

EAST RENFREWSHIRE COUNCILAUDIT AND SCRUTINY COMMITTEE23 September 2021Report 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 2020/21

3. In 2020/21 there has been a reduction in Local Government Employee (LGE) absence with days lost per FTE at 10.4 days compared with 13 days in 19/20 which is a decrease of 2.6 days.

4. Teacher absence has reduced to 4.0 days per FTE compared to 5.2 days per FTE in 19/20, which is a reduction of 1.1 days. The Council's overall annual day's absence per FTE was 8.2 which is a significant improvement in comparison to 10.1 days absence per FTE in 2019/20 and in 2018/19.

5. The top three absence reasons combined across the council for both long and short term sickness absence in 2020/2021 can be attributed to stress non-work related, musculoskeletal including back pain and Gastro intestinal disorders.

6. Stress (non-work related) is the top reason for absence across the Council, which makes up 31% of the overall absence. Managers continue to be encouraged to make staff aware of the services available such as the employee counselling service, online resources provided via the Employee Assistance Programme and occupational health where an employee is absent or is showing signs of stress, anxiety or is presented with a personal problem.

Covid-19 Absence

7. It should be noted that absences due to Covid-19 are not included in the statutory absence figures. The council started to record Covid-19 absence data on 30 March 2020

and this information is currently reported separately and regularly reviewed by CRMT (Council's Resilience Management Team).

Sickness Absence Reporting

8. With the introduction of the new HR and Payroll system the sickness performance indicator for teachers has moved from an automated to a manual calculation. An agreement has been reached with internal audit regarding the calculation that will be used, and we have benchmarked various calculation scenarios with other local authorities to ensure we are complying with the improvement services' local government benchmarking framework calculations. Returning to an automated calculation requires further system set-up and this will be considered in a future release of the system.

Absence Benchmarking

9. 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 2019/20. It should be noted that the Improvement Service do not report overall absence data.

10. When reviewing the benchmarking data for 2019/20 the Council is ranked 26th out of 32 councils for LGE absence, in 2018/19 our ranking was 21st. The Council's LGE absence was 13 days per FTE in 2019/20 with other councils ranging from 8.2 to 14.1 days per FTE for the same period. The LGBF data demonstrates that LGE Scottish average absence was the highest for 8 years at 11.9 working days lost per FTE in 2019/20.

11. In 2019/20 the East Renfrewshire teachers' absence SPI position has reduced from 11th to 6th place with 5.2 days absence per FTE. Other councils range from 4.3 to 10 days per FTE during this period. The LGBF data demonstrates that teacher absence has increased over the past 5 years with the Scottish average being 6.3 working days lost per FTE in 2019/20.

12. 2020/21 sickness absence data demonstrates that there has been a significant improvement compared to 2019/20. This improvement may be as a result of COVID, therefore it could be expected that other Local Authorities will see a similar improvement. Covid absence data is not included in this measurement and councils are also reporting indirect improvements for example, less colds/flu as less people mixing, and less absence as people are able to work from home but may not have been well enough to come into the office. The LGBF 2020/21 data is not yet available to review and compare.

Table 1: Statutory Absence Performance Indicator

	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	2020/21 Days absence/ FTE
LGE	12.3	13.5	11.8	11.5	10.5	12.2	13.0	10.4
LGE Scottish Average	10.3	10.8	10.7	10.9	11.4	11.49	11.9	Data not yet available
LGE National Placing	29 th	31 st	25 th	20 th	8 th	21 st	26 th	Data not yet available
Teachers	6.1	6.3	5.6	4.1	4.5	6.1	5.2	4.00
Teachers Scottish Average	6.1	6.3	6.2	6.0	6.1	6.2	6.3	Data not yet available
Teachers National Placing	18 th	16 th	7 th	2 nd	3 rd	11 th	6 th	Data not yet available
Overall ERC absence	10.3	11.2	9.8	9.0	8.5	10.1	10.1	8.2

Industry Sickness Absence Data

13. 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. The Council's overall absence for 2020/21 is positioned slightly above the public sector average, by 0.2 days per FTE.

14. The Office of National Statistics 'Sickness in the UK labour Market: 2020, published on 3 March 2021 states that the Coronavirus has affected the sickness absence data in a number of ways, while the virus may have led to additional sickness absence, measures such as furloughing, social distancing, shielding and increased home working appear to have helped reduce other causes of absence, allowing the general downward trend to continue.

15. The CIPD Health and Wellbeing at Work 2021 report states that mental health and stress are among the top causes of absence across all sectors, but particularly in the public sector. Covid-19 has exacerbated the risks to many people's mental health.

16. The report states there are corresponding improvements in the proportion of respondents who believe their Organisation actively promote good mental wellbeing and that Senior Leaders encourage a focus on mental wellbeing through their actions and behaviours, which is more positive in the public sector.

