

# Scrutiny Sub-Committee for Promoting Strong, Healthy and Safe Communities



7 March 2005

## Sickness Absence: Review Report

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### Report of Head of Overview and Scrutiny

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#### Purpose of Report

1. To up-date the Sub-Committee about the latest review of Sickness Absence.

#### Background

2. A Scrutiny Group, in June 2004, made recommendations about improvements in sickness absence management, both in Social Care and Health and also corporately, in relation to the following areas:
  - Further and improved training in relation to lifting and carrying and risk assessment
  - Increased inclusivity in relation to Social Care and Health employees who may be geographically remote; speedy referrals to occupational health and progression of long term sickness absence
  - Better management of sickness absence
  - More consistency of the sickness absence procedures and better monitoring
  - Recruitment/promotion of staff and sickness absence
  - Publicity to employees about sickness absence procedures
  - Promotion of staff health and well being
3. The review meeting took place on 11 February 2005 and was attended by officers from Personnel and Social Care and Health.

#### Progress against the Scrutiny Working Group Recommendations

4. Peter Appleton, Head of Service, Social Care and Health and Geoff Hardy, Principal Personnel Services Officer, Corporate Services gave progress reports. A copy of the Action Plan template showing progress against each of the recommendations is **attached**.

## Current Sickness Absence Data

5. We also received an update from Peter Appleton about current sickness absence, during which the following main points were highlighted:
- Sickness absence levels have fallen from a high of 8.8% (22.9 days) per annum in 2001/02 to a projected 6.9% (17.6 days) for 2004/05
  - There have been sustained falls in sickness absence in County Durham Care over the last year, although absence levels have risen in other Branches and particularly in Children & Their Families where the main causative factor is stress
  - Targeted savings of £250,000 on reducing sickness absence in Social Care and Health for 2004/05 should be met or exceeded. The target savings of £171,664 in relation to County Durham Care represent real savings (i.e. by not having to employ replacement staff to cover for absent colleagues), for some other Branches where replacement cover would not necessarily be provided, notional sums have been calculated as it is difficult to be precise about replacement costs.
  - The cause of the greatest number of days lost due to sickness absence for January – December 2004 was depression/stress (at 29.8%, as compared with 27.1% in the same period the previous year). Musculo skeletal illness was the next highest cause of sickness absence (at 26.9%, down from 30.7% the previous year)
  - Significant progress was being made in tackling long-term sickness absence and the aim was to have completed all stages within 9 months
  - The number of sickness absence reviews had increased in 2004 compared to the previous year and the reporting system now included data about the number of return to work interviews (from December 2004)
  - Sickness absence levels were still high in Durham compared to many of the Social Care and Health Comparator Authorities, although the projected figures for 2004/05 were expected to place Durham amongst the mid-ranking authorities. Northumberland County Council had the fourth lowest level of sickness absence in this group at 5.9% in 2003/04
  - Regionally, Middlesbrough had the lowest levels of sickness absence in Social Care and Health at 5.0%
6. Geoff Hardy from Personnel advised that the most recent data for sickness absence rates in the County Council (up to December 2004) showed a level of 10.16 days per person per annum, against the target of 10.0 days. The new Sickness Absence Management policy would be rolled out from 1 April 2005 and training of managers in operation of the new procedures had just begun.

7. The following issues were discussed by members/officers and considered as part of the review:
- There is constant monitoring of the equipment used in client homes and assessment of home care staff and occupational therapist feedback to ensure that the most appropriate devices are used (recommendation 1)
  - The move towards a high level/high dependency community based service has resulted in more mobile staff. The current arrangements mean that managers now hold area-based meetings on a monthly basis, together with one-to-one meetings (recommendation 4)
  - In relation to sickness absence caused by stress, a Stress Management Policy has been developed in Social Care and Health and it is hoped that this might serve as a model for the rest of the County Council
  - Progress is being made towards the development of a common costing model for sickness absence and Treasurer's staff are closely involved in this (recommendation 9)
  - The sickness absence policy is non-specific in some areas (i.e. reporting requirements by the person off sick after the initial contact) because of the need to allow for exigencies of different Services. The new Sickness Absence Policy also places much more emphasis on managers to better manage periods of absence, including communication with those who are absent due to sickness (recommendations 11-14)
  - The poster and intranet campaign to raise staff awareness of the sickness absence procedures is likely to begin in April when the new Policy is launched; Social Care and Health has already launched its own web page on the intranet and this has been well used (recommendation 20)
  - Staff health and well-being issues and a review of the People Strategy are all under active consideration. The recent Best Value Review of Support Services will lead to significant changes in the personnel support process with the creation of specific dedicated teams at the centre to advise Services on staff health and well-being. The People Strategy will also be revisited (recommendations 21 and 22)

### **Summary of issues raised for further Action/Investigation**

8. Members of the Working Group felt that good progress was being made towards implementation of the recommendations, but that the push towards better management of sickness absence needs to be sustained. It was emphasised to officers how important this was in terms of keeping within budget in 2005/06. It was agreed that a further review be undertaken in six month's time and that the report to the next meeting should (amongst any other issues) include details of progress in relation to the following specific issues:

- Implementation of the new Sickness Absence Policy and publicity for employees
  - Details of the Stress Management Policy
  - Development of a common costing model
  - More detailed information about sickness absence rates in Social Services Departments in Northumberland County Council and Middlesbrough Council
9. It was also felt that there might be some merit, as part of the Group's future work, in examining sickness absence levels across the whole of the County Council and assessing the financial impact.

### **Recommendation**

10. **That a review takes place in approximately 6 months time.** This will provide an opportunity to:
- Consider information in relation to the issues raised in paragraph 8 above
  - Allow ongoing monitoring of levels of sickness absence in Social Care and Health
11. In relation to the proposal to scrutinise sickness absence levels across all Services outlined in paragraph 9, it is suggested that discussions about this proposal take place with the Corporate Scrutiny Sub-Committee and Human Resources Committee.
12. Members also asked that copies of the new Sickness Absence Management Policy and Social Care and Health Stress Management Policy be circulated to all members of the Working Group.

### **Background Papers**

Action Plan template and presentations from Social Care and Health and Personnel Service officers to the Scrutiny Group.

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**Contact: Tom Bolton Tel: 0191 383 3149**

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**ATTENDANCE LIST –11 February 2005****Present:**

**COUNCILLOR NICHOLLS** in the Chair

**Members of the Working Group:**

Councillors J Armstrong, Cordon, Douthwaite, Priestley, Stradling, Watson and Wright

**Co-opted Member:**

K Ibbotson (County Durham Service Users and Carer Forum)

**Observer:**

Councillor N D P Ross

**Apologies for absence** were received from Councillors Coates and T Forster

**Officers****Social Care and Health:**

P Appleton, J Chapman, J Clark and P Forster

**Personnel:**

G Hardy