

## **ATTENDANCE MANAGEMENT**

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### **1. Executive Summary**

- 1.1 This report updates Members on the Management of Attendance throughout the Council and confirms that last years out-turn figure for our BVPI level, as of March 2008, stood at 9.79 days, which was above the target set for 2007/8 of 9.20 days. The report goes on to explore the reasons why sickness absence increased last year.

### **2. Background**

#### **Performance**

- 2.1 The current sickness absence level for the Council stood at 9.79 days for the twelve month period up to March 2008. This figure reveals a decrease in the sickness levels reported to committee in November 2007 for the 12 month period ending September 2007, of 9.95 days, however our target for 2007/8 was 9.20 days, with our final performance therefore exceeding the target by 0.59 days.
- 2.2 The end of a year out-turn figures provide the Council with an opportunity to compare our performance against other Local Authorities. In terms of the historical trend in Wirral the table below confirms that between 1998/99 and 2007/8 our sickness absenteeism reduced by approximately 3.56 days per employee per year, i.e. an overall reduction of 26.6% over the period.

<b>Year</b>	<b>Days lost per employee</b>
1998/99	13.35
2000/01	12.05
2001/02	12.45
2002/03	11.05
2003/04	10.15
2004/05	9.46
2005/06	9.86
2006/07	9.21
2007/8	9.79

- 2.3 In comparing our absence levels to other Merseyside Authorities over the last three years, the overall sickness levels have fallen across each Authority with Wirral's

performance currently being marginally behind that of Knowsley (0.02 of a day) and 0.90 of a day behind Sefton.

<b>Authority</b>	<b>2005/6</b>	<b>2006/7</b>	<b>2007/8</b>
Knowsley	11.46	10.97	9.77
Sefton	11.05	9.15	8.89
St Helens	9.86	10.38	10.08
Wirral	9.86	9.21	9.79
Liverpool	N/a	N/a	11.43

- 2.4 Comparisons with other North West Metropolitan Authorities, based on information published by the North West Employers Organisation for 2006/07 is detailed in the following table:

<b>NW Met Authority</b>	<b>2006/7</b>
Bolton	10.98
Manchester City	11.81
Oldham	10.90
Rochdale	11.30
Stockport	10.00
Tameside	8.88
Trafford	11.99
Wigan	13.09

- 2.5 In terms of the Manchester Authorities Merseyside compares favourably and in regards to the overall performance in the North West Metropolitan Authorities Wirral's performance was third best for 2006/7.
- 2.6 In the first quarter of 2008 the Council's sickness absence level remained consistent with the same quarter as last year, 10.27 days this year compared to 10.25 days last year. Accordingly should everything else remain the same over the remainder of the year our sickness levels at the end of the year are likely to be similar, i.e. in the region of 9.79 days. This reinforces the need to review our current arrangements and to explore whether they can be improved.
- 2.7 As can be seen Tameside and Sefton are the best performing metropolitan authorities in the North West, with Sefton showing an improving trend over the past two years. For Wirral to become an excellent Council we too will need to improve our performance in optimising attendance, thus ensuring that services are better staffed and through effective leadership that employees are fully engaged in service provision.
- 2.8 I have therefore reviewed how the Council currently manages attendance and have suggested some further improvements in the following sections.

## Analysis of the reasons for Sickness

- 2.9 This section explores the reason why absence levels rose last year and examines the reasons why employees were absent compared to the previous two years.
- 2.10 Absence levels can change from one year to the next due to one or more of the following reasons:
- A one off event such as a flu pandemic affecting the population
  - Absenteeism not being as effectively managed by the organisation as previously.
  - The workforce not being as effectively engaged as previously due to changing organisational circumstances or factors.
- 2.11 Whilst many employees were affected by a Novo-virus over the winter months this does not appear to have affected absence levels as the number of days lost to ear nose and throat related conditions reduced.
- 2.12 the following table provides a breakdown of the most common reasons for sickness absences over the past three years;

Reason	Sick Days lost 2005/6	%	Sick Days lost 2006/7	%	Sick Days lost 2007/8	%
Mental Health	30,717	19.63	39,070	21.11	37,035	19.16
Muscular/skeletal (exc back)	19,269	12.31	21,419	11.57	24,990	12.94
Ear, Nose and Throat	18,416	11.77	18,120	9.79	17,108	8.85
Medical Procedures	16,018	10.24	17,443	9.42	23,604	12.22
Abdominal Problems (inc Digestive tract)	11,878	7.59	15,634	8.45	16,265	8.42
Back Problems	9,664	6.17	12,583	6.80	13,689	7.09
Infectious Disease	6,209	3.96	5,770	3.11	5,793	2.99
Respiratory Problems	8,001	5.10	9,148	4.94	8,971	4.64

## Summary

- 2.13 This summary reveals that the main reasons why sickness absence increased during 2007/08 related to medical procedures and muscular/skeletal injuries, with the other common reasons only moving up or down marginally and thus only having a marginal impact on the overall figure. Analysis of the increase in absences arising from medical procedures reveals that the extra 6,161 days lost last year increased the absence rate by 0.41 days alone, with the increase in muscular/skeletal absences of 3,571 days increasing the rate by 0.24 days.
- 2.14 Given that our BVPI figure increased by 0.58 days overall from 9.21 days to 9.79 days (after taking account of small variances in the number of days lost due to the other common reasons) the key reason why we experienced higher levels of sickness absence was due to the number of employees undergoing medical procedures with the NHS and other providers last year followed by the number of employees absent due to muscular or skeletal injuries.

