

Committee: **Corporate Overview and Performance Scrutiny Committee**

Date of meeting: **12<sup>th</sup> October 2023**

Report Subject: **Sickness Absence Performance 2022/23**

Portfolio Holder: **Councillor Stephen Thomas, Leader / Cabinet Member Corporate Overview and Performance**

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	Cabinet	Council	Other (please state)
	28.09.23	28.09.23			12.10.23	29.11.23		

## 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 the 12-month period from the 1 April 2022 to 31 March 2023, recognise the positive attendance of a significant proportion 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 improving attendance remains a key priority. Sickness is identified as a critical corporate risk for the Council acknowledging that a high level of sickness absence has a detrimental impact on the ability of the Council to deliver services effectively and has significant cost implications at a time of unprecedented financial pressures for Local Government.
- 2.2 During 2022/23 there was an improving picture with **sickness levels reducing by 1.29 days** per full time equivalent (FTE) employee when compared to the previous year, however sickness remains high at 15.45 days per FTE employee (13.71 days excluding COVID-19). Based on the comparative data available the Council had the highest level of sickness across Welsh Local Government. Whilst sickness levels remain high it is important to recognise the commitment of staff with a significant proportion of the workforce having little or no sickness absence. Full details of the 2022/23 performance information and data is set out in paragraph 6 and Appendix 1.
- 2.3 In terms of the UK position, sickness absence rose to its highest level since 2004 and for those with long-term health conditions it increased to the highest point since 2008, according to the latest sickness absence report produced by the Office for National Statistics (ONS). Covering 2022, the new report details that workers living in Wales had the highest sickness absence rate compared to other UK regions and sickness absence rates for public sector workers have been higher than those in the private sector for every year on record.

- 2.4 The Council has in place a range of wellbeing support for staff and strategies to manage attendance in the workplace and minimise the impact of sickness absence. These 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 for managers.
  - Critical illness and working guidelines
  - Signed up to the TUC's Dying to Work Charter
  - Regular discussion and learning nationally and regionally
  - Dashboard of sickness absence data for managers within iTrent
  - 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.
  - Employee engagement

- 2.5 Employee wellbeing which includes physical, mental, and social health is intrinsically linked to levels of attendance and is a focal point in the Council's Workforce Strategy. The Council has a range of support services to promote employee wellbeing as well as manage sickness absence to include:
- The Council's Employee Assistance Programme (EAP) provides a range of services including counselling, advice, and information. The Council actively promotes the services on offer for employees and managers.
  - An Occupational Health Service that provides medical advice and assists with early interventions particularly in cases of stress and anxiety and supports the management of absence. During 2022/23 there were 457 management referrals to the service.
  - 'Wellbeing Wednesday' bulletins are published each week which provide a range of wellbeing information and resources including special editions to address key issues and topics such as the cost-of-living crisis.
  - Working in partnership with the Trade Unions the Council offers mental health awareness training.

## 2.6 **Measures to support improvements in attendance**

- Directorate Workforce Plans have been developed to consider the future workforce needs of services to meet changing demand and deliver on priorities. A review of progress and updated workforce plans to be completed and reported to CLT.
- LGA workforce planning training has been facilitated for Organisational Development and scheduled for CLT in October 2023. Further roll out to be planned for managers.
- 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.
- A quarterly review of sickness absence by CLT considers any further actions required to mitigate the impact of sickness absence this has included a review of agency workers and an in-depth review and analysis of the five services that exceeded the Council outturn figure of 15.45 days. (Legal and Corporate Compliance, Adult Services, Provider Services, Community Services and School based staff excluding teachers).

- An audit of compliance has commenced by internal audit in relation to the five hotspots listed above.
- Performance data and factors affecting absence levels are discussed by CLT on a quarterly basis and cascaded through DMT's to all Managers. Emphasis is placed on the importance of timely and accurate recording within iTrent, and policy compliance.
- Corporate and service targets agreed for 2023/24.
- iTrent improvements implemented to improve the accuracy of sickness recording and remove the need for manual inputting of working patterns.
- 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.
- Ongoing management of sickness absence by managers supported by Organisational Development.
- Regular reviews of long-term sickness cases and hotspots.
- Recognition of good attendance through one to one and team meetings.
- Signposting of employees to self-access immunisation programmes as appropriate.
- The Council continues to research any areas of good practice in other Councils and the public sector to assist further with any learning for this Council.

### **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 identify any further areas of 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**

- 4.1 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. Reducing sickness absence is a critical priority given the current financial challenges to ensure cost mitigation in relation to replacement costs and managing the capacity of the workforce to deliver Council services.

## 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 this report.

## 5.5 **Health and Safety**

Any health and safety implications are detailed within this report.

# 6. **Supporting Evidence**

## 6.1 **Performance Information and Data**

6.1.1 The sickness outturn for 2022/23 is 15.45 days per FTE employee which exceeds the Council's 10-day target. When comparing the overall outturn with the previous year, performance has improved with a **reduction of 1.29 days** in the level of sickness from 16.74 days. The total days lost for 2022/23 equates to having 132 FTE employees absent for a year (based on 52.2 weeks)

6.1.2 Over the previous five years the Council has experienced sustained levels of sickness above 11 days per FTE employee. The general trend over this period has seen sickness increasing, peaking at 16.74 days in 2021/22. The only exception to this is a reduction to 11.67 days in 2020/21 at the height of the Covid-19 pandemic and 2022/23 which saw a reduction to 15.45 days. The All-Wales average figures for the four years up to 2021/22 are well below the Council's outturn figures with the gap widen from 2.16 days in 2018-19 to 4.94 days in 2021/22 however the general trend for sickness over the five years does mirror that of the Council. Appendix 1 Table 1 details the outturn and trend for the Council over 5 years.

6.1.3 The All-Wales comparative data for 2022/23 is set out in Appendix 1 Table 2. The data has not yet been published and therefore has been anonymised. Of those Councils that have provided data the Council reports the highest days lost and is 1.49 days above the next highest Council, with the lowest reported being 9.15 days. It is important to recognise when making comparisons that not all Councils deliver services in the same way with some retaining more services in-house which would have a direct impact on sickness levels.

6.1.4 When comparing the sickness outturn figures at a directorate/school level over the previous five years, Corporate Services and Education have consistently come within the corporate target but have seen sickness increase over the last two years. Regeneration and Community Services and Schools have exceeded the corporate target in all years except 2020/21 but have seen a reduction in levels in 2022/23 in comparison to the previous year. Social Services has exceeded the corporate target across all five years and has experienced the highest levels of sickness of all directorates, with the last three years in excess of 22 days. The last year has, however, seen a reduction from 24.32 days in 2021/22 to 23.33 days. Appendix 1 Table 3 details the full breakdown by directorate.

