

AGENDA ITEM 9

CWOP/51/10

Policy & Scrutiny Committee Community Wellbeing and Older People

Date 9 December 2010

Final Report: Absence Management in the Adults Health and Community Wellbeing Directorate



Absence Management in the Adults Health & Community Wellbeing Directorate

a review by the Community Wellbeing & Older People
Policy & Scrutiny Committee

December 2010



Background

The review of absence management was undertaken following concern expressed at the Executive Scrutiny Committee that the Adults Health & Community Wellbeing (AH&CW) Directorate had high absence rates in relation to other Essex County Council Directorates. The Chairman of the Community Wellbeing and Older People Policy and Scrutiny Committee (CWOP P & SC) agreed to undertake scrutiny on this issue and report back to the Executive Scrutiny. The CWOP P & SC was concerned to ensure managers were more responsive to sickness absence rates. Members wished to identify particular issues related to continuing high absence rates within certain departments; and as a starting point look at overall absence rate data within the Directorate.



Councillor Sandra Hillier, Chairman of the Task and Finish Group

A scoping document was prepared and it was agreed that a Task and Finish Group be convened to call witnesses as necessary to seek responses, and reasons for the relevant issues identified above and to make recommendations to reduce the baseline absence rates and identify positive ways forward in the management of absence within the Directorate.

The Task and Finish Group was Chaired by Councillor Sandra Hillier. Other Members on the Group were Councillor Bill Dick, Councillor Mike Garnett and Councillor Jillian Reeves.

Issues and Evidence

The Task and Finish Group recognised that traditionally the social care sector has had high rates of absence at national level. They heard that AH&CW have introduced a tracker programme which enables managers to view the absence rates for their particular area within the Directorate. This high-level data signposts managers to issues related to staff absenteeism; with lower-level data enabling them to deal with individual cases, and, as such, giving them the opportunity to see whether there is anything they can do, as a manager, or the Authority can do to reduce the instances of absence. As a result of the high absence rates within the Directorate a more robust line is being taken, alongside a promotion of an attendance culture. Managers are given data on absence and trends of sickness absence that individuals may take. Additionally, the Absence Reporting Tool (ART) was introduced across Essex County Council on 1 November 2009. The Task and Finish Group was given a demonstration of the ART at its final meeting by the systems creator, Craig Driscoll [Information Services]. The inception of the ART has provided provide the Directorate with accurate and timely data to tackle issues of absenteeism. The ART was originally established as a bespoke system at the outbreak of the flu pandemic, and now includes all permanent, temporary and contracted staff.

The ART has trigger-points within the system which alert managers to contact absentees to ascertain when they might be ready to resume work. All evidence suggests the system is well used with in excess of 70,000 absences logged.

RECOMMENDATION 1

High-level data should reflect anomalies related to absence, for example long-term absences due to serious conditions which may be one or two individuals within a department, so that when the absence is recorded the raw data does not highlight these absences as a serious issue.

Owner: Bob Whiting

Implementation Review Date: June 2011

Impact Review Date: December 2011

Over the series of four Task and Finish Group meetings data was presented by the HR Director of AH&CW, Bob Whiting which showed the overall absence trend in the Directorate was downwards (see appendix 1 and 2). The Group heard that a great deal of effort has been put in by management to reduce the absence rates. A simplification of procedures together with managers being accountable for the sickness absences of the staff that they line-manage have all contributed to the reduction in overall absence.

The Library Service gave evidence at one of the Task and Finish Group sessions due to concerns that manual handling may increase sickness absence rates, as identified on the absence tracker. The Group heard all new staff are sent on manual handling courses as part of their induction, with refresher training carried-out on a six-monthly basis by line-managers.



Working in the Library Service

RECOMMENDATION 2

All peak relief and temporary staff within the Library Service should receive manual handling training. This training should be extended across the Directorate where staff are required to assume manual handling as part of their duties. The Directorate should ensure that this training be kept up-to-date.

