

Employment and Appeals Committee – 17th July 2019

Sickness Absence Update

Summary

This summary report provides the Councils average sickness days lost per full time equivalent (FTE) for 2018/19, a comparison to previous years and how this stands across Wales.

The report also summarises the work carried out to help increase attendance and employee wellbeing, since the previous update to Employment and Appeals Committee on 5th October 2018.

Sickness Absence Figures

The table below illustrates the average days lost per FTE for the past three financial years.

Council / Directorate	2016/17	2017/18	2018/19	Change from 17/18 to 18/19
Whole Council	8.95	9.35	9.16	-0.19
CEO & Member Services	6.44	2.4	3.21	+0.81
People	13.03	15.58	14.03	-1.55
Place / Environment	9.7	10.62	11.62	+1.00
Resources	7.29	8.64	8.16	-0.48
Schools & Schools Service	7.63	7.1	8.19	+1.09
Workforce & Organisational Development	9.98	9.22	n/a	n/a

Following a disappointing increase from 2016/17 to 2017/18, which was consistent across Wales, the statistics show an improvement at the end of 2018/19 with a reduction of 0.19 days lost per FTE, which represents a 2.03% improvement.

It is important to note that due to the Council restructure effective from 1st March 2019, for comparative purposes, the Directorate figures are based on the 11-month period April 2018 to February 2019, and have subsequently been uplifted to a full year figure based on the 11-month average.

The total 2018/19 figure of 9.16 days lost per FTE for the whole Council is the actual figure.

Please note that the Workforce & Organisational Development Directorate moved under Resources from 2018/19, which is why no figures are reported during 2018/19.

Position in Wales

Powys County Council has the third lowest sickness absence rate per FTE for each of the past three financial years, when comparing against all other Local Authorities.

The table below illustrates the average of all 22 Councils in Wales, in comparison to Powys, for average number of days lost per FTE during for the past three financial years.

	2016/17	2017/18	2018/19
Average across Wales	10.09	10.23	10.50
Powys County Council	8.95	9.35	9.16
Difference	-1.14	-0.88	-1.34

The three-year trend evidences a year on year increase across Wales, however, Powys' absence rate from 2017/18 to 2018/19 goes against that. In addition, the difference between Powys' sickness rate and the Welsh average is as high as it has been over the three-year period, going from Powys being 1.14 sickness days less per FTE, to 1.34 days less.

The best and worst performing Councils, in comparison to Powys, for each of those years are as follows:

	2016/17	Compared to PCC	2017/18	Compared to PCC	2018/19	Compared to PCC
Council with lowest sickness rate per FTE	5.5	-3.45	7.8	-1.55	8.3	-0.86
Council with highest sickness rate per FTE	12.4	+3.45	13.6	+4.25	12.7	+3.54

Over the three years, the difference between the Council's sickness absences per FTE, and the best performing Council has reduced from 3.45 days, to 0.86 days.

When comparing Powys to the worst performing Council, the difference rate has increased over the 3 years, from 3.45 days, to 3.54 days.

The story since October 2018

During October 2018, sickness absence focus groups were established to discuss the perceived high levels of sickness in the council, including how the impact on staff and services, with 60 participants selected at random from all service areas.

The sickness workshops were held during November and December 2018, with two questions set for the participants to openly and safely share their thoughts on the issue. The two questions posed were:

- Why do you think sickness absence is so high in the council?
- What changes do you think need to be made across the council which could help improve the sickness absence issue?

The feedback from the workshops was presented to Executive Management Team in January 2019.

EMT discussed in detail and recommended a number of key actions following set of actions, which are in the process of being actioned.

Current position and next steps

As a result of the focus group discussions and EMT recommendations, the following strands of work have been established, with achievements set out as an update:

- **New Sickness Policy** – a new sickness policy was approved by HR Policy Forum in early July and will be launched shortly. Senior Leadership Team were heavily involved in designing the new policy, taking in to account the views of employees, with the aim of becoming less bureaucratic and to support employees attendance and wellbeing.

As part of this process, the following elements are currently being reviewed:

- **Streamline sickness process and procedures** – through use of computer based functionality rather than paper based processes
- **Develop new e-learning package** – this will help support managers when dealing with short and long term sickness absence
- **Improve Occupational Health Contract** – this is currently in the tender process. The Head of Workforce and Organisation Development will provide a verbal update at the Committee meeting.
- **Employee Assistance Programme** – The introduction of an EAP will be a further positive step to support employees in their wellbeing and will replace and exceed the current counselling provision. The new provision will include telephone and face-to-face counselling, information and advice services, Carefirst Lifestyle (Wellbeing Online) and Cognitive Behaviour Therapy.
- **Middle Managers Forum** – the intention of this group is to create a culture of management that is based on sharing both best practice and lessons learnt through regular review of practices. The first session was held in June 2019 and was well attended and well received. Further meetings will be taking place and consideration will be made to setting up new forums.
- **Recording of Appraisals** – regular communications are being issued to ensure that appraisals are being carried out and recorded.
- **Review Council Policies** – a general review to ensure that policies better support the health and attendance of staff, including a focus on agile and flexible working.

Other on-going work

It is important to note the on-going work carried out by WOD staff, in addition to the above, to ensure positive health and attendance levels across the Council, including Schools.

Case Worker roles have been created to assist with absence management with positive effects in the reduction in sickness days lost per FTE from 2017/18 to 2018/19.

Examples of the positive work carried out by Case Workers in proactive management of absence cases can be found in focus areas such as HTR, as the October 2018 update referred to, as well as Schools.

In Schools, as reported to ESTYN during the recent inspection, the number of long-term absence cases has reduced from 117 in May 2018 to just 16 in July 2019.

Furthermore, specific sickness absence training was held with School Governors during the 2019 Spring Term, and coaching has been provided to Headteachers in terms of supporting their wellbeing. There are further staff wellbeing training planned for Spring Term 2020.