



Absence Management Task Group Review



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Summary of the Group's Findings and Recommendations

On 28 June 2019, the Scrutiny Management Board (SMB) commissioned a full day Task and Finish Group session, with a focus on absence management, organisational development and a specific deep dive into the absence within the 'People' directorate. A key element of the group was to centre on culture, capacity and confidence of managers. SMB has considered information on absence across the council in previous years and also considered performance updates a number of times within the last year.

Members agreed that a task and finish review should focus on:

- Understanding the areas of the council with the highest levels of absence and why, and to consider the action plans in place and if further actions are required to improve absence management in these areas;
- Consider the council's culture and transformation plans, and how this will impact on absence management;
- Talking to frontline managers about their experience of managing absence;
- Consider good practice – external and internal;
- Identify recommendations for Cabinet on improvements to culture and management of absence.

The Task and Finish Group held a one-day session on 14 November 2019 in County Hall, Kendal. Members of the Task Group reflected on the witness presentations and discussions and have included the following key learning points into the final recommendations arising from the session:

- It is important to look behind the data and remember that absence is person centric, and that compassionate and empathic approaches are all essential when dealing with absence management;
- Providing both employees and managers with mental health support, advice and guidance is crucial, as early intervention and prevention could help to avoid or shorten absences;
- Making the administration and process of absence management as easy as possible for managers is essential;
- Normalising conversations about health and wellbeing across the organisation will encourage staff to feel comfortable in talking about any work or personal issues, that may have otherwise ultimately led to absence;
- There is a clear expectation that absence management is a high corporate priority and therefore strong performance management at all levels is expected. Ensuring conversations about absence is included in senior managers appraisals will help to strengthen the expectations and accountability of every Council manager. There is

an expectation that all managers routinely monitor and manage absence performance and take appropriate action when performance is off target.

Following consideration of the evidence gathered and the key points outlined above, the Task Group recommend to Cabinet that:

Recommendation 1

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.

Recommendation 2

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.

Recommendation 3

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.

Recommendation 4

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.

Recommendation 5

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.

The Chair of the Task and Finish Group would like to thank everybody who was involved in the review.

Background and Context

On 28 June 2019, the Scrutiny Management Board (SMB) commissioned a full day Task and Finish Group session, with a focus on absence management, organisational development and a specific deep dive into the 'People' directorate. A key element of the group was to centre on culture, capacity and confidence of managers.

Absence management is recognised as a priority at a high level by the Council Plan and the Workforce Plan. Since September 2016, a comprehensive project management approach has been in place to support and improve sickness absence levels across the council. This has been led by the Assistant Director – Organisational Change and the Manager – Organisational Delivery, People Management, supported by the whole People Management service working with the Corporate Management Team (CMT) and service based colleagues across the organisation.

Absence data has regularly been reported to CMT, Scrutiny Management Board (SMB) and the Audit and Assurance Committee to keep a strong leadership focus on the issue. However at 12.49 working days lost per full-time equivalent (WDL per FTE), the 2018/19 year-end performance did not achieve target of 10.0 WDL. As a result, SMB requested a deep dive session to further examine the issues behind this.

SMB were guided through the deep dive by the Assistant Director Organisational Change at the June 2019 meeting of SMB. This included: delivery against the agreed action plan; sickness absence data to the end of March 2019, including WDL; staff with full attendance; directorate overview data; seasonal increases in absence rates; service areas receiving targeted focus; a comparison to national figures and trends; and the next steps proposed for 2019/20 for improvement.

The range of interventions that have been put in place with senior management teams working with People Management to try to remedy the levels of absence were highlighted to members. This has included: mandatory absence management training sessions; a revised Absence and Wellbeing Procedure; refreshed management information available online and in 'real time'; tightening the thresholds of high priority cases; targeted health and wellbeing support; greater visibility of the Occupational Health Service; and support from the Trade Unions. Additionally, members were also interested in hearing from Assistant Directors about the service specific action plans they are putting in place, as well as a supportive discussion with a group of frontline managers to gain a deeper understanding of the issues the council is currently facing.

