Staff and Pensions Committee

9 September 2019

Employee Sickness Absence Management

Recommendation

That the Staff and Pensions Committee notes the performance information in relation to the management of employee sickness absence during 2018/19, endorses a target reduction to 9.04 days per employee for 2019/20, and supports a proactive approach to the health and wellbeing of employees and in managing employee sickness absence.

1.0   Introduction

1.1   This report covers information on sickness absence for:-
   a) the financial year April 2018 – March 2019
   b) compares data with previous years
   c) the figures exclude absence for non-sickness reasons such as annual leave, maternity, paternity, or adoption leave, unpaid leave and leave for compassionate reasons.
   d) unless otherwise stated, the sickness data provided in the report includes both short and long term sickness absence as defined in Section 5.1.

2.0   Sickness days lost per employee

2.1   A summary of days lost at County Council level through sickness absence per employee (full-time equivalent) since 2011/12 is set out below: -

Year Ending	11/12	12/13	13/14	14/15	15/16	16/17	17/18	18/19
Days Lost per Employee FTE	8.82	9.61	9.60*	10.08*	10.26*	9.90*	9.87*	9.51*

* These figures exclude schools.

2.2   In terms of comparative data, the public service sector average for 2018 was
        8.4 days per employee per year (8.5 days reported in 2017).
        (Source: Chartered Institute of Personnel and Development, 2018).

        The mean average figure for local government in 2018 was 9.8 days
        (Source: Chartered Institute of Personnel and Development, 2018).

        Benchmark data on average days absence relating to 2018/19 has been
        obtained from the shire authorities network in order to provide comparative
        data. The data made available is reported in the table below:-

Local Authority	2016/17 (where available)	2017/18	2018/19
Warwickshire CC	9.90 days	9.87 days	9.51 days
Buckinghamshire CC	8.4 days	9.1 days	9.4 days
Cumbria CC	13.2 days	11.9 days	12.4 days
Gloucestershire CC	7.8 days	9.1 days	8.1 days
Herefordshire CC	9.57 days	8.2 days	8.2 days
Hertfordshire CC	7.3 days	7.3 days	7.3 days
Kent CC	6.9 days	7.3 days	7.5 days
Northumberland CC	10.4 days	11.4 days	11.3 days
Rutland CC	9.1 days	8.8 days	9.7 days
Somerset CC	7.5 days	8.3 days	6.7 days
Suffolk CC	12.9 days	13.6 days	13.0 days
Staffordshire CC	-	10.6 days	10.7 days

        Gloucester and Somerset County Councils have been contacted in order to learn
        more in relation to their approach to sickness absence management, given their
        relative absence levels.
        In the case of Gloucestershire County Council, a crackdown on under-reporting
        was done approximately 3 years ago. Stress/depression is their top reason
        (30.65%). Similar wellbeing initiatives to Warwickshire's have been undertaken,
        including wellbeing days, and talks and presentations on issues such as obesity,
        menopause and mindfulness. Sickness absence levels are reported to
        Directorate Leadership teams with an emphasis on trend data, and the HR
        service produces specific reports on those staff exceeding absence trigger points.
        The view is that their occupational health offer is good and that their approach to
        sickness absence management is now much more joined up.

        Somerset County Council has indicated that there is some significant under-
        reporting and that this is currently being addressed. Anxiety/stress is their top
        reason (28.65%). As with Warwickshire, Somerset has championed a number of
        wellbeing initiatives over the last 12 months. Further information has been
        requested.

2.3   The County Council continues to have a proactive focus on employee wellbeing
        in order to reduce sickness absence levels. Further details on this area of work
        are contained in Section 8 of this report.

2.4 Sickness absence levels (days per employee FTE) by Directorate and by Business Unit are reported in the table below and include headcounts:-

