Staff and Pensions Committee

Employee Sickness Absence Management Report

14 September 2020

1.0 Recommendations

1.1 That the Committee notes the performance information in relation to the management of employee sickness absence during 2019/20, and endorses an overall target reduction of 7% for 2020/21, with service level target reductions ranging between 5% and 10% to be applied, in managing sickness absence levels.

1.2 That the Committee supports a proactive approach to the health and wellbeing of employees in developing a sustainable and resilient workforce.

2.0 Executive Summary

2.1 This report covers information on sickness absence for: -

   a) the financial year April 2019 – March 2020
   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.

3.0 Supporting Information

3.1 A summary of days lost at County Council level (excluding schools) through sickness absence per full time equivalent (FTE) employee since 2013/14 is set out below: -

Year Ending	13/14	14/15	15/16	16/17	17/18	18/19	19/20
Days Lost per Employee FTE	9.60	10.08	10.26	9.90	9.87	9.51	10.90

3.2 In terms of comparative data, the public service sector average for 2019 was 8.0 days per employee per year, compared to 8.4 days reported in 2018. (Source: Chartered Institute of Personnel and Development, 2019).

The mean average figure for local government in 2018 was 9.8 days (Source: Chartered Institute of Personnel and Development, 2018). Data for 2019 is currently unavailable.

In the private sector, the average for 2019 was 4.3 days, whilst in the non-profit sector it was 5.2 days. (Source: Chartered Institute of Personnel and Development, 2019).

Benchmark data on average days absence has been obtained from the Shire Counties network in previous years in order to provide comparative data.   Some data has been received and is included below. Please note that anonymity has been requested. Datasets should be considered as illustrative as the precise method for calculation, together with absence strategies, may differ. Some authorities have previously indicated an element of under reporting and 2019/20 data remains outstanding in a number of cases.

Local Authority	2016/17	2017/18	2018/19	2019/20
Warwickshire CC	9.90 days	9.87 days	9.51 days	10.90 days
Authority A	8.4 days	9.1 days	9.4 days	9.80 days
Authority B	13.2 days	11.9 days	12.4 days	Not available
Authority C	7.8 days	9.1 days	8.1 days	Not available
Authority D	9.57 days	8.2 days	8.2 days	Not available
Authority E	7.3 days	7.3 days	7.3 days	Not available
Authority F	6.9 days	7.3 days	7.5 days	8.02 days
Authority G	Not available	Not available	Not available	9.48 days
Authority H	10.4 days	11.4 days	11.3 days	Not available
Authority I	Not Available	Not Available	Not Available	10.92 days
Authority J	9.1 days	8.8 days	9.7 days	Not available
Authority K	7.5 days	8.3 days	6.7 days	Not available
Authority L	12.9 days	13.6 days	13.0 days	13.6 days
Authority M	Not available	Not available	Not available	7.42 days
Authority N	Not available	10.6 days	10.7 days	Not available
Authority O	Not available	Not available	Not available	6.39 days

3.3 The County Council continues to have a proactive focus on employee health and wellbeing in order to reduce sickness absence levels. Further details on this area of work are contained in Section 9 of this report.

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

	Headcount 2019/20	Average days absence per employee 2019/20
WCC (excluding schools)	4593	10.90
Communities Directorate	1509	9.65
Environment Services	329	7.02

Communities	271	7.27
Education	480	7.83
Fire & Rescue	429	14.34
People Directorate	1468	14.11
Children & Families	822	13.12
Adult Social Care	569	16.22
Strategic Commissioning	63	7.98
Public Health	14	6.22
Resources Directorate	1616	9.94
Business & Customer Services	712	13.50
Governance & Policy	198	6.08
Commissioning Support Unit	119	5.73
Enabling Services	419	7.98
Finance	168	7.18

3.5 The table below provides sickness absence levels (days per employee FTE) by Directorate and by Business Unit for the previous 4 years for comparative purposes. Please note that due to structural changes it is not possible to make direct comparisons across the whole of the organisation.

