

**REPORT OF THE SERVICE DIRECTOR – CUSTOMERS AND HUMAN  
RESOURCES****EMPLOYEE HEALTH AND WELLBEING AND SICKNESS ABSENCE  
PERFORMANCE UPDATE AS AT 31<sup>st</sup> DECEMBER 2015****Purpose of the Report**

1. This report sets out updated information in relation to levels of sickness absence across the Nottinghamshire County Council workforce and highlights the current actions being taken to further improve the health and wellbeing of its direct employees.

**Background**

2. Sickness absence data, reasons reporting and associated trend analysis is drawn down and reported at regular intervals, usually on a quarterly basis, from the data input by line managers into the corporate Business Management System (BMS).
3. On this occasion, rather than reporting on a full 3 month quarterly period, the report covers the **4 month period 1<sup>st</sup> September 2015 to 31<sup>st</sup> December 2015** in order to reflect the revised organisational structure which was implemented from 1<sup>st</sup> September. The normal quarterly reporting cycle will resume and be reflected in the report setting out the year end situation as at 31<sup>st</sup> March 2016.
4. As this is the first report to reflect the new County Council structure, changes to the breakdown of data by department and service division will impact on the Council's short term ability to report accurately on comparative trend information at departmental and divisional level until sufficient time has elapsed to look back over a rolling period (see **Appendix A**).
5. At departmental level the most significant impact is reflected in the integration of Public Health into the ASCH department and the creation of the two new departmental definitions: Resources and Place. The integration of departmental specific Business Support under the management of the HR and Customer Services division of the Resources department also has a significant effect on comparative data.
6. **Appendix B** illustrates the reasons for absence in NCC as at 31<sup>st</sup> December 2015.
7. This information informs the development of the Council's Employee Health and Wellbeing Action Plan. The current plan identifies a series of actions to effectively address the actual and potential impact of ongoing and significant organisational

change on employee wellbeing. These are developed and added to on an ongoing basis.

8. The status of the plan as at September 2015 was considered by Members at Personnel Committee on 18<sup>th</sup> November 2015. Regular half yearly updates are provided to Members on the development and implementation of the plan. The next update will indicate progress against current actions as at March 2016.

## **Overall Performance and Trends**

9. Against an in year performance target for 2015/16 of **7.00 days** per employee the data in the appendices illustrates an overall trend of continuous improvement in relation to employee absence. Reported sickness levels as at 31<sup>st</sup> December 2015 stood at **6.60 days** a slight increase of **0.09 days** from **6.51 days** at the 31<sup>st</sup> August 2015.
10. This level of absence remains significantly lower than the local government or wider public sector average. A breakdown by the new departments and service areas is contained in **Appendix A**.
11. The Council's current in year target was set at **7.00 days** per annum by 1<sup>st</sup> April 2016. This reflected the need for a target that is stretching whilst also being both realistic and sustainable and took into account that the Council's performance in relation to staff absence is most influenced and impacted on by the performance of its largest direct services, some with a significant direct frontline workforce.
12. The impact of the transfer out of a number of these services into alternative service delivery models from April 2016, will need to be taken into due consideration when proposing a new target for the next financial year following year end reporting.

## **Benchmarking**

13. The Council's performance relating to the number of days absence attributable to sickness per employee per annum continues to be better than the national average for the local government sector and the wider public sector as previously reported and the overall trend over the previous 12 months remains one of incremental improvement.
14. The Council's sickness absence reporting continues to include schools under County Council control (excluding Academies which are independent employers); in order to enable the Council to make consistent year on year comparison to identify performance trends and to benchmark this authority's performance against other local authorities using national benchmarking data, including CIPFA (Chartered Institute of Public Finance and Accountancy), whose definitions include schools.
15. The level of reported absence in schools alone is currently **5.29 days** on average per employee, a slight increase of **0.04 days** from **5.25 days** in the previous quarter.

### Reasons for absence:

16. The 14 categories adopted by the Council for managers to attribute a reason for each occurrence of employee sickness absence when recording the absence on the Business Management System reflect those used by the Local Government Association (LGA). This allows for comparison with other local authorities and national performance benchmarking.
17. As part of an identified need to reduce the percentage of managers recording attributable absence against the "Other" category which, although steadily improving, having reduced slightly **14.41%** to **14.33%** following the recent reissue of management guidance, remains high.
18. Based on information gathered through a specific intervention with Public Health managers, consideration is currently being given to systems development to enable terminal illness to be recorded under an additional separate reporting category.

- **Stress:**

19. The most common overall cause of all absence across the local government sector is stress, depression, anxiety, mental health and fatigue, the most recent available data indicates that this comprises of **22.80%** of all absence across the sector. This reflects the operating environment of budget reductions and organisational change which have resulted in post reductions and increased demands on those who remain in the service.
20. Stress remains the most prevalent cause of sickness absence in the County Council. Reported absence attributed to stress and related conditions has increased from the previous quarter and currently stands at **18.99%** of all reported absence as indicated in **Appendix B** compared with **18.65%** at the previous quarter.
21. Change and uncertainty arising from ongoing organisational transformation could impact on the levels of sickness absence attributed to stress. Trades union colleagues have raised the issue of workloads specifically. In recognition of this building individual and organisation resilience to prevent, proactively respond to and manage stress, including effective workload management, with a particular focus on mental health awareness, is a priority as reflected in the Council's Employee Health and Wellbeing Action Plan for 2015-18.