A Task and Finish Group was agreed as a result of discussions at the meeting, with a focus on organisational development and a specific deep dive into the People Directorate. The Task and Finish Group held a one-day session on 14 November 2019 in County Hall, Kendal.

National Context

It is recognised that high levels of sickness absence impact negatively on workforce capacity and the available resources required to deliver council services to meet the needs and priorities of the community. In comparison with national benchmarking, Cumbria County Council compares higher than the national average for WDL per FTE. The local government and health sectors averaged at 9.8 WDL per FTE in the 2018/19 CIPD annual survey, where CCC currently operates at 12.49 WDL. In the Local Government Association (LGA) Workforce Survey 2018, councils reported 8.8 WDL per FTE. In the North West Employers annual survey 2017/18, Cumbria County Council ranked 29 out of 35 for WDL per FTE.

National Benchmarking Data

Data source	2016/17	2017/18	2018/19
CIPD – annual survey	Public Sector = 8.5 WDL per FTE Local Gov = 10.5 WDL per FTE	Public Sector = 8.5 WDL per FTE <i>Local Gov & Health – not collected.</i>	Public Sector = 8.4 WDL per FTE Local Gov & Health = 9.8 WDL per FTE
North West Employers – annual survey	Range: 6.76 to 13.31 WLD per FTE CCC rank position: 21 / 22 respondents	Range: 6.05 to 13.31 WLD per FTE CCC rank position: 29 / 35 respondents	<i>Survey ceased on regional basis – awaiting LGA national survey</i>

There has been a move nationally towards acknowledging that organisations with positive, dynamic and supportive cultures are more likely to have healthier, happier staff with lower rates of turnover and more commitment to their work. This has been together with a greater recognition of the importance of mental health, normalising conversations about mental health issues and workplaces putting in place initiatives like mental health first aid training.

The ‘Thriving at Work’ review was published in October 2017, and is an independent review that outlines what employers can do to better support employees to remain in and thrive through work. The review sets out six core standards that all employers can adopt to better support mental health at work. It recommends that public sector employers go further by meeting an additional four enhanced standards.

Nationally, 37% of organisations have seen an increase in stress-related absence over the last 12 months. The top three causes of stress-related absence at national level are: workloads/volume of work, management style and relationships at work. In CCC, the top three causes are: workloads/volume of work, management style and non-work factors (relationships/family). Absences brought on by stress over the last year (2018/19) have tended to lead to slightly higher long-term absences than short-term (53%/47%). Other reasons for absences have been: accident/injury, acute medical conditions, musculoskeletal conditions and mental ill health.

Cumbria County Council has been putting in place health and wellbeing initiatives that focus on both physical and mental health. Activities include establishing workplace wellbeing champions, a voluntary role taken on by staff to help support initiatives like the Better Health at Work Award, Time to Change and Mental Health First Aid Awareness training. There are currently over 100 staff carrying out the various volunteer roles across the organisation.

There have been various different campaigns that have ran throughout the year, including the annual flu vaccination campaign, a campaign focusing on the menopause, and workplace health and wellbeing days. On World Mental Health Day 10 October 2019 the following was launched:

- An improved search facility for staff to locate champions. Champions are grouped according to districts, and champion role;

- New Mental Health guidance for managers covering:
 - Supporting staff
 - Having a wellbeing conversation
 - Finding the words – guidance on supporting someone who has been bereaved and affected by suicide
 - Signposting to relevant support;
- Suicide e-learning packages – one from Public Health England and another from the Zero Suicide alliance;
- Accessing free training offered by South Cumbria and Lancashire NHS for Mental Health First Aid training and also the Applied Suicide Intervention Training;
- The continuation of promoting the suicide alertness training across the county, which is commissioned via Public Health.

