

Date: 17 December 2021

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Dear Chris,

Policy Review & Performance Scrutiny Committee: 14 December 2021

On behalf of the Policy Review and Performance Scrutiny Committee, thank you for attending Committee and providing the opportunity for Members to consider the Council's progress in tackling Sickness Absence, with a specific focus on Waste Management. Members have asked me to pass on their appreciation to Cllr Michael, Paul Orders, Neil Hanratty, Tracey Thomas, and Donna Jones for supporting this scrutiny. I need to put on record that the evidence considered and the Committee's responses pre-date the arrival of the Omicron variant of the Covid virus. It is within that context that we offer the following comments and observations for you to reflect on as you continue to review and refine the Cabinet's approach to sickness absence.

The Committee notes your conviction that tackling sickness absence is a priority for all managers, and that the Council needs to develop a tighter operational grip on the position. We note, against a backdrop of intense and exceptional pressures, that you consider that progress has been made on short term absence and overall, that in 2020/21 sickness absence levels fell, however many challenges remain. Long term absence remains the key issue and concern and its level continues to grow. We also note that long-covid and delays in being able to deal with ill health retirement cases are direct drivers of increasing long term absence levels. There are challenges with such cases in Schools, Adult Services and Waste Management which need to be addressed.

Stress risk assessment

The Committee heard about options for dealing with stress related illness as part of the Way Forward outlined in your presentation. However, we consider there is a need

to look further at the causes of work-related stress. We have previously highlighted that work related, and non-work-related stress are inextricably linked and recommended that all service areas undertake a risk assessment into work-related stress. We wish to re-iterate the importance of that assessment and therefore **recommend** that you make it a priority. Members consider it critical that each directorate undertakes a risk assessment as to the *causes* of stress in individual service areas. We note you intend to bring forward a corporate risk assessment in the new year, which will lead on to more focussed service area risk assessments. As stated in the meeting this will be especially important in services such as Children's Services, where bespoke well-being interventions are required. We acknowledge that categories of reporting absence are set by Welsh Government, but these two categories are more linked than ever. We therefore urge that your Way Forward should support both work and non-work-related stress and clearly recognise their interdependency.

Preventative measures

The Committee recognises staff commitment over the last 18 months in very difficult circumstances. We endorse the continuing development of the well-being offer to staff, note the potential long-term effects of Covid and agree that preventative work should be a key priority. We note the example of a 'trauma informed' counselling service introduced for social workers in Children's services.,

Breaking the cycle

Members are keen to establish whether there are other initiatives the Council could be exploring to break out of a downward sickness absence cycle. We note you consider no immediate policy change is required and the focus must remain on fully embedding consistent and early intervention in the case management of long-term absence cases. We also note your recognition that a concentrated effort is required on the services in greatest difficulty. The Committee has heard similar reports over many years but continues to see little improvement. Recently the situation has again deteriorated with non-covid related cases, following some improvement related to hybrid/home working. We therefore have difficulty seeing how the downward cycle will be broken. Looking beyond past practice towards best practice offers one way to break the mould.

Best practice

The Committee has previously referred Cabinet to other local authorities with approximately half the absence levels of Cardiff for comparative learning. Some contact was made but we are unclear what the conclusions or preclusions were. Such authorities have retained their lower absence levels over a number of years, which would suggest that they are doing things Cardiff could learn from. We consider the size of authority should not have a significant bearing on what can be learned. There was acknowledgement, at Chief Executive level, of the need for greater proactivity in approaching other organisations including within the private sector. The Committee therefore **recommends** that specific and urgent research is undertaken in this area and selected organisations visited in the search for best practice which the Council could put in place or try in specific departments with the highest absence levels. We consider there should be flexibility in considering policy as well as practice in such a review.

Members wish to signpost potentially beneficial best practice learning within the Council as well as externally. Over the challenging pandemic period, despite being at the frontline on public health matters, sickness absence rates within the Shared Regulatory Services (Licensing, Trading Standards & Environmental Health) have been running at 3.6FTE. We therefore **recommend** you start making effective comparisons between Council services and internal sharing of focussed strategies to tackle long and short-term absence.

