

Agenda Item: 5**REPORT OF THE SERVICE DIRECTOR HR AND CUSTOMER SERVICE****SICKNESS ABSENCE PERFORMANCE AS AT 31st DECEMBER 2013****Purpose of the Report**

1. To provide a further quarterly update for Members about Nottinghamshire County Council's performance in relation to current levels of sickness absence across its workforce.

Information and Advice**Background**

2. One of the Council's priorities continues to be to reduce the number of working days lost to employee sickness absence.
3. At the Personnel Committee meeting on 6th November 2013 Elected Members received updated data and analysis of the Council's performance against this key corporate performance indicator. This set out that the level of absence at the end of the second quarter of 2013/14 was **8.19 days** absence on average, per employee, per annum. This level of performance fell slightly below the County Council's current target of **8.17 days** by **0.02 days**.
4. As requested by Members at the last Personnel Committee, the table in **Appendix A** shows the longer term trend going back to 2003/4 when corporate recording began. This information should be considered in the context of the impact of system and organisational change on accurate comparison year on year. Improvement in absence levels has been achieved since 2003 when corporate absence levels were at an average of 12 days sickness per employee. Over that timeframe the average number of days lost per employee has fallen by nearly 4 days. The overall number of employees has also fallen significantly during the same period. Latterly the improvement in absence levels has been sustained through the adoption of a strategic approach which refocused absence management onto proactive, preventative employee health and wellbeing and the delivery of key actions for improvement.
5. The on-going priority is to maintain and continue to improve on this level of performance whilst building in sustainability through increased employee engagement which will be reflected in a refreshed Workforce Health and Wellbeing action plan for the Council's direct employees.

Performance

6. The validated data for quarter 3 indicates that the current level of sickness absence has improved slightly to **8.18 days** sickness per employee on average per annum, a decrease of **0.01 days** on the previous quarter which is now just above the current target of **8.17 days**. At this current level of performance it is reasonable to predict that this target will be achieved by the year end.
7. The charts attached to this report continue to illustrate a variation across departments and service areas within departments in respect of performance against the Council's overall in-year target.
8. The next update report to Personnel Committee will set out the known situation as at the end of the final quarter of 2013/14, that is as at 31st March 2013.

Reasons for absence

9. The most recent Local Government Workforce Survey, 2011/12, reported that the top three causes of reported sickness absence across local authorities were stress, depression, anxiety, mental health and fatigue (21.7 %) followed by other muscular skeletal problems (14.7 %) and back and neck problems (12.3 %).
10. Overall stress related absence at Nottinghamshire County Council currently represents **18.18%** of the total, closely followed by absence for surgical operations and post-operative recovery at **17.77%** (see **Appendix C**).
11. In the Children's Families and Cultural Services and Adult Social Care, Health and Public Protection departments stress related absence remains the prevalent reason and reported levels exceed the Council average. Levels of absence attributable to stress in Policy, Performance and Corporate Services also appear high, but this is a significantly smaller department in terms of headcount in comparison to all others. Therefore one or two cases can considerably distort the average percentage.
12. HR interventions are planned for early 2014 to remind managers of the importance of recording a reason for absence against one of the established categories, the percentage of illness not attributed to any specific reason currently stands at **1.12%**. This should result in an increase in attributable absence which will begin to impact in the next quarter.
13. The relatively high proportion of absence reported as being for operations and post-operative recovery may to some extent reflect the relative age profile of the departments concerned and analysis of this will inform the future focus of action planning for improvement as part of the 2014/15 Employee Health and Wellbeing action plan.
14. The third and fourth quarters of each year have usually seen an increase in absence reported as attributable to colds and flu. **Appendix C** illustrates that, as at 31st December 2013 absence attributable to colds, sore throats and flu stood at **9.61%** of all reported absence, this compares to **10.00 %** at the same time last year. This may be an indication of the fact that, unlike in some previous years there has been no widespread flu epidemic so far during Winter 2013-14.

15. The Council's current flu vaccination programme encourages front-line employees who have regular and direct contact with vulnerable service users to obtain a flu vaccination through locally available services to protect both themselves and service users from infection, the cost of which will be reimbursed by the Council. This will also have impacted on the figures.

Stress

16. Relatively high levels of stress related absence across the local authority sector reflect the operating environment of budget reductions and change which have resulted in post reductions and increased demands on those who remain in the service; over the past few years levels of stress related absence in the Council have been as high as **21%** of all recorded absence, in line with the reported national average for County Councils.
17. The absence reasons report for quarter 3 2013/14 (**Appendix C**), shows that, against this background, stress continues to be a significant cause of sickness absence in the Council. There has been a slight increase in absence attributed to stress and stress related illness of **0.01%** from the previous quarter to **18.18%**. However the general trend continues to be one of improvement against the equivalent reporting period for 2012/13 when it stood at **19.11%**.
18. It is essential that this positive trend is maintained and that levels of stress and stress related illness continue to decline. HR Business Partners continue to work with managers in hot spot areas to identify causes and solutions which will include promoting the use of the Council's stress audit tool to engage with staff to identify actual and potential stressors and action plan accordingly.
19. One of the priorities of the Council's Workforce Strategy for 2014-18 will be to continue to engage managers and employees in proactive and preventative workforce health and wellbeing, with a focus on the prevention, reduction and management of stress through early intervention. This approach will include assisting individual employees to maximise their capacity to find solutions in response to challenges and changing demands at work, balanced against an appropriate organisational response with a particular focus on "hot spot" service areas.
20. Discussions continue to progress positively with Public Health colleagues and the trades unions to develop resource and deliver specific approaches and activities to support the development and delivery of this plan.

Long term absence

21. The quarter 3 2013/14 data indicates that **43.51%** of all absence is currently long term, that is of four weeks or more in duration (**Appendix D**), indicating that the Council continues to exceed its performance against a target of **50.00%** or less.
22. Overall the position compared with the previous quarter is further improved by **1.38** percentage points when it stood at **44.89%**, evidencing that HR working with managers to ensure early intervention to ensure that absent employees are facilitated to return to work at the earliest possible opportunity continues to have a positive impact.

Other Options Considered

23. The Council's approach to employee health and wellbeing is the subject of ongoing discussions with trades union colleagues in order to consider a wide range of potential options for continued improvement.

Reasons for Recommendations

24. The recommendations in this report 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

25. 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

26. The human resources implications are implicit in the body of the report. The trades unions are engaged in the further development of employee health and wellbeing initiatives through the Joint Wellbeing and Attendance Management Steering Group.

Equalities Implications

27. 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 on-going trend of continuous improvement
2. the current level of performance in respect of sickness absence levels

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Constitutional Comments (KK 30/01/14)

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

Financial Comments (SEM 30/01/14)

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

Background Papers

None

Electoral Division(s) and Member(s) Affected

All