	Headcount 2018/19	2014/15	2015/16	2016/17	2017/18	2018/19
WCC (excluding schools)	**4501**	**10.08**	**10.26**	**9.90**	**9.87**	**9.51**
Communities Directorate	**1668**	**9.99**	**9.28**	**9.21**	**9.05**	**8.44**
Transport & Economy*	408	-	-	7.34	9.87	8.43
Community Services	315	9.26	10.19	11.12	8.31	7.12
Education & Learning	523	11.72	8.54	9.62	9.09	7.07
Fire & Rescue	416	6.50	8.42	7.91	10.22	10.09
People Directorate	**1549**	**12.28**	**13.16**	**13.12**	**12.12**	**12.12**
Children & Families	808	11.80	12.86	11.45	12.40	11.66
Social Care & Support Services	618	11.90	16.0	15.37	13.35	13.38
Strategic Commissioning	68	15.89	13.0	11.24	4.03	7.98
Public Health	30	3.16	6.56	7.49	7.95	15.15
Resources Directorate	**1273**	**8.20**	**8.87**	**8.36**	**7.05**	**8.25**
Customer Service	402	11.21	11.55	10.15	9.95	9.43
Finance	162	6.83	7.35	7.18	8.81	7.30
HR & OD	131	7.84	9.46	7.77	5.03	8.04
ICT	169	4.64	6.89	5.27	5.55	7.71
Law & Governance	130	7.29	7.95	5.92	6.77	5.49
Property Services	205	8.70	9.07	10.07	6.37	12.26
Performance	68	9.00	4.98	4.82	3.70	2.66

* Please note the Transport and Highways and the Economic Growth business units were combined in April 2016 to form the Transport and Economy Business unit. Consequently, comparative data with previous years is not available.

2.5 The sickness absence figures for the Fire and Rescue Service (FRS) for 2017/18 and 2018/19 include absence for operational Firefighters, whereas in previous years the figures only referred to Green Book staff. The absence figures for the FRS are calculated on a monthly basis using information provided by the FRS and also the Your HR system. This is because the shift systems for operational Firefighters are varied and, for a number of stations, arranged on a self-rostering basis.

3.0 Percentage of employees with no absences

3.1 The percentage of employees with no absence in 2018/19 is reported in the table below:-

	2014/15	2015/16	2016/17	2017/18	2018/19
WCC (excluding schools)	**38.7%**	**40.7%**	**39.6%**	**48.1%**	**39.95%**
Communities Directorate	**41.2%**	**44.0%**	**41.5%**	**52.3%**	**44.42%**
Transport & Economy	-	-	40.6%	42.8%	36.76%
Community Services	43.2%	47.8%	46.4%	58.4%	43.49%
Education & Learning	41.4%	43.2%	39.5%	54.8%	48.18%
Fire & Rescue	47.5%	48.8%	51.1%	53.1%	47.6%
People Directorate	**35.5%**	**38.3%**	**36.1%**	**45.9%**	**37.70%**
Children & Families	47.3%	45.5%	43.6%	50.3%	40.47%
Social Care & Support Services	32.0%	29.9%	27.2%	39.1%	33.82%
Strategic Commissioning	30.2%	50.7%	39.6%	50.8%	39.71%
Public Health	47.1%	52.9%	38.7%	46.4%	36.67%
Resources Directorate	**37.8%**	**38.7%**	**38.2%**	**44.6%**	**36.37%**
Customer Service	37.0%	40.7%	39.0%	48.2%	39.55%
Finance	35.9%	36.4%	38.7%	41.6%	35.19%
HR &OD	25.9%	34.5%	29.8%	38.6%	29.77%
ICT	35.6%	34.9%	42.5%	43.7%	34.32%
Law & Governance	32.1%	39.4%	34.9%	38.4%	43.08%
Property Services	41.5%	39.5%	38.6%	46.3%	29.27%
Performance	39.0%	40.7%	38.4%	47.3%	44.12%

4.0 Average number of episodes of sickness per employee

4.1 The average number of episodes of sickness absence per employee in 2018/19 is reported in the table below:-

	2014/15	2015/16	2016/17	2017/18	2018/19
WCC (excluding schools)	**1.49**	**1.41**	**1.50**	**1.26**	**1.21**
Communities Directorate	**1.69**	**1.40**	**1.40**	**1.04**	**1.15**
Transport & Economy	-	-	1.40	1.42	1.28
Community Services	1.61	1.18	1.27	0.91	1.06
Education & Learning	3.00	1.65	1.44	1.22	1.23
Fire & Rescue	0.93	0.92	0.93	0.94	0.96
People Directorate	**1.46**	**1.50**	**1.63**	**1.30**	**1.23**
Children & Families	1.20	1.32	1.34	1.30	1.19
Social Care & Support Services	1.61	1.69	1.96	1.33	1.28

Strategic Commissioning	2.07	1.62	1.39	0.77	1.15
Public Health	1.02	0.94	1.85	1.37	1.30
Resources Directorate	**1.47**	**1.43**	**1.59**	**1.36**	**1.29**
Customer Service	1.67	1.50	1.58	1.40	1.21
Finance	1.74	1.60	1.79	1.51	1.39
HR &OD	1.72	1.46	1.98	1.15	1.37
ICT	1.31	1.38	1.37	1.27	1.32
Law & Governance	1.27	1.45	2.01	1.47	1.33
Property Services	1.33	1.35	1.50	1.43	1.43
Performance	1.75	1.40	1.42	1.12	0.85

5.0   Percentage of time lost due to short term / long term sickness

5.1   Short term absence is defined as an absence of below 20 working days. Long term absence is defined as absence of longer than four weeks and which often requires a medical intervention to aid recovery and a return to work.