The Committee **recommends** that the HR function should be targeted with carrying out this work within clear timeframes, also working alongside committed managers who are actively seeking solutions to this continuing problem within their functions.

Waste Management

High levels of absence

The Committee highlighted that non-Covid absence levels are high and increasing in Waste Management. This department was starting from an already very high sickness/absence record over many years. We heard that efforts are being made to resolve a number of long-term ill health retirement cases which have impacted on the increasing levels. We also heard that it remains difficult for managers to validate that all absence is genuine, particularly around mental health and commend the upskilling

of waste management supervisors in mental health counselling in efforts to address this growing problem.

We **recommend** that this department takes part in a similar best practice research, led by its senior managers, to that outlined above, but focused on city waste operations which are similar to our own. This could include public, public/private and private operators.

Progress reports - Waste management

Members feel that Cabinet and Scrutiny would benefit from quarterly progress reports on progress in dealing with absence/sickness within Waste Management and are **recommending** arrangements are put in place to achieve this. We note the falling use of agency staff following the early ending of garden waste collections and the risk of higher absence due to increasing infection rates. Members are concerned that this may impact severely on ward waste collections as winter sets in.

Musculo-skeletal sickness

Given its particular relevance to the Waste Management service, the Committee is keen to understand the level of incident investigation undertaken into Musculo-skeletal absence. We note that you investigate every accident, that the rotation of staff is encouraged, workloads are regularly monitored and the processes around the methodology of collection are regularly examined. We also heard of the bespoke in-house training team and physiotherapist services, and we note you consider there is more opportunity to focus on preventative initiatives in Waste Management.

Stress related absence

Members noted that you continue to operate with around thirty long-term absence cases at any one time and hold regular sickness absence meetings to deal with these. On an individual basis we note that stress risk assessments take place between manager and employee, to identify triggers, make adjustments and review over time. As referred to above, we **recommend** that this individual risk assessment is founded on a service area assessment as to the *causes* of stress in Waste Management. Members cannot convey strongly enough the importance of risk assessing the likelihood of absence from the individual employee's perspective, encouraging individuals to come forward and report on the culture within their

team/service area. If the employee is prepared to contribute to this discussion, then they should be encouraged to do so.

Recommendations to be monitored following this scrutiny:

To summarise, the Committee makes 5 formal recommendations which are set out below. As part of the response to this letter I would be grateful if you could, for each recommendation, state whether the recommendation is accepted, partially accepted or not accepted and summarise the Cabinet’s response. If the recommendation is accepted or partially accepted. I would also be grateful if you could identify the responsible officer and provide an action date. This will ensure that progress can be monitored as part of the approach agreed by Cabinet in December 2020.

Recommendation	Accepted, Partially Accepted or Not Accepted	Cabinet Response	Responsible Officer	Implementation Date
1. Corporate -That you prioritise undertaking work-related stress risk assessments within all service areas.				
2. Corporate - That you proactively research the policies and processes of selected public and private organisations in the search for best practice in tackling sickness absence.				
3. Waste Management - The service undertakes best practice research as above, led by its senior managers, focused on city waste operations which are similar to Cardiff’s.				
4. Waste Management - arrangements are put in place for Cabinet and Scrutiny to receive quarterly progress reports on sickness absence within the service.				
5. Waste Management - the service prioritises a risk assessment to establish the <i>causes</i> of stress in Waste Management.				

Once again thank you for attending the PRAP Scrutiny Committee to update us on Sickness Absence. I would be grateful if you would consider our views, 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
Councillor Michael Michael, Cabinet Member Clean Streets, Recycling & Environment
Paul Orders, Chief Executive
Chris Lee, Corporate Director, Resources
Neil Hanratty, Director of Economic Development
Tracey Thomas, Chief Human Resources Officer
Graham Harries Head of Recycling & Neighbourhood Services
Donna Jones, Assistant Director County Estates
Mr David Hugh Thomas, Chair, Governance & Audit Committee
Chris Pyke, OM Governance & Audit
Tim Gordon, Head of Communications & External Relations
Jeremy Rhys, Assistant Head of Communications and External Affairs
Alison Taylor, Cabinet Support Officer
Joanne Watkins, Cabinet Office Manager