

Report of the Director of Human Resources to the meeting of Corporate Overview and Scrutiny to be held on 14 October 2021

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Subject:

Attendance Management

Summary statement:

This report provides an update on the Managing Attendance Scrutiny Review which was considered at Corporate Overview Scrutiny Committee on 22 October 2020.

EQUALITY & DIVERSITY:

Equality and Diversity considerations are integral to the effective management of sickness absence. Wellbeing interventions for employees aim to maintain good health and have a positive influence on the protected characteristics identified by the Equality Act 2010. Health outcomes can be significantly impacted by having certain protected characteristics and this is recognised in the implementation of the Wellbeing Strategy through the Wellbeing Framework and Action Plan.

Recent work on supporting the workforce through the Covid-19 Pandemic resulted in an individual risk assessment being implemented for all Black, Asian and Minority Ethnic and other at risk employees, and several video conferences being arranged to engage with staff. The Wellbeing Strategy has been Equality Impact Assessed and will continue to enable the Service to be instrumental in providing an inclusive employee wellbeing offer and support employees regardless of their background or disability to stay in work.

Absence data and is now available to managers in a variety of formats including an innovative dashboard. Data is displayed, formatted and analysed to examine the impact on protected characteristics so that appropriate action can be taken.

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Portfolio:
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1. SUMMARY

- 1.1 A Managing Attendance Scrutiny Review was considered by the Corporate Overview and Scrutiny Committee on 22 October 2020. One of the agreed recommendations was that the Committee receives a report back in 12 months, which monitors the progress against all seven of the recommendations. This report provides this update.

2. BACKGROUND

- 2.1 At the Corporate Overview and Scrutiny Committee of Wednesday 22 November 2017 it was agreed that an in-depth Scrutiny Review, into Managing Attendance across Bradford Council would be undertaken.
- 2.2 A report was produced by the Corporate Overview and Scrutiny Committee in response to this recommendation made by the committee and was considered by the committee on 22 October 2020.
- 2.3 In recent years' sick absence in the Council has peaked at 13.0 Full Time Equivalent (FTE) days lost per employee in 2018/19 and reduced to 10.75 FTE days lost per employee in 2020/21. The operating environment has changed significantly due to the COVID-19 pandemic and Council staff have been delivering services in many different ways.
- 2.4 Sickness absence caused by poor mental health is the main cause of sickness absence and has been steadily increasing over the past 5 years, which is a national and global trend. The appointment of a Wellbeing Co-ordinator has added capacity to develop a comprehensive programme of wellbeing interventions that are detailed in Appendix A, aimed at reducing sickness absence which seek to address this trend.
- 2.5 In their report the committee agreed to 7 recommendations, the respective progress update is detailed under each recommendation:

Recommendation 1:

That amendment's be made to Bradford Council's Managing Attendance Policy, specifically relating to promoting earlier conversations and dialogue between manager and employee, with a view to a quicker return to work.

Update on Progress:

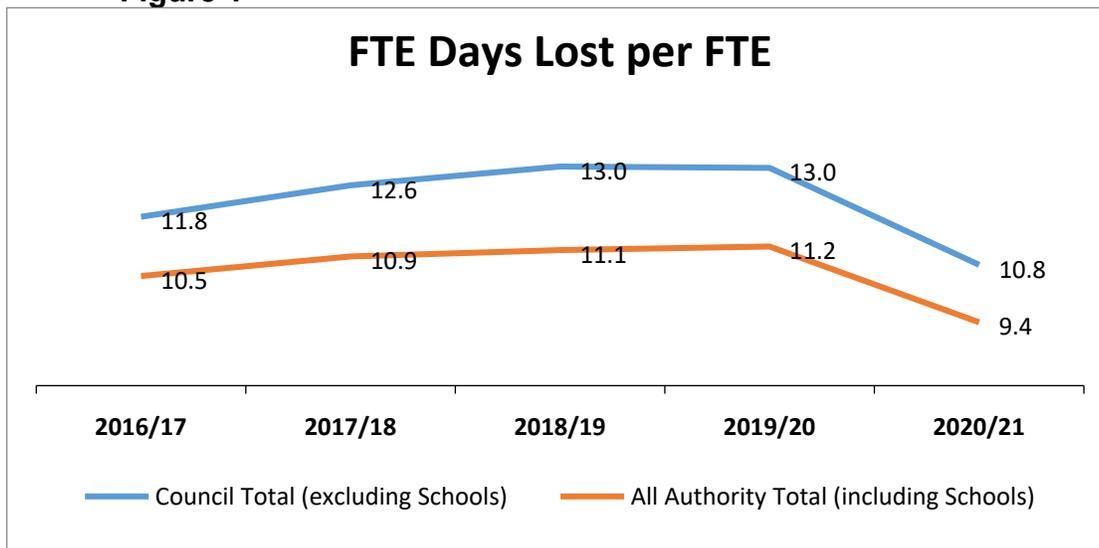
Early conversation and intervention by managers for all sickness cases has always been paramount. Our outsourced HR Advisory Service, which came in-house from August 2021, provided a coaching service to managers enabling them to feel confident in making those interventions. Relevant guidance has been provided and frequently updated for managers to enable them to effectively and sensitively manage sickness absence.

