

Final Report of the Corporate and Customer Overview and Scrutiny Panel into Absence Management

1. EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

At the request of the Overview and Scrutiny Committee the sub-group undertook a scrutiny inquiry into absence management. This was selected as a topic linked to the corporate strategy and the Council's priority of "ensuring that Chorley Council is a performing organisation".

Objectives

1. To assess whether the current attendance policy is sufficiently robust.
2. To determine whether the attendance policy is being applied consistently.
3. To identify actions that could improve attendance.

Desired Outcomes

1. To ensure the Council is on target to improve the Council's Best Value Performance Indicator (BVPI) 12 and reach the top quartile.
2. To identify best practice from the public/private sector and recommend actions for Chorley.
3. To ensure the Council has appropriate action plans in place to encourage a healthy workforce and workplace.
4. To ensure that staff recognise the benefits to themselves and colleagues of a fair and consistently applied absence management policy.

Sub-Group Membership

Councillor Mike Devaney (Chair)

Councillor Terry Brown

Councillor Danny Gee

Councillor Hasina Khan

Councillor Geoff Russell

Councillor Stella Walsh

Councillor Doreen Dickinson

Councillor Pat Haughton

Councillor June Molyneaux

Councillor Joyce Snape

Officer Support

Lead Officer

Lorraine Charlesworth

Corporate Director (Human Resources and Organisational Development)

Democratic Services

Ruth Hawes

Assistant Democratic Services Officer

Contribution of Evidence

The Panel would like to thank all those who have provided evidence and contributed to the Inquiry, including South Ribble Borough Council, British Nuclear Fuels and Debit Free Direct (a local private company with a similar number of employees and age range).

The staff should be thanked for their co-operation and congratulated on the excellent improvement of the absence statistics.

Recommendations

The Sub-Group, after taking account of all the evidence has made recommendations in the following areas:

- Employees should speak to their manager specifically when phoning in sick rather than a colleague. *In addition to the Manager being aware immediately of the absence and reasons it also gives the opportunity to discuss any diary appointments or outstanding workload that the Manager can redistribute.*
- A solution should be found to enable managers to put an automatic “out of office” message on the absent employees e-mails, informing senders that the person is unavailable and who to contact if the message is urgent or divert all e-mails to a nominated person. *This will ensure that all e-mails are responded to. Although technically this is possible legal advice is needed to access individuals in boxes as this contravenes the privacy policy.*
- Return to work interviews will be carried out by managers on the first day back in work. They should be held in private and handled sensitively ensuring the employee is fully fit to return to work. *It also gives the Manager the opportunity to discuss any issues that may have contributed to the absence and welcome the employee back into work as a valued member of the team.*
- To report long-term and short-term sickness as well as the overall figure. *This will highlight trends to the management team.*
- To support the implementation of a workplace listeners scheme.
- Feedback on the new Occupational Health contract as part of the monitoring of inquiry recommendations. *It is important to continually monitor the Occupational Health contract to ensure that staff receive the best possible service.*
- Encourage staff to take up the Active at Work and new initiatives offered.

Financial Implications

There are no financial implications to any of the recommendations made.

3. METHOD OF INVESTIGATION

Evidence

The Sub-Group received and considered several reports and documents, these included:

1. Chorley Council Policies: attendance, bereavement and special leave.
2. Absence Statistics (BVPI 12).
3. Return to work interview statistics.
4. Absence figures shown by month and cumulative.
5. Disability, sickness and categories used to show the reasons for absence.
6. Health and well-being initiatives, including Occupational Health Services.
7. Demonstration of the electronic system used to report sickness.
8. South Ribble Absence Management Policy.
9. Comparative information with other local authorities.
10. Evidence of a private sector system.

Witnesses

The sub-group Chair, Councillor Mike Devaney, interviewed officers from South Ribble Borough Council and Debit Free Direct (a comparably sized local company) in September. The Corporate Director (Human Resources and Organisational Development) attended a convention for workplace listeners at British Nuclear Fuels in November.

Panel Meetings

The meeting papers of the Sub-Group can be found on the Council's website: www.chorley.gov.uk. This includes the inquiry documentation: project outline, information and witness checklist and project plan.