- 6.1.5 The top five reasons for sickness account for 75% of all absences. Mental health continues to be the most frequent cause of absence across the Council accounting for 30.94% of days lost, this includes stress, anxiety, and depression. 22% of time lost to mental health is work related. Covid-19 continued to have an impact during 2022/23 accounting for 11.21% of days lost with the highest proportion being short term absences. The impact of Covid-19 on NHS treatment waiting times continues and has led to prolonged periods of sickness absence and increasing levels of diagnosis where employees working in Local Government may not have accessed treatment during the period of the pandemic. Appendix 1 Table 4 sets out the percentage of time lost by sickness reason.
- 6.1.6 59.16% of staff across the Council (excluding schools) lost time to sickness absence in the last year whilst 40.84% had no sickness. Appendix 1 Table 5 provides a breakdown of the percentage of staff by directorate.
- 6.1.7 With the introduction of the Agile Working Policy an analysis has been undertaken of the level of sickness by workstyle. Service based staff make up over 63% of the workforce and lost 18.6 days, agile workers 11.4 days and home workers 5.77 days. Appendix 1 Table 6 provides the detail.
- 6.1.8 67% of all sickness absence in the Council is classed as long term (over 4 weeks), with short term absence accounting for 33%. This percentage split has remained consistent over the years with long term absence accounting for the majority of days lost. As at the 31st March 2023, Council directorates excluding schools had 45 members of staff on long term sick. Appendix 1 Table 7 details the breakdown by directorate.
- 6.1.9 During 2022/23 there were 18 formal warnings issued under the Council's Attendance Management Policy (1 Commercial Services, 1 Provider Services 4 Schools and 12 Community Services) 23 dismissals/mutual terminations, and 7 ill health retirements. Appendix 1 Table 8 provides comparative data for previous years which evidences management action.
- 6.1.10 A breakdown of sickness absence by service area is detailed in Appendix 1 tables 9-16 the key headlines are detailed below:
- 6 services came within their service target and saw a reduction in sickness absence compared to the previous year.

Directorate	Services within target	FTE as at 31.03.23	21/22	22/23	
Corporate Services	Commercial Services (Benefits / Communications, Marketing & Customer Access / Procurement / Strategic Transformation)	48.96	8.17	5.52	↓
Corporate Services	Resources	65.85	8.28	6.28	↓
Corporate Services	Governance & Partnerships	40.45	6.67	6.11	↓
Regen & Community Services	Regeneration & Development	92.29	12.41	4.90	↓
Regen & Community Services	Public Protection	39.84	4.44	3.86	↓
Education	School Improvement & Inclusion	20.39	6.15	2.51	↓

- 10 services exceeded their target, 4 of which saw an increase in sickness levels from the previous year.

Directorate	Services exceeding target	FTE as at 31.03.23	21/22	22/23	
Corporate Services	Commercial Services (OD / Workforce Development / Business Support)	130.30	8.27	10.89	↑
Corporate Services	Legal & Corporate Compliance	11.57	7.64	20.16	↑
Regen & Community Services	Community Services	348.82	19.73	17.44	↓
Social Services	Adult Services (excl Provider)	76.30	22.63	21.43	↓
Social Services	Provider Services	173.58	39.14	38.88	↓
Social Services	Children's Services	248.73	14.16	13.32	↓
Schools	School Based Staff (excl Teachers)	421.01	21.31	19.61	↓
Schools	Teachers	512.10	12.42	11.11	↓
Education	Education Transformation	5	9.80	11.20	↑
Education	Young People & Partnerships	30.24	7.58	11.66	↑

- 6.1.11 Senior management sickness absence is reported separately and is detailed in Appendix 1 tables 9 -16. In 2022/23 senior management in Regeneration and Community Services and Education had no sickness. Corporate Services and Social Services saw an increase from no absence in 2021/22 with Corporate Services reporting 4.15 days and Social Services 1.60 days.
- 6.1.12 The first quarter outturn figure for 2023/24 (2.74 days) has seen a reduction of over 1 day per FTE employee in comparison to the same period in 2022/23 (3.97 days). Three of the four directorates (Corporate Services, Regeneration and Community Services and Social Services) and schools have seen a reduction in sickness for the first quarter, with Social Services sickness reducing by over 2 days per FTE employee. Appendix 1 Table 17 details the sickness absence outturn figures by directorate.

## 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)

This report has been reviewed by the Corporate Leadership Team (CLT) and there is recognition of the critical impact on the workforce and the capacity to deliver services to the community. CLT will prioritise and are committed to working consistently with the workforce and the trade unions to reduce sickness absence and will consider the following feedback from the trade union:

Consequences of delivering the same services with shrinking financial resources puts enormous pressure on the wellbeing of staff and it is no accident that sickness levels are unsatisfactory. High sickness levels, also have a significant impact on "in work" staff who have to pick up the work of absent staff or further support agency staff. It cannot be coincidental that high levels of stress and anxiety are being reported.

The high levels of sickness are unaffordable, unsustainable and needs urgent attention. This does not mean using an approach that affects hard working staff or genuine staff who need to take sick leave. Unison believe the following approaches would help reduce sickness in the workplace:

- Extend the remit of Audit to further deep dive into all service areas that exceed the council target
- CLT undertake a monthly review of sickness rather than a quarterly review
- Managers use a more consistent approach with regards to the management of sickness absence
- Look at the value and impact of welfare meetings
- Support OD to continue to look at good practice used by better performing authorities regarding absenteeism management

Unison believe it is in everyone's interest to reduce high sickness levels and want to work with the council to achieve this.

**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 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 to support the reduction of sickness absence.

**6.7 Integration (across service areas)**

N/A

**6.8 Decarbonisation and Reducing Carbon Emissions**

N/A

**6.9 Integrated Impact Assessment (IIA)**

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 and Performance Scrutiny Committee. Annual workforce profiles are provided and discussed with Managers and Headteachers.

