

Committee: **Cabinet**

Date of meeting: **4th December 2024**

Report Subject: **Employee Wellbeing and Sickness Absence**

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

Report Submitted by: **Andrea J Prosser, Head of Organisational Development**

Reporting Pathway								
Directorate Management Team DMT	Corporate Leadership Team	Portfolio Holder / Chair	Governance Audit Committee	Democratic Services Committee	Scrutiny Committee	Cabinet	Council	Other (please state)
	24/10/2024	14.11.24			07/11/2024	04.12.24		

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, recognise the positive attendance of a significant proportion of the workforce and the continued actions to support employee wellbeing and improve attendance. The report presents sickness absence data for the 12-month period from the 1 April 2023 to 31 March 2024 and the first two quarters of 2024-25 up to 30 September 2024.

2. Scope and Background

2.1 Staff health and wellbeing is critical in delivering Council priorities and improving attendance remains a key priority. Absence management is identified as a corporate risk for the Council acknowledging that a high level of sickness absence has a detrimental impact on the ability of the workforce to be as productive as possible and for the Council to deliver services effectively.

2.2 The downward trend in sickness absence continued during 2023/24 with a reduction of 3.63 days from 15.45 days the previous year to 11.82 days lost per full time equivalent (fte) employee. The first two quarters of 2024/25 however have exceeded the council target at 3.35 and 6.07 days lost, an increase from 2.75 and 5.14 days lost in the previous year. Sickness levels continue to remain high; however, it is important to recognise the commitment of staff with a significant proportion of the workforce having little or no sickness absence. An analysis of the sickness performance data is set out in paragraph 6 and Appendix 1.

2.3 In terms of the UK position, the Chartered Institute of Personnel and Development (CIPD) Health and Wellbeing Survey 2023 reports that sickness absence is at the highest level for over a decade. The average rate in the public sector is 10.6 days with mental health and musculoskeletal being the most common causes of long-term absence. There is also considerable variation within sectors, smaller organisations tend to have lower levels of absence than larger ones, with levels up to 13.3 days for organisations with 5000+ employees.

The report outlines that the rise in sickness absence needs to be looked at in context and not taken as the sole measure of an organisation's effectiveness in supporting people's health and wellbeing. External events such as COVID-19, economic turmoil, the UK's cost-of-living crisis and global events have had far-reaching impacts on people's wellbeing.

2.4 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. In terms of what has been done, 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:

- A focus on health and wellbeing initiatives to include 'Wellbeing Wednesday' bulletins published weekly providing a range of wellbeing information and resources including special editions to address key issues and topics such as the cost-of-living crisis.
- Extensive range of flexible working and leave arrangements.
- Stress management policy and toolkit.
- Attendance Management Policy, with support for managers.
- Critical illness and working guidelines including the Council signing up to the TUC's Dying to Work Charter.
- Health and Safety Corporate Group.
- Regular discussion and learning nationally and regionally.
- Dashboard of sickness absence data for managers within the iTrent system.
- Continued emphasis on the importance of timely and accurate recording within the iTrent system, and policy compliance by managers and employees.
- Performance data and factors affecting absence levels discussed by the Corporate Leadership Team on a quarterly basis and cascaded through DMT's to all Managers.
- Employee wellbeing and sickness absence considered by management teams, and as part of annual performance coaching.
- Directorate Workforce Plans in place supporting the future workforce needs of services to meet changing demand and deliver on priorities. A review of the workforce planning framework has been completed and reported to CLT and training facilitated for Organisational Development and Wider CLT.
- Corporate and service targets agreed for 2024/25.

2.5 An in-depth review and analysis was also undertaken of the five services that exceeded the Council outturn figure of 15.45 days in 2022/23 (Legal and Corporate Compliance, Adult Services, Provider Services, Community Services and School based staff excluding teachers) and presented to CLT. Each service was required to develop an action plan to address the recommendations in the review and to reduce the high levels of sickness absence. The key recommendations reinforced the following:

- Communication with the workforce detailing current sickness absence statistics and the priority to reduce sickness.
- Objective for managers as part of their annual performance coaching.

- Consistent application of the Managing Attendance Policy by managers to be reviewed by Directorate Leadership Teams.
- Focussed sessions to regularly review sickness absence – on agenda for team meetings, etc.
- Sickness data by school to be discussed with Headteachers.
- Performance data and factors affecting absence discussed by CLT on a quarterly basis and cascaded through DMT's.
- Emphasis on the timely and accurate recording within iTrent.
- Regular reviews of long-term sickness cases and hotspots.
- Recognition of good attendance through one to one and team meetings.
- Consideration of the feedback from the Unions on suggested actions.

2.6 Internal Audit also undertook an audit of compliance in respect of the agreed policy with the main focus being the five hotspots identified in paragraph 2.5 The audit report identified a number of control weaknesses and an action plan was developed to address the weaknesses which has been considered by CLT and presented to the Audit Committee.

2.7 All 5 hotspot areas identified last year have seen an improvement in sickness absence levels from 2022/23 to the outturn for 2023/24, with three of the services having reduced by over 40%.

Services	23/24 Target	23/24	22/23	
Legal & Corporate Compliance	7	9.91	20.16	↓
Adult Services (excluding Provider Services)	11	9.76	21.43	↓
Provider Services	22	23.52	38.88	↓
Community Services	15	14.91	17.44	↓
School Based Staff (excluding Teachers)	12	15.20	19.61	↓

2.8 Hotspot areas exceeding the Council outturn (11.82 days) for 2023/24 are Community Services, Provider Services, school-based staff (excluding teachers) and senior management in Social Services and Education. These have been highlighted in red in the tables in paragraph 6.1.11. Of these services, with the exception of senior management in Social Services and Education which has had no sickness in 2024/25, all have seen an increase in sickness levels at the end of the 2nd quarter of 2024/25, in comparison to 2023/24.

2.9 What we are currently doing which will have a positive impact on employee wellbeing and attendance at work:

- Introduction of a new employee assistance programme (EAP) provider, 'VIVUP,' that provides a range of services including counselling, advice, and information. The Council actively promotes the wellbeing services on offer which includes an online wellbeing platform where individual employees can carry out a personal wellbeing assessment and set goals, along with self-help workbooks, podcasts and blogs for employees and managers.

- Working with the Council's new occupational health provider, Caer Health, to provide support including early interventions particularly in cases of stress and anxiety, targeted health surveillance and support for the management of attendance. In addition, the offer of an online wellbeing hub where employees can access a range of information and support.
- Additional clinics secured with a dedicated mental health practitioner. These appointments will be longer than the standard appointment and a detailed report will be provided which will support in the management of increasing mental health absences.
- 10-day turnaround from referral to occupational health appointment and mechanisms in place with the provider to react to an increase in demand.
- Quarterly lunch and learn sessions for managers for 2024/25 on suicide prevention, menopause, thinking under pressure and neurodiversity.
- Employee engagement through a planned staff survey.
- Continued support for managers to include training / briefing sessions.
- Review of the Menopause Policy to include menstruation.
- Proposals to introduce a restorative culture which is centred around creating a culture where employees feel supported and empowered to learn when things do not go as expected, rather than allocating blame whilst ensuring people are held accountable for their decisions.
- 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.
- 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.
- A sickness absence task and finish group to be established with the trade unions Autumn 2024.
- Identification of hotspots above the Council's outturn for 2023/24 and development of dedicated action plans.
- Corporate directors all have sickness absence included in their objectives and data will be reported through the 12-week performance cycle which is being implemented.

