

Report to: CMT
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APPENDIX 3

Improving Slough Borough Council's Work Absences & Staff Wellbeing

Purpose of report:

CMT have asked for a further breakdown about the causes of absence therefore Neil Fraser was asked to undertake a review on this subject as part of his professional study to set into context Slough Borough Council's absence incidences in comparison to the National absence statistics, in conjunction with Slough Borough Council's absence and wellbeing policies, so that conclusions can be reached and recommendations for further improvements can be made.

Foreward

There are several key premises it is important to acknowledge when discussing health, wellbeing and absences from the workplace. Firstly, it is understood that for most people of working age, work – the right work – is good for their health and well-being. Secondly, for most people worklessness is harmful. Third, much sickness absence and inactivity follows common health conditions which, given the right support, are compatible with work.¹

Poor attendance saps employee morale, costs employers overtime expenses, and reduces employee engagement. Poor attendance takes supervisory time and attention and could result in dismissal.

It is therefore important to foster an environment in which people are happy and enthused to come to work, while solutions to absences are tailored to that individual or absence reason, to further minimise absences and their impact to Slough Borough Council.

Slough's Absence Statistics

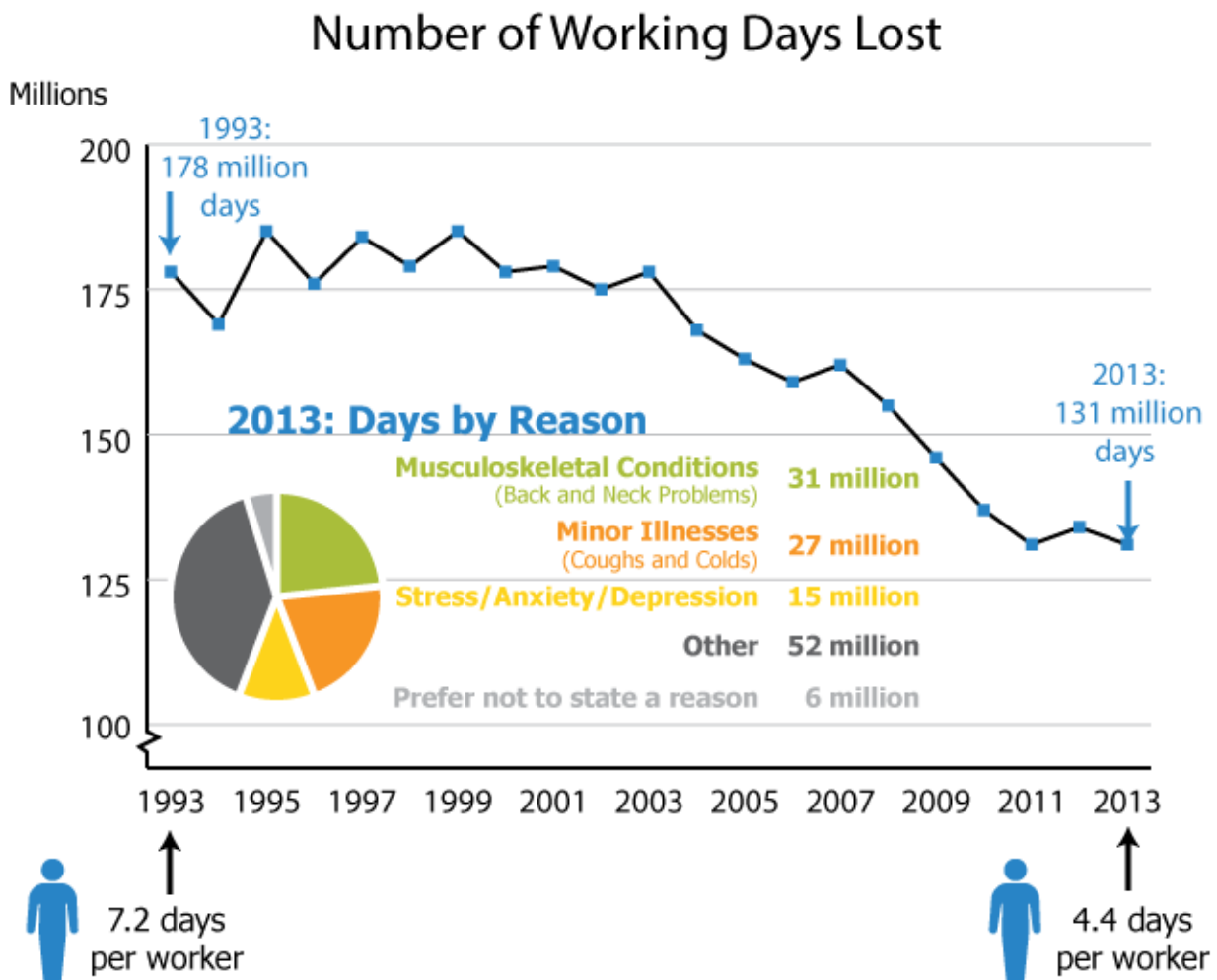
Firstly, it is important to recognise the work already done by Slough Borough Council in reducing instances of sickness over the last 18 months.

