



PARTNERSHIP AND RESOURCES POLICY DEVELOPMENT AND SCRUTINY PANEL

REVIEW OF POLICY AND PROCEDURE FOR SUPPORTING ATTENDANCE AT WORK

REPORT BY HEAD OF CORPORATE SERVICES

A. PURPOSE OF REPORT

To present to the Panel, the outcome of a review of the council's Policy and Procedure for Supporting Attendance at Work together with a Supporting Attendance Action Plan to improve the effectiveness of the policy going forward.

B. RECOMMENDATION

It is recommended that the Panel:

1. Notes that sickness absence rates across the council have been rising despite the introduction of the council's Policy and Procedure for Supporting Attendance at Work on 1 September 2018 as reflected in quarterly Statutory Performance Indicator (SPI) figures reported to the Panel;
2. Notes the summary position on absence rates and in particular, the prevalence of stress-related absence as set out in Section D.2 of the report;
3. Notes the proposed adjustments to the policy and its application set out in Section D.3 aimed at improving its effectiveness.
4. Notes the package of measures currently in place to support the management of stress-related absence outlined in Section D.4;
5. Notes the additional support measures proposed in the Supporting Attendance Action Plan at Appendix 1 of the report;
6. Considers the proposal that the policy should continue to be reviewed on an annual basis to ensure that improvement in the council's sickness absence levels are being delivered;
7. Notes that quarterly sickness absence monitoring reports will continue to be submitted to the Panel in the normal manner and that regular update meetings with the recognised Trade Unions will also continue on an ongoing basis.

C. SUMMARY OF IMPLICATIONS

I Council Values

- Focusing on our customers' needs
- being honest, open and accountable

		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • providing equality of opportunities • making best use of our resources
II	Policy and Legal (including Strategic Environmental Assessment, Equality Issues, Health or Risk Assessment)	The Policy and Procedure approved by the Council Executive on 26 June 2018 seeks to strike a balance between effective management of sickness absence and the promotion of a healthy workforce that takes account of the council's obligations under equality legislation.
III	Implications for Scheme of Delegations to Officers	An amendment to the policy and procedure will involve minor adjustments to service Schemes of Officer delegations enabling Heads of Service to delegate responsibility for Stage 3 meetings and Capability Review meetings to Service and Group Managers as appropriate.
IV	Impact on performance and performance Indicators	Since the implementation of the current policy on 1 September 2018, SPI figures for sickness absence has increased from 4.99% to 5.63% as at 31 December 2019.
V	Relevance to Single Outcome Agreement	High attendance levels assist the council in providing continuity of quality service delivery to customers.
VI	Resources - (Financial, Staffing and Property)	The proposed improvement measures arising from the policy review include the funding of an additional temporary HR Adviser to support the application of the policy together with continued funding of an existing temporary HR Adviser post for a further 12 months.
VII	Other consultations	Consultation has taken place with the council's recognised Trade Unions.

D. TERMS OF REPORT

D.1 BACKGROUND

The council's Policy and Procedure for Supporting Attendance at Work was approved by the Council Executive on 26 June 2018 with an implementation date of 1 September 2018. The policy and procedure replaced the former council Policy and Procedure on Managing Sickness Absence which had proved unsuccessful in reversing the upward trend in sickness absence rates as reported in successive quarterly reports to the Partnership & Resources PDSP. Those reports highlighted that long-term sickness absence was a particular issue for the council.

The overall rationale behind the introduction of the revised policy was to try to strike a balance between proactively addressing the council's high levels of sickness absence while doing so in a manner that was supportive and sufficiently flexible to enable discretion to be applied where extenuating circumstances called for a compassionate application of the policy.

In approving the new policy, the Council Executive also instructed that it be reviewed after 12 months to assess its effectiveness particularly in addressing long-term sickness absence. The outcome of that review together with a Supporting Attendance Action Plan for implementing improvements going forward is set out in this report.

D.2 SPI PROFILE ANALYSIS

The Statutory Performance Indicator (SPI) for December 2019 is 5.63%, which compares with an SPI figure of 5.18% for December 2018, which is reflective with the rising trend in absence across the authority.

Mental & behavioural absences have accounted for 31.41 % of all absence over the period 1 April 2019 to 31 December 2019 and since the council's Policy and Procedure for Supporting Attendance at Work was introduced on 1 September 2018, 56% of cases recorded under that category were stress-related. In those cases where the source of the stress was specified, 42% related to personal stress factors while 15% specified work-related factors. A further 4% specified both personal and work-related factors. The remaining 39% was non-specified.

