



Briefing 09/66 December 2009

# Absenteeism in Northern Ireland Councils 2008-09

This briefing is a précis of the Report by the Chief Local Government Auditor issued on 11 December 2009 titled 'Absenteeism in Northern Ireland Councils 2008-09'.

To: All contacts in Northern Ireland

For information: All Contacts in Scotland, Wales and England

## Key Issues

121,000 days were lost to sickness in 2008-09 in councils

Average absenteeism per council employee was 12.43 days

There was an average reduction of 1.27 days compared with 2007-08

## 1. Introduction

The Chief Local Government Auditor reports on absenteeism based on data requested from the 26 councils on an annual basis in accordance with Article 26 of the Local Government (Northern Ireland) Order 2005.

The data is analysed over a three year period to counter the impact of annual fluctuations in absenteeism which could distort findings particularly within smaller councils. The report notes that the three year derived rate provides a better illustration of the underlying absenteeism position for each council.

## 2. Overall council figures

The report notes that 121,000 working days were lost as a result of sickness which is an average of 12.43 days per employee during 2008-09. There has been a reduction of 1.27 days (or 9%) compared to the 2007-08 rate of 13.7 days. The current absence rate is lower than at any time during the last decade. There has been a reduction in

the cost of lost productivity due to absence from £16.4m in 2007-08 to £15.5m in 2008-09. Although this is the first ever fall in the cost of absenteeism since 2000-01, the cost is still only at 2006-07 rates.

When compared with other sectors, Northern Ireland council's absence rates (12.4 days) are lower than the NI Health Service (12.8 days) and the NI Housing Executive (13.2 days) but higher than the NI Civil Service. (11 days). All have shown a decrease in rates of absence from 2007-08 to 2008-09.

When compared with councils in England and Wales (9.4 days), Northern Ireland councils perform substantially worse.

In terms of long term absence, 65% of the total cost of time lost due to absence was as a result of long term absence compared with only 5% of the UK economy.

### **3. Individual council figures**

The report highlights Magherafelt District Council as that with the lowest average absence over the three year period between 2006-09 at 7.25 days and a reduction of 2.19 days over the previous three year period. This is the lowest figure by a day from the council with the next lowest absence level which is Armagh City and District Council. There is a steady increase thereafter across all councils up to the highest absence level of 19.3 days.

The largest reduction between periods was made by Newry and Mourne District Council (4.58 days) with Magherafelt, Armagh, Cookstown, Omagh, Limavady, Belfast and Larne councils making reductions of more than 2 days.

Figures were calculated for average annual potential productivity gains based on the absence rate of Magherafelt District Council and this totalled £7.2m within councils.

Across all councils, 40% of full time equivalent employees had no absence at all during 2008-09, an improvement of 3% on the previous period.

### **4. Causes of absence**

Stress, depression, mental health and fatigue are noted as the largest cause of absenteeism, being responsible for 23% of all days lost. Musculoskeletal problems accounted for 17% of absence and together these two causes account for £6.3m worth of lost productivity. Stress, depression, mental health and fatigue accounted for 47% of days lost at Ballymoney Borough Council.

The paper notes that variations in absence rates appear to have no discernable pattern with no link between absence rates and the urban/rural split, the political control, size or location of councils. The Report does point to the fact that the management of absenteeism differs in different councils and that this may have an impact on the rate of absence. It looks specifically at policies, targets and data and comments that although this review was not detailed enough to link specific

management practices with absenteeism rates, research elsewhere has shown the significant impact that effective management has in reducing absenteeism.

## **5. APSE Comment**

APSE welcomes the reductions made by some councils in absenteeism rates. It is the workforce that delivers the council services which local communities value and it is vital that services are delivered in as effective and efficient way as possible. Clearly reducing the amount of absenteeism to a minimum is an aim of any organisation and councils are just the same. Absenteeism has a number of impacts – it is expensive forcing up the cost of service delivery; overtime and the employment of temporary staff increase; it results in a loss of productivity; there is an impact on the staff who are in work covering for those who are absent; and it provides those who wish to criticise local government with an excuse to do so irrelevant of the validity of the criticism.

APSE promotes the concept of learning between councils and there is a lot that can be learnt on the topic of managing absence. Different councils have different absence policies and procedures; they have a range of support services in place; different approaches to keeping in contact with staff whilst they are absent and with return to work interviews; and a variety of disciplinary procedures – all within the existing legal framework. Furthermore individual managers take different views on dealing with individual members of staff who are absent. The fact that Magherafelt District Council does not have an absenteeism policy yet their absence rate is the best of all councils shows that there is no one size fits all approach for councils.

There is no single way of dealing with absence which is guaranteed to produce results but the fact that there are different approaches in existence means that if the method of managing absence currently employed is not working, there is an alternative method in use in another council. Councils looking to improve their performance in absence management should not limit themselves to looking at other councils in Northern Ireland as there are examples of good practice across the UK.

The Review of Public Administration (RPA) and the creation of new councils will be a fundamental change to the way public services are delivered in Northern Ireland. It is vital that arrangements for dealing with issues such as absence are in place prior to vesting day and that they are followed and developed once the new councils settle in. As such all officers responsible for staff management should be aware of existing policies and procedures as well as the personal skills that they will need to manage absence positively.

Tracking absence and reporting absence figures as this report does is only the first stage in the process of improving performance in this area. Councillors and officers must be willing to learn from those who are performing well, try new approaches, develop existing policies and procedures, realise the benefits of reducing absence

and aim to minimise the impacts of absence on budgets and other staff, if they are to really manage absence.

This is only one element of performance management and only one way of tracking the performance of councils. There are a range of factors which should be tracked on a regular basis to ensure that the quality of services, customer satisfaction, cost of services and operational effectiveness is appropriate across all services. Absence has an impact on all of these but tracking the overall performance of a council involves a monitoring and reporting on series of indicators which are agreed by a range of councils to provide a robust and regular comparison. Such an approach should also be in place as part of the process of creating the new councils.

APSE runs the Performance Networks benchmarking service which collects data from a range of services about absenteeism and has done so for over a decade. A variety of data is tracked and analysed on cost, quality and customer satisfaction of services and these can be cross referenced with absenteeism to highlight any impacts.

The report notes stress as a major cause of absence in this time period and within Northern Ireland and it is generally accepted that stress is a major cause of absence across all employment sectors. The delays, changes and doubts which surround RPA and the potential impacts upon all council staff can be a factor in creating high stress levels amongst the workforce. It could be argued that this has been a contributory factor to some of the absence experienced over the period.

## **6. APSE Course**

APSE run a series of courses to support the delivery of council services and a Managing Positive Attendance course will be held on 10<sup>th</sup> February 2010 in Belfast. This course will specifically address some of the issues raised within the Report by the Chief Local Government Auditor and is aimed at staff who manage people, represent employees or are involved in the management of employees in the workplace.

Details of the course can be found by clicking the link below:-

<http://www.apse.org.uk/lifelong-learning/pdfs/Positive%20Attendance%20Management%20Flyer.pdf>

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