Sick days from 1 December 2012 to 30 November 2013 equated to an average of 7.5 days lost per employee, in comparison to 10.2 days within the same period for the previous year, a marked decrease. This is likely an effect of the implementation of a new policy in December 2012 which changed the trigger days from 10 days within 12 months, to 6 days within 6 months. This highlighted awareness of sickness absence among employees and Managers and promoted a more proactive attitude to employee absence that is further explored later in this report. The reduced average of 7.5 days is also broadly commensurate to other unitary authorities, for example RBWM, who average 7.22 days lost per employee.

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Health at work – an independent review of sickness absence.
Dame Carol Black and David Frost CBE, 2011

7.5 days lost per employee is in comparison to the 2013 National Average of 4.4 days absence per employee.²



However, it is worth noting that this National figure includes data pertaining to the private sector and self-employed workers which statistically have, on average, lower instances and length of absences in comparison to the public sector.

Reasons for such a discrepancy include, but are not limited to:

- There are differences in the types of jobs between the two sectors and some sectors have higher likelihoods of sickness than others.
- SBC currently employs 1182 members of staff (headcount as of 31st December 2013). National statistics show that organisations with over 500 employees have the highest percentage of working hours lost though absence. It may be that sickness absences in small workplaces may be less common as workers do not feel able to take time off due to work commitments and not having colleagues to cover their work.

² Sickness Absence in the Labour Market, February 2014: Office of National Statistics: <http://www.statistics.gov.uk/hub/index.html>

- The analysis only counts someone as sick if they work fewer hours than contracted for. It would exclude someone who is sick and makes up for the lost hours at a later point in the week. It is possible that individuals in smaller workforces are under more pressure to make up any lost hours and these workforces are more prominent in the private sector.
- Individuals within the private sector are also more likely to not be paid for a spell of sickness than individuals within the public sector.
- On average, women have more sickness absence than men and the public sector employs a higher proportion of female workers. Of the current Slough Borough council employees, circa 70% are women, a figure that has remained broadly constant from 2012 to 2013.³

Overall, Slough Borough Council has reduced working days lost due to absence from a total of 13736 in 2012, to 10752 in 2013, a reduction of 21.7%. However, this is somewhat to be expected, being broadly in line with an 18.3% reduction in employees during the same period (from 1446 to 1182). More pertinently, the average occasions of absence per employee have fallen, from 3.2 instances in 2012 to 3 instances in 2013.

The top 3 reasons for those absences have also changed, to an extent, for the period 2012 - 2013:

2012 Days Lost SBC		2013 Days Lost SBC		2013 Days Lost Nationally	
Infections	1915	Skeletal, breaks/sprains	1670	Skeletal, breaks/sprains	31 million
Stress	1863	Stress	1583	Infections	27 million
Stomach/liver/kidney/digestive	1643	Infections	1450	Stress	15 million

From the above, we can see that stomach/liver/kidney/digestive issues are no longer one of the top 3 reasons for absence within SBC, though this has been replaced by infections, which account for the majority of short term absences.

