

WEST MIDLANDS FIRE AND RESCUE AUTHORITY

SCRUTINY COMMITTEE

20 JANUARY 2014

1. REVIEW OF NON-UNIFORMED SICKNESS

Report of the Chief Fire Officer

RECOMMENDED

THAT Scrutiny Committee notes the recommendations agreed at the Services Strategic Advisory Group (SAG) relating to the review of Non uniformed sickness. These being to:

- 1.1 measure sickness absence by costs and days;
- 1.2 discontinue the process of giving additional leave for good attendance for employees not currently in receipt of this additional leave;
- 1.3 proactively support the robust implementation of our existing performance management framework for all employees; and
- 1.4 implement the recommendations in 3.7 of this report.

2. PURPOSE OF REPORT

The purpose of this report is to update the Scrutiny Committee on the activity and outcomes of the review of non-uniformed sickness absence including the possibility of incentives and the process of rewarding employees for attending work.

3. BACKGROUND

- 3.1 In developing this report a focus group with representatives from each Directorate was set up. Group members were asked to undertake some investigative work and feed back to the wider group. The findings of this work have been encapsulated within a report to SAG.

As a result of this approach it was identified that some common and specific themes were emerging from across the Directorates. This information is contained within 3.3.

- 3.2 The Service has, over time, reported sickness absence as days lost as a full-time equivalent (FTE) to determine our performance against key performance indicators. The focus group considered that at a time of financial pressures the actual cost of sickness absence should be reported. This would include the additional costs associated with the absence and not just the employees' pay.

3.3 Outcomes of Focus Group

3.3.1 HRMS and Systems

Training in the use of HRMS has been raised across all directorates as an issue. The group through their work has identified that additional support in the reporting abilities of HRMS would be beneficial to managers.

It was acknowledged that good advice and guidance was available to support managers but that it was not being fully utilised. It was agreed that a full review of the guidance information and intranet functionality should be explored to ensure that this information was easily obtainable. In addition additional support would be explored such as webinars and 'help video' which could provide a quick reference/update. This could be provided and be easily accessible through the Intranet. This would achieve more timely advice for managers and better meet their needs.

It was felt that the return to work information on HRMS was too limiting. It was agreed that our systems should be amended to reflect that more than one return to work interview may be necessary (please see section 3.3.3). These amendments to HRMS would assist with the management of data and simplify data entry for managers. This would also improve the accuracy of the data and auditability of the information.

Having reviewed the reason for absence information on HRMS it is apparent that there has been an increase in the number of non-specified reasons for absence in both uniformed and non-uniformed employees since April 2013.

3.3.2 Policy – Application and Communication

In the main there was confidence in the support received from HR to implement the management of Attendance Policy. It was agreed that the policy needs to be flexible to enable managers to consider individual circumstances and make reasonable adjustments where possible. The use of phased returns can assist in achieving earlier returns to work from sickness absence.

It is important for managers to be, and to be seen to be, the decision makers. Engagement with HR is necessary to ensure all factors and eventualities are explored and that reasons and rationale are documented.

The focus group also determined that employees need to be aware of their responsibilities in relation to their own health and well being. Setting out and managing performance expectations will raise awareness and assist to reduce sickness absence

The use of proactive interventions is also being implemented within certain employee groups to address specific health issues. It was also recognised that, additional rehabilitative treatments/support at Occupational Health or improved use of restricted duties may support a speedier return to work. It is important to note that the use of restricted duties in support roles is less frequent than in operational roles.

3.3.3 Return to Work Interviews (RTWI)

The use of the RTWI is identified to be the most effective tool across public and private sector organisations to assist with the management of attendance.

WMFS operates a RTWI system and the content appears appropriate when they take place. The review did identify that approximately a third of employees having short term sickness either did not have a return to work interview, it was not timely or not recorded onto HRMS. In some instances the RTWI was up to 6 weeks after the return to the workplace.

There were factors contributing to this delay such as work patterns and managers and employees working in different locations. Generally there are higher levels of sickness absence in the areas where RTWIs are delayed or where no RTWI takes place.

The important factor from a managing attendance perspective is that the RTWI is timely and covers the necessary detail relating to health and fitness for work, adjustments, previous absence and trends and follow up actions.

The second most used and effective approach for managing attendance is trigger mechanisms to review attendance. If managers are not taking ownership of the management of the absence this will have a negative impact on the effectiveness of the RTWI as a tool to reduce absence.

3.3.4 Incentives

- i) Incentives have been raised within the group and have been considered within the Service previously. One of the incentives currently available for green book employees is the award of additional annual leave in recognition of good attendance. This approach was adopted by WMFS in 1999.
- ii) The rewarding of attendance however, will only benefit those employees who have zero sickness over an extended period of time and therefore employees may see this as being unachievable.