3. Options for Recommendation

3.1 The Corporate and Performance Scrutiny Committee considered this report at its meeting on the 7th November 2024 and supported Option 2. The Committee requested clarity on the number of occupational health management referrals detailed at para 6.1.9 and it is confirmed that the figure of 480 is correct. In addition, the Committee will be given a breakdown of first-time referrals and follow up appointments for occupational health cases further to their request.

3.2 Option 1

That Cabinet having considered 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.

3.3 **Option 2**

That Cabinet 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.

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 2023/24 is 11.82 days per fte employee which exceeds the Council's 10-day target. When comparing the overall outturn with the previous year, performance has **significantly improved with a reduction of 3.63 days** in the level of sickness from 15.45 days.

6.1.2 Over the previous five years the Council has experienced sustained levels of sickness above 11 days per fte employee. The trend over this period has seen sickness peak at 16.74 days in 2021/22 **and subsequently reduce significantly over the following two years to 11.82 days in 2023/24, a reduction of over 29% in days lost.** The All-Wales average sickness absence figures from 2019/20 to 2022/23 are well below the Council's outturn figures, however the gap in 2022/23 has narrowed to 2.65 days and the Council has bucked the All-Wales trend and seen a reduction in sickness levels. 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 2a. When reported last year the data had not been published and of those Council's that had provided data the Council had the highest days lost at 15.45 days, however it should be noted that based on the published data the Council was in fact ranked third highest with two councils having higher levels of sickness absence.
- 6.1.4 The All-Wales comparative data for 2023/24 has not yet been published, however the WLGA has collated data from 13 out of the 22 local authorities which is detailed anonymously at Appendix 1 Table 2b. The highest reported being 13.62 days, the lowest 9.41 days and with 6 of the 13-reporting sickness of between 11 and 12 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.
- 6.1.5 When comparing the sickness outturn figures at a directorate/school level over the previous five years, all directorates have seen a reduction in sickness levels in 2023/24. Corporate Services and Education have consistently achieved levels below the corporate target. Regeneration and Community Services and Schools have exceeded the corporate target in all years except 2020/21, sickness peaked in 2021/22 and has subsequently reduced year on year. Social Services has exceeded the corporate target and experienced the highest levels of sickness across all years. The last year, however, has seen a significant reduction of 37% in days lost from 23.33 days in 2022/23 to 14.66 days in 2023/24. Appendix 1 Table 3 details the full breakdown by directorate.
- 6.1.6 The top three reasons for sickness account for over 64% of all absences. Mental health continues to be the most frequent cause of absence across the Council accounting for 36% of days lost which is an increase from 31% in the previous year this includes stress, anxiety, and depression. 24% (2850.36 days). of time lost to mental health is work related Appendix 1 Table 4 sets out the percentage of time lost by sickness reason.
- 6.1.7 Just under a half (49%) of staff across the Council (excluding schools) had no sickness in the last year which has increased from 40.8% in the previous year. Appendix 1 Table 5 provides a breakdown of the percentage of staff by directorate.
- 6.1.8 With the introduction of Agile Working an analysis has been undertaken of the level of sickness by workstyle. Service based staff make up over 61% of the non-school based workforce and lost 13.72 days, agile workers 7.17 days and home workers 5.3 days. Appendix 1 Table 6 provides the breakdown.
- 6.1.9 Long term absences of four weeks or more make up 66% of all sickness absence, with short term absence accounting for 34%. This percentage split has remained consistent over the years with long term absence accounting for the majority of days lost. During 2023/24 there were 480 management referrals to the occupational health service. Appendix 1 Table 7 details the breakdown by directorate

6.1.10 During 2023/24 there were 16 formal warnings issued under the Council's Attendance Management Policy, 24 dismissals/mutual terminations, and 5 ill health retirements. Appendix 1 Table 8 provides comparative data for previous years which provides evidence of continued management action.

6.1.11 A breakdown of sickness absence by service area is detailed in Appendix 1 tables 9-16 the key headlines are detailed below:

- 14 services came within target, of which 9 had a reduction from the previous year, 3 had more sickness and 1 remained the same.

Services within target	23/24 Target	23/24	22/23	
Commercial Services (OD / Social Care Workforce Development / Business Support)	7	6.35	10.89	↓
Resources	7	6.57	6.28	↑
Governance & Partnerships	7	6.92	6.11	↑
Senior Mgt – Corporate Services	6	2.83	4.15	↓
Regeneration & Development	7	3.33	4.90	↓
Community Services	15	14.91	17.44	↓
Public Protection	7	2.11	3.86	↓
Silent Valley	10	6.54	N/A	
Senior Mgt – Regeneration & Comm. Services	6	0.00	0.00	↔
Adult Services (excluding Provider Services)	11	9.76	21.43	↓
Children's Services	9.71	9.71	13.32	↓
Teachers	12	9.85	11.11	↓
Education Transformation & Business Change	7	4.80	11.20	↓
School Improvement & Inclusion	7	4.39	2.51	↑

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

Services exceeding target	23/24 Target	23/24	22/23	
Commercial Services (Benefits / Communications, Marketing & Customer Access / Procurement / Strategic)	7	9.71	5.52	↑
Legal & Corporate Compliance	7	9.91	20.16	↓
Provider Services	22	23.52	38.88	↓
Senior Management – Social Services	6	34.00	1.60	↑
School Based Staff (excluding Teachers)	12	15.20	19.61	↓
Young People & Partnerships	7	8.66	11.66	↑
Senior Management – Education	6	40.50	0.00	↑

6.1.12 The accumulative sickness figures for 2024/25 quarter 1 (3.35 days) and quarter 2 (6.07 days) have increased in comparison to the previous year. Appendix 1 Table 17 details the outturn figures by directorate. The key headlines are:

- Corporate Services and Education have seen a reduction in sickness, with Regeneration and Community Services, Social Services and Schools experiencing increased levels of sickness absence
- The split between short and long-term absence has remained consistent with previous years, with 69% long term and 31% short term.
- Mental Health is the highest reason for staff absence
- Over three quarters of the workforce have had no sickness.
- 8 of the 22 Councils in Wales have shared their 1st quarter data, as detailed in the table below

Council A	3.66
Council B	3.62
Council C	3.43
Blaenau Gwent	3.35
Council D	3.34
Council E	3.05
Council F	3.02
Council G	2.89
Council H	2.52

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)**

CLT are committed to working consistently with the workforce and the trade unions to reduce sickness absence. A task and finish group is being established with the unions to consider sickness absence.

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)**

The management of absence is a priority across all services.

