



Nottinghamshire
County Council

Overview and Scrutiny Sickness Absence

September 2008



Sickness Absence Final Report

Members of the Select Committee

Nine County Councillors made up the **Sickness Absence Select Committee**:

- **John Knight** (Chair)
- Andy Stewart (Vice Chair)
- Reg Adair
- John Allin
- Vince Dobson
- Andy Freeman
- David Shaw
- Parry Tsimbirdis
- Brian Wombwell

Support for the Committee was provided by

- Martin Gately, Scrutiny Officer, Nottinghamshire County Council
- Paul Davies, Principal Admin Officer, Governance and Scrutiny,
Nottinghamshire County Council

Background

1. On 10 March 2008, the Overview and Scrutiny Committee commissioned a Select Committee to examine sickness absence issues in Nottinghamshire County Council.

Best Practice Case Study – Derbyshire County Council

2. In 2001, Derbyshire County Council changed its absence control procedures and addressed attendance issues in fundamental ways in order to create a change in culture.

New measures put in place included:

- An employee assistance programme with six counselling sessions per employee
 - The introduction of flexible working
 - A shift to managers owning the process
 - The introduction of mandatory return to work interviews
 - Sickness absence totalling eight days results in a review meeting
 - Tight target times on occupational health referrals
 - Attendance guidelines for both managers and employees disseminated
3. In addition, manager posts were introduced specifically targeted at managing attendance issues. One attendance manager was placed in each department in order to work with departmental managers on complex cases and produce statistics and reports. However, the focus was still on managers owning the process and attendance managers acting in an advisory capacity.
 4. Derbyshire County Council also began to address issues around ill health capability. Warnings were delivered to those on long term sickness absence indicating that if the absence continues it could lead to dismissal. Two hundred cases have now been reduced to just 80 – just the core remains. Only a handful of employees receive ill-health retirements and redeployment is looked at wherever possible.
 5. Derbyshire County Council also operates a quick access physiotherapy scheme (for musculo-skeletal injuries) and spends £100,000 per annum on this provision.

6. Phased returns to work from long-term sickness absence are utilised and 'health surveillance' is employed for employees exposed to vibration and noise.
7. Many of the measures used by Derbyshire County Council are now in place at Nottinghamshire County Council (e.g. physiotherapy scheme, return to work interviews and flexible working).

Nottinghamshire County Council - Evidence and Key Findings

BVPI 012

8. Data on sickness absence for the year ending 31st March 2008 indicates that Nottinghamshire County Council has failed to meet the target of 8.75 days per employee. The amount of sickness absence per employee stands at 9.75 days. However, this is a significant improvement on the performance up to 31st March 2007 which stood at 10.9 days. Naturally, any downward trend in these figures is to be commended.

Attendance Management Team

9. Two temporary Attendance Management Officers are in post and two further posts are planned. There is undoubtedly a causal link between the improvement in performance that has been demonstrated so far and the deployment of dedicated resources to address the issue. Evidence of this lies in the figures for 2003/04 when the levels of absence were as high as 12 days per employee.
10. The role of managing attendance issues rests with individual line managers; but managers require expert support and advice to enable them to address these complex issues. Further, the Attendance Management Team has a role to play in ensuring that all managers fully comply with policy and procedure (e.g. ensuring that trigger interviews are conducted).
11. Further improvements in attendance management are likely to be obtained by making attendance management posts permanent and mainstreaming the role into the HR function. Greater resourcing of the function would also be likely to pay dividends – the four permanent attendance management posts should be augmented by an additional three posts (temporary for twelve months) in order to maximise impact.

Absence Management System

12. Detailed and reliable management information is essential in order for sickness absence issues to be properly addressed. Therefore the commissioning from an external provider of an Absence Management System is to be welcomed.

Data Cleansing

13. It is a matter of some concern that the Attendance Management Team and Employee Services Centre colleagues have had to make significant efforts in order to improve the integrity of data related to sickness absence. While these efforts are commendable, the poor quality of the data calls into question the reliability of older data sets that may not have been subject to data cleansing.
14. The responsibility for the poor quality of this information rests with all managers within this Authority. The new Absence Management System has the potential to improve data quality and will certainly reduce the extent to which data is 'touched by many hands.'

Compassionate Leave and Urgent Domestic Business

15. From anecdotal evidence, it may be that some employees who are turned down compassionate leave or leave for urgent domestic business go off sick instead. Once again this is a matter of concern and proper information and evidence should be gathered on this point – for instance, it may be useful to know whether managers are applying proper consistency in their response to such requests.

Trigger Points

16. This Authority's trigger point for sickness absence formal procedure is ten days or four separate occasions over a six month period. Judged against the best practice of Derbyshire County Council (seven days over a twelve month period) and our own target for annual performance of 8.75 days this measure appears to be generous and should perhaps be amended so that it harmonises with the Best Value Performance Indicator. This would, of course, be subject to negotiation with the Trade Unions.

Occupational Health

17. In order to support the Attendance Management Programme's approach to case management the Occupational Health Service have increased the number of appointments available across the Authority. Since managers may refer staff to occupational health when they are concerned that health is affecting their attendance and employees may also self-refer for confidential advice, any additional focus on the management of sickness absence is likely to increase the burden on the Occupational Health Service. The Authority may wish to investigate ways in which the capacity and resources of the service can be augmented.

Summary of Recommendations

1

The work of the Attendance Management Team should be mainstreamed within this Authority's HR function on a permanent basis as part of an 'invest to save' approach with the expectation of savings on backfill costs

2

The Attendance Management Team should comprise four permanent attendance managers with the complement augmented by three further temporary attendance managers for a period of twelve months

3

Attendance is made a key issue for all managers to address within the Authority

4

Managers should ensure that they conduct return to work interviews after every instance of sickness absence and compliance with this should be monitored at service director level

5

Managers should conduct trigger interviews on every occasion when it is indicated that they should do so by the Attendance Management Team. When managers do not see fit to conduct trigger interviews with their staff, the Attendance Management Team should inform the relevant service director.

6

The benefits of phased returns to work in which employees who have been off long term sick work reduced hours and gradually increase them over a period of one to four weeks should be widely promoted to both employees and managers - especially since there is no requirement for employees to use up their annual leave as part of the phased return during the agreed period.

7

The absence trigger level should match the Best Value Performance Indicator i.e. be set at 8.75 days over a twelve month period rather than ten days over a six month period

The Select Committee would like to thank Nigel Hughes from Derbyshire County Council for his contribution to this review.

The Select Committee took evidence on:

- 23 June
- 21 July
- 15 September

For more information about this review contact the lead Scrutiny Officer Helen Lee
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