- iii) Certain job types may be specifically disadvantaged by the implementation of a scheme to reward attendance. This could be due to the nature of the work undertaken. and the specific work location.
- iv) As women in most ethnic groups are still predominantly the main carers within a family unit, some of the absences may be as a result of caring responsibilities.

Therefore it is important that employees and managers work together to consider flexible working options which can benefit the employer, employee and the family.

- v) Employees attending work when they are not fit to do so (known as presenteeism) should not be encouraged. The performance of these individuals will be affected and there is also the risk of other employees becoming unwell.
- vi) Since the implementation of CPD for grey book employees, there are a larger proportion of employees on restricted duties. This could be as a result of improved case management but also a desire to return to work to be eligible to apply for CPD. However, it is important to note that employees on restricted duties are still not undertaking their full role. Restricted duties and phased return to work should be used only as short term interventions and the case should continue to be managed. Ultimately, if the employee cannot return to their substantive role within a defined period of time then further management action should be taken.
- vii) The current CPD payment for grey book employees equates to £883 per annum. The cost to the Service of paying CPD payments to green book employees would equate to:-

- all green book employees (FTE) met criteria for CPD payment cost to the Service is £331k.
- if 70% of green employees (FTE) met the criteria, the cost to the Service would be £231k. These estimations have been based on the average number of green book employees who had more than 3 absences or 8 days or more in a rolling 12 month period.

viii) The CPD scheme is designed to recognise and reward experienced employees who are able to demonstrate continual professional development over and above that required at 'competent' level for their grade. Therefore any CPD payment paid should recognise and reward experience and performance. The Service should not reward employees for attending work but not necessarily performing well.

3.4 The cost (based on salaries) of Support Staff sickness for 2012 was £818k. However to fully appreciate the 'cost' of absence to an organisation the following also needs to be considered.

The impact and cost of:-

- providing replacement staff;
- authorised overtime;
- missing deadlines, inability to complete pre-planned work;
- reduced service delivery;
- low morale amongst colleagues; and
- diminished reputation.

3.5 Management style, culture, traditions of behaviour and working conditions can have a significant impact on attendance at work. Research shows that absence is likely to be greater in larger working groups or where there is no direct line manager on site. The reason for this is the absence is less likely to be noticed.

3.6 Measures to be considered to improve employee attendance:

- 3.6.1 flexible working arrangements; the use of restricted duties and employee engagement have been found to have a positive impact on employees' performance. They also assist the employee in managing their work-life balance which can also have a positive impact on performance and attendance. It reinforces to the employee that they are valued.
- 3.6.2 evidence suggests that the role of the line manager in case management is key. Attendance at work is supported by a healthy lifestyle and a clear understanding of role and its fit with the Service. Therefore good line management can lead to good health, well being and improved performance. Regular contact between managers and employees whilst an employee is absent assists with the return to work process. Managers should build relationships with their employees as this aids discussion of sensitive issues. Maintaining employee contact is a key feature in managing absence and overall employee performance.
- 3.6.3 advocates of attendance payments argue that they reward those who by turning up for work frequently carry an additional workload caused by persistent absentees and that it raises the general level of attendance. However, good attendance is part of the employee/employer contract so the employee is already being paid to attend work. As only a minority are likely to be frequently absent, payments are paid to all employees to improve the attendance of a minority. Incentive payments tend to reduce the line manager's responsibility to encourage good attendance and effectively manage poor attendance. Once the qualification for payment is lost, the incentive is removed. It is important to note that over time the extra payment may be seen as part of the normal pay

It is more cost effective to ensure that performance management arrangements are properly implemented.

- 3.7 Strategic Advisory Group agreed the following recommendations to improve employee attendance.
- 3.7.1 The Service should continue to support positive health promotion.
 - 3.7.2 Managers should continue to be, and improve their approach to, proactive not reactive in the management of attendance
 - 3.7.3 Managers and employees to ensure necessary discussions take place to prevent ill-health as a result of working conditions.
 - 3.7.4 Ensure that managers and employees take responsibility for developing relationships which consider style/approach and encourages employees to discuss sometimes sensitive issues with their manager.
 - 3.7.5 Managers should make timely interventions and consider additional support an employee may require. This may be to support the work-life balance of the employee.

4. **EQUALITY IMPACT ASSESSMENT**

In preparing this report an initial Equality Impact Assessment has been undertaken and the outcomes taken into consideration in the development of the recommendations.

5. **RISK IMPACT ASSESSMENT**

The actions within this report are aligned to the Corporate Risk register and seek to mitigate those foreseeable risks.

6. **LEGAL IMPLICATIONS**

There are no legal implications arising from this report.

7. **FINANCIAL IMPLICATIONS**

There are no financial implications arising from the recommendations within this report

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