

13 March 2009

**Sickness Absence: Quarterly  
Performance Monitoring**



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**Report of Stuart Crowe, Corporate Director Resources**

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**Purpose of the Report**

- 1 This quarterly report provides an ongoing review of the County Council's overall performance in relation to sickness absence. The data is considered from a quarterly perspective, as well as looking at the overall annual rates.

**Corporate Background & Performance**

- 2 Following comment from both the Corporate Management Team (CMT) and the Human Resources Committee during 2008, a revised reporting style was adopted in the autumn. This method has been maintained into 2009 and we will continue towards developing information that relates to the unitary Council.
- 3 Currently, we are still using the former Best Value Performance Indicator (PI) 12 criteria for calculating our sickness absence rate. This provides us with a consistent record of analysis, whilst also generates data as part of our commitment to the PricewaterhouseCooper (PwC) Benchmarking Club.
- 4 The analysis considers the aggregate number of days of absence over a 12 month period alongside the number of full-time equivalent (fte) staff employed by the Council. **The rate for the existing Durham County Council in the 12-month period to December 2008 has fallen for the third quarter in succession, this time down to 8.50 days. Appendix 2** tracks the movement of our official PI performance<sup>1</sup> in recent years and also includes for the ongoing rate for the 12-month periods ending in June, September and December of 2008.
- 5 The fall from the previous quarter was less marked than earlier in the year, but the general trend remains positive in that it has been downward since 2002-03 – absences have fallen by almost a third since that point. This current level of absence means we also remain below our target for 2008-09 which stands at 9.00 days.
- 6 For comparison purposes, the quarterly absence figures for the last two **quarters** and the corresponding quarter for last year are as follows:
  - October – December 2008 = 2.22 days per fte;
  - July – September 2008 = 1.71 days;
  - October – December 2007 = 2.47 days.
- 7 As you may recall, during 2008 we have also begun to use the BVPI calculation to provide a figure for absence, when **removing schools staff** from the analysis. This

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<sup>1</sup> The official annual figure is recorded for the 12-months to March every year.

figure for the 12-month period to December stands at 11.57 days per fte, marginally up from the 11.55 days per fte in the period to September 2008.

### **The County Council data in more detail**

- 8 A number of appendices have been included to again provide a further breakdown of data. As with the previous report, it should be noted that any such breakdown of data does not include information relating to sickness absence of school-based staff. Similarly the CYPS narrative later in the report does not include for school-based staff.
- 9 **Appendix 3** shows a detailed breakdown, by Service, of the days lost per fte for this quarter and the 3 previous quarters. Although this period starts to take us into the time of year when absences tend to rise, three of the seven Services actually managed to record an improved figure on the previous quarter.
- 10 **Appendix 4** shows the split between short, medium and long-term absences. The last quarter has seen an increase in short-term absences to 23% - noticeably, this is the highest figure since the January-March quarter earlier this year.
- 11 **Appendix 5** shows the causes of sickness absence for the past 2 quarters. The work that has gone on with Services in trying to promote more accurate reporting continues to generate more meaningful data in that the catch all 'Other' category has declined now to 13% of reported absences, down from the 30% mark earlier in the year. 'Mental Health' absence remains the primary cause across the Council, but its is noticeable that 'Infections' has tripled as we went into the autumn/winter period of the year.
- 12 **Appendix 6** shows a breakdown of the average days of absence between Full-time and Part-time staff. Although again absences remain relatively evenly split, it should be pointed out that just over three quarters of the staff included in this comparison are working full-time hours.

### **Comparisons**

- 13 **Appendix 7** demonstrates the County Council's performance in relation to the district councils. As well as the formal annual figures for the last three years<sup>2</sup>, the rates have also been included for the 12-month periods to the end of September and December 2008.
- 14 In addition, we have been able to make a calculation based on the data from all eight Councils<sup>3</sup> and the PI criteria – for the 12-month period to December our 'unitary' PI rate stands at 8.87 per fte (including school based staff).

### **Corporate Developments**

- 15 The Council has been formally invited to take part in a research study funded by the European Union - the ISAFRUIT project, which is being coordinated by Newcastle University and the Technical University of Denmark. The study requires employees to volunteer to take part in the intervention, which will be broken down into two groups: one to receive free fruit for a period of 6 months and the other half to act as the 'control'

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<sup>2</sup> The formal annual figures are based on the data at the end of March

<sup>3</sup> Information for the current period is not currently available from Wear Valley Council, but their most recent data has been included.

