), which emphasise the value of devolved decision-making and the relational proximity of line managers in effectively addressing workforce issues. One contemporary line manager alluding to the ease in which employees could divulge personal information to them during sickness absence episodes and the relevancy of their close working relationship:

> *"You know, I have a good relationship with them [staff], also those things mean it is better for me to deal with because they are already comfortable having those conversations with me."* (C9)

While contemporary line managers consistently expressed the belief that discretion was a vital component of effective sickness absence management, such discretion was not embedded in routine practice. Contemporary line managers operated within a compliance-oriented framework, shaped by HRM. As such, managerial responses were largely governed by formal policy procedures and other control mechanisms. In instances where discretionary judgement was deemed appropriate, line managers rarely acted autonomously but rather sought explicit permission from HR. This reliance on HR approval underscores the extent to which managerial autonomy had been curtailed, with discretion functioning as an exceptional aspect of the role, subject to HR sanction.

Even though contemporary line managers appeared outwardly to adopt the policy-driven approach to absence management as standard organisational practice, their reflections revealed underlying tensions. Comments regarding HR's perceived rigidity and prioritisation of procedural adherence over individual staff welfare suggested a subtle but evident discomfort with the absence management system, with several line managers recounting instances in which they believed HR had acted with undue severity towards employees, prompting feelings of unease.

Line managers expressed concern that HR's limited interpersonal relationships with staff contributed to perceptions of detachment and a lack of understanding of employee needs. This was illustrated by one line manager's observation:

> *"…because [HR] they just don't really know the people, they're just looking at it as, you know, numbers on a screen kind of thing."* (C2)

A further suggestion of underlying indications of resistance to the HRM framework surfaced as line managers questioned the ethical implications of policy rigidity when managing cases of genuine illness. Current line managers repeatedly described HR decisions and policy implementation as "harsh," signalling discomfort with the procedural approach. Comments such as *"they [HR] would follow it to the letter,"* (C5) as stated by one current line manager about adhering to procedures, exemplify a wider perception of HR as rigid policy enforcers.

These instances of dissonance suggest that, although procedural conformity was the prevailing norm, it frequently conflicted with the personal values of contemporary line managers, particularly their emphasis on fairness, empathy, and trust in staff, alongside a commitment to constructive relationships. Notably, both current and former line managers recognised the importance of positive workplace relationships with their staff, suggesting this enhanced motivation, commitment, and ultimately attendance. Unprompted, line managers independently identified a clear association between managerial quality and sickness absence levels. Elevated absence rates were attributed to poor management, whereas lower rates were linked to stronger interpersonal relationships and more effective managerial practice. This disparity was interpreted as indicative of how well line managers treated their staff and the overall quality of the line manager-employee relationship. At the same time, line managers did recognise that a degree of absence resulting from deliberate misuse of the system was inevitable, irrespective of managerial skill or workplace relationships.

Prior to the HRM era the historical cohort of former line managers operated within an informal and judgement-based framework of people management. Decision-making drew on personal knowledge of employees, shaped by informal norms and the established workplace culture. Documentation was minimal, and sickness absence was typically managed through interpersonal judgement rather than formal procedures. As one former line manager reflected:

> *"…it was done more on gut instinct, knowing your workforce, understanding what their personal circumstances were…" (H15)*

The Personnel Department was perceived as playing a facilitative role, widely regarded as enabling and supportive of both staff and line managers, while maintaining a degree of autonomy from senior management. This independence appeared to contribute to the empowerment of line managers to exercise discretion in handling absence cases, and this trust-based approach to employee management aligned closely with former line managers' preferred methods for addressing sickness absence.

The historical cohort articulated clear opposition to the procedural rigidity introduced under HRM. Their perspective of the new approach to absence management was that HRM was an instrument of senior management, and engaged in, "*management by bullying",* a view that

was consistently reflected throughout their narratives concerning the later years of their employment.

They viewed the new HRM approach as fundamentally undermining their capacity to exercise discretion and to maintain and utilise workplace relationships when managing staff. One former line manager described a marked shift from the supportive ethos of Personnel to the more rigid orientation of HR, noting:

"Personnel had ceased to exist… [HR] weren't there to help you…" (H7)

In contrast to the consistent opposition voiced by former line managers toward the formalised HRM approach, contemporary line managers conveyed a more muted disapproval. Rather than openly resisting, they tended to internalise the system's constraints, navigating them through cautious compliance and subtle adaptation.

Having experienced the transition first-hand, former line managers clearly recognised the significant shift from discretion-based practices to policy-driven compliance. Their ability to identify this change was most likely because of exposure to the direct experience of both systems, enabling them to articulate not only the nature of the shift but also its consequences. This comparative vantage point made the deterioration in managerial freedom and the quality of workplace relationships particularly stark to them. As such the implementation of formalised absence protocols was frequently described as undermining trust and constraining the ability to respond sensitively to individual circumstances (summarised in Table 1, box C (p. 7)). Former line managers consistently argued that the approach they were previously able to use, characterised by personal knowledge of staff, informal dialogue, and trust-based interactions, was more effective in managing absence and fostering cooperation. This enabled line managers to respond sensitively to individual circumstances rather than blindly adhering to formal procedures. The new system, by contrast, was perceived as impersonal and overly punitive, contributing to a decline in morale and a weakening of the line manager-employee relationship (as summarised in Table 1, box C (p. 7)). Their reflections reveal a resistance to institutional change as well as a strong belief in the value of discretion, empathy, and contextual judgement in people management.

Viewed from a comparative perspective, the reflections of both cohorts reveal a shared belief in the value of close working relationships and discretionary judgement in managing sickness

absence. However, the conditions under which these shared viewpoints were enacted contrasted significantly. The historical cohort had operated within an informal framework that supported and enabled discretion, whereas contemporary line managers were embedded within a compliance-oriented system that positioned discretion as an exception rather than the rule.

In light of the increasing constraints placed on managerial autonomy by formalised HR protocols, underlying dissatisfaction with the rigidity of the system emerged in the narratives of current line managers. For those wishing to deviate from procedural norms, they either adopted discreet acts of resistance which were typically concealed, or sought prior advice and approval from HR. In both instances, independent autonomy was seldom exercised openly. This tendency reinforced the procedural constraints within which managerial discretion was exercised. This temporal contrast raises questions about how the HRM structures introduced restricted and weakened line managers' capacity to respond compassionately and effectively to employee needs.

6.3. Risk aversion and confidence to deviate in Sickness Absence Management: The role of HRM oversight

According to former line managers, the transition from traditional personnel departments to Human Resource Management (HRM) marked a significant reconfiguration of sickness absence management within public sector organisations. For those in Public One, the shift appeared to directly undermine current line managers' confidence when managing absence to exercise discretion autonomously, as the compliance-oriented absence management system significantly constrained their use of judgement (as detailed in Table 1, box C (p. 7)). The lack of confidence among current line managers was not only apparent in their accounts but became even more visible when contrasted with the assuredness expressed by former line managers, who described their past roles as grounded in trust and discretion. Under the earlier personnel model, absence management was framed by former line managers as an advisory and supportive function. Line managers operated with considerable autonomy, managing staff in ways they deemed appropriate. In contrast, HRM repositioned absence management responsibility as devolved to line managers, but this was compliance-driven, with line managers embedded within a system of centralised HR control. This finding exemplifies Legge's (1995) and Dundon et al.'s (1999) assessment of the superficial nature of

HRM's devolvement discourse, wherein responsibility is transferred to line managers, yet meaningful authority remains constrained by centralised control, suggesting that what is framed as empowerment may, in reality, amount to little more than delegation of a function which is subject to intensive scrutiny by HR (as indicated in Table 1, box C (p. 7)).

Contemporary line managers confirmed their responsibility for implementing formal absence policies; however, their narratives revealed the extent to which standardised HR protocols, such as fixed absence thresholds, mandatory return-to-work procedures, and automated system-generated prompts shaped their decision-making. For example, line managers routinely received automated notifications when an employee was scheduled for a return-to-work or monitoring interview, typically one week prior to the designated deadline. If task completion was not confirmed, a follow-up email was triggered, prompting justification for non-compliance. As one line manager explained:

> "…*you have to justify why you haven't followed procedure. And if you say, 'I haven't,' you tell them, 'I haven't done it because [then give the reason] …'" (C15*)

Yet despite these tightly regulated mechanisms, current line managers appeared somewhat unaware of the degree to which their autonomy was being constrained. The analysis clearly shows this lack of awareness, evidenced by conflicting narratives and implicit tensions that emerged during interviews. This suggests a degree of normalisation, in which managerial control is accepted as routine practice rather than recognised as a structural constraint, in this context, the constraints being the formalised HR protocols, monitoring systems, and compliance culture that systematically restrict discretion. In contrast, former line managers articulated a much sharper awareness of how procedural formalisation had curtailed their role and undermined their professional agency. Their accounts highlighted HR's operational influence, whereas current line managers appeared less attuned to the structural limitations shaping their practice.

