

THE VALE OF GLAMORGAN COUNCIL

CABINET: 5TH SEPTEMBER, 2024

REFERENCE FROM CORPORATE PERFORMANCE AND RESOURCES
SCRUTINY COMMITTEE: 17TH JULY, 2024

“237 Q4 SICKNESS ABSENCE REPORT 2023/2024 (REF) –

Cabinet had on 20th June, 2024 referred the Sickness Absence report for 2023/2024 to the Scrutiny Committee for further consideration.

The report set out the sickness absence figures for the period 1st April, 2023 to 31st March, 2024 as part of the agreed performance management arrangements.

The Operational Manager for Employee Services advised that the absence figures had improved based on the same period as the previous year. The previous year (2022/2023) had seen increased levels of absence, this was due to coming out of the pandemic and absence had been seen to have been increasing across all organisational groups including the public sector.

In presenting the report the Operational Manager for Employee Services drew attention to the initiatives that had been introduced by the Council to support staff which included support and resources from Occupational Health colleagues to assist staff in returning to work as soon as possible. Having regard to paragraph 4.5 of the report the Head of Human Resources and Organisational Development Service advised that the Vale of Glamorgan Council had now ended its association with the Care First Employee Assistance Programme (EAP) in relation to providing a 24-hour advice line for staff and a new provider had been sourced. The new provider Westfield Health had commenced with the Authority on 1st November, 2023 and whilst the transition to the service was being carried out staff could contact the Council's Occupational Health Unit with any queries or concerns. In referring to positive health promotion, it was noted that flu vaccinations had been delivered both corporately and in schools and residential settings during October and November 2023 with approximately 2,000 vaccines having been given across the organisation.

A new Occupational Health booking system was currently being implemented with a view to it being rolled out by 1st November, 2024. The new booking system would enable administration time of the nurses and doctors to be reduced and would thereby provide a more efficient and streamlined process within the Occupational Health Unit.

The Operational Manager also drew attention to paragraph 5.7 of the report which advised that the Council now had nearly 40 trained mental health champions whose primary roles were:

- To promote health campaigns
- Encourage colleagues to participate in the Council's wellbeing initiatives and challenges.
- Involvement in events and collaborative working
- Role modelling
- Providing a healthy culture within the workplace
- Organising activities
- Signposting colleagues to relevant services.

Appendix A to the report detailed the breakdown of absences by service area including Wales-wide comparative data and Appendix to the report provided details of overall sickness rates. Appendix C to the report detailed sickness breakdown by Directorate and Appendix D to the report detailed the sickness breakdown by age.

The Chair was pleased to note that sickness absence was trending in a downwards projection and requested that a report be presented to the Committee in due course on how Westfield Health were progressing.

Councillor Carroll in commenting on the sickness figures referred to the age range noting that the 16-25 age group appeared to have a higher number of days lost than the 65+ age group which is not what he would have expected. The officer stated that this was also in his view an error and that he would double check the figures and advise Members of the Committee accordingly by email. It being noted that the figures should actually be the other way around.

Having regard to the reasons for sickness absence Councillor Wood commented that the 'Other' category appeared to have a large percentage of responses as opposed to any other categories and he wondered why this category had been introduced especially with there being no further detail on what 'Other' meant. The Head of Service advised that the "Other" category had always been in the system but it appeared more staff were now ticking that category. Further work would be undertaken to ascertain why and also to consider broadening the categories should the investigation into "Other" result in a need for new categories to be created..

Councillor Dr. Johnson, in commenting on the work of the 30 Mental Health Champions, enquired as to the Committee also receiving an update report in respect of the service, maintaining momentum and consistency of approach and any plans for training any new champions. In referring to paragraph 5.7 of the report and the number of people who received training as mental health champions, The Head of Service advised they had recently lost a particular champion who like other champions had been enthusiastic and committed and that further work was being progressed to engage future champions.

Councillor Dr. Johnson also asked for some examples of the service provision to be forwarded to Members for their information outside of the Committee reporting mechanism.

Councillor Loveluck-Edwards enquired about stress-risk assessments and what assurances the Council had been given that the new provider had someone who had

the ability to guide the employee in terms of the support they required for their individual needs. The Head of Service advised that risk assessments were completed in partnership with the individual, the Safety and Wellbeing Team and the Occupational Health Team. Both the Care First and Westfield Health were managed by the Occupational Health team and Health and Safety Wellbeing Team. Early indications were showing that feedback in respect of the service provided by Westfield Health was positive.

The Chair, referring to the pie chart attached as an Appendix, three quarters of cases stating there was stress at work so it was important to know what exactly was the cause of stress, with managers having the opportunity to get to the root cause at work.

In response, the Head of Service stated that there could be further opportunities to drill down further with regard to the information as it was currently based on what a medical certificate stated. However, she informed the Committee that under the Council's Management of Attendance Policy there was a robust structure of meetings that needed to take place in a supportive way which were undertaken by team managers. Although she was not sure how further detailed breakdown could provide more accurate information, she would consider broadening the category noting that the actual aim would be to proactively reduce the issues in the first place and to ensure mitigations were undertaken to assist employees.

Following consideration of the report it was subsequently

RECOMMENDED to Cabinet that work be undertaken in relation to:

- broadening the reasons for absence in relation to the 'Other' box.
- Further clarity relating to the absence figures for the 16-25 age group and 65+ plus categories to be emailed to Members.
- That a further report be presented to the Committee in respect of progress following the commissioning of Westfield Health in six months' time.
- That further information be presented to the Committee in relation to the service provided by the 30 Mental Health Champions, the good work being undertaken and to include details of training opportunities.

Reason for recommendation

Having regard to the discussions at the meeting, the contents of the report and to advise Cabinet following requests of the Scrutiny Committee.”