WIRRAL

Business Overview and Scrutiny Committee
Thursday, 23 January 2020

REPORT TITLE:	SICKNESS ABSENCE - UPDATE
REPORT OF:	HEAD OF HUMAN RESOURCES

1.0 REPORT SUMMARY

1.1 This report has been produced at the request of Business Overview Committee and provides an update on absence levels in the organisation and sets out the steps that are being taken to manage sickness absence in the organisation.

1.2 This follows a previous report to the Committee in March 2019.

1.3 The Council's current target is 10.75 lost per full time equivalent (fte). The absence levels in 2018/19 were 10.60 days lost per fte. The projection for 2019/20 is currently 10.74 days lost per fte (based on figures submitted up to November 2019). In 2017/18 performance was 11.12 days lost per fte.

2.0 RECOMMENDATION/S

2.1 That the Committee notes the current position in relation to sickness absence and the approach being taken to manage sickness in the organisation.

3.0   REASON/S FOR RECOMMENDATION/S

3.1   The report provides Business Overview and Scrutiny Committee with the update on sickness absence that was requested.

4.0   OTHER OPTIONS CONSIDERED

4.0   None

5.0   BACKGROUND INFORMATION

Current position and projection

5.1   Appendix One sets out a summary of the current position in relation to sickness absence figures.

5.2   The Council's absence levels in 2018/19 were 10.60 per full time equivalent (fte). The Council's target is 10.75. The projection for 2019/20 is currently 10.74 (based on figures submitted up to November 2019). In 2017/18 performance was 11.12 days.

5.3   Across the Council, Children's Services had the highest days lost at 12.80 days per fte in 2018/19. However, this is currently projected to reduce to 11.74 days in 2019/20. Delivery Services which incorporates Parks, Leisure, Libraries, Highway and Streetscene services is projected to be 11.20 average lost days from 11.32 days last year.

5.4   In 2018/19 62% of all days lost to absence has been long term (over 20 days) and 37% has been short term.

5.5   Stomach 'bugs' and common colds have remained the most common causes of absence since April 2019 with mental health issues as the 3rd biggest cause of absence. However, mental health related absence accounts for the highest number of days lost with 37% of all absence being mental health related. These statistics remain broadly consistent with previous years.

5.6   The level of mental Health related absence remains the highest cause of concern. The Council's position is similar to other organisations. The CIPD Annual Survey Health and Wellbeing 2019 reported that stress-related absence has increased over the last year in nearly two-fifths of organisations. Just 8% report it has decreased. Nearly three-fifths have seen an increase in the number of reported common mental health conditions, such as anxiety and depression, among employees in the last 12 months.

Strategies to manage absence

5.7   The Council continues to manage sickness through a wide range of different approaches and strategies in line with best practice.

5.8   The Chartered Institute of Personnel and Development (CIPD) Absence Survey 2019 reports that the most common methods of managing short-term and long term absence are as follows:

Most common methods of managing short-term and long term absence (CIPD)					
Short Term	% of respondents	Council	**Long Term**	% of respondents	Council
Return to Work Interviews	82%	✓	Return to Work Interviews	74%	✓
Providing leave for family circumstances eg emergency/carer/dependent leave	77%	✓	Changes to working patterns or environment	64%	✓
Trigger mechanisms to review attendance	74%	✓	Occupational Health Involvement	64%	✓
Disciplinary and or capability procedure for unacceptable absence	67%	✓	Trigger Mechanisms to review attendance	63%	✓
Line Manager take primary responsibility for managing sickness	64%	✓	Case management approach	63%	✓
Changes to working patterns or environment eg flexible working	62%	✓	Disciplinary and or capability procedure for unacceptable absence	57%	
Managers are trained in absence handling procedures for absence management	56%	✓	Employee Assistance Programme	56%	
Employee Assistance Programme	56%	✓	Tailored support for line managers (eg Case conference with HR)	55%	✓
Tailored support for line managers eg Case conference with HR	50%		Risk Assessment to aid return to work	54%	✓
Case Management Approach (for example involving HR/OH and Line Manager	49%	✓	Restricting Sick Pay	47%	✗

Table 1: *Most commonly used methods of addressing short term and long term.* **Source** CIPD Survey 2019

5.9 Table 1 shows the Council's methods and approach to managing short-term and long-term absence is consistent with how 742 organisations that responded to the CIPD survey are managing these issues.