Owner: Martin Palmer (Libraries); Liz Chidgey ?? (remainder of the Directorate)

Implementation Review Date: June 2011

Impact Review Date: December 2011

The Task and Finish Group heard that the high incidences of absence within the library service due to back and neck problems were in fact due to just three occurrences of absence involving just two individuals. One of these individuals has been off work for in excess of a year due to serious illness. It was this which led to the Group recommending the clearing up of anomalies within the absence tracker programme.

EssexCares was invited to attend an evidence session as absence rates within the Local Authority Traded Company are significantly lower than that within the Directorate. The Group heard that since the transfer from Essex County Council in July 2009 *EssexCares* had set a challenging absence rate of 3%. ; compared to the Directorate target of 4.8%. Factors that have improved the absence rate within *Essex Cares* were highlighted as communications, engagement and robust management. Staff roadshows were held at the inception of *Essex Cares* which engaged all staff at an early juncture. Weekly newsletters are sent to all staff; and each month there is a HR newsletter which includes details of absence which, to date, has enthused about the falling absentee rates, although emphasising there is still work to be undertaken to reach the challenging target. The flatter management structure within operational services has had an impact in reducing absence in *Essex Cares*. Managers now see themselves as people required to generate business, and as a result, they treat absence management with a higher level of scrutiny.

RECOMMENDATION 3

Throughout AH&CW there should be regular newsletters informing staff about absentee rates, and the responsibility of staff to ensure, wherever possible, their attendance. The impact upon other team members due to absenteeism should be highlighted. It was recognised that as a Directorate AH&CW could learn from *EssexCares* to celebrate success in reduction of absence within certain departments/ teams.

Owner: Bob Whiting

Implementation Review Date: June 2011

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The Impact of Absence

AH&CW met the directorate target of 4.8% absence in 2009/10. The target for 2010/11 has been set at 4.5% (the target for ECC is 3.6%). Directorate targets are based upon past performance and factors specific to them. As at the end of October 2010 the Directorate is running at an average absence rate of 4.2%. The indications are that having raised the profile of absence management, plus the contribution of measures to support have been effective and sustained in reducing the instances of absence. Efforts with colleagues in the Mental Health Partnerships are beginning to pay dividends, with particular progress

noticeable with the North Essex Partnership. There are still issues in terms of reporting and systems due to the management of seconded staff in the Trusts.

RECOMMENDATION 4

To re-profile the absence targets on a section-by-section basis throughout the directorate.

Owner: Bob Whiting

Implementation Review Date: June 2011

Impact Review Date: December 2011

Whilst acknowledging the robustness of the absence management system operating within the directorate the Task and Finish Group discussed the nature of the data capture and were concerned the data does not capture absences related to elective surgery. This may skew the data. Therefore, it was agreed smarter targets based on individual section absence rates should be incorporated into revised absence data reports. It was agreed that smarter targets should be adopted across the Directorate, based upon individual departmental/professional absence rates. Re-profiling of targets across the Directorate will be undertaken. Issues around long-term absenteeism, for example absences in excess of 29 calendar days in a year were discussed by the Task and Finish Group.

RECOMMENDATION 5

To analyse reasons for long-term absenteeism, including from which sections these are based, and, thus, target such absences.

Owner: Bob Whiting

Implementation Review Date: June 2011

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With regard to the ART, which was demonstrated to Members at the last Task and Finish Group meeting, the Group heard that not all Directorates are logging planned absences on the system. The Task and Finish Group also requested data which would show which service areas are not either using, or fully utilising the system. Such data would enable recommendations to be made to the Chief Executive.

RECOMMENDATION 6

All planned absences should be logged across Essex County Council to fully utilise ART as a resource management tool.

Owner: ??

Implementation Review Date: June 2011

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The ART is currently housed within Emergency Planning. The Task and Finish Group queried whether this was appropriate.

RECOMMENDATION 7

All planned absences should be logged across Essex County Council to fully utilise ART as a resource management tool.

Owner: ??

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Essex County Council - Governance**

You can contact us in the following ways:

By Post:

**Room C328
County Hall Chelmsford
CM1 1LX**

By Telephone:

01245 430306

By email:

scrutiny@essex.gov.uk

By Website:

<http://essexcc.gov.uk>

