

Finance Scrutiny Committee - Human Resources Subgroup

Minutes of the meeting held on 31 July 2012

Present:

Councillor Flanagan – In the Chair
Councillors Andrews, Clayton and Hitchen

Councillor S Murphy – Deputy Leader of the Council

Apologies:

Councillors Siddiqui and Watson

FS/HS/12/01 Attendance Monitoring

A report of the Assistant Chief Executive (People) was submitted at the request of the Finance Scrutiny Committee at its May 2012 meeting. At this meeting, the Committee had resolved to re-establish the Human Resources Subgroup to investigate attendance monitoring in more detail, with specific reference to:

- The financial cost of long and short term sickness
- The impact of covering for absences
- Comparison data with other relevant authorities and the private sector
- The role of the m people approach in reducing sickness levels
- Detailed information on sickness levels across individual services

In addition, the report also set out current activity to support attendance at departmental and corporate level and the main managerial responsibilities when managing attendance. An overview of absence trends together with a summary of the main underlying causes for absence was appended to the report. The Chair thanked officers on behalf of the subgroup for the comprehensive and detailed report which satisfied the Finance Scrutiny Committee's key lines of enquiry.

The Assistant Chief Executive (People) introduced the report with particular emphasis on approximately 45% of the current workforce having had no recorded sickness absence in the last 12 months, which she felt demonstrated a strong commitment from Council staff in the delivery and maintenance of quality services to the people of Manchester.

Members acknowledged that genuine sickness absence from work is largely unavoidable, and agreed that unjustified and/or high levels of sickness absence needed to be appropriately addressed in a non-discriminatory way due to the additional burden and cost to the authority. They also stressed the importance of promoting a high attendance culture where people want to attend work and fulfil their contractual obligations.

As the report highlighted that one of the main reasons for short term absence was flu-related illness, a member asked whether consideration had been given to the introduction of a staff vaccination program, particularly for staff members who deal with the public. The Head of Human Resources/Organisational Development (HROD) Service Delivery advised that a flu-vaccination programme had previously been offered, however take up had been sporadic. He said that a further programme could be considered with exploration as to whether the benefits outweigh the costs. He added that if adopted, such a scheme would have to be tracked against absence patterns to assess the impact of vaccination. A member suggested that delivery through the Vectis card (the employee benefit and discounts scheme) might also be explored.

In its analysis of sickness duration across the Council, the report highlighted specific trends across each of the directorates broken down by service area. As part of this discussion, the report made reference to a detailed analysis of the causes of stress related absences in the medium and long term categories within the Department for Adults, Health and Wellbeing and the implementation of an action plan. A member expressed an interest in seeing this.

The Subgroup also noted relatively high instances of long term absence within Children's Services. A member asked for further information on this. The Assistant Chief Executive (People) advised that these trends were not consistent across the Directorate but were occurring around four particular service areas, with the most significant cause being stress-related illness followed by depression/mental health, illness, and musculoskeletal factors. She advised that measures were being undertaken to strengthen and support managers' roles, identify any underlying issues and explore a range of early interventions to promote an early, safe return and rehabilitation into the workplace. The Subgroup welcomed these steps and requested further information on this area of work in a future update.

The Subgroup then discussed the prevalence of long-term sickness across wider Council services, which accounted for the highest proportion of the number of days lost and the subsequent impact in terms of financial cost and service delivery. It was emphasised that a proportionately small percentage of the workforce had contributed to a much higher proportion of absence. Officers described the proactive support being undertaken with managers to offer advice and support on specific cases.

The report also discussed the number of days lost due to specific circumstances linked to individual disputes with the organisation, or where the organisation was taking disciplinary action against a small cohort of individuals. Members noted this and asked whether in future the methodology of gathering statistics could be amended so that cases of this particular type of absenteeism were recorded separately so that the overall figure is not skewed. Officers agreed to look into this.

The Subgroup discussed the fundamental role of managers and the importance of providing them with the right incentives to apply the attendance policy effectively. The Assistant Chief Executive (People) advised that current systems were being updated to promote real-time recording of absence data and other associated activities related to the management of sickness absence. It was envisaged that this system would be in place in April 2013 and would create a refreshed culture within which

managers were duly supported to effectively monitor levels of sickness absence and senior managers were able to undertake greater scrutiny of day to day management practice.

There was a discussion about the role of HROD in attendance management and whether they should adopt a stronger role in improving attendance across the Council. The Assistant Chief Executive (People) advised that through their knowledge and understanding of work place issues, and day to day supervision, engagement and communication of individual staff members, managers represented an essential element in the application of the policy. She gave emphasis to the role of HROD in providing flexible support and challenge to managers, particularly where sickness absence has extended over 20 days and by ensuring that departments were complying fully both with the Council's policy and legislative requirements.

Decision:

To request that a further update in 6 months on Attendance Monitoring is submitted to the Finance Scrutiny Committee which includes:-

- a feasibility study on the introduction of a staff flu-vaccination programme
- details of the action plan relating to stress related medium and long term absence in the Department for Adults, Health and Wellbeing
- further information on the incidence of stress related absence in Children's Services and the effectiveness of actions being undertaken to address this.

FS/HS/12/02 Terms of Reference and Work Programme

Decision

To note the terms of reference of the Human Resources subgroup.