

**REPORT OF THE SERVICE DIRECTOR – CUSTOMERS AND HUMAN
RESOURCES****EMPLOYEE HEALTH AND WELLBEING AND SICKNESS ABSENCE
PERFORMANCE AND ACTION FOR IMPROVEMENT****Purpose of the Report**

1. This report sets out information, **as at 30th June 2017**, in relation to current levels of sickness absence across the directly employed Nottinghamshire County Council workforce and highlights the actions being taken by the Council to further reduce these, including by improving the health and wellbeing of its employees.

Background

2. Absence levels are an indicator of the overall health of an organisation. As part of its wider Workforce Strategy, Nottinghamshire County Council has a strategic ambition to be a Healthy Organisation providing a safe and healthy working environment. This maximises productivity and performance, motivates and engages all employees and actively promotes a culture of positive mental and physical wellbeing at work.
3. This commitment is underpinned by the Council's established sickness absence policy. This focuses on enabling managers to prevent work related illness, support employees who are experiencing ill health to remain in work with appropriate support and manage sickness absence to ensure a sustainable, supportive, return to work at the earliest possible opportunity.
4. A suite of absence reports are available to NCC managers to enable them to take local action to improve workplace wellbeing and prevent and reduce absence in their service area. Where absence occurs managers are supported to respond to individual issues and identify any reasonable adjustments to enable their employees to return to work.
5. Sickness absence performance information also informs the ongoing review and development of the Council's Employee Health and Wellbeing Action Plan. This identifies a series of strategic actions to effectively address the actual and potential impact of ongoing and significant organisational change on employee wellbeing and minimise its impact on levels of attendance across the Council.

Performance Monitoring and Trend Analysis

6. Historical comparison of the available data indicates that within this authority the position remains one of overall improvement over recent years from a high of **10.15 days** as at 30th June 2010.
7. The data in the appendices to this report reflects the position as at **30th June 2017** when the headcount of direct NCC employees was 7,533 and the average sickness per employee per annum stood at **8.01 days** overall. This is a further decrease of **0.36 days** on the previous quarter.
8. The Council's previous in-year target has been retained at **7.00 days average per employee per annum by 1st April 2018**. This reflects the need to have a sufficient period to take into account the impact of the transfer out of a number of predominantly front-line services, into alternative service delivery models during 2016 before setting a revised target for 2018/19.
9. The most common overall cause of all absence across the local government sector is reported as attributable to stress, depression, anxiety, mental health and fatigue and this also remains the most prevalent cause of sickness absence in the County Council. Levels of reported absence attributed to stress and related conditions continue to decline and currently stands at **17.78%**, a further decrease of **0.09** percentage points on the previous quarter.
10. The performance information illustrated in **Appendices A-C** to this report sets out in detail:
 - Current levels of performance and comparison between departments and service divisions
 - The reasons for absence across the Council and by department
 - The relative distribution of short and long term absence.

This is presented as an Executive Summary in the form of an Infographic at **Appendix D**.

11. It is proposed that members consider how they wish this information to be reported to them in future. This could include both the Executive Summary and more detailed information (Appendices A-D) or members may wish to only receive the summary information on a regular basis (Appendix D) and more detailed information annually.

Benchmarking

12. The Council's adopted methodology for calculating the time lost to sickness absence originated from the now discontinued Best Value Performance regime as required under the Local Government Act 1999. It continues to be used nationally as a robust and consistent calculation which takes account of the varied terms and conditions and composition of local authority workforces.

13. The Council's current performance compares well against the most recently available data about its regional and national comparator Councils:
- Regionally the current reported average is **9.90 days** with the highest level being 12.6 days
 - The current CIPFA benchmark average for County Councils in the benchmark cohort is **8.50 day**.
 - The Chartered Institute of Personnel and Development (CIPD) records the average level of employee absence reported by its local government respondents at **9.80 days**
 - Local Government Authority (LGA) data indicates the most prevalent reason for absence across all local authorities continues to be stress, comprising of **22.20%** of all absence across the sector nationally.

