

Date: 23 January 2020

Councillor Chris Weaver,
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Dear Councillor Weaver,

Policy Review & Performance Scrutiny Committee: 15 January 2020

Please accept my thanks on behalf of the Committee for attending the Policy Review and Performance Scrutiny Committee last week with a mid-year Sickness Absence update. The opportunity to focus on Waste Management as a case study was much appreciated and I am copying this letter to Cllr Michael Michael, as Cabinet Member with responsibility for the Waste Management service. Please also pass our thanks to Sarah McGill, Tracey Thomas, Matt Wakelam and Anita Batten for facilitating the scrutiny.

Corporate sickness levels and initiatives.

Members noted the new initiatives that have been put in place to address sickness levels, particularly reviewing policies on annual and special leave with the aim of supporting the sickness absence policy. We note that staff can now take annual leave in hours as well as days, and there is improved flexibility around compassionate leave.

We heard about the many complimentary health services available and were advised of new services you have introduced to support mental health, such as the introduction of Mental Health and Group Well-being sessions, as well as a flu vaccination programme for social services and schools.

However, despite these new initiatives, a forecast corporate outturn of 11.09FTE days lost in 2019/20 against a 9.5FTE target is discouraging. Quarter 1 and 2 absence levels for the current year exceed levels for quarters 1 and 2 2018/19, this forecast may therefore be optimistic.

The forecast is even more discouraging given the 4 day UK national average for sickness absence and the fact that an increasing number of local authorities in Wales have improved their levels of sickness absence to levels below 10 days per employee a year. We note your view that it is too soon to assess the impact new services are having on sickness levels, but cannot see from the data presented how a further rise in the outturn by the end of the year can be prevented.

The Committee was, however, encouraged to hear that the number of staff taking no sick leave at all had improved significantly (62%). We note that long term sickness absence remains the primary cause of high sickness absence levels and recommend further efforts by attendance officers in targeting long term sickness cases.

Comparing Cardiff with others.

The Committee has monitored sickness absence routinely over many years, noting a fall in outturn from 2013, then a rise in recent years. We were interested to hear that officers consider factors in the recent rise included organisational changes, smaller staff numbers and an increase in non-work related stress. We consider that in reality it is difficult to distinguish between non-work and work-related stress. We would be reassured to learn how different types of stress can be distinguished and diagnosed. We would also be interested to see comparator data for stress from other organisations and will monitor your intention to break down and analyse data related to this area more deeply. We request that this data be made available to the committee when available.

We endorse your view that it is important to benchmark Cardiff's sickness levels against UK core cities as well as the 22 Welsh authorities. We recommend that you look closely at those Welsh authorities with sickness outcomes of less than 10 days and assess the measures taken which contrast with Cardiff's. There are UK cities of similar size to ours which would also be useful comparators. As there is a growing focus on well-being, members felt it would be worthwhile exploring well-being initiatives offered more widely within the private as well as the public sector.

Organisational stress risk assessment

Members heard that the Council considers that it has mechanisms in place to assist the individual employee to identify symptoms of stress, and is providing training and

facilities to staff and managers to improve staff resilience. However, we urge that you lift your vision on sickness from the individual level to an organisational, preventative picture. This requires you to perform an organisational stress risk assessment, as required under Regulation 3 of the Management of Health and Safety at Work Regulations 1999. In reality it is difficult to separate non work from work related stress and it may require a closer look at working conditions. We note you are working on a plan to address stress risk assessments and therefore offer some links and advice below that you might find useful:

- An organisational stress risk assessment should take the form of any other health and safety risk assessment, taking into account hazards, risks and controls, ideally following the HSE's 5 steps to Risk assessment. The regulator, the Health and Safety Executive (HSE), has produced guidance for organisations to assist in complying with the law and to reduce the 11 million work days lost in the UK because of stress. The guidance covers the risk assessment which is based on how the organisation meets the standards that HSE would expect of it in dealing with the 6 identified causes of stress in employees. The causes are *demands, control, support, relationships, role and change*. The assessment is undertaken to prevent symptoms of stress from their work affecting employees, not simply to treat them when it does.

<https://www.hse.gov.uk/stress/what-to-do.htm>.

- There is good evidence that such an approach changes the culture of organisations, reduces stress, reduces sickness absence, improves productivity, increases work satisfaction and helps retain staff.

<https://www.hse.gov.uk/stress/casestudies/index.htm>

- The HSE have produced excellent tools to enable organisations to tackle stress, available free, including examples of risk assessments, survey tools, a self assessment stress competency tool for managers and more.

<https://www.hse.gov.uk/stress/resources.htm>

Therefore, while noting the work the Council has already done and the services provided, the Committee considers that if we do not assess and control the risks to employees some will continue to suffer stress related issues, which can manifest

themselves in many ways. We repeat that present measures taken do not appear to have reduced absence and sickness levels.

Sickness absence in Waste Management

The Committee notes the exceptionally high levels of sickness absence in Waste Management and the efforts now being made to address this long standing problem. These high levels of absence impact severely on the Council's efforts to improve its overall work performance in this service area, which is a cause of concern. We heard a presentation on the many initiatives and preventative measures to tackle sickness absence levels being put in place within Waste Management. Long term sickness absence significantly outweighs short term sickness absence and many interventions are targeted at musculo-skeletal, stomach, stress and back issues, all of which are areas which cause higher levels of absence.

We note the Assistant Director Street Scene's view that levels of disingenuous sickness are present but not felt to be a huge issue, though evidence of returning to work prior to the onset of half pay at 6 months is notable. We heard in a previous scrutiny that a Welsh local authority reduced the 6 month stage and showed a substantial increase in those returning to work as fit earlier.

The case study provided evidence of a Council service that has recognised the benefit of linking Health and Safety to sickness levels. From the presentation, Waste Management has clearly taken a step change in looking at 'safety' alongside 'health', focussing on a targeted improvement plan for the MRF, based on a Health and Safety review. We commend the aspiration to improve sickness absence levels in this specific area by 20-30%. We also commend further planned work within the MRF facility on stomach liver and kidney outcomes to ensure interventions are making a difference. However the outcomes will be the best judge of how effective these efforts will be and we will ask to hear more in due course when we will hope and expect to hear encouraging results.

Once again, on behalf of the Committee, my sincere thanks for attending the PRAP Scrutiny Committee to update us on Sickness Absence. We found the case study approach most useful and may request a closer look at Social Services targeted improvement plans for sickness in due course. I would be grateful if you would

consider our views and look forward to your response. I confirm we will maintain an interest in this important challenge.

Yours sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'David Walker', with a stylized, cursive script.

COUNCILLOR DAVID WALKER
CHAIR, POLICY REVIEW AND PERFORMANCE SCRUTINY COMMITTEE

cc Members of the Policy Review & Performance Scrutiny Committee
Councillor Michael Michael, Cabinet Member, Clean Streets, Recycling & Environment
Sarah McGill, Corporate Director People & Communities
Matt Wakelam, Assistant Director Street Scene
Tracey Thomas, Acting Senior HR People Partner
Anita Batten, HR People Partner
Alison Taylor, Cabinet Support Officer
Heather Warren, Cabinet Support Officer
Joanne Watkins, Cabinet Office Manager