- 2.6 Guidance was updated during 2020 and 2021 to support staff wellbeing with a particular focus on the pandemic. This included additional guidance and support

around health and wellbeing, physical and mental health, and new guidance to support Covid-19 including self-isolation, shielding, vulnerable staff, Covid sickness absence, Long Covid and vaccine reaction, all of which promote early conversations and dialogue to support employees to stay well and return to work as soon as possible.

2.7 The chart below (Fig 1) shows the average number of Full Time Equivalent (FTE) days lost per employee over the last 5 years. This shows a very significant drop in sickness absence between 2019/20 and 2020/21. The factors influencing this decline are varied; due to the promotion of earlier dialogue, support, new and well publicised guidance and support tools, and also the impact of the pandemic on service delivery and working arrangements.

Figure 1



The chart below (Fig 2) shows the days lost per FTE by Department.

Figure 2

Sickness Days: Department	FTE Days Lost per FTE (original BV12 definition)				
	2016/17	2017/18	2018/19	2019/20	2020/21
Health & Wellbeing	14.74	14.68	15.60	13.37	13.66
Chief Exec's & Office of the Chief Executive	4.60	7.71	5.36	4.87	7.30
Children's Services	13.72	13.62	14.03	14.98	12.52
Place	11.22	13.01	14.06	13.58	9.23
Corporate Services	10.02	10.65	10.32	11.35	9.47
West Yorkshire Pension Fund	9.27	6.79	6.14	6.05	5.48
Council Total (excluding Schools)	11.85	12.57	13.00	12.96	10.75
Schools	8.68	8.33	7.65	7.51	6.60
All Authority Total (including Schools)	10.50	10.94	11.09	11.17	9.44

2.8 The recent in-sourcing of the HR Advisory service during August 2021 has provided the opportunity to embed this approach further within the organisation and support managers fully through all sickness cases, with supporting case management system, that enhances our ability to proactively manage cases. As part of the proposed employment policy review, HR will be looking at any

amendments needed to the Council's sickness absence procedure. The insourced service wherever possible, encourages managers to be pro-active in their approach to managing sickness absence cases and have early conversations with staff members that are absent to try and facilitate a quicker supported return to work. Each case is assessed on a case by case basis, in order that the most appropriate advice is provided and managers are clear where early conversations might be beneficial for a return to work.

Recommendation 2:

That officers from Human Resources and the Health and Wellbeing Board raise with the Clinical Commissioning Groups and explore opportunities to overcome barriers presented with 'no contact' statements on GP Fit Notes in order to progress support, occupational health referral and adjustments and facilitate an employee returning to work early. That officers review and strengthen the supporting attendance policy on communicating with employees who are absent due to illness or injury.

Update on Progress:

There is some evidence of a small amount of fit notes asking for the employee not to be contacted and occasionally the employee may need some time away from work to help them deal with on-going issues and would prefer management not to contact them. This is often not an unreasonable request, our HR and Employee Health and Wellbeing approach is to assess each case individually and consider the following:

- a) Could another manager be used to make contact with the member of staff?
- b) Could Employee Health and Wellbeing set a timescale as to when they could re-assess the member of staff and see when they might be fit for contact to be made.
- c) We have an obligation/duty of care to the member of staff so can we correspond with a relative for a period of time?
- d) Can we use other mechanisms of communication such as email as this may be less stressful for the employee?
- e) We still need to ensure that we are aware of any wellbeing support that they may require that we can facilitate whilst they are away from work.
- f) Ultimately the employee is obligated to engage in our contractual sickness absence procedure, but we need to approach this in as supportive way as possible.
- g) We also have a right to challenge the medical advice, if this comes from the employee's GP. They are not occupational Health experts, so we could suggest getting a second opinion from our own Employee Health and Wellbeing Service and they may also be able to suggest options that are open to us, such as using an intermediary.