The top 3 reasons for absence 2013 also directly correspond to the National top 3, though conversely, infections are a more common reason for absence nationally than stress. Infections remain high nationally, and it would appear that SBC do not have a particular issue with regards to these types of absences.

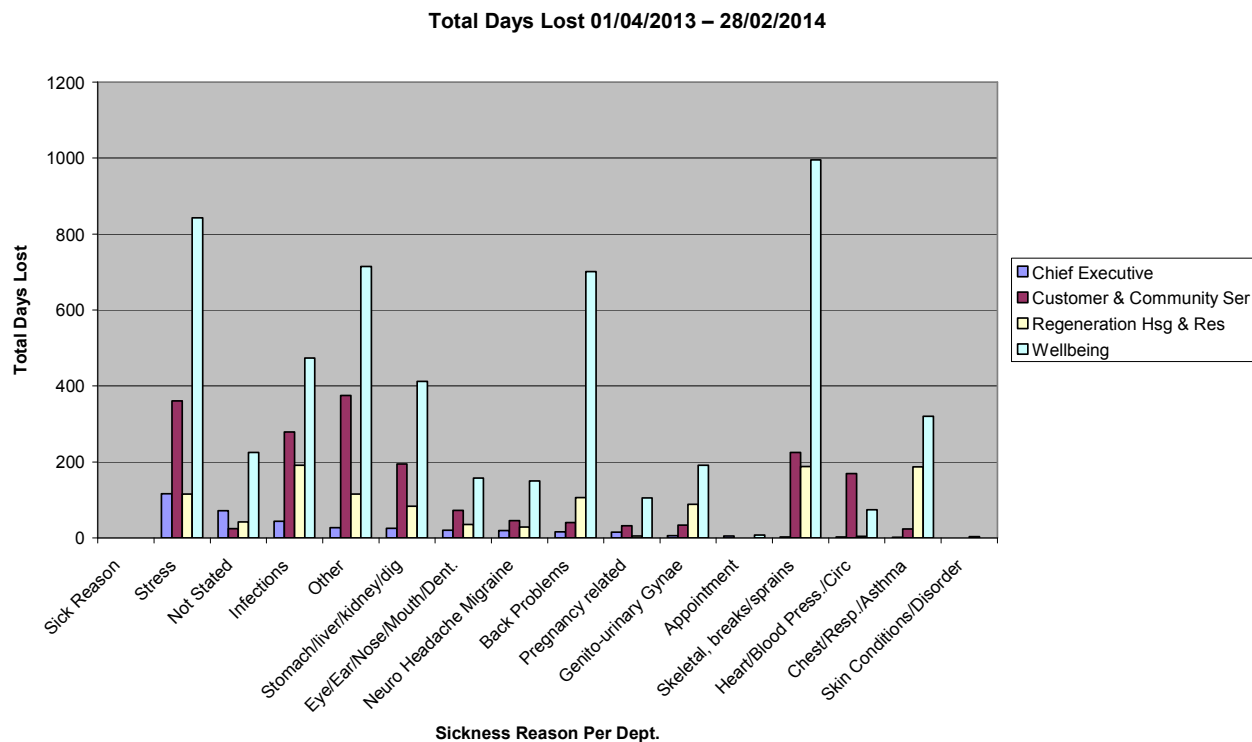
We can therefore conclude that the number of individual absences, and the length of those absences, has fallen over the last 12 months, though Slough Borough Council's absences do remain above the National average, potentially for the reasons listed above.

Below is a table showing the total reasons for sickness absence, per department, for the period 01/04/2013 – 28/02/2014:

We can see that that top reasons given for workplace absence do vary based on department. For example, the Wellbeing department's top 3 reasons for absence include infections, which is uniformly high across all departments, but also back problems and skeletal breaks/sprains. This is likely borne out by the type of work they do, which includes a greater amount of physically demanding work, particularly within social care.