**8. Background Documents /Electronic Links**

Appendix 1 - Sickness absence performance data

Table 1

### Sickness Absence - Blaenau Gwent CBC 2018 - 2023

Days lost per full time equivalent employee

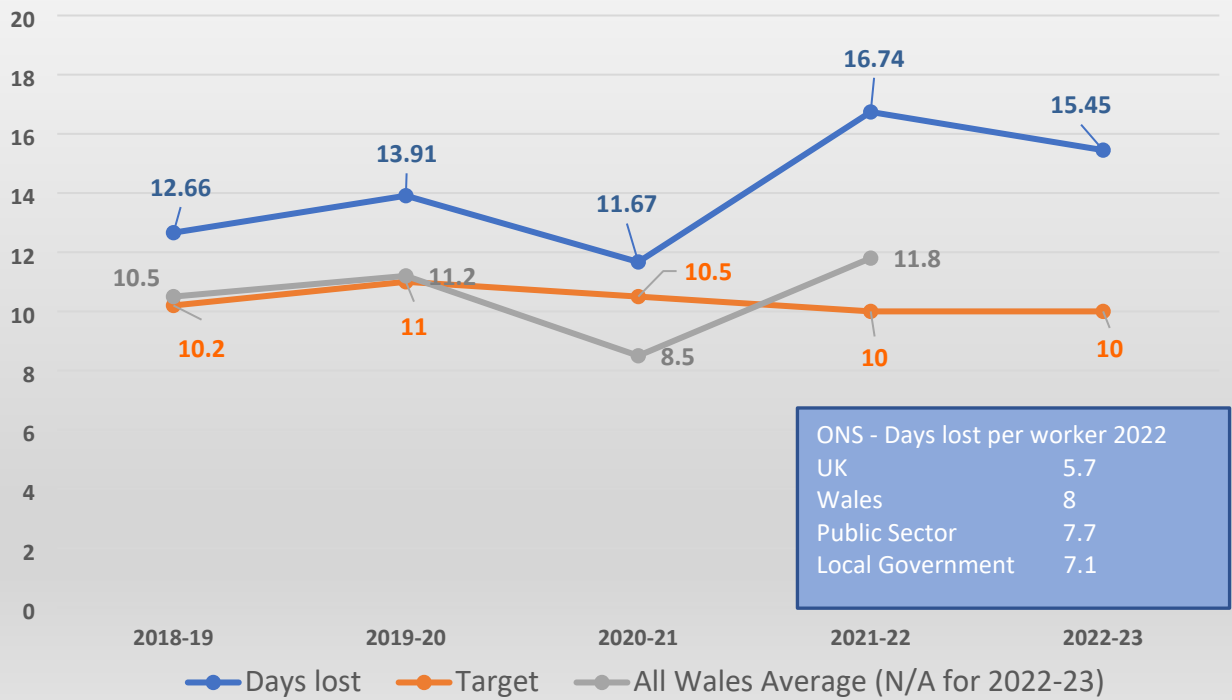


Table 2

### Sickness Absence - All Wales Comparative 2022-23

Days lost per full time equivalent employee

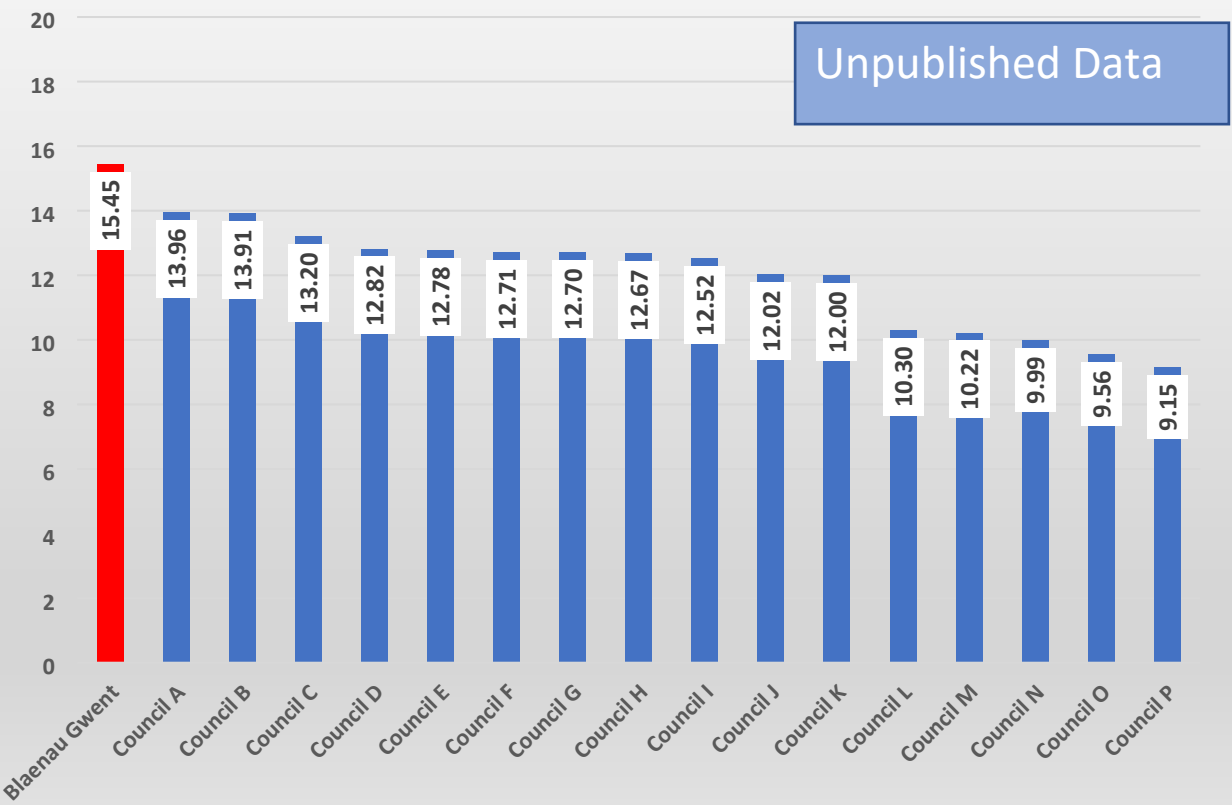




