

EAST RENFREWSHIRE COUNCILAUDIT AND SCRUTINY COMMITTEE29th September 2022Report 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 the range of approaches being taken to reduce absence levels across the Council.

REPORTAbsence Data 2021/22

3. In 2021/22 there has been an increase in Local Government Employee (LGE) absence with days lost per FTE at 12.33 compared with 10.16 days in 20/21 which is an increase of 2.17 days.

4. Teacher absence increased to 4.14 days per FTE compared to 3.61 days lost per FTE in 20/21 which is an increase of 0.53 days. The Council's overall annual day's lost absence per FTE was 9.44 days which is an increase of 1.66 days against the previous year.

5. However it should be noted that LGE and teaching absence have both improved compared with pre-covid figures in 2019/20 with a decrease of 0.67 days and 1.06 days respectively. In 2020/21 there was a significant decrease in absence due to lockdowns and the high numbers of employees working from home.

6. The top three absence reasons combined across the council for both long and short term sickness absence in 2021/2022 can be attributed to stress non-work related, musculoskeletal including back pain and Gastro intestinal disorders.

7. Stress (non-work related) continues to be the main cause of sickness absence across both Local Government and Teaching staff. 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.

Sickness Absence Reporting

8. With the introduction of the new HR and Payroll system the majority of local government managers input their team's absence directly into the system. As part of ongoing Business Systems and Processes work a pilot will take place with Schools based staff so that they can trial inputting their absence into the HR and Payroll system without the need to submit returns to the payroll department. It is hoped by having all managers across the council inputting and maintaining absence directly into the system we will be able to improve sickness absence reporting so that it becomes real-time reporting rather than having to wait until the monthly payroll has run.

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 2020/21. It should be noted that the Improvement Service do not report overall absence data.

10. Through work undertaken to review sickness reports from the new HR and Payroll system it has been identified that due to the way the data was loaded into the system the overall FTE figure used to calculate and report the SPI for 20/21 was incorrect and we had over reported the SPI for LGE and Teachers. It was identified that employees who left, returned, changed positions or changed their employment status prior to the data load were not counted in the FTE. The calculation has been rectified which means the teaching absence is 3.61 days per FTE and would have put us in 10th place instead of 15th place in the LGBF tables. LGE absence is now 10.16 days per FTE which would have put us at 21st instead of 24th in the LGBF comparison tables. This is a one off issue which is directly linked to the data loaded between the old and new HR and Payroll system, and this will not occur in the future.

Covid-19 Absence

11. It should be noted that Covid Absence in 20/21 was not counted as part of the sickness absence PI; therefore it was expected that absence would be higher in 21/22 considering the number of employees affected by Covid-19. It was anticipated that the absence performance indicator would increase after the relaxation of Covid rules and social distancing guidance allowing individuals to mix more. This has contributed to the increase of short term absence for viral infections. Whilst Covid absence may have been high at different points throughout the pandemic shielding and homeworking has helped to reduce the cause of other absences.

12. In 2021/22 Covid-19 absence over 12 weeks or due to the Covid vaccine were recorded as sickness absence which resulted in 1852 FTE Days lost. Absences under 12 weeks were recorded as special leave rather than absence.

13. Since July 2022, following guidance from CoSLA, managers are now required to record all absences related to Covid-19 as sickness absence.

Table 1: Statutory Absence Performance Indicator

	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	2021/22 Days absence/ FTE
LGE	11.8	11.5	10.5	12.2	13.0	10.16	12.33
LGE Scottish Average	10.7	10.9	11.4	11.49	11.9	9.71	Data not yet available
LGE National Placing	25 th	20 th	8 th	21 st	26 th	21 st	Data not yet available
Teachers	5.6	4.1	4.5	6.1	5.2	3.61	4.14
Teachers Scottish Average	6.2	6.0	6.1	6.2	6.3	4.16	Data not yet available
Teachers National Placing	7 th	2 nd	3 rd	11 th	6 th	10 th	Data not yet available
Overall ERC absence	9.8	9.0	8.5	10.1	10.1	7.8	9.44

Industry Sickness Absence Data

14. The Office of National Statistics 'Sickness in the UK labour Market: 2021 states that the sickness absence rate in the UK in 2021 rose to 2.2%, from a record low of 1.8% in 2020; this is the highest it has been since 2010, when it was also 2.2%. An estimated 149.3 million working days were lost because of sickness or injury in the UK in 2021, equivalent to 4.6 days per worker.

