

EAST RENFREWSHIRE COUNCILAUDIT AND SCRUTINY COMMITTEE26 September 2019Report by Deputy Chief ExecutiveMANAGING ABSENCE**PURPOSE OF REPORT**

1. The purpose of this report is to update the Audit and Scrutiny Committee on the Council's sickness absence levels and its approach to managing absence.

RECOMMENDATION

2. The Committee is requested to note the content of the report, the trend in absence ratings and to support the range of approaches being taken to reduce absence levels across the Council.

REPORTAbsence Data 2018/19

3. In 2018/19 the Council's overall annual day's absence per FTE was 10.1 which is a decline in performance of 1.6 days from the previous year and 0.9 days above target. There has been an increase in both Local Government Employee (LGE) and Teaching absence with days lost per FTE at 12.2 days and 6.1 days, increases of 1.7 and 1.6 days respectively.

4. The top absence reasons in 2018/19 are stress (non-work related), gastrointestinal disorders and musculoskeletal (except back pain).

5. The main reasons for the increasing absence rates in the last year are due to cancers and gastrointestinal disorders which has affected both short and long-term absence across LGE and Teaching staff. Increases have also been seen in surgery (other), back pain, mental health issues and gynaecological disorders. The increase in some of these absence reasons could be influenced by demographics and the increasing age of council employees.

Absence Benchmarking

6. The LGBF (Local Government Benchmark Framework) data comparing LGE (Local Government) and teaching absence data from all councils is issued by the Improvement Service annually (Table 1) and we review this with respect to our performance and targets. This data is issued retrospectively so the latest data available is for 2017/18. It should be noted that the Improvement Service do not report overall absence data.

7. When reviewing the benchmarking data for 2017/18 the council is ranked 8th out of 32 councils for LGE absence, an improvement from 20th the previous year. The council's LGE absence was 10.5 days per FTE in 2017/18 with other councils ranging from 8.4 to 14.7 days per FTE for the same period. The teachers' absence SPI has moved to 3rd position from 2nd

with 4.5 days absence per FTE, an exceptional performance. In 2017/18 other councils range from 4.2 to 9.1 days per FTE during this period.

Table 1: Statutory Absence Performance Indicator

	2012/13 Days absence /FTE	2013/14 Days absence /FTE	2014/15 Days absence /FTE	2015/16 Days absence /FTE	2016/17 Days absence /FTE	2017/18 Days absence / FTE	2018/19 Days absence / FTE
LGE	11.3	12.3	13.5	11.8	11.5	10.5	12.2
LGE Scottish Average	11.3	10.3	10.8	10.7	10.9	11.4	
LGE National Placing	21 st	29 th	31 st	25 th	20 th	8 th	
Teachers	5.4	6.1	6.3	5.6	4.1	4.5	6.1
Teachers Scottish Average	6.9	6.1	6.3	6.2	6.0	6.1	
Teachers National Placing	5 th	18 th	16 th	7 th	2 nd	3 rd	
Overall ERC absence	9.5	10.3	11.2	9.8	9.0	8.5	10.1

8. In 2018 the CIPD (Chartered Institute of Personnel and Development) annual survey report on absence management was rebranded as Health and Wellbeing at Work. While it continues to monitor trends in absence management, the survey now has an increased focus on health and well-being policies and practice.

The average level of absence in the UK across private, public and non-profit sectors is 5.9 days per employee which is the lowest ever recorded in this survey. It should be noted that this figure is based on the number of employees and not full time equivalents and there is considerable variation seen across and within sectors. The CIPD reports the average absence remains considerably higher for the public sector at 8.4 days per employee with local government reporting an average of 9.8 days per employee.

9. CIPD reports that mental ill health, stress and musculoskeletal injuries (including back pain) are the most common causes of long-term absence with minor illness (e.g. cold/flu, stomach upset, etc), musculoskeletal and stress the top reasons for short term absence. The report notes that the public sector is considerably more likely to include stress and musculoskeletal among their top causes of both short and long term absences compared to other sectors. The public sector is least likely to include caring responsibilities for children among their top causes of short term absence and the availability of family-friendly and flexible working policies is thought to contribute to this finding.

