

WILTSHIRE COUNCIL

Staffing Policy Committee

8th January 2020

Sickness absence update

Purpose

1. The purpose of this item is to provide Staffing Policy Committee with an update on the council's sickness absence position following a request for more detailed analysis of sickness absence at the meeting of the committee on 14 November 2019.
2. The detailed analysis report is attached at Appendix 1.

Background

3. Sickness absence is a key workforce metric and it is important that we can identify where workforce capacity is likely to be affected through absenteeism as this can impact on service delivery and on staff morale.
4. When looking at sickness absence our analysis is split by long term (>20 continuous working days), medium term (5 – 20 continuous working days) and short term (<5 continuous working days)
5. The impact of long-term absence is easier to mitigate as arrangements can be made to cover the lost productivity, however it is the more frequent patterns of short, and medium-term absences that are most challenging to manage and therefore can cause the greatest disruption.
6. A high sickness absence rate teams may also be an indicator of other underlying workforce issues. For example, we know that employee relations issues in teams (disciplinary, improving work performance, grievance) can cause an increase in absenteeism, as can the impact of service restructuring.
7. Multiple sources of research have identified positive correlation between increased employee engagement and improved performance against common workforce metrics and this includes sickness absence.

Main considerations

Sickness absence at Wiltshire Council

8. At Wiltshire Council, the absence rate over the 2018/19 financial year was 9 days lost per FTE, which cost the council around £3m; this is consistent with the previous long-term trend.

9. The current 2019/20 financial year absence rate is projected to be around 8.7 days lost per FTE, indicating an improvement from the consistently stable long-term trend.
10. A report by the Local Government Association stated the average absence rate for single/upper tier authorities only is 10.2 days, which is significantly above our absence rate.
11. The council's sickness absence follows a very clear seasonal trend; with an increase in short term absences in the latter 2 quarters (October to March) of the financial year due to the cold and flu season. This is especially prevalent in frontline areas that are working closely with the public or vulnerable residents.
12. Regular analysis shows that sickness absence across the council's workforce is proportionately more common in staff over the age of 55, in females and in part-time staff.
13. There is also a correlation between those teams where staff are able to take advantage of working from home (as indicated by the 2018 staff survey) and lower sickness absence rates. According to the 2017 Occupational Health Survey staff felt that flexible working was the principal component that supported a healthy work life balance.
14. Stress related absence (reasons that include work and non-work related stress, chronic fatigue syndrome, depression and anxiety, and other mental health issues) continues to be the most common reason for absence, with around 1 in 3 days attributed to this reason. Management culture is critical to addressing stress related absence as they are the channel to encourage their staff to use the wellbeing initiatives and support provided as part of the council's programme of preventative measures.

Focused Analysis

15. An in-depth analysis of sickness trends and related factors is provided at Appendix 1 and should be read in conjunction with this report.
16. The social care services have the highest absence rates at the council; projecting for the 2019/20 financial year:
 - 22.7 days lost per FTE in Learning Disabilities and Mental Health
 - 19.9 days in Access and Reablement
 - 8.0 days in Families and Children's Services (although this is below the corporate average it is still currently the third highest absence rate; the corporate average is significantly increased by the 2 directorates above)
17. All other directorates are projected to be under the corporate average for 2019/20.
18. This is not an issue exclusive to Wiltshire Council. In a recent report for 2018, the [ONS](#) found that social care has the highest absence rate by profession.

19. Families and Children's Services have been working diligently to address management culture to reduce stress related absence. During this time, alongside a consistently reducing absence rate, they have also reduced stress related absence by 20%, improved their employee engagement score and improved their Ofsted rating to 'good'. Details about the actions they have taken are outlined in Appendix 1.
20. The Learning Disabilities & Mental Health and Access & Reablement directorates have both recently undergone a significant restructure to address leadership and management issues. The changes made have increased the level of proactive and robust management of workforce issues and absence rates in these areas will continue to be closely monitored to ensure that an impact is seen.
21. The HR advisory team have run bespoke absence management workshops for adult social care, with more detailed 'case study' style workshops scheduled for early 2020. Initial feedback indicates this is improving line managers confidence in having difficult conversations, decision making and management in respect of absence cases.
22. HR are also supporting managers to be confident and competent in controlling their workforce processes well as we know areas that do this have higher levels of employee engagement, lower sickness absence and reduced employee turnover rates.
23. Whilst all other directorates are projected to be below the corporate average for 2019/20, we have identified some increasing trends of absence rates which we will continue to monitor. The HR business partners will work with these service areas to understand any causes or to address contributory factors. Directors are provided with quarterly workforce reports to enable them to monitor sickness absence and business partners ensure these are discussed at senior management team meetings.

Next Steps

24. The HR insight team will provide information to the HR business partner for adult social care services who will liaise with colleagues in HR, OH and in the services to monitor and support reductions in absence rates.
25. HR will continue to monitor absence trends in other directorates and undertake early interventions where required in conjunction with the relevant heads of service.
26. The HR strategy team are developing a more robust managers induction to provide all new managers with the tools to be able to better manage sickness absence and other workforce issues, and a workshop on the same topics will also be a feature of the leadership and managing programme for aspiring and developing managers in 2020.

Risk Assessment

27. None

Financial Implications

28. As outlined the cost of sickness absence is significant but as with absence due to annual leave any tangible additional cost will only be where staff absence is covered with other resources, either agency or relief staff or due to the payment of additional hours or overtime to other staff.
29. We will continue to monitor the costs associated with sickness absence and report these to the Staffing Policy Committee through the quarterly workforce reports.

Recommendations

30. It is recommended that Staffing Policy Committee note the contents of this report.
31. It is recommended that Staffing Policy Committee consider the detailed analysis at Appendix 1.

Joanne Pitt
Director HR&OD

Report author: Michael Taylor, Workforce Insight Analyst