While these mechanisms were portrayed to current line managers by HR as ensuring consistency and accountability, in reality they also constrained managerial discretion and introduced a culture of procedural rigidity. As a result, many line managers appeared to lack confidence in their ability to manage staff according to their own judgement, expressing concern about the risks associated with deviating from policy and the need to seek HR

approval for discretionary decisions. The majority of line managers described feeling compelled to seek advice or formal permission from HR before deviating from policy, even in cases where they believed practical judgement might have been more appropriate. This behaviour was often framed as a protective strategy in an attempt to *"cover their backs"* by transferring responsibility to HR for both the decisions made and any potential repercussions. As one line manager explained:

> *"Anything that doesn't fall 100% in line with the policy, I will consult [HR] … because I don't want to do something wrong, and I don't want to cause myself grief for doing something wrong."* (C9)

The increased formalisation of the absence management system also introduced extensive documentation requirements. Line managers were expected to maintain detailed records through absence tracking systems, monitor trigger points, and conduct formal interviews. These practices were largely accepted by contemporary line managers as part of their role. *As one line manager described the online monitoring system:*

> *"Yeah, we do have kind of like an automated system, the system that we use is when you Input people's sickness in. If somebody hits a trigger it will generate an email, then you have to reply to it which go to HR saying what you've done about it. So, it might say, for example, for this person had three periods of sick, they've triggered stage I, you need to have a meeting with them. Then that is all automated. And then on the back of that email we then have to you know write a paragraph about what we have done and send it onto HR." (C7)*

Although HR oversight was largely normalised and accepted as part of the line manager role, it nonetheless contributed to a sense of constraint, limiting their discretionary capacity and caused a tension between consistency and compassion. Line managers are aware that their decisions may be scrutinised, especially if they deviate from standard procedures, which appeared to reinforce a culture of risk aversion among current line managers.

In contrast, former line managers, for the majority of their working life, operated within a markedly different framework. Their practice was shaped by a discretionary style, with minimal procedural oversight and limited formal documentation. Absence management was largely informal, recording systems were basic, typically limited to paper records or verbal

exchanges, and line managers were not guided by automated prompts or e-mail reminders in their decision-making.

Former line managers expressed confidence in their ability to manage absence independently, without needing to consult personnel departments or seek permission. Decisions were made on a case-by-case basis, informed by the line manager's understanding of the employee's situation. The limited presence of scrutiny or centralised control enabled managerial authority to be exercised with relative autonomy. Former line managers did not describe a need to protect themselves from procedural scrutiny, nor did they perceive absence management as a risk-laden task. Instead, they approached it simply as a managerial responsibility, guided by trust and discretion.

The difference between the two cohorts reflects a fundamental shift in managerial confidence to exercise autonomy independently and appears to be as a direct result of the increased HRM procedural controls (as highlighted in Table 1, box C (p. 7)). Although both groups expressed a strong desire to use discretion and regarded it as integral to effective management, their capacity to do so appeared shaped by differing temporal conditions. Former line managers operated within a trust-based environment that legitimised discretion, and their management of staff was largely without procedural oversight, which allowed them the confidence to manage their staff in an informal manner. In contrast, contemporary line managers experienced a compliance-oriented system and, while they accepted extensive reporting systems and automated guidance as part of their role, many described a sense of constraint and vulnerability. The need to consult HR, document every action, and adhere rigidly to policy appeared to diminish their confidence in managing staff according to their individual needs. Both groups viewed good quality line manager-employee relationships and informal management as important, but only the historical cohort felt confident using independent informality without fear of consequences. The contemporary line managers, by comparison, were socialised into a system that often left them uncertain about when and how to intervene as they expressed uncertainty and hesitation. Yet despite these tightly regulated mechanisms, current line managers appeared somewhat unaware of the degree to which their autonomy was being constrained. The analysis clearly displayed this lack of awareness, evidenced by their own conflicting narratives and implicit tensions about exercising discretion that emerged during interviews. In stark contrast, former line managers articulated a much clearer

understanding of how procedural formalisation had restricted their role and undermined their managerial autonomy. Their insights reflected a deeper awareness of HR's operational influence, whereas current line managers appeared less attuned to the structural controls shaping their practice.

The shift from autonomous discretion to cautious compliance highlights part of the overall changes in managerial freedom under the HRM led approach, illustrating the erosion of confidence in frontline decision-making.

6.4. Scrutinising Absence: Implications for Workplace Relationships

The shift in managerial practice from discretionary engagement to procedural scrutiny had an impact in several aspects of people management, notably altering the tone of sickness absence interactions. This was reflected in the emergence of extensive and often formalised questioning surrounding employee absences. Line managers, tasked with implementing formal procedures such as mandatory return-to-work interviews and absence pattern monitoring, became increasingly focused on the details and circumstances of each absence. While these practices were framed within HR policy as mechanisms for identifying underlying issues and offering support, their enactment was often experienced by employees as interrogative and distrustful. As one line manager remarked:

> *"…people were actually literally cross-examined every time they were off."* (H1)

Line managers recalled how employees reported feeling that their integrity was being questioned, interpreting the detailed inquiries as evidence that they were no longer trusted by their line manager. This perception was compounded by the routinisation of formal interviews and the emphasis on documentation, which positioned absence as a problem to be managed rather than a symptom or circumstances to be understood. In this context, the erosion of workplace trust and the strain placed on the psychological contract were evident, as employees perceived a shift away from mutual respect and supportive dialogue towards surveillance and compliance.

Despite the policy's stated intention to facilitate supportive conversations, the procedural format appeared to inhibit open dialogue. Line managers themselves expressed discomfort with the rigidity of the process, noting that it often failed to elicit meaningful disclosures about health conditions or personal challenges from employees. Instead, the increased scrutiny of

absent staff meant that employees felt increasingly monitored and constrained and one where HR controls were perceived not merely as procedural, but as potentially punitive, undermining the employees' trust in both line managers and HR.

Both former and current line managers described the increased focus on policy compliance as damaging to employment relations, noting a marked shift away from relationship-based practices toward a more depersonalised, procedural approach. The apparent rigidity of the HRM absence practices were frequently construed as intrusive, and indicative of a managerial culture focused primarily on reducing absence rather than understanding the personal circumstances surrounding absence.

Even though it was established practice for current line managers, they expressed unease with the expectation to question employees extensively, particularly when absences were perceived as legitimate. While they were required to establish the basic reason and anticipated length of absence, they preferred to postpone any further discussion until staff had returned to work, noting that it felt particularly inappropriate to initiate detailed enquiries while individuals were still unwell.

Former line managers similarly criticised the newly introduced prescriptive protocols, such as the scripted set of questions required to be asked during return-to-work interviews. They felt these procedures undermined the authenticity of post-absence conversations. What had previously been a natural, caring exchange of checking in on the employee's wellbeing and welcoming them back was now replaced by a formalised process that felt impersonal and unsupportive.

Overall, the negative perceptions expressed by former line managers about HR and their absence management protocols appeared to create additional barrier to managing sickness absences. Rather than serving as a resource for resolution, HR was often viewed as an enforcer of rigid procedures, further distancing itself from line managers and the staff they managed, but also damaging the relationship between line managers and HR, thereby increasing workplace tension.

Contemporary line managers expressed heightened concern and frustration about the perceived authenticity of employee illness as a driver of absence. In contrast to their predecessors, current line managers appeared more inclined to question whether absences

were genuine, reflecting a shift towards scepticism and procedural vigilance. Their reflections suggest that the procedural orientation of HRM may have contributed to a culture of managerial doubt, in which illness is increasingly viewed through a lens of suspicion. This was particularly evident when line managers adopted a surveillance-oriented approach to absence management, prioritising accelerating employees through the absence procedures particularly when legitimacy was perceived to be in question.

Former line managers, by contrast, acknowledged the potential for sickness absence misuse but did not regard it as a central issue in their practice. Instead, they emphasised the role of managerial judgement and discretionary practice, managing absence through interpersonal familiarity and employee's individual circumstances. They also described a subsequent decline in the quality of workplace relationships following the shift to an HRM-led approach, particularly in terms of trust (as reflected in Table 1, box C (p. 7)). This weakening of interpersonal rapport appears to have contributed directly to the heightened managerial suspicion observed in the contemporary cohort. With discretion curtailed, current line managers had little scope to rely on trust as a basis for decision-making, since absence outcomes were determined by compliance with formal procedures rather than relational judgement. In this context, investing in trust-based relationships offered limited practical value, discouraging line managers from prioritising them and reinforcing procedural compliance as the safer, more legitimate approach. The contrast between these two managerial cohorts highlights how a focus on policy compliance appears to have redefined the criteria and assumptions underpinning how absence is assessed and managed over time.