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

8. **Background Documents /Electronic Links**

Appendix 1 below - Sickness absence performance data

Table 1

Sickness Absence - Blaenau Gwent CBC 2019 - 2024

Days lost per full time equivalent employee - all employees

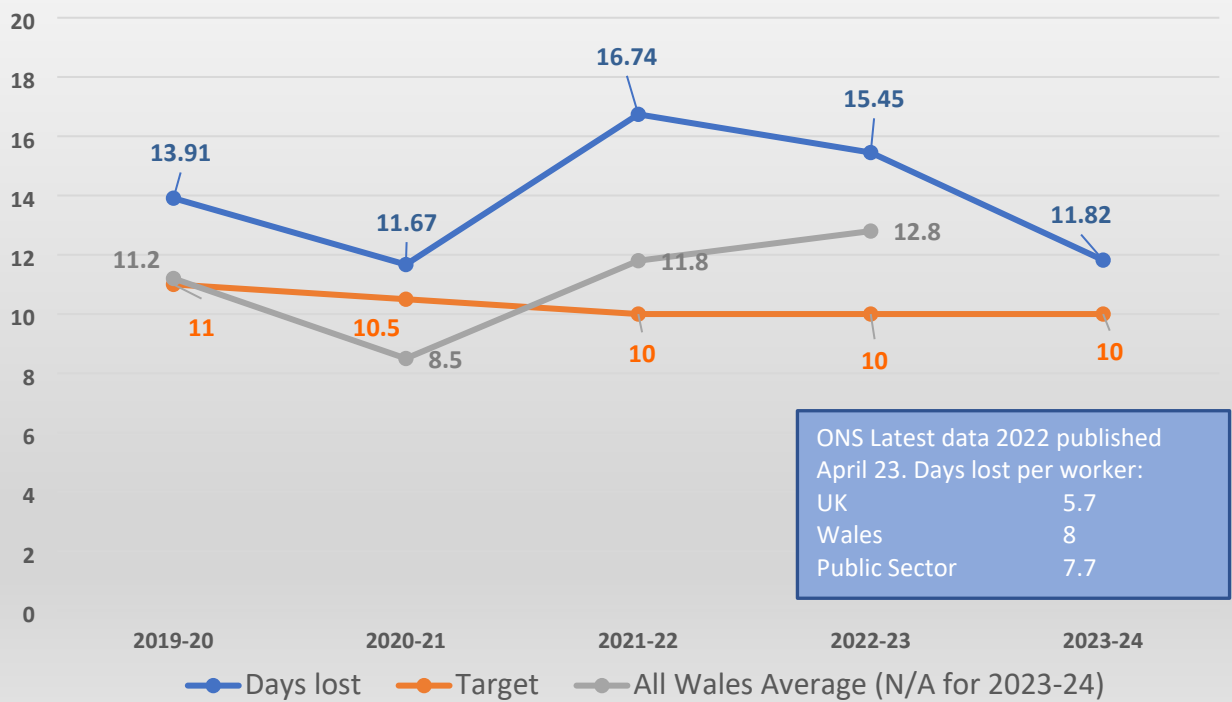
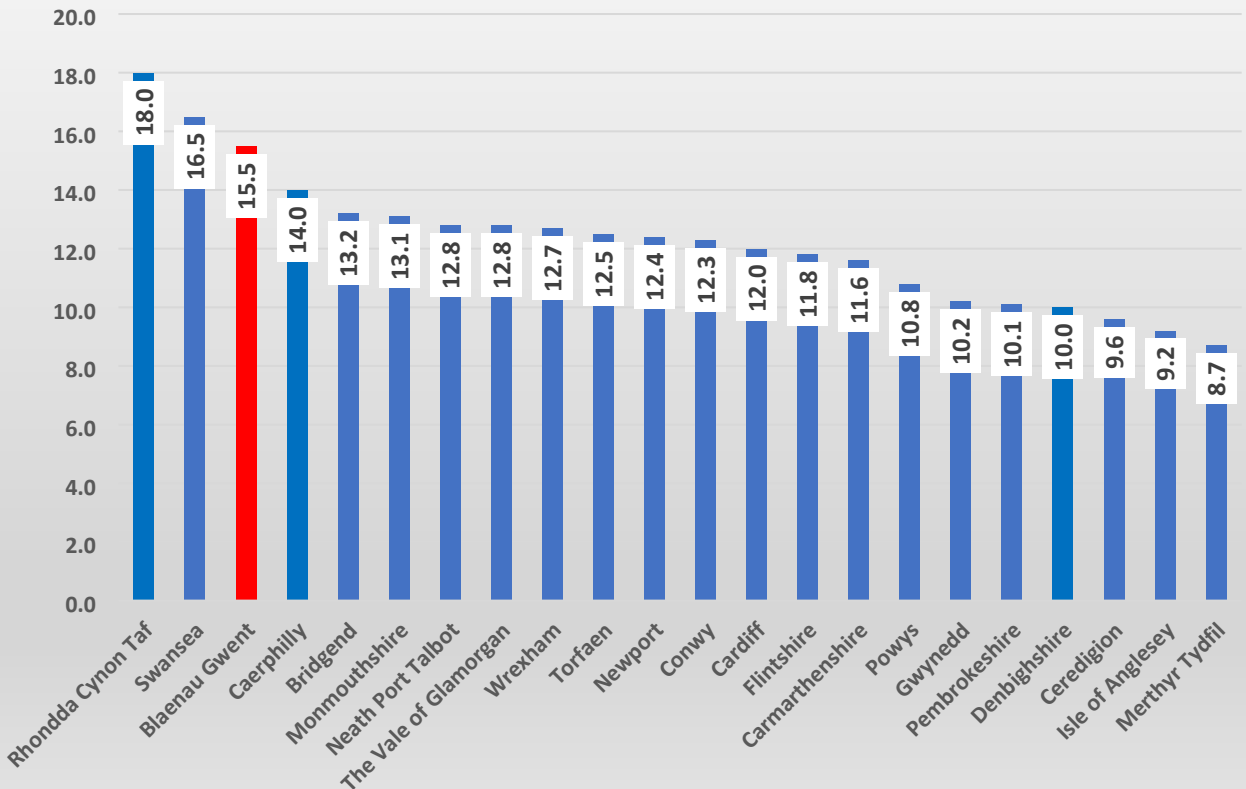


Table 2a

Sickness Absence - All Wales Published Comparative Data 2022-23

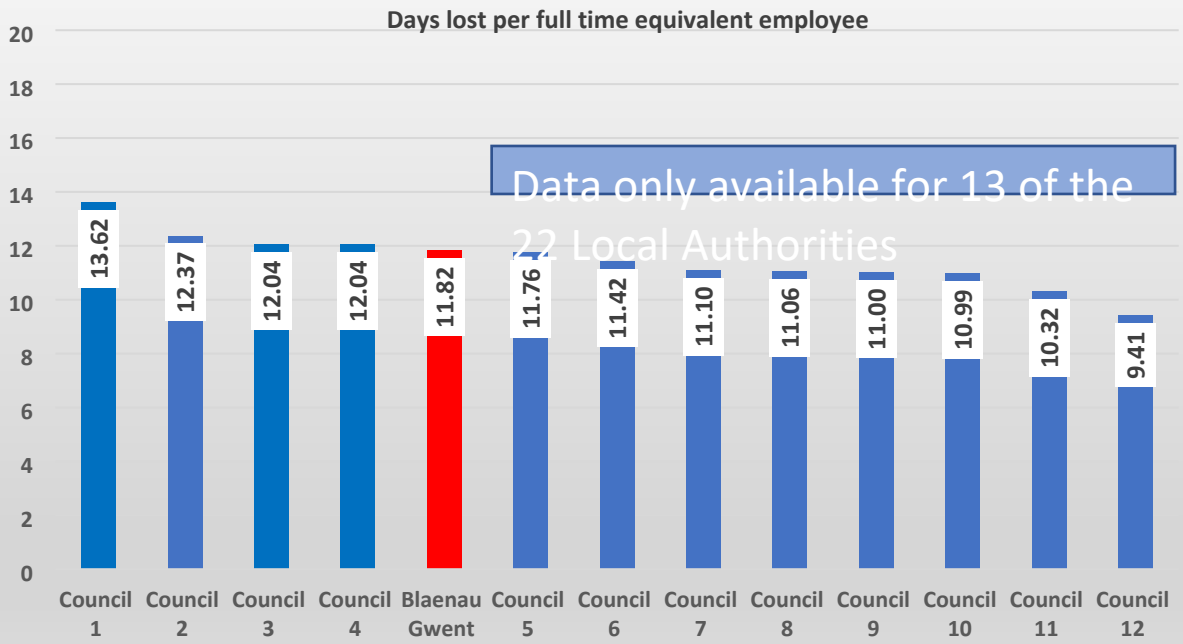
Days lost per full time equivalent employee



