

Committee: Cabinet
Date of meeting: 30 January 2020

Title of Report: Response of the Executive Director to Scrutiny Review of Absence Management

Report by: Dawn Roberts, Executive Director- Corporate, Customer & Community Services.

Cabinet Member: Councillor Janet Willis, Cabinet Member for Customers, Transformation and Fire and Rescue.

What is the Report About? (Executive Summary)

1. On 28 June 2019, the Scrutiny Management Board (SMB) commissioned a full day Task and Finish Group session to focus on attendance management, organisational development and a specific deep dive into the absence performance of service areas that were not forecast to achieve the annual sickness targets. The Task and Finish Group took place on 14 November 2019 and the purpose of this report is to provide a suggested response to the recommendations submitted to Cabinet by SMB.

Recommendation of the Executive Director

2. It is recommended that Cabinet note the report and support all of the five recommendations made by Scrutiny Members subject to an assessment and prioritisation of resources.
3. A response to each recommendation and any potential resource implications are covered in more detail within the report.

Background to the Proposals

4. Scrutiny Management Board (with a performance focus) and Audit & Assurance Committee (with a risk management focus) has considered information on attendance and absence management across the council a number of times over the last three years.
5. Despite CMT, Cabinet and SMB's close performance management and significant interventions from officers via a detailed corporate action plan; council wide programme of manager training; and a refreshed Absence and Wellbeing Policy and guidance, absence performance has remained off target.
6. The latest 2019/20 year-end performance as at 31 December 2019 projects 13.13 Working Days Lost per Full Time Equivalent (WDL per FTE) against a corporate 2019/20 target of 10 WDL per FTE.
7. Members agreed that a Scrutiny task and finish review should focus on:
 - Understanding the service areas of the council with the highest levels of absence and why, and to consider the service level action plans in place from each Assistant Director to aim improve attendance management in these areas;

- Consider the council's culture and transformation plans, and how this may impact on attendance management;
 - Talking to frontline managers about their experience of managing absence and any suggestions managers have;
 - Consider good practice – benchmarking against external and internal successes;
 - Identify recommendations for Cabinet to aim to improve workplace culture and management of absence and ultimately increase attendance levels.
8. A key focus of the Task and Finish Group was to centre on data and performance management, organisational and service level culture, including the capacity and confidence of managers. Members discussed these issues in detail with input from a number of service Assistant Directors, people management absence management professionals and also frontline managers during a specific session to understand what would make their role in managing absence in their respective service areas easier and more successful.
9. Members stressed that a number of key learning 'themes' should be noted when considering the recommendations and the context in which they are made. These themes are listed below and have been incorporated into the final recommendations arising from the SMB session:
- It is important to look behind the data and remember that a person centric, compassionate and empathic approach is essential when dealing with attendance management;
 - Providing both employees and managers with mental health training, support, advice and guidance is crucial, with early intervention and prevention advised to help to avoid or shorten absences;
 - Making the policy, administration and process of attendance management as easy as possible for managers is essential;
 - Normalising conversations about health and wellbeing across the organisation will further encourage staff to feel comfortable in talking about any work or personal issues that could have otherwise ultimately led to absence.

Recommendations made by SMB

10. The SMB Task and Finish Group made five recommendations which are outlined below with a response for Cabinet to consider for each:

Recommendation 1:

11. ***Occupational health services to be reviewed to ensure there is effective mental health capacity and specialist training in place to offer greater advice, support and guidance for managers and employees.***