Table 3

### Sickness Absence by Directorate 2018 - 2023

Days lost per full time equivalent employee

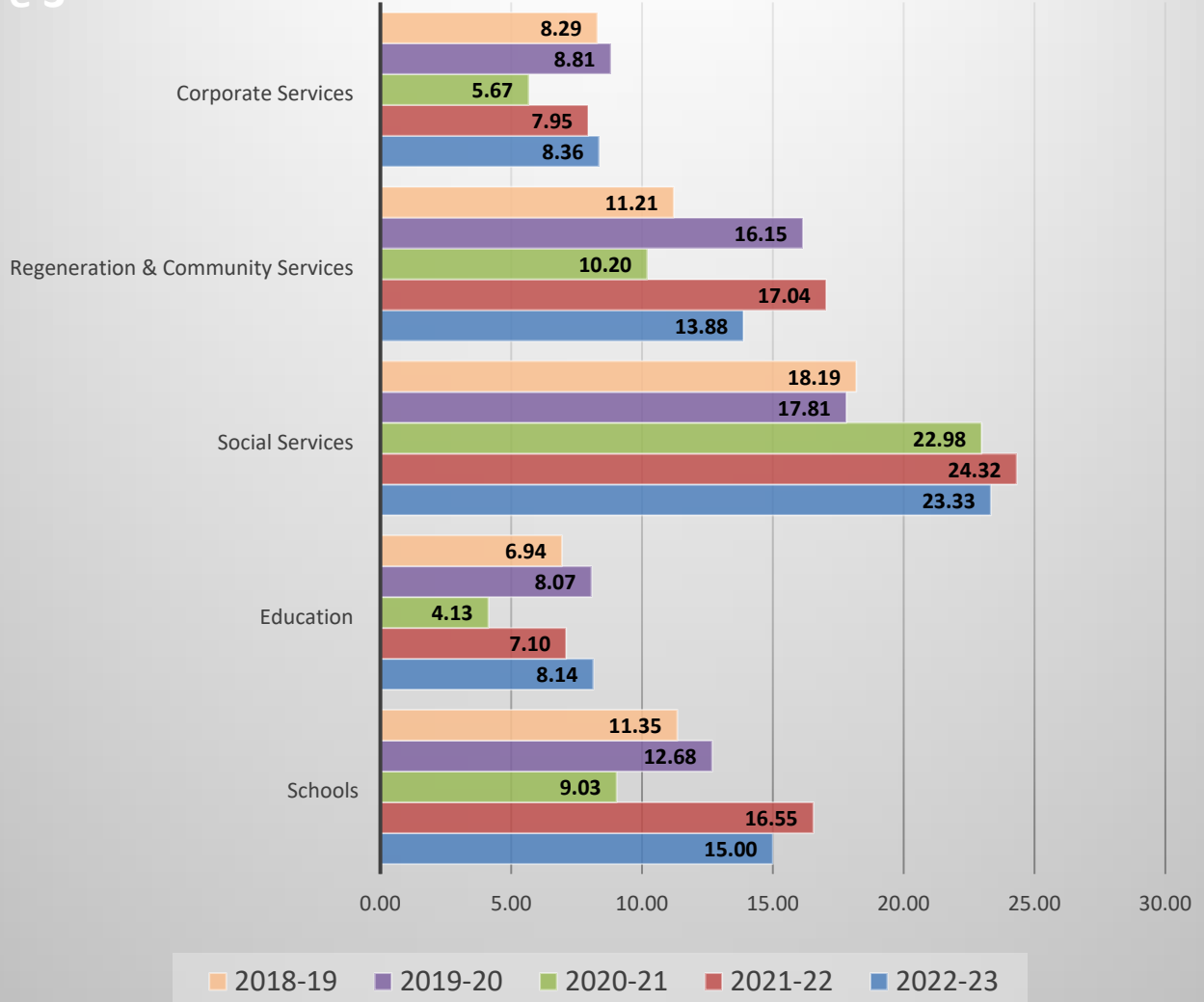
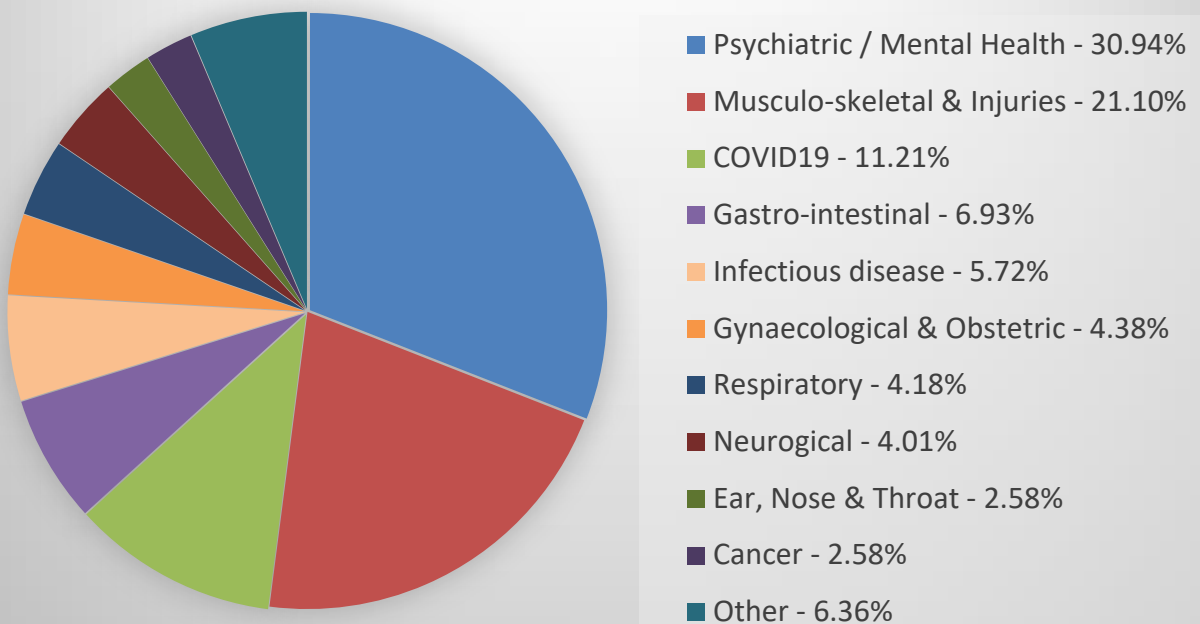


Table 4

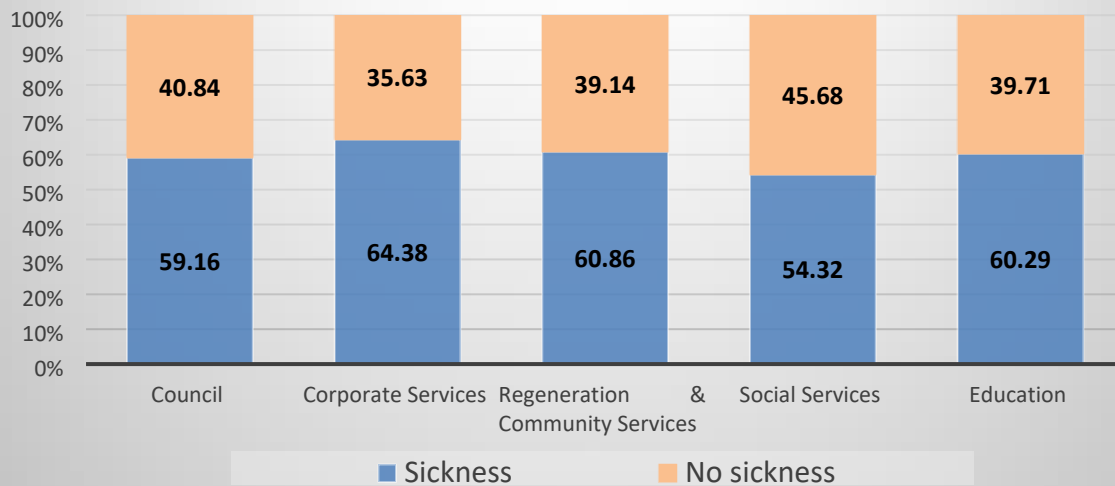
### Sickness Absence - Reasons 2022-23

% of time lost



**Table 5**

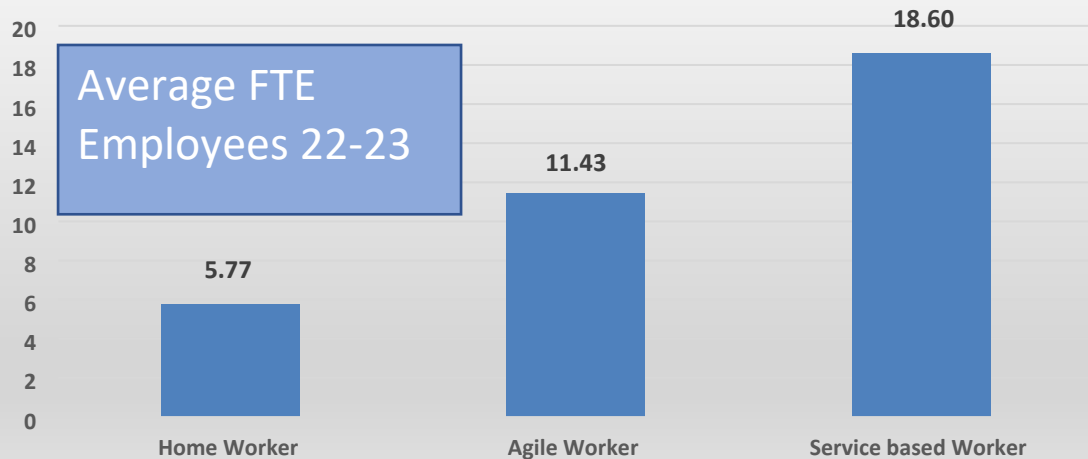
**Sickness Absence - % of employees with no sickness**