- group. Following the study, the 'control' group will then receive free fruit for 6 months as a good will gesture.
- 16 Initially all volunteers will undertake an individual health check and then during the study they will be asked to complete brief on-line questionnaires.
  - 17 To date, over 400 volunteers have undertaken an individual health check with a qualified dietician and are currently in the process of completing the first on-line questionnaire.
  - 18 As part of the employee support programme linked to Local Government Review, both the County and District Councils recognised the need to address the levels of stress and confidence from staff members facing selection interviews. External consultants, SOLACE, are running a series of workshops and coaching sessions aimed at encouraging managers to reflect on the individual implications of the forthcoming changes. To date, approximately 80 managers have participated on the programme with further workshops planned through to April 2009. Evaluation feedback has been extremely positive.
  - 19 In addition to the above programme, SOLACE have been contracted to provide career coaching support to unsuccessful applicants after the Head of Service selection process. This has involved coaching discussions with Managers to reflect on career opportunities and options available to them.
  - 20 Additional workshops have been delivered to assist managers when handling change at both a strategic and operational level. The content is aimed at managers managing the change process both in themselves and when managing others. Once again feedback has been very positive.
  - 21 Again, with the purpose of providing support to employees concerned about LGR implications, arrangements were made with our contractor First Assist, late in 2008, to extend the telephone counselling arrangements to most of the District Council staff, at no extra cost. The exception is Chester-le-Street which has had its own contract with the same company for some time.
  - 22 A new publicity leaflet/card was also designed to remind County Council employees that the service is available. With the assistance of Payroll colleagues, we made arrangements to widely distribute this across our staff. In addition, we are currently distributing further stocks to the District Councils, together with other related publicity.
  - 23 With the current contract drawing to a conclusion, arrangements are being explored to allow for a temporary extension to allow for seamless provision of this important service beyond Vesting Day and into the latter half of 2009.
  - 24 Managing Sickness Absence training continues to be an integral part of a manager's development. The one day course is part of the Corporate Training Programme and runs every 6 – 8 weeks.
  - 25 From a wider perspective, consideration of existing sickness management strategies and procedures will be an ongoing exercise linked to the LGR circumstances. However, within that we will also have to implement national Government initiatives. Late in 2008, the Dame Carol Black study of the health of Britain's working population concluded with a series of recommendations, most of which seem likely to be adopted by the Government.

The most eye-catching feature is the proposed introduction of the national electronic 'fit note', replacing the 60 year old 'sicknote system. Fit notes are currently being piloted, but although the Government aim to introduce the system later in 2009, a number of factors still need to be clarified - for example data protection and e-security issues.

## **Service Developments**

26 All Services have again provided individual narrative on how they are tackling sickness absence and any trends within their Service. Services were asked to give comment on sickness trends, sectors that are causing concern or improving and feedback on any internal action taken or that is being planned. We have also ensured that details are included at the start of each section comparing the current quarterly figure (October - December 2008) against the previous (July - September 2008) and corresponding quarter (October - December 2007) for each Service.

27 All Services are seeking to ensure a consistent approach on sickness absence management. Sickness reviews are undertaken, in line with the Sickness Absence Policy, Procedure and Toolkit, and referrals are made to Occupational Health where appropriate.

### **Adult and Community Services (A&CS)**

28 For comparison purposes, the quarterly absence figures for the last two quarters and the corresponding quarter for last year are as follows:

- October – December 2008 = 3.87 days per fte;
- July – September 2008 = 4.08 days;
- October – December 2007 = 4.21 days.

29 Trends – the reduction from 4.21 to 3.87 days per employee (current quarter) is equivalent to 1000 working days overall.

30 As expected there has been a seasonal increase in 'Infection' related absences. There was a decrease in both 'Mental Health' and 'Musculo-skeletal' sickness absence – 3,383 to 2,759 days and 2,245 to 1,491 days respectively. For this reason, the increase in sickness absence days which usually occurs during this period was prevented.

31 A summary of the sickness absence for the quarter ended 31 December 2008:

- A decrease in overall absence from the last quarter and the same period last year.
- A decrease in 'full time staff' sickness absence.
- An increase in 'part time staff' sickness absence.
- Increase in 'Infection', 'Digestive' and 'Chest/Respiratory' related sickness days.
- Decrease in 'Mental Health' and 'Musculo-skeletal' related sickness days.
- Increase in the number of Capability Hearing leavers for this quarter.
- There continues to be no staff who have been absent for 18 months or more.

32 Areas of Concern / Improvements – County Durham Care & Support (which is the largest service area in terms of staff employed in A&CS) has recorded a significant decrease over the last 2 quarters. This has influenced the overall absence level for A&CS.

33 Actions Taken / Planned – Work continues in supporting managers in all aspects of managing sickness absence cases, concentrating efforts on those teams with high levels

of absence, creating action plans and ensuring the use of tools available such as the Stress Toolkit.

