

Committee: **Corporate and Performance Scrutiny Committee**
Date of meeting: **23rd September 2022**
Report Subject: **Sickness Absence Performance 2021/22**
Portfolio Holder: **Councillor Steve Thomas, Leader / Executive Member**
Report Submitted by: **Andrea J Prosser, Head of Organisational Development**

Reporting Pathway								
Directorate Management Team	Corporate Leadership Team	Portfolio Holder / Chair	Governance & Audit Committee	Democratic Services Committee	Scrutiny Committee	Executive Committee	Council	Other (please state)
07.09.22	08.09.22	13.09.22			23.09.22	26.10.22		

1. Purpose of the Report

- 1.1 The purpose of this report is to provide Elected Members with the opportunity to scrutinise and challenge sickness absence performance for 2021/22, recognise the positive attendance of the majority of the workforce and the continued actions to support improvement in attendance.

2. Scope and Background

- 2.1 Staff health and wellbeing is critical in delivering Council priorities and sickness absence is a key performance indicator reflected in the quarterly Finance and Performance report. Improving attendance remains a key priority and is identified as a corporate risk for the Council acknowledging that high levels of sickness absence have a detrimental impact on the ability of the Council to deliver services.
- 2.2 During 2021/22 sickness levels remained high increasing from the previous year as the Council continued to respond to the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic and return to business as usual. Whilst sickness levels increased it is important to recognise the commitment of staff during this period with a large majority of the workforce having little or no sickness absence.
- 2.3 The Council has in place a range of wellbeing support for staff and strategies to manage attendance in the workplace which include:
- Health and wellbeing initiatives
 - Extensive range of flexible working and leave arrangements.
 - Stress management policy and toolkit
 - Health, Safety and Welfare Corporate Group
 - Attendance Management Policy, with support and training for managers.
 - Regular discussion and learning nationally and regionally
 - Dashboard of sickness absence data for managers
 - Performance data provided to the Corporate Leadership Team, Heads of Service and Elected Members on a quarterly basis.
 - Sickness performance considered on management teams, team meetings and as part of manager's annual performance coaching.

2.4 **Employee Health and Wellbeing**

- 2.4.1 Employee wellbeing is intrinsically linked to levels of attendance. Wellbeing is more than an avoidance of becoming physically sick it includes physical, mental, and social health.
- 2.4.2 The Council has an Employee Assistance Programme (EAP) which provides a range of services including counselling, advice, and information. The Council actively promotes the services on offer for employees and managers. During 2021/22 the overall usage was up by almost 3% on the previous annual reporting period, with 40% of the contacts to the 24/7 telephone line, 48% individual counselling, 11% information specialists and 1% online counselling.
- 2.4.3 Advice and support to managers and employees from the Occupational Health Service is also integral in the management of sickness and employee health and wellbeing. The service assists with early interventions particularly in cases of stress and anxiety, supports the management of absence including the more complex or serious cases and provides advice to support employee's returning to work. During 2021/22 there were 477 management referrals to the service.
- 2.4.4 A weekly wellbeing bulletin for staff 'Wellbeing Wednesday' is published which provides a range of wellbeing information and resources including special editions to address key issues and topics such as the cost-of-living crisis.
- 2.4.5 Working in partnership with the Trade Unions the Council offers mental health awareness training which supports staff understand and identify colleagues who may be at risk of, or are experiencing, mental health issues.
- 2.4.6 The Council has recently introduced an employer supported volunteering policy which supports and encourages employees to volunteer in the community to improve skills, personal development, health, and wellbeing and also have a positive effect on the Council's ability to recruit and retain employees.

2.5 **Employee Engagement**

- 2.5.1 The Council recognises the critical need to communicate and engage staff through a range of mechanisms:
- Regular 121s / performance coaching / team meetings
 - Newsletters / wellbeing bulletin / managers brief
 - A dedicated engagement and consultation framework with trade unions
 - Staff surveys
 - Dedicated engagement sessions to support transformational change including Transitional leadership and managing an agile workforce

2.6 **Workforce Strategy 2021-26**

- 2.6.1 The Workforce Strategy 2021-26 has a focus on wellbeing which will play a significant role in supporting attendance at work. The year one action plan of the Strategy focused on the transition from responding to the pandemic to a future working model which became operational in September 2021. Agile working offers a modern model of working across the Council providing greater flexibility and work-life balance for employees positively impacting health and wellbeing and attendance at work.

