Review of Attendance & Wellbeing Policy

Report for City of Cardiff Council

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Executive Summary

This report has been compiled taking good practice principles into account, predominantly for local government services but also for public services as a whole.

The findings and recommendations specifically take account of the Briefing Paper for the Management of Sickness Absence by the Auditor General for Wales, published in May 2014 as well as national absence management information and data contained in the CIPD Absence Management Annual Survey Report for 2014.

1. Background

1.1 In September 2011 the Policy Review and Performance Scrutiny Committee published an Inquiry into Managing Attendance that had been undertaken by a task and finish group of the Committee. The task and finish group reported back to the Committee in October 2011.

A policy was developed that complied with the Equality Act, had been benchmarked with other authorities and was the subject of consultation with representatives from Service Areas and schools, the Trade Unions and the Council's Equality Networks.

The policy was agreed at Cabinet in April 2013 and it was agreed that a review would take place of the policy at 6 and 12 months. At the 6 month review it was determined that there needed to be further operational experience before any changes could be proposed.

(Source: Cabinet report Nov 2014)

1.2 Following an audit for the year 2013/14, a Briefing Paper was published in May 2014 by the Auditor General for Wales for the Management of Sickness Absence.

The Paper concluded that corporate policies and procedures for the management of sickness absence are based on positive practice models.

It also concluded that:

- Corporate policies and procedures for the management of sickness absence have improved but are not being applied consistently at directorate level
- Corporate sickness absence arrangements are not consistently applied at service level.
- Review arrangements do not include evaluation of whether policies and procedures are being effectively implemented.

1.3 Furthermore, a number of recommendations were identified within the audit namely;

1.3.1. Directors should introduce a more robust approach to ensure each service area consistently applies intended practice such as:

- Incorporate sickness absence as a key objective in all service business plans to raise the profile of the need to minimise sickness absence as a way of reducing

costs and minimising the impact on service delivery

- Clarify their expectations of how managers use and report on sickness absence targets;
- Make existing sickness absence reports more widely and routinely available to all line managers
- Obtain assurance that the methods adopted by managers would satisfy the mandatory objective contained within the Personal Performance and Development Review (PP&DR) process for all managers to effectively manage sickness absence.

1.3.2.   Directors should encourage use of a wider range of information in both corporate and service monitoring reports in order to manage sickness absence performance more closely, such as:

- The costs of sickness absence i.e. payroll and agency costs;
- Reasons for variance against target;
- Actions taken by managers to reduce sickness absence levels
- How well managers are performing against the mandatory objective contained within the PP&DR process to effectively manage sickness i.e. ineffective, developing, effective or outstanding.

1.3.3.   HR&PS should use the outcomes of the planned evaluation of the central sickness absence team to define a systematic approach for evaluating sickness absence management arrangements. This could include:

- Identifying those services that require further support and/or training to improve how they access and collate Digigov data and reports through combining information from the sickness absence team and the HR advisers
- Identifying and sharing examples of good practice across services.

(Source: Briefing paper for the Management of Sickness Absence)

Since then, a review of the policy has been undertaken involving a significant amount of consultation with Service Area managers, the 5 employee networks and the Trade Unions to discuss proposed changes. Throughout the review, the proposed updated policy has been amended to reflect comments and suggestions, where possible.

2. Findings

2.1   The revised content and approach of the revised Attendance & Wellbeing Policy is in line with good practice and principles.

2.2   In comparison to similar policies from other organisations, the document is lengthy however, that said, it does encompass all aspects of managing attendance, which in the case of some other Authorities/Councils, are sometimes kept separate.

2.3   The policy document also includes all management guidelines for managing attendance & wellbeing. Again, many organisations would keep the management guidelines as a separate document but reference them in the policy document. The purpose of this is twofold:

i) Employees are less likely to read through lengthy documents, particularly if they do not consider the information relevant. They are more likely to be interested in policy and procedure which applies specifically to them.

ii) In general, changes to policy in the public sector tend to be more widely consulted. More often than not, it is not the policy that needs to be reviewed and amended but the guidelines for managing it. If the guidelines are separate, this can reduce the amount of time required to enact any changes.

