

Cyngor Sir CEREDIGION County Council

REPORT TO: Corporate Resources Overview & Scrutiny Committee

DATE: 13 January 2022

LOCATION: Online

TITLE: Sickness Absence Report

PURPOSE OF REPORT: To report on the management of sickness absence in the Council and to receive a presentation on sickness absence data

REASON SCRUTINY HAVE REQUESTED THE INFORMATION: For information

BACKGROUND:

This report sets out procedures of managing sickness absence in the Council and will be supported by an up to date sickness absence data presentation.

For our corporate workforce the Managing Sickness Absence at Work Policy & Procedure has been in place since autumn 2017. The processes outlined within the document have been fully implemented and are by now well established.

For our school workforce, a revised model Managing Sickness Absence at Work Policy & Procedure was approved by Cabinet in December 2021 and is being offered to Governing Bodies this term for adoption.

The following procedures are broadly the same for both policies.

Sickness Absence monitoring

The monitoring of sickness absence is split into two distinct parts:

- a) Short term sickness absence – short period of absences, often only a few days as a result of minor ailments
- b) Long term sickness absence – continuous absence of longer than 28 days

Short term absence monitoring

Short term absence are seen as the most disruptive due to their unpredictability and difficulty in arranging cover.

The management of short term sickness absence relies on the monitoring of periods of individual absences and checking these overtime to see if one or more of the policy's trigger points have been hit. These trigger points are as follows:

- 3 or more occasions of absence in a 3 month rolling period
- 5 or more occasions of self-certified absence in a 12 month rolling period

- 2 or more occasions in a 12 month rolling period where absences about any period of leave (annual or bank holidays)
- Any unacceptable patterns of absence

Following any absence a line manager will conduct a Return to Work interview with the employee to discuss their absence; whether the reporting procedure was followed correctly; their fitness to return to work; and any concerns which may arise from the employee or line manager. This process is currently run on an aging legacy system but it has become more difficult to maintain the system and therefore we are currently working on developing a new process within the Ceri system which will significantly improve the reliability of the system and data.

Employees who reach a trigger point will be required to attend an Absence Review Meeting with their line manager to investigate further the reason(s) for absence, to assess if there are any underlying issues (medical or otherwise) and, if relevant, to advise the employee of the consequences of the continued short term absences. The record of the Absence Review Meeting will be kept on file for a period of 12 months. If a further trigger point is hit within that period a further Absence Review meeting will be held.

Initial Absence Reviews will take place within the Service but any further stages will be supported by a member of the HR Team. If it is necessary to hold a Final Absence Review chaired by the relevant Corporate Lead Officer then the outcome may be dismissal with notice.

Long term sickness absence monitoring

Long term sickness absence is defined as being continuously absent for 28 days or more due to sickness and the process followed is very different from that of short term absences.

As soon as possible after the 28th day of absence a welfare meeting will be arranged by the line manager, who will be accompanied by a colleague or member of the HR Team, to identify any support which would assist the employee returning to work which may include a referral to the Council's Occupational Health provider, Carmarthenshire County Council. It is explained to the employee that any referral to occupational health should be seen as a supportive process and not a punitive one. Since the beginning of the pandemic these have been held remotely but previously the expectation was for these to be held face to face.

A First Absence Review meeting is scheduled to take place in the 6th or 7th week of absence, following receipt of an occupational health report. The content of the report is discussed with the employee and its recommendations considered. The scope of recommendations are wide and could range from a phased return to work, reasonable adjustments to support a return to work (e.g. a reduction in working hours; suitable equipment or a temporary redeployment to another role), not currently being fit enough to return to work, or in certain circumstances a suggested termination of employment on grounds of ill health.

If the employee remains absent, an Intermediate Review is scheduled between 12 and 16 weeks of continued absence where the same process outlined above is followed. In some cases it may be necessary to hold more than one Intermediate Review, especially where an employee is undergoing a course or treatment such as chemotherapy or operation such as joint replacement. The pandemic has seen a lengthening in the period for employees to be diagnosed, for hospital appointment and postponement of treatment or operations, which has inevitable impact on the length of time employees remain absent.

A Final Absence Review will be held if an employee remains absent. This review will rely on the advice of an occupational health physician but may also include information from their GP or treating consultant where appropriate. Any termination on the grounds of ill health will be with notice and, if relevant, the employee will be referred to the pension scheme to consider if it is appropriate for early release of pension benefits.

Monthly meetings take place between the Absence Team and HR Offices to review each of the long term absence cases to ensure that progress is recorded and line managers advised on any action required from them.

Care First

Care First is the Council's Employee Assistance Programme which not only provides a 24/7 independent and confidential counselling service, either telephone or face-to-face, but also a range of other services such as debt management; information and advice service on consumer issues, legal, finance, and benefits; wellbeing information and advice on nutrition, health or fitness. The service is available to all employees.

Dying to Work Charter

In June 2021 the Council and its recognised trade unions signed up to the TUC's Dying to Work Charter. The charter requires a commitment from the Council that our employees will be supported, protected and guided throughout their employment, following a terminal diagnosis. The following are indicative of the commitment required of the Council:

- Terminally ill workers will be secure in the knowledge that we will support them following their diagnosis and we recognise that safe and reasonable work can help maintain dignity, offer a valuable distraction and can be therapeutic in itself.
- We will provide our employees with the security of work, peace of mind and the right to choose the best course of action for themselves and their families which helps them through this challenging period with dignity and without undue financial loss.

Absences due to Covid-19

It was agreed by Welsh Government and local authorities that absence due to self-isolation, experiencing Covid-19 symptoms or testing positive for Covid-19 would not be treated as sickness absence for the purposes of annual absence stats. Nevertheless, there have been times when these absences have disrupted the provision of services, especially in our residential homes and schools. The data included in the absence presentation shows only those staff who are unable to work due to self-isolation requirement, Covid-19 symptoms or Covid-19 positive illness and does not include those who were able to continue in their role working from home.

Employee Health and Wellbeing Officer and strategy

Lucy Barratt was appointed Employee Health and Wellbeing Officer in November 2019 and this role has proved invaluable in supporting employees at every level throughout the past two years, but especially during the pandemic. This support is provided with the aim of keeping staff in work where possible and has included individual wellbeing support/discussions with staff, group or team sessions of resilience, stress management, wellbeing emails (originally weekly, now monthly), wellbeing webinar, and dedicated support for front line staff.

In addition, an Employee Health and Wellbeing Strategy has recently been implemented covering the period 2021 – 2026 with the aim of improving the health and wellbeing of employees by focussing on five pillars: Positive Environments; Policies and Practice; Healthy Lifestyle; Mental Health and Wellbeing; and Culture and Behaviour. Employee absence data is one of the measures which will be used in future to measure the success of this strategy.

Has an Integrated Impact Assessment been completed? If, not, please state why

Not applicable. Report for information.

WELLBEING OF FUTURE GENERATIONS: *Summary:*
Long term:
Integration:
Collaboration:
Involvement:
Prevention:

RECOMMENDATION (S):

- To receive the report on the management of sickness absence

REASON FOR RECOMMENDATION (S):

Contact Name: Geraint Edwards
Designation: Corporate Lead Officer – People & Organisation
Date of Report: 08/12/2021
Acronyms: