

Report to Business & Transformation Scrutiny Panel

Agenda Item:

A.6

Meeting Date: 18th February 2021
Portfolio: Finance, Governance and Resources
Key Decision: No
Within Policy and Budget Framework: Yes
Public / Private: Public

Title: SICKNESS ABSENCE REPORT QUARTER 3 2020/21
Report of: The Deputy Chief Executive
Report Number: CS 13-21

Purpose / Summary:

This report sets out the authority's sickness absence levels for the period April 2020 to December 2020 and other sickness absence information.

Recommendations:

- 1) Scrutinise and comment on the information on sickness absence provided in the report.

Tracking

Executive:	Not applicable
Scrutiny: BTSP	18 th February 2021
Council:	Not applicable

1. BACKGROUND

1.1 The Council has an Attendance Management Policy which was written and implemented in 2004 (with changes incorporated since that date) and it has already been recognised that a fundamental review of said policy is required which will benefit from clearer, more transparent trigger points. Business and Transformation Scrutiny Panel met on 13th February 2020 and during a discussion on the Sickness Absence Report, it was resolved that a Task and Finish Group would be established to assist the HR Manager in reviewing the Attendance Management Policy which would enable Managers to more effectively manage absence. A new Improving Attendance Policy has been drafted as part of the work of this group. The draft policy is currently going through the necessary process of approval and is intended to support managers and employees with improving attendance at work.

1.2 Current sickness statistics are shown below, with the number of days lost per FTE equating to 6.2 (2019/20 8.2).

2. 2020/21 SICKNESS ABSENCE

2.1 The tables below show the 6.2 days lost per FTE split between long and short-term sickness (long term sickness is defined as any absence more than 4 consecutive working weeks):

2019/20	Days Lost	Days Lost per FTE
Long-term	2,121 (76%)	4.7 (76%)
Short-term	660 (24%)	1.5 (24%)
Total	2781	6.2

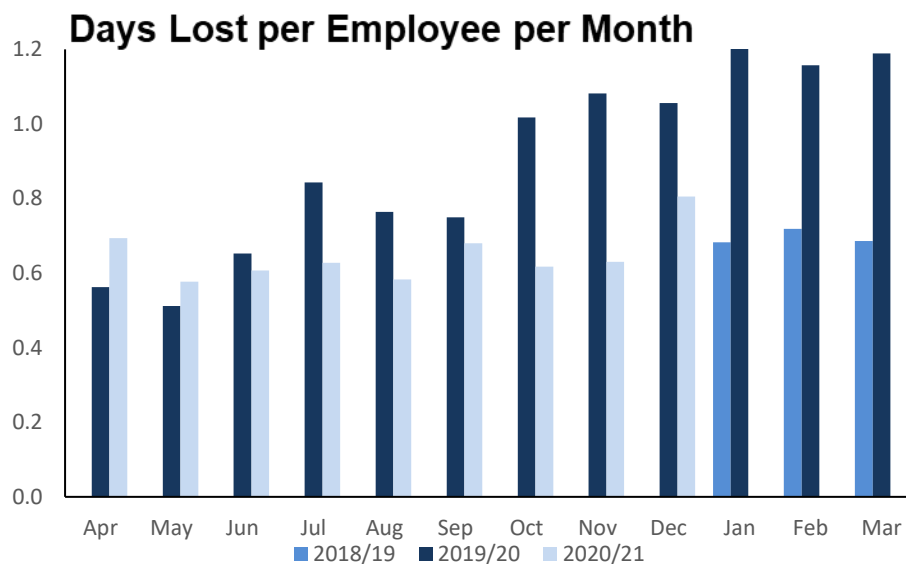
2.2 The tables below provide absence levels split by directorates for the period up to the end of Quarter 3 2020/21 and previous whole years. New staffing structures were in place with effect from 1 October 2016 and 1 October 2018.