There was a strong view among current line managers that the policy could be utilised as a punitive tool, and that its design focused on determining whether absence was genuine with a tendency to assume it was not. This view was reflected in the account of a current line manager, who described the policy as a punitive mechanism, referencing staff perceived as feigning illness or exploiting the absence system, remarking that:

> *"the policy will catch them out" (current line manager, C7)*

It was clear line managers experienced exasperation when dealing with the "*regulars",* those employees perceived to routinely exploit the absence management system. These individuals were characterised by repeated, often predictable, patterns of short-notice absences that

undermined managerial efforts to limit sickness absence levels. As one line manager reflected his exasperation at an employee who was frequently absent:

> *"...and it does become quite frustrating, and you think, 'aww, it's happening again, them again'."* (C4)

Contemporary line managers often recalled feeling doubt about the authenticity of staff absences and, as such adopted a dual approach to policy implementation which distinguished between perceived legitimacy and suspected misuse. This perspective sought to balance procedural compliance in cases deemed non-genuine with discretionary leniency for those considered genuinely ill. Where absences were viewed as legitimate, line managers consistently expressed a preference for a more compassionate and supportive response. As such contemporary line managers expressed concern about the perceived inflexibility and severity of absence policies when applied to cases of genuine illness. To illustrate this, one line manager recounted an instance in which an employee, following the death of a parent, took two weeks of sickness absence. Upon returning to work, the employee was immediately placed under formal monitoring for exceeding the organisation's 8.5-day sickness threshold. This kind of response was widely regarded as disproportionate and lacking in compassion, highlighting tensions between procedural enforcement and the ethical treatment of staff.

The narratives of current line managers also indicated further tensions between moral judgement and organisational constraint, despite articulating a desire to tailor their management approach based on perceived legitimacy, protocol adherence remained the dominant approach, with discretionary practices rarely exercised due to HR oversight (as outlined in Table 1, box A (p. 7)).

Several current line managers described circumventing formal HRM protocols by operating below the radar to protect genuinely ill staff. These narratives emerged organically, rather than being directly questioned on the subject during interviews. These line managers recounted bypassing official procedures by informally permitting flexi time, annual leave, or unrecorded absences to shield employees from punitive measures. Such discretionary practices reflected a deeper discomfort with the restrictive mechanisms of HR control. As one current line manager explained, they allowed staff unofficial hours off when they believed it was genuinely needed, thereby ensuring the absence did not appear on the sickness record.

Beyond a perceived moral obligation to ensure fairness, line managers believed that informal support fostered reciprocal commitment. Shielding employees from punitive measures was thus seen not only as ethically justified, but also as a strategic means of enhancing loyalty and engagement. This rational was illustrated by one line manager who chose not to record certain instances of sickness:

> *"And that's what we've kind of found in our office, if we support them and help them and give them time, we will get the time back, you know, threefold."* (C5)

The covert discretion exercised by line managers underscore an underlying resistance by contemporary line manager to procedural rigidity and suggest that a certain level of moral values continue to inform managerial behaviour in subtle but hidden ways. Additionally, these reflections also intersect with concerns about workplace relationships expressed by former line managers who consistently emphasised the importance of maintaining good workplace relationships, viewing it as central to effective absence management.

The contrast between cohorts reveals a significant shift in how authenticity and discretion are conceptualised and operationalised within absence management. Former line managers, rooted in a trust-based organisational climate, rarely questioned the legitimacy of employee illness. their approach being grounded in concern for the individual circumstances and involving minimal procedural interference. In contrast, contemporary line managers operated within a compliance-oriented framework that focussed on authenticity as a source of managerial concern. Because HRM protocols tended to frame sickness absence as a risk to be managed and contained, line managers may have been more inclined to treat illness claims with scepticism, focusing less on support and more on verification. This procedural orientation fostered a culture in which sickness was routinely scrutinised, reflecting an underlying distrust embedded in the system rather than in individual managerial intent.

The evolution from discretionary to procedural absence management has fundamentally reshaped the nature of how line managers and employee interact. Former line managers operated within a framework in which absence was treated as a contextual issue, addressed through informal dialogue and personal understanding. Their approach prioritised trust, and questioning was minimal, often guided by genuine concern. In contrast, contemporary line managers were required to implement formalised procedures such as return-to-work

interviews and absence pattern monitoring. These practices which were framed by HR as supportive were frequently perceived by employees as interrogative. The routinisation of detailed questioning and documentation positioned absence as a behavioural problem, eroding line manager-employee relationships and fostering a climate of distrust. Line managers themselves expressed discomfort with the rigidity of these processes, noting their limited capacity to elicit meaningful disclosures or respond compassionately to individual circumstances. The cumulative effect is a weakening of workplace trust between line managers and their staff in addition to the erosion of the social responsibility ethos traditionally associated with the public sector. In its place a culture has emerged centred on absence reduction, displacing the ethics that once underpinned absence management to a system that prioritises compliance, consistency, and risk aversion over employee wellbeing.

6.5. Perceptions of the effectiveness of the absence policy in managing genuine and non-genuine Sickness Absence

Policies designed to ensure uniform treatment of staff are guided by the assumption that applying policy procedures consistently will promote equity and fairness in the treatment of employees. However, reflections on the effectiveness of the formal absence policy, voiced primarily by contemporary line managers, consistently questioned its utility in managing both legitimate and illegitimate sickness absence.

While policies are intended to clarify acceptable behaviour, most line managers observed that the explicit nature of the absence procedures inadvertently enabled exploitation. Employees perceived to be misusing the system could operate within its clearly defined boundaries, limiting managerial capacity to challenge questionable absences.

Reflecting on the frustration experienced, one line manager described the recurring cycle of abuse within the absence system, noting that certain staff members exploited it somewhat blatantly:

> *"…staff…will get to stage two, meet their targets, get de-escalated to stage one, but then they're just in and out of stage one and stage two…and they happen to take the exact number of days that they have as targets, you know, it's kind of a bit of a joke really…" (C16)*

Although line managers viewed the absence management process as straightforward, they believed it was often ineffective in addressing instances of deliberate sickness absence policy abuse. Some employees were described as, "*laughing in your face",* confident in their ability to manipulate policy guidelines without serious consequence. This perception of managerial powerlessness led to heightened frustration, as line managers felt unable to take action against individuals engaging in this form of misconduct.

Not only can clearly articulated policies enable employees understanding of how to secure additional paid time off, but they may also be strategically interpreted by line managers, revealing how rigid systems can be manipulated by both parties. Both former and current line managers acknowledged a persistent tension between the need for equitable treatment for staff and the importance of accommodating individual circumstances when necessary. This underscores a central paradox: while policies are intended to ensure fairness and uniformity, the discretionary powers granted to those implementing them can lead to differential outcomes. Furthermore, the potential for policy manipulation by employees further complicates the effectiveness and perceived fairness of the system.

Although all line managers expressed a commitment to fairness and consistency, many recalled instances where discretion was perceived to be applied unevenly. Some line managers were harsher with certain employees and more lenient with others, occasionally refraining from reporting the absences of close colleagues. Even with stricter policies in place, the speed at which employees are progressed through the absence process can still vary depending on the line manager's judgement, including their perception of the authenticity of the sickness claim and whether they choose to conceal the absence from HR. These variations in practice mean that, despite formal guidelines, equality in absence management is not always achieved.

As one line manager explained:

> *"… I'm guessing [the policy] it's to try and get all line managers to manage in the same way, but in reality, you can use your discretion to plough through it, or you can choose to hold off if you think that's appropriate. So really, how effective is [the policy]?" (C12)*

Several line managers expressed frustration at being unable to offer appropriate support to staff with genuine cases of illness, due to the procedural rigidity imposed by HR. The perceived

dual policy impact of facilitating misuse while obstructing compassionate flexibility was a recurring source of tension for current line managers. Despite their best efforts, they often felt caught between competing demands of supporting their staff while also ensuring compliance with organisational procedures. This dual responsibility appeared to be emotionally taxing, particularly when dealing with staff who were genuinely unwell but at risk of being penalised by rigid monitoring systems. Line managers described how they felt a strong responsibility to provide support, yet were constantly aware of the need to 'do things by the book' in case their decisions were later scrutinised. This balancing act was experienced as especially difficult when employees were clearly very unwell, intensifying the emotional strain.

This tension was further complicated by the need to maintain fairness across the team, especially when certain employees are perceived to be "*playing the system*" while others are clearly struggling. Contemporary line managers described how the absence policy's explicit definition of their responsibilities prompted them to seek guidance or permission from HR, often as a way to ensure they were acting correctly and to minimise personal risk. In doing so, they aimed to transfer responsibility for absence-related decisions and any potential negative consequences to HR. The policy's clarity, while intended to promote consistent practice, was experienced by line managers simultaneously as a safeguard, a constraint, and a source of tension.