General Information

Information on Chorley Borough Council's Overview and Scrutiny Toolkit, policy and procedures can be found on the Council's website: www.chorley.gov.uk/scrutiny

4. FINDINGS

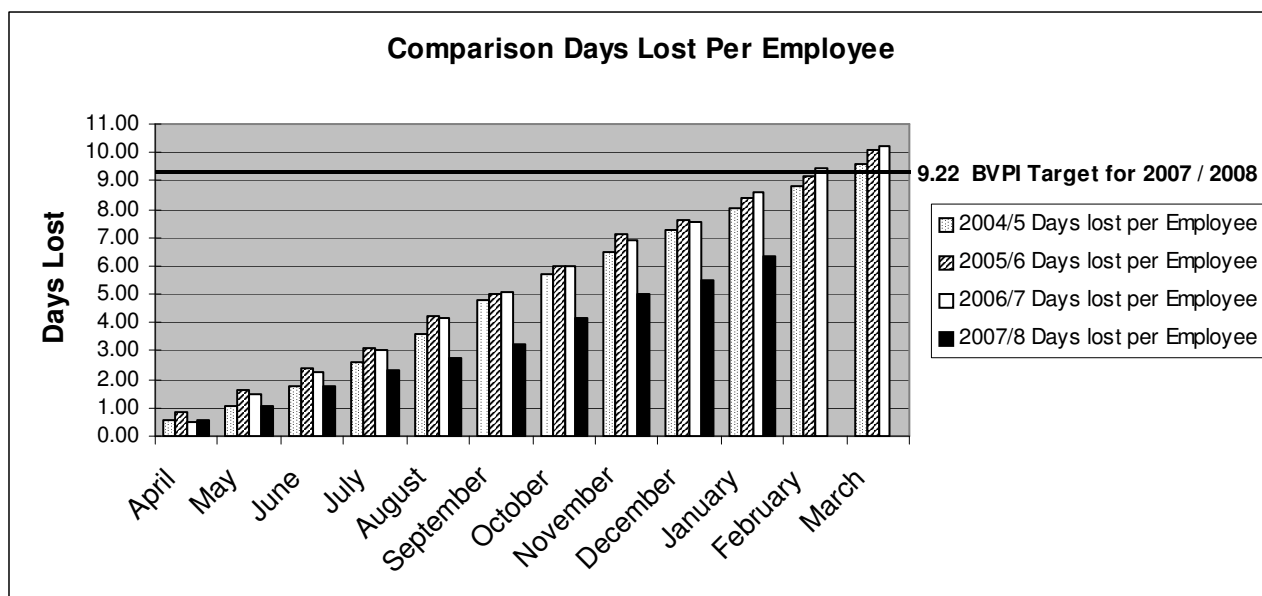
Objective 1: To assess whether the current attendance policy is sufficiently robust

It should be recognised that everyone gets ill from time to time and the Council supports its staff as appropriate. If an employee is absent due to long-term illness he/she must be treated fairly and sympathetically. The Council is committed to encouraging a healthy workforce.

Chorley Council has a number of policies in place to manage absence, including bereavement leave, special leave and parental leave. These policies enable staff to take authorised leave as outlined within the relevant policy, this avoids the need to report in sick for example when a close family member has died. Leave associated with these policies must be approved by their Manager and is closely monitored within Human Resources to avoid any abuse of the provisions. Chorley’s attendance policy is comprehensive with practical advice to managers on how to manage absence.

Best Value Performance Indicator 12 measures the working days lost due to sickness absence.

- The annual target for the Council for the financial year, to the end of March, is 9.22 days.
- The actual absence statistics for the Council from April 2007 to the end of December 2007 is 5.5 days.
- Comparative figures from 5 other District Councils in Lancashire range from 5.53 days to 8.92 days for the same period.
- For 2006/07 Chorley was mid table in comparison to other Lancashire Councils.



A local company with a comparable number of staff was contacted to compare how they manage attendance. Whilst their practices were effective for their own organisation it was felt that they would not be appropriate for the Council as we are subject to a National Agreement on Pay and Conditions of Service.

Return to work interviews are an important part of the policy. Evidence shows that return to work interviews are an effective part of managing absence and therefore are monitored and reported on a monthly basis. It is disappointing to report however that despite the work carried out this stands at only 90% completed up to the end of December. Additional work is currently underway with managers to ensure they are completed on every occasion regardless of the length of sickness absence.

