

Date: 25 January 2018



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Councillor Chris Weaver,
Cabinet Member Finance, Modernisation & Performance,
Cardiff Council,
County Hall,
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Dear Councillor Weaver,

Policy Review & Performance Scrutiny Committee: 17 January 2018

Thank you for attending the Policy Review and Performance Scrutiny Committee last week, to participate in a short scrutiny of sickness absence. The Committee's work on this issue has been well supported by the Chief Human Resources Officer, Philip Lenz, and I would be grateful if you would pass on our appreciation, particularly in securing contributions from two external expert witnesses, Jonathan Lloyd (WLGA) and Andy Mudd (APSE).

The Committee was unable to consider all of the evidence on offer from the panel due to time restrictions. We therefore wish to reassure you that we will give consideration to the content of the action plan you have in place, raise any queries we have with Philip, and prioritise monitoring the Plan in July 2018, six months into its implementation. Following the scrutiny Members agreed that the Committee will continue its work and interest in sickness absence, but wishes at this point to pass on its observations and concerns for your reflection and action between now and July where appropriate.

The Economy and Culture Scrutiny Committee (Dec 2017), during its scrutiny of Leisure Services post contracting-out services to GLL, heard that in the last 18 months GLL had successfully tackled sickness absence amongst staff, reducing long-term sickness levels and sickness overall by 50% in Leisure Services. Members of this Committee were very interested to hear of such success given the increase in sickness absence in the Council generally during the same period.

Similarly, we recall that during a scrutiny of Alternative Delivery Models in December 2014 we heard from Cormac that they would typically expect to reduce sickness to around 3% where a service such as waste is contracted out. We therefore join our Economy and Culture colleagues in encouraging you to engage with GLL, and with Cormac to explore whether there are lessons that can be shared and effectively applied to the in-house delivery of similar frontline services.

During the scrutiny, we heard the WLGA expert witness state there is no silver bullet in tackling sickness absence. Our view is that an appropriate culture and strong leadership which is prepared to take on this issue is critical. We will therefore be looking for evidence of this when we scrutinise progress on the action plan to address APSE recommendations in July 2018.

The Committee noted with interest Merthyr Tydfil Council's success in reducing sickness absence to 5.5 average working days lost for 2016/17, compared with our own at 10.8. We note this is likely to be linked to Merthyr's decision to limit long-term absence to 4 months before reviewing an individuals' sickness absence. We may wish to investigate this approach further, accepting that there is a significant difference in authority size, and that Cardiff's sickness at 10.8 is at the higher end of the spectrum when compared with all other Welsh authorities.

Members are very concerned that the Council does not appear to have undertaken an organisation-wide employee stress risk assessment. Our understanding is that we are obliged to do so under Health and Safety law. You suggested such an assessment is a part of Health and Safety policy planning and parts of the organisation have in fact undertaken such assessment. We are therefore seeking reassurance that this organisation wide stress risk assessment is in hand and look forward to clarification and to seeing the results of that work.

We were pleased to hear that the occupational health service continues to play an important part in tackling sickness absence. We note, whilst there have been log jams due to a change in the Council's policy that introduced as a default referral to occupational health, management are now expected to exercise greater judgement, and a triage approach is used, resulting in waiting times falling to 2-3 weeks.

We also heard that some managers had concerns about whether occupational health fulfils its role, and believe it is timely to undertake a full review of this service, involving its key management sponsors.

The Committee notes that the sickness absence action plan has many implications for managers and is keen to ensure that, as a key group in tackling sickness absence, managers are fully supported, particularly in the early recognition of stress related issues. We note the new early intervention initiatives such as sports massage at Lamby Way, but consider the development of skills in managers getting to know their teams and spotting issues early is key to preventing an escalation in sickness absence and needs to be prioritised.

Further, we wish to stress that managers not only need support in recognising early signs of stress in their workforce, importantly they need to know they will be later supported when formal action is required. Alongside strong support for managers in delivering the policy, Members have asked me to reiterate that managers need freedom to be flexible, as well as tools with which to manage sickness.