**Table 6**

**Sickness Absence by Workstyle Designation 2022-23**

Days lost per full time equivalent employee



**Table 7**

Short / long term sickness absence by Directorate	Short Term %	Long Term %
Corporate Services	31	69
Education	41	59
School based Teachers	45	55
School based (excluding Teachers)	42	58
Regeneration & Community Services	35	65
Social Services	22	78
BGCBC	33	67

**Table 8**

Formal warnings, dismissals, and ill health retirements	2020/21	2021/22	2022/23
Formal warnings issued	4	20	18
Dismissals / mutual terminations	0	7	23
Ill health retirements	2	6	7

Table 9

### Sickness Absence - Corporate Services Directorate

Days lost per full time equivalent employee

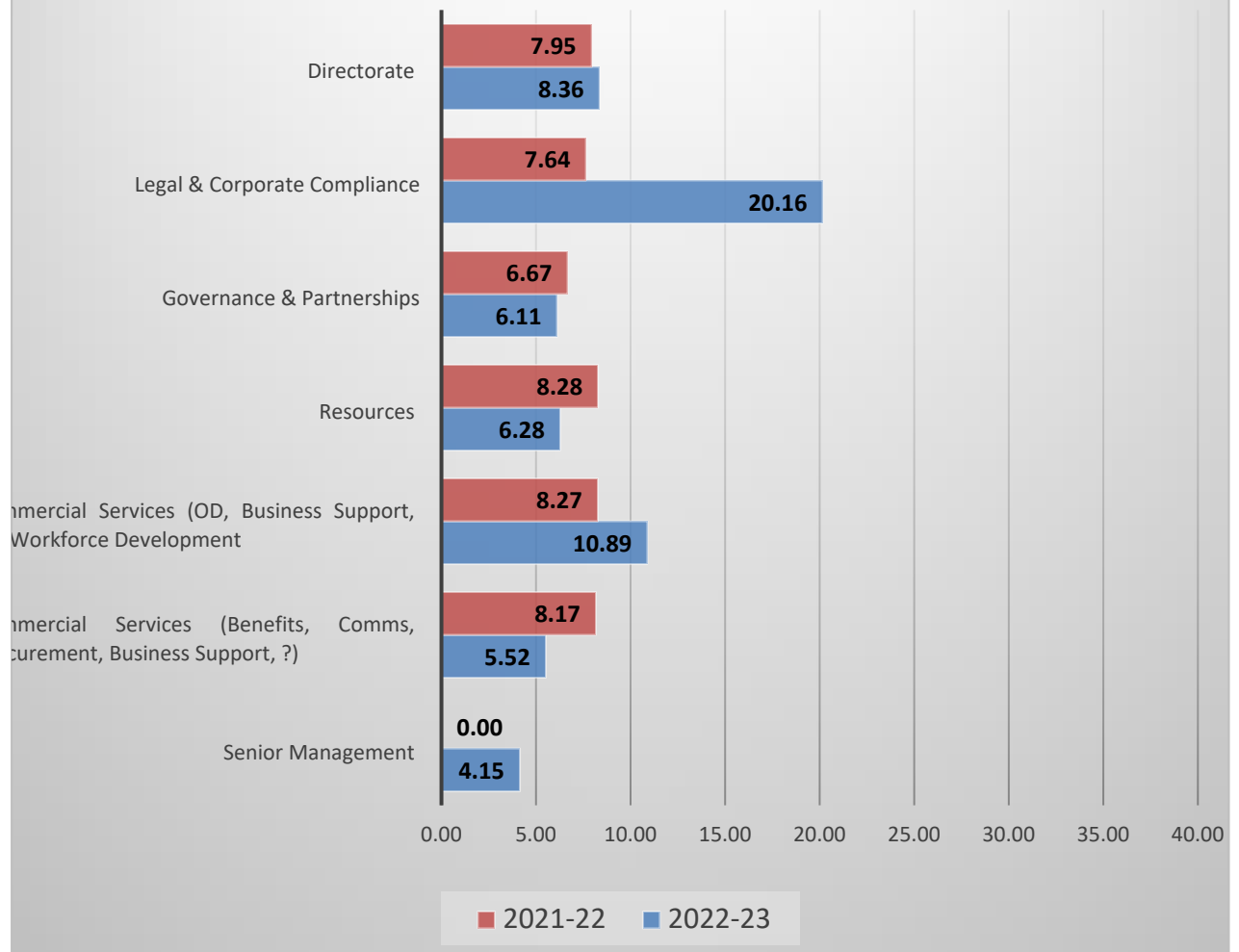


Table 10

### Corporate Services Directorate

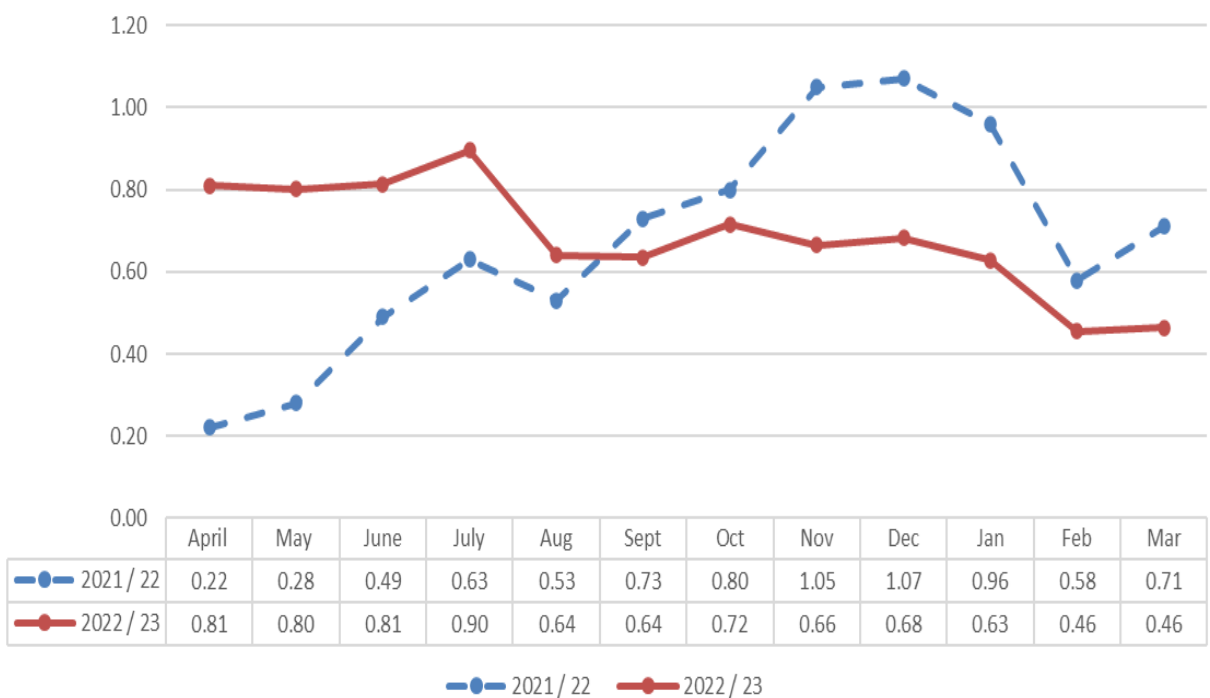


Table 11