15. Absence is consistently higher within Public Sector in comparison to Private Sector and has been consistently since 1995. The Office of National Statistics confirms that this can be attributed to the differences in job roles and that within Private Sector it is more likely that employees will not be paid Occupational Sick Pay in comparison to public sector workers.

16. The most common reason for sickness absence in 2021 was "other" conditions, including accidents, poisonings, diabetes and Covid accounted for nearly one in four of all occurrences of sickness absence in 2021, which is significantly different to the Council's top 10 reasons for absence. This is due to the fact Covid was treated as special leave for the first 12 weeks rather than sickness absence.

17. According to the Office for National Statistics, the groups of employees with the highest rates of sickness absence in 2021 included women, older workers, those with long-term health conditions, people working part-time and people working in caring, leisure and other service occupations.

18. The Office for National Statistics state around 1 in 5 (21%) adults experienced some form of depression in early 2021; this is more than double than before the pandemic (10%).

19. The CIPD Health and Wellbeing at Work 2022: Survey report recognises that apart from Covid related absence the other causes of absence are similar to previous years, with minor illness most commonly responsible for short-term absence. Mental ill health, musculoskeletal injuries, stress and acute medical conditions are the most common causes of long-term absence (four weeks or more). As in previous years, manufacturing and production organisations and those in the public sector are more likely than those in private sector services or non-profits to include musculoskeletal injuries among their top causes of absence. The public sector is also more likely to include stress among their top causes of short- and long-term absence.

20. PAM Wellbeing produced material 'restoring wellbeing', which would concur with the Office for National Statistics how 'challenging the crisis has been for everyone, but for some it has been devastating' with individuals suffering from PTSD, increase in domestic abuse, increased divorce rates and suicide.

21. A theme from the benchmarking for employers to be noted is that as we recover from the pandemic and the catastrophic effects this has had on individuals' health and wellbeing, employers will also now need to support employees through the economic fallout of the pandemic.

Focus on Absence Improvement

22. 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 services within the Council have higher rates of absence in comparison to other Council services.

23. The Council continues to adopt robust absence monitoring strategies to ensure the policy is applied consistently. Within the hot spot frontline service areas Neighbourhood Service, Facilities Management and Homecare there is key focus on reviewing absence cases, however it is recognised that a contributing factor is an ageing workforce and long term conditions are associated with age, which are a key challenge for these frontline services.

24. HR continues to have monthly meetings with management within the hotspot areas to discuss absence. The capability guidance is used to manage long term absences with 5 dismissals due to capability and 20 ill health retirements in the last year. The process of awarding ill health retirements is decided by the Council using medical guidance from our Occupational Health provider and can only be awarded with the approval of an Independent Registered Medical Practitioner.

25. With regards to stress, an early intervention approach is promoted to ensure employees who are experiencing stress can be supported with resources available such as the Stress Risk review, PAM Assist counselling service and online resources. Managers are also reminded that when supporting an employee with personal stress in some cases this can be due to financial stress and employees are signposted to our colleagues in Money Advice and Rights.

26. The advice from Occupational Health, is that the first step towards restoring the mental health of the workforce is for employers to normalise the fact it is okay to feel anxious; therefore management are encouraged to have conversations with staff around their wellbeing and if

stress is being displayed in the workplace. All managers are being encouraged to discuss a wellbeing goal with staff for inclusion as part of the Quality Conversation.

27. HR and MART are reminding managers and employees that through our employee benefits and savings scheme, East Ren Rewards, this could make a difference to our employees offering access to a range of benefits, offers and discounts to help employees save money on everyday lifestyle spending and motoring. Managers should be aware it is simple to register and the information can be accessed via the [Rewards and Recognition intranet page](#). As part of the CIPD Health and Wellbeing at Work Survey Report 2022, it was recognised that financial wellbeing benefits remains the most neglected area therefore the introduction of Salary Finance by East Renfrewshire Council is a positive step forward and employees are benefiting from using these services.