- 2.9 The process for fit notes and their use will vary between all GP Practices. Having engaged with health it has been confirmed that that this isn't something the CCG are able to get involved with. The Council has been directed to progress conversations with the Local Medical Committee in order to progress discussions and communicate with General Practices. The assessment of each individual case will continue.

Recommendation 3:

That the Director of Human Resources reinstates the Department Attendance Champions group, to be chaired by the Director of Human Resources.

Update on Progress:

A revised model has been introduced and is being piloted in Corporate Resources before wider roll out across the Council, whereby Corporate Resources Departmental Management Team consider reports prepared by the Departmental Attendance Champion (DAC) Chair who meets regularly with a network of service champions.

The Director of Human Resources and HR service continue to promote and support the Departmental Attendance Champions meeting, ensuring that appropriate data and guidance is provided and a consistent approach to absence management is taken throughout the organisation. Recent consequences of this approach has delivered greater consistency around attendance review periods. Ensuring consistency in means that the HR Service can clearly see how council services and departments compare to each other and where HR may need to provide additional focus and bespoke support to those departments with higher than average sickness absence rates.

Recommendation 4:

That officers in Bradford Council's Human Resources develop a more consistent and streamlined approach to providing and guidance to Bradford Council officers, who are responsible for managing attendance.

Update on Progress:

Human Resources have developed a multi-channel communications approach and wellbeing offer (see Appendix A) which includes a My Wellbeing Matters Facebook group, a wellbeing booklet that brings tools and support into one place, online webinars and sessions and a refreshed new employee wellbeing strategy.

Our in-house HR Advisory Service established in August 2021, while in its infancy has a new team some posts are currently being recruited to, that are working in a systematic and person centred way to provide consistent advice, coaching and, support to managers and track and manage sick absence cases proactively. The team are developing and adopting key performance indicators to ensure timeliness, quality and customer service measures are in place. HR Advisory support is provided through a blended model of phone/face to face support and further plans are being put in place to provide a single points of access for all

workforce queries, the implementation of development and learning plans and plans to provide multi-channel policy/process toolkits for managers including short practical 'how to' video's, visual and PowerPoint presentations.

The procurement of a case and call management system that will support the work of the HR Advisory team is underway to be implemented in early 2022 (a temporary case management system is in place in the interim).

Significant work has also been undertaken within HR to remodel the service. A People Strategy has been developed which refocuses on enabling the organisation to deliver the type of workforce needed to meet its priorities and support the whole employee life cycle. It provides the link between the Council Plan and the workforce needed. This is supported by a new Workforce Development Strategy which includes investment in inclusive management, leadership and talent development.

A new policy review cycle framework has been developed and will be implemented during Q3/4 of 2021/22 FY that provides a systematic, clear, accessible and inclusive suite of policy and procedures, supporting guidance and toolkits.

Recommendation 5:

That Bradford Council's Human Resources officers develop and implement approaches, to ensure that the Council's Managing Attendance Policy is being followed consistently, by those officers who have a responsibility for Managing Attendance.

Progress Update:

In addition to the progress updates contained within recommendation 1-4 of this report, the Council introduced targets for managers in August 2018 to measure adherence with agreed absence management processes. For long term sickness the target was for 75% of formal cases to be closed in under 122 days. Trigger points have long been in place to alert managers to take certain actions when one of their staff has a certain level of sickness.

As we transition into and embed the new service and HR structure targets will be reviewed taking account of what has been learnt through the pandemic, from staff engagement (surveys and sessions), and learning from current practices and new targets developed and consulted upon. The current approach to targets could be seen as punitive in some areas (e.g. proportion of formal improvement notices target at 33%) which does not align with person centred, work focussed approach.

The table below shows the latest performance figures.

Figure 4

Short Term Sickness	Target	Actual
Proportion of formal improvement notices	33%	31.7
Cases raised when a trigger point has been exceeded (8+ days absence in 12 months)	85%	32.8%
Long Term Sickness		
Average length of absence	122 d a y s	124 days
Cases raised when a trigger point has been exceeded (4 weeks of absence)	85%	84%

2.10 The graphs below provide further information on compliance showing the proportion of cases where managers have raised a case in compliance with the sickness absence procedures. There has been a slight improvement in compliance.

Figure 5



2.11 Performance data is considered by Departmental Management Teams, and actions put in place to improve compliance including using the Departmental Attendance Champions network. Areas of poor performance have been identified and interventions are being put in place to improve this performance, including a bespoke approach that is being piloted currently.