### Sickness Absence - Regeneration & Community Services Directorate

Days lost per full time equivalent employee

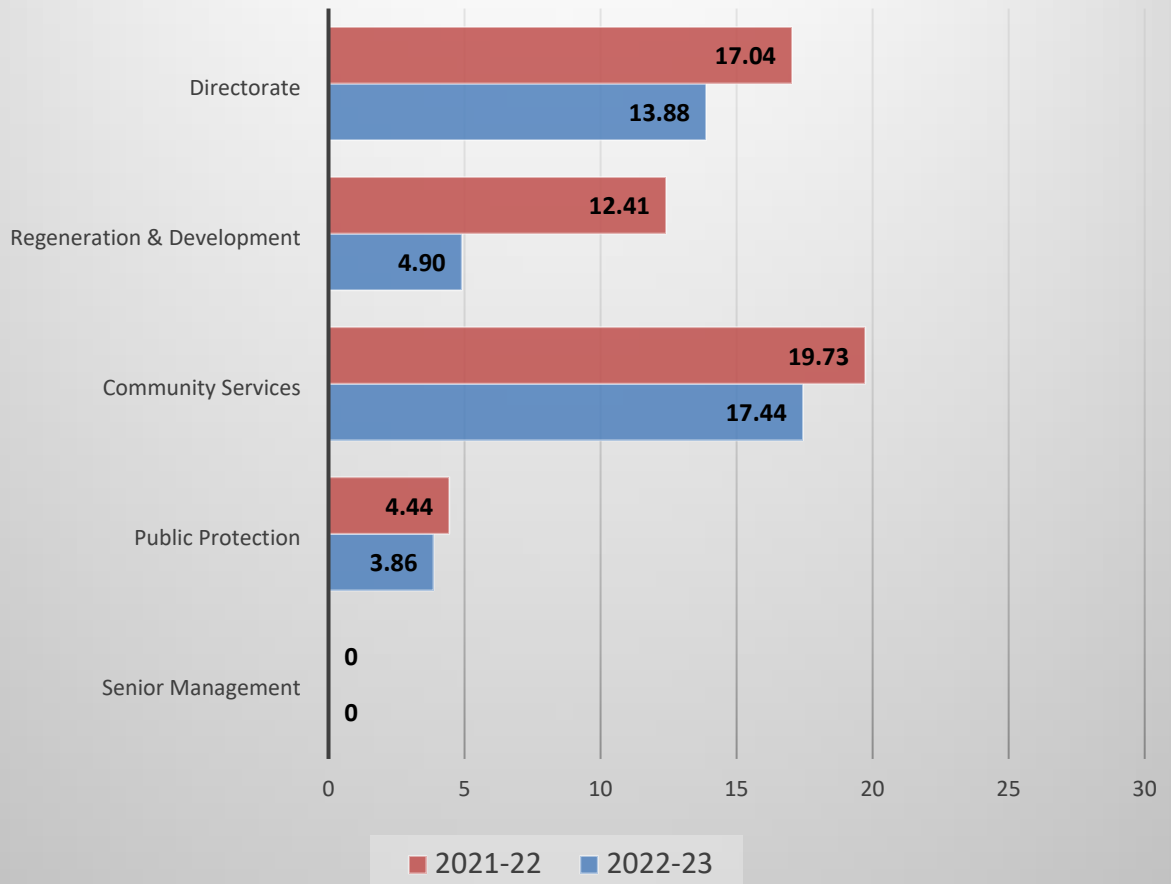


Table 12

### Regeneration & Community Services Directorate

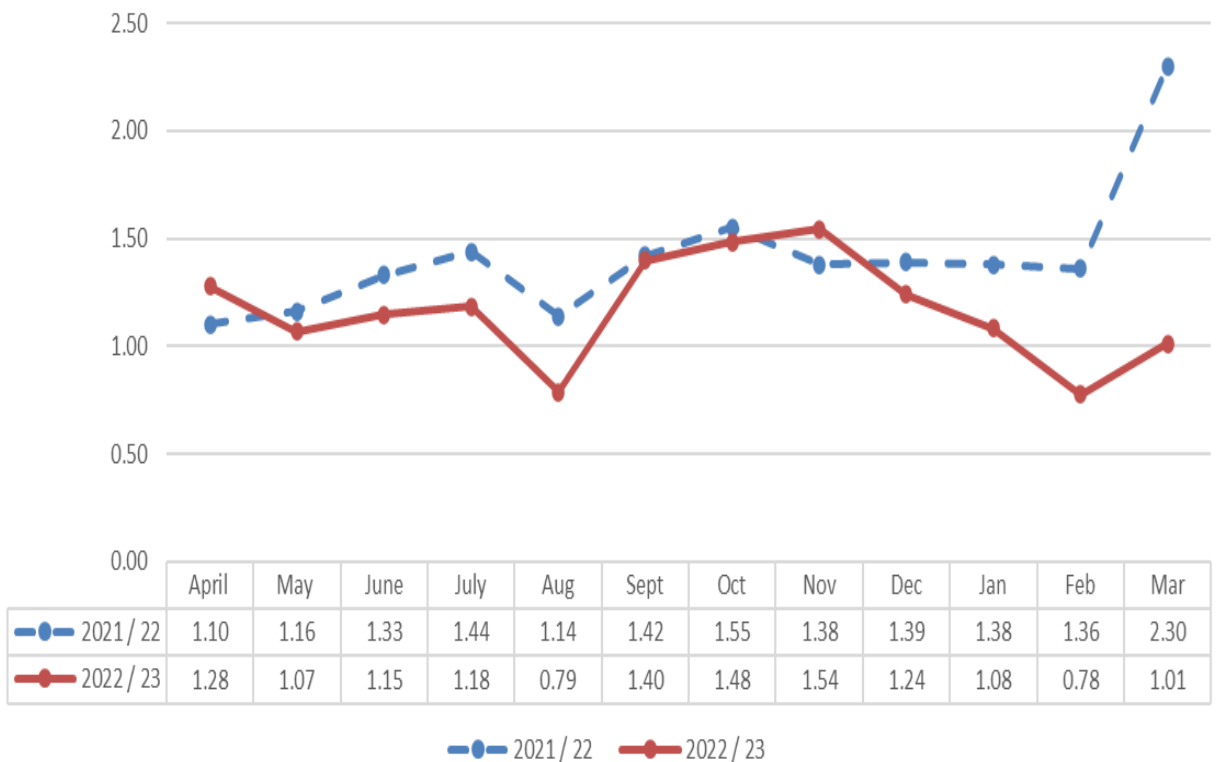


Table 13

### Sickness Absence - Social Services Directorate

Days lost per full time equivalent employee

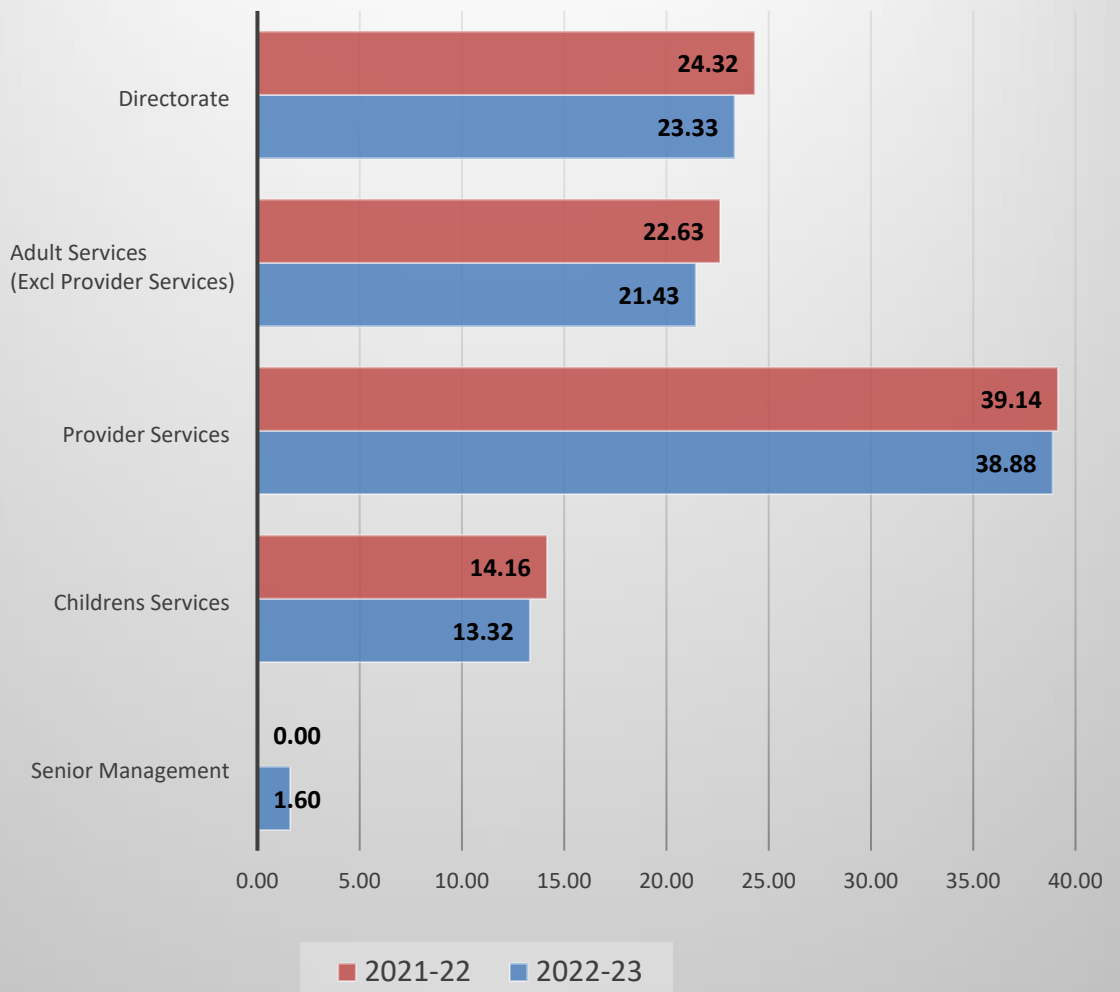


Table 14

