

EAST RENFREWSHIRE COUNCILAUDIT AND SCRUTINY COMMITTEE24 September 2020Report 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.

**REPORT**Absence Data 2019/20

3. In 2019/20 the Council's overall annual day's absence per FTE was 10.1 which is the same as in 2018/2019. There has been an increase in Local Government Employee (LGE) absence with days lost per FTE at 12.97 days which is an increase of 0.77 days. Teacher absence has reduced to 5.16 days per FTE which is a reduction of 0.94 days.

4. The top absence reasons for both long and short term in 2019/2020 can be attributed to stress non work related, musculoskeletal, gastrointestinal disorders and influenza.

5. Stress (non work related) continues to be a significant absence reason across the Council and managers have been encouraged to make staff aware of the services available such as the employee counselling service and occupational health where an employee is absent or is showing signs of stress, anxiety or is presented with a personal problem.

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 in the latter half of the financial year so the latest data available is for 2018/19. It should be noted that the Improvement Service do not report overall absence data.

7. When reviewing the benchmarking data for 2018/19 the Council is ranked 21<sup>st</sup> out of 32 councils for LGE absence. The Council's LGE absence was 12.2 days per FTE in 2018/19 with other councils ranging from 8.8 to 15.0 days per FTE for the same period. The

LGBF data demonstrates that LGE Scottish average absence was the highest for 7 years at 11.49 working days lost per FTE in 2018/19.

8. In 2018/2019 the East Renfrewshire teachers' absence SPI moved to 11<sup>th</sup> position from 3<sup>rd</sup> with 6.1 days absence per FTE. Other councils range from 4.6 to 9.0 days per FTE during this period. The LGBF data demonstrates that teacher absence has varied over the past 7 years this is due to the nature of long term absence cases in the particular year.

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	2019/20 Days absence/ FTE
LGE	11.3	12.3	13.5	11.8	11.5	10.5	12.2	12.97
LGE Scottish Average	11.3	10.3	10.8	10.7	10.9	11.4	11.49	Data not yet available
LGE National Placing	21 <sup>st</sup>	29 <sup>th</sup>	31 <sup>st</sup>	25 <sup>th</sup>	20 <sup>th</sup>	8 <sup>th</sup>	21 <sup>st</sup>	Data not yet available
Teachers	5.4	6.1	6.3	5.6	4.1	4.5	6.1	5.16
Teachers Scottish Average	6.9	6.1	6.3	6.2	6.0	6.1	6.2	Data not yet available
Teachers National Placing	5 <sup>th</sup>	18 <sup>th</sup>	16 <sup>th</sup>	7 <sup>th</sup>	2 <sup>nd</sup>	3 <sup>rd</sup>	11 <sup>th</sup>	Data not yet available
<b>Overall ERC absence</b>	<b>9.5</b>	<b>10.3</b>	<b>11.2</b>	<b>9.8</b>	<b>9.0</b>	<b>8.5</b>	<b>10.1</b>	<b>10.1</b>

9. The CIPD (Chartered Institute of Personnel and Development) annual survey report 2020 on Health and Well-being at Work highlights that on average public sector employees had an absence level of 8.0 days of absence, which is a reduction of 0.4 days per employee from the previous year.

10. The average level of absence in the UK across private, public and non-profit sectors is 5.8 days per employee which is the lowest level recorded by the CIPD in 20 years. 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 in the public sector, as well as in larger organisations across all sectors with circa 5000 staff with 9.2 days absence reported.

11. The CIPD reports that the top 3 reasons for long term absence in order of prominence are mental ill health, musculoskeletal conditions and stress. The CIPD reported that as with previous years public sector organisations are more likely to include stress among their

common causes of long term absence at 70% which is high when compared to private sector organisations at 38%.

12. The CIPD reports that the top 3 reasons for short term absence are minor illness such as flu, stomach upsets, headaches and migraines, followed by musculoskeletal injuries and stress.

13. The report states there is little change in their recommendations regarding the most effective approach to managing absence for long term absence which is a case management approach, occupational health involvement, trigger mechanisms and for short term absence 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.

14. In their 2020 report the CIPD found that a heavy workload is by far the most common cause of work related stress, across all sectors followed by management style and non-work factors such as family and relationships. 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.

15. Common approaches to mental ill health 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.

16. 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.

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

18. Additional research was undertaken using the Health in the Workplace – pattern of sickness absence, employer support and employment retention report published in July 2019 by the Department of Work & Pensions (DWP) and Department of Health & Social Care (DHSC). The report focused on long term absence (absence over 4 weeks) and delves into the characteristics of employee absence. Their key findings were similar to the CIPD in terms of reasons for sickness absence with mental health, stress and musculoskeletal reported as the main long term absence reasons.

19. Findings identified that employees in the public sector were 1.5 times more likely to have at least one spell of long term absence in a year compared to the private sector, with employees working in public administration, education and health most likely to have a spell of long term sickness caused by a mental health condition compared to all other industries with the exception of banking. The report found that those employees in labour intensive industries specifically caring were more likely to report a musculoskeletal condition as their main cause of long term absence compared to other industries/roles.

This research will be used to consider our approach to absence management and reporting, in conjunction with the measures mentioned below.

### Focus on Absence Improvement

20. 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 which although is an arm's length organisation, it does not have higher than average absence levels.

21. 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 4 dismissals due to capability and 12 ill health retirements in the last year. 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.

22. 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.

23. 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.

24. The Council uses Occupational Health service provider, People Asset Management (PAM), who support occupational health referrals, ill health retirement assessments, 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.

25. 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)

The Maximising Attendance course is run by representatives from the HR team who 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.

26. Mental health continues to 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 continue to encourage managers to promote employees attending training or visiting the e-learning system which may provide information and early intervention to someone who is showing signs of stress or mental health issues.

27. To support managers we have set up a dedicated HR case management team with a dedicated phone number and email address so that managers are able to access coaching and mentoring on how best to tackle absence, especially complex issues. The aim is support managers to gain more experience and confidence in tackling these issues moving forward.

28. 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 affecting their health and some experience barriers to accessing health services.

29. Due to COVID staff have had to adapt to different ways of working which we are aware can affect people differently. HR have proactively focused on promoting good mental health by sending weekly email briefings with useful information and links on relevant health and wellbeing topics. This approach has been positively received across the Council.

30. The Council has utilised technology to support our workforce to continue working during the COVID pandemic. There are many positive impacts of technology for the Council and also for employees which were mentioned in the CIPD survey also this year. Positive impacts include enhancing wellbeing through improving efficiency, freeing up time to spend on meaningful tasks and work life balance. However the CIPD also notes the negative impacts such as employees inability to 'switch off' from work and the stress that can result from technology failing. Managers continue to monitor their teams and they are being encouraged to proactively identify any impact on wellbeing.

31. 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.

32. 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.

33. 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.

34. The Council's family friendly policies including temporary home working, due to COVID, and flexible working assist employees and support reduced absence rates. Further reviews will be undertaken on these policies during the coming year.

## **CONCLUSIONS**

35. The Council's overall absence performance had remained unchanged since 2018/2019. LGE absence declined overall but teacher absence has improved when compared with the previous year.

36. The Council's approach to absence management is in line with CIPD researched approaches.

37. 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 PAM 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**

38. 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 2020

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## **PAPERS**

CIPD, Health and Wellbeing at Work, March 2020  
DWP & DHSC Health in the Workplace, July 2019