Table

Sickness Absence - All Wales Unpublished Comparative Data 2023-24

2b



Table

Sickness Absence by Directorate / Schools 2019 - 2024

e 3

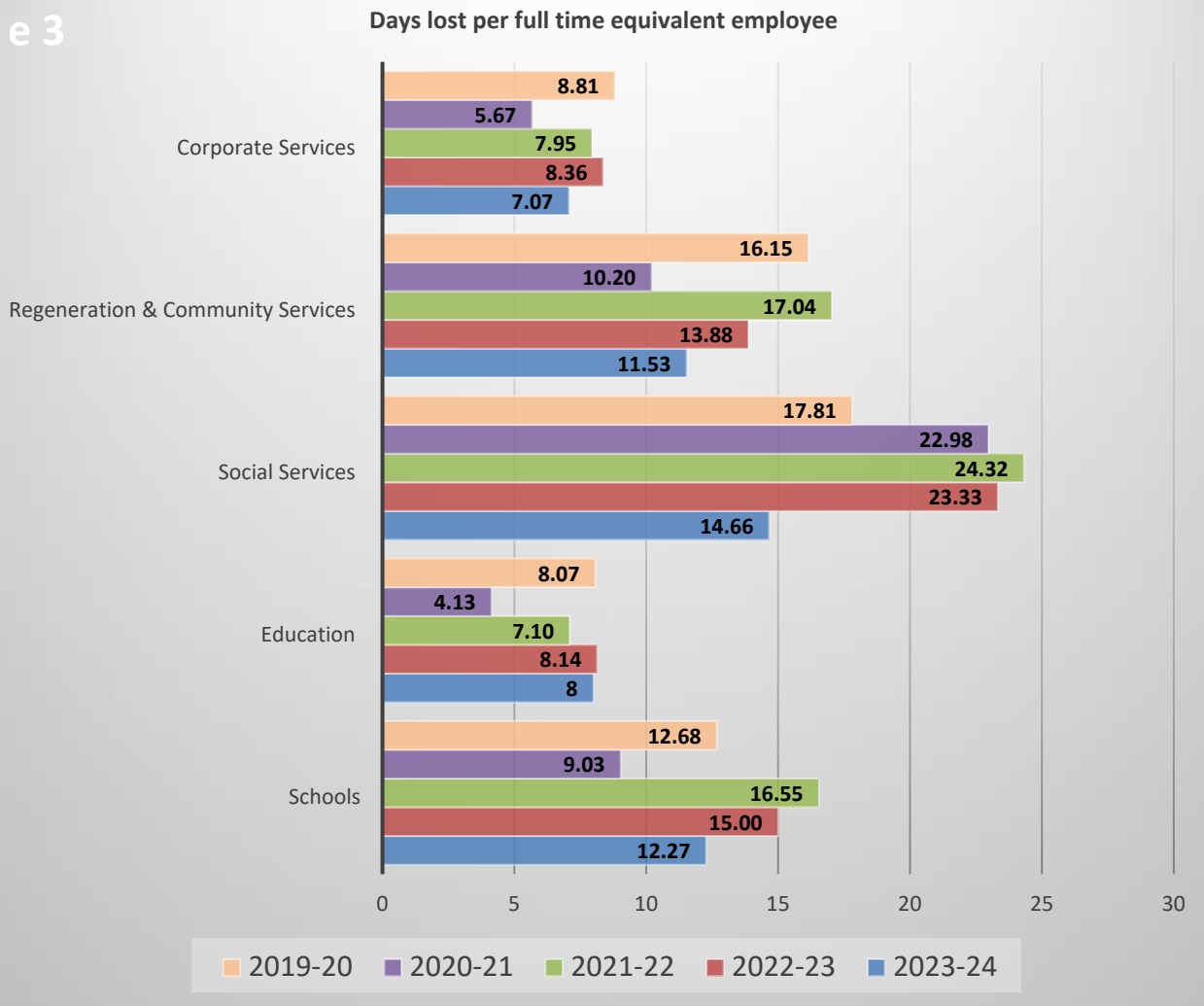


Table 4

Sickness Absence - Reasons 2023-24 % of time lost- all employees

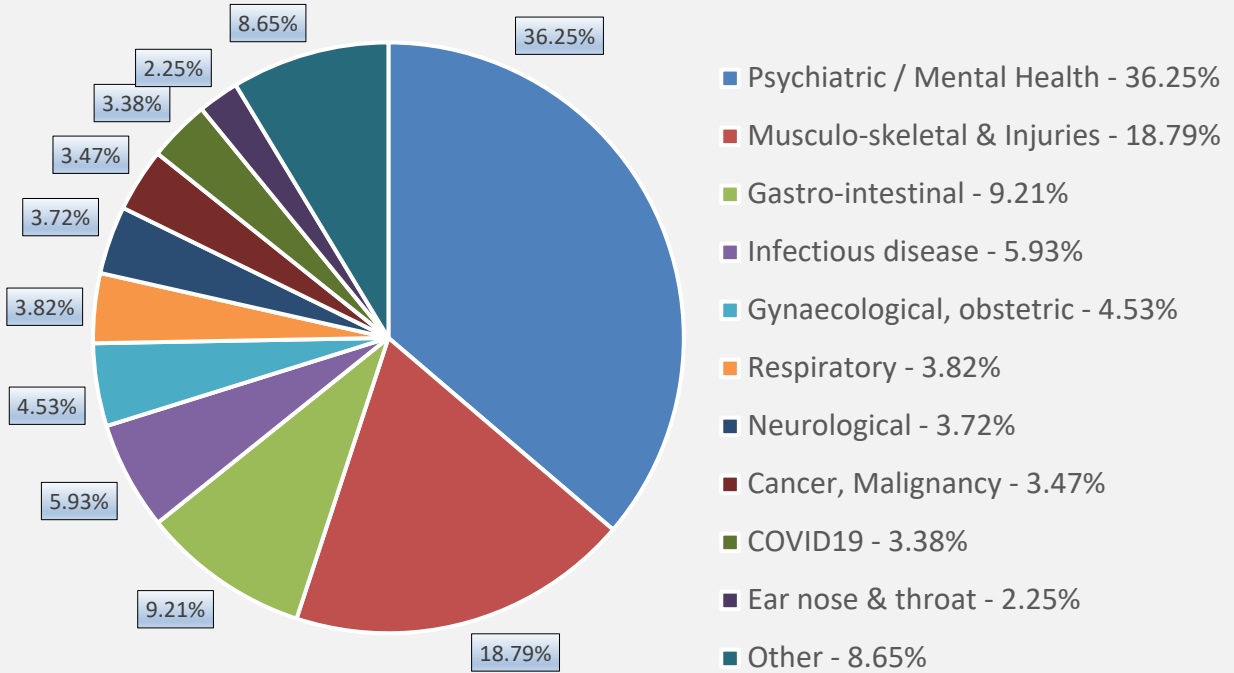


Table 5

% of employees with no sickness 2023-24 (excluding school based employees)



