

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

1. This report sets out information, **as at 30th September 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 improve the health and wellbeing of its employees to further reduce these.

Background

2. The County Council wants to provide 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.
3. Absence levels and related trend data provides an indicator of how well the Council is performing in this respect and is used to highlight areas of focus for both service specific and strategic actions to promote employee wellbeing and further develop the employee support package.
4. This approach has resulted in an overall trend of incremental improvement with a significant reduction in reported sickness absence levels over recent years.
5. 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 it being the first local authority employer to achieve the highest, Platinum level, award under the Wellbeing@Work, workplace health scheme which celebrates forward thinking employers who promote health and wellbeing.

Performance Monitoring and Trend Analysis

6. It was agreed at Personnel Committee on 27th September 2017 that moving forward Members would receive an updated Executive Summary, in the form of the Infographic presented at that Committee, on a quarterly basis.

7. The Infographic in the **Appendix** to this report illustrates in executive summary the situation as at 30th September 2017, when the headcount of direct NCC employees was 7,563, in relation to:
 - The current level of performance against the NCC target and CIPFA benchmark
 - The most significant causes of reported absence across the Council and the main reason by department
 - The relative distribution of short and long term absence.
8. The average sickness per employee per annum at the end of quarter 2 remains at **8.01 days** overall which is the same as at the previous quarter, that is as at 30th June 2017.
9. This level of overall performance continues to compare well against the most recently available benchmarking data for the local government sector;
 - The current Chartered Institute of Public Finance Accountancy (CIPFA), benchmark average for comparable County Councils in the national benchmark cohort is **8.50 days**
 - The March 2017 annual Local Government Association (LGA), Workforce Survey reports an average of **8.80 days** across all local authority respondents and **9.40 days** for comparable County Councils
 - Regionally the current reported average for local authorities is **9.90 days**.
10. 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**.
11. The CIPD survey also highlights the level of absence for the same period across respondent private sector services (excluding manufacturing and production), as **6.50 days**.
12. The Council's in-year target is **7.00 days average per employee per annum by 1st April 2018**. In order to make progress towards the achievement of this target by further reducing absence levels and ensuring sustainability, a range of strategic HR, Learning and Development and wellbeing interventions and guidance have been developed. These are set out in the Council's Employee Health and Wellbeing Action Plan as reported to the previous meetings of this Committee.
13. The **appendix** to this report also illustrates that, overall, stress and related conditions remain the most prevalent reason for absence across the Council currently standing at **17.85%**. Broadly the same as the previous quarter.
14. Stress, depression, anxiety, mental health and fatigue are also the most common overall cause of all absence across the local government sector, the most recent LGA data, reports that stress now comprises of **22.30%** of all absence across the sector nationally.

15. Absence reporting for Quarter 3 (31st December) each year is influenced by the relative impact of “seasonal flu” when, depending on the prevalent strains of the virus, employee absence reported as being due to flu/colds/sore throats might be expected to temporarily increase.
16. Funded through Public Health, the County Council has made a free flu jab voucher available to frontline workers who directly provide social care services with a stretch target of 75% uptake by the qualifying group. In addition to protecting vulnerable service users from risk of infection it is anticipated that this will have a positive impact on this employee group.
17. Prior to 2010 various pilots took place in areas of highest absence levels attributed to colds/flu/sore throats to encourage staff to access a flu jab at work. Without exception these were resource intensive and costly, resulted in low uptake and had no tangible impact on reducing absence attributable to flu.
18. In 2012/13 the offer of flu vaccination was extended to all staff as a trial using one-off public health funding. Despite the fact that this was delivered at NCC workplaces this resulted in a very low return on investment with only 12 % uptake overall and a very minimal impact on the overall level of absence attributable to colds/flu/sore throat.
19. In subsequent years the Council has returned its focus to offering targeted flu vaccinations to staff directly working with highest risk groups including vulnerable adults and children. Other staff will be encouraged to have flu jabs but efforts will continue to be focussed on achieving improved take up amongst these priority staff groups. However, in the event of a pandemic occurring or being predicted the Council can reconsider providing access to vaccinations to all staff as part of its overall risk management response.

Action for Improvement

20. Whilst the Council's performance in respect of preventing and managing stress and related conditions compares favourably with other Council's it is not complacent about the need to further improve. The ongoing challenge of preventing and significantly reducing stress and stress related absence and continuing to improve the mental wellbeing of the workforce, has been a particular focus of the Council's employee health and wellbeing action planning to date.
21. Further actions to improve on progress made to promote good mental health, prevent, manage and further reduce stress in the workplace and support all employees to develop individual resilience will continue to be a priority, informing the new initiatives and actions planned and under development as previously reported.

22. A range of new Employee Wellbeing support initiatives and associated actions to improve on existing progress and reduce absence further were agreed at Personnel Committee on 27th September 2017 and are now under active development. This next phase of activity will involve significant engagement with employees and managers to ensure the actions taken meet their needs. The progress which has been made is the subject of a separate report to this Committee.
23. It is further proposed that the timing of this annual update will reflect the position at the year end, that is the 31st March for the year concerned, in order to enable Members to monitor progress against the in-year target and consider whether this needs adjusting.

Other Options Considered

24. In addition to its overall strategic approach, the Council continues to benefit from the ongoing commitment of the recognised trade unions to improving employee health and wellbeing and their active engagement and involvement in task focussed, time limited, joint working groups which operate as sub groups of the Central Joint Consultative and Negotiating Panel.

Reasons for Recommendations

25. The recommendations in this report will enable Elected Members to continually regularly review the current levels of performance, consider the impact of identified actions on further improving the level of performance and identify additional actions in order to meet the Council's identified target.

Statutory and Policy Implications

26. 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

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

Financial Implications

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

Human Resources Implications

29. 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.
30. 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

31. 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) Identify whether there are any additional actions immediately required to achieve the Council's in year target of 7.00 days absence per fte.
- 2) Agree to receive the more detailed Annual Report following each financial year end as part of the Personnel Committee work programme.

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Constitutional Comments (KK 14/11/17)

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

Financial Comments (RWK 08/11/17)

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

Human Resources Comments (CLG 23/10/17)

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