Scope of Review

Members agreed that a task and finish review should focus on:

- Understanding the areas of the Council with the highest levels of absence and why, and to consider the plans in place to improve absence management in these areas;
- Consider the Council's culture and transformation plans, and how this will impact on absence management;
- Talking to frontline managers about their experience of managing absence;
- Consider good practice – external and internal;
- Identify recommendations for Cabinet on improvements to culture and management of absence.

The membership of the Task and Finish Group was:

- Cllr Bill Wearing (Chair)
- Cllr Mark Wilson (Vice-Chair)
- Cllr Kevin Hamilton
- Cllr Bill McEwan
- Cllr Claire Driver
- Cllr Jim Lister
- Cllr Shirley Evans
- Cllr Stan Collins

Officer support was provided by:

- Paul Robinson, Assistant Director – Organisational Change
- Alice Madden, Manager – Operational Delivery
- Clare Killeen, Strategic Policy & Scrutiny Advisor
- Hayley Reay, Policy & Scrutiny Officer

Officers contributing to the review on the day were from the service areas who are receiving a targeted focus for support in their absence management and those involved in the corporate organisational development programme:

- Simon Higgins, Assistant Director for Customer and Community Services
- Fiona Musgrave, Assistant Director for Integration and Partnerships
- Catherine Whalley, Assistant Director for Adults
- Pam Duke, Assistant Director for Provider Services
- Paul Robinson, Assistant Director – Organisational Change
- Steve Healey, Chief Fire Officer (and Chair of the Organisational Development Board)
- Frontline Managers who volunteered to have a discussion with members about their experiences of absence management:
 - Dan Chalmers, Operations Manager – Highways & Transport
 - Emma Kershaw, Registered Manager for Riverside House – People
 - Stella Armstrong, Operations Lead, Service Centre - Corporate, Customer and Community Services

Evidence Gathered and Witness Presentations

In advance of the review, Task Group Members considered a range of background and contextual information. This included:

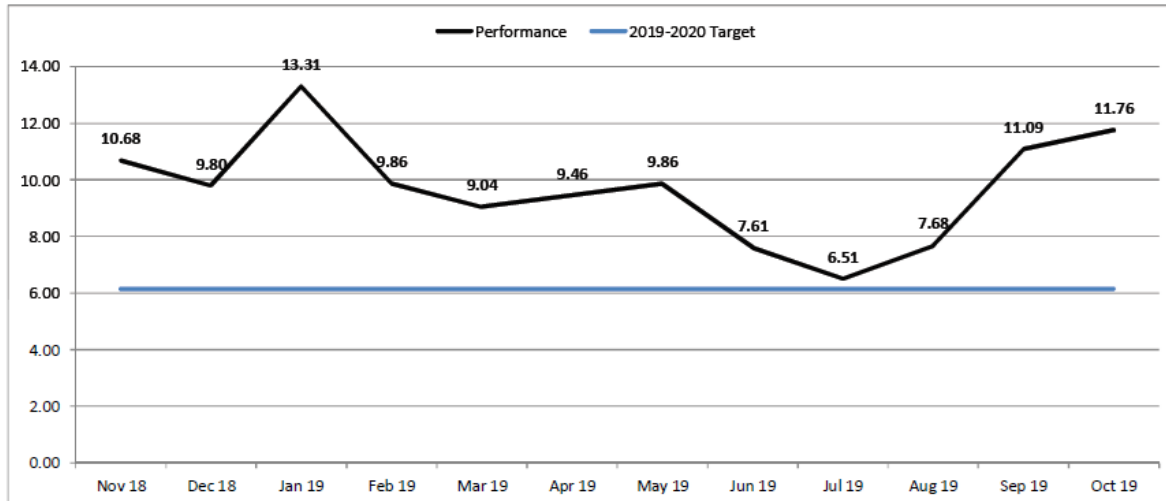
- Relevant Policies and Procedures – the Absence & Wellbeing Procedure; the Absence Management Action Plan; the Workforce Plan 2018-2022 and year 1 and 2 delivery plans;
- Assistant Directors Action Plans for managing attendance;
- Occupational Health guidance for managers and employees;
- A health and wellbeing update including examples of recent campaigns;
- A previous report from a CCC scrutiny review in 2012 – plus an update on the previous 2012 recommendations;
- Background research including case studies from other councils and the national context;
- Performance data on absence and attendance levels across the organisation from the last 12 months including: benchmarking data; the main reasons for absences; differences between short-term and long-term absences; and demographic factors.