All Directorates (472 head count/411 Full-Time Equivalents (FTE) as at 31/12/20)				
Indicator	2017/18	2018/19	2019/20	2020/21 Q3
Working days lost due to sickness absence per FTE	9.3	10.4	12.1	6.2
Number of working days lost due to sickness absence	3,875	4,260	5,065	2,781
Proportion of sickness absence that is long term (four working weeks or more)	58%	65%	69%	76%
Community Services (190 head count/178 FTE)				
Indicator	2017/18	2018/19	2019/20	2020/21 Q3
Working days lost due to sickness absence per FTE	12.6	13.1	12.8	7.4
Number of working days lost due to sickness absence	2,078	2,139	2,116	1,309
Proportion of sickness absence that is long term (four working weeks or more)	69%	68%	64%	75%
Economic Development (40 head count/37 FTE)				
Indicator	2017/18	2018/19	2019/20	2020/21 Q3
Working days lost due to sickness absence per FTE	3.6	4.4	5.4	1.9
Number of working days lost due to sickness absence	128	157	200	72
Proportion of sickness absence that is long term (four working weeks or more)	0%	33%	37%	88%
Governance and Regulatory Services (132 head count/108 FTE)				
Indicator	2017/18	2018/19	2019/20	2020/21 Q3
Working days lost due to sickness absence per FTE	8.6	11.3	11.7	6.1
Number of working days lost due to sickness absence	902	1,165	1,308	813
Proportion of sickness absence that is long term (four working weeks or more)	59%	78%	77%	85%
Corporate Support* (36 head count/28 FTE)				
Indicator	2017/18	2018/19	2019/20	2020/21 Q3
Working days lost due to sickness absence per FTE			11.3	8.9
Number of working days lost due to sickness absence			795	475
Proportion of sickness absence that is long term (four working weeks or more)			65%	75%
Finance and Resources* (74 head count/59 FTE)				
Indicator	2017/18	2018/19	2019/20	2020/21 Q3
Working days lost due to sickness absence per FTE			19	2.3
Number of working days lost due to sickness absence			647	113
Proportion of sickness absence that is long term (four working weeks or more)			82%	37%

*Corporate Support and Finance and Resources directorates restructures took effect from 1st October 2018, therefore reporting on new directorates has commenced from 2019/20.

2.3 So far in 2020/21 there has been a 24% decrease in overall days lost per employee when compared to the same period in the previous year. 47 employees have been absent long-term (those cases where the absence is 4 working weeks or more) throughout the year; only 2 less than the previous year. 11 long-term cases remained open as at 26th January 2021 and 19 of the instances were due to 'Stress, depression, mental health, fatigue syndromes'.

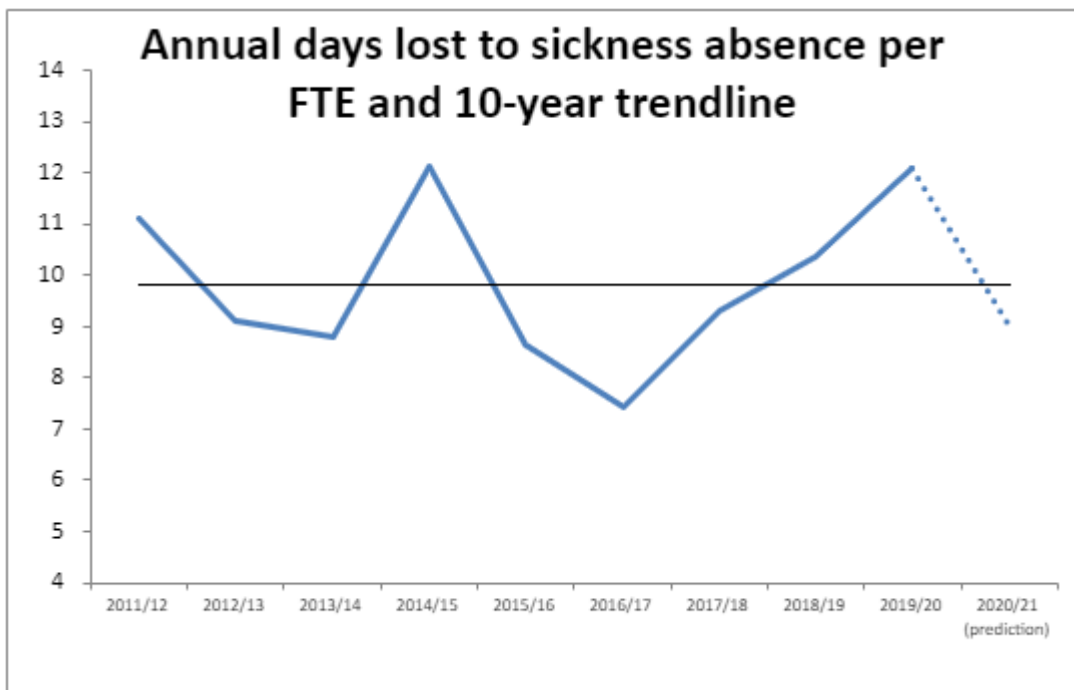
2.4 The following graph compares the latest twelve months with those of the previous year. The last six consecutive months has seen a reduction in days lost compared to the same months of the previous year. Much of this reduction can be attributed to a decline in short-term sickness cases.