In contrast, former line managers rarely reflected on the formal absence policy's effectiveness. This absence of commentary appeared to stem from the peripheral role that formal procedures played in their day-to-day management of staff. For much of their tenure, absence management was governed informally, relying on judgement, experience, and contextual understanding, reflecting a broader orientation toward trust and discretion rather than adherence to formal rules. Effectiveness, in this context, was understood not through adherence to formal policy but through the capacity to support staff compassionately and responsively during periods of illness. In the pre-HRM era, policies were loosely applied and did not appear to substantively shape managerial decision-making. Instead, former line managers' narratives about the effectiveness of the absence policy tended to focus on the broader shift from personnel to HRM, expressing concern about the compliance orientation and its detrimental impact on staff relationships. Without rigid frameworks or institutional

oversight, they were able to respond flexibly to individual circumstances, drawing on interpersonal knowledge and moral judgement. This less standardised approach was perceived as more effective in fostering cooperation and maintaining workplace relationships. For this cohort, effectiveness was understood through employee wellbeing, managerial autonomy, and observed absence levels.

By comparison, current line managers, operating within tightly regulated HRM protocols, framed effectiveness in terms of procedural adherence. Their narratives revealed a pronounced preoccupation with rule compliance and the potential for policy manipulation by savvy employees. The clearly defined boundaries of the policy were seen to obstruct compassionate flexibility, making it difficult to challenge questionable absences while also limiting support for genuinely ill staff. These constraints reinforced a culture of risk aversion and HR dependency, with line managers frequently deferring to HR as a protective measure. For this cohort, the policy itself was viewed as the primary mechanism for managing absence, with success measured by consistent application and containment of any perceived misuse. In contrast, former line managers saw the resolution of absence issues as rooted in the quality of workplace relationships, relying on trust, dialogue, and contextual judgement rather than formal procedures.

This divergence highlights a fundamental difference in how each cohort experienced and interpreted the role of discretion, control, and relational engagement in absence management and underscores a broader shift toward a HRM orientation of procedural compliance.

6.6. Conclusion

This chapter has demonstrated that managerial approaches to sickness absence are significantly shaped by the organisational structures, policies, and norms in which they operate. The reflections of former line managers active prior to the rise of HRM in the 1990s reveal a marked shift from personnel-based, discretionary practices toward policy-driven systems embedded within HRM frameworks. This transition was situated within broader public sector reforms that emphasised efficiency and accountability, signalling a move away from the traditional public service ethos toward a business-oriented model.

Former line managers, having directly experienced the transition from discretionary personnel practices to HRM prescriptiveness, resisted the rigidity of the new system, however,

contemporary line managers, by contrast, voiced a more muted response, with just a small number referring to increased autonomy in “the old days”. This may reflect the lack of historical reference for the majority of current line managers and over time HRM rigidity has become normalised. With little exposure to discretionary practice, contemporary line managers appear more likely to accept procedural oversight as the standard condition of their role.

The relative nature of managerial power is central to this distinction. For former line managers, autonomy was perceived as a loss, experienced as an erosion of discretion and trust-based practice. For contemporary line managers, autonomy is constrained but less visible, as compliance is embedded as standard. While both groups voiced frustration with HR’s procedural rigidity, contemporary line managers were more likely to characterise HR as supportive, whereas former line managers consistently viewed the introduction of HRM as detrimental to the quality and effectiveness of absence management.

Taken together, these insights highlight how organisational conditioning and shifting frameworks shape perceptions of autonomy, fairness, and relational practice in absence management. They also point to wider implications for the psychological contract and workplace trust, illustrating that when discretion is eroded, the relational foundations of absence management are weakened, altering expectations of fairness and reciprocity between line managers and employee. The comparison suggests that managerial discretion is not a fixed attribute but a relative construct, experienced differently depending on the systems within which line managers operate. This perspective deepens our understanding of how line managers engage with absence protocols and provides valuable implications for refining future practice and policy.

Chapter 7. Discussion

7.1. Introduction

The preceding three chapters presented the empirical findings of this thesis, offering a detailed account of how line managers experience and enact sickness absence policy within organisational settings. Building on that foundation, this chapter shifts focus to interpretation and theoretical contribution, situating the findings within the broader literature on human resource management and sickness absence, whilst engaging with existing theoretical frameworks to explore their implications.

Specifically, this chapter examines how line managers navigate the complex terrain of policy implementation, balancing procedural requirements with employee-centred assessment. It interrogates the tensions between formal control and interpersonal responsibility and considers how managerial discretion operates within structurally constrained environments. In doing so, the chapter contributes to ongoing debates about autonomy, interpersonal relationships, and the evolving role of line managers in contemporary HRM systems.

Central to this analysis is Johns and Miraglia's (2016a) meta-analytic research on presenteeism, which underscores the importance of line manager-employee relationships in shaping attendance behaviours, particularly in contexts where trust, disclosure, and psychological safety are critical to effective absence management. This is increasingly pertinent given that mental health-related illness now constitutes the leading cause of work-related absence in the UK (HSE, 2025), placing increasing importance on empathetic and context-sensitive management. These concerns are heightened by the growing recognition that employee wellbeing is not only a moral imperative but also central to organisational performance.

This thesis suggests that the line manager-employee relationship dynamic is being undermined by increased formalisation of absence procedures and intensified oversight, raising concerns about managerial autonomy, trust, and the effectiveness of current HRM practices (summarised in Table 1, box C (p. 7)). This discussion unfolds through a series of interrelated themes: the tension between policy compliancy and relational management; discretion as a site of moral agency; the expanding role of HR oversight; and temporal shifts in managerial perception and power. These themes are explored through the lived

experiences of two cohorts, former and current line managers, whose contrasting accounts reveal how personal experiences of shifting people management approaches shape perceptions of fairness, legitimacy, and workplace relationships. The chapter concludes by reflecting on the limits of formalisation in managing absence, especially mental health-related absence, arguing that effective practice requires a balance between empathy and structure, which current systems appear to be struggling to achieve.

7.2. Interpretation of Key Findings

This thesis provides an analytic account of how line managers undertake sickness absence management, showing how their actions are shaped by commitment to employee relationships, ethical judgement, and organisational constraints (as captured in Table 1, box B (p. 7)). The research was guided by three core inquiries: how line managers perceive their role and responsibility; what factors influence their interpretation and implementation of absence policies; and how organisational changes have affected their autonomy following the devolution of HR responsibilities.

In response to the first question, the findings show that line managers recognise their formal accountability for absence management but also experience a moral and emotional burden that extends beyond policy enforcement. This duality is especially pronounced in cases involving sensitive or mental health-related absence, where interpersonal understanding is most needed yet least supported by formalised systems.

Addressing the second question, the study builds on Miraglia and Johns' (2016a) meta-analytic work, which demonstrates that presenteeism and absence are shaped by organisational culture, managerial practices, and perceptions of legitimacy. Extending this insight, the findings highlight how transparent communication, emotional security, and mutual trust are actively mediated by line managers as the closest managerial link to employees, shaping the psychological contract (Rousseau, 1995). These relational dynamics are further constrained by institutional pressures, where policies designed to signal external legitimacy often privilege procedural conformity over discretionary, employee-focused practices (Boxall and Purcell, 2007; Kirk, 2017a). Line managers therefore navigate absence management through subtle, often covert practices that reconcile fairness with compliance, selectively applying rules to protect staff and preserve social integrity.

The third question is explored through an analysis of temporal shifts and structural contradictions. Digital monitoring and procedural oversight have progressively reshaped managerial autonomy, shifting decision-making away from interpersonal judgement toward standardised, compliance-driven practices. This aligns with Townsend et al.'s (2022b) theorisation of the Master–Victim dynamic, wherein line managers are positioned as both enforcers of organisational control and victims of its constraints (as reflected in Table 5, box B (p. 154)). A more nuanced understanding of these dynamics emerged through analysis of the second cohort, whose experiences revealed the cumulative effects of formalisation over time. Their accounts highlighted a marked shift in how absence management is enacted and perceived, with constrained autonomy and the normalisation of compliance increasingly overshadowing social responsibility.

These findings resonate with Legge's (1995) critique of HRM's rhetorical commitment to empowerment and support Dundon et al.'s (1999) argument that formal devolution often obscures the underlying centralised control still maintained by HR. By focusing on the lived experiences of line managers, the study contributes to a deeper understanding of how managerial autonomy is negotiated within evolving managerial frameworks, offering insights that may inform both theoretical debates and practical policy refinement in contemporary HRM.

7.3. Integration with Existing Literature

This thesis contributes to and extends existing HRM scholarship by examining how managerial discretion operates at the intersection of policy design, interpersonal ethics, and organisational control. Much of the HRM literature has historically conceptualised discretion as a mechanism for policy implementation, often evaluated in terms of consistency, compliance, and performance outcomes (Purcell and Hutchinson, 2007; Truss et al., 2012). However, this research reveals that in the management of sickness absence, discretion operates not merely as a functional tool but as a site of ethical agency, shaped by compassion, trust relationships, and context-sensitive reasoning.