- 2.15 The Council already has arrangements in place to minimise the potential of muscular/skeletal injuries arising in work, as all work tasks should be risk assessed to identify any risk of injury or ill health from musculoskeletal disorders. Where a risk is identified from either manual handling tasks or via poor ergonomic job design, the risks should be eliminated, avoided or reduced so far as reasonably practicable. Where there is a risk of injury or ill health remains, training in manual handling is available to staff to promote good kinetic lifting techniques for manual handling tasks within safe limits. The Council Health and Safety Officers are also providing an IOSH Managing Safely training programme for managers and key employees to raise the awareness and competence of line managers in health, safety and welfare.
- 2.16 Whilst absences due to mental health remain significantly high at 19.16% of all sickness, there was a decrease in 2007/8 from the previous year when the rate stood at 21.11 days. Pilot training around stress awareness has commenced. The pilot in conjunction with colleagues from the PCT will provide joint training for managers to raise awareness of stress amongst the workforce. An initial three sessions are scheduled to take place following which the training will be reviewed with further sessions planned for later in the year. The funding for the training is being provided by a PCT grant stream and is at no cost to the authority. Clearly if the training proves successful we will need to identify how we can roll it out across all relevant managers in the council.
- 2.17 Whilst the increase in absence arising from more employees undergoing medical procedures with the NHS and other providers was beyond the control of the Council's managers, the rest of the increase was there to be managed. From one year to the next all of the categories of absence fluctuate with the Council seeing increases in one category and decreases in another, accordingly we will continue to need to have effective procedures and arrangements in place, which when correctly applied will ensure continued good performance in managing attendance. The potential is always therefore there to manage the overall levels of absence and improve overall attendance levels, despite a pressure in a certain category. It is important therefore that we review again the Council's procedures for managing attendance.

### **The effective management of attendance**

- 2.18 This section considers our practices around managing or optimising attendance, draws comparisons against best practice and makes a number of recommendations as to how we can further improve our arrangements.
- 2.19 There are a number of aspects of management which employers can invest time and resources in, in order to optimise the level of attendance in their organisation, some actions being over the longer term and some more immediate. These actions can be categorised under 4 key areas of activity:
- A healthy organisational culture – employees regard the Council as a good place to work
  - Supporting employees so that they are more able to attend work
  - Effectively managing the absence of employees
  - The further embedding of a culture of attendance management

## **The Council as a good place to work**

2.20 The longer term actions which the Council can explore are around developing the organisations culture and in developing demonstrable leadership qualities in our management teams and in our leaders of the future, which in itself will help to develop the organisational culture. A healthy culture tied to good demonstrable leadership practice, whereby employees are truly engaged and involved in what they do and through which they can make a real contribution to their work and where their achievements are recognised and rewarded, will be the culture of an organisation where employees actively want to attend and, to participate in and contribute to the work of the business. To this end the Council is already taking significant steps to establish a healthier organisational culture. These steps include:

- Our first organisational specific leadership development programme in conjunction with Chester University
- Simpler and more focused competencies including leadership competencies
- The completion of our first employee perception survey (staff survey) and the implementation of departmental action plans to address issues raised through the survey
- Improved pay and conditions of employment as part of the local pay review

Together with other planned steps such as:

- A review of the Key Issues Exchange process and performance management at the individual employee level
- Improved employee communication, with two way communications channels together with a refocused One Council publication which focuses more on employees their performance, successes and their needs along with the Council being an employer of best practice

I also intend over the next 12 months to look at a more comprehensive approach around the Council to improve how we reward and recognise the work and achievements of the workforce.

These actions amongst other things will help to enhance the perceptions of the workforce about the Council which should improve attendance levels.

## **Supporting employees in order that they are more able to attend work**

2.21 Alongside fostering a culture whereby employees actively want to attend work employers also need to ensure that they have all necessary arrangements in place to ensure that the workforce is as healthy as they reasonably can be and are offered support when their health requires it, so that they are more able to remain in work. The Council already has good arrangements in place for this, including:

- Responsive access to occupational health advice
- Responsive access to counselling
- Responsive access to physiotherapy
- Free access to Council gyms where this will assist
- Access to flexible working arrangements (work life balance schemes)
- Health promotions

- Access to Employee Assistance Programmes under continuing pilot arrangements

2.22 Whilst there are other initiatives employers could introduce, such as private medical care, I believe that on balance the Council has reasonable and effective support arrangements in place. Nevertheless I do intend to review and re-launch the flexible working arrangements so that managers and employees are aware of their availability in appropriate circumstances together with how they can help to assist attendance in work. I will also further review our health promotion initiatives.