	2015/16	2016/17	2017/18	2018/19
WCC (excluding schools)	**10.26**	**9.90**	**9.87**	**9.51**
Communities Directorate	**9.28**	**9.21**	**9.05**	**8.44**
Transport & Economy*	-	7.34	9.87	8.43
Community Services	10.19	11.12	8.31	7.12
Education & Learning	8.54	9.62	9.09	7.07
Fire & Rescue	8.42	7.91	10.22	10.09
People Directorate	**13.16**	**13.12**	**12.12**	**12.12**
Children & Families	12.86	11.45	12.40	11.66
Adult Social Care	16.0	15.37	13.35	13.38
Strategic Commissioning	13.0	11.24	4.03	7.98
Public Health	6.56	7.49	7.95	15.15
Resources Directorate	**8.87**	**8.36**	**7.05**	**8.25**
Customer Service	11.55	10.15	9.95	9.43
Finance	7.35	7.18	8.81	7.30
HR & OD	9.46	7.77	5.03	8.04
ICT	6.89	5.27	5.55	7.71
Law & Governance	7.95	5.92	6.77	5.49
Property Services	9.07	10.07	6.37	12.26
Performance	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.

3.6 The sickness absence figures for the Fire and Rescue Service (FRS) since 2017/18 include absence for operational Firefighters, whereas in previous years

the figures only referred to Green Book staff. The absence figures for FRS are calculated on a monthly basis using information provided by the FRS and the Your HR system. This is because the shift systems for operational Firefighters are varied and, for several stations, arranged on a self-rostering basis.

3.7 The percentage of employees with no absence in 2019/20 is reported in the table below. In excess of 50% our people took no sickness absence in the year to 31 March 2020. Even when adjusted to reflect those in post both at the beginning and end of the year, over 45% of employees have no sickness absence at all.

	All Employees (Including part year service)	**Full Year Service Only**
WCC (excluding schools)	**50.25%**	**45.13%**
Communities Directorate	**53.73%**	**49.08%**
Environment Services	47.18%	45.33%
Community Services	51.95%	44.98%
Education & Learning	57.14%	52.07%
Fire & Rescue	55.75%	50.77%
People Directorate	**50.94%**	**44.15%**
Children & Families	57.73%	51.93%
Adult Social Care	41.12%	34.66%
Strategic Commissioning	51.56%	48.21%
Public Health	27.78%	0.00%
Resources Directorate	**46.24%**	**42.05%**
Business & Customer Services	42.41%	38.69%
Finance	41.58%	45.51%
Governance & Policy	44.13%	36.47%
Enabling Services	48.63%	45.43%
Commissioning Support Unit	56.59%	53.57%

3.8 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.

3.9 All of the figures within this report relate 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, this would be dealt with as a disciplinary issue and would not be included in the sickness figures.

3.10 In 2019/20, at WCC level, 33.5% of working time lost to absence is accounted for by short-term absences, whilst 66.5% 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%
2019/20	33.5%	66.5%

	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%
2019/20	33.1%	66.9%	30.2%	69.8%	39.0%	61.0%

3.11 With the support of the HR Service, managers across all Directorates are working to proactively manage sickness absence in accordance with the Council's Sickness Management of Absence Procedure. During 2019/20, a total of 9 employees left the County Council on ill health retirement grounds and one employee was dismissed due to sickness absence, or for reasons related to the absence triggers, during this period. This compares with 6 ill health retirements and 7 dismissals in 2018/19.

In addition, during 2019/20, 3 employees were successfully redeployed to alternative roles with WCC due to health reasons. This compares with one in the previous year.

3.12 The top reasons for sickness absence by percentage days in 2019/20 are reported in the table below: -

Reason	**2019/20**
Mental Health	29.1%
Musculoskeletal	17.0%
Chest or Respiratory	7.9%
Digestive System	6.8%
Reason Withheld	6.1%
Neurological	5.0%
Viral	3.5%

3.13 For comparative purposes, 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	2018/19
Mental Health	19.9%	25.4%	25.3%	24.6%	25.7%
Musculoskeletal	17.7%	18.6%	16.0%	18.1%	19.6%
Chest or Respiratory	5.9%	4.6%	5.1%	9.9%	9.6%
Digestive System	6.9%	6.7%	7.0%	4.5%	6.4%
Reason Withheld	6.6%	3.9%	5.5%	0.9%	5.9%
Neurological	4.0%	4.2%	3.4%	3.7%	4.1%
Viral	13.9%	13.2%	12.3%	4.8%	3.5%

3.14 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 at 29.1% (an increase from 25.7% in 2018/19) and Musculoskeletal disorders at 17.0% (a decrease from 19.6% in 2018/19). These factors are consistent with benchmark comparators.

