

NORTH LINCOLNSHIRE COUNCIL

CABINET

RE-VISIT OF THE REVIEW OF SICKNESS ABSENCE IN NORTH LINCOLNSHIRE COUNCIL COMPLETED IN DECEMBER 2003

1. OBJECT AND KEY POINTS IN THIS REPORT

- 1.1 To consider the conclusions and recommendations of the Economic Development and Corporate Issues Scrutiny Panel in relation to a re-visit of the Review of Sickness Absence in North Lincolnshire.

2. BACKGROUND INFORMATION

- 2.1 At its meeting held on 17 March 2010, the council considered a report of the Economic Development and Corporate Issues Scrutiny Panel in relation to a re-visit of the Review of Sickness Absence in North Lincolnshire which had been completed originally in December 2003.
- 2.2 The report was approved by council and referred to cabinet for consideration of the recommendations with a view to the preparation of an action plan.
- 2.3 The panel completed its review in February 2010. It was carried out following the publication of the Annual Audit and Inspection Letter in March 2009 which identified a number of key issues where action needed to be taken, which included the reduction of staff sickness absence rates. The report identified that the council's capacity was hampered at its operational level by increasing levels of staff sickness absence, and that this was an area of poor performance.

In July 2009, the Economic Development and Corporate Issues Scrutiny Panel had agreed to once again re-visit sickness absence, taking on board and contributing to the council's response to the comments made in the Annual Audit Inspection Letter.

- 2.4 Following its re-visit the panel made 16 detailed recommendations. A copy of the conclusions and recommendations are attached as an appendix to the report.

3. OPTIONS FOR CONSIDERATION

- 3.1 There are no options associated with this report.

4. RESOURCE IMPLICATIONS (FINANCIAL, STAFFING, PROPERTY, IT)

- 4.1 There may be some resource implications associated with the recommendations when they are implemented.

5. OTHER IMPLICATIONS (STATUTORY, ENVIRONMENTAL, DIVERSITY, SECTION 17 - CRIME AND DISORDER, RISK AND OTHER)

- 5.1 There may be other implications associated with the implementation of the recommendations which will be highlighted in any action plan.

6. OUTCOMES OF CONSULTATION

- 6.1 The panel consulted widely with other scrutiny members and officers and other organisations and individuals in relation to the preparation of the original report.

7. RECOMMENDATIONS

- 7.1 That the report and recommendations be approved and adopted.
- 7.2 That the Service Director Human Resources and other officers, together with the Cabinet Member for Corporate Services prepare an action plan in response to the recommendations of the report for submission to a future meeting of cabinet.

SERVICE DIRECTOR LEGAL AND DEMOCRATIC

Pittwood House
Ashby Road
Scunthorpe
North Lincolnshire
DN16 1AB
MDH/LMK
Author: Mel Holmes
Date: 24 March 2010

Background Papers used in the preparation of this report - Report of the Economic Development and Corporate Issues Scrutiny Panel

THE PANEL'S CONCLUSIONS & RECOMMENDATIONS

This scrutiny review has highlighted the continuing failure to reduce significantly the level of sickness absence in North Lincolnshire Council as they did in the two previous scrutiny reports. It is clear that the council will not achieve significant improvement and set targets unless something is done about the situation and the recommendations are put into action. It is difficult to estimate the impact of any particular change, but any change that helps to encourage firm and timely action across all council services is likely to be beneficial.

The aims of the panel's recommendations in the report are largely directed at achieving greater consistency and a corporate approach to managing attendance. Some of the recommendations are already in place in some services, but more energy is still required to ensure that the authority as a whole achieves.

MANAGEMENT

Once again the panel found overwhelming evidence as they did in their previous reports on sickness absence that management are the ones who hold the key to reducing sickness absence rates. They are the closest to the employees within the service and they need to be much more pro-active and spend more time managing rather than doing. It is their responsibility to assess levels of sickness in their service, and tackle the issues as they arise in accordance with the council's sickness absence procedure.

Members have heard evidence to suggest that this is not happening across the council and are very concerned with some of the review findings. The Chief Executive, Service Directors and managers need to understand that it is a mandatory part of their role to manage sickness absence and that it should be carried out consistently across the council.

Human Resources (HR) also have a role to play in assisting managers on sickness absence, and if some managers are not complying with the council's sickness absence procedures steps should be taken to rectify this. Having the right information on absence is at the heart of managing it well.

The first step in being able to manage a problem is to know the exact nature of the problem. This is about managers having the right information to manage the job, and show that the job is being managed.

RECOMMENDATION 1

That all managers be reminded of their obligation to manage the absence of all their employees through the diligent and fair application of the council's sickness absence procedure.