2.6.2 Whilst it is acknowledged that COVID-19 will not disappear, the long-term impacts of the pandemic will continue to impact these include Long Covid, NHS treatment waiting times which could lead to prolonged periods of sickness absence and increasing levels of diagnosis where employees may not have accessed treatment during the period of the pandemic. Currently there are 20 employees on long term sickness absence that are awaiting treatment on the NHS. It has also become clear that individual personal and career aspirations have changed during this time and a continuing priority will be to manage the capacity of the workforce to ensure that services are delivered.

2.7 Ongoing Measures to support improvements in attendance

2.7.1 Strategies to address the impact of Covid and sickness absence

- Each directorate is developing a workforce plan that will sit under the Council's Workforce Strategy which will consider the future workforce needs of services to meet changing demand and deliver on priorities.
- Work nationally and regionally through the relevant networks to raise issues impacting Local Government and to consider and develop strategies to address for the future.
- Review of Agile Working commencing September 2022.
- Staff engagement through a staff survey and workshops.

2.7.2 Understanding the data

- Continue to measure the impact of Covid on sickness absence to manage the ongoing impacts.
- Performance targets set for 2022/23 (Council 10 days per fte).
- Further development of ITrent to improve sickness recording and reporting.
- Workforce profiles providing service workforce data and management information to help managers to plan and lead service performance and improvement issued annually to directorates and schools.

2.7.3 Management of sickness absence

- Recognition of good attendance through one to one and team meetings.
- Continued management and support by managers in managing sickness absence in line with Council Policy.
- Directorates with the support of Organisational Development to review the top 20 long term sickness absence cases and hotspots.
- Communication with the workforce on the impact of sickness and the support available for employees.
- Signposting of employees to self-access the Covid and flu immunisations.

2.7.4 Attendance Management Policy

- The policy remains a key aspect of the Council's approach to the management of attendance at work and is reviewed periodically to ensure that it remains fit for purpose and takes account of any learning. It is in the final stages of being updated following a recent review. This approach is replicated across Wales; however, one local authority has taken the decision to move away from this approach and adopt a focus primarily on wellbeing. The impact of this approach on attendance rates will be reviewed to understand if it is an approach that the Council could consider in managing attendance in the future.

3. Options for Recommendation

3.1 Option 1

That the Scrutiny Committee having scrutinised the sickness absence performance information and the ongoing actions to support improved attendance within the Council and identify any further areas for improvement in order to drive forward performance improvement.

3.2 Option 2

That the Scrutiny Committee endorse the report and the ongoing actions to support improvement in attendance.

4. Evidence of how this topic supports the achievement of the Corporate Plan / Statutory Responsibilities / Blaenau Gwent Well-being Plan

The management of attendance is a critical strand in managing the capacity of the workforce to deliver services to the community of Blaenau Gwent and achieve the priorities laid out in the Council's strategic planning documents.

5. Implications Against Each Option

5.1 Impact on Budget (short- and long-term impact)

There are direct and indirect costs of sickness absence which are a key driver in the Council's approach to effectively improve attendance at work.

5.2 Risk including Mitigating Actions

The high levels of sickness absence do present a risk in terms of the impact on front line service delivery and continuity through lost time and staffing changes. In addition, the financial implications associated with sickness absence directly impact on the Council's budget. Mitigating actions are detailed within the report.

5.3 Legal

There are no legal implications arising from this report.

5.4 Human Resources

The staffing implications are detailed within the content of the report.

6. Supporting Evidence

6.1 Performance Information and Data

6.1.1 44% of staff within the Council had no sickness absence during 2021/22. Table 1 appended provides a breakdown by directorate.

6.1.2 The overall outturn figure for the Council is 16.74 days (per full time equivalent (FTE) employee) (14.20 days excluding Covid) which is an increase from the previous year and exceeds the 10-day target. When comparing the overall outturn with the previous year, there has been an increase of 5.07 days from 11.67 days. (4.22 days increase from 9.98 days when excluding COVID-19 sickness).