Based on the current data, members agreed to hear from the Assistant Directors from Customer and Community Services, Integration and Partnerships, Adults Social Care and Provider Services about their action plans for managing attendance. This included deep dives into the current data on absence for their directorates, including the causes and numbers of absences for 2018/19, demographic factors and the key issues facing that directorate.

Witness Presentations

Simon Higgins, Assistant Director for Customer and Community Services (CCS)

Last 12 months absence for Customer and Community Services (CCS)



Over the last 12 months, the CCS directorate have seen generally good performance in terms of WDL per FTE, the target being 6.14 days. In July this year WDL were 6.51, however there has been a gradual increase reaching 11.76 in October 2019. The majority of absences have been short-term.

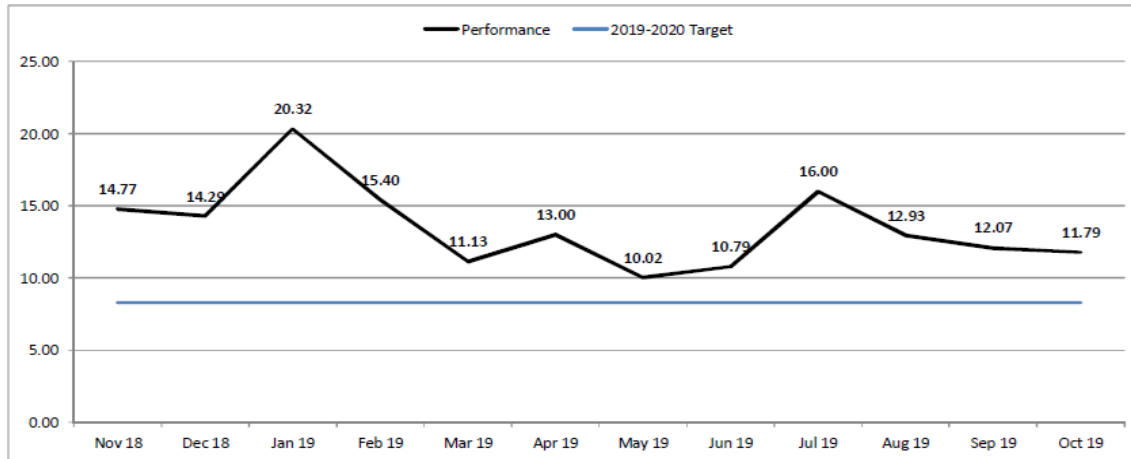
The key issues facing the workforce of CCS currently are:

- The nature of the work – a lot of this area of work is in libraries, and often these roles are part-time or transient and the roles themselves do not seem to be a part of a career progression route. Furthermore, many of the libraries are in isolated rural areas making the roles less attractive which only lend themselves to people living locally, normally who are just looking to fill a few hours here and there and work sporadic hours.
- Age of the workforce – the average age of the workforce in this area is 49 for women and 45 for men, over half of the workforce is aged over 50. This puts the majority in the so called 'sandwich generation', where individuals are likely to have caring responsibilities at both ends of the age spectrum e.g. younger children/grandchildren and elderly parents/in-laws.
- Culture – it was felt that a culture has developed within the workforce of taking unnecessary sickness absence when not feeling on top form, linked to the point below on management oversight.
- Management oversight – managers need to take on the responsibility for managing absences to ensure the wellbeing and capacity of their teams.
- Focus – there is a need to maintain the current management focus on absence so as not to slip back with the improvements in managing and challenging absence. However, it was also about the need to focus on the underlying factors of which absence may be a symptom: job design, workforce demographics & general engagement.