Historically, HRM research has been shaped by large-scale survey methods, often drawing on the perspectives of HR professionals and senior managers (Purcell and Hutchinson, 2007; Truss et al., 2012; Wright and Haggerty, 2005). Parallel strands have focused on employee

attitudes and experiences, also through quantitative methods. These approaches have generated valuable insights contributing significantly to understanding HRM systems. However, by their very nature, quantitative approaches are limited in their ability to capture the situated, interpretive, and emotionally charged nature of line management practice, particularly in areas such as sickness absence, where discretion, empathy, and contextual judgement are central to managerial behaviour. In recent years, however, there has been growing qualitative research in the field of HRM, offering greater depth and a more nuanced understanding of HRM practice.

By adopting a qualitative, inductive approach, this study examines the micro-level processes through which the organisational absence policy is enacted, interpreted, and at times circumnavigated, encompassing the lived experiences of line managers operating at the frontline of policy implementation. The inclusion of a historical cohort further strengthens this contribution by illuminating how these processes have evolved over time, enabling comparison between earlier and contemporary approaches to people management. The findings reveal how managerial interpretations and discretionary practices actively shape organisational outcomes in ways that system-level metrics often struggle to reflect. This methodological contribution is significant, as it shifts analytical focus away from aggregated survey style indicators and toward the relational and moral dimensions of management practice, which is particularly pertinent to sickness absence management, where managerial decisions carry both procedural and human implications.

This thesis highlights how line managers interpret and enact absence policies in ways that reflect interpersonal obligations and moral judgement, often navigating tensions between formal rules and social expectations. Therefore, the findings illustrate how discretion functions as a practical and integral feature of policy enactment, rather than operating informally or at the margins it enables line managers to reconcile procedural demands with situational judgement (as captured in Table 5, box D (p. 154)).

Legge (1995) and Dundon et al. (1999) critique HRM's portrayal of enhanced line manager empowerment as largely rhetorical, both argue that power remains firmly centralised, with managerial autonomy largely constrained by procedural compliance and institutional oversight. This research supports these critiques but offers a more nuanced account by illustrating how discretion is not only structurally constrained but also shaped by

interpersonal and cultural dynamics. One illustrative example is the way HR presents itself as supportive and approachable, a stance that, while seemingly enabling, reinforces a culture of dependency in which current line managers feel compelled to consult HR even on routine matters. This helpful and accessible face of HR, which prompts dependency, operates alongside other mechanisms of control, including tightly prescribed procedures and risk-averse organisational norms, all of which collectively limit the scope for autonomous decision-making (as highlighted in Table 5, box B (p. 154)). These dynamics are particularly visible in the context of sickness absence, an area that can more emotionally and ethically charged than in other devolved aspects of people management. Decisions about illness, recovery, and support often require moral judgement and social sensitivity, making the tension between procedural compliance and discretionary responsiveness especially acute. The findings therefore extend existing critiques by showing how subtle control mechanisms such as reliance on HR who positioning themselves as both gatekeeper and guide, make exercising discretion more difficult, despite the façade of discretion being encouraged by HR.

This thesis also contributes to ongoing debates on work intensification and the extent to which line managers can influence employee wellbeing, particularly under conditions of procedural constraint. Prior research, such as Huo et al. (2020), demonstrates that line-manager support can help mitigate the adverse effects of lean production systems, underscoring the strategic importance of workplace relationships in high-pressure environments. Crucially, their findings imply that line managers require sufficient autonomy to exercise this agency effectively and respond to employee needs. Similarly, Boxall and Purcell's (2016) HRM-performance linkage model identifies line managers as key translators of HR policy into practice, provided they have the ability, motivation, and opportunity (AMO). Yet, even where these conditions appear to be met, this study reveals the presence of persistent tensions and constraints. Sickness absence management, in particular, exposes the emotional labour, ethical dilemmas, and contextual sensitivities that complicate policy enactment (as indicated in Table 5, box B (p. 154)). Line managers are expected to investigate, support, and manage absence processes, but their discretion is often curtailed by HR scrutiny and technological oversight. These procedural constraints erode autonomy and undermine context-sensitive decision-making within the employee-line manager relationship. In this way, the study extends existing models by showing that line manager influence is not only a

matter of capability and access, but also of institutional permission, emotional complexity, and ethical negotiation (as shown in Table 1, box B (p. 7)). Building on these foundations, the thesis offers additional insight through its specific focus on sickness absence management, where the emotional and ethical dilemmas surrounding differing employee circumstances are especially pronounced. These dynamics are central to understanding how line managers shape wellbeing outcomes, and how procedural constraints restrict discretion in practice. In doing so, the thesis enhances current HRM–performance frameworks by positioning line manager influence as a site of emotional labour, ethical judgement, and organisational pressure (highlighted in Table 5, box B (p. 154)).

Additionally, the comparison between former and current line managers offers a novel contribution to the literature by revealing how evolving people management approaches are interpreted through lived experience. This historical cohort comparison demonstrates how shifts in organisational systems and expectations have altered the scope and meaning of discretion over time, highlighting how perceptions of autonomy, responsibility, and fairness have shifted with the cumulative effects of formalisation. Former line managers, who experienced greater discretionary latitude, view current systems as unnecessarily rigid and depersonalising, while current line managers have internalised compliance-oriented norms and perceive digital oversight as a natural feature of their role. This divergence underscores the importance of historical context in evaluating HRM systems and suggests that policy reforms should acknowledge previous shifts in managerial practice.

7.4. Theoretical Contribution

This thesis advances theory in three interconnected ways: by reframing managerial discretion as an ethical practice; by revealing how procedural formalisation damages the psychological contract; and by demonstrating how line managers are trapped in a 'Master-Victim' dynamic that sets responsibility against authority. These contributions are developed through the integration of the research questions with key theoretical frameworks in HRM, enabling a deeper analysis of the ethical and trust-based dynamics that shape line manager behaviour in sickness absence management.

7.4.1. Managerial Discretion and Moral Agency

The primary theoretical contribution of this thesis is to establish managerial discretion as a form of moral agency, not merely procedural flexibility. The findings show that discretion is the mechanism through which line managers exercise ethical judgement, balancing organisational demands for compliance with their own sense of fairness and compassion towards employees. This reconceptualisation moves discretion from the periphery of HRM implementation to its core as a deeply human, value-laden activity.

Discretion is largely marginalised in contemporary HRM practice, despite the value placed upon it both in the literature and by line managers themselves as a mechanism through which policy is navigated, adapted, and operationalised. Although increasingly shaped by procedural formalisation, this thesis demonstrates that discretion remains a vital component of effective managerial practice, enabling fair judgement, fostering employee trust, and tailoring responses to the specific circumstances of each absence case. In highlighting these functions, the thesis challenges instrumentalist perspectives that view discretion merely as a technical mechanism for bridging procedural gaps or facilitating policy delivery. Such perspectives reduce discretion to a reactive tool, deployed only when formal guidelines are absent or insufficient, rather than recognising it as a relational and ethical practice grounded in human understanding.

This thesis contributes to managerial discretion theory (Hambrick and Finkelstein, 1987; Hales, 2005; Townsend and Kellner, 2015), moral agency in management (Weaver, 2006; Clegg et al., 2007; Held, 2006), and paradox theory (Smith and Lewis, 2011; Lewis, 2000; Aust et al., 2017) by demonstrating that discretion is not merely a technical or procedural tool but a form of moral and relational judgement through which line managers navigate competing organisational and interpersonal demands (as detailed in Table 1, box B (p. 7)). The findings show that discretion operates as a form of moral engagement, enabling line managers to balance fairness, consistency, and compassion in ways that cannot be fully prescribed by policy. This reframing positions discretion as a core dimension of managerial competence rather than an optional or residual activity.

This perspective reshapes how the relationship between policy and practice is understood: policies do not simply control or enable action but generate dilemmas that require situated judgements about fair and appropriate treatment (as outlined in Table 5, box D (p. 154)).

Within the context of sickness absence management, these dynamics are especially pronounced. Flexibility remains essential, as discretion allows line managers to make decisions that extend beyond formal procedures and address individual circumstances appropriately. Rather than being minimised through standardisation, discretion should be cultivated as a vital managerial competence, central to navigating the paradoxes inherent in absence management and sustaining trust-based relationships with employees. competence.