### Social Services Directorate

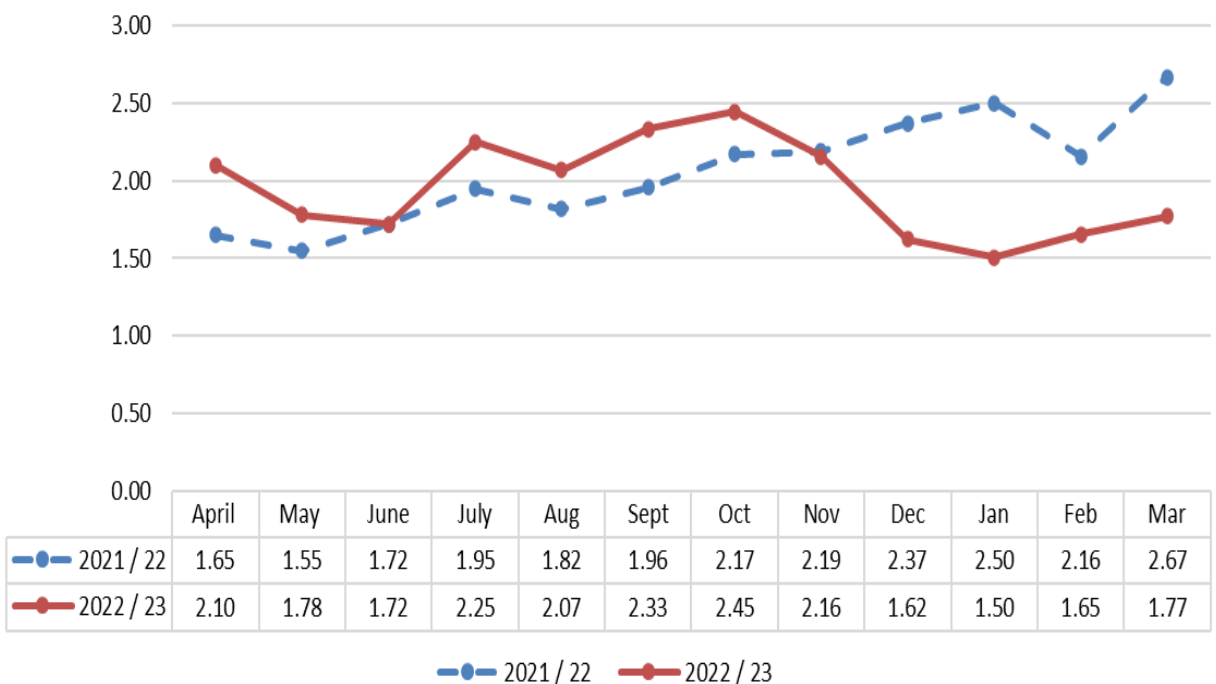


Table 15

### Sickness Absence - Education Directorate & Schools

Days lost per full time equivalent employee

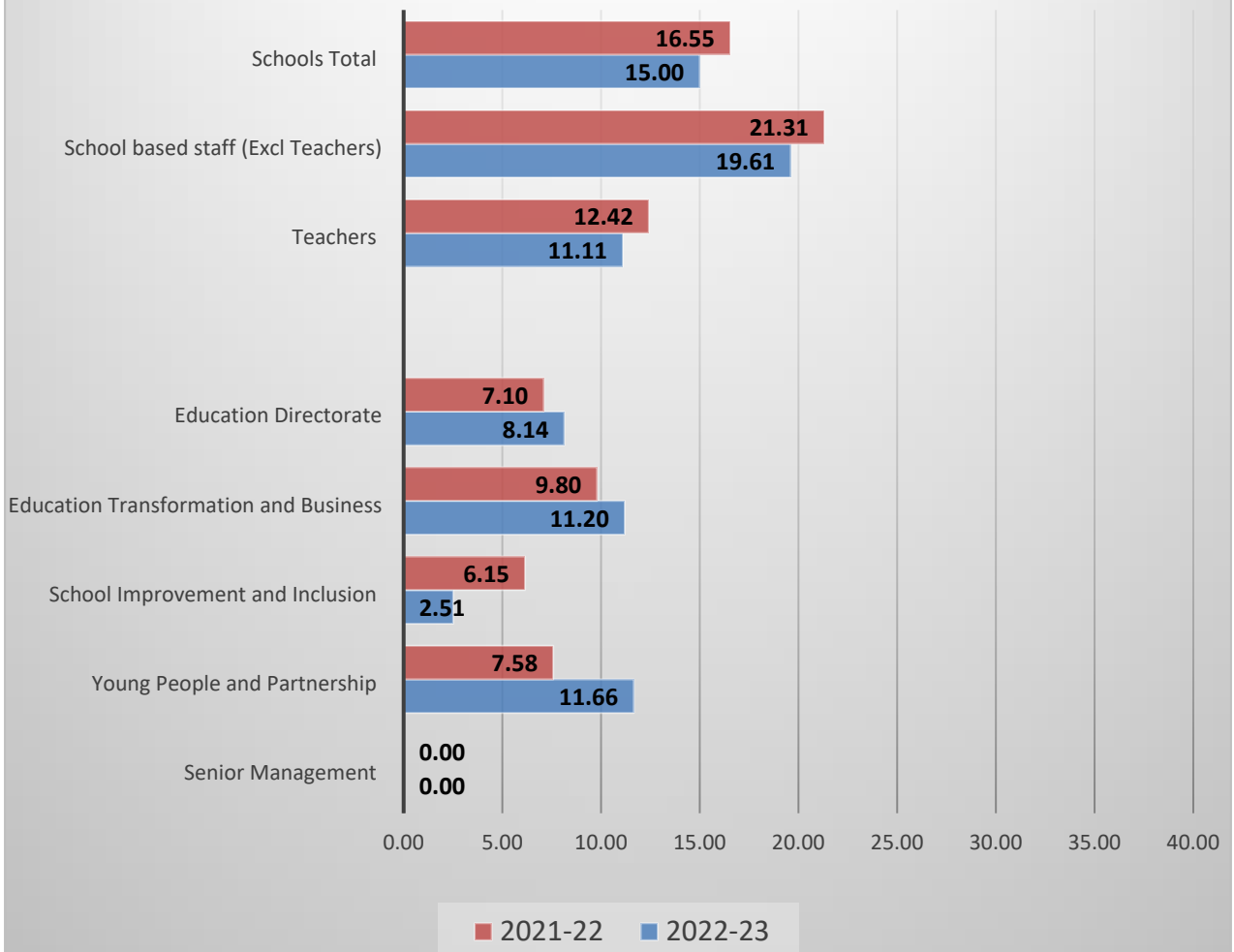


Table 16

### Education Directorate (inc. Schools)

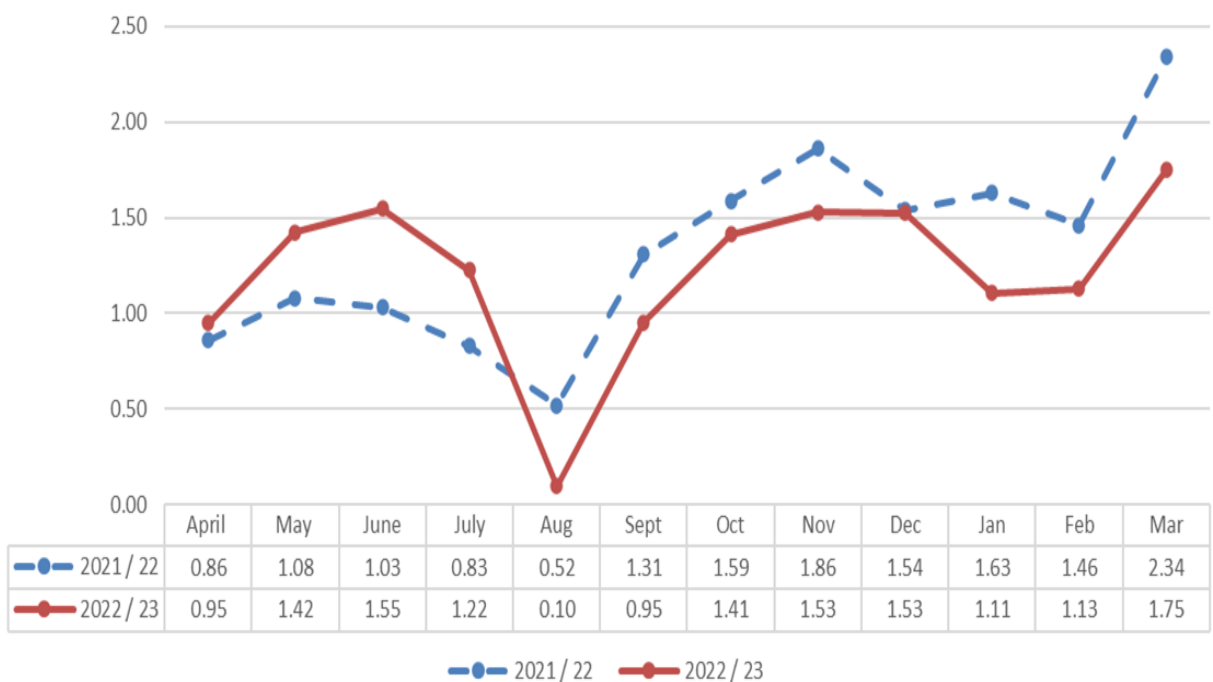


Table 17

### Sickness Absence by Directorate Qtr 1 2023-24

Days lost per full time equivalent employee