Table 6

Sickness Absence by Workstyle Designation 2023-24

Days lost per full time equivalent employee (Excluding school based employees)

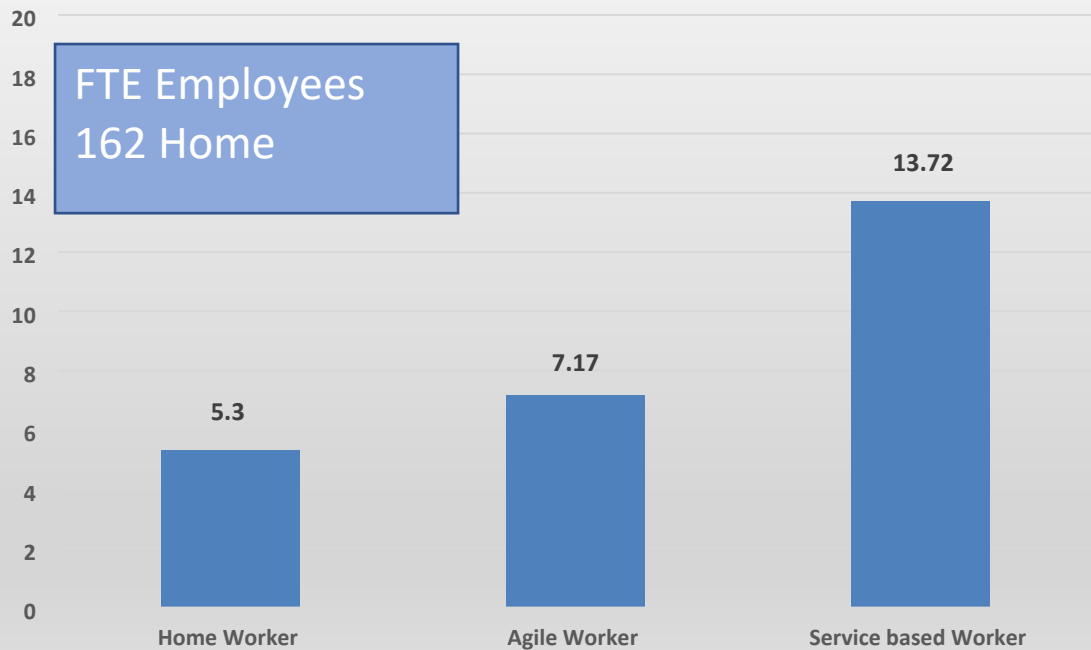


Table 7

Short / long term sickness absence 2023-24	Short Term %	Long Term %
Council	34	66
Corporate Services	28	72
Education	36	64
Schools	41	59
Regeneration & Community Services	30	70
Social Services	29	71

Table 8

Formal warnings, dismissals, and ill health retirements	2021/22	2022/23	2023/24
Formal warnings issued	20	18	16
Dismissals / mutual terminations	7	23	24
Ill health retirements	6	7	5