4.0 Occupational Health Support

4.1 The following is a summary of the use of the Occupational Health (OH) provision from July 2019 to April 2020 (2018/19 referrals): -
People Directorate – 222 (181)
Resources Directorate – 78 (79)
Communities Directorate - 111 (78)

4.2 The top two reasons for new referrals to the Occupational Health service were:
Mental health issues - 47% (40% in 2018/19)
Musculoskeletal - 20% (21% in 2018/19)
The top referral reasons are consistent with the main causes of sickness absence across the Council.

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

5.0 Employee Support

5.1 The Employee Assistance Programme provision is available to all WCC employees (excluding WFRS who have their own in-house provision) and has continued to be extensively communicated and promoted to employees. It is worth noting that during 2020, this has also made available to all WCC's 260 foster carers and to the staff of 280 WCC commissioned social care providers.

5.2 The COVID-19 pandemic has seen a range of activities and resources being introduced in order to support staff. These included a "Keeping you well at work" intranet page that formed a vital section within the Coronavirus intranet pages; providing up to date information on staff wellbeing services.

In April 2020, the first wellbeing check-in survey in response to the COVID-19 situation was conducted. The response rate from employees was 46%, with 88% of respondents informing that they were coping with working remotely.

A "Thrive at Work Toolkit" designed to support managers in having conversations about mental health with their staff was developed and introduced. Furthermore, several additional activities have been developed to support staff to stay well, remain socially connected and to provide tips on working from home.

A range of learning and development activities have been on offer to staff; including Developing Personal Resilience, Mental Health Awareness, Leading with Resilience, and Work-Life Balance.

6.0   Absence Management Strategies

6.1   As detailed in the Health, Safety and Wellbeing Annual Report presented to the Staff and Pensions Committee on 8th June 2020, the priority actions from the first phase implementation plan has now been completed. The key actions progressed and implemented are as follows: -

- Your Wellbeing intranet page being regularly updated with information and resources from OH and EAP, health topics, training, support and information.
- Continuation of Wellbeing Wednesday (WW) intranet slots which promoted health and wellbeing campaigns, information and signposting to EAP and Year of Wellbeing initiatives.
- The method of communication has now been updated since January 2020, based on read rate of the WW articles and, as a result, general wellbeing updates are being included in Directorate briefings and Working for Warwickshire to maximise audience reach.
- The recruitment, training and promotion of WCC Wellbeing Champions to support teams and staff with positive health and wellbeing. There are now 31 trained Champions in WCC.
- The recruitment, training and promotion of WCC Listening Mates to replace the Dignity at Work contacts; with a remit to support and signpost staff if something is wrong at work, or at home, and it is affecting them at work. The Listening Mates received mental health first aid training, bullying, harassment and discrimination training, as well as active listening training.
- WCC has signed up to the Thrive at Work commitment, and is working on attaining the Bronze Level to benchmark against best practice and identify gaps within WCC; this now has 83% completion.
- Wellbeing and mental health awareness sessions delivered to teams:
  - Wellbeing sessions: Communities (x7); People (x13); Resources (x6); Apprentice inductions (x2); Corporate HSW training (x2); Schools HSW training (x1).
  - Mental Health sessions: Communities (x3); People (x3); Resources (x3) plus bespoke training at 5 libraries; Learning at Work sessions (x4); Mental

Health Awareness training for managers (x1); Mental Health Awareness training for staff (x2).
- Additional resilience and mindfulness training sessions have been offered.
- New work-life balance training sessions have been made available.
- Health, Safety and Wellbeing service attendance at all building user group meetings to identify any wellbeing/work environment issues for advice and support.
- Development of Individual and Team Wellness Plans to replace the Stress Risk Assessments as a proactive and preventative tool available to all staff, not just those who are absent.
- There was a 4% increase in the 2019 Your Say survey response for the question "employee wellbeing is promoted at work", which is an overall increase of 9% since 2017 and demonstrates staff awareness of positive wellbeing across WCC.

6.2   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 93% (2018/19: 87%) of staff who have had an assessment reported that the recommendations made have improved their workstation set-up and, therefore, eliminated or reduced the issues raised.

6.3   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 is provided by the HR Advisory Service, with particular emphasis where sickness absence hotspots have been identified in order that a targeted approach can be taken. A successful pilot has been undertaken in this regard across the Resources Directorate.

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.

