

meeting **Personnel Committee**

date: **29 JANUARY 2010**

Agenda item number 5

REPORT OF THE SERVICE DIRECTOR- HUMAN RESOURCES

PROPOSED CHANGES TO THE ATTENDANCE MANAGEMENT PROCEDURE

1. Purpose of Report

- 1.1 The purpose of this report is to update Personnel Committee on changes to the Attendance Management Procedure.

2. Background

- 2.1 The latest absence figures show a reduction to 9.56 days lost per employee per year. These figures are calculated on the basis of a rolling twelve month period from 1st October 2008 to 30th September 2009. Whilst this continues the trend of an ongoing reduction in absence levels; performance still falls short of the target of 8.75 days lost per employee which is required to be met by 31st March 2010.
- 2.2 The reduction of absence levels; reducing the costs of absence and improving the health and wellbeing of employees are priorities for the County Council. As part of the ongoing Attendance Management Project to further improve absence management within the Authority, a number of aspects of the Attendance Management Procedure have been reviewed. This included reviewing the trigger levels at which action in relation to absence is initiated; amending the appeals process on final written warnings and reviewing the wording of the procedure. The changes to the procedure are set out in more detail below.

3. Actions taken to date

- 3.1 A range of other activity has also been undertaken to support the reduction in

absence levels. This includes the development of management reports on levels of absence and trends; reasons for absence and the breakdown of long term and short term absence. This information is being circulated to Corporate Directors and Service Directors on a quarterly basis in order that action plans can be developed to address the common themes and issues identified in addition to more localised issues. Work is currently ongoing to develop reports which identify levels and reasons for absence down to individual divisional level to enable more preventative and targeted action to be taken by local managers in relation to specific areas of service.

- 3.2 Service Directors and Service Heads continue to receive regular reports on the percentage of trigger interviews completed so that they can take appropriate follow up action to ensure that the Attendance Management Procedure is being correctly applied.
- 3.3 The managers' training programme has been reviewed and extended to a two day programme which is more skills based than previously. A refresher programme has also been developed to ensure all managers are trained and have the relevant and up to date knowledge and skills to apply the procedure. Feedback from managers on the new programme has been very positive.
- 3.4 Specific activities have been undertaken (in relation to alcohol awareness for example) and articles have appeared in In Contact and on the intranet to raise awareness of employees' personal responsibility for their health and help improve the overall health and wellbeing of employees.
- 3.5 A review of the County Council's redeployment process has been undertaken in order to identify areas for improvement. A dedicated HR Officer has been appointed in order to improve and speed up the redeployment process; identify retraining and other opportunities for employees and improve outcomes for employees and the County Council.
- 3.6 Stress/depression is the second highest reason for absence across the County Council after absence due to operations and post operative recovery. A steering group is being set up and initial scoping of the work undertaken to focus on the issue of stress and develop a co-ordinated approach and specific action plan to target this issue. This will include more proactive and preventative measures to prevent and identify potential stress at an earlier stage; in addition to effective measures of supporting employees suffering with stress/depression.
- 3.7 Work is continuing to ensure that accurate and timely sickness absence reporting is undertaken in order to comply with Statutory Sick Pay (SSP) regulations, ensure accuracy of records and allow monitoring against performance targets. A pilot is being developed in which employees will initially contact a qualified nurse to report absence rather than their line manager. This would ensure that employees have direct access to appropriately qualified medical professionals for advice and support in the first instance.

4. **Proposals**

- 4.1 In order to further reduce absence levels changes to the Attendance Management procedure are being implemented as follows:

Absence trigger levels

The trigger level for action under the procedure is being reduced to 3 separate instances of absence in any 6 month period or 10 working days of absence in a 12 month period, or equivalent to two working weeks for part time workers.

Attendance Management Appeals Process

Currently appeals under the Attendance Management Procedure are considered by elected members. In future senior officers would hear appeals against final warnings in order to streamline the process and ensure that appeals are dealt with in a timely manner. Any appeals against a decision to dismiss under the terms of the Attendance Management Procedure will continue to be heard by the Members Appeals Committee.

Other changes to the procedure

A number of other changes have been made to the wording within the procedure. These mainly relate to clarifying the procedure that affects the management of long term absence along with updating names and titles.

- 4.2 Formal negotiations with the recognised trades unions began at Informal Corporate Joint Forum (ICJF) on the 19th August 2009. A number of formal and informal meetings have been held since then to continue the negotiation process with a view to reaching agreement on the proposed changes.
- 4.3 Throughout the consultation on the proposed changes, the trades unions have clearly stated that they are not willing to agree to changes to the trigger levels as, in their opinion, there are other actions which should be taken first before considering changing trigger levels. The trades unions have indicated that they are prepared to discuss and consider these other areas of activity. For example improving outcomes in relation to retraining and redeployment to facilitate employees returning to work at an earlier stage.
- 4.4 Management welcome the engagement of the trades union side in these areas of work but are of the view that this needs to take place in conjunction with the changes to the trigger levels. Significant work has already taken place or is ongoing in relation to the other areas which the trades unions have identified. Whilst there has been an ongoing reduction in absence; the pace of improvement in absence levels is too slow if the target of 8.75 days is to be achieved by 31st March 2010. If the trigger level at which any action in relation to absence continued to be significantly above the corporate target it will make reaching the target more difficult to achieve. Benchmarking with other authorities has reinforced the link between the trigger level and performance in relation to absence.

- 4.5 The trades unions have commented on the proposed changes to the appeals mechanism and are opposed to changing the procedure to allow senior officers to hear appeals against final warnings. It is the trades unions' view that it is an employee's right to have their appeal heard by members. It is proposed that members continue to hear appeals against dismissal.
- 4.6 The recognised trades unions have commented on the changes to wording to clarify some areas of the attendance management procedure and a number of these changes have been agreed.
- 4.7 The changes to the Attendance Management Procedure are effective from 1st January 2010 and it is proposed that the revised Attendance Management Procedure be reviewed after 12 months in operation. Performance against the corporate performance target for absence will be monitored on an ongoing basis. The absence monitoring data will be made available to elected members, senior officers, front line managers and trades union representatives.

5. Statutory and Policy Implications

This report has been compiled after consideration of implications in respect of finance, equal opportunities, personnel, crime and disorder and those using the service. Where such implications are material they have been described in the text of the report.

Personnel Implications

The main implications of the changes identified will be to further improve the management of absence across the Authority and support the reduction of the costs of absence to the Authority.

Financial Implications (MA 11/12/09).

There are no direct financial implications arising from the contents of this report. However, if the proposed changes significantly reduce absence that will impact on the overall cost of absence to the Authority.

Legal Comments (GR 11/12/09)

The Personnel Committee may receive this report for noting in that pursuant to section 9.2.2 of the County Council's constitution the Chief Executive has the delegated authority for staffing matters subject to the Employment Procedure rules. Section 4.2.1 of the Employment Procedure Rules provides that the Chief Executive can approve changes to existing policies following a period of consultation with recognised trade unions which can include the proposals contained within this report.

Equal opportunities implications.

An Equality Impact Assessment is being undertaken in relation to the proposed changes to the Attendance Management Procedure.

6. Recommendations

It is recommended that members note the changes to the Attendance Management Procedure as set out in the report.

**Marjorie Toward
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Electoral Divisions affected

All

Background papers available for inspection.

Revised Attendance Management procedure.