2.12 A key part of compliance is ensuring the managers have access to relevant data and intelligence. The Workforce Dashboard has played a major part in this and was rolled out to all staff with access to Bradnet in September 2019. This gives a wide variety of regularly updated anonymised statistical workforce information by Department and Service, including absence management, case management and absence performance.

2.13 This dashboard is in a process of continuous improvement in response to user feedback received and now provides transparent workforce data on a wide range

of topics in an easy to use format which can be exported to other applications as required. Managers are able to easily see the contribution they are making to their Service's successful management of sickness absence.

- 2.14 The Workforce Dashboard is currently the number one most-visited Dashboard on the Council's network, and has been visited 269 times in the last 2 months.
- 2.15 The data on the Workforce Dashboard is anonymised "open data", which means that anyone in the Council can access it. HR is now also currently further improving the data service provision to managers, trialling a restricted Manager Dashboard with a group of pilot managers, which is almost ready to be rolled out. This will give managers secure, detailed, "real-time" information about their employees and help them to manage absence and attendance more effectively than ever.
- 2.16 The introduction and implementation of the new 'in-house' HR Advisory Team also provides an opportunity to improve performance, customer experience, consistency and work with employee health and wellbeing to support managers to reduce absence and support people to stay in work or return to work as early as possible.

Recommendation 6:

Mandatory learning and development support should be provided to all Bradford Council officers who have a responsibility for managing attendance.

Update on Progress:

Bradford Council managers have continued to receive coaching on absence management through the out sourced, and more recently through the in-house HR Advisory service. The table below shows the number of line managers who have received specific managing attendance/managing mental health training and the percentage trained.

Figure 6

Year	Total Managers	No. Trained	% Trained
2015	910	98	10.8%
2018	898	420	46.8%
2021	1,073	434	40.5%

Due to the Covid Pandemic it has not been possible to provide face to face learning so training activity has reduced slightly and the offer has moved online.

The HR Advisory service will provide ongoing coaching to managers, and also some bespoke training and face to face support. The new Workforce Development Plan identified ten priority areas of learning and development for the Council – with a clear focus on inclusion, culture, and values which will support with the 'how' managers' manage and support their staff through sickness and/or disability. As part of the policy review cycle framework any new or refreshed policies will have a supporting communications and training plan associated with delivery and launch.

Recommendation 7:

Bradford Council's Corporate Overview and Scrutiny Committee to receive a report back in 12 months, which monitors the progress against all the recommendations contained within this scrutiny review.

Update on Progress:

This report shows the progress made against each recommendation.

Appendix A outlines the developments made and future plans for the employee health and wellbeing offer.

3. OTHER CONSIDERATIONS

None

4. FINANCIAL & RESOURCE APPRAISAL

None

5. RISK MANAGEMENT AND GOVERNANCE ISSUES

None

6. LEGAL APPRAISAL

None

7. OTHER IMPLICATIONS

7.1 SUSTAINABILITY IMPLICATIONS

None

7.2 GREENHOUSE GAS EMISSIONS IMPACTS

None

7.3 COMMUNITY SAFETY IMPLICATIONS

None

7.4 HUMAN RIGHTS ACT

None

7.5 TRADE UNION

Consultation and engagement with the Trade Unions is a critical aspect of effectively managing sickness absence. Trade Union consultation will take place for future policy refreshes of sickness absence and supporting attendance.

7.6 WARD IMPLICATIONS

None

7.7 AREA COMMITTEE ACTION PLAN IMPLICATIONS (for reports to Area Committees only)

None

7.8 IMPLICATIONS FOR CORPORATE PARENTING

None

7.9 ISSUES ARISING FROM PRIVACY IMPACT ASSESMENT

None

8. NOT FOR PUBLICATION DOCUMENTS

None

9. OPTIONS

None

10. RECOMMENDATIONS

That Corporate Overview and Scrutiny Committee consider the contents of this report and provide any feedback that they wish to do so to enable the HR & OD team to incorporate this in our ongoing work.

11. APPENDICES

Appendix A - Employee Health and Wellbeing Offer

Appendix B - Corporate Overview & Scrutiny Committee Managing Attendance Scrutiny Review Report 22 October 2020 (Report No.7 on the main agenda pack)
<https://bradfordintranet.moderngov.co.uk/documents/g7430/Public%20reports%20pack%2022nd-Oct-2020%2016.00%20Corporate%20Overview%20and%20Scrutiny%20Committee.pdf?T=10>

