ABERDEEN CITY COUNCIL

COMMITTEE	Staff Governance Committee
DATE	24 June 2024
EXEMPT	No
CONFIDENTIAL	No
REPORT TITLE	Sickness Absence for Environmental, Roads and Waste Services
REPORT NUMBER	CR&E/24/178
EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR	Gale Beattie
CHIEF OFFICER	Mark Reilly – Chief Officer Operations Isla Newcombe – Chief Officer People & Citizen Services
REPORT AUTHOR	Martina Klubal – Acting Waste Resources Manager Sharon Robb – Employee Relations Casework lead
TERMS OF REFERENCE	2.7

1. PURPOSE OF REPORT

1.1 To report on sickness absence trends for Environmental, Roads & Infrastructure and Waste Services, following the instruction at the meeting of Net Zero, Environment and Transport Committee in March 2024:

   i) to note the report and agree that the report indicated Sickness Absence at Environmental, Roads and Waste to be well above average and of concern to officers; and

   ii) in light of the high sickness absence within these services, agree to instruct the Chief Officers – Operations and People and Citizen Services to bring back a report to the June Staff Governance Committee on why sickness absence was so high within those services and what the Council was doing to reduce such absence; and for future updates to be incorporated into the relevant sickness absence report to Staff Governance Committee.

1.2 To report on what the Council is doing to reduce absences within these areas.

2. RECOMMENDATIONS

That Committee:-

2.1 note the explanation and update provided within this report for assurance; and

2.2 instruct the Chief Officers - Operations and People and Citizen Services to incorporate any future updates into the Absence Annual Update (EAS Annual Progress Update, Occupational Health and Absence Annual Update).

3. CURRENT SITUATION

3.1 Background

3.1.1 Sickness absence in Environmental , Roads & Infrastructure and Waste Services was highlighted as higher than average across Council services by the Net Zero, Environment and Transport Committee within Appendix A of the Net Zero, Environment and Transport Performance Report. A RAG status of Red (more than 20% below target and being actively pursued) was noted against the Sickness Absence Performance Indicator for each service. The relevant performance indicators are shown below.

Environmental Services (Environment)

Performance Indicator	Nov 2023		Dec 2023		Jan 2024		2023/24 Target
	Value	Status	Value	Status	Value	Status	
Sickness Absence - Average Number of Days Lost - Environmental	15.3	🔴	15.3	🔴	15.2	🔴	10
Establishment actual FTE	319.18	📈	314.83	📈	313.02	📈	

Roads and Infrastructure Services (Roads)

Performance Indicator	Nov 2023		Dec 2023		Jan 2024		2023/24 Target
	Value	Status	Value	Status	Value	Status	
Sickness Absence - Average Number of Days Lost - Roads	13.5	🔴	13.2	🔴	13.0	🔴	10
Establishment actual FTE	162.19	📈	161.19	📈	159.59	📈	

Waste Services (Waste)

Performance Indicator	Nov 2023		Dec 2023		Jan 2024		2023/24 Target
	Value	Status	Value	Status	Value	Status	
Sickness Absence - Average Number of Days Lost - Waste	14.1	🔴	13.6	🔴	12.9	🔴	10
Establishment actual FTE	186.34	📈	187.12	📈	187.05	📈	

3.2 Data

3.2.1 The attached appendices illustrate the available sickness absence data in relation to each service and, where possible, this has been shown as a monthly trend across the period April 2023 to April 2024. It should be noted that within monthly trend patterns of sickness absence, seasonal and other variations often occur (for example it is normal for sickness absence to be higher in winter months).

3.2.2 Appendix 1 shows the number of employees absent from work each month per service, broken down by long and short term absences (long term is defined as more than 23 working days). For all 3 services, the trend for long term sickness showed an overall increase in the number of employees absent until this peaked in July 2023 for Waste and in October 2023 for Environment and Roads. Thereafter, in both services, the number of employees with long term absences showed a significant improvement. Data shows that the number of employees with long term absence per month for the period October 2023 to April 2024 for Roads decreased from 14 to 5 and for Environmental from 52 to 15. Waste decreased for the period July 2023 to April 2024 from 30 to 15.