5.10 The CIPD Absence Survey 2019 reports that the most common methods of managing stress are as follows:

Most Common Method of Managing Stress		
Method	% of respondents	Council
Flexible working options/work life balance	68	✓
Employee Assistance Programme	61	✓
Training for line managers to manage stress in their team.	50	✓
Staff surveys/Focus Groups to identify causes	49	✗
Risk Assessments/Stress Audits	48	✓
Trained aimed at building personal resilience such as coping techniques, mindfulness, cognitive behaviour therapy, positive psychology courses	40	✓
Written Stress Policy/ Guidance	31	✓
Greater involvement of occupational health specialists	30	✓
Changes in work organisation such as role adaptations	28	✓
Stress Management Training for the whole workforce	27	x
Health and Safety Executive Management Standards	15	In progress
Other	3	n/a

Table 2: *Most commonly used methods of managing stress* **Source** CIPD Survey 2019

5.11 Table 2 shows the Council's methods and approach to managing stress is consistent with 429 organisations who responded to the CIPD 2019 survey.

5.12 Whilst not explicit in the survey findings, the Council also has a legal obligation to make reasonable adjustments to support employees to remain in work. This can include changes to duties, working hours, provision of IT or equipment or adaptations to the physical environment as appropriate. The Human Resources Team work with employees, line managers, Occupational Health and relevant agencies to implement recommendations for reasonable adjustments.

SPECIFIC ACTION TAKEN IN RELATION TO MANAGING ABSENCE AND HEALTH AND WELLBEING

Training

5.13 Line Manager Training - as reported previously, HR has now completed a programme of one-on-one line manager training. Designed in response to an internal audit report which raised some issues in relation to line managers compliance with policy and

procedures and accurate recording, this training aimed to ensure managers have the skills and knowledge required to be proficient in use of the HR self-serve system, able to access the data and management information available and to cover the managing attendance policy and procedure. Over 250 sessions were delivered to line managers across the organisation. This has now been incorporated into the induction programme for new managers.

5.14 Mental Health First Aid Training - this two-day training was delivered to 64 employees in 2019 at different levels of the organisation. The accredited training provides knowledge and skills on how to identify, understand and help someone who may be experiencing a mental health issue. Further sessions are planned in 2020.

HR interventions/Support

5.15 As previously reported some HR resources have been redirected since October 2017 to provide dedicated support on absence. This has focussed primarily on driving down the number of long-term cases and improving the management of long-term cases as well as following up on non-compliance with policy.

5.16 In October 2017 there were 18 employees in the Council who had been absent from work for more than one year. An organisation of our size will always carry a number of serious long term serious or complex cases. However, our view was this was too high. By November 2019, through the targeted work undertaken, this had reduced to 5 employees, 3 of whom are expected to return to work in January 2020.

5.17 There have been 433 cases managed through the formal absence process since November 2018 and 74 warnings issued under the absence procedures. There have been 18 dismissals in this time (inc ill health).

Occupational Health Service and Employee Assistance

5.18 In April 2019, the Council entered a new contract for Occupational Health Services. Line Managers are able to refer employees for advice from specialist advisors in relation to a range of medical conditions. The Council's policy is that any employee absence with stress should be referred on the first day of absence.

5.19 The Occupational Health offer also includes an Employee Assistance Programme. All employees (including schools based staff) have free access to a 24/7, 365 days a year helpline where independent and confidential advice can be accessed. This includes access to six sessions of counselling for all employees if required.

Workplace Wellbeing Initiatives

5.20 Workplace wellbeing is a key priority within the Council's People Strategy. We have significantly developed the activity in this area over the past 18 months.

5.21 It is not always possible to directly correlate the activities undertaken with positive outcomes or with sickness levels but the primary aim is to promote health and wellbeing in the workplace and provide opportunities for staff to look after their physical and mental health. Some of the recent activities are set out below:

Employee volunteering – we continue to raise awareness of volunteering opportunities for employees to encourage them to be active for good causes. Volunteering can have a very positive impact for those that participate.