- 6.1.3 Covid-19 continued to have an impact during 2021/22, with the most significant impact on short term sickness absence occurring in the last quarter of the year. COVID-19 accounted for 2.54 days of the Council’s overall absence rate and has likely affected a large number of employees. In some cases, staff who tested positive were able to continue to work from home which has had a positive impact on absence levels.
- 6.1.4 Over the last five years the Council has had sustained levels of absence of over 11 days per employee. Since 2017/18 the Council has experienced increasing levels of absence up to 16.74 days at its highest in 2021/22, with the only exception being 2020/21 which saw a reduction in levels to 11.67 days. Table 2 details the outturn and trend for the Council and directorates.
- 6.1.5 68% of all absence in the Council is classed as long term (over 4 weeks), with short term absence accounting for 32%. There has been a slight shift from previous years with a 6% increase in the level of short-term absence. Table 3 details the breakdown by directorate.
- 6.1.6 The top 5 reasons for long term absence in the Council equate to over 76% of all long-term absences with mental health (stress, anxiety, and depression) being the top cause at 38%. Covid-19 accounted for over 30% of all short-term absence. Table 4 sets out the top five causes of long and short term absences.
- 6.1.7 Table 5 appended details the number of formal warnings, dismissals, and ill health retirements during 2021/22 and demonstrates a return to pre-pandemic figures.
- 6.1.8 A breakdown of sickness absence by service area is appended at Table 6 the key headlines are detailed below:

- 3 services have come within in target, of which 2 have seen a reduction from the previous year and 1 has had more sickness.

Service	21/22	20/21	
Governance & Partnerships	6.67	8.14	↓
Legal & Corporate Compliance	7.64	3.82	↑
Public Protection	4.44	9.11	↓

- 12 services have exceeded the target, 8 of which have seen an increase in sickness levels from the previous year, 2 have seen a reduction and there is no comparative data for 2 service areas due to changes in structure.

Service	21/22	20/21	
Commercial Services	8.22	5.34	↑
Resources	8.28	6.29	↑
Regeneration & Development	12.41	5.56	↑
Community Services	19.73	11.57	↑
Adult Services (Excluding Provider Servs)	22.63	12.84	↑
Provider Services	39.14	39.25	↓
Children’s Services	14.16	14.68	↓
School Based Staff (excluding Teachers)	21.31	12.03	↑
Teachers	12.42	6.45	↑
Education Transformation	9.80	No	
School Improvement & Inclusion	6.15	3.87	↑
Young People & Partnerships	7.58	No	

6.1.9 The All-Wales comparative data for 2020/21 and 2021/22 is appended at Table 7. This data has been anonymised as the 21/22 information has not been published. In 2021/22 of those Councils that have provided their data the Council reports the highest days lost. It is important to recognise when making comparisons that some Councils have retained services in-house while others who have outsourced which when considering certain front-line services would have a direct impact on sickness levels.

6.1.10 Available data for 2022/23 indicates an increase in sickness absence in the first quarter (outturn 4.27 days) in comparison to the same period in 2021/22 (outturn 3.23 days).

6.2 **Expected outcome for the public**

Information included within the report will provide opportunity for the public to scrutinise the Council's performance and provide accountability across the Council.

6.3 **Involvement (consultation, engagement, participation)**

The Trade Unions believe it is everyone's interest to reduce sickness absence levels to an acceptable level and continues to work positively with the Council to achieve this. The trade unions are keen for the Council to review the position of the Council in 2022/23 that has moved away from attendance management to focus on wellbeing.

6.4 **Thinking for the Long term (forward planning)**

Options detailed in this report contribute directly to enabling the workforce for the future.

6.5 **Preventative focus**

The Workforce Strategy and Council's policies and practice focus on prevention.

6.6 **Collaboration / partnership working**

There are regular discussions with the All-Wales Human Resources Directors Network and regionally in terms of good practice or emerging practice in reducing sickness absence.