Table 9

Sickness Absence - Corporate Services Directorate

Days lost per full time equivalent employee

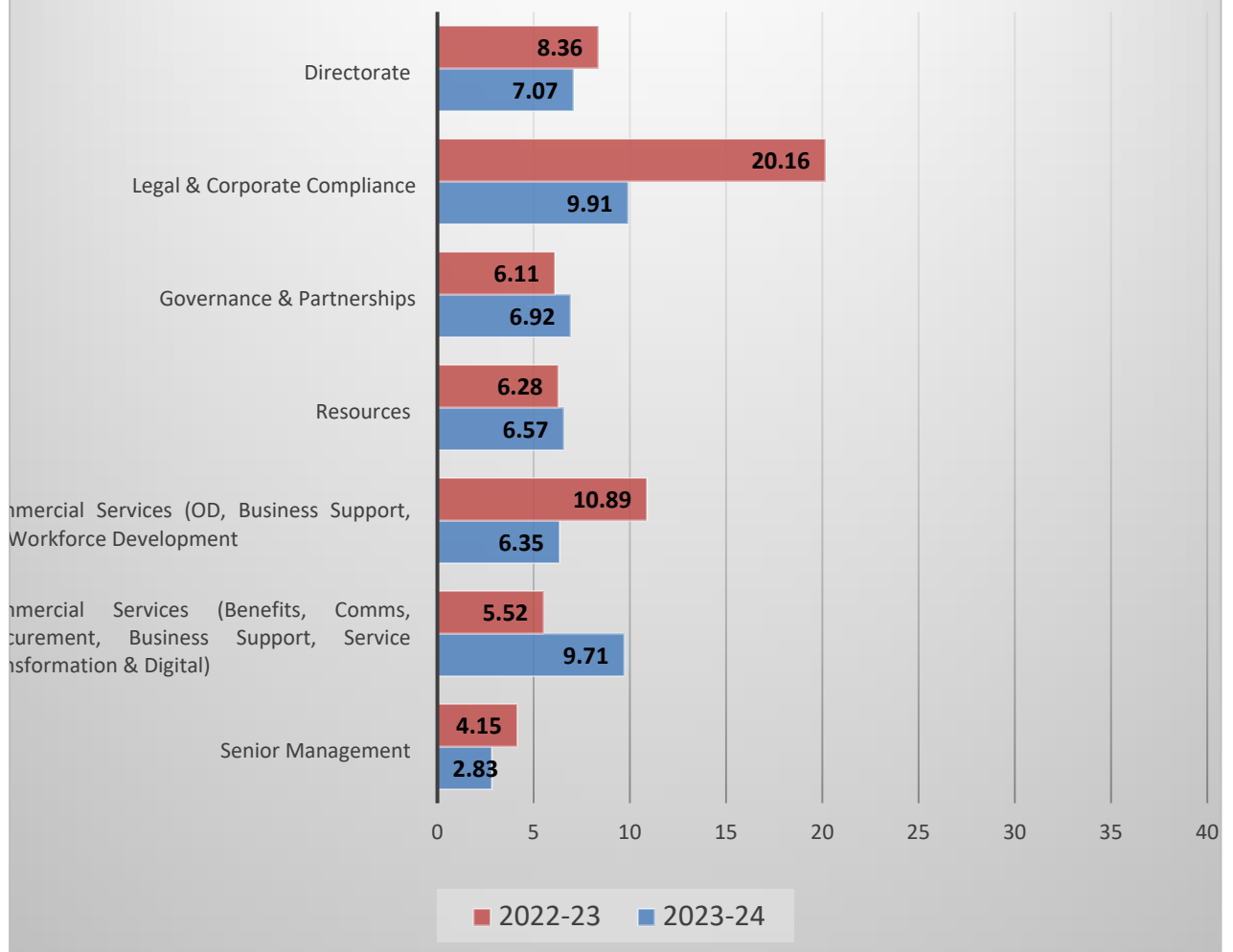


Table 10

Corporate Services Directorate

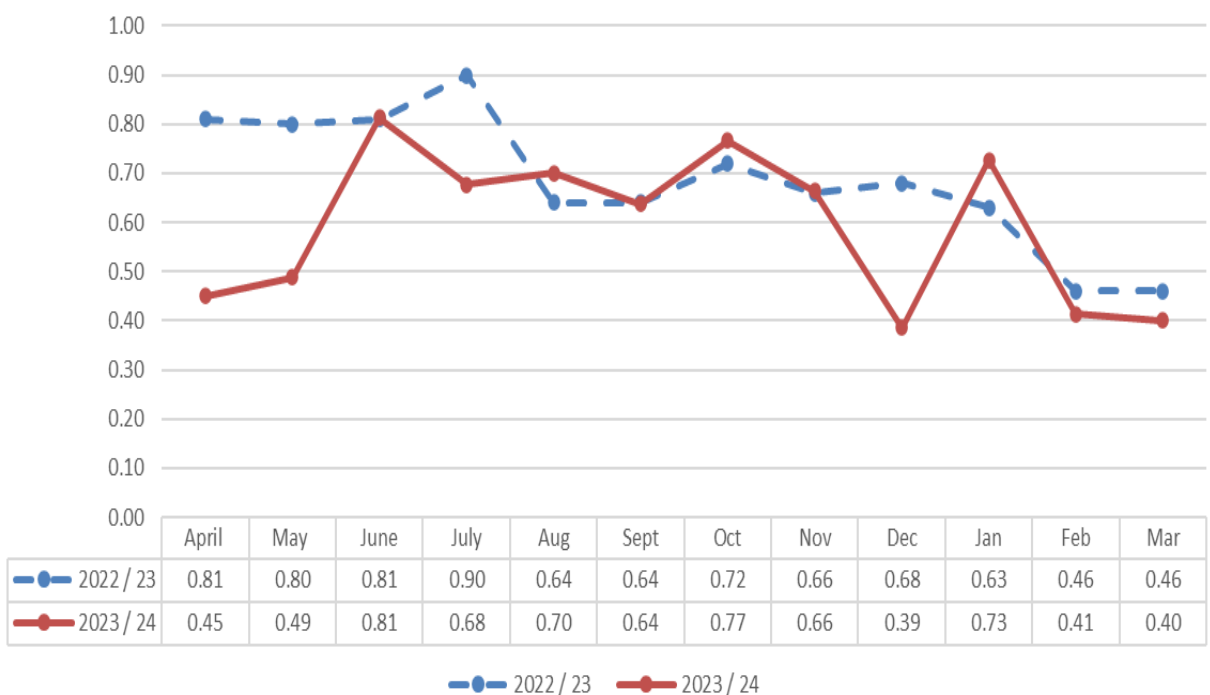


Table 11

Sickness Absence - Regeneration & Community Services Directorate

Days lost per full time equivalent employee