There is a less clear pattern in the short term absence numbers, which can be more variable due to a number of factors, such as outdoor conditions, outbreaks of minor infections such as cold/flu viruses, and these are less likely to be attributable to underlying medical conditions.

3.2.3   Appendix 2 shows the number of days lost per FTE employee across the April 2023 to April 2024 period. Each service has a similar peak when compared to the numbers of employees with long term absence (i.e. July 2023 for Waste and October 2023 for Environment and Roads) with a decline in the number of absence days from the respective peak in absence. Whilst there has been a slight increase in the number of days per employee within Waste in 2024, which correlates to a small increase in the number of people with long term absence, there has still been an overall decrease from May 2023.

Work is underway within Data Insights to make similar monthly trend data available within the Sickness Absence dashboard thereby enabling management teams to follow absence more easily on a monthly basis and identify trends, fluctuations and anomalies more timeously.

3.2.4   Appendix 3 shows the main reason category for sickness absence within each area. The top 3 reasons for absence within each area are as follows:

Service	1st	2nd	3rd
Environment	Musculoskeletal	Psychological*	Respiratory
Roads	Musculoskeletal	Respiratory	Psychological*
Waste	Musculoskeletal	Psychological*	Hospitalisation

*(*Psychological includes anxiety, depression, mental health and stress)*

Given the physical nature of the work within the three service areas, it would be expected that musculoskeletal would be the main reason for absence. Staff in operational services undertake physical tasks outdoors, for example pushing and pulling heavy wheeled and bulk bins over uneven surfaces and in inclement weather. Any musculoskeletal injury or condition will more likely result in a period of sickness absence when compared to, for example, office based staff, where similar injuries/conditions have a lower likelihood of impacting their ability to attend work.

3.2.5   Appendix 4 shows the average number of working days lost due to sickness per FTE employee as a 12 month rolling average across a trend graph for each service. This data is used to populate the Sickness Absence Performance Indicator used within the [Performance Report](#). Whilst there was an increase in the 12 month rolling average across all 3 services, peaking around the 4th quarter of 2023, all 3 services have seen an improvement since this time, with both Roads and Waste now close to the target level of 10 in April 2024. The peak for Environment is somewhat later, but a downward trend is now emerging. A similar pattern can be seen in the rest of the Council's 12 month rolling average (with these 3 services not included).

ACC 12 month rolling average

Average number of total working days lost due to sickness absence per FTE employee (12 month rolling average)
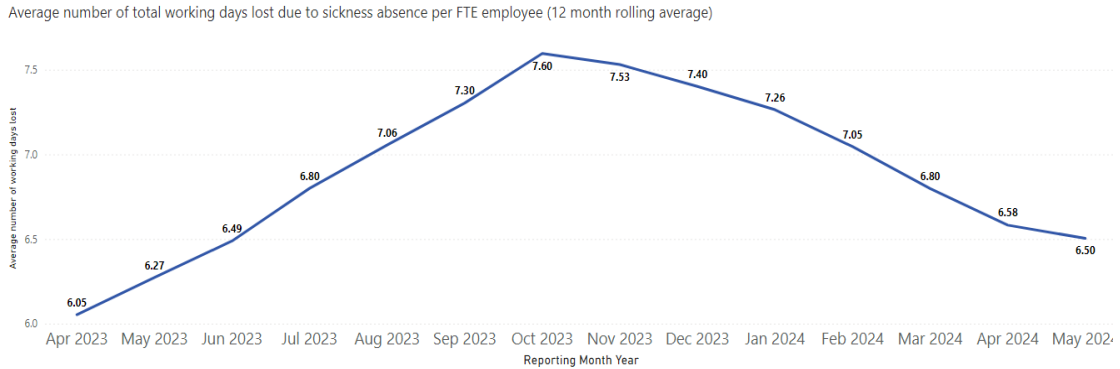
It is worth noting that the 12 month rolling average takes into account the current FTE (which has decreased within Environment but has remained steady in Waste and Roads) and as it continues to factor in absences within the last 12 months, any changes can take time to balance out.