Employee led activities – we have implemented an employee led activity scheme, this is a wide range of various activities taking place across the organisation for employees to access. Examples include lunchtime yoga, mindfulness, running clubs and football. There is a Council choir and in January 2020, free self-defence taster sessions were offered. There is a timetable on the intranet with details of different events in Council locations on a daily basis.

Financial Wellbeing mental health and stress can often be linked to financial problems or concerns. The Council has arranged a series of financial awareness advice sessions delivered by partners to provide advice and guidance.

Free flu jabs for all staff - the Council has for the past two winters offered free flu jabs for all employees to encourage them to cover themselves in the event of flu.

Public Health Campaigns – throughout the year we continue to raise awareness of key wellbeing issues in line with the Public Health campaigns through internal communications.

Wellbeing breakfasts – we have celebrated mental health week and other events by holding well-being breakfasts to encourage staff to take time out to think about their mental health.

Management Information and Data

5.22 We have continued to develop and improve the data available to line managers and senior managers in the organisation in relation to sickness:

- Every line manager in the organisation has immediate access on their desktop to detailed sickness information the individuals in their teams including whether the employee has breached policy triggers.
- All Directors and Senior Managers have access to absence management for their directorate and service areas. A whole range of sickness reports are available via the self-serve system.
- HR Business Partners attend Departmental Management Teams to present and discuss sickness absence figures and trends.
- The Senior Leadership Team are provided with sickness absence data on a monthly basis broken by directorate.
- There is a monthly Operational Health Report to SLT which sets out latest organisational performance in relation to days lost per FTE and a projection for the financial year.
- Internal Audit routinely audit compliance against policy and also non-reporting of absence.

Management of Short-Term absence/System Developments

5.23 From February 2019, in house developments to the HR system enabled automatic e-mail alerts to managers if an employee who reports to them has breached a trigger in the absence policy, if they have not recorded that a return to work interview has been undertaken or when a manager reporting to them has entered an employee absence late. These alerts will automatically escalate to the manager's line manager if no action is taken within one week.

5.24 As well as reminding managers of their responsibilities for complying with the policy, these measures will support senior managers to manage short term absence which is an area we need to improve and will allow them to more easily monitor the performance of their managers.

6.0 CONCLUSION

6.1 This report sets out the current position in relation to sickness absence within the Council.

6.2 Overall the Council's absence figures remain higher than we want them to be with a marginal increase currently projected compared to last year. The position is relatively steady and we remain comparable with other local authorities in the region.

6.3 This continues to be a challenge and a significant amount of work continues to be undertaken to address sickness absence. The benchmarking information and research from outside the organisation demonstrates that the Council is facing the same challenge as many large organisations, particularly in the public sector and specifically in relation to levels of mental health and wellbeing.

7.0 FINANCIAL IMPLICATIONS

7.1 The cost of absence is estimated to be over £3m per year. The impact varies in different service areas as comparatively few roles require cover for short-term absence. However, sickness absence does have an impact on service delivery, particularly in front line services.

8.0 LEGAL IMPLICATIONS

8.1 The Council is required to manage sickness absence in accordance with relevant policies, national conditions and employment law.

9.0 RESOURCE IMPLICATIONS: ICT, STAFFING AND ASSETS

9.1 Sickness absence is managed within existing resources. There are resources within the HR Team dedicated to supporting management of sickness.

10.0 ENVIRONMENT AND CLIMATE CHANGE IMPLICATIONS

10.1 None

11.0   RELEVANT RISKS

11.1   There are risks to service delivery if sickness absence is not managed in accordance with policies. The Council also has a duty of care to employees to provide a safe workplace environment with appropriate arrangement to manage risks to health, safety and wellbeing.

11.2   The Council has a policy framework and provides training to mitigate risks.

12.0   ENGAGEMENT/CONSULTATION

12.1   There are regular discussions with trade unions about sickness absence levels and the work that is being undertaken to manage this.

13.0   EQUALITY IMPLICATIONS

13.1   There are no proposals for changes within the report that require an equality impact assessment at this stage. There is a clear equality dimension within the management of sickness and the Council is required to manage sickness in accordance with the provisions of the Equality Act 2010.

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APPENDICES

Appendix One   Sickness Absence Summary

BACKGROUND PAPERS

SUBJECT HISTORY (last 3 years)

Council Meeting	Date
Business Overview and Scrutiny Committee	**5 March 2019**