7.4.2. The Psychological Contract and Trust

Theoretically, this thesis shows that the erosion of discretion constitutes a breach of the psychological contract, shifting the employee–manager relationship from a trust-based exchange to a more transactional and compliance-driven dynamic (as summarised in Table 5, box A (p. 154)). This finding supports Miraglia and Johns' (2016) argument that effective sickness absence management depends on workplace trust, sustained through managerial discretion and interpersonal responsiveness. Rousseau's (1995) conceptualisation of the psychological contract as an implicit exchange of obligations, grounded in mutual expectations and reciprocal commitments, provides a useful lens for interpreting these dynamics. Guest (2004) extends this framework by positioning fairness and trust as central to maintaining the psychological contract, particularly in contexts where formal rules intersect with relational expectations. This study's findings resonate with Guest's (2004) observations as it reinforces the role of discretion in sustaining employee wellbeing and organisational legitimacy. Discretion, though often tightly bounded, emerges in this study as a perceived necessity, an active component of policy enactment that enables line managers to reconcile formal requirements with the interpersonal demands of everyday absence management practice, but at the same time retain workplace trust. The findings suggest that policy formalisation and surveillance-style oversight erode the psychological contract by reducing line managers' capacity to respond flexibly and empathetically to individual circumstances (as captured in Table 5, box A (p. 154)). When line managers are required to apply standardised rules routinely, employees may perceive this as a breach of implicit expectations that underpin trust. This is particularly salient in cases involving mental health, where disclosure requires emotional security and trust in line management intentions. The erosion of

discretionary freedom thus threatens employee wellbeing as well as the broader legitimacy of organisational authority.

7.4.3. Formalisation, Organisational Control and Relational Paradox

The findings reveal a paradox at the heart of contemporary HRM: while policies ostensibly aim to promote fairness and consistency, they simultaneously constrain the discretionary judgement required to achieve these goals (noted in Table 5, box D (p. 154)). This thesis builds on earlier critiques by demonstrating how HR scrutiny and digital systems intensify surveillance and compliance pressures, repositioning line managers as enforcers of organisational control rather than autonomous decision maker (as indicated in Table 5, box B (p. 154)).

This shift towards heightened policy compliancy requirements has significant implications for managerial practice and subjectivity. Former line managers describe a loss of autonomy and express concern about the diminishing attention to employees' personal circumstances under compliance-driven regimes. In contrast, current line managers appear to have internalised this situation as normal, exhibiting less critical awareness of the constraints imposed upon them. This suggests a reconfiguration of managerial identity over time, in which surveillance and standardisation have come to be accepted as legitimate features of organisational life, shaping the employees' experience and influencing the role perception and orientation of line managers within organisations.

These dynamics also resonate with Brandl et al's (2022) relational paradox perspective, which highlights the tensions line managers face between procedural compliance and interpersonal responsiveness. While their framework emphasises the skill required to balance competing demands, this study adds nuance by showing that even highly competent line managers may be unable to reconcile these tensions when constrained by inflexible systems (as reflected in Table 5, box D (p. 154)). In contexts where managerial discretion is constrained, the navigation between procedural compliance and relational sensitivity presents complex emotional and ethical demands, particularly within the management of sickness absence. In such contexts, line managers are often forced to choose between compliance and compassion, with each option carrying potential risks. The thesis findings suggest that effective resolution of

relational paradoxes requires not only individual capability but also organisational structures that preserve discretionary space and support ethical judgement.

7.4.4. HRM Oversight and the Master-Victim Dynamic

Townsend et al.'s (2022b) concept of the Master-Victim dynamic offers a suitable compelling framework for interpreting the dual positioning of line managers as both enforcers and victims of organisational control. The findings of this thesis reveal that HRM systems can create conditions in which line managers are held accountable for outcomes whilst being systematically restricted in the discretionary authority required to achieve them. This generates feelings of powerlessness and frustration, particularly when line managers are positioned as 'victims' and at the same time believe that rigid adherence to policy undermines employee wellbeing (as indicated in Table 5, box B (p. 154)).

Importantly, this thesis shows that line managers respond to this dynamic through covert practices designed to avoid or mitigate procedural constraints. These practices, such as selectively applying rules, manipulating administrative categories, or shielding employees from punitive oversight, constitute forms of resistance that preserve employee-line manager relationship integrity whilst maintaining an impression of compliance. This reveals a gap between formal policy and enacted practice that has implications for how organisational control is perceived.

7.5. Implications for Practice

The central practical implication of this thesis is a clear warning: the current compliance-driven approach to absence management is fundamentally counterproductive. The evidence shows that by constraining managerial discretion and automating oversight, organisations are damaging the trust-based relationships that are most effective at encouraging attendance and supporting genuine ill-health. To reverse this trend, organisations must:

1. Redesign Policies to Protect Discretion: Shift from rigid rule following to frameworks that explicitly empower and legitimise managerial judgement as a core competency.
2. Critically Appraise HR Technology: Assess whether automated monitoring and AI systems enable or undermine the human judgement required for sensitive cases, especially mental health.

3. Prioritise Relationships Over Procedures: Train and reward line managers for building trust and empathy, recognising that strong relationships are a more powerful driver of attendance than procedural control.

Taken together, these implications call for a shift away from procedural rigidity and toward a model of absence management that recognises discretion, relational competence, and human judgement as essential line managerial capabilities.

7.6. Limitations of the Study

While this thesis offers valuable insights into the relational and procedural dimensions of sickness absence management, several limitations should be acknowledged. First, the research was conducted within a single organisational context, which may limit the generalisability of findings to other sectors or institutional settings. The organisational culture, policy approach, and digital systems of Public One shaped managerial experience in specific ways that may not be replicated elsewhere.

Second, the study relied on retrospective accounts, particularly in the case of the cohort of former line managers. Whilst this enabled a rich temporal comparison, it also introduced the possibility of recall bias and interpretive framing shaped by subsequent experience. The contrast between cohorts was analytically productive, but it should be interpreted with caution, recognising that memory and narrative construction play a role in shaping perceived autonomy and relational engagement.

Third, whilst the study examined managerial perspectives in depth, it did not include employee accounts of absence management. As such, the findings reflect one side of the relational dynamic. Future research could benefit from triangulating managerial narratives with employee experiences to offer a more holistic understanding of trust, discretion, and procedural impact.

Fourth, as with all qualitative research, the role of the researcher in shaping the interpretation of data must be acknowledged. While efforts were made to ensure analytical rigour through systematic coding and iterative theme development, the interpretive lens applied to participants' accounts was inevitably influenced by the researcher's theoretical orientation and professional and educational background in HRM and workplace health and wellbeing. Importantly, the researcher's high level of expertise in sickness absence management, the

public sector, and workplace health and wellbeing provided a valuable interpretive resource, enabling the recognition of nuanced dynamics and latent meanings that may not have been apparent to less experienced analysts. This positionality may have shaped the emphasis placed on certain themes, such as ethical agency, procedural constraint, or relational trust and influenced how managerial narratives were framed and understood. Although reflexive practices were employed throughout the research process, including memo-writing and peer debriefing, the findings should be read as situated interpretations rather than neutral representations.

Finally, the study focused on sickness absence broadly, with particular attention to mental health-related absence. However, it did not disaggregate findings by specific absence categories or explore intersectional factors such as gender, ethnicity, or occupational role. These dimensions may further shape how discretion is enacted and experienced and warrant deeper exploration in future studies.

7.7. Directions for Future Research

This thesis has illuminated the complex interplay between managerial discretion, procedural oversight, and interpersonal ethics in sickness absence management, offering the conceptualisation of line manager practice as both emotionally charged and structurally restricted. Future research could build on this foundation to examine how discretion, emotional labour, and relational judgement are enacted or suppressed across different organisational settings, especially under conditions of technological surveillance and policy formalisation.

A further avenue for development lies in exploring how managerial discretion operates across different categories of absence. Although the present study examined sickness absence in general, future research could disaggregate by absence type, such as mental health-related cases, musculoskeletal conditions, or short-term episodic absences, to assess whether particular categories intensify or reshape the relational and procedural tensions identified here. Incorporating intersectional factors such as gender, ethnicity, age, or occupational role would also deepen understanding of how discretion is enacted and experienced across diverse employee groups, and whether certain demographics face distinct vulnerabilities or constraints within absence management processes.

Longitudinal and comparative studies could offer deeper insight into how temporally distinct experiences of shifting people management approaches influence line managers' perceptions, behaviours, and decision-making practices. Such research could track line managers' experiences during differing time periods, documenting how the formalisation of processes unfolds and how different cohorts respond to changing policy environments. Comparative studies across sectors, organisational sizes, and national contexts would also enhance understanding of how structural factors mediate the relationship between policy design and managerial practice.

From a policy perspective, HR frameworks require reconsideration to better support interpersonal competence and contextual awareness. This is particularly critical in cases involving mental health, where rigid procedures can discourage disclosure and erode trust between employees and line managers. The need for such recalibration is heightened by two emerging trends: the growing use of AI-driven HR technologies and the expansion of hybrid and homeworking arrangements. Although AI interventions are often promoted as enhancing efficiency and consistency, they risk entrenching procedural rigidity and constraining the discretionary judgement that effective absence management demands. Similarly, whilst remote and hybrid working arrangements are frequently valued for the flexibility, they afford employees, the management of absence in these contexts presents distinct challenges. It is often the case in absence management that direct, face-to-face interaction remains central to addressing sensitive issues, particularly sickness absence, where trust, disclosure, and relational competence are critical. The reduced opportunities for interpersonal contact in remote settings may therefore undermine the effectiveness of absence management practices and weaken the relational foundations on which managerial discretion depends.