6.7 **Integration (across service areas)**

N/A

6.8 **Decarbonisation and Reducing Carbon Emissions**

N/A

6.9 **Integrated Impact Assessment**

N/A

7. **Monitoring Arrangements**

7.1 Sickness absence statistics are reported to the Corporate Leadership Team (CLT) and Scrutiny Committee on a quarterly basis and an annual performance report is presented to Corporate Overview Scrutiny Committee. Annual workforce profiles are provided and discussed with Managers and Headteachers.

Background Documents /Electronic Links

Appendix 1 - performance data

Table 1 - Attendance at Work

Directorate	% Staff by directorate with no sickness	% Staff by directorate with sickness
Corporate Services	58	42
Education	54	46
Schools	38	62
Regeneration & Community Services	50	50
Social Services	39	61
BGCBC	44	56

Table 2 – Sickness Days Lost Per Full Time Equivalent Employee

Council - Days Lost per FTE					
2017/18	2018/19	2019/20	2020/21	2021/22 All Sickness	2021/22 Excluding Covid
11.23	12.66	13.91	11.67	16.74	14.20

Directorate - Days Lost per FTE							
Directorate (Historical)	2017/18	Directorate	2018/19	2019/20	2020/21	2021/22	2021/22 Excluding Covid
Resources	7.38	Corporate Services	8.29	8.81	5.67	7.95	7.23 ↑
Corporate Services	6.65						
Education	6.11	Education	6.94	8.07	4.13	7.10	5.36 ↑
School based (Teachers)	9.07	School based (Teachers)	12.20	11.57	6.45	12.42	9.74 ↑
School based (excluding Teachers)	9.71	School based (excluding Teachers)	10.64	13.98	12.03	21.31	16.93 ↑
Environment	19.19	Regeneration & Community Services	11.21	16.15	10.20	17.04	14.54 ↑
Social Services	13.60	Social Services	18.19	17.81	22.98	24.32	22.05 ↑

Table 3 - Short / long term sickness absence by Directorate.

Directorate	2021/22 Short Term %	2021/22 Long Term %
Corporate Services	38	62
Education	48	52
School based Teachers	38	62
School based (excluding Teachers)	42	58
Regeneration & Community Services	32	68
Social Services	20	80
BGCBC	32	68

Table 4 – Sickness Absence Reasons – Top 5**Long term**

Rank 2021/22	Category	% of long term sickness
1	Psychiatric / Mental Health	38.17%
2	Musculoskeletal & Injuries	24.59%
4	Gastro-intestinal	5.50%
5	Cancer	4.40%
3	Neurological	4.22%

Short Term

Rank 2021/22	Category	% of short term sickness
1	Covid 19	30.86%
2	Gastro-intestinal	17.35%
3	Infectious disease	13.39%
4	Musculoskeletal & Injuries	7.52%
5	Neurological	6.19%

Table 5 - Number of formal warnings, dismissals, and ill health retirements

	2019/20	2020/21	2021/22
Number of formal warnings issued	22	4	20
Dismissals	6	0	7
Number of ill health retirements	8	2	6