12. **Response:** A significant programme of work to support mental ill-health remains a key theme of the Council's Workforce Plan and will continue as a priority. Through this programme, the Council was externally recognised in December 2019 achieving the maximum '*continuing excellence*' standard of the TUC '*Better Health at Work Award*'.
13. Whilst this independent assessment is positive and reassuring, the prevalence of reported mental ill-health cases in the workforce is increasing and is understood to be as a result of normalising conversations around the topic which are backed by local, regional and national campaigns to reduce the stigma and also recognition of the workplace challenges facing local government with limited resources.
14. The Occupational Health Team will maintain and continue professional training in mental health appropriate to their role and will continue to liaise closely with specialist mental health practitioners where required and within the existing resources. Should demand for services increase beyond the capacity available then officers would prepare a business case for additional resources. Managers across the council will continue to receive mental health awareness training to ensure prevention and intervention of mental health related issues are addressed at the earliest possible opportunity.
15. **Recommendation:** For Cabinet to agree the SMB recommendation.
Recommendation 2
16. ***A targeted, multi-disciplinary team approach should be implemented over a short period of time for services with high levels of absence and those furthest from target. This will provide a 'wraparound' package of support and advice to address the levels of absence – including, but not limited to, People Management staff, data analysts, service managers and Health and Wellbeing Coaches (HAWC's). A pilot suggestion could take place with the Provider Services teams.***
17. **Response:** This recommendation is supported as a refreshed wrap-around 'squad' approach. Existing resources will be reviewed to aim for a focus on managing absence on a service or team basis, and will form part of the wider AD level absence action plan for services most off target.
18. **Recommendation:** For Cabinet to agree the SMB recommendation.
Recommendation 3
19. ***The resource levels of the People Management team should be reviewed to ensure that the service has the capacity and expertise to provide the necessary focus and intensive support to services and managers addressing absence management challenges.***
20. **Response:** Service Managers and elected members that contributed to the SMB Task and Finish group noted the quality of People Management support to be of high quality, but also commented that dedicated resources focusing solely on absence management where in limited supply due to caseload and other policy

related demand pressures placed on the People Management team. The resources and service plan of the People Management Team will be reviewed with absence management prioritised within the wider Workforce Plan Delivery Plan. Following this review, should additional resources be required, then a separate business case would be developed and considered in response to this recommendation.

21. **Recommendation:** For Cabinet to agree the SMB recommendation.

Recommendation 4

22. ***That health and wellbeing conversations are embedded in everyday business across the organisation, including CMT, DMT's, management and team meetings and individual appraisals and ongoing discussions throughout the year.***

23. **Response:** This recommendation is supported and recognises the need to further ensure that absence management is more strongly embedded into every manager's day- to-day activities with greater levels of accountability expected when performance is off-target. Executive Directors will be holding Assistant Directors to account in terms of absence management and this is aimed to ensure that Directors, Assistant Directors, senior managers and service managers have greater accountability to monitor and manage absence performance in their teams.

24. People Management professionals will continue to have a key role to play in terms of effective policy, accurate and timely data provision, efficient workflow, effective advice and support, and this must continue alongside strengthened manager responsibility so that each manager (at all levels of the Council) prioritise absence management as a key council, directorate, service, team and individual priority. Stronger accountability and greater focus across service areas off target will aim to ensure progress is made and will be closely monitored by Corporate Management Team, Cabinet and Scrutiny members.

25. Recommendation 4 is therefore supported and the corporate action plan will be refreshed to further embed and communicate the greater accountability expectation of every manager with greater oversight by senior officers. The action plan will include for example the requirement for absence targets to be discussed and documented in all manager VIP appraisals; ensure managers invest time in diaries to manage absence more closely; and a continued focus on absence through Leadership events. Team, service and directorate level performance management systems will be prioritised to monitor and report progress, taking intervention actions promptly when progress is not as expected.

26. **Recommendation:** *For Cabinet to agree the SMB recommendation.*

Recommendation 5

27. ***That measures be taken to ensure that existing tools and guidance for managers to support managing absence are well-communicated and fully embedded in all parts of the council, and that technological and automation***

opportunities to simplify and rationalise the policy, processes and administration requirements for managers, in relation to managing absence, are fully explored and maximised.

28. **Response:** Easy to understand and follow policies, procedures and systems are critical to supporting service managers to access accurate and up to date absence data promptly.
29. A significant programme of work has already been undertaken and will continue to strengthen the corporate and service level absence management data, monitoring tools and trend tools such as trend graphs, year-end forecasts and week by week 'heatmaps' that are available to all managers.
30. Close analysis of the data on an ongoing basis will be crucial to ensure that absence reasons and trends inform actions to be taken at a service, directorate and corporate level. This will ensure that reasons for absence are more fully understood. For example in December 2019, there was a national spike in flu related absence that was typically a month earlier than in previous years. So, whilst a flu spike was already anticipated for the County Council over the winter period, we now have enhanced monitoring systems and intelligence to allow more prompt and detailed understanding of the reasons for absence related trends which we will continue to target health and wellbeing interventions, communications and campaigns accordingly.
31. In addition, work has progressed to further simplify processes and improve management information with a suite of manager self-service information tools now available via I-Trent for all managers to have 24/7 dedicated access to 'real time' absence information that shows employee trends and the number of instances, policy trigger points and return to work interview dates for all staff within their responsibility. Work is also being scoped to research an improved case management system with greater automation, dashboards and workflow functionality.
32. In response to manager focus group feedback, member discussion at the SMB session and meetings with Trade Union colleagues, it is planned that officers work with Trade Union colleagues to further review the absence policy in an aim to support managers to access streamlined procedures, ensure clarity of process and enable easier access and use of the systems and tools available.
33. **Recommendation:** *For Cabinet to agree the SMB recommendation.*