17. Figures from the Office of National Statistics (ONS) have revealed that 19% of employed adults experienced some form of depression between January 2021 and March 2021, with rates of depression in adults more than doubled pre-pandemic levels.

18. Research from these reports will be used to consider our approach to absence management and reporting. The Council already adopts many of these approaches and further detail is provided later in the report.

Focus on Absence Improvement

19. The CMT continues to support the focus on absence management and improvement. From the analysis and absence monitoring it is evident that the employees who carry out frontline manual services within the Council have higher rates of absence in comparison to other Council services.

20. Departments continue to closely monitor absence focusing on both short and long term absence. Within the hot spot areas Neighbourhood Services, Facilities Management and Homecare there is key focus on a downward trend in relation to absence, however it is recognised that a contributing factor is an ageing workforce and the long term conditions associated, which are a key challenge for these frontline services.

21. There is a focussed approach to further strengthen the capability of managers in promoting employee well-being and attendance ensuring they are trained in absence-handling and that they receive tailored specific support. The capability guidance is used to manage long term absences with 9 dismissals due to capability and 9 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. From the benchmarking research suggested best practice approaches, the Council continue to implement to support the health and wellbeing of our employees by facilitating employee surveys, promoting employee counselling services, the provision of training for managers to be able to facilitate difficult conversations and managers are encouraged to use the flexible working policy to support employees with a good work-life balance,

23. In the last year the council has introduced a financial wellbeing provider and the East Ren Rewards scheme which are helping our employees to save money on everyday lifestyle spending, monitoring and evaluating their own financial wellbeing. These schemes are supported by sickness absence research which highlights the importance of financial wellbeing for employees as poor financial well-being can be a significant cause of employee non-work related stress.

24. There is management information available from PAM Assist, Counselling Service Provider, which demonstrated that some employees who do access the Employee Assistance Programme have concerns around financial matters. 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.

25. In addition when an employee advises of financial difficulties, Management are encouraged to support the employee by signposting the employee to the Money Advice and Rights Team who can offer confidential, impartial and independent advice service to assist with resolving financial concerns.

26. The Council continues to work with Occupational Health the service provider is People Asset Management (PAM), who support occupational health referrals, ill health retiral 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.

27. There are a number of training courses available for managers to attend, which Senior Management are encouraged to support managers to participate in for personal development.

- Personal Resilience
- Workplace Mindfulness
- Assertiveness Skills
- Managing Emotions & Understanding Emotional Intelligence
- Spotting & Managing Stress and Mental Health issues
- Dealing with Stress (E-Learning)
- Managing Stress (E-Learning)
- Ask, Tell – Look after your Mental Health (E-Learning)

The Maximising Attendance course continues to be run by representatives from the HR team who use practical 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. The corporate training calendar along with the e-learning courses have been promoted and management will continue to be reminded of these resources to ensure early intervention is a method utilised to support an employee who is showing signs of stress or mental health issues.

28. Stress (non-work related) continues to be the number one reason for absence and managers are encouraged to make as much use of the services available to them when an employee is absent or is showing signs of stress, anxiety or is presented with a personal problem. To support managers the HR team provide advice and support with the management of sickness absence matters.

29. Mental health continues to be an area of focus in the coming year currently benchmarking is underway to consider a mental health strategy that further strengthens the support provided to employees in relation to their wellbeing.

30. During Covid-19 the Council has embedded a holistic approach to employee wellbeing with an increased focus on mental health encouraging employees to access resources and providing employees with information on check-in tools, encouraging employees to talk over any concerns. Also employees have been encouraged to participate in 'switch off and shift' taking short breaks from the working routine in order to promote the importance of employee wellbeing. Managers have been encouraged to check in with staff members on a regular basis.

31. It is recognised that 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. Within the Council it is recognised the importance of engaging with employees throughout the change programme to ensure there is a clear communication strategy.

CONCLUSIONS

32. The Council's overall absence performance has improved across both LG Employees and Teacher absence since 2019/20, however, it should be noted that this could be as a result of Covid-19 with periods of isolation not being included within the absence figures and a higher percentage of employees working from home.

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

34. 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 an increased focus on mental health. Managers will be encouraged to be as proactive as possible by participating in training to ensure Managers are confident in dealing with mental health in the workplace ensuring that our employees are well supported. Managers will also be encouraged to embed early intervention when an employee shows signs of a stress related illness and to ensure the appropriate resources are being accessed such as the counselling service provided by PAM to provide support to the employee.

RECOMMENDATION

35. 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 2021

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PAPERS

CIPD, Health and Wellbeing at Work, March 2020

CIPD Health and Wellbeing at Work 2021

The Office of National Statistics 'Sickness in the UK labour Market, March 2021