10. The report states the most effective approach to managing absence for long term is a case management approach, occupational health involvement, trigger mechanisms and for short term the most effective approaches are trigger mechanisms, return to work interviews and line manager responsibility for managing absence. This is consistent with the council approach to managing absence.

11. Recent CIPD research states that a heavy workload remains by far the most common cause of work related stress, across all sectors followed by management style and relationships at work. The public sector and non-profits are more likely to be taking action using a range of methods such as: flexible working options, employee assistance programmes, line manager training, occupational health specialists, use of stress risk assessments and approaches to build personal resilience.

12. Over the last few years an increasing proportion of organisations have included mental ill health among their main causes of absence with 86% of organisations saying that they are taking some action in this area. Common approaches are phased returns to work/reasonable adjustments, increasing awareness of mental health issues across workforce, employee assistance programme, training managers to support staff with ill health, promotion of flexible working options, personal resilience training, mental health first aid training and greater involvement of occupational health specialists.

13. Research in the report also continues to identify the importance of financial wellbeing for employees and organisations with a quarter of respondents believing that poor financial well-being is a significant cause of employee stress in their organisations rising to a third in organisations with greater than 5000 employees. Employers should consider pay and benefit policies, retirement provision, employee communication and employee support.

14. The council already adopts many of these approaches, further detail of which is provided later in the report.

Focus on Absence Improvement

15. The CMT continues to support the focus on absence management and improvement.

It is recognised that a number of factors influence the absence figures. For example, within the Local Government Employee grouping the Council continues to provide a large number of services which include a high level of manual tasks. These areas typically have higher absence rates and unlike some other councils these services remain in house and are not carried out by arm's length organisations. The one exception is the East Renfrewshire Culture and Leisure Trust.

16. The council has a robust approach to the monitoring and review of absence with clarity included in the policy on how an employee will progress through the different absence stages and the transition between maximising attendance and capability policies. All departments continue to closely monitor absence focusing on both short and long term absence with particular focus in the hot spot areas, particularly Facilities Management and Homecare. There are regular meetings with HR and management to discuss all long term and short term absence cases with triggers and use is made of in service days and management meetings to update on absence. The capability policy is used to manage long term absences with 12 dismissals due to capability and 5 ill health retirements in the last year. There has been a reduction in the number of ill health retirements. The process of awarding ill health retirements is managed through our Occupational Health provider and can only be awarded with the approval of an Independent Registered Medical Practitioner.

17. The Council has implemented many of the approaches highlighted in the CIPD survey to promote health and wellbeing at work including employee surveys, flexible working options, work-life balance policies, stress risk assessments and management training. In addition there has been a strong focus to strengthen the capability of managers in promoting employee well-being and attendance ensuring they are trained in absence-handling and that they receive tailored support.

18. The Council provides counselling services to employees either by self or management referral. Counselling covers a range of issues including stress (personal and work-related), critical incident debriefing, debt, gambling, substance misuse, bereavement. The council continues to promote the employee counselling services. In addition we are also exploring opportunities to promote financial security with employees through financial management.

19. The Council uses Occupational Health service provider, People Asset Management (PAM), who support occupational health referrals, ill health retiral assessments, physiotherapy, audio and hand/arm vibration assessments. Each case is assessed on an individual basis to determine all available options with decision making based on full review of all available information.

20. There are a number of training courses available for managers to attend. During Mental Health week we promoted the courses below on the training calendar and e-learning.

- De-stress with Mindfulness
- Personal Resilience Skills
- Scottish Mental Health First Aid
- Spotting and Managing Mental Health Issues
- Maximising Attendance
- Dealing with Stress (E-learning)
- Maximising Attendance (E-learning)
- Mental Health Module (E-learning)
- Life Balance Module (E-learning)
- Relaxation Module (E-learning)
- Resilience Module (E-learning)

There were 100 face to face and 118 e-learning course attended in the last year. In addition for Mental Health awareness day there was promotion through the intranet about services available including Employee Counselling Service, NHS24, the Samaritans and Breathing Space. Promotions are performed throughout the year to link in with national initiatives.