Risks

34. There are a number of risks associated with these recommendations which mainly centre around the capacity and resources to deliver prompt improvements;

Risk 1: Given the resources available within the People Management service, there is a risk that other Workforce Plan activity will need to be de-prioritised to ensure the required level of resources are focused to ensure delivery of the additional absence related recommendations.

Risk 2: There is a risk that service management capacity challenges result in managers unable to prioritise the required time to focus on absence management. As a result there is a risk that absence levels do not reduce to the required target levels.

Risk 3: There is a risk that services with high absence levels do not improve performance and this has a further knock on impact to colleagues in the service that are asked to cover the work of those not at work. As a result sickness and stress levels get worse and taken longer to control.

Reasons for the recommendation/Key benefits

35. The recommendations made by SMB further develop the attendance management work already in place and recommend a continued focus on absence management as a key Council priority.

Financial – What Resources will be needed and how will it be Funded?

36. This report is in response to the Scrutiny Management Board review of absence management and seeks Cabinet approval to support recommendations 1-5 detailed within the report.
37. The resources required to progress the recommendations are a revenue activity. Existing resources will need to be prioritised to ensure a continued focus on absence management. Following the review of resources recommended by SMB, should additional funding be required then a business case will be prepared by officers for consideration on an invest-to-save basis.

Legal Aspects – What needs to be considered?

38. The Council as an employer has an obligation to deal with short term and long term sickness absence; to assist employees to return to work; and take steps to manage absence in a way that is fair to employees and takes into consideration any disability issues. The recommendations in the report assist the Council in meeting these legal obligations.

Health and Safety Aspects – What needs to be considered?

39. The County Council has a duty under the Health and Safety at Work Act 1974 and associated legislation and regulations to ensure that, as far as reasonably practicable, adequate health and safety management arrangements are in place to protect employees, members, customers and visitors to County Council related services. This report includes consideration of attendance and absence management including the causal factors and organisational controls to manage the risks.
40. All recommendations made are intended to support improvements in health and wellbeing at work and as such support the overall Health, Safety and Wellbeing of the workforce as outlined in the Corporate Health, Safety and Wellbeing Policy Statement agreed annually by Cabinet.

Council Plan Priority – How do the Proposals Contribute to the Delivery of the Council’s Stated Outcomes?

41. All recommendations support improvements in health and wellbeing at work and as such support the delivery of all council outcomes across the breadth of the workforce overall Health, Safety and Wellbeing of the workforce.

What is the Impact of the Decision on Health Inequalities and Equality and Diversity Issues?

42. All recommendations support improvements in health and wellbeing at work and as such positively support the equality and diversity of the workforce.

Appendices

None

Key Facts

- As of 31 December 2019 Council absence forecast at 13.13 days lost per FTE for 2019/20 is not expected to achieve the corporate target of 10.00 days in the Council Plan.

Electoral Division(s):

Executive Decision	Key Decision Included in Forward Plan	Exempt from call-in	Exemption agreed by scrutiny chair	Considered by scrutiny, if so detail below	Environmental or sustainability assessment undertaken?	Equality impact assessment undertaken?
Yes	n/a	n/a	n/a	Yes – SMB	No	No

Approved by Cllr Willis, Cabinet Member on 16 January 2020.

Previous relevant Council or Executive decisions

- Various Cabinet, SMB and Audit Committee Reports on Council Sickness Absence

Consideration by Overview & Scrutiny

Background Papers

- Cabinet Covering Report – SMB Review of Absence 2019
- SMB Recommendations to Cabinet – SMB Review of Absence 2019

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