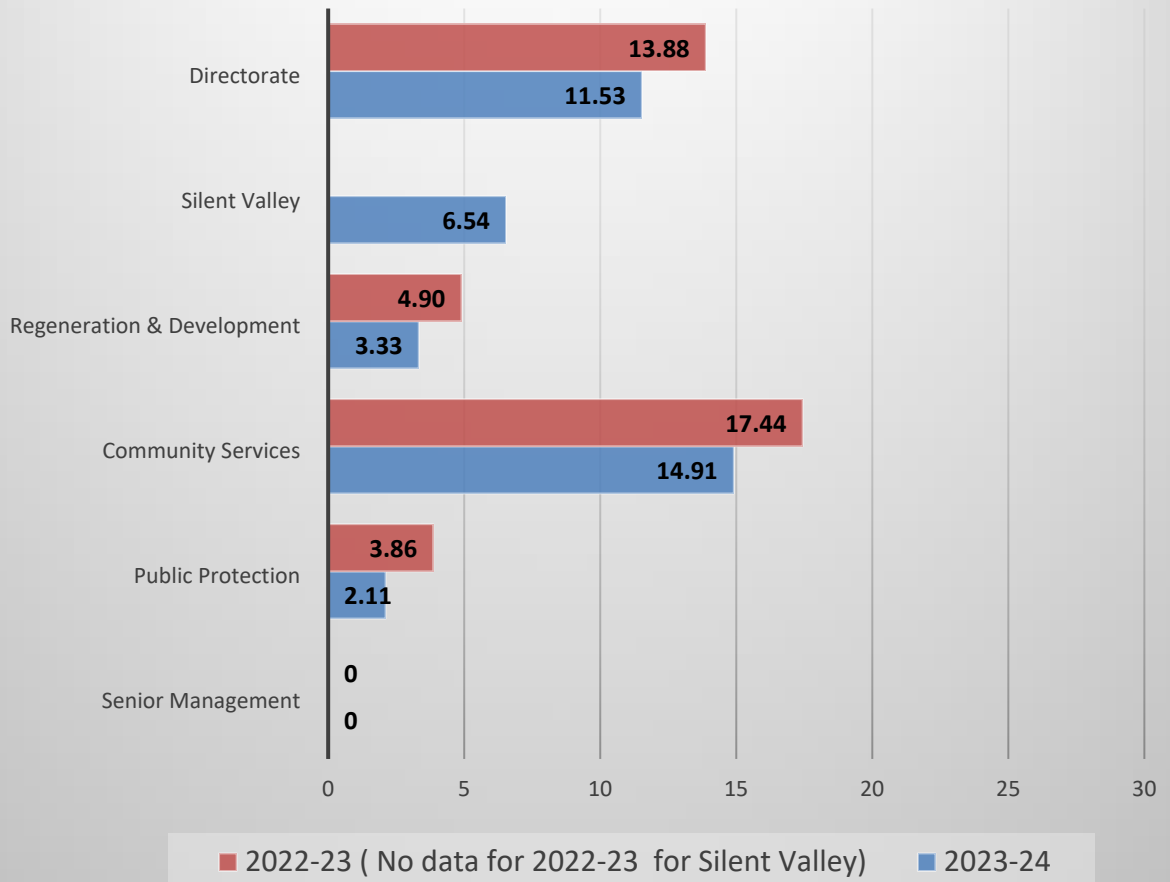


Table 12

Regeneration & Community Services Directorate

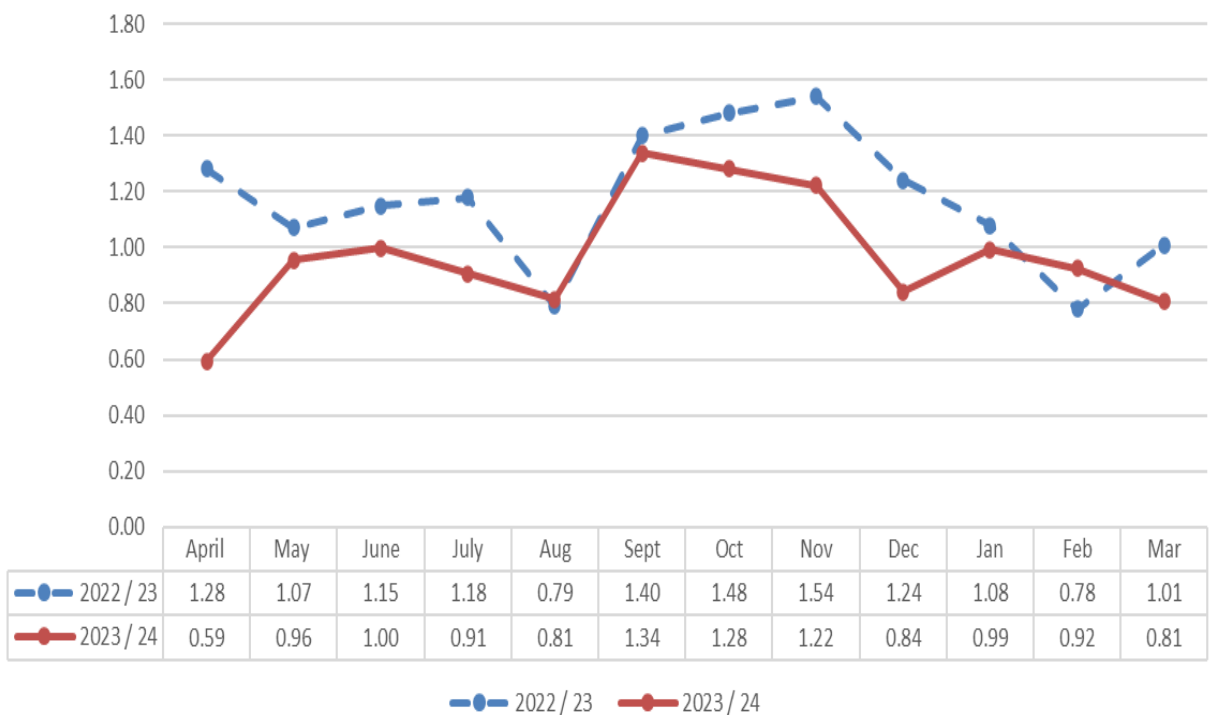


Table 13

Sickness Absence - Social Services Directorate

Days lost per full time equivalent employee

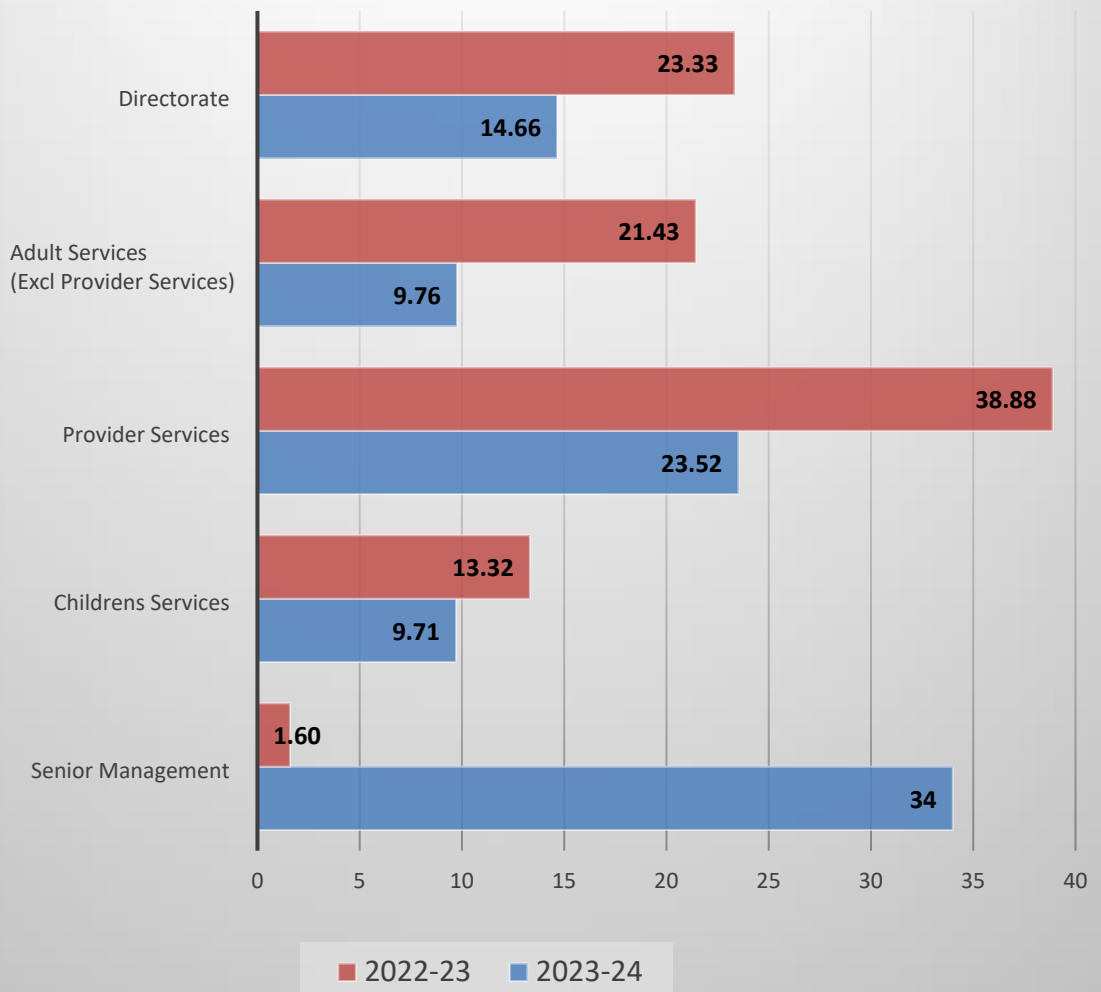


Table 14

Social Services Directorate

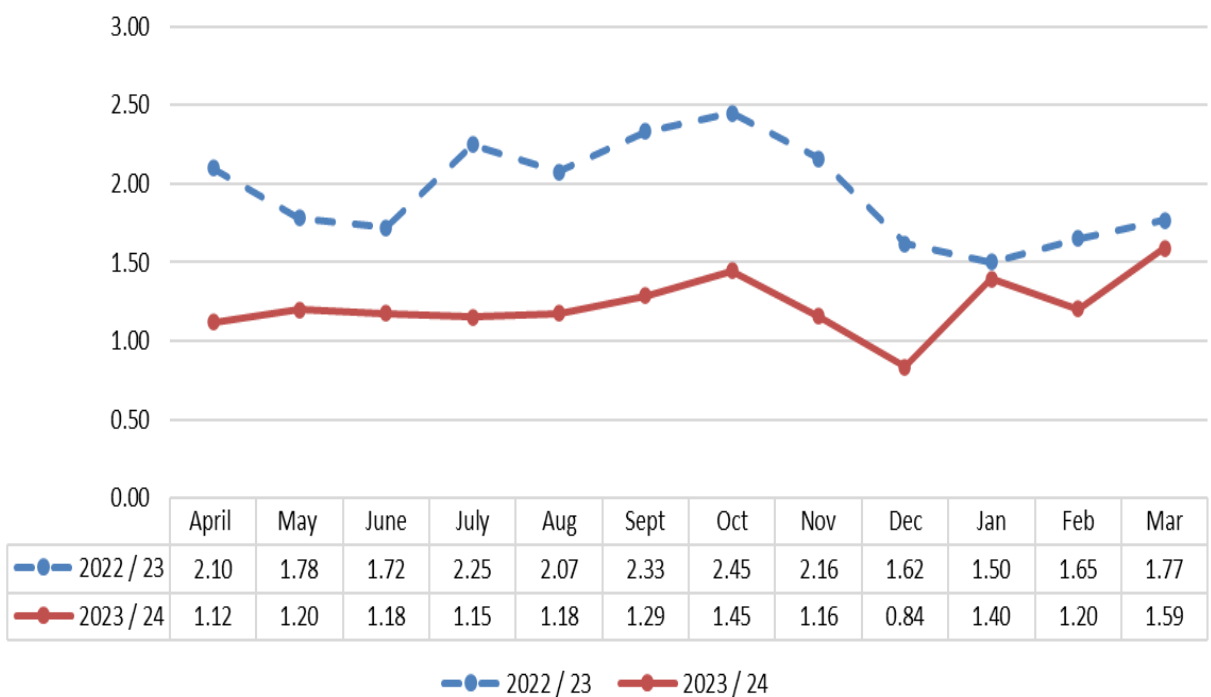


