

REPORT OF THE SERVICE DIRECTOR – CUSTOMERS AND HUMAN RESOURCES

SICKNESS ABSENCE PERFORMANCE TRENDS AND ACTION FOR IMPROVEMENT

Purpose of the Report

1. To update Members on quarterly performance information, **as at 31st December 2017**, in relation to levels of sickness absence across the directly employed Nottinghamshire County Council workforce and seek approval for ongoing actions to further reduce absence levels.

Information

Background:

2. This report sets out the latest available sickness absence figures and the actions being taken by the Council to continue to improve the health and wellbeing of its employees with an aim to further reduce these to make sustainable progress towards the achievement of the in-year target of **7.00 days average per employee per annum by 1st April 2018**.
3. The range of strategic HR, Learning and Development and wellbeing interventions and guidance has been extended as detailed in the previous report to this Committee. 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.
4. Absence levels and related trend data provides an indicator of how well the Council is performing in this respect and continues to be used to highlight areas of focus for both service specific and strategic actions to promote employee wellbeing and further develop the employee support package.
5. This approach has resulted in an overall trend of incremental improvement with a significant reduction in reported sickness absence levels over recent years.

Performance Monitoring and Trend Analysis

6. The Infographic in the **appendix** to this report illustrates in executive summary the situation as at 31st December 2017, when the headcount of direct NCC employees was 7,537, in relation to:

- The current level of performance against the NCC in-year target and CIPFA national benchmarking data
 - The most significant causes of reported absence across the Council during the quarter and the main reasons by department
 - The relative distribution of short and long term absence.
7. Compared to 8.42 days absence on average per employee per annum at the same period in the previous year, **the average sickness per employee per annum at the end of quarter 3 was 8.25 days overall**. This is an increase of 0.24 percentage points compared to the previous quarter when it stood at 8.01 days.
 8. This reflects the fact that absence has increased in three service departments this quarter. The exception is Adult Social Care and Health, where it has dropped 0.35 percentage points since the last quarter but at 12.09% consistently remains significantly higher than in all other departments.
 9. The most significant departmental increase in absence this quarter is in the Children and Families Department which has seen a 0.67 percentage point increase with the most significant increases being in absence reported as attributable to stress and to operations and post-operative recovery.
 10. The **appendix** to this report illustrates that stress and related conditions remain the most prevalent overall reason for absence across the Council and has increased by 0.80 percentage points since the previous quarter currently standing at **18.65%** of all reported absence.
 11. Due to the particular pressure of the social care services stress is routinely the most prevalent reported reason for absence in both the Adult Social Care and Health and Children and Families services, currently standing at **22.83% and 20.67%** respectively, having seen an increase in both departments on the previous quarter.
 12. Stress has also been the most significant reported reason for absence in the Resources department over recent quarters, currently standing at **22.57%**, possibly reflecting the uncertainties for employees of the ongoing Corporate Services Review.
 13. The exception is the Place department where the most prevalent reported reason continues to be muscular / skeletal injury which currently stands at **22.6%** compared to stress at 15.35%.
 14. Stress, depression, anxiety, mental health and fatigue also remain the most common overall cause of all absence across the local government sector, the most recent LGA data, comprising of **22.30%** of all absence across the sector nationally and **22.40%** for comparable Councils.
 15. At **18.65%** the Council's overall performance reflects its commitment to taking action to prevent and manage stress and related conditions to achieve continuing

improvement continues to compare favourably with other Council's and public sector employers nationally.

16. The next most significant attributed reasons for absence across the Council are operations and post-operative recovery which has increased by 0.99 percentage points to **16.88%** from 15.89% at the previous quarter.
17. Muscular / skeletal conditions are the third most reported reason but have fallen overall in the current quarter by 1.09 percentage points from 13.91 to **12.82%**.
18. Absence due to Flu has not had a major impact on reported levels so far this winter having fallen by 0.38 percentage points to **8.74%** since the previous quarter. This could increase for Q4 in light of the strains of Flu in prevalence across the UK early in the New Year.

