

My Ref: T: Scrutiny/PRAP/Comm Papers/Correspondence

Date: 17 September 2018

Councillor Chris Weaver,
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Dear Councillor Weaver,

Policy Review & Performance Scrutiny Committee: 12 September 2018

On behalf of the Policy Review and Performance Scrutiny Committee thank you for attending Committee to facilitate scrutiny of the Council's progress in tackling Sickness Absence. Members would be grateful if you would pass on our appreciation to Philip Lenz and his team for the significant preparation that went into this scrutiny. We offer the following comments and observations for you to reflect on as you continue to review and refine the Cabinet's approach.

The Committee was pleased to hear of the many new initiatives in tackling sickness absence since our previous scrutiny in January 2018. Members particularly noted the signposting to Council well-being services by GP surgeries, the flu vaccine programme targeting frontline employees, and the physiotherapy massage sessions made available in the workplace. All these appear to have contributed to an improved end of year forecast of 10.15 FTE days lost at quarter one, indicating that absence levels are expected to fall when compared with the last two years. The forecast indicates sickness absence may fall below the Wales average for 2017/18 of 10.4 FTE days lost per employee, but fail to achieve the Council's 9.5-day target.

Schools – Governing Bodies

Several Members reflected on their experience of sitting on governing bodies and the notable improvement in the sickness absence information provided to schools, which now enables governors to benchmark their own schools performance against other schools in Cardiff. We congratulate you on this work, acknowledging that you now ensure the report is sent both to the Head Teacher and to the Chair of Governors

simultaneously. This ensures governing bodies are empowered to tackle sickness absence proactively, and we urge you to take a further step of strongly recommending to schools that sickness absence becomes a standing item on all Governing Body agendas.

Schools – Consistency

You stated that you were not aware of under-reporting of sickness absence in schools, although it was mentioned in the APSE report; however, you consider there is still a return to work interview compliance issue. We understand there is some difficulty in establishing the quality of application of the sickness policy, however feel it is important that you monitor uniformity of policy adoption, and therefore we would urge you to continue development work in this area.

Benchmarking

It is the Committee's view that the challenge of bringing sickness absence below 10 days will require closer analysis of the policies of other organisations. We continue to be interested in benchmarking with other Councils. Having identified Merthyr Tydfil Council's sickness levels are considerably lower than Cardiff's and encouraged you to explore further, we remain keen to hear more of the best practice your officers unearthed in recent discussion with Merthyr's HR team. When we next examine progress of reducing sickness absence levels we will be looking for a more detailed comparison. We urge you similarly to explore the success of Glasgow Council in tackling sickness absence.

Good Practice

The Committee highlighted the practice of 'social prescribing' as a good initiative used by organisations such as United Welsh Housing and embraced by the GP service. You agreed to follow up this initiative, and we look forward to hearing how it might fit within the Council's approach to improving sickness absence when we review progress.

We note the majority of days lost through absence are caused by stress and muscular-skeletal/back reasons, and we consider there is value in the Council recording 'work related' back and muscular-skeletal sickness figures separately.

Culture

The Committee considers that culture plays a significant part in tackling sickness absence, and notes that there are some services, such as Education, that are skewed by the results of one part of the service. We refer to your example of the schools catering service with high levels of part-time staff and significant absence levels. We endorse your initiative in creating a bespoke action plan for this service, adapting reporting arrangements to ensure compliance with the policy. We feel it would be useful to see the data for Education presented without the catering service. We expect such bespoke action plans to be introduced in other service areas where one part of it shows particularly high absence rates. This should include Waste Management and parts of Social Services.

Members are also interested in how the Council can tackle high levels of sickness absence in service areas that hold vacant posts, either for budgeting reasons or because there is a difficulty filling posts. We note you have additional Health & Safety Officers that will be undertaking more work on this specific issue and more information will emerge over the next 6 months. We will therefore uphold this line of inquiry in our next scrutiny.

Finally, there are a number of action points for you to follow up in this letter, and the Committee is keen to ensure that its comments and suggestions are explored by the HR service. Therefore, we will be looking for a response on all matters we have raised in this letter.

To recap, the Committee:

- Recommends you strongly recommend to schools that sickness absence becomes a standing item on all Governing Body agendas.
- Urges you to continue development work on monitoring schools' uniformity of sickness absence policy application.
- Requests a more detailed comparison of best practice in Merthyr Tydfil and Glasgow Councils when it next monitors sickness absence.
- Urges you to explore the practice of *social prescribing* as a good initiative used by organisations such as United Welsh Housing.
- Considers there is value in the Council recording '*work related*' back and muscular-skeletal sickness absence figures.

- Considers it would be useful to see the data for Education presented without the catering service
- Will continue its interest in the sickness absence figures for service areas that hold vacant posts, and looks forward to more health and safety information informing sickness reporting over the next 6 months.

Once again, on behalf of the Committee, my sincere thanks for attending the PRAP Scrutiny Committee for consideration of Sickness Absence. I would be grateful if you would consider our views as you continue your work to reverse the sickness absence trend of the last two years, and I look forward to your response.

Yours sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "David Walker". The signature is written in a cursive, flowing style.

COUNCILLOR DAVID WALKER
CHAIR, POLICY REVIEW AND PERFORMANCE SCRUTINY COMMITTEE

cc Members of the Policy Review & Performance Scrutiny Committee
Christine Salter, Corporate Director, Resources
Philip Lenz, Chief Human Resources Officer
Anita Batten, HR People Partner
Heather Warren, Cabinet Support Officer
Joanne Watkins, Cabinet Office Manager