3. TRENDS

3.1 As stated above, Authority-wide, compared to 2019/20, 2020/21 levels of sickness have decreased by 24%. The long-term trend based on a forecast for 2020/21 can be seen in the graph below. The first three quarters of 2020/21 have been similar to 2017/18 but the medium to long term direct and indirect impacts of the Covid-19 pandemic on the Authority's sickness absence level are difficult to predict. However, absences will continue to be proactively managed and the absence data monitored for any emerging issues.

The black line is the long-term trendline.



4. SICKNESS ABSENCE REASONS

4.1 The reasons for sickness absence in 2020/21 are shown in the table below. The table shows the FTE days lost due to each reason for the sickness absence and is split by directorate. 'Stress, depression, mental health, fatigue syndromes' currently represents the absence reason with the greatest days lost (1,174 days). 85% of these lost days were from 19 long term absentees. 3 of these cases were still open at the time of writing.

FTE Days lost by reason and directorate	Comm. Services	Corporate Support	Economic Dev't	Financial Services	Gov & Reg Services	Total
Back and neck problems	39		3	10	3	55 (2%)
Other musculo-skeletal problems	463		40	25	27	555 (20%)
Stress, depression, mental health, fatigue syndromes	503	162		48	462	1,174 (42%)
Infections (incl. colds and flu)	30	34		10	19	91 (3%)
Neurological (incl. headaches and migraine)	5	6			57	68 (2%)
Genito-urinary / gynaecological	6	22	23			51 (2%)
Pregnancy related (not maternity leave)			2		17	19 (1%)-
Stomach, liver, kidney & digestion (incl. gastroenteritis)	118	76	4		6	203 (7%)
Heart, blood pressure & circulation	35	66				101 (4%)
Chest & respiratory (incl. chest infections)	105					105 (4%)
Ear, eye, nose & mouth / dental (incl. sinusitis)	4	4		1		9 (0.3%)
Other	2	106		20	222	350 (13%)

4.2 'Stress, depression, mental health, fatigue syndromes' has continued to be the greatest contributor to sickness in the first quarter of 2020/21.

The top 4 reasons for sickness absence for **1 April 2020 to 31 December 2020** are:

Reason	Percentage
Stress, depression, mental health, fatigue syndromes	42%
Other musculo-skeletal problems	20%
Stomach, liver kidney and digestion (incl. gastroenteritis)	7%
Other	13%

5. RETURN TO WORK INTERVIEWS (RTW)

5.1 Research shows that carrying out a return to work interview is one of the most effective ways to manage attendance and reduce absence. There are many benefits to conducting return to work interviews. These can include:

- Making sure employees really are well enough to go back to work
- Updating employees on news that has occurred in their absence
- Identifying whether any workplace adjustments might be required

