

Report to: Scrutiny Management Panel

Report from: Head of Human Resources

Report written by: Stephen Todd - Head of Central Services HR

Date: 8 March 2010

SUBJECT: SICKNESS ABSENCE - STRESS

1. Purpose of Report

- 1.1. At its meeting of 18 February 2010 the panel requested a brief report on the management of stress related sickness absence.

2. Background

- 2.1. In April 2005 as part of another national initiative, the Health and Safety Executive (HSE) carried out an audit of the council's work related stress management provision. At that time a Stress Management Policy was in place and although this was commended as a good policy, there was no evidence that the policy had been implemented and knowledge of it was virtually non-existent.
- 2.2. In 2006 a well-being survey of council staff was undertaken and analysed against the HSE's management standards. In the analysis it was recognised that there was a range of other council policies and procedures that complement the findings and support managers in the management of stress. For example, HR policies relating to absence, staff performance, harassment, Health and Safety and various policies on time off. From the results, the Stress Management Project Group developed an action plan to satisfy the requirements of the HSE stress audit. This action plan included reviewing job design, clear definition of roles, work organisation, hours and workload, performance management, management culture and recruitment and training.
- 2.3. The results were presented and agreed by the Employment Committee, the stress policy was reviewed, stress management training was introduced for both managers and staff and a series of actions introduced to implement the changes either at council, directorate or local level.

3. Current Situation

- 3.1. The city councils in-house Occupational Health Service was set up in 2008 and has made a significant impact on overall sickness absence reducing the average days per employee from 11.3 to 9.9 in less than 2 years.
- 3.2. Absence rates are reported quarterly to the Employment Committee and the most recent statistics show that 34% of referrals to Occupational Health in the period July to Sept 2009 were for Mental Health issues. Of the top three reasons recorded for long term sickness stress, anxiety and mental health is at the top of the list at 25% of all long term sickness reasons. Whilst it is not known how much employee stress is unrelated to work, the effect of the Local Pay Review and annual budget cuts may have an impact in some cases.

4. Management of Stress

- 4.1. There are a number of tools in place to enable managers to support staff who are suffering from stress related illness including:
- 4.1.1. The Occupational Health team offer a fast track referral process for mental health issues, which can involve either advice to the manager or in more serious cases an early referral for the employee. This is to enable issues to be addressed early and resolved before they become more serious. However, this is not well used by managers.
 - 4.1.2. There are two in-house Learning & Development courses available which cover stress issues, one for staff "Well-being Awareness" and one for managers "Managing Well-being" In the last 12 months 141 staff have attended the Well-being Awareness course and 30 Managers have attended the Managing Well-being course.
 - 4.1.3. The city council provides free access for all staff to an Employee Assistance Provider/Counselling Service via a free-phone helpline and where appropriate face to face counselling sessions funded by the employer.
 - 4.1.4. The formation of the 6 Staff Groups (LGBT, Religion & Belief, Carers, BME, Disability and Forces Family Support) over the last 1-2 years is seen as supporting staff where non-work issues may have an effect on their wellbeing at work.
 - 4.1.5. The Wellbeing Steering group set up as a result of the HSE inspection and the stress survey in 2006 is currently being reviewed along with a Wellbeing Strategy. It is hoped to re-launch the wellbeing agenda in late spring putting the management of staff wellbeing within the core of each service with service groups resolving their own issues, with support from the appropriate professionals within the city council.
 - 4.1.6. The Wellbeing Strategy and management structure together with initiatives already in place such as Stop Smoking classes, Know Your Numbers event, flu jabs and keep fit walks will enable the city council to apply for the Work Health & Wellbeing Hallmark which is awarded to organisations that can demonstrate a commitment to employee health and wellbeing.

Signed:.....

Date:.....

Kay White Head of Human Resources