

Report of the Director of Customer and Business Support Services

ATTENDANCE MANAGEMENT UPDATE

Summary

1. This report provides the Executive with an update on the Council's approach to attendance at work and recommends a number of revised work/life balance policy provisions in order to achieve significant and sustained improvements in attendance levels.

Background

2. On the 1st October 2007 the new Attendance at Work Policy came into effect which provided staff and managers with detailed guidance and support on sickness absence management.
3. This new approach has led to significant improvements in sickness absence rates across the Council with an overall reductions as follows:
 - 2006/07 – 12.93 days per full time equivalent (FTE);
 - 2007/08 - 9.54 days per FTE;
 - 2008/09 – 9.08 days per FTE;
 - 2009/10 – 8.98 days per FTE.
4. In comparative terms, in 2006/07, York was the worst performing unitary authority in this area and one of the worst in the country. The 2007/08 and 2008/09 performances both placed the Council in the third quartile and 2009/10 second quartile performance was achieved with the improvements being significant both in real and relative terms.
5. Sickness absence levels are monitored monthly with Directorate Management Teams (DMTs) being supplied with data regarding their performance for the period and also in comparison to previous years. The period April to June 2010 showed that all sickness reported was at a higher level in this year than for the same period in the previous two years.

Analysis

6. It is difficult to undertake any trend analysis based on performance over this relatively short period, although it should be considered to be an early warning that sickness levels may 'bounce' and may be starting to deteriorate. Prompt action now, as outlined in this paper, may show these early results to be a 'blip' and re-establish the downward trend shown in paragraph 3.
7. In order to continue to improve it is critical that the council continues to treat the management of sickness absence as a priority. In order to help in this regard, HR Business Partners are planning and leading discussions at DMTs aimed at identifying absence trends and hotspots, helping DMTs develop directorate action plans containing specific interventions designed to tackle local issues. This will dovetail with the work currently being undertaken by the Health and Safety Team around stress related sickness absence.
8. The council's sickness absence procedures have been benchmarked against high performing councils and have been found to be 'best of breed', incorporating all elements of best practice. The main differences between York and these other councils are around enabling attendance at work and the modernisation of working practices.
9. As well as continuing to manage sickness absence when it occurs, improvements in sickness absence levels can be maintained by taking a holistic approach to attendance and enabling attendance, enabling a more flexible and responsive workforce to increase efficiency and productivity.
10. In this regard work has been undertaken in the following areas.

Management training

11. A specific module on managing attendance has also been developed and included in the Effective Manager Programme for this year and bespoke training has already been provided to managers to expand and develop their skills in dealing with sickness absence casework.

Health and Well-being Promotion Activities

12. A range of health and well-being promotional activities have taken place designed to maximise the physical, psychological and social health of all employees, focusing areas such as healthy eating, back care, smoking cessation and fitness. The Communities and Neighbourhood Services directorate have run a month of healthy lifestyle and wellbeing promotional activities as part of the Excellence in Everything programme.

Occupational Health Service (OHS)

13. Work has taken place with council's contracted occupational health service, York Hospitals NHS Foundation Trust to provide additional services such as flu vaccinations, physiotherapy/ osteopathy, influenza and Hepatitis B jabs,

specialist display screen equipment (DSE) and workplace assessments, ergonomics and rehabilitation programmes amongst others.

Work/life balance

14. The council's current work/life balance provisions have been reviewed with a view to extending and re-marketing them, thereby making it easier for staff to attend work and to use the correct provisions for unavoidable absence. The revised provisions were piloted as part of the Office of the Future work being undertaken by the Accommodation Project, which has resulted in recommendations being made for amendments to some existing policy provisions and for the development of some new policies. The revised policy provisions, summarised below, are now recommended to the Executive.

| Policy | Description |
|-------------------------------|---|
| Flexible working | Extend the current right to request flexible working scheme to all employees rather than only those who qualify in accordance with the statutory right in this area. |
| Variation in hours | Extend the current right, which only allows employees to request permanent amendments to contracts, to request a temporary reduction in hours, retaining the right to return to their previous contracted hours after the agreed period of time. |
| Flexitime | The adoption of a revised flexitime scheme with increased flexibility around working hours, supported by a framework of guidance for managers to determine the most appropriate working arrangements for their service. |
| Compressed Hours | The adoption of a compressed hours policy to give employees the opportunity to work their contracted hours over a shorter number of days than the standard working week. |
| Career Breaks and Sabbaticals | A period of unpaid leave of no less than 3 months and not more than 12 months after which time the council will guarantee the employee the opportunity to return to work. This will be either a return to the same job as the employee occupied before their career break, or if that job is no longer available or it is not reasonably practicable from the council's perspective to offer the same job, a return to another job on terms and conditions not less favourable. |

15. All of the above provisions will be subject to a formal process to consider their suitability against the needs of the particular service before agreement and the exigencies of the service will take precedent. However the new and revised provisions will enable attendance at work and will contribute to lower sickness absence levels in the long term.
16. In addition to enabling attendance, flexible working schemes have also become common in the private sector during the current recession as a way of achieving temporary and permanent cost reductions in the workforce, whilst avoiding wholesale redundancies and therefore retaining the skills of the workforce. Whilst the public sector has operated similar provisions for some time, they have more usually been associated with work/life balance and recruitment and retention, although they are now becoming increasingly common as a way of achieving cost reductions and could be used as such within the Council.

Corporate Priorities

17. The action being proposed in this report is designed to support the Council's corporate priority "Effective Organisation" and is consistent with the required outcomes of the More for York programme.

Implications

18. The issues contained in this report have the following implications:
 - i. **Financial** – no direct financial implications of the actions in this paper, although continuing to increase attendance levels will reduce the cost of sick pay, both the indirect costs of backfill and cover for absent employees and also increase efficiency and productivity.
 - ii. **Human Resources (HR)** – included the body of the report.
 - iii. **Equalities** – All of the proposals in this report have been subject to an Equality Impact Assessment (EIA).
 - iv. **Legal** – no implications.
 - v. **Crime and Disorder** – no implications.
 - vi. **Information Technology (IT&T)** – no implications.
 - vii. **Property** - no implications.
 - viii. **Other** - no implications.

Risk Management

19. The specific risks associated with this issue are financial, legal, operational and reputational. The current gross risk score for this issue is 14, placing the issue in the medium category. Implementation of initiatives in this report will reduce the risk to low in the long term.

Recommendations

20. The Executive is asked to:

- 1) Note the work undertaken in this area and the need to continue to treat the management of sickness absence as a priority
- 2) Agree to adopt the revised policy provisions set out in paragraph 15.

Reason: In order to achieve significant and sustained improvements in attendance levels.

Contact Details

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Ian Floyd
Director of CBSS

Report Approved

Date 20th September
2010

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Director of CBSS

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Specialist Implications Officer(s):

Wards Affected: *List wards or tick box to indicate all*

All

For further information please contact the author of the report

Background Papers:

Attendance Management Update Executive Report 7th October 2008
Attendance Management Policy, Procedure and Guidelines – available in the Council's HR Manual

Annexes

None