

**REPORT OF SERVICE DIRECTOR – CUSTOMERS, GOVERNANCE AND
EMPLOYEES****SICKNESS ABSENCE PERFORMANCE AND ONGOING ACTIONS FOR
IMPROVEMENT****Purpose of the Report**

1. a) To update Members on quarterly performance information as at **30 June 2019**, in relation to levels of sickness across the directly employed Nottinghamshire County Council workforce.
- b) To seek approval for ongoing actions to further understand reasons for sickness absence and therefore reduce absence levels
- c) To provide Members with an update on the work undertaken to specifically address the issue of mental health in the workplace

Information

2. This report sets out the latest available sickness absence figures for the end of Quarter 1 2019/20 as at 30th June 2019. In addition, it seeks to inform Members of the actions being taken by the Council to improve the health and wellbeing of its employees with an aim to reduce the levels of absence and to make sustainable progress towards the achievement of the target of **7.00 days average per employee per annum**. The figure for this period is 8.72 days per employee.
3. The range of strategic HR, Workforce and Organisational Development and wellbeing interventions and guidance has been extended as detailed in previous reports to this Committee and in the attached updated Employee Health and Wellbeing Action Plan (Appendix E).
4. The County Council continues to give priority to providing a safe and healthy working environment which maximises workforce productivity and performance, motivates and engages all employees and actively promotes a culture of positive mental and physical wellbeing at work. We continue to benchmark our policies, procedures, and support package against organisations held up as exemplar employers in this area and by engaging in local and national networks and workshops to provide assurance that we are not missing a vital component which may deliver a further positive impact.

5. Work continues to be developed with Public Health colleagues to ensure we have a joined-up approach and to maximise the benefits of any planned health initiatives such as the flu vaccination programme, promoted to eligible staff on the intranet on 3rd September, as well as promoting smoking cessation and obesity reduction programmes. Our approach is more one of education and self-help than anything more prescriptive which is a more progressive approach in an organisation which seeks to trust, support and enable its workforce to maximise their performance whilst at work.
6. The table below shows the quarterly breakdown, by department since July 2017 as a 12-month rolling figure to 30 June 2019. This shows a modest increase of 0.3 days over this period. Whilst of concern, this picture reflects a societal problem rather than one solely experienced by Nottinghamshire County Council and Members may have read recent articles in the press identifying an average absence figure of 14 days per employee across the Nottingham University Hospitals Trust.

	(A) October 2017 to September 2018	(B) January 2018 to December 2018	(C) April 2018 to March 2019	(D) July 2018 to June 2019
Adult Social Care, Health	11.76	11.96	11.70	12.11
Children and Families	10.49	10.51	10.28	10.88
Place	8.98	9.20	9.33	9.36
Chief Executive's	8.59	8.17	8.30	8.81
NCC Schools	6.72	6.79	6.86	6.85
Authority	8.42	8.50	8.52	8.72

7. The Infographic in the **Appendix D** to this report illustrates in executive summary the situation as at 30 June 2019, when the headcount of direct NCC employees was 7,357 in relation to:
- The level of performance against the current Council target and CIPFA national benchmarking data
 - The most significant causes of reported absence across the Council and by department during the quarter
 - The relative distribution of short and long-term absence.

The average level of sickness per employee per annum at the end of quarter 1 was **8.72 days overall**. This is an increase of 0.20 percentage points compared to the previous quarter when it stood at 8.52 days.

8. **Appendix B** to this report illustrates that stress and related conditions remain the most prevalent overall reason for absence across the Council with the exception of Place where muscular/skeletal absence stands at 25.26%.

9. There has been a very small reduction from **34.97% to 34.95%** attributed to stress and related conditions in Children and Families. The primary reason for absence in Adult Social Care for this period is also **Stress and Depression** standing at **20.59%** up from **19.48%**.
10. Stress has also been the most significant reported reason for absence in the Chief Executive's department over recent quarters, having increased from **24.51% to 28.63%** for this period.

Use of absence type "Other"

11. Members will recall previous discussions around the use of "other" as an absence type reason and that an exploration of its use would be undertaken as part of the work recently completed by Internal Audit colleagues. The draft report and recommendations provide "reasonable assurance" on four separate risk areas and have found that there is comprehensive guidance for managers to support any member of their team absent from work.
12. The audit also found that there is a clear and simple method for managers to record absence on BMS and to run their own trigger reports or to do so with the help of HR colleagues. Having surveyed a number of line managers, the audit found there was a high level of compliance in relation to holding "return to work" discussions and "trigger meetings" where any required action in relation to absence is identified.
13. In respect of using the absence type "other", an article was published on the Council's intranet, followed up in Team Talk, earlier this summer asking managers to accurately record absence reasons and advising that any use of the reason "other" would be investigated by an HR business partner to fully understand the reason for its use and for this to be corrected where it is appropriate to do so. Of the sample of 49 cases considered, 42 responses were received and in 16 of these it was found that the incorrect absence type had been entered onto BMS. In 19 others, more than one reason for absence had been given and the relevant manager has used "other" rather than choose one reason over another. Work will continue over the coming months where managers will be required to use the correct absence type and progress on this will be reported to future meetings of Personnel Committee to see whether the use of "other" reduces significantly and the impact this may have on alternative absence reasons.