5.2   All figures within this report only to sickness absence as reported through the appropriate procedures and managed through the County Council's Sickness Absence Management Procedure. On the very rare occasions where there is strong evidence that employees are not genuinely sick, then this would be dealt with as a disciplinary issue and would not be included in the sickness figures.

5.3   In 2018/19, at WCC level, 37.4% of working time lost to absence is accounted for by short-term absences, whilst 62.6% is attributed to long-term absences as detailed in the tables below:-

WCC	**Short Term**	**Long Term**
2015/16	37.3%	62.7%
2016/17	39.7%	60.3%
2017/18	36.6%	63.4%
2018/19	37.4%	62.6%

	Communities		**People**		**Resources**	
	Short Term	**Long Term**	**Short Term**	**Long Term**	**Short Term**	**Long Term**
2015/16	41.1%	58.9%	33.8%	66.2%	40.0%	60.0%
2016/17	38.9%	61.1%	37.3%	62.7%	45.6%	54.4%
2017/18	39.8%	60.2%	33.6%	64.4%	44.7%	55.3%
2018/19	39.0%	61.0%	32.4%	67.6%	44.2%	55.8%

5.4 With the support of the HR Service, managers across all of the Directorates are working to proactively manage sickness absence in accordance with the Council's Sickness Management of Absence Procedure. During 2018/19, a total of 7 employees were dismissed due to sickness absence, or for reasons related to the absence triggers. In addition, a further 6 employees left the County Council on ill health retirement grounds during 2018/19. This compares with 9 dismissed and 5 ill health retirements in 2017/18, and 10 and 7 respectively in 2016/17.

6.0 Reasons for sickness absence

6.1 The top reasons for sickness absence by percentage days in 2018/19 are reported in the table below. The table in Section 6.2 provides comparative data for previous years.

Reason	2018/19
Mental Health	25.7%
Musculoskeletal	19.6%
Chest or Respiratory	9.6%
Digestive System	6.4%
Reason Withheld	5.9%
Neurological	4.1%
Viral	3.5%

6.2 The top sickness absence reasons by percentage days for the previous 4 years are reported in the table below.

Reason	2014/15	2015/16	2016/17	2017/18
Mental Health	19.9%	25.4%	25.3%	24.6%
Musculoskeletal	17.7%	18.6%	16.0%	18.1%
Chest or Respiratory	5.9%	4.6%	5.1%	9.9%
Digestive System	6.9%	6.7%	7.0%	4.5%
Reason Withheld	6.6%	3.9%	5.5%	0.9%
Neurological	4.0%	4.2%	3.4%	3.7%
Viral	13.9%	13.2%	12.3%	4.8%
Eye, Ear, Nose, Mouth	3.6%	3.8%	3.8%	2.7%

6.3 An analysis of the specific reasons for sickness absence shows that the top two reasons for sickness absence remain consistent with previous years and are Mental Health (25.74%) and Musculoskeletal disorders (19.69%).

7.0 Financial Implications

7.1   The opportunity cost of days lost due to sickness absence during 2018/19 has been calculated from the Your HR system and is reported at £3.13m. Please note that this is a notional figure only. Sickness absence only impacts on the actual costs incurred by the authority where, to ensure service continuity, cover arrangements need to be put into place. These latter costs are not recorded separately from other overtime, temporary staff or acting up arrangements that may be required by services.

8.0   Occupational Health support

8.1   With effect from 1 July 2018 a new contract for the Occupational Health provision through Duradiamond commenced. The following is a summary of the use of the provision from July 2018 to March 2019:-

People Directorate - 181
Resources Directorate - 79
Communities Directorate - 78

These figures are generally comparative with the last two years.

8.2   The top two reasons for new referrals to Occupational Health were:-

Mental health issues - 40% (38% in 2017/18)
Musculoskeletal - 21% (22% in 2017/18)

The top referral reasons are consistent with the main causes of sickness absence across the Council.