6.4   The wellbeing of staff is a priority for the organisation and, as a result, a Wellbeing Pledge has now been developed for implementation as part of our refreshed People Strategy. It starts with the premise that:

- Everyone who works for Warwickshire County Council wants to do a good job and embodies our values and behaviours
- We support our people to bring their whole selves to work.
- We care about our workforce, understand the link between wellbeing and productivity and manage all our people in an inclusive way.

As part of the Wellbeing Pledge, the HR Service commits to provide the following information and support to enable leaders and manager to manage the wellbeing of staff as a priority: -

- Provide all managers with a core data set to enable them to manage their team's attendance.
- Provide Senior management and DLT's with the information they require to support and constructively challenge their direct reports.
- Support managers with timely occupational health referrals and the stages of the sickness absence procedure
- Support new managers to navigate the sickness absence procedures and the hand-over of cases between managers.
- Identify the members of staff who require an action plan and support the manager with the creation of these plans.
- Ensure our wellbeing and sickness absence support offer is clear and easy to find and will target interventions for particular areas.
- Ensure that our wellbeing and sickness management offer is "best in class" and is continually developing to meet the needs of the organisation.

Similarly, in accordance with the Wellbeing Pledge, managers / leaders will make the commitment to:

- Utilise the wealth of resources available to support the wellbeing of their people and enable their attendance.
- Make regular contact with members of staff who are off sick.
- Hold return to work discussions within 3 days of staff returning and follow the sickness absence procedure as appropriate.
- Refer staff who are struggling with stress or their mental health reasons to the occupational health service, either before they go off sick, or on the first day of sickness.
- Have an action plan to end the absence, for all staff who are off sick longer than 3 months, which will be regularly reviewed. This will be co-created with HR Advisory and will be shared with the relevant (Tier 3) service manager.
- Ensure that sickness absence dates and reasons are recorded in Your HR in a timely and accurate way.

6.5   A Sustainable and Resilient Workforce Project Team is being established; consisting of a cross section of managers/leaders, HR, Health and Safety, Occupational Health, Business Intelligence and Communications representatives. The Project Team's remit will be to support the management of wellbeing and absence facilitate learning and best practice. The Project Team will focus on three main workstreams: -

1. **Data and insights** - ensuring managers/leaders have the necessary data to manage attendance

2. **Culture** - ensuring the organisation promotes the right culture regarding wellbeing and managing attendance

3. **Skills and behaviours** - ensuring that managers are aware of, have access to, and are engaged in the available resources to increase wellness in work.

The Project Team's terms of reference are to: -

- Commission sickness absence data for the group to monitor

- Review sickness absence trend data and wellbeing initiative utilisation; commissioning investigation in priority areas, including understanding the reasons to for increases in absence in particular areas.
- Recommend attendance targets for the organisation.
- Review policy documentation
- Review the success of the wellbeing pledge and other initiatives in order to develop progressive strategies.
- Holistically targeting the areas with the most significant issues
- Recognising/ celebrating many services with low/improved sickness
- Agree the communication plan to publicise the project outcomes
- Future scope wellbeing and attendance management initiatives to ensure our approach is "best in class" and enables a sustainable and resilient workforce

7.0   Financial Implications

7.1   The cost of days lost due to sickness absence during 2019/20 is reported at £4.05m. This figure is based on Occupational Sick Pay through the Your HR system. Please note that this figure does not include any cover costs where cover arrangements may have been put into place.

8.0   Environmental Implications

None

9.0   Timescales associated with the decision and next steps

9.1   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.

9.2   The average sickness absence levels of Warwickshire County Council staff (excluding schools) in 2019/20 equate to 10.90 average days per employee. This has seen an increase from 9.51 days in 2018/19. An overall target reduction for the organisation is proposed at 7% for 2020/21, with service level target reductions ranging between 5% and 10% to be applied. These targets are considered stretching, given continued focus on redesigning our services coupled with the global pandemic, but achievable.

9.3   As with 2018/19, the top reasons for employee sickness absence in 2019/20 remain as Mental Health and Musculoskeletal. These conditions can typically result in longer term absences which account for around two-thirds of total time lost.

9.4   The focus remains on managing attendance, 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 includes the health and wellbeing initiatives.

9.5   This report identifies that there is a significant proportion of employees who do not have any sickness absence throughout the year. In recognition of this, it is our intention to positively reframe attendance as we move forward whilst continuing to provide comparative data to enable absenteeism to be measured and addressed.

Background Papers
None.

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The report was circulated to the following members prior to publication:

Not applicable.