Table 6 – Sickness Absence breakdown by Service

Attendance Management - Number of days lost per full time equivalent employee											
Service Area	Qtr 1 Outturn	Qtr 1 Outturn (excl. COVID19)	Qtr 2 Outturn	Qtr 2 Outturn (excl. COVID19)	Qtr 3 Outturn	Qtr 3 Outturn (excl. COVID19)	Qtr 4 Outturn	Qtr 4 Outturn (excl. COVID19)	Annual Target	Outturn 2020/21	Outturn 2020/21 (excl. COVID19)
Corporate Services Directorate											
Commercial Services - Organisational Development / Social Care Workforce Development /Business Support	1.20	1.20	3.64	3.56	6.46	6.26	8.27	7.67	8	5.94	5.73
Commercial Services - Benefits / Communications, Marketing & Customer Access /Procurement / Strategy Transformation & Culture	0.71	0.71	2.22	1.97	4.54	3.89	8.17	7.01	8	4.33	3.65
Commercial Services Total	0.98	0.98	3.01	2.85	5.58	5.18	8.22	7.37	8	5.34	4.96
Resources	1.57	1.57	2.96	2.96	6.90	6.82	8.28	7.94	8	6.29	6.23
Governance & Partnerships	0.19	0.19	2.65	2.65	4.78	4.78	6.67	6.35	8	8.14	8.24
Legal & Corporate Compliance	0.63	0.63	1.17	0.63	7.17	6.54	7.64	6.58	8	3.82	3.82
Senior Management	0.00	0.00	0.00	0.00	0.00	0.00	0.00	0.00	8	0.00	0.00
Corporate Services Total	1.00	1.00	2.87	2.74	5.73	5.41	7.95	7.23	8	5.67	5.38
Regeneration & Community Services Directorate											
Regeneration & Development	3.99	3.99	8.47	8.27	10.48	10.04	12.41	11.65	6.5	5.56	4.32
Community Services	3.78	3.75	8.00	7.52	13.48	11.88	19.73	16.55	11	11.57	9.89
Public Protection	1.40	1.40	3.31	3.26	4.12	3.89	4.44	4.02	9	9.11	8.87
Senior Management	0.00	0.00	0.00	0.00	0.00	0.00	0.00	0.00	0	0.00	0.00
Regeneration & Community Services Total	3.60	3.58	7.64	7.25	12.09	10.82	17.04	14.54		10.20	8.74
Social Services Directorate											
Adult Services (excluding Provider Services)	3.99	3.99	9.56	9.56	15.99	15.66	22.63	21.41	11	12.84	11.91
Provider Services	7.70	7.50	16.56	15.94	27.76	26.40	39.14	35.82	22	39.25	32.19
Children's Services	3.21	2.94	6.74	6.33	9.90	9.30	14.16	12.22	11	14.68	12.28
Senior Management	0.00	0.00	0.00	0.00	0.00	0.00	0.00	0.00	0	0.00	0.00
Social Services Total	4.93	4.73	10.66	10.26	17.17	16.36	24.32	22.05		22.98	19.23
Education Directorate											
School based staff (excluding Teachers)	3.96	3.90	7.77	7.09	14.47	12.27	21.31	16.93	8.5	12.03	10.18
Teachers	2.40	2.40	3.98	3.68	7.81	6.56	12.42	9.74	8.5	6.45	5.67
Schools Total	3.13	3.10	5.72	5.24	10.88	9.19	16.55	13.08	8.5	9.03	7.75
Education Transformation & Business Change	0.00	0.00	3.80	0.00	9.00	0.00	9.80	0.00	6		
School Improvement & Inclusion	0.00	0.00	4.29	4.29	6.04	6.04	6.15	5.87	6	3.87	3.54
Young People & Partnerships	1.19	1.19	1.19	1.19	4.64	3.96	7.58	6.22	6		
Senior Management	0.00	0.00	0.00	0.00	0.00	0.00	0.00	0.00	6	0.00	0.00
Corporate Education Total	0.69	0.69	3.30	2.73	5.30	4.10	7.10	5.36	6	4.13	3.40
Education Totals	2.99	2.96	5.58	5.10	10.55	8.89	15.98	12.61		8.75	7.50
Corporate Totals	3.23	3.17	6.67	6.28	11.53	10.34	16.74	14.20	10.00	11.67	9.98

Table 7 - All Wales Comparative Data

Local Authority	2020/21* Published Data	2021/22* Unpublished Data	Movement Year on Year
1	6.8	N/A	
2	7.7	N/A	
3	7.7	N/A	
4	8.8	N/A	
5	9.6	N/A	
6	11.0	N/A	
7	8.4	7.92	0.48↓
8	8.6	9.84	1.24↑
9	6.5	9.90	3.40↑
10	7.1	9.96	2.86↑
11	6.3	10.07	3.77↑
12	7.9	10.50	2.60↑
13	8.0	11.05	3.05↑
14	8.6	11.34	2.74↑
15	7.7	11.41	3.71↑
16	9.3	11.74	2.44↑
17	9.2	12.36	3.16↑
18	8.1	13.28	5.18↑
19	10.0	14.12	4.12↑
Blaenau Gwent	11.67	16.74	5.07↑

*2 Authorities did not report