

Agenda Item No. 11

Humberside Fire Authority
17 March 2017

Report by the Director of Human
Resources

ABSENCE MANAGEMENT

SUMMARY

1. This report is the latest of the regular updates requested by members on the performance and progress of the management of sickness absence. Sickness absence data has not been included in this report on this occasion as there has been little change since the last report.
2. This report also gives an update on progress relating to improved awareness of mental health, reducing stigma and earlier intervention and support for staff suffering mental distress. This is in the context of mental health difficulties being the highest reason for absence across the Service.

RECOMMENDATIONS

3. (a) That Members note the content of the report, in particular the initial views and findings from the representative of Capsticks HRA who are currently undertaking the Service's employment elements of sickness absence management;
- (b) That Members agree that sickness absence data should be reported to the Authority on a quarterly basis in line with the performance reporting schedule;

ABSENCE MANAGEMENT ACROSS THE SERVICE

4. Members are aware of the decision taken to commission Capsticks Human Resource Advisory team to undertake the absence management work stream for a 3 month period which began at the end of February. This work includes the complete management of sickness absence for all cases in the Service during this period, as well as a review of the roll out and efficacy of the Sickness Absence Policy and a training needs analysis of management capability in this area. An added benefit of free advice from their legal team in relation to any resulting employment cases was included in the agreement.
5. It is planned that this work will leave a legacy for the Service of up to date case work for absence management cases, as well as a detailed plan for any required amendments to policy and management training in the future, which will then be supported and delivered by the HR Service Partners.
6. This work is already starting to have an impact on the Service, with positive reports from managers as to their interactions with the representative from Capsticks and earlier interventions and referrals for staff when they become unwell, with appropriate employment advice to managers earlier in the process.

7. Clearly, a more detailed picture will emerge when the work is further progressed and members will be presented with this information at that time.
8. However, it was felt important to share Capsticks' early views as to the efficacy of the current approach to absence management with members to keep them informed of progress.
9. The initial views are as follows:
 - (a) That interactions with between the Occupational Health team, Line Managers and HR advisory could be more streamlined to provide timely advice and interventions in absence management;
 - (b) That employment advice provided to managers needs to be more robust, with HR support given at Occupational Health referral stage;
 - (c) That there are significant training needs across the Service in the management of absence both from a management and an HR perspective
 - (d) That information flows should be reviewed
 - (e) That the possibility of accelerated access to certain treatments should be explored to support earlier returns to work
10. Once the work by Capsticks is completed, which is envisaged to be June 2017, then a more detailed report can be prepared as to the plans to integrate their recommendations in our absence management processes going forward to coincide with the appointment of the new HR Service Partners.
11. It is envisaged that the impact of this targeted approach to sickness absence will yield benefits not only on the levels of absence, given proactive support for staff to return to work earlier, or be fairly exited from the Service, but also, that assurance can be taken that the health of our staff and their regular and reliable attendance at work is being supported consistently and fairly.
12. Given this position, it is proposed that sickness absence updates, including detailed data are presented to members on a quarterly basis, in line with the performance reporting schedule. This will give a more realistic view on the planned improvements in the data.

MENTAL HEALTH AWARENESS AND SUPPORT

13. It was reported previously to members that plans were being developed to hold a Mental Health Awareness Conference during May 2017 and that further details would follow.
14. The Conference will be held on the 8th May 2017 at the KC Stadium in Hull and members are invited to attend. There are a number of confirmed speakers and workshops throughout the day and it is planned that support will be available for a large proportion of the workforce to attend, with a responsibility to report back their learning from the day to their watch, station or department.

STRATEGIC PLAN COMPATIBILITY

15. It is crucial to the success of the Service's Strategic Plan that sickness absence is managed fairly, consistently and appropriately, ensuring that as far as possible, staff are able to attend work regularly and reliably.

16. Specifically, the effective management of sickness absence will support the delivery of our two underpinning strategic objectives of “Managing the best use of the resources we have” and “Continuing to develop a committed, skilled and safe workforce”.

FINANCIAL/RESOURCES/VALUE FOR MONEY IMPLICATIONS

17. The development of effective and fair processes and accurate data will better enable the Service to manage both the finances and the staffing resources, which will result in better value for money and increased personnel available for deployment.
18. The spend required to finance the temporary position of outsourced sickness absence management will be balanced with the expected reduction in sickness absence cases and the legacy of a more effective absence process and more informed managers in the medium term future.

LEGAL IMPLICATIONS

19. Improved processes in relation to fair and consistent management of absence will reduce the risk to the Service of Employment Tribunal claims that are difficult to defend and any claims made are more likely to be unsuccessful. Where a return to work isn't possible and an appropriate and fair exit from the Service is more favourable, this can be enacted quickly with the least pain for all concerned and with significantly less litigation risk.
20. Free legal advice is given as part of the agreement with Capsticks HRA which reduces the legal risks of managing sickness issues.

EQUALITY IMPACT ASSESSMENT/HR IMPLICATIONS

21. Fair processes which support staff to return to work wherever possible, in the shortest possible timeframe, will improve morale and facilitate a culture where staff can feel able to share their difficulties and health concerns earlier. Improved awareness of mental health will have a positive effect on the support available to staff with mental health difficulties and reduce stigma.
22. The Equality Impact assessment for this paper has been completed.

CORPORATE RISK MANAGEMENT IMPLICATIONS

23. No direct issues arising.

HEALTH AND SAFETY IMPLICATIONS

24. Increased focus on Absence Management and the role of Human Resources, Occupational Health and Managers, with a clear process, accurate data and better developed skill sets will decrease the risk of reportable incidents occurring which are due to the individual health needs of staff.

COMMUNICATION ACTIONS ARISING

25. A full briefing for all staff will be issued and a management development programme will be developed to increase the skills and knowledge of all managers in the Service.

DETAILS OF CONSULTATION AND/OR COLLABORATION

No direct issues arising.

BACKGROUND PAPERS AVAILABLE FOR ACCESS

26. Absence Management Policy.

RECOMMENDATIONS RESTATED

27. (a) That Members note the content of the report, in particular the initial views and findings from the representative of Capsticks HRA who are currently undertaking the Service's employment elements of sickness absence management;
- (b) That Members agree that sickness absence data should be reported to the Authority on a quarterly basis in line with the performance reporting schedule;

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