The graph below shows the percentage of return to work interviews completed per month – April to December 2007.

GRAPH 1 – To be distributed at the meeting

In response to Objective 1 “To assess whether the current attendance policy is sufficiently robust” the Sub-Group found that the current Attendance Management Policy is robust, however, as the policy has been in place for nearly two years it would benefit from a number of modifications as part of the policy review process.

Recommendations

- Employees should speak to their Manager specifically when phoning in sick rather than a colleague. *In addition to the Manager being aware immediately of the absence and reasons it also gives the opportunity to discuss any diary appointments or outstanding workload that the Manager can redistribute.*
- A solution should be found to enable managers to put an automatic “out of office” message on the absent employees e-mails, informing senders that the person is unavailable and who to contact if the message is urgent. *This will ensure that all e-mails are responded to. Although technically this is possible legal advice is needed to access individuals in boxes as this contravenes the privacy policy.*
- Return to work interviews will be carried out by managers on the first day back at work. They should be held in private and handled sensitively ensuring the employee is fully fit to return to work. *It also gives the Manager the opportunity to discuss any issues that may have contributed to the absence and welcome the employee back into work as a valued member of the team.*

Objective 2: To determine whether the attendance policy is being applied consistently

The system used to report and then monitor sickness was demonstrated to the sub-group. The same system is used throughout the Council and ensures consistency. Human Resources Advisors support managers through the whole process as difficult situations can arise.

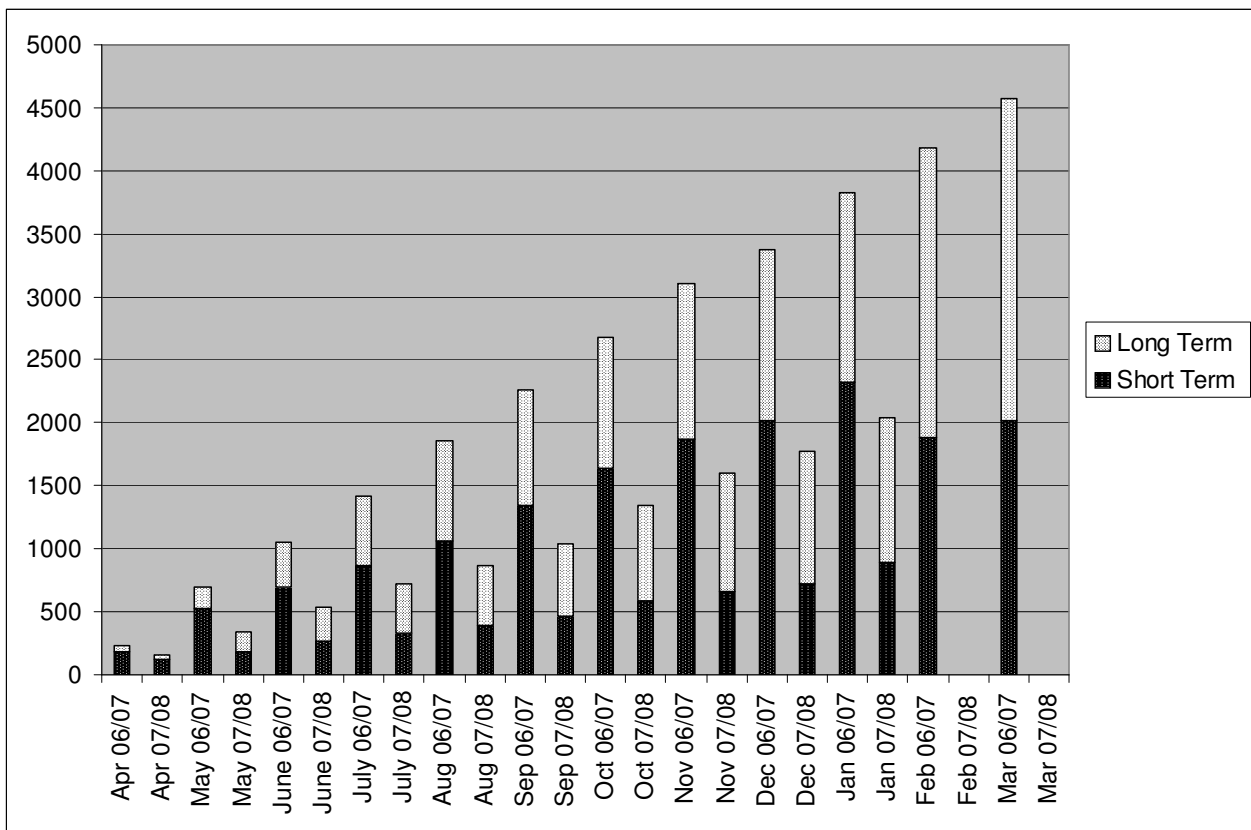
As part of the ongoing efficiency inquiry all Directors were asked about the level of absences and the application of the policy within their Directorate. Overall the response was positive. However, it was recognised that the use of the policy was ongoing.