The Maximising Attendance course is run by representatives from the HR team who can use challenging case examples for managers. They are also able to promote the different health and well-being related courses to managers when supporting specific absence cases.

21. Mental health will be an area of focus in the coming year. We will continue to promote the available training to managers and employees and encourage participation. We have increased the provision of courses in this area and managers should encourage employees to attend a corporate training course or visit the e-learning system which may provide information and early intervention to someone who is showing signs of stress or mental health issues.

22. HR resource continues to coach and mentor managers on how best to tackle absence, especially complex issues, so that they have more experience and confidence in tackling these issues moving forward. The HR team actively attend training – both internal and external to improve knowledge of mental health, how to support employees, manage

cases and to learn best practice from other organisations. There are also a number of wellness workshops/training for both employees and managers run by HSCP which can be really informative e.g. menopause, mental health and these help managers to understand some of the symptoms their employees could be experiencing and the supportive measures they could be discussing.

23. Some staff groups are more likely to experience poorer health for example lower paid staff, part-time staff, shift workers and some manual workers. Some staff within these groups have reported difficulty in maintaining healthy lifestyles, some have reported money concerns affect their health and some experience barriers to accessing health services. In the last year we offered 80 health check appointments to staff with more manual job roles, CCTV control room staff, catering, cleaning and janitorial workers. In addition due to a number of health issues within a specific team we organised voluntary health checks and lifestyle advice around diet/exercise and eating for shift working which was well received.

24. The council pays all employees at least the Scottish Local Government Living Wage and all employees are auto-enrolled to become members of Strathclyde Pension Scheme on joining the council and then again every three years if they have chosen to leave the scheme. Financial support is available through the employee counselling service and the Money Advice and Rights Team will also support employees. The council uses the employee intranet to promote these services.

25. One of the key aims for the organisation in the HR strategy is to support the wellbeing, reward and benefits of employees. Employee benefits offer a way to attract and retain employees, contribute towards improving well-being and enhancing staff engagement. We are currently exploring options to introduce an employee benefit scheme which would include additional financial wellbeing support. This would complement the services we already provide via MART and our employee counselling service. Along with the launch of the new council employee benefit scheme there will be an internal communications campaign to promote services to employees and the types of advice and support available.

26. There continues to be a significant amount of change ongoing within the Council and it is recognised that there is the potential for absence levels to continue to be a concern over the next few years due to the level of change and number of planned service reviews. Significant restructures have been ongoing for a number of years within the Council and this has impacted on absence in some instances. During service reviews there is a focus on communicating all the changes to encourage as much employee engagement as possible particularly for those employees who remain with the organisation. It is important that they understand how the new workloads will be configured and what it will mean for them. Some services have also made use of mediation services to support specific team dynamics that are also having an impact on absence.

27. The council's family friendly policies including mobile and flexible working assist employees and support reduced absence rates. There are plans to benchmark and review approach to mobile working to determine if there are improvements that could be made in this area.

CONCLUSIONS

28. The council's overall absence performance had improved from 2015/16 to 2017/18 with a decline in performance over the last year.

29. The council's approach to absence management is in line with CIPD researched approaches.

30. The council continues to have a strong focus on absence improvement and continues to benchmark and implement training and improvement actions. Over the next year there will be a focus on mental health and managers will be encouraged to be as proactive as possible when an employee shows signs of a stress related illness and use the counselling service provided by Time for Talking to provide support to the employee. Managers will also be asked to encourage employees to attend training courses available through the training calendar and/or access the resources on the e-learning system to get information on how to deal with mental health issues and stress.

RECOMMENDATION

31 The Committee is requested to note the content of the report, the trend in absence ratings and to support the range of approaches being taken to reduce absence levels across the Council.

Deputy Chief Executive, September 2019

Report Author: Sharon Dick, Head of HR, Customer and Communications – Ext 4079

Email: Sharon.Dick@eastrenfrewshire.gov.uk

PAPERS

CIPD, Health and Wellbeing at Work, April 2019