

Report to: Overview and Scrutiny Committee

Date of meeting:

Report of: Head of Human Resources

Title: Absence Levels in Watford Borough Council

1.0 **SUMMARY**

1.1 This report sets out the Council's absence levels for 2010/11 and draws a comparison with absence levels in Three Rivers District Council.

1.2 The report also explains what action is being undertaken to address sickness absence in 2011/12.

2.0 **RECOMMENDATIONS**

2.1 That the Committee notes the report.

Contact Officer:

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Report approved by: Terry Baldwin Head of Human Resources

3.0 **DETAILED PROPOSAL**

3.1 **Watford absence levels**

Historically, Watford has had high levels of sickness absence with 15 days per employee in 2003/04 and just under 12 days per employee in 2007/08. To remedy this, Watford brought in a sickness absence monitoring system in 2008 using an external supplier (First Care). This system provided for:

- All absence calls to be logged with an Occupational Nurse and a discussion held with the employee regarding the absence
- Emails and texts to be sent to line managers immediately following notification of absence stating reason for absence (where this has been disclosed) and expected return to work date
- Return to work interviews to be completed and logged on the system
- Management information regarding trend analysis, reasons for absence and absence by Service.

The Management Information pack is circulated to managers on a monthly basis and HR support managers with absence management, particularly long term sickness absence.

3.2 The Effect of using First Care

Absence levels in Watford have fallen and the rate of 8.5 days for 2010/11 was a similar level to that for 2009/10. This represents the lowest absence levels Watford has recorded and although it is higher than the target level of 7.6 days, it does represent a downward trend in absence levels.

3.3 Comparison of the breakdown of absence in Watford BC and Three Rivers DC

Three Rivers have consistently been one of the best performing councils in Hertfordshire for sickness absence levels per employee and have achieved an average absence rate of below 7 days per employee. The target of 7.6 days absence per employee was the first time the councils agreed a shared target for absence per employee. Three Rivers have previously recorded lower figures than 7.6 days and therefore it was not a surprise that they came in below this target. As our shared service partner, Three Rivers set a standard for Watford to aim for and to learn from their experience. Both councils have sickness absence management policies and interventions by line managers/HR.

During 2010/ 2011 1996 working days were lost to sickness absence at Three Rivers District Council, representing an average of 6.5 days absence per employee. In Watford Borough Council 4111 working days were lost to sickness absence during the same period, representing an average number of 8.5 days per employee. The table below identifies the levels of sickness within each service. As service names and the composition of occupations within services varies in each council these are grouped to give as close a match as possible. Head counts differ, therefore a comparison of number of days sickness per service is not helpful. The number of sickness days per service is shown as a percentage of the total sickness days in each council.

Note – for Watford Borough Council add total figures for all services above ICT only, the remaining 4 services are shared across both Councils. These breakdown figures are for information only to aid comparison between 'like' occupations, across both councils

Three Rivers District	Head count 308		Watford Borough Council	Head count 499	
	Absence Incidents	%age		Absence Incidents	%age
			Corporate Management	15	0.36
Corporate Services	8	0.4	Corporate Services total 267.75	267.75	6.5
CSC	146	7.3	Customer Services	214	5.2
			Management	3	.07
Partnerships	53	2.6	Partnership & Performance	48.75	1.18
			Environmental Services Total 1,508	1,508	36.6
Environmental Health	25	1.25	Environmental Health	84.75	2.08
Environmental Protection	31	1.5	Management	9	0.2
Street Cleaning	199	9.96	Street care	596.50	14.5
Waste	388	19.4	Waste management	806.75	19.6
			Community Services total 794	794	19.3
Housing	101	5.0	Housing	182.25	4.4
Grounds maintenance	25	1.25	Parks and open spaces	157.5	3.8
Leisure	28	1.4			
			Legal, Democratic and property total 377.5	377.5	9.18
Legal	54	2.7	Legal	24	0.58
Democratic	18	0.9	Democratic	40.25	0.97
			Buildings and projects	97.25	2.36
			Property	210	5.1
			Planning & Development total 277.25	277.25	6.7

Three Rivers District	Head count 308	Watford Borough Council	Head count 499	177.75	4.3
	Absence Incidents	%age		Absence Incidents	%age
Development planning	16	0.8	<i>Planning policy</i>	30	0.72
Building control	174	8.7	<i>Transport & infrastructure</i>	55.5	1.35
Tree protection	259	12.9			
Sustainability	36	1.8			
ICT	20	1.0	ICT	320	7.78
HR	12	0.6	HR	99	2.4
Finance	34	1.75	Finance	58	1.41
Revs & Bens	330	16.5	Revs & Bens	394.5	9.59
	1996		4111		

3.4 Analysis

The analysis shows that whilst there are less days absence per employee taken at Three Rivers, there remain some similarities in the absence trends in both councils. Refuse has the highest percentage of absence in both councils and demonstrates absence levels that are the same proportion of the total.

Street cleaning absence levels are considerably higher at Watford Borough Council.

The areas of Building Control and Tree protection at Three Rivers are inflated due to 2 long term sickness cases that are currently being managed with Occupational Health.

Housing holds similar absence levels in each council.

Grounds Maintenance absence percentage is higher at Watford Borough Council and the figures are mainly due to one absence case that has now returned to work.

The level of absence in Property at Watford Borough Council is due to one complex long term absence case that is being managed with Occupational Health

There have been 3 long term absences, and intermittent short term absences in Revenues and Benefits in Shared Services across both councils.

4.0 Conclusion

The absence levels within Watford are reducing on an average per employee basis. The figures for the first quarter of 2011/12 show a level of 1.97 days per employee. If this trend continues for the rest of the year the average absence level would be 7.88 days which is a further decrease and brings us closer to the target level of 7.6 days.

Active management of absence cases by line managers and HR have seen the average absence rate reduce and further work in this area is planned. Long term absence cases are reviewed regularly and specialist medical reports obtained to support decisions regarding phased return to work, alternative employment options (if available) or proceedings under the capability policy.

Short term absence is discussed with employees and return to work interviews implemented in accordance with the First Care system.

Leadership Team review average absence levels across all services on a monthly basis and any areas of concern are noted. The absence trend is also reviewed and discussions

take place should the trend show an increase in absence levels.

HR will meet with First Care to identify what further action may be taken to further reduce the absence levels within Watford.