3.2.6 A review of the CIPD's annual [Health and Wellbeing at Work Report](#), published in September 2023, reports an increase in sickness absence across all sectors in 2023 when compared to previous years and notes a correlation between the size of the workforce and the average number of days lost per employee (see figures below).

Figure 25: Average number of days lost per employee per year, by sector (5% trimmed mean)
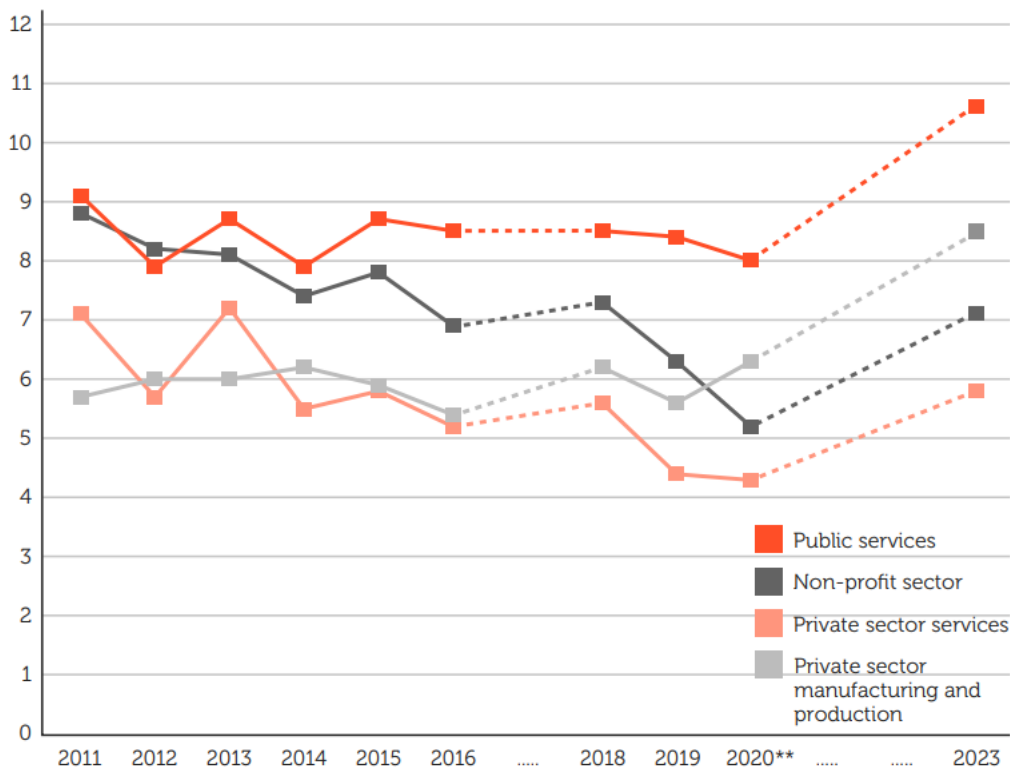
* 5% trimmed mean.
** Data collected in October/November 2019 before the COVID-19 pandemic in the UK.
Base: 290 (2023); 365 (2020); 446 (2019); 443 (2018); 736 (2016); 396 (2015); 342 (2014); 393 (2013); 498 (2012); 403 (2011).

Figure 26: The effect of workforce size on absence levels

No. of UK employees

5.0	6.5	7.2	8.7	13.3
Fewer than 50 (base: 30)	50–249 (base: 88)	250–999 (base: 62)	1,000–4,999 (base: 31)	5,000+ (base: 34)

Average number of days lost per employee per year (5% trimmed mean)

3.3 Progress Update

3.3.1 To address absence within the services, interventions have been developed in conjunction with colleagues in People and Citizen Services (P&CS) to better support operational services to manage absences. The Absence Improvement Project, in particular, aimed to reduce the number of absences through several key actions implemented around October 2023 including: targeted intervention to 'hot spot' services where recorded absence was notably higher than average; a Sickness Absence Toolkit was launched to support managers in managing sickness absence; a data cleansing exercise was undertaken to improve reporting; and development of notifications were implemented to improve the quality of absence reporting and to monitor the impact of interventions.