During the discussion about the action plan going forward, members commented on the approach to culture and the fact that absence conversations are being included in senior managers' objectives, appraisals, on Senior Management Team (SMT) and 1-1 agendas was highlighted as a good example. The next steps are to set up a project group to investigate how such factors were specifically affecting services in this area.

Fiona Musgrave, Assistant Director for Integration and Partnerships

Last 12 months absence for Integration and Partnerships



The number of WDL per FTE reached a peak in July 2019 at 16.00 days, however this could be down in part to the fact that the Integration and Partnerships service areas expanded from around 49 staff to a headcount of 193 with some staff from the previous 'Directorate Support – Adults' moved across. This service area had been a poor performing area for absence, and one of the key tasks going forward was to understand the reasons why this was the case. This number had decreased by October 2019 to 11.79, with a target of 8.29 days.

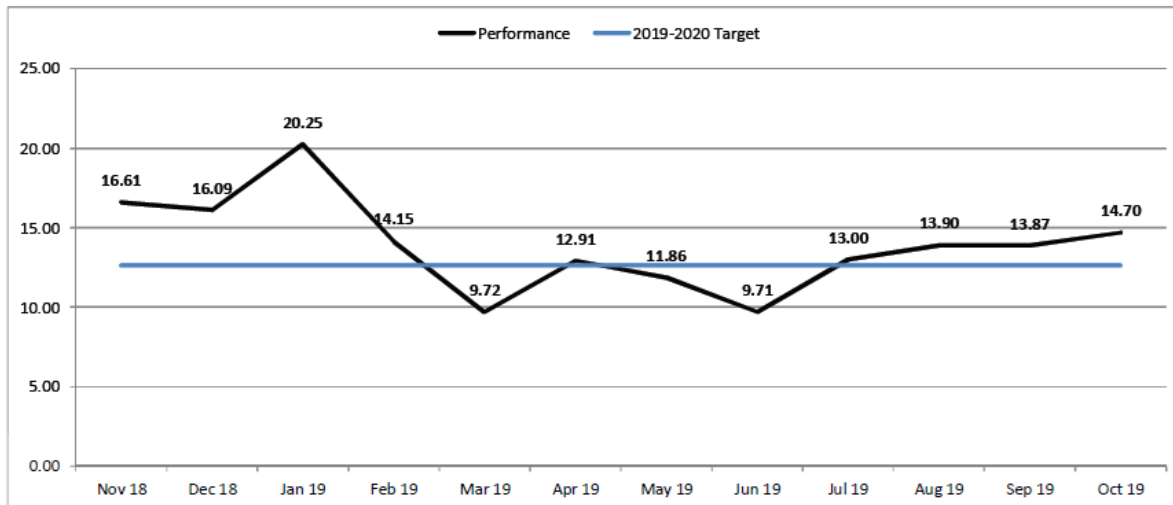
As well as the directorate undergoing an increase in staff, key issues for the workforce include:

- Challenging workloads – Independent Reviewing Officers (IRO) are typically holding 80+ cases of varying complexity in challenging circumstances (the IRO handbook recommends a caseload of 50-70)
- Also issues of high staff turnover; capacity issues; increasingly busy front door; a new ICT system in the Brokerage service which has resulted in a number of problems
- Teams are not resourced for the level of demand they have

The next steps for the directorate include embedding the action plan which will help to create an environment where people want to come to work and feel empowered and fulfilled in their roles. Strong absence management is expected from senior managers, with support from People Management where required. The directorate also plan to have regular communications and use team away days as an opportunity to share learning from difficult cases and how to handle challenges.

