



HSC Pension Service

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Business Services Organisation

EMPLOYER TECHNICAL UPDATE

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December 2022

1. Foreword

This Employer Technical Update (ETU) provides you with an update on the pressures facing the NI Civil Service Occupational Health Service (NICS OHS), the organisation which assists HSC Pension Service in administering applications from Scheme Members for consideration for Ill Health Retirement.

Unfortunately the position the NICS OHS finds itself in has deteriorated in recent months which will result in a delay/reduction of services available.

2. Applications for Consideration for Ill Health Retirement

HSC Pension Service (HSCPS) has received further communication from the NI Civil Service Occupational Health Service (NICS OHS) concerning the staffing issues they were encountering and the impact these issues were having on the delivery of services.

Background and Process

Eligible HSC Pension Scheme members who have a medical condition which prevents them from carrying out the duties of their employment may apply for consideration for Ill Health Retirement (IHR). Members who are successful in qualifying for IHR may access the HSC Pension Scheme benefits before their Normal Retirement Age with no actuarial reductions applied to the benefits payable.

The process requires the member, their employer and their employer's Occupational Health Service Department to each contribute to the written application. At times, an application can and will include further supporting medical evidence from the member's GP/Consultant etc.

While HSCPS is ultimately responsible for making the decision on whether a member qualifies for IHR, HSCPS seeks the opinion of Medical Advisors employed with the NICS OHS on the interpretation of the medical evidence provided in the application.

Previous Position

In July 2022, the NICS OHS had written to HSCPS to inform us that they were encountering issues with staffing levels and that these issues would unfortunately impact service delivery.

Such impacts included longer processing times of normal applications and appeals, however those applications where a member suffered with a terminal illness with a limited life expectancy were still being prioritized.

Employers' Attendance Management Teams (who normally manage such applications) were informed accordingly of the potential delays in normal and appeal applications.



2. Applications for Consideration for Ill Health Retirement Cont.

Current Position

The Director of Learning & Development, OHS and Welfare in the NICS OHS has now provided HSCPS with a further update on the staffing issues they are encountering and how this will impact services, summary of main points below:

- There has been a reduction in NICS OHS Medical Officer resource in November, and this will reduce further in December. This will have an impact on the delivery of services.
- NICS OHS is working to explore and implement additional delivery options in light of recent developments and further updates on these will be provided.
- Recruitment of nursing staff is at an advanced stage, and medical officer positions have been advertised with interviews planned early January 2023. NICS OHS are also working to source additional capacity via medical agency
- An overarching review on the NICS OHS delivery model is being commissioned and discussions were due to commence with Business Consultancy Services in early December to take this forward
- Short term limits to service provision that will be required until interim arrangements are in place. Therefore, as of 8 December:
 - A) Referrals will be processed on a prioritised basis.
 - B) Health & Social Care Pensions referrals will be deemed a priority in instances when a terminal illness requires that medical advice be provided on grounds of ill-health retirement.

What does this mean for Members and Employers?

Members/Employers may still submit applications for consideration for Ill Health Retirement to HSCPS, however until services provided by NICS OHS are fully re-instated, it is unlikely that normal/appeal applications will receive the medical advice required to allow HSCPS to make a qualified decision on the said application.

Below is a list of FAQ's which will be useful for staff within your organization who manage Consideration for Ill Health Retirement Applications.



2. Applications for Consideration for Ill Health Retirement Cont.

Why was action not taken earlier to address this issue?

The NICS OHS has been taking forward work to revise its operating model, progress recruitment competitions, and explore all avenues for temporary resource solutions. The update provided previously advised of this and this work continues. Additional challenges, which have prompted this most recent communication, have only just occurred. The NICS OHS has acted promptly to explore other solutions to this and will provide additional information as the position and timescales become clearer.

When will an interim arrangement be in place?

NICS OHS have taken advice on options available and these are being explored. Although a precise timeframe cannot be provided at this stage, this work is being taken forward with a view to urgent implementation of additional support arrangements.

Will pension services continue to be delivered until interim arrangements are in place?

With the exception of referrals where a terminal illness requires that medical advice be provided on grounds of ill-health retirement, it is unlikely services will continue to be delivered until interim arrangements are in place. NICS OHS senior management will continue to review these measures in the context of an evolving situation.

Should I contact OHS to ask that referrals be prioritised?

Requests to prioritise referrals will only be accepted in instances when a terminal illness requires that medical advice be provided on grounds of ill-health retirement.

When will a further update be provided?

A range of options are being considered/progressed at the moment and when available, a further update will be provided.

HSCPS will continue to engage with NICS OHS to find a resolution to these issues and will keep you informed of any developments. HSCPS will also engage with the Department of Health to explore any other options available.

HSCPS will also include a summary of the above issues in our additional Member and Employer Newsletters.

Action for Employers: It is of vital importance that all staff who manage or are engaged in the Consideration for Ill Health Retirement process are made aware of the current position.



3. Contact Us

By writing to us at:-

HSC Pension Service

Waterside House

75 Duke Street

Londonderry

BT47 6FP

By Telephone: 028 7131 9111

10.00 am to 12.00pm / 2.00 pm to 4.00pm - Monday to Thursday

10.00 am to 12.00pm - Friday



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If you have any suggestions for the newsletter or would like a particular topic covered in future publications please do not hesitate in contacting us by emailing: hscpensions@hscni.net