³ Sickness Absence in the Labour Market, April 2012. Office for National Statistics.

This is in comparison to the Customer & Community Services department wherein the top 3 reasons for workplace absence given included stress, infections and Other (which can include such reasons as Allergy or allergic reaction, Cosmetic surgery and Poisoning (chemical)).



As stated previously, there has been a marked decrease in average days lost per employee over the last 12 months. There are several actions Slough Borough Council has undertaken in order to effect these changes, such as:

Staff Wellbeing Project Board

Slough Borough Council’s Staff Wellbeing Project Board has recently been re-launched.

The Project Board aims to promote good health through:

- Increased access to exercise and fitness
- Promotion of healthy eating choices
- Advice on giving up smoking
- Effective support during periods of ill health.

This has been borne out with such events as:

- Stoptober – SBC’s support for the National Stoptober campaign encouraging staff to give up smoking for the whole of October.
- The Pedometer challenge, a month-long event aimed at encouraging people to get up out of their chairs and do more walking
- HSF Health Plan Drop In – sessions to promote a simple and affordable way to help employees spread the cost of health care not covered by the NHS.
- Cycle Scheme – wherein employees are encouraged to commute to work via bicycle. In order to help facilitate this, the cost of a new bike is heavily reduced, with payment is via monthly payments.

As part of the re-launch, the Project Board will also include a staff wellbeing calendar, which will include theme days, some of which could tie into National directives such as 'National No Smoking day'.

Employee Assistance Programme (EAP)

In addition to the above, the Employee Assistance Program provides counseling over the phone for issues such as stress, bereavement, coping with pressure etc. A designated Quiet Room has also been made available should employees feel the need to get away from their desk/office environment. As stress is the only top-3 reason for absence constant throughout both 2012 and 2013, it is important that employees are provided the support and tools in order to help them manage such issues.

At this point, it is worth recognising that Slough Council has been tasked with making significant savings over a 5 year period. As such, various actions to ensure such savings have taken place, and included consultations, redundancies, and outsourcing to organisations such as Arvato. Notwithstanding the stress that comes from uncertainty around whether their jobs will be safe, a reducing workforce can result in putting additional pressure on the remaining staff, which is an additional source of stress and potentially absence.

There is also a key difference between stress caused by work, i.e. professional stress, and stress brought about by personal circumstances away from work.

Occupational Health

The Council has also commissioned the services of OhWorks Limited to supply an occupational health service. Their approach is focused on helping employees to stay in work through ensuring early access to advice and rehabilitation. Both OHWorks and the council are committed to delivering a service that benefits the organisation and its staff.

This will include specialist advice e.g. physiotherapy for musco-skeletal problems, access to mental health specialists where required, closer working relationships with our current Employee Assistance Programme (EAP) and the mediation service to ensure joined up solutions for staff.

How to reduce absences?

It would appear that the measures already put in place by Slough Borough Council cover the most commonly used tactics to reduce absences. These include monitoring and measuring absences, instigating an absence reporting procedure, analysing absence records etc. This is borne out in the regular updates comprising part of the Employment and Appeals Committee.

Recommendations for discussion

It is clear that a great deal of work has already been undertaken to reduce absence and improve staff wellbeing however further improvements are still required. Listed below are some actions that the Council is currently undertaking or recommending for action.