Table 15

Sickness Absence - Education Directorate & Schools

Days lost per full time equivalent employee

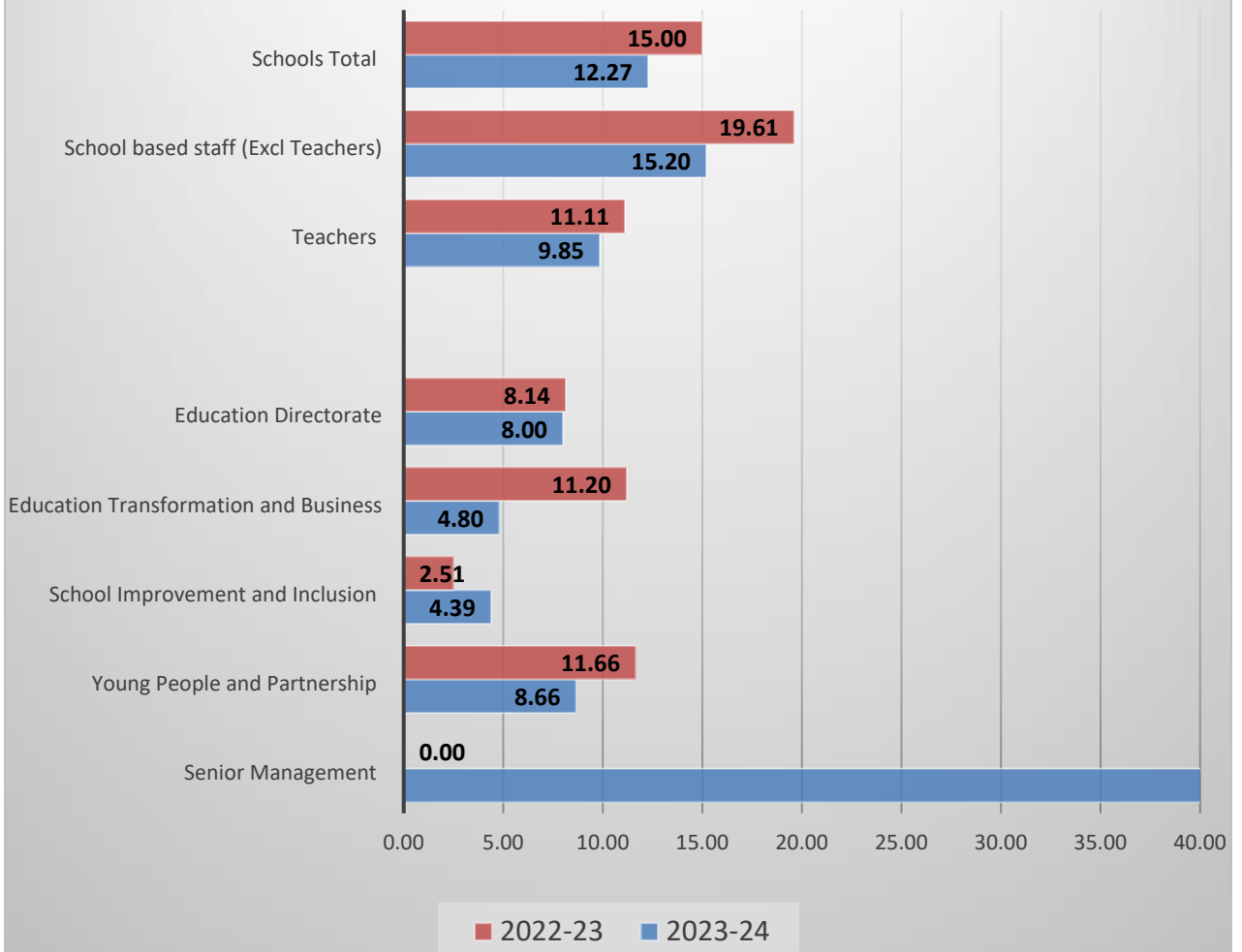


Table 16

Education Directorate (inc. Schools)

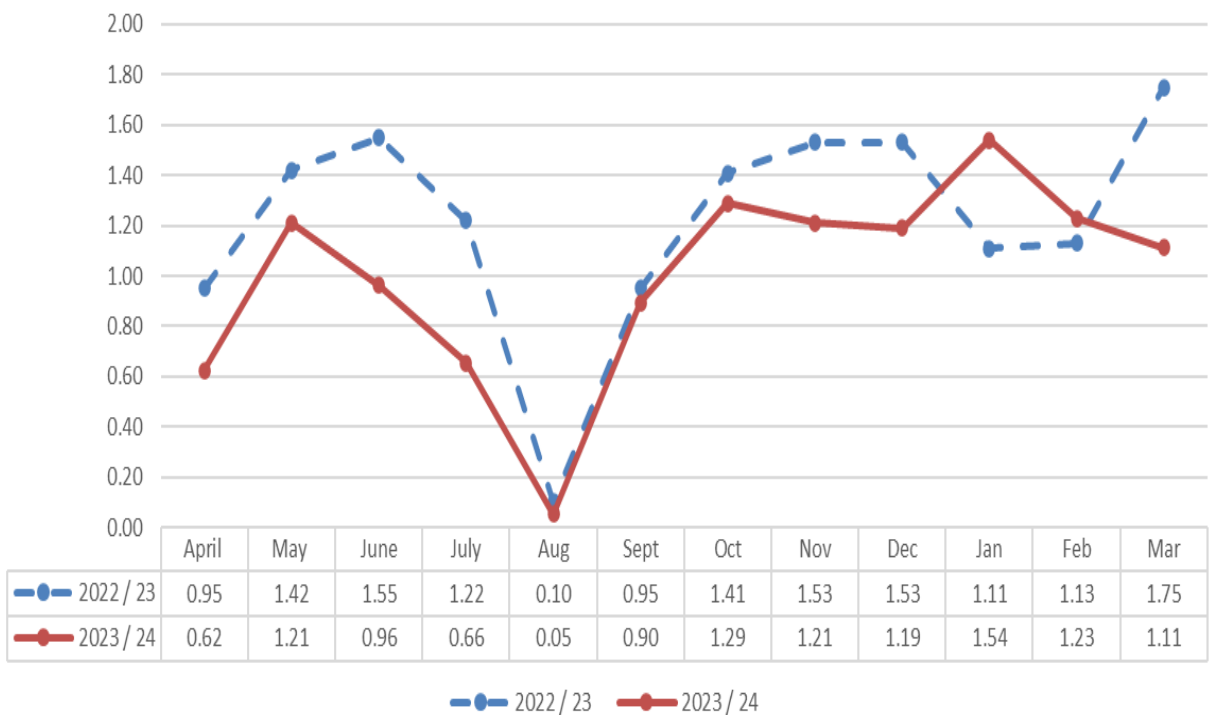


Table 17

Accumulative Sickness Absence Qtr 1 & 2 2024-25

Days lost per full time equivalent employee