The main factors recorded as accounting for personal stress (non-work related) were bereavement and carer responsibilities. The other cases were wide ranging and included stress arising from health worries, awaiting medical test results and family, domestic issues.

D.3 ADJUSTMENTS TO POLICY AND MONITORING ARRANGEMENTS

Extended Management Discretion

The new policy removed the provision for the automatic disregard of absence relating to *non - elective hospital treatment, industrial injury, and bereavement* and replaced it with additional flexibility for relevant managers to apply discretion in extenuating circumstances.

Under the previous approach periods of absence disregarded for trigger purposes were open-ended and therefore often resulted in lengthy absences. The new policy enables relevant managers to apply temporary relaxation of trigger levels at any point up to Stage 2 of the procedure. The periods of absence in respect of which discretion is exercised, are subject to review which enables greater control to be exercised over the length of absences. The requirement for managers to consult HR Services on each occasion that discretion is being considered also ensures a consistent, corporate approach is maintained.

Following an analysis of cases where discretion has been applied under the new policy, it is considered that the monitoring and control of discretionary decisions would benefit from undertaking a Mandatory Case Review of all discretionary absences that extend to 6 weeks. In addition, the requirement for services to provide further supporting information in support of requests to extend initial periods of discretionary absence before an extension is agreed, will be more robustly enforced.

Additional Policy Compliance Monitoring

Under the new policy, trigger action points now apply to cases of continuous (long-term absence) at 4 weeks, 3 months, 6 months, and 9 months. Instead of long-term

absences of employees becoming open-ended under the former policy and resulting in the tendency for individuals to become disenfranchised from the organisation, the application of trigger action points now ensures earlier and more regular contact and engagement with individuals thus increasing the possibility of a quicker return to work.

In addition to the monitoring information currently issued by HR Services to services, it is proposed that Heads of Service will be provided with additional monitoring reports going forward to assist in tracking ongoing cases. Improved visibility of cases for Heads of Service will ensure that appropriate action is being taken timeously at the relevant stages of the policy by the relevant managers in their services.

Extended Management Delegation (Procedural Stages 2 and 3)

With a view to ensuring a more flexible and effective day to day application of the Policy and Procedure for Supporting Attendance, responsibility for chairing Capability Assessment Review Panels and Stage 3 Capability Assessment meetings (formerly Final Absence meetings) will be delegated to Service and Group Manager level facilitated by the necessary adjustments to service Schemes of Officer Delegations.

In addition, responsibility will be further delegated to Service Managers and Group Managers to exercise discretion at Stage 2 of the procedure in determining whether or not a Capability Review Panel requires to be convened subject to consultation with HR Services.

D.4 CURRENT SUPPORT MEASURES – STRESS RELATED ABSENCE

Given that stress – related absence constitutes the highest contributor to absence in the authority, a number of resources are in place aimed at supporting staff to either remain at work during stressful periods/situations or if absent to assist employees to return to work. Details of these resources are set out below:

Employee Assistance Programme (EAP)

The EAP is a confidential service run independently by Help EAP (a subsidiary of Optima Health) who provide a 24/7/365 telephone helpline service. The telephone helpline provides instant access for employees to a professional service on a range of work-related and personal issues such as stress, anxiety, addiction, bullying & harassment, bereavement, ill health etc. In addition, Help EAP is able to provide legal and financial information such as property issues, personal injury claims, consumer rights, debt management etc.

Although initial contact is by telephone Help EAP is able to provide face to face counselling services where appropriate and also has a free online resource which provides comprehensive information on a range of issues including life stage events such as pregnancy, caring for others as well as stress/anxiety.

Employee Financial Support Service

Employees of the council who are worried about money matters can access free, confidential advice tailored to individual needs through the Advice Shop. The Employee Financial Support Service provides a three-step process, which supports employees to maximise income by looking at ways to reduce outgoing costs and develop practical skills to put them in control of their money.

Learning and Development Support

The Learning and Development Team in HR Services have a number of online eLearning modules and bitesize training courses including mentally healthy workplace, developing resilience, dealing with sensitive conversations and supporting attendance at work, all designed to equip managers with the appropriate skills and tools to manage stress related absences.

Workplace Chaplain

The council currently engages with Work Place Chaplaincy Scotland who offers confidential pastoral support for all employees. The Chaplain is available every Tuesday morning in the Civic Centre. This service is offered on a drop in basis and a room has been made available for confidential discussions away from the general office.

Employee Mental Well-Being Policy

Under the council's Employee Mental Wellbeing Policy recommends that line managers offer to meet with staff as soon as possible at the point that an employee reports a stress related absence. The key objective is to identify the issues that are giving rise to the employee's stress so that an appropriate support plan can be put in place.