Refreshed approach to Mental Wellbeing

14. The various support measures put in place to assist employees experiencing mental health issues are set out in the attached action plan (Appendix E). In seeking to understand why we have an increased incidence in stress and depression as a reason for absence, it is worth noting that encouraging people to talk about their mental health in an effort to remove the stigma attached, will potentially lead to increased confidence in reporting poor mental health rather than attributing this to a physical condition which has previously happened.
15. We are seeking to refresh our offer to supporting people with mental health issues by drawing together the various interventions from the less formal workplace buddying scheme and

promoting exercise and leisure activities including the staff choir as mechanisms to build resilience and which are more preventative in nature, through to the signposting of the trained mental health first aiders as issues are identified and the use of the provisions provided through the Care First contract for workplace counselling and cognitive behavioural therapy but ultimately relying on clinical responses when an employee's mental ill health escalates.

16. It is intended to build a launch of the refreshed support package to align with World Mental Health Day on 10 October 2019.

Actions for Improvement:

17. The focus on mental health at work will continue to be a key area on which to focus activity and we seek to continue to work closely with the recognised trades unions to identify and test the effectiveness of the various initiatives in place and to develop new approaches and activities to further improve employee health and wellbeing and reduce absence. This includes reviewing the current Health and Wellbeing Action Plan, attached at Appendix E.
18. We will also seek to build our support to colleagues and managers of those experiencing poor mental health to maintain the balance between supporting the affected individual whilst recognising the impact their illness and absence may have on those around them.

Other Options Considered

19. The actions outlined in the attached plan are a continuation of activity previously determined by Personnel Committee. We continue to identify, test and research new initiatives to establish their value to the Council and our employees.

Reason/s for Recommendation/s

20. The Council's People Strategy identifies its employees as its most valuable asset and essential to the successful delivery of the Council Plan and various departmental strategies. A healthy workforce will be best placed to deliver on these identified priorities. In addition, a comprehensive package of employee benefits, support and assistance demonstrate our commitment to our workforce to meet our aspiration to be an "employer of choice" and can demonstrate how employees are valued. This in turn can have a very positive impact on recruitment and retention in the competitive market for current and future talent.

Statutory and Policy Implications

21. This report has been compiled after consideration of implications in respect of crime and disorder, data protection and information governance finance, human resources, human rights, the NHS Constitution (public health services), the public sector equality duty, safeguarding of children and adults at risk, service users, smarter working, sustainability and the environment and where such implications are material they are described below. Appropriate consultation has been undertaken and advice sought on these issues as required.

Data Protection and Information Governance

22. There are no data protection or GDPR issues arising from this report as all the information contained is generic and cannot be attributed to individual employees.

Financial Implications

23. There are no direct financial implications arising from the content of this report. However, there is clearly a cost to absence and turnover so maximising the package of support with the intention of developing a more preventative strategy has a strong business benefit to delivering this.

Human Resources Implications

24. The effective management of absence and the delivery of effective support for employees experiencing periods of ill health is a key business driver for the Council. It enables us to maximise performance but also to demonstrate the value placed on the contribution of the workforce. Whilst there are various legal obligations placed on employers to make reasonable adjustments to enable people to remain in work, there are also strong business reasons in terms of attracting and retaining quality employees who value the approach we have adopted as a caring employer.

Public Sector Equality Duty implications

25. The policies and procedures of the Council apply to all directly employed staff whatever their protected characteristic. However, given the content of the action plan, any activity around managing absence and supporting people to remain at work potentially has a greater impact on employees with a declared disability. An equality impact assessment will be completed once the detail of the refreshed action plan has been agreed.

RECOMMENDATIONS

It is recommended that:

- 1) Members consider the current level of sickness absence as at 30 June 2019 in relation to the target of 7 days across the Council and agree to the required actions set out in the refreshed Employee Health and Wellbeing Action Plan including the launch of the refreshed package of mental health support to coincide with World Mental Health Day on 10 October 2019.
- 2) Members agree to receive a further update on absence management performance at November's Committee and a further update on the agreed action plan in January 2020.

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For any enquiries about this report please contact:

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Constitutional Comments (GR 06/09/19)

26. Pursuant to Nottinghamshire County Councils Constitution this Committee has the delegated authority to receive this report and make the recommendations contained within this report.

Financial Comments (SES 06/09/19)

27. There are no specific financial implications arising directly from this report.

HR Comments (JP 17/09/19)

28. The Human Resources implications are set out in the body of the report. Reducing overall absence remains a key priority area for the Council together with a package of initiatives to support employee mental health issues and wellbeing.

Background Papers and Published Documents

Except for previously published documents, which will be available elsewhere, the documents listed here will be available for inspection in accordance with Section 100D of the Local Government Act 1972.

- None

Electoral Division(s) and Member(s) Affected

- All