### **Effectively managing the absence of employees**

2.23 All organisations face a degree of sickness absence and will need therefore to ensure that adequate arrangements are in place to support absent employees with a view to their early return to work and so that managers are fully equipped to effectively manage absence. To this end the Council has a range of actions/processes in place, including:

- guidance for managers as to how to manage attendance
- training for managers as to how to manage attendance
- regular management information provided to managers on a service by service and sub service basis, detailing absence details/levels
- HR support including one to one advice
- Support from HR with attendance surgeries
- Ability to speedily refer employees for occupational health examination and hence to obtain occupational health advice
- Ability to speedily refer employees for counselling
- Ability to speedily refer employees for physiotherapy
- Ability to phase in returns to work
- Ability to agree family friendly policies/flexible working arrangements in order to address a health issue or negate the possible need for an employee to otherwise report sick
- Suitable procedural arrangements and guidance in place to help managers manage absence, ill health capability and to conduct return to work interviews
- Suitable attendance triggers which enable managers to address absenteeism

2.24 Having considered these arrangements it is clear that managers are equipped with everything that they need to effectively manage attendance. However to further support managers, the Corporate HR Team will:

- Produce a summary guide to managing attendance and ill health capability. This will provide managers with the choice of either reading the full or summary guidance before deciding how they should best deal with a particular absence.
- As stated elsewhere in this report to review and re-launch the Council's family friendly policies/flexible working arrangements to ensure that managers and employees are fully aware of them and how they can assist in managing attendance

## **The further embedding of a culture of attendance management and managerial accountability**

2.25 Where suitable arrangements are in place to train and provide managers with all of the necessary tools guidance and support facilities to enable them to effectively manage attendance but nevertheless absenteeism levels increase, there could be a need to further embed an attendance management culture in the organisation. The following actions can help towards embedding such a culture which I am recommending we undertake:

- That we brand our approach as managing attendance rather than managing sickness as we are seeking to develop an attendance culture
- That departments audit the most excessive cases of short and long term sickness absenteeism to establish whether or not managers are managing absences in accordance with the Council's prescribed procedures
- Departments to report the outcome of this including any deviation from the Council's procedures regularly to their DMT.
- That we seek to develop an 'attendance matters' culture by; including reference to attendance being important at all meetings with staff, including it on all staff agendas, by referring to it in all key staff publications and communications and by departments supporting any managers who consistently fail to apply the Council's prescribed procedures for managing absence. Such support compromising the consideration of the capability needs of the manager, including any further training needs and where the desired improvement in management practice is not achieved to then explore the question of incapability/conduct.
- That the requirement to manage attendance in accordance with the Council's prescribed procedures together with a target be included in the Key Issues Exchange objectives for all managers.

### **3. Financial implications**

3.1 There are no specific financial implications arising out of this report although management need to effectively manage and monitor absence in order to seek to further optimise attendance.

### **4. Staffing implications**

4.1 It is important that we take all reasonable steps to ensure that the workforce is encouraged to be as healthy as they can be and that the Council as an employer is held in high regard by its workforce. At the same time the Council needs to take all reasonable steps to help employees remain in work or to return to work when they are affected by ill health.

4.2 As part of this employees need to know what is expected of them when their absence patterns give cause for concern. It is essential therefore that managers comply with the attendance management procedures and that they properly conduct return to work interviews, ensure that employees understand the effect that their absences are having on service provision and other employees and that they deal with the employees absences in accordance with the requirements of and stages within the

capability procedure which could ultimately lead to dismissal being considered in appropriate circumstances.

**5. Equal Opportunities implications**

5.1 It is important that all employees are treated equitably under the Council's attendance management procedures. Care will need to be given to how disability and maternity related absences are considered under the procedures.

**6. Community Safety implications**

6.1 There are none arising from this report.

**7. Local Agenda 21 implications**

7.1 There are none arising from this report.

**8. Planning implications**

8.1 There are none arising from this report.

**9. Anti-poverty implications**

9.1 There are none arising from this report.

**10. Human Rights implications**

10.1 There are none arising from this report.

**11. Social Inclusion implications**

11.1 There are none arising from this report.

**12. Local Member Support implications**

12.1 There are none arising from this report.

**13. Background Papers**

13.1 None were used in the production of this report.

**14. Recommendations**

14.1 That Members note the actions being undertaken in order to improve the attendance of employees.

**B. NORMAN**

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