- Return to work (RTW) interviews. Although employees are currently required to submit a certificate of absence, which can be less demanding on Management's time, a RTW interview can personally address specific concerns including whether the absence was caused, or exacerbated, due to work. However, it appears that these interviews are not always being undertaken to their fullest extent as managers are not recording appropriately. In addition, measures can be put in place during these interviews to potentially reduce further absence by tailoring a work environment that allows the employee illness to be avoided, or managed as an ongoing matter without the need for absence. A review of previous absences can also be undertaken at this time.
- Terms of Employment and Bonus schemes. Slough Borough Council amended the sickness absence policy. This included reducing the trigger points to 6, within a six month period and early intervention to Occupational Health before an employee is managed through the formal process. However, there remains the option of providing an employee bonus scheme based on attendance. This would incentivise staff towards working through illnesses without being absent, though there would be implications towards budget and ensuring compliance legally, e.g. towards discrimination e.g. the Equalities Act 2010 (DDA).⁴ However, such incentives are not limited to only financial, but could also include additional time off work (e.g. an extra day's leave for an employee with no absences in 12 months).
- Acting on the information. Quickly spotting and addressing issues with appropriate action is key, whether this is meeting with an employee to discuss a pattern of regular absence, or suggesting to an employee who has not taken annual leave that they need to take holiday in line with legal requirements. Arvato and Occupational Health provide data that allows HR to produce the sickness balanced scorecard, which identifies absence trends globally, and by service. Human Resources are now using this information to target potential 'hot spots' which need further improvements. Currently Human Resources are attending management meetings to support managers understand the sickness absence process, provide advice to assist them manage difficult cases and ensure timely action is being taken. Further support is being provided to managers to ensure that employees attend Occupational Health appointments to continue to maintain a zero tolerance on non attendance.
- Increased physiotherapy sessions. OHWorks, our Occupational Health provider supply physiotherapy sessions every other week to those staff that have been referred due to absence. This service could be made more regular, in an effort to manage musco-skeletal injuries and to reduce absence. The cost for each extra day of physiotherapy would be £550. A time limited study will be undertaken in an area of the Council to see if this measure reduces absence of this type so that a wider business case can be made to assess if this is cost effective and valuable for Slough. In addition Slough currently offer staff training to manage posture in terms of Manual Handling, on top of this there is bespoke training for staff who undertake Manual Handling of clients although there is generally equipment to support staff with this task. As part of the above study we will include some sessions with high risk staff to focus on back awareness (e.g. reablement staff) which could include useful leaflets to advise staff on how to manage their own back care.

⁴ <http://www.orbuk.org.uk/article/managing-absence-reducing-and-preventing-absence>

- Public Health Department (PHD). Slough Borough Council is currently involving the PHD in their Staff Wellbeing Project Board to ensure we tap into initiatives that could be rolled out to staff. Slough has planned 'Health Checks' for staff in June 2014 which will assist staff manage their own personal health issues. This employee 'M.O.T.' will review diet, cholesterol, blood pressure, diabetes etc, in a personal programme tailored to the individual. Employees can then be referred through to GP for management, where necessary.
- Sickness and Stress Management Training. Although SBC has worked to ensure all Managers are attending Sickness Absence training, it is felt that further training could be implemented to mitigate the potential for conflict which lead to employee stress and absence. It is worth noting that employment tribunals and payouts due to workplace stress are significantly higher in the public sector. Slough Council must ensure that we are actively fulfilling our remit to carry out stress assessments and plans of actions to mitigate the potential for such payouts. How performance is managed and how an individual reacts to that management is frequently a source of stress. Management style/behaviour self assessments could be undertaken by Managers to determine their own management style and better understand how this impacts upon their colleagues and team members. Various tools can be found at <http://www.hse.gov.uk/stress/> . In addition our PHD have confirmed that they will run an employee programme in October to support staff manage stress.

The Sickness Absence training also needs to be reviewed to change the focus which should be more about managing difficult conversations and managing situations rather than on the policy changes.

- Suspensions. When employees are suspended, or absent from work due to stress, SBC currently look at providing the option of moving the employee internally to another area of the organisation whilst any investigation is undertaken. This would ensure that the employee is removed from the environment causing them to feel stressed, but also ensures that the Council continues to make use of the employee. By moving rather than suspending, the employee is also more likely to integrate or reintegrate into the new or existing role once the investigation is concluded, rather than suffering the additional stress and trepidation of having to return to work following an extended absence.