- **Other reasons:**

22. The next most prevalent reason for absence across the Council continues to be surgical operations and post-operative recovery; as at the 31<sup>st</sup> December 2015 this stood at **17.44%**, an increase from **16.95%** at the previous reporting period.
23. Across the local government sector absence caused by muscular-skeletal problems is currently reported as **14.40%**. The NCC percentage currently stands at **12.22%** which currently reflects the comparatively high proportion of physically demanding frontline services provided in-house. As many employees involved in delivering these services move into alternative service delivery models from 1<sup>st</sup> April 2015 this is likely to decrease significantly.

### Long term absence:

24. As set out in **Appendix C** of this report, for the third quarter of the year data indicates that overall **58.99%** of all reported absence across the Council is long term (that is of 4 weeks or more in duration) an increase of 0.32 percentage points on the previous reporting period. Reducing long term absence by supporting managers to make early interventions to support return to work remains a priority as set out in paragraph 27 below.

### Action for improvement

25. In addition to identifying corporate responses to further improve the health and wellbeing of the Council's workforce, as set out in the current Employee Health and Wellbeing Action Plan, all available data continues to be used to identify service areas where improvement is most required and/or there are specific reasons for high levels of absence and prioritise these for intervention.

26. Working with and through departmental managers, HR Business Partners are available to provide advice and support to enable managers to respond by identifying "hotspot" areas and developing actions and initiatives for improvement.

27. Some examples of recent and ongoing HR interventions are provided below:

- Absence overall in the CFCS department is significantly higher in Children's Social Care division. HR Business Partners meet with managers on a quarterly basis to discuss ongoing cases and provide direct support to progress these, including trigger level meetings and referral to Occupational Health.
- Due to the nature of the work, absence reported as being due to stress is particularly prevalent in social care services and in schools. Specific, fast tracked targeted group or individual counselling referrals can be facilitated through HR to the Council's external provider "Care First" to help retain these key employees in work.
- Absence currently remains consistently highest in the ASCH department overall and HR Business Partners also meet regularly with managers in this department to support them to take the necessary action under agreed policy to progress cases.
- Across all departments HR advice and support is available to managers to enable them to respond to cases of long term absence in a timely and proactive manner, working with the individual employee concerned to achieve an effective rehabilitation back into work through the use of reasonable adjustments, including phased return to work.
- Managers may neglect to close down long term sickness cases on the BMS when the employee returns to work or leaves the Council and this can distort data. HR Business Partners monitor errors in inputting in order to flag these up with the appropriate manager for action.
- The Council's Occupational Health service can provide targeted full or half day wellbeing events with specialist clinical input for direct services and for those schools and Academies that buy back OH services, those can be themed around specific hotspot issues such as stress.
- The range of management guidance and learning interventions, including eLearning, available to managers to enable them to effectively prevent, manage

and respond to sickness absence are continuously developed and promoted and specific resources relating to mental ill health have recently been added.

- There are also a range of learning interventions to help support employees facing change and materials on building personal resilience have recently been added.
- Support and advice is available to managers and head teachers on the use of the Council's Well Worker stress audit tool which enables them to work with their teams to identify potential stressors in their workplace and action plan for improvement.

### **Other Options Considered**

28. The Council's approach to employee health and wellbeing is the subject of ongoing discussions with trade union colleagues which now take place through task focussed time limited joint working groups which will consider developments for continued improvement. The initial task will focus on guidance for managers on supporting staff with terminal illness, including cases relating to cancer.

### **Reasons for Recommendations**

29. The recommendations will enable Elected Members to review the current levels of performance and direction of travel set out in this report and the actions that are in place to maintain a level of performance, which meets the Council's identified targets and supports continuous improvement in levels of attendance across the Council. Regular update reports will be submitted on a quarterly basis.

### **Statutory and Policy Implications**

30. This report has been compiled after consideration of implications in respect of finance, equal opportunities, human resources, crime and disorder, human rights, the safeguarding of children, sustainability and the environment and those using the service and where such implications are material they are described below. Appropriate consultation has been undertaken and advice sought on these issues as required.

### **Human Resources Implications**

31. These are set out in the body of this report. The trades unions continue to be engaged in joint working to further development of employee health and wellbeing initiatives, as described in paragraph 28 above. Trades union colleagues are supportive of the priority that is being given to tackling and providing support around the issues of stress and have emphasised the need overall for continuing work with managers.

### **Equalities Implications**

32. The Council's Attendance Management policy and procedure applies equally to all directly employed staff. There is a separate policy which is applicable to all maintained schools and is recommended to all schools with different governance arrangements. These procedures contain guidance which ensures that appropriate management of the sickness absence of employees with a disability complies with the requirements of the Equality Act 2010.

## **RECOMMENDATIONS**

It is recommended that Elected Members note:

1. The current level of performance and related trends in respect of sickness absence levels.
2. The current actions being taken by HR Business Partners to work with departmental managers to reduce absence and improve the health and wellbeing of their workforce.

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### **Constitutional Comments (SLB 03/02/16)**

33. This report is for noting only.

### **Financial Comments (SES 02/02/16)**

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

### **Human Resources Comments (CLG 04/01/15)**

35. The human resources implications are implicit in the body of the report.

### **Background Papers**

Trades Union comments – 25<sup>th</sup> February 2016

### **Electoral Division(s) and Member(s) Affected**

All