- 34 The Flu Immunisation Campaign for this year was successful. The process was administered effectively between Occupational Health and A&CS and the result was a high level of uptake in vaccinations by staff.
- 35 Dates for Capability Hearings are planned in advance for the year ahead. This ensures the availability of Senior Officers to chair these hearings.

### **Children and Young People's Services (CYPS)**

- 36 As indicated earlier, this commentary does not include information relating to sickness absences of school-based staff.
- 37 For comparison purposes, the quarterly absence figures for the last two quarters and the corresponding quarter for last year are as follows:
- October – December 2008 = 2.55 days per fte;
  - July – September 2008 = 2.02 days;
  - October - December 2007 = 3.25 days.
- 38 Trends – 89.9% of the working days lost in this quarter are attributable to staff working full time hours, whilst part time staff account for 10.1%.
- 39 Long term sickness absence has decreased from 64.49% to 60.59% in this quarter against the previous quarter. This quarter also saw a decrease in the proportion of sickness absence days attributed to medium term sickness absence (7.5 to 19 days) from 16.4% to 12.44%. This has resulted in an increase in the short term sickness absence from 19.11% to 26.97%. This is likely to be due to the increase in short term viral infections.
- 40 The reason for absence with the highest percentage continues to be mental health. However there has been a decrease against the previous quarter from 29.15% to 23.37%. Conversely there has been an increase in reported absences due to infections from 2.86% to 13.14%, which is likely to be attributable to the winter season.
- 41 Absences reported in the “other” category have fallen from 18.67% to 14.02% during the quarter.
- 42 The number of staff who have been absent for nine months or more has reduced from 10 to 3, this decrease is accounted for by returns to work and dismissals following capability hearings. There are no members of staff absent for 18 months or more. This decrease is a significant improvement upon previous reporting quarters and accounts for overall reductions in long term sickness absence.
- 43 The CYPS Sickness Absence Team have now been recording and monitoring sickness information since September 2008 including progress-chasing management action and ensuring corporate sickness absence management procedures are followed to their conclusion. This action has resulted in more robust management and accountability which is reflected in the reduction in days lost per FTE, long term sicknesses over 20 days, recording against “other” and members of staff absent for more than 9 and 18 months.

- 44 Areas of Concern / Improvements – the number of cases where staff have been absent for more than nine months has reduced significantly from 10 to 3 and work continues in the management of these cases with progress-chasing by the CYPS Sickness Absence Team. Of these cases two will shortly leave the employment of CYPS following capability hearings and one will return to work at the end of January following redeployment as a result of a Final Stage Interview.
- 45 Viral and short term sicknesses are a cause for concern within this quarter, reflected in the increase in short term sickness absence for the period. Measures are being put in place for short term sickness absence to be addressed at a service level assisted by improved reporting data so that Managers can address this with individual staff members at the earliest opportunity.
- 46 Actions Taken / Planned - the Sickness Absence Team is now well established within CYPS and has collated historical data for the last four months. The systems are now embedded and Managers are contacted routinely by the Team, who also provide advice and guidance.
- 47 The Intranet portal for CYPS HR is now live and Managers are signposted to this information in connection with sickness absences. All forms and guidance is available via this portal.
- 48 The work of the CYPS Sickness Absence Team has been positively recognised by CYPS Managers as a valuable system in aiding their management of sickness absence. There is still much to do however in ensuring continued improvement in the accuracy and reporting of sickness absence data across the service.

### **Environment**

- 49 For comparison purposes, the quarterly absence figures for the last two quarters and the corresponding quarter for last year are as follows:
- October – December 2008 = 2.66 days per fte;
  - July – September 2008 = 2.63 days;
  - October – December 2007 = 3.08 days.
- 50 Trends – there has been a 1% increase on the last quarter's figures, but a 13% decrease on the corresponding quarter last year.
- 51 Areas of Concern / Improvements – although there has been a small rise in sickness compared to the last quarter, the figures do show a 20% decrease in the days lost by part-time staff. This may be attributed to the increase in sickness monitoring carried out with School Crossing Patrol staff. In this group of staff there will be three capability hearings due to sickness in the next quarter.
- 52 Actions Taken / Planned – a further two capability hearings due to sickness are to be held within the rest of the Service.

### **Service Direct**

- 53 For comparison purposes, the quarterly absence figures for the last two quarters and the corresponding quarter for last year are as follows:

- October – December 2008 = 3.09 days per fte;
- July – September 2008 = 2.88 days;
- October – December 2007 = 3.79 days.