Catherine Whalley, Assistant Director for Adults

Last 12 months absence for Adults



The service area has seen a gradual increase since July 2019 in terms of WDL per FTE with the figure at 14.70 in October 2019, with a target of 12.64 days. The majority of absences over the last 12 months have been short-term, with the main reason being listed as 'infection and virus e.g. flu, coughs and colds'. For longer-term absences, the main reason has been 'stress-work related'. The key issues facing the workforce include:

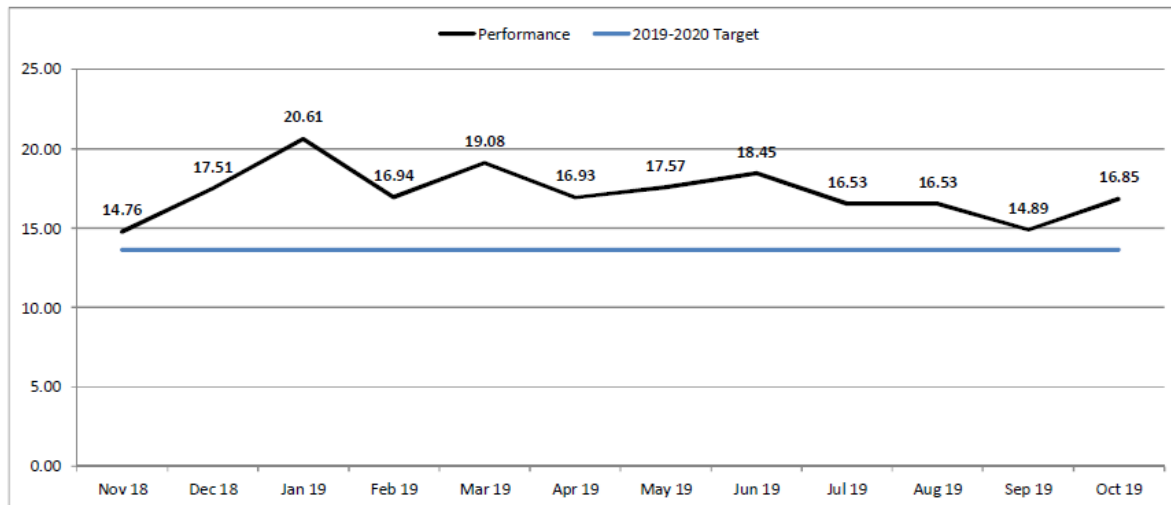
- Current structure – the service is undergoing a major restructure, and it is important to recognise the anxiety and stresses that this may cause
- Culture and engagement - where managers have the responsibility and mandate for the wellbeing of their teams, ensuring they are having conversations about health and wellbeing, including being interested in things important to employees' e.g. family life, flexible working etc.
- Impact of job role on mental health – staff roles can be highly challenging and stressful which can impact on mental health, it is important for managers to ensure staff are taking time for breaks
- Budget / resource pressures – this can be seen across local government but especially in adult social care services
- Manager compliance – with absence management procedures and taking up training and development
- Absence Policy - feedback from some managers is that the policies are difficult to understand

In terms of the action plan going forward, embedding the right culture is the focus. Some of the actions include: empowering managers to make their own decisions with the appropriate support from People Management; open up communications across teams and recognise success; managers being proactive in identifying more challenging absence cases; staff taking responsibility for their own personal wellbeing; and health, safety and wellbeing being the first item on the agenda at every team meeting.

The discussion also raised the question as to whether we are effectively working with partners in health and the third sector to help alleviate budget and resource pressures, and to create an all-round support package for people which help to meet their needs.