Future research should therefore investigate how algorithmic management affects discretionary practice, asking whether automated systems can be designed to complement rather than supplant human judgement. Parallel attention should be directed to the challenges of managing absence in remote and hybrid contexts, where diminished interpersonal contact may exacerbate problems of trust, disclosure, and relational competence. Together, these lines of inquiry would provide a more nuanced understanding of how HR policy and practice can evolve to balance technological innovation with the human elements of managerial agency.

Finally, further research could explore how discretion is shaped by the social identity of the line manager, offering deeper insight into how characteristics such as gender, ethnicity, occupational role, and disability status influence both the capacity to exercise judgement and the expectations placed upon managerial behaviour. Such inquiry could illuminate how institutional norms and workplace relationships interact with different line manager characteristics, affecting how discretion is enacted, constrained, or legitimised across diverse organisational settings. Such research could reveal how power dynamics and structural inequalities influence both the exercise of discretion and employees' experiences of absence management.

7.8. Conclusion

This thesis has examined the lived experiences of line managers tasked with implementing sickness absence policy, revealing a complex interplay between policy constraints, ethical agency, and workplace trust. Drawing on detailed qualitative analysis of two managerial cohorts, the research demonstrates that effective absence management depends on both the structure of formal rules and the level of discretionary authority. Such authority enables line managers to respond with flexibility, empathy, and contextual sensitivity to individual circumstances, highlighting discretion as a necessary and integral component to procedural guidance.

The findings challenge the dominant view of managerial discretion as a functional tool for enforcing policy or driving performance, which is prevalent in mainstream HRM discourse. Instead, discretion is reconceptualised as a form of moral agency through which fairness, compassion, and organisational legitimacy are negotiated. Line managers do not simply implement policy; they interpret, adapt, and at times resist formal requirements in order to protect employees and maintain social integrity. This practice of managerial agency, however, occurs within increasingly constrained environments where automated oversight and increasingly formalised procedures have progressively narrowed the scope for considering contextual judgement and curtailed opportunities to exercise discretion.

The four central theoretical insights emerging from this thesis are outlined on the next page in Table 5, and then explored in greater depth in the discussion that follows.

Table 5. Theoretical/Conceptual Insights

Theoretical/Conceptual Insight	Core Idea	Explanation
*Psychological Contract Insight	Policy rigidity weakens trust	A. Strict, compliance-driven enforcement undermines the informal expectations and relational norms that support disclosure, wellbeing, and commitment.
**Master–Victim / Critical HRM Insight	Devolved HR creates dual pressures	B. Line managers become both enforcers of organisational discipline and constrained subjects under HR oversight, generating ethical tension and reduced agency.
** Institutional Theory Insight (temporal)	Formalisation reshapes managerial subjectivity	C. Over time, increasing procedural control reduces discretionary confidence and alters how autonomy is understood and enacted.
****Paradox Theory Insight	Paradox navigation requires structural support	D. Even skilled managers cannot resolve relational tensions when organisational systems restrict discretionary space; effective navigation depends on supportive structures.

*Rousseau (1995); Guest (2004) **Townsend et al (2022b) *** Greenwood et al. (2011); Scott. (2008); Smith and Tracey (2016) **** Aust et al (2017); Brandl et al. (2022); Lewis (2011)

The first insight builds on psychological contract theory by showing how strict policy enforcement can weaken the informal expectations that support employee wellbeing and commitment. When line managers are not able to use their judgement, employees often see this as a breakdown in trust, especially in sensitive situations which reduces the likelihood they will disclose issues such as mental health concerns.

Second, the research contributes to critical HRM scholarship by exposing how the formal delegation of responsibilities to line managers may merely represent a technical shift in role, leaving the authority firmly in the hands of HRM. Drawing on Legge's (1995) critique and Townsend et al.'s (2022b) Master-Victim dynamic, the study shows that line managers are simultaneously positioned as enforcers of organisational discipline and victims of its constraints, generating feelings of powerlessness and ethical tension.

Third, the temporal comparison in this thesis between managerial cohorts gives unique insights into institutional constraints by showing how shifting people management approaches shape perceptions of autonomy and fairness. By examining line managers who entered their roles under contrasting organisational approaches, some during periods characterised by interpersonal responsiveness and informal discretion, others within more formalised, compliance-driven systems, this thesis highlights how historical shifts in HRM governance influence managerial expectations and interpretations. These evolving regimes not only alter the structural conditions of management but also reconfigure how autonomy is understood and experienced. Former line managers, who experienced greater discretionary freedom, view current systems as impersonal and excessively rigid. By comparison, current line managers appear to have internalised compliance-oriented norms, reflecting a deeper shift in how managerial roles are understood and enacted. This suggests that an organisational focus on policy compliance does more than constrain behaviour, it actively reshapes managerial subjectivity, influencing how line managers perceive their responsibilities, exercise judgement, and relate to employees.

The increasingly regulated HRM framework, particularly in relation to sickness absence, appears to have conditioned current line managers to equate procedural compliance with managerial competence, even when such practices risk undermining workplace trust and organisational commitment. While current line managers do acknowledge the value of supportive workplace relationships, they refer to them less frequently and often qualify their reluctance to exercise discretion by citing concerns about equity, consistency, and potential HR scrutiny. Many current line managers still regard discretion as important but often feel reluctant to exercise it without first seeking permission from HR. This tendency reflects a shift in how discretion is enacted. Instead of being recognised as a routine and morally justifiable part of managing absence, discretion is increasingly treated as something that requires formal

approval, primarily because line managers fear scrutiny from HR. As a result, line managers have less freedom to make decisions based on individual circumstances, and their behaviour becomes more shaped by formal procedures than by personal judgement. A clear example of this was current line managers' preoccupation with verifying the authenticity of illness, in contrast to former line managers who focused more on how best to support the individual.

Former line managers, having operated within a more discretionary and informal approach to absence management, more readily recognise the potential damage to workplace relationships caused by punitive management approaches. The temporal dimension of this study underscores the importance of historical context in understanding how HRM systems evolve. What emerges is a form of institutional socialisation that prioritises procedural compliance over employee wellbeing, with potentially harmful consequences for employee engagement and organisational commitment.

Fourth, the thesis extends relational paradox theory by demonstrating how structural constraints limit line managers' ability to navigate relationship tensions. Whilst Brandl et al. (2022) highlight the skill involved in balancing competing demands, this research demonstrates that even highly capable line managers may be unable to reconcile such tensions when organisational systems constrain their discretionary authority. This suggests that resolving relational paradoxes requires supportive organisational structures as well as individual managerial competence.

For practitioners, the thesis offers important guidance on policy design and managerial support. The findings suggest that organisations should recognise discretion as a core managerial competency to be developed within paradox theory's emphasis on relational skill. This involves embedding social competence, ethical reasoning, and contextual sensitivity into everyday managerial practice. Absence policies should be designed to achieve a balance between compliance monitoring and the facilitation of informed, compassionate decision-making, ensuring that human judgement is retained. In parallel, organisations should pay critical attention to current and emerging HR technologies, such as AI-driven systems, to determine whether they enhance or undermine the discretionary judgement required for effective absence management. Finally, while procedural consistency remains important for ensuring equity, it must be balanced with human-centred judgement, so that rule compliancy

does not come at the expense of employee wellbeing or the integrity of workplace relationships.

The central argument of this thesis is that effective sickness absence management requires a careful balance between structure and flexibility, as well as between consistency and compassion. Current trends toward strict policy compliance and automated managerial surveillance, risk tipping this balance too far toward procedural rigidity, thereby weakening workplace relationships that foster trust, open communication, and employees' confidence in seeking support without fear of judgement. The balance of power has increasingly shifted toward HRM, with line managers becoming more restricted in their capacity to act autonomously. Yet rather than resisting this shift, many appear to have internalised it, reflecting the extent to which compliance-driven norms have become embedded and normalised within everyday managerial practice. This is particularly concerning given the growing recognition of employee wellbeing as integral to organisational health, and the rising prevalence of mental health-related absence, contexts in which rigid policy adherence may discourage disclosure, restricting line managers' ability to help absent employees and inadvertently intensify presenteeism.

The contrast between managerial cohorts serves as a cautionary illustration of how policy reform can produce unintended consequences. While reforms aimed at standardisation may be introduced to enhance equity and transparency, they can simultaneously erode the discretionary freedom that underpins ethical and context-sensitive practice, which is essential in sickness absence management. Over time, this erosion may become embedded in organisational culture, as successive generations of line managers internalise compliance-oriented norms and gradually lose both sight of, and skill in, practising flexible and compassionate ways of working. What was once experienced as a constraint may come to be seen as the natural order of managerial responsibility. To guard against this outcome, organisations must remain alert to the long-term effects of protocol-driven approaches and actively preserve the conditions that enable interpersonal, contextually informed line management.