Benchmarking:

19. Despite the recent increase, overall the level of the Council's current performance continues to compare well against the most recently available benchmarking data for the local government sector:
 - Since the previous report the Chartered Institute of Public Finance Accountancy (CIPFA), have published their March 2017 benchmark data. This shows that the average for comparable County Councils in the national benchmark cohort is now **8.60 days** (having increased from **8.50 days** at the previous year) and **9.30 days** for all Councils.
 - The most recent annual Local Government Association (LGA), Workforce Survey (March 2017), continues to report an average of **8.80 days** across all local authority respondents and **9.40 days** for comparable County Councils.
 - Pending release of the 2017 update, as previously reported, the most recent (2016) annual benchmarking report on absence management from the Chartered Institute for Personnel and Development (CIPD), reports the average days absence reported by respondents across the wider public sector, including Health and Central Government, as **9.80 days** and across respondent private sector services (excluding manufacturing and production), as **6.50 days**.

Actions for Improvement:

20. The ongoing challenge of preventing and significantly reducing stress and stress related absence and enabling employees to improve their resilience and mental wellbeing therefore continues to be a priority of the Council's employee health and wellbeing action planning and delivery, supported by a range of existing initiatives. Identifying and developing further actions and initiatives to improve on the progress made to promote good mental health in the workplace was reported in detail to the previous meeting of this Committee on 29th November 2017.
21. The Council also recognises that an inclusive workplace with a culture that promotes fairness, dignity and respect and does not tolerate unacceptable behaviour towards others is critical to positive health and wellbeing at work. An action plan to support this commitment by creating and fostering an

organisational culture that models these values is being developed with the support of trades union colleagues and employee support groups.

22. It is anticipated that maintaining and growing the focus on mental health at work will incrementally have a positive impact on levels of absence reported as attributable to stress in future reporting periods.
23. The new employee support package will be promoted to employees through the refreshed Wellbeing intranet site which goes live in February 2018. Additional information will be added when the new Buddying and Chaplaincy services are fully developed, launched and implemented, which it is anticipated will be by April 2018.
24. The proposed approach to Buddying has been informed by the results of feedback from an employee survey and a series of employee focus groups. Taking this into account it is proposed that:
- The scheme will be informal in nature and will supplement existing employee support provision such as counselling and coaching
 - A role descriptor will be used to define how the Buddy will interact with the employee and the parameters of the role
 - Normally in the first instance the manager and employee will look to jointly identify a colleague within their own team/service area to undertake the Buddy role
 - Where this is not possible, the manager will be able to access a register of Buddies who have volunteered to join the scheme and in conjunction with the employee, determine who is best placed to act as the Buddy.

The Buddies will be recruited to the Register in March.

25. It was agreed at the last meeting of this Committee that a detailed annual update to reflect the sickness absence position at the year end, that is the 31st March, will be submitted following year end (for the year 2017/18 this will be the meeting on 23rd May 2018), along with an updated action plan for continuous improvement, and annually thereafter.
26. It is intended that this information will enable Members to monitor progress made against achievement of the in-year target and the potential impact of the employee wellbeing provisions, previously reported, in order to consider and agree the target for 2018/19.

Other Options Considered

27. In addition to its overall strategic approach, the Council continues to benefit from the ongoing commitment of the recognised trade unions in considering options to improve employee health and wellbeing. Their active engagement and involvement, and that of the employee support groups, in task focussed, time limited, joint working groups which operate as sub groups of the Central Joint

Consultative and Negotiating Panel, are helpful in developing proposals for further consideration by Members.

Reasons for Recommendations

28. The recommendations in this report will enable Elected Members to regularly review the current levels of performance and consider potential actions to further reduce the level of absence in order to meet the Council's identified target.

Statutory and Policy Implications

29. 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

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

Financial Implications

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

Human Resources Implications

32. 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.
33. Trade union colleagues remain 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.

Public Sector Equality Duty Implications

34. 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.

RECOMMENDATION

- 1) It is recommended that Members approve the additional actions set out within this report to continue to progress toward the achievement of the Council's in year target of 7.00 days absence per fte.

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For any enquiries about this report please contact:

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Constitutional Comments (KK 12/02/18)

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

Financial Comments (SES 13/02/18)

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

Human Resources Comments (CLG 16/1/18)

37. The human resources implications are set out in the body of the report.

38. The Trades Unions have highlighted that the Council's new initiatives should achieve improvements to employee health and wellbeing which should result in a reduction of absence levels. However, they remain concerned about how well equipped line managers are to deal with Stress, Anxiety and Depression.

Background Papers and Published Documents

None

Electoral Division(s) and Member(s) Affected

All