Pam Duke, Assistant Director for Provider Services

Last 12 months absence for Provider Services



Provider Services have seen higher levels of sickness absence, with 16.85 days for October 2019, with a target of 13.61 WDL per FTE. Short-term absences make up the majority of absences, however for the long-term absences 'stress non-work related' was recorded as the main reason. The key issues facing the Provider Services workforce were identified as:

- They provide a 24/7 service – this includes shift working which means limited flexible working for staff
- Increased dependency of customers
- Workforce – the average age of staff is 48 years old, working in labour-intensive and challenging environments
- Reshaping – this will continue for the foreseeable future
- Absence Policy – this needs to function for the workforce and the settings that they work in

The main elements of the action plan that are being put in place to help alleviate the issues include an academy approach to recruitment and development of staff. This includes the promotion and benefits of working for CCC as an employer e.g. excellent working conditions. Also advertising the care sector as a career path to make it attractive for apprentices, with a focus on 'growing our own'. Other actions include improving communication, investing in skills to support team development, celebrating positive behaviours and continuing to work with Trade Unions constructively.

The discussion also revolved around the use of support from Health and Wellbeing Coaches (HAWCs) as well as support from People Management for staff in Provider Services.

Paul Robinson, Assistant Director for Organisational Change

Paul Robinson provided Task Group Members with an update on the Organisational Development (OD) Programme on behalf of Steve Healey, Chief Fire Officer and Chair of the Organisational Development Board who had needed to tender his apologies for the meeting. The aim of the programme is "to deliver organisational success by attracting, engaging and empowering our people through inspirational leadership and creating a dynamic, ambitious and valued culture".

Task Group Members were updated on the emerging themes of the OD programme and current activities and focus, including a focus area of ensuring effective Trade Union relationships contribute to positively managing absence. Other activities include:

- Focus groups established and leadership conferences to help support cultural change
- New Valuing Individuals & Performance (VIP) appraisal process put in place
- Introduction of higher apprenticeships e.g. MBA, MSc etc. and 'growing our own'
- Leadership development at all levels
- Ongoing staff engagement and surveys

The programmes are looking at a revised approach to absence management given the existing approach has not achieved the 2019/20 target of 10.00 days (October year-end projection is 12.50 days). It is recognised that a lot of work has been invested by People Management to support service managers to improve absence performance, but collectively this is not having the desired results when focused work is stepped down. The key areas are:

Manager Accountability – a fundamental part of improving absence performance is increasing manager accountability at all levels. A renewed focus is welcomed and supported, but required at all levels to be able to see improvements.

Assistant Director Performance Clinic – led by the Organisational Development Board Chair challenge discussions with ADs, to focus on current performance, discuss reasons for absence and identify any trends so that intervention can be planned to improve performance.

First day medical intervention – there is a potential option being considered relating to a 'first day' intervention absence management service which has been explored by other councils, where nurse-led professionals provide health and wellbeing advice on the day in which an employee calls in sick. A variety of different options are currently being considered to evaluate this, including consideration of the costs and benefits of an in-house approach or a commercial option before a decision is made.

Manager focus groups – five dates are planned to review the Absence & Wellbeing procedure which was launched in September 2018. The focus will be on streamlining documentation and processes, improving manager confidence and understanding barriers to using the guidance effectively.

Trade Union Support – Having a positive working relationship with the Trade Unions is essential to progressing improvement in absence management.

Approach to risk – once compliance with the procedure is embedded, then a more risk based approach to absence management can be considered. This would require support from the Staffing Committee who may consider a larger number of appeals against absence (and other) dismissals.

Workforce engagement and moral contract – high attendance levels can be seen as a "happiness indicator" in the workplace. Ongoing engagement activity is essential to improve employees experience in the workplace, and to in turn improve the discretionary effort aspect that impacts on absence.

Links to performance and capability – in some pockets of the organisation high absence levels link closely to a perception of low levels of capability or performance. This trend needs to be reversed to unlock lost capacity to increase overall organisational performance.