Current actions for Improvement:

14. In order to make progress towards the achievement of the established target and ensure sustainability, a range of HR, Learning and Development and wellbeing interventions and guidance is in place to enable departmental managers to work toward reducing absence levels.
15. HR Business Partners continue to work with departmental managers, to provide professional advice and support to improve attendance and promote the creation of more healthy workplaces in their own service areas linked to local performance targets, including:
- Offering targeted surgeries to provide professional HR advice and support to managers where it has been identified that absence levels are particularly high and/or there is a prevalence of absence for a specific reason. This includes those services where, due to the demanding nature of some aspects of the work, stress is most prevalent, for example Social Care functions
 - Supporting managers to focus on improved workplace wellbeing to reduce and prevent absence, including that relating to stress, and to build a culture of resilience in a climate of continuing change
 - Identifying outstanding long term absences and encouraging managers to engage with the Council's Occupational Health service for appropriate professional advice to identify actions to support return to work wherever possible, including convalescence leave, phased return, reasonable adjustments and redeployment
 - Promoting the wide range of flexible working policies and modern technologies that facilitate remote working to enable employees to achieve a good work/ life balance which supports their good physical and mental health
 - Encouraging managers to fully utilise the established attendance management policy which provides managers with a toolkit of measures, including trigger levels and return to work interviews, to enable them to respond to short term, repetitive or regular absence and any patterns of absence.

16. In addition, the corporate Employee Health and Wellbeing Action Plan sets out a range of pro-active and preventative corporate responses aimed at further improving the health and wellbeing of the Council's workforce. Current actions centre on a number of themes with a particular focus on building a culture of individual and organisation resilience to respond positively to change and manage occupational stress as far as possible through effective workload management and the provision of information and learning resources.
17. Themes and current priorities for action include:

Raising awareness of the causes and symptoms of mental ill health in the workplace and highlighting appropriate individual and managerial responses

- Developing, reviewing and extending a range of bespoke learning materials and guidance for **managers** on recognising, supporting and managing employees with mental health issues at work
- Developing, reviewing and extending the range of bespoke learning materials and guidance for **employees** on how to maintain their good mental health at work, covering Resilience, Mindfulness, Stress and Mental Health awareness.

Supporting all NCC employees to maintain good mental health and build resilience in response to change

- Providing direct access to the employee Counselling service to support those employees experiencing stress at work to remain at work and be productive and to help employees who are off sick with stress to return to work
- Fostering a Coaching Culture by training managers to adopt a coaching style of leadership and by offering work based coaching through the Council's in house network of fully trained and qualified coaches to enable employees to effect positive personal change. This includes identifying their own strategies to manage stress, respond positively to change and develop personal action plans to maximise their performance and attendance at work.

Promoting and raising awareness of improved workplace wellbeing and healthy lifestyles to maximise attendance and productivity

- Training and supporting a network of Workplace Health Champions to be available Countywide to inform and signpost colleagues to information and support on health and lifestyle issues
- From the point of induction onwards actively promoting employee wellbeing through a wide range of intranet based information, guidance, events targeted interventions and learning materials available to all employees to help them to make healthy lifestyle choices
- Research and promote proactive wellbeing initiatives linked to national campaigns and seek funding streams to develop and directly offer specific health promotion activities to Council employees

- Continuing to work alongside Public Health colleagues to identify community health priorities that can be extended to the Council's workforce and identifying public health budget to fund as necessary.

Promoting effective workload management, prioritisation and support for employees to maximise their performance as a key management competency

- Providing managers with a range of guidance and tools, including an online stress audit tool "Well worker" to identify triggers for stress and preventative actions
- Incorporating wellbeing and workload into the new Employee Performance and Development Review (EPDR), template, to assist managers to work with teams and individuals to identify and plan actions for prevention and improvement
- Encouraging all managers to have regular coaching style dialogue with their employees about priorities and pressures through EPDR, regular supervision and day to day contact
- Identification of actions arising from the annual health check initiatives in ASCHP and CFCS departments and ensuring these are implemented
- Extending and promoting the range of management guidance and learning materials to enable managers to appropriately support employees with specific conditions, including mental illness, diagnosed terminal illnesses and Dyslexia.