In cases where the employee struggles to articulate the cause of work related stress, or where recommended by OH, the line manager can provide the employee with a stress audit. This audit was developed by the Health & Safety Executive based on six management standards (demands, control, support, relationships, role, and change) and is presented in a questionnaire to be completed by the employee.

Healthy Working Lives (HWL) Initiatives

The Healthy Working Lives (HWL) group hold two health weeks per year, one in the summer and one in the winter. During these health weeks there are a number of activities held and at least one activity is based on mental health. For example, the 2019 programme of activities included the Steps in Work challenge, Office yoga classes and Mindfulness classes.

Online Resources

In addition to the above supports, Westspace is West Lothian's partnership online source of mental health and wellbeing information, which is managed by Health in Mind in conjunction with NHS Lothian and Changes CHP. This website provides a database which aims to signpost individuals to appropriate mental health and wellbeing services within West Lothian, enabling them to access services and information which may be of benefit to them or someone they support.

D.5 ADDITIONAL SUPPORT MEASURES PROPOSED

In addition to the proposed minor adjustments to the policy and the increased compliance monitoring arrangements outlined earlier at Section D.3, a range of other supplementary measures are proposed to support the application of the policy as set out below;

Recruitment of an additional HR Adviser

An additional HR Adviser will be recruited to specifically support those services with the highest levels of stress-related absence. The role of the Adviser will be to support managers apply the Employee Mental Wellbeing Policy ensuring that meetings take place timeously and that individual Employee Stress Action Plans are developed. While the line manager and employee will be responsible for driving forward any actions, HR Services will support and record the necessary interventions/actions.

Procurement of Specialist Training

To supplement the training currently delivered through the council's Learning & Development team, additional specialist training will be procured through the Health & Social Care Partnership (HSCP) promotion team to support managers in managing difficult and sensitive issues;

Four Pillars of Wellbeing Initiative

In attempts to draw together the various resources available both online and locally, HR Services in partnership with Healthy Working Lives (HWL) Group, Health, & Safety and Anti-poverty Services have developed the Four Pillars of Wellbeing Programme. This initiative focuses on the four main themes of mental health, physical health, financial wellbeing, and workplace wellbeing. It is designed to provide valuable information and designated pathways to help employees navigate their own wellbeing journey as well as equipping line managers with tools to signpost staff to the various supportive options available.

A website will be available on the Council's intranet accessible to all staff and will provide an extensive source of information to signpost staff to various professional local and nationally provided sources of support as well as providing some self-help tools and guidance including increased promotion of the council's Employee Assistance Programme (EAP).

In addition, a quarterly Wellbeing Employee Briefing Script will be distributed to Line Managers for cascading within their teams, the first of which focusses on work-related and personal stress, how to recognise the signs in themselves and colleagues, and where to access appropriate support.

Mental Health First Aiders

The introduction of Mental Health First Aiders in certain areas of the service will be piloted. A Mental Health First Aider provides a support contact in the workplace for anyone experiencing mental health issues. The first aider will be present to help guide the person in distress to the relevant help they need.

Once trained the person will have the relevant knowledge to be able to identify someone who is developing a mental health issue. Introducing Mental Health First Aiders will ensure employees are involved directly in supporting the council's health and wellbeing strategy.

It is proposed that HR Services will liaise with Heads of Service to agree appropriate areas to pilot this service. This will involve an agreed selection process to ensure suitable individuals are appointed to undertake the training required.

Accessing Treatment Interventions in the Community

A pilot will be conducted to assess the feasibility of council employees accessing community treatment services for mental health/addiction issues through the Health & Social Care Partnership (HSCP).

Access to these services is currently available through a GP or social work referral for all West Lothian residents and is based in Wellbeing Hubs situated in St John's Hospital and Bathgate. The service provides 1:1 support to individuals for low level stress/distress and mental health conditions including but not exclusively bereavement issues.

West Lothian Drug & Alcohol Services (WLDAS) are also able to offer adult counselling and support services for all West Lothian residents and provide a number of drop-in services available throughout the region at various times throughout the week allowing people with an alcohol or drug problem easy access to local services without an appointment.

Initial discussions have taken place with the Director of the HSCP on the potential to create a pathway for all West Lothian Council employees to access these services without the requirement for either a GP referral or West Lothian residency.

Champion of Healthy Working Lives (HWL)

While the HWL group will continue to promote health activities including awareness of mental health issues throughout the year such as the Mental Health Awareness week held annually in May, it is considered that a more visible and high level promotion of HWL issues might help raise greater awareness.