Learn from others (benchmarking & peers) – a peer challenge session (through Local Government Association and the North West Employers) is currently being planned to test the approach and to draw on external expertise to ensure best practice approaches are

being followed by Cumbria. Ongoing benchmarking activity will continue to monitor and track performance against regional and national peer organisations.

Frontline Manager Discussion

Members also had a supportive discussion with three frontline managers who volunteered to share their experiences of absence management. This was to help enhance members' understanding and inform their consideration of potential improvements that could help managers approach absence management more effectively. The main issues raised included:

- More support is needed on how to support employees with mental ill health, there is a perception that greater professional advice on mental health, specifically in the occupational health service would benefit managers
- The administration of absence management can be time-consuming
- There is some confusion around the different policies the council has in place e.g. stuck not sick, what to do if an employee has to take time off to look after their child or elderly relative etc.
- There was support for the idea that Health and Wellbeing Coaches could help provide support for more complex staff absence management cases

Also raised in the discussion was the success of the coaching champions programme helping managers to provide this support to their employees.

Findings and Recommendations

From the evidence gathered, witness presentations and the discussions that followed, members felt they had a good understanding of the issues in each of the directorates and the actions being put in place. After all of the presentations and discussions, members reflected on the information they had been provided with and agreed that the following key learning points should that should run throughout all actions being put in place are:

- It is important to look behind the data and remember that absence is person centric, and that compassionate and empathic approaches are all essential when dealing with absence management;
- Providing both employees and managers with mental health support, advice and guidance is crucial, early intervention and prevention could help to avoid or shorten absences
- Making the administration and process of absence management as easy as possible for managers is essential
- Normalising conversations about health and wellbeing across the organisation will encourage staff to feel comfortable in talking about any work or personal issues, that would've otherwise ultimately led to absence

- Ensuring conversations about absence is included in senior managers appraisals will help to strengthen the expectations and accountability of every Council manager. There is an expectation that all managers routinely monitor and manage absence performance and take appropriate action when performance is off target.

Following consideration of the evidence gathered and the key points outlined above, the Task Group recommend to Cabinet that:

Recommendation 1

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.

Rationale: It was pointed out to members that while the Occupational Health service are excellent at providing advice and support on physical health, more is required for mental health. The aim would be for both employees and managers to feel more supported and confident when dealing with mental health issues.

Recommendation 2

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.

Rationale: Members discussed the opportunities available for Health and Wellbeing Coaches to provide targeted support to employees who are doing challenging frontline jobs e.g. working in social care settings, working outdoors in challenging weather environments or in a care home. It was recognised that this could be a gap worth exploring, and this developed into a wider targeted team approach with a range of officers involved to find solutions to issues more promptly and then that team share areas of success more widely across the council.

Recommendation 3

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.

Rationale: The People Management team provide experience, advice, guidance and coaching to managers on a wide-range of issues, including absence management. Having additional dedicated people management capacity focusing solely on absence management would help to lower absence levels on an 'invest to save' basis and aim to result in greater levels of corporate productivity.

Recommendation 4

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.

Rationale: Members were supportive of senior managers being given the responsibility and mandate to ensure the wellbeing of the employees in their team and to ensure that the conversations that need to be made are had. This would be reflected in all manager objectives and performance expectations, and follow through routinely through conversations in their appraisals and day to day management responsibilities.

Recommendation 5

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.

Rationale:

Members received a demonstration of the online, real time self-service tools available to all managers relating to absence. Members were impressed with the simplicity of the system and the clear benefits the data and tools would have for managers. It did however become clear during discussions with managers that knowledge of the tools and where to access them within the intranet was variable.

Managers also commented that a lot of time was spent on servicing the process and administration of absence management through the stages of the policy. If processes could be streamlined and technology could be more widely used to enable managers to manage attendance more effectively e.g. managers receiving reminders to review their data and when trigger levels are activated, this would help to focus energy on following any issues up with staff more promptly. This is important in helping to set managers' expectations of what is required from them as managers and where they can go for support.