8.3   The Occupational Health statistics are monitored both from a contract management perspective, and to identify trends in order to take appropriate action.

9.0   Absence Management Strategies

9.1   As detailed in the Health and Wellbeing Annual Report presented to the Staff and Pensions Committee on 10 June 2019, the Workplace Health and Wellbeing Strategy was launched in June 2018. A Health and Wellbeing steering group has been established in order to ensure that the strategy is implemented. It includes representatives from senior leadership, the HR & OD service, Health and Wellbeing Champions, and Marketing & Communications.

The implementation plan includes elements such as staff engagement, communication and awareness, sickness absence, occupational health, employee assistance programme, and mental health. There is a range of health and wellbeing actions and initiatives which involve strong links with Public Health, the Year of Wellbeing Coordinator, and external partners such as NHS and Mind Mental Health.

With mental health being the top reason for sickness absence, mental health and general wellbeing have featured highly in the initiatives and activities

undertaken over the last 12 months and include:-

- the benefits of pulling all relevant information together into a single place for staff to access is something that the Committee has highlighted previously. Consequently, the Your Wellbeing intranet page now includes information on Occupational Health and the Employee Assistance Programme, health topics, training, support and information;
- introduction of Wellbeing Wednesday, promoting health and wellbeing campaigns, information and signposting to Workplace Wellness and the Year of Wellbeing initiatives;
- recruitment, training and promotion of WCC Wellbeing Champions to support teams and staff with positive health and wellbeing;
- the wellbeing communications plan is designed to continually raise the awareness of wellbeing through different communication channels;
- WCC sign up to the Thrive at Work commitment, working on attaining the Bronze Level award where WCC is currently at 75% completion. The Thrive at Work award is a best practice guide in order to benchmark and identify gaps within WCC;
- mental health and wellbeing awareness sessions have been delivered to 13 teams to date, with another 15 planned over the coming months;
- additional resilience and mindfulness training sessions provided and the introduction of work-life balance training; and
- Health, Safety and Wellbeing service attendance at all building user group meetings to identify any wellbeing/work environment issues for advice and support. The building user groups exist within WCC occupied buildings to provide a representative forum, enabling staff the opportunity to contribute to issues concerning the buildings that they occupy.

Key actions that are currently being planned for the remainder of 2019 and beyond include:-

- the launch of "listening mates" in November 2019 whereby staff will be trained to provide support to colleagues who feel that there is an issue in the workplace and need some support;
- the development of a WCC Mental Health Policy planned for October 2019; and
- conducting a mental health campaign entitled "Time to Change" planned for the end of 2019.

9.2 Musculoskeletal continues to be one of the top reasons for sickness absence. In order to address this and reduce the potential musculoskeletal health issues experienced by staff working at their workstations, the Health, Safety and Wellbeing service undertakes a programme of display screen equipment assessments. A total of 87% of staff who have had an assessment reporting that the recommendations made have improved their workstation set-up and, therefore, eliminated or reduced the issues raised.

9.3 Sickness absence levels continue to be reported to managers on a monthly basis in order that they are in receipt of timely management information relating

to sickness absence. Advice and support in managing both long and short term sickness absence are provided by the HR Advisory Service, with particular emphasis where sickness absence hotspots have been identified.

In conjunction with this, managers now have access to a case management facility within the Your HR system that includes sickness absence, which allows them to record and keep track of actions taken in relation to managing absence.

9.4   Sickness absence management surgeries continue to be available for managers who require guidance and support on managing absence in their respective services. In addition, there are also examples of where bespoke training and support has been provided to Service Managers and Team Leaders.

10.0 Conclusion

10.1   This report has compiled all relevant and available statistics for sickness absence management within the County Council. The statistics demonstrate that the monitoring and management of sickness absence remains essential.

10.2   The average sickness absence levels of Warwickshire County Council staff (excluding schools) in 2018/19 equate to 9.51 average days per employee. This has seen a reduction from 9.87 in 2017/18. Target reductions of 5% have again been applied by all of the Directorates.

10.3   As with 2017/18, the top reasons for employee sickness absence in 2018/19 remain as Mental Health and Musculoskeletal.

10.4   Whilst there has been a reduction in sickness absence levels in 2018/19, the focus remains on managing absence, ensuring managers are aware of their roles and responsibilities, and proactively managing employee sickness absence cases. The focus is also very much upon preventative strategies and measures, and this is evidenced by the implementation of the Workplace Wellbeing Strategy.

Background Papers

None

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