Future Developments:

18. The quality and breadth of the Council's support for the improvement of the health and wellbeing of its workforce to date has been demonstrated by its ongoing accreditation against the Wellbeing at Work, Platinum level standard, the highest level of award under the current scheme. Nottinghamshire is the first local authority employer to be awarded this level.
19. It is recognised that there is an ongoing challenge to sustain this improvement, including reducing stress and stress related absence further. To improve on existing progress a range of **new initiatives** are therefore planned and under development for later in 2017, including:
 - Establishing an informal "Buddying Scheme" to provide peer support to employees. It has been suggested by employees that the initial focus for this could be employees returning from significant long term absence, including sickness and maternity. An employee survey to gather information from line managers and employees to assist in developing a relevant scheme is currently underway
 - Developing a checklist for managers on how to support their employees when they are returning from significant long term absence
 - Redesigning and expanding the Employee Wellbeing intranet pages to ensure they continue to provide the support employees need
 - Canvassing views and obtaining feedback from employees using employee surveys and focus groups on what further measures they would want to see

included in the refreshed wellbeing offer to enable them to adopt healthy lifestyles and be healthy at work

- Hosting a joint wellbeing event with the trade unions in the autumn which would include an emphasis on women's health issues, including cervical cancer screening awareness
- Reviewing the current Stress Policy as part of the wider programme of employment policy review to ensure relevance and currency
- Vouchers for free seasonal flu vaccinations for frontline employees, which also help to protect vulnerable service users from infection, will once again be available for 2017/18. These will be funded departmentally following withdrawal of Public Health funding. A campaign to promote this and encourage uptake was launched on the Council's intranet in August 2017.

Other Options Considered

20. In addition to its overall strategic approach, the Council has secured the engagement and commitment of the recognised trade unions to improving employee health and wellbeing through their involvement in task focussed, time limited, joint working groups which operate as sub groups of the Central Joint Consultative and Negotiating Panel.
21. To date this joint working has produced additional guidance for managers and learning resources on promoting positive mental health at work, on effectively supporting employees diagnosed with terminal illness and employees with Dyslexia.

Reasons for Recommendations

22. The recommendations in this report will enable Elected Members to review the current levels of performance, consider how they wish this information to be reported in future and consider the actions that are required to improve the level of performance in order to meet the Council's identified target.
23. It is proposed that regular update reports will continue to be submitted on a quarterly basis.

Statutory and Policy Implications

24. 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 Implications

25. The data in this report and the associated appendices cannot be attributed to individual employees and therefore protects their privacy.

Financial Implications

26. There is no specific budget allocation to fund the development and delivery of employee wellbeing interventions and initiatives.

Human Resources Implications

27. These are set out in the body of this report. The trades unions continue to be engaged in joint working with managers and HR colleagues to further develop employee health and wellbeing initiatives including joint training and guidance and have commented very positively on joint working with management and the impact of this on staff absence levels.

28. Trade union colleagues are supportive of the positive steps made by the authority to support and help staff; particularly in target areas where absences are higher than other departments. Trades union colleagues view the Council's lower than average absence levels when compared to other local authorities as positive but have commented that the target of 7 days absence per fte may prove to be too stretching.

29. The proposed next phase of activity involves significant engagement with employees and managers to ensure the actions taken meet their needs.

30. 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 Members:

- 1) Agree to continue to receive regular quarterly update reports in the form of an Executive Summary (Appendix D) and more detailed Annual Report (Appendices A-C) as part of the Personnel Committee work programme.
- 2) Agree the future actions set out in paragraph 19 of the report.
- 3) Consider whether there are any other actions required to achieve the Council's target of 7.00 days absence per fte.

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Constitutional Comments (KK 05/09/17)

31. The proposals in this report are within the remit of the Personnel Committee.

Financial Comments (RWK 04/09/17)

32. There are no specific financial implications arising directly from the report.

Human Resources Comments (CLG 31/7/17)

33. The human resources implications are implicit in the body of the report. The trade unions have asked that we highlight the continuing support the authority provides for employees and managers and benefits that staff receive and are keen to see this continue.

Background Papers and Published Documents

None

Electoral Division(s) and Member(s) Affected

All