Ultimately, this thesis argues that discretion should not be viewed as an adversary to fairness but as essential to achieving it. Genuine fairness requires attention to individual circumstances, recognition of disproportionate power dynamics, and responsiveness to

vulnerability, qualities that cannot be fully captured by procedural rules alone. Discretion should not be treated as a problem to be controlled through rigid oversight; instead, organisations should encourage and support the development of this core skill to strengthen managerial competency. By doing so, organisations enable line managers to exercise judgement that maintains procedural integrity while remaining attentive to employee wellbeing.

This thesis contributes to ongoing debates about the changing nature of work, the intensification of line manager roles, and the ethical dimensions of HRM practice. By examining the perceptions of line managers both temporally and in depth and by considering the moral and emotional complexities of absence management, it offers a nuanced account of how policy is enacted on the public sector frontline. The findings have implications for sickness absence management and raise broader questions about autonomy, control, and trust in contemporary organisations. They also highlight the further erosion of the psychological contract, as compliance-driven practices weaken social foundations and limit the effectiveness of absence management by undermining trust between line managers and employees.

As procedural rigidity and digital technologies continue to reshape HRM systems, it is imperative that researchers and practitioners remain attentive to the human dimensions of line management practice, ensuring that in the pursuit of efficiency gains, relational integrity, ethical agency and ultimately employee wellbeing are safeguarded rather than sacrificed.

In conclusion, this thesis demonstrates that effective sickness absence management is not a technical problem of policy compliance, but a human problem of trust and discretion. It shows that the very systems designed to control absence have, by constraining managerial autonomy, damaged the relationships that could prevent it. The ultimate contribution is to reframe discretion from a risk to be managed into a core competency to be cultivated, one that is essential for balancing fairness with compassion and for safeguarding employee wellbeing in an increasingly procedural workplace.

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Appendices

Appendix A - Participant Demographics

Current line manager participant demographics

ID	Sector	Age	Sex	Tenure (yrs)	Line Manager Experience (yrs)	Team Size	Higher Education
C1	Public One Line manager	42	F	25	5	7	Y
C2	Public One Line manager	30	M	2.5	1	4	Y
C3	Public One Line manager	63	F	30	24	20	N
C4	Public One Line manager	51	F	15	12	14	Y
C5	Public One Line manager	31	F	6	2	13	Y
C6	Public One Line manager	49	F	8	2	15	N
C7	Public One Line manager	44	M	6	12	10	Y
C8	Public One Line manager	42	M	16	6	12	N
C9	Public One Line manager	47	M	4	0.5	6	N
C10	Public One Line manager	27	M	6	1	11	Y
C11	Public One Line manager	38	M	3	1	9	Y
C12	Public One Line manager	53	M	9	1.5	11	Y
C13	Public One Line manager	57	F	29	4	8	N
C14	Public One Line manager	34	F	9	9	10	Y
C15	Public One Line manager	56	M	20	15	9	Y
C16	Public One Line manager	41	F	20	4	10	Y

The current line manager participants all worked within one public sector department, pseudonym “Public One”. The cohort showed variation in age (27–63 years, average 44), tenure (2.5–30 years, average 13), line management experience (0.5–24 years, average 6.2), and team size (4–20, average 10.5). Eight were male and eight female, with eleven holding higher education qualifications and five without.

Former line manager participant demographics

Identification	Sector	Age	Sex
H1	Education	63	F
H2	Education	57	F
H3	Social Services	64	M
H4	Prison Service	60	F
H5	Nationalised Industry	58	M
H6	Local County Council	65	F
H7	NHS	68	F
H8	Nationalised Industry	72	M
H9	Education	68	F
H10	Local County Council	60	M
H11	Local County Council	58	F
H12	NHS	60	F
H13	Education	59	F
H14	Nationalised Industry	75	M
H15	NHS	68	M
H16	NHS	56	F

The former line managers all worked during the introduction of HRM in the 1980s–2000s. The cohort showed variation in age (56–75 years, average 63) and sectoral background, having held roles across education, Social Services, the Prison Service, nationalised industries, the NHS, and local government. Six were male and ten female. Detailed job histories were not collected, as participants had held multiple roles across their careers and further detail would have added limited analytic value.

Appendix B - Interview Guide Framework

The following interview guide was developed to explore line managers' experiences of sickness absence management. It is included in this appendix to illustrate the semi structured nature and general scope of the questions used in data collection. The guide functioned as a flexible framework: questions were not asked verbatim in interviews, and probes or follow-up questions were introduced depending on participant responses to deepen discussion where appropriate.

At the beginning of each interview, participants were welcomed, the study was outlined, and standard ethical procedures were followed, including obtaining informed consent and confirming recording arrangements. At the conclusion, participants were thanked for their time and insights, reminded of their rights, and invited to offer any final reflections.

1. Job Role Background

1.1. Could you provide a brief overview of your general job role?

1.2. What are your responsibilities in relation to managing staff?

2. Managing Sickness Absence

2.1. What is your specific role in managing sickness absence?

2.2. How do you feel about the absence management part of your role?

2.3. When a staff member phones in sick, what does the conversation typically involve?

2.4. Could you give me an example of a time you handled such a call?

2.5. Do you ever feel that an employee phoning in sick could have actually attended? And, if so, why did you think this?

2.6. Do you think line managers sometimes feel frustrated when staff take sickness absence?

2.7. In your opinion, what are the key line manager qualities central to effective sickness absence management?

3. Policy and Discretion

3.1. What can you tell me about the formal policy procedures for managing sickness absence?

3.2. To what extent do you feel you have discretion in applying these procedures?

3.3. Could you provide examples to illustrate your experiences?

3.4. What is the purpose of the Absence Policy?

3.5. Do you think the Absence Policy is effective?/ What does the policy accomplish in practice? and Does it effectively serve its intended goals?

4. Trigger Points in Absence Management

4.1. How do you handle trigger points that lead to the next stage of absence management?

4.2. Do you find this process straight forward, difficult, uncomfortable? Why?

5. Seeking Advice and HR Involvement

5.1. Do you ask for advice when managing sickness absence? If so, from whom?

5.2. What level of involvement, if any, does HR have in managing sickness absence? /Can you describe the general level of input HR personnel have in the decision-making process for absence management?

5.3. How would you evaluate HR's involvement?

6. Challenges and Pressures

6.1. What aspects of managing sickness absence do you find most challenging?

6.2. Why are these aspects difficult for you?

6.3. Do you feel under pressure when managing sickness absence?

6.4. If so, in what ways does this pressure manifest?

7. Changes Over Time (Additional questions for historical cohort)

7.1. Do you remember HRM being introduced into the organisation? Describe.

7.2. Did the approach to sickness absence management changed over time?

7.3. Do you feel your level of managerial discretion changed over time?

Appendix C – Ethical Approval

The Secretariat
University of Leeds
Leeds, LS2 9JT Tel: 0113 343 4873
Email: ResearchEthics@leeds.ac.uk

UNIVERSITY OF LEEDS

Gillian Wright
Leeds University Business School
University of Leeds
Leeds, LS2 9JT

Social Sciences, Environment and LUBS (AREA) Faculty Research Ethics Committee
University of Leeds

16 July 2026

Dear Gillian,

Title of study: **An examination of the line manager's perspective on sickness absence management**
Ethics reference: **LTLUBS-279**

I am pleased to inform you that the above application for proportionate (light touch) ethical review has been reviewed by a representative of the Social Sciences, Environment and LUBS (AREA) Faculty Research Ethics Committee and I can confirm a favourable ethical opinion as of the date of this letter. The following documentation was considered:

Document	Version	Date
LTLUBS-279 LightTouchEthicsForm - Gill Wright - 201282340 - 15 aug 2019.doc	1	02/09/2019
LTLUBS-279 Participant_Information_Sheet_Sept_2019.doc	1	02/09/2019
LTLUBS-279 Template_Participant_Consent_Form_Sept_2019.doc	1	02/09/2019
LTLUBS-279 Interview questions for line managers.docx	1	02/09/2019

Please notify the committee if you intend to make any amendments to the original research as submitted at date of this approval, including changes to recruitment methodology. All changes must receive ethical approval prior to implementation. The amendment form is available at http://ris.leeds.ac.uk/EthicsAmendment.

Please note: You are expected to keep a record of all your approved documentation, as well as other documents relating to the study. You will be given a two week notice period if your project is to be audited, there is a checklist listing examples of documents to be kept which is available at http://ris.leeds.ac.uk/EthicsAudits.

We welcome feedback on your experience of the ethical review process and suggestions for improvement. Please email any comments to ResearchEthics@leeds.ac.uk.

Yours sincerely

Jennifer Blaikie
Senior Research Ethics Administrator, the Secretariat
On behalf of Dr Matt Davis, Chair, AREA Faculty Research Ethics Committee