2.4 The roles and responsibilities section (page 4) includes 'management responsibilities'. It is not uncommon to see a section for senior managers/directors as well as management.

An example roles and responsibilities for senior managers would be:

Senior managers

Senior managers play a lead role in tackling sickness absence levels. They are responsible for ensuring that:

- staff are aware of this policy and associated procedures and the standards of attendance which are expected of them;
- service attendance targets are monitored and appropriate action is taken to address areas of concern;
- performance around sickness management is routinely discussed by management teams;
- the management of sickness is included as a key performance indicator for all managers; and
- appropriate action is taken against managers and supervisors that fail to manage sickness in line with this policy.

Interestingly, in line with the final point above, the management responsibilities section of the Cardiff policy (section 1.7, point d) refers to completing the mandatory on line training package but there is no reference in the remainder of the policy as to what happens if this is not done.

2.5 The annual CIPD report indicates a year on year improvement in absenteeism nationally.

"Overall, there has been a fall in absence levels this year by a day per employee, from 7.6 days in 2013 to 6.6 days in 2014. Public sector absence has fallen by almost a day, although at 7.9 days per employee, this figure is still markedly higher than in the private sector (5.5 days)."

2.6 In 2013/14 the average days lost per FTE in **Cardiff Council was 10.18** against the **national average of 7.9 for public sector** absence, indicating there is still scope for improvement.

2.7 The vast majority of organisations (95%) who took part in the CIPD survey have a written absence/attendance management policy and 'absence level' is a key performance indicator in 60% of them.

2.8 Half have introduced changes to some aspect of their approach in the last year, with public sector organisations most likely to have made changes.

2.9 The most common change is to develop line manager capability to manage absence, showing an increased focus on this compared with last year (2014: 61%; 2013: 39%).

2.10 Other common changes include introducing a new, revising or reinforcing an existing absence management policy and introducing or revising monitoring procedures.

2.11 The introduction of Wellbeing strategies and approaches features highly as an intervention for improving attendance with the report identifying that Stress remains a more common cause of absence in the public sector (77%) than the private (42%), for manual and non-manual workers.

It was noted that Cardiff Council is committed to the development and implementation of an Employee Health & Wellbeing Strategy. Once established, this should, subject to the approaches and interventions, aid employee attendance and is recommended good practice for reducing levels of absence.

3. Recommendations

3.1 It is clear that that Cardiff Council is committed to ensuring that the management of Attendance & Wellbeing is as effective as possible.

3.2 There is no doubt that the policy complies with good practice and is comprehensive.

3.3 Therefore, if the policy is not the problem and attendance remains lower than expected, it stands to reason there are other causal factors, many of which have already been highlighted in previous reports and audits.

3.4 Based on the information available to compile this report, the following are suggestions rather than recommendations as some may already be in place and others may not be appropriate. These suggestions, however, have been utilised by other Authorities/Councils with success and there are others contained in the CIPD report referred to previously:

3.4.1. Consider removing the management guidelines from the policy document to make the policy easier to read and digest.

3.4.2. Add a section for senior managers in the roles and responsibilities section.

3.4.3. Focus on management capability and compliance.

A manager may know the policy and the procedure but if they don't know how to have 'The Conversation' with an employee, on line training won't resolve the issue.

3.4.4. Ensure managers are held to account for the management of attendance. If training is 'mandatory', by definition there must be a consequence for non-compliance.

3.4.5. Analyse the top reasons for absence and the demographics and type of work of the worst performing departments. Developing strategies for improvement could be completed in conjunction with members of staff from these underperforming areas.(this may already be in development as part of the Wellbeing strategy).

3.4.6. Adopt all the recommendations outlined by the Auditor General for Wales.

3.4.7. Consider developing and publicising league tables.

3.4.8. Utilise attendance records as part of the process for selection for new roles and

promotions.

3.4.9. Recognise those with excellent attendance records. This could be as simple as publishing names in team briefs, sending congratulatory letters from the CEO etc.

3.4.10. Develop and implement the planned Wellbeing Strategy as soon as practicable (the CIPD Absence Management Annual Report may be a good source of information for this purpose).