28. Currently HR are working with PAM Assist to consider a wellbeing app that employees will be able to access which will interact with the employee and offer tailor made wellbeing support.

29. The Council pays all employees above the Scottish Local Government Living Wage and all employees with a contract above 3 months are auto-enrolled to become members of the relevant Pension Scheme.

30. It should be noted that musculoskeletal related absences feature in ERCs top reasons for absence and early intervention should be adopted ensuring up to date DSE assessments are undertaken, manual handling training or refresher training where appropriate, and physiotherapy can be purchased through the Occupational Health Provider to facilitate an earlier return to work advice can be sought from the HR Team. Reminders about the use of DSE assessments are particularly important especially with a number of employees working from different locations with a hybrid workstyle.

31. ERC continues to support the health and wellbeing of our employees by facilitating awareness sessions, being aware of employee views by facilitating surveys, managers are encouraged to use resources available such as the flexible working policy to support employees with a work-life balance, the stress risk review process is available to identify stress factors within the workplace and to alleviate stress where possible, provide training for managers to be able to facilitate difficult conversations. From the benchmarking research, best practice approaches have been adopted by the Council such as HR attending HSCP facilitated Domestic Abuse training and Suicide Prevention training so that managers are supported with how to address and respond to any employee affected.

32. Colleagues within ERC have been afforded the opportunity by the HSCP to attend a suite of training provided by Scottish Association of Mental Health to support managers to be able to facilitate conversations around the wellbeing of their employees and to be able to act swiftly and supportively in situations.

33. HR continue to provide operational management with support at monthly meetings within the hotspot absence areas 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.

34. The Council continues to work with Occupational Health, service provider 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.

35. There are a number of training courses available for managers, which Senior Management are encouraged to support managers to attend for personal development. Training can be accessed via Brightwave e-learning as well as the Corporate Training Calendar courses can be booked through the HR/Payroll system. It should be noted that there are an additional 2 new corporate training courses available to support with well-being, Understanding & Developing Resilience and Personal, Health, Wellness & Fitness.

36. 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.

37. The HR team continues to provide support to managers on a range of cases of varying complexity. In 21/22 the HR team supported managers with around 350 absence cases. This may appear high however it should be noted that our employee population is really mixed compared to say the private sector. Over the last 12 months there have been some really complex matters to support including serious health conditions, social economic issues, substance abuse and personal tragedies. Support has been provided to ensure the case is being managed correctly and in line with employment law.

38. It is recognised that there continues to be a need to educate employees to recognise the symptoms of anxiety and what pro-active steps can be taken to reduce stress and anxiety, the HR team have continued to increase awareness of health and wellbeing and the individual's responsibility towards a pro-active approach.

39. The switch off and shift approach has been implemented across the Council, this is again to remind employees of the importance of having a break encouraging movement to ensure the health benefits are promoted for each individual encouraging a healthier workforce.

40. With a number of organisational change programmes across the Council, it is recognised that there is the potential for an increase in levels of non-attendance. Within the Council the importance of engaging with employees throughout the change programme is recognised to ensure there is a clear communication strategy.

CONCLUSIONS

41. The Council's overall absence performance has increased across both LG Employees and Teacher absence since 2021/22, however, has improved when compared to 2019/20, pre covid. It was anticipated that absence levels would increase due to the impact of Covid-19 (stress, health conditions due to medical delays, absence over 12 weeks being included in absence reporting) and cost of living pressures.

42. The Council's approach to absence management is in line with benchmarking and best practice.

43. The Council continues to have a strong focus on absence improvement and continues to benchmark and implement training and improvement actions. Mental health will continue to have a focus ensuring appropriate resources and strategies are in place for our employees. HR will continue to encourage our management teams to participate in training in order to develop a confident approach when dealing with mental health in the workplace ensuring that our employees are well supported.

44. Early intervention will continue to be supported where an employee shows signs of a stress related illness or musculoskeletal health issues to ensure the appropriate resources are being accessed for our employees.

RECOMMENDATION

45. 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.

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PAPERS

The Office of National Statistics 'Sickness in the UK labour Market: 2021 states

The CIPD Health and Wellbeing at Work 2022

Pam Wellbeing 'Restoring Mental Health'

Pam Group, 'UK Survey Report, Health at Work'

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