RECOMMENDATION 2

That Human Resources produce a manager's checklist to be used by all managers when (a) an employee notifies them of their absence, (b) steps to be followed during absence providing advice of different scenarios, (c) actions to be implemented upon the employees return, and (d) be used for every employee absence.

RECOMMENDATION 3

That once the employee has successfully returned to work the above checklist be signed by the line manager and returned to HR for audit purposes.

RECOMMENDATION 4

That the mandatory completion and return to HR of the checklist form be part of individual service areas Quarterly Performance Review meetings. This will allow Service Directors to ensure that managers are complying with the council's sickness absence procedures.

RECOMMENDATION 5

That the scrutiny panel be consulted on the checklist prior to its implementation.

RECOMMENDATION 6

That as part of managers' Employee Development Reviews held annually, a specific part of their appraisal be their performance in implementing the council's sickness absence procedures, failure by the manager to have achieved 100% completion and return of the checklist to HR be dealt with according to the severity of failing to comply with mandatory requirements.

RECOMMENDATION 7

That a Sickness Absence Panel/Board be formed and led by the Chief Executive. This would provide specific management coordination of sickness absence and

should be made up of Human Resources officers, senior managers and a representative from Occupational Health.

RECOMMENDATION 8

That in future managers receive details of sickness costs for their service and these should be incorporated into their performance targets.

TRAINING

From evidence gathered during the review it was apparent that the council's sickness absence policy is not applied consistently across all service areas, and not all managers feel they have had the necessary training to be able to competently deal with various sickness absence issues. The panel would like to see a specific training package just for managers that will communicate the importance of consistency in applying the policy, recognising trends and providing appropriate support to employees who are either off long term or short term, in addition to raising awareness of the affects sickness absence has on the service.

RECOMMENDATION 9

That a new comprehensive mandatory training package be developed and brought into use for all managers with supervisory responsibilities.

RECOMMENDATION 10

That mandatory refresher training courses be introduced once all managers have attended the above training, particularly when any amendments are made to the council's sickness absence policy.

COUNCIL'S SICKNESS ABSENCE POLICY

The council's sickness absence policy is the key tool used by managers and HR within the council to consistently mange staff sickness absence. Therefore, it is vital that as a council we get this right, and eventually reductions in absence will follow.

It is obvious from the evidence received by the panel that a review of the procedure is necessary. To enable managers to deal with short-term absences more effectively the current trigger points of up to 12 days per employee are felt to be too generous based on the council's target of 8.8 days. Members would also like to see referrals initiated sooner to the Occupational Health Service (OHS).

RECOMMENDATION 11

That in addressing amendments to the sickness absence policy the panel would like the Trade Unions to be consulted on any proposals.

RECOMMENDATION 12

That the reduction of the current trigger points for short-term absences be investigated with immediate effect.

RECOMMENDATION 13

That consideration be given to reducing the referral times to the OHS, and detailed in the council's sickness absence policy for managers guidance.

RECOGNISING GOOD ATTENDANCE

The panel would like to express once again that the majority of staff working for the council have excellent attendance, some with 100%, and the members appreciate all their hard work. The panel have not carried out this review to just penalise staff for bad attendance, but also to reward employees for excellent attendance.

Evidence from other council's suggest that praising good attendance shows everyone that it is valued and that this can easily be achieved through team meetings, information on notice boards or in newsletters. There are other incentives detailed in the findings of the report and have indicated that it is just as vital to be positive about good performance, as it is to challenge poor performance.

RECOMMENDATION 14

That the Council Management Team investigates the possibilities of praising and rewarding good attendance and showing employees they are valued.

ABSENCE MANAGEMENT SPECIALISTS

Members were of the conclusion that the absence management company that attended to give a presentation on their abilities to reduce sickness within the council was very interesting and worth further investigation. However, members were of the

opinion that the tools provided by this company could ‘in the main’ be carried out by the council if the appropriate mechanisms were put in place, for example: a checklist for managers that could be completed on e-forms or through the e-personnel records system.

RECOMMENDATION 15

That the Service Director Human Resources carries out further investigations/consultations with other service providers before making any commitments.

GENERALLY

To conclude, the panel would like to inform the council’s Executive that they expect changes to be made from the recommendations highlighted in this report. The current poor performance is not acceptable and management and employees have to be accountable for their responsibilities in reducing sickness absence across the council.

RECOMMENDATION 16

That the council’s leaders, service directors, managers and employees be aware that scrutiny will be re-visiting this review on an annual basis in order to scrutinise implementation of the recommendations and any progress that has been made.