- 54 Trends & Areas of Concern / Improvements – Sickness in this current quarter shows an increase from the last quarter, however, when this is compared to the same quarter in previous years it is at a reduced level – 3.79 in December 2007, 3.32 in December 2006 and 3.47 December 2005.
- 55 The quarter has been badly effected by the flu and sickness virus which can be seen when comparing the short and long term absences. Short term absences in the September quarter accounted for 17.5% of the total and this increased to 25.1% in December. This has overtaken the reduction in long term sickness which occurred in the quarter.
- 56 The analysis of absence by cause confirms this detail, with the number of days lost due to infection more than doubling from 146 to 330 in December. This increase has meant that infections went from 6.3% of the total to 13.2%.
- 57 Actions Taken / Planned - Management information continues to provide analysis by operational service on a monthly basis to ensure managers are able to monitor performance and act where required. Two employees left on capability grounds as part of the process of dealing with long term sickness.

### **Chief Executive's Office**

- 58 For comparison purposes, the quarterly absence figures for the last two quarters and the corresponding quarter for last year are as follows:
- October – December 2008 = 0.45 days per fte;
  - July – September 2008 = 0.84 days;
  - October – December 2007 = 1.92 days.
- 59 Trends & Areas of Concern / Improvements – there has been a further decrease in sickness absence in the quarter as compared to the previous quarter. Absences, in the majority, are currently down to a small number of short-term absentees and appropriate action is being taken. There are currently no long-term absentees.
- 60 Actions Taken / Planned – all absences have been actively managed in line with DCC policy on sickness absence management. The Head of Human Resources and the Chief Executive's Office is advised of staff hitting trigger points. Sickness reviews and appropriate referrals to Occupational Health have been undertaken.

### **Corporate Services**

- 61 For comparison purposes, the quarterly absence figures for the last two quarters and the corresponding quarter for last year are as follows:
- October – December 2008 = 1.75 days per fte;
  - July – September 2008 = 2.38 days;
  - October - December 2007 = 1.20 days.

- 62 Trends & Areas of Concern / Improvements – there has been a decrease in sickness absence in the quarter as compared to the previous quarter. This compares less favourably with the figures against the same quarter in the previous year.
- 63 A significant proportion of the increase in absences is attributable to a small number of unforeseen long-term absences, none of which are work related. Some of the long-term absentees have now returned to work.
- 64 Actions Taken / Planned – all absences are actively managed in line with County Council policy on sickness absence. A detailed monthly report is produced and discussed at CSMT to ensure that it remains a Service priority and is carefully monitored. This information is also shared with staff. Sickness Reviews and appropriate referrals to Occupational Health have been undertaken.

### **County Treasurers**

- 65 For comparison purposes, the quarterly absence figures for the last two quarters and the corresponding quarter for last year are as follows:
- October – December 2008 = 2.57 days per fte;
  - July – September 2008 = 2.12 days;
  - October – December 2007 = 2.21 days.
- 66 Trends & Areas of Concern / Improvements – absence has increased from 2.12 days per FTE in the last quarter to 2.57 days in this quarter, but is consistent with levels achieved over the last 18 months. The Finance Divisions recorded a level of absence of 2.27 days compared to 2.83 days for Customer Services (including IT and Access to Services).
- 67 Actions Taken / Planned – the most significant rise is in short-term absences up from 130 days to 261 days, due in part to seasonal illnesses.
- 68 Four members of staff are on long-term sickness absence. The two who have been absent for over 9 months are being closely monitored through referral to Occupational Health and with the advice of the Head of Human Resources.
- 69 A monthly list of staff hitting trigger points is provided to managers together with advice about sickness absence procedures.

### **Recommendations and reasons**

- 70 You are asked to note the data and the commentaries on progress given and provide comment.

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## **Appendix 1: Implications**

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### **Local Government Reorganisation**

#### **(Does the decision impact on a future Unitary Council?)**

No decision required within the report. Consideration is being given to how sickness absence reporting will be conducted within the unitary authority.

### **Finance**

None directly.

### **Staffing**

Short-term absences have a continuing impact on provision of adequate cover across the services. The spasmodic and unpredictable nature of this type of absence affects satisfactory provision in the short term.

### **Equality and Diversity**

The Council may consider the equalities monitoring of sickness absence levels as such, and is required to monitor formal action affecting employees.

### **Accommodation**

None specific.

### **Crime and disorder**

None.

### **Sustainability**

None

### **Human rights**

None specific.

### **Localities and Rurality**

None

### **Young people**

None specific.

### **Consultation**

Chief Officers may wish to share data in this report within their Services to promote awareness of the issues.

### **Health**

It is anticipated that developing strategies such as the Stress Management Policy will contribute to an improvement in the health of its workforce and assist in an improvement in sickness absence levels.