5.2 Up to the end of December 2020, 95% of return to work interviews were conducted (2019/20: 97%). The number of working days between the employees returning to work and interviews being conducted and the proportion completed within five working days has also been included in the table below:

Directorate	Proportion of RTWs conducted	Average time taken to complete RTW (working days)	Proportion of RTWs completed within 5 working days
Community Services	97%	4.6	84%
Corporate Support	97%	8.8	52%
Economic Development	100%	3.5	75%
Finance & Resources	80%	6.8	83%
Governance & Regulatory Services	90%	8.2	62%
All Directorates	95%	6.0	75%

6. KEY ACTIVITIES TO SUPPORT ATTENDANCE MANAGEMENT

6.1 HR, Organisational Development, Health & Safety and Occupational Health all continue to work closely to proactively manage sickness absence cases, attendance at work, and health surveillance and promotion.

6.2 The Council's Occupational Health provider has been supportive in terms of categorising higher risk staff throughout the Covid pandemic and advising on any appropriate measures to support them at work.

6.3 Stress remains the most common reason for sickness absence and although it cannot be claimed that the pandemic is the sole contributor to this, the HR team have observed increased anxiety amongst staff in relation to Covid. Managers and colleagues are consistently encouraged to check in with each other through virtual Teams meetings and are frequently reminded about the resources available through the Council's support channels e.g. Employee Assistance Programme, Occupational Health and physio.

6.4 In addition, the following initiatives were arranged from April 2020 to December 2020 to improve health and wellbeing, and reduce sickness absence:

- Flu vaccinations offered to staff
- Workplace surveys – sent to all staff
- Virtual Session - Working safely from home to reduce Musculo Skeletal stresses and strains on the body – December 2020
- A Virtual Health and Wellbeing Day was arranged in July 2020. Numerous presentations/activities - Science of Wellbeing, Stress and Resilience, Men's Health, Mood Food, Virtual Waistline Check, Meditation and Sleep
- Mental Health Awareness Week – help and links
- Mental Fitness & Resilience Resources provided by North West Employers
- Stress Awareness Day - Advice emailed to staff - November 2020
- Virtual Mood Monday Chat
- Virtual Workshop – Bio-Resilience During Winter Months - December 2020
- Women's Health – Virtual Chat
- Men's Health Week – Virtual Presentations and Chat
- Virtual Sessions - Coping Skills for Anxiety at Work – taking place January 2021
- Virtual Training Session – Coping Skills for Anxiety at Work
- Virtual Session: Drug, Alcohol and Sexual Health Awareness - December 2020
- Wellbeing pages on the intranet - which include support for mental health, carers and general wellbeing – ongoing
- Wellbeing newsletters emailed to staff – ongoing
- EAP - Employee / Employer Monthly Newsletters sent to staff and managers – ongoing.

7. PROPOSALS

None

8. RISKS

None

9. CONSULTATION

The report was reviewed by the Senior Management Team in February 2021.

10. CONCLUSION AND REASONS FOR RECOMMENDATIONS

The Panel are asked to scrutinise and comment on the sickness absence information with a view to driving continuous improvement.

11. CONTRIBUTION TO THE CARLISLE PLAN PRIORITIES

Monitoring sickness absence to help ensure the staff resources available to deliver the Carlisle Plan are maximised.

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**Appendices
attached to report:**

Note: in compliance with section 100d of the Local Government Act 1972 the report has been prepared in part from the following papers:

- **None**

CORPORATE IMPLICATIONS:

LEGAL - This report raises no explicit legal issues.

FINANCE – This report raises no explicit financial issues

EQUALITY – This report highlights the positive interventions taken around mental health in the workplace. This work demonstrates our commitment to the Public Sector Equality Duty and is consistent with the Equality Policy and Action Plan.

INFORMATION GOVERNANCE – This report raises no explicit issues relating to Information Governance.

PROPERTY SERVICES - This report raises no explicit issues relating to Property Services