We cannot stress enough the importance of developing a culture where managers get to know their staff well. We feel, where this is the case, managers should not need DigiGov reminders to undertake a return to work interview. We would be interested to hear whether there are any incentives for managers to analyse and identify when staff appear to be playing the system. As such, we consider it important that managers receive HR support in the process of addressing their concerns.

In the context of the £11million opportunity cost of sickness absence to the Council Members referenced data published by the Office of ONS which suggests that as a large Welsh public sector organisation the Council may be more likely to show high rates of sickness absence. We note WLGA's view that local government sickness is higher than that in the NHS, but note that NHS work pressures are very different.

Our concern that there is the potential for non-recording of sickness absence was not fully answered, particularly where it is management absence, and we would be interested in your view on this matter. For example, we note from the Head Teachers workshop findings a call for absence reports to be presented to governors, and we

support such an initiative being introduced. One conclusion from this under-reporting is that the sickness absence levels reported by HR are likely to be understated, making it unclear what the true level is.

We are also interested in the reasons that make it more likely that teaching assistants take sick leave. We note teaching assistants are often part time, and may feel undervalued compared with teachers, We therefore consider further analysis of this particular work group may be required.

The Committee, in its role as the voice of those affected by the sickness absence policy, notes that frontline staff have not been consulted as a part of the review process to date. We consider the findings would benefit from the input of focus groups held with frontline staff and recommend this be considered in light of the findings so far. If this is not considered feasible I will be discussing with the Committee that we consider a scrutiny research exercise to seek the views of staff prior to monitoring progress in delivering the action plan in July 2018.

Members generally consider this is a sound report but that more data is required for specific groups and the absence/sickness related culture at various levels within the organisation. We particularly note APSE's view at the meeting that grades 6-8 are contributing significantly to sickness absence levels and more information may be required about cultural effects at this level.

To recap, the Committee:

- Will give consideration to the content of the action plan in place, raise any queries we have, and prioritise monitoring the Plan in July 2018.
- Encourages you to engage with GLL, and Cormac to explore whether there are lessons that can be shared and effectively applied to the in-house delivery of services.
- Will be looking for evidence of strong senior management leadership on this issue when we scrutinise progress on the action plan in July 2018.
- Will consider investigating further Merthyr Tydfil Council's success in reducing sickness absence to 5.5 average working days lost for 2016/17, compared with our own at 10.8.

- Would like clarification that an organisation wide stress risk assessment is in hand.
- Considers managers are a key group in tackling sickness absence and must be fully supported, particularly in the early recognition of stress related issues, and in addressing repeat absenteeism.
- Considers managers need to know they will be supported when action is required in delivering the policy,
- Considers managers need authority to react flexibly, as well as tools with which to manage sickness.
- Would like clarity on whether there any incentives for managers to analyse and identify when it is considered that staff may be playing the system.
- Would like clarity on the potential for non-recording of sickness absence, particularly management absence. For example, how can the Council be reassured that all Head Teacher sickness is recorded?
- Considers further analysis may be required of the reasons that make it more likely that teaching assistants take sick leave.
- Is concerned that frontline staff have had no voice in the consultative process to date. Therefore recommends focus groups be held with frontline staff.
- May consider undertaking our own frontline primary research prior to monitoring progress in delivering the action plan in July 2018.
- Considers more data is required around high levels of sickness absence within specific groups, and the culture at various levels within the organisation which may impact on this, particularly grades 6-8.

I look forward to your response. Once again, on behalf of the Committee, please pass my sincere thanks to all internal witnesses who attended PRAP Scrutiny Committee to assist us in consideration of sickness absence.

Yours sincerely,



COUNCILLOR DAVID WALKER
CHAIR, POLICY REVIEW AND PERFORMANCE SCRUTINY COMMITTEE

cc Members of the Policy Review & Performance Scrutiny Committee
Paul Orders, Chief Executive
Philip Lenz, Chief Human Resources Officer
Joanne Watkins, Cabinet Office Manager
Heather Warren, Cabinet Support Officer.