A page on the loop advises all staff of the health initiatives and facilities available, the ticker-tape and e-news and views is used to highlight information.

In response to Objective 2 “To determine whether the attendance policy is being applied consistently” the Sub-Group found that the policy is generally being applied consistently. However, it is recognised that further work needs to be carried out in certain areas particularly around return to work interviews.

The split between short and long-term absence, which is any absence above 20 working days, is reflective of national trends at 1.36% short-term and 1.75% long-term up to the end of January 2008.

The graph below shows a comparison of long-term/short-term days lost.



The table shows sickness statistics from April to January 2007.

WORKING DAYS LOST	2039.47
WORKING DAYS AVAILABLE	65489.18
SICKNESS LEVEL (%)	3.1
SHORT TERM DAYS LOST	891.11
LONG TERM DAYS LOST	1148.36
SHORT TERM (%)	1.36
LONG TERM (%)	1.75

Trends and reasons for absence are analysed, in addition to monitoring Directorates and teams within them, thus recognising different working environments. Those employees who work outdoors in general have more absence due to the nature of their job and working conditions, this again is reflective of the national picture. However, further analysis and investigation and support will be carried out to improve attendance in these areas.

Recommendations

- To report long-term and short-term sickness as well as the overall figure on a monthly basis. *This will highlight trends to the management team.*

Objective 3: To identify actions that could improve attendance

As a result of the visit to British Nuclear Fuels it would be beneficial to introduce a similar scheme of workplace listeners throughout the Council. Workplace Listeners are trusted colleagues with whom people could share concerns. To help volunteers the Council will introduce training and listening skills.

A health and well-being strategy is currently being developed and intends to provide a holistic approach to improving the overall health and well-being of our workforce. This will include:

Creating a safe and healthy workplace includes flu vaccinations, health and safety.

Recruitment, retention and rehabilitation robust selection, attendance and job evaluation policy.

Mental Well-Being stress management policy, workplace listeners, flexi-time policy, staff involvement and communication, equality and diversity policy, plus other alternative therapies.

Musculoskeletal conditions includes DSE assessments, and physiotherapy and manual handling training.

Tobacco includes the smoke free policy and help to stop smoking.

Alcohol and substance misuse including development of an alcohol and substance misuse policy and support through occupational health.

Physical activity includes Active at Work, discounted gym membership and information on the loop

Healthy eating includes promoting and encouraging healthy eating through advice and guidance on the loop.

A good example of creating a safe and healthy workplace was the introduction of antibacterial hand wash in all toilets and kitchens throughout the Council after the winter vomiting bug.

The Chief Executives Awards is an annual event that amongst other things recognises individual and team attendance.

A review of the current Occupational Health provision has taken place and with effect from the 1 April 2008 will be provided by Preston and Chorley NHS Trust based at Chorley Hospital.

The Council is part of a “health and well-being” group that is looking at new initiatives and best practice across Lancashire. Lancashire County Council, West Lancashire and Burnley Councils are partners in this group.

In response to Objective 3 “To identify actions that could improve attendance” the Sub-Group have made the following recommendations:

- To implement a workplace listeners scheme.
- Feedback on the new Occupational Health contract be reported as part of the monitoring of inquiry recommendations. *It is important to continually monitor the Occupational Health contract to ensure that staff receive the best possible service.*
- To encourage staff to take up the active at work and new initiatives on offer.