It is proposed that the Depute Chief Executive – Social Policy and HSCP will champion the HWL initiative going forward. The Trade Unions that are already represented on the council's HWL Steering Group will also be asked to input to the programme.

Development of Carers Policy

An analysis of sickness absence cases in the council indicates that a proportion of absences can be attributed to employees who themselves are not sick but take time off to care for other members of their family.

While the council's Policy on Leave for Family Care Purposes does include provision for time off to care for an ill dependent, the policy is not sufficiently flexible in scope to deal with employees with on-going, longer term caring responsibilities.

It is considered that the development of a specific Carers Policy for the council may have the added benefit of reducing employee stress and sickness absence. The peak age for caring is the 45-64 age group which accounts for approximately 52% of the council's workforce and in terms of retention, represents a group of employees with a vast amount of valuable skills and experience.

E. CONCLUSION

The Policy and Procedure for Supporting Attendance at Work has had limited success in impacting sickness absence rates in the authority since its introduction on 1 September 2018 and in overall terms during the period of its application, rates have

marginally increased.

It has become evident that applied in isolation, the policy itself has been an insufficient tool for reducing sickness absence and that further supplementary support measures are required. With that in mind, a Supporting Attendance Action Plan has been developed to address the root causes of sickness absence which includes a package of positive and targeted measures aimed primarily at tackling stress – related absence which to date tends to be the highest contributor to absence in the authority.

Progress on implementation and monitoring of the effectiveness of the planned measures and initiatives will be reported regularly to the Panel. Regular updates meetings with the council's recognised Trade Unions will also continue as part of the consultative process.

It is proposed that the policy and procedure should continue to be reviewed on an annual basis to ensure that sustained improvement in sickness absence levels is delivered subject to appropriate solutions being proposed where this is not the case.

F. BACKGROUND REFERENCES

- Policy and Procedure for Supporting Attendance at Work
(Approved Council Executive : 26 June 2018)
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Appendices/Attachments:

Appendix 1: Supporting Attendance Action Plan

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7 February 2020

SUPPORTING ATTENDANCE AT WORK

ACTION PLAN – REVIEW OF POLICY AND STRATEGY

AREA OF ACTIVITY	ACTION	ACTION BY	START DATE	TARGET COMPLETION DATE
Review of Policy	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Report to P&R PDSP 	HR Services	7 Feb 2020	7 Feb 2020
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Report to Council Executive 	HR Services	25 Feb 2020	25 Feb 2020
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Implement policy amendments (officer delegations/application of discretion) 	HR Services	26 Feb 2020	26 Feb 2020
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Managers Briefing/Workshops on review outcome 	HR Services	2 Mar 2020	31 Mar 2020
Supporting Application of Policy	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Continue funding of Temporary HR Adviser resource 	HR Services	1 April 2020	31 Dec 2020
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Recruitment of additional HR Adviser 	HR Services	13 Jan 2020	31 Mar 2020
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Develop employee Stress Action Plans 	HR Advisers /Heads Of Service	April 2020	Ongoing
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Ongoing monitoring of employee stress action plans 	HR Advisers /Heads Of Service	April 2020	Ongoing
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Apply revised policy compliance monitoring – absence management reporting and application of discretion 	HR Advisers /Service & Line Managers	Feb/Mar 2020	Ongoing
Accessing Treatment Interventions in the Community	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Assess feasibility of providing access to Community Wellbeing Hubs for council employees via HSCP 	HR Services /Depute Chief Executive (HSCP)	1 April 2020	June 2020
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Conduct Pilot 	HR Services /Depute Chief Executive (HSCP)	TBC	TBC
Training & Management Support	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Review content of NHS training module on managing difficult and sensitive conversations/employee engagement 	HR Services	Feb/March 2020	TBC
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Procure training as appropriate 	HR Services	April 2020	April 2020
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Review options for Mental 		Feb 2020	

AREA OF ACTIVITY	ACTION	ACTION BY	START DATE	TARGET COMPLETION DATE
	Health First Aider Training <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Identify areas to introduce Mental First Aiders in conjunction with Heads of Service 	HR Services HR Services	March 2020	Feb 2020 March 2020
Promotion of Employee Well-Being Initiatives	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Launch and promote Four Pillars of Wellbeing initiative through council Intranet and Quarterly Employee Briefing Scripts Promote Workplace Chaplain service through INSIDE NEWS publication Develop Healthy Working Lives programme of activities for remainder of the year. 	HR Services HR Services HR Services /Depute Chief Executive	April 2020 Feb 2020 Jan 2020	Ongoing March 2020 Ongoing
Policy Development	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Develop Carers Policy 	HR Services	March 2020	June 2020