3.3.2 Operational Management in each service, with assistance from P&CS, focused on cases with the highest absence figures. The services developed individual plans to reduce the number of cases in each of the service areas. The services consistently followed the "Supporting Attendance and Wellbeing Policy" and put in supportive approaches, such as referral to Occupational Health, and wider communication of the "Employee Assistance Programme" (EAP) to enable employees to return to work, where possible.

3.3.3 Within these Services there has been a particular focus on staff absence and performance for the last 9 months. Services have worked closely with the P&CS teams and in some instances worked through each staff absence line by line. The original priority was a focus on the highest long term sickness cases, with a particular aim of getting employees back to work wherever possible, but this has now moved to a more holistic approach to tackling all staff absence and supporting staff with their health and wellbeing at work.

3.3.4 This original management focus has seen the services work through, stage by stage, the Council's Supporting Attendance and Wellbeing Policy and applying the policy to each, very different, staff absence, which in some cases, can take several months. Services have ensured that meetings and the process have been followed in a very timely and proper manner. For example, within Environment, this included weekly sessions with the Employee Relations Casework Lead initially, to ensure the management team were coached and fully confident in following all process and procedures,

considering and implementing individually tailored options correctly and consistently, while taking a supportive and positive approach to absence management.

3.3.5 The work involved has been very challenging, but it has seen significant improvement in the services' absence figures. Wherever possible, services have managed and supported employees back to work, but where necessary also have followed the policy through to conclusion.

3.3.6 Other measures services have taken to reduce absence include –

- Carrying out regular Toolbox Talks
- Investigating all accidents and incidents.
- Reviewing risk assessments.
- Share with staff all updates on health and wellbeing initiatives and campaigns.
- Regular meetings with management and Trade Union colleagues to discuss health and safety and any other staff concerns.
- A tailored solutions based approach to enable employees to return to work, utilising options such as physiotherapy, phased return and temporary adjustments to duties, or where necessary, redeployment.

3.3.7 In partnership with colleagues in People and Citizen Services (P&CS), each of the Service Managers have ensured that their team have the correct skills and knowledge in the use of the interventions / procedures to be able to sustain this work. The service managers have worked with their respective teams to ensure that, moving forward, the use of these interventions / procedures is continued.

3.3.8 In October 2023, the Waste service held a Health and Wellbeing Roadshow at Altens, promoting mental health, men's health and healthy eating and physical wellbeing assessments were offered on the day. The Council's Employee Assistance Programme was promoted, in particular, with assistance also provided to assist staff in accessing employee benefits more generally. The event was attended by external partners to promote wellbeing and was also supported and promoted by Trade Union colleagues. The roadshow was undertaken as a pilot project and feedback following the event was extremely positive from staff, managers and Trade Union representatives who attended. Building on the success of the roadshow, it is planned to roll this out to other locations.

Benefits and Wellbeing Roadshow

Celebrating World Mental Health Day
'Mental Health is a universal human right'

Come along and hear about our employee wellbeing and benefits opportunities available to you.

1.00 pm to 3.00 pm
Tuesday 10 October 2023
Altens East Depot, Portacabins

3.3.9   P&CS have been working directly with Operations SMT and with Trade Union colleagues to understand barriers to communication, engagement and development for colleagues in frontline operational services. The key issues include a lack of digital skills to access information available online, lack of available technology or opportunity as part of their role to access information, and challenges with log-ins. Together, they are working together to develop a Frontline Communication Action Plan, which has a multifaceted approach to improving access to information and opportunities. Key successes so far include a Frontline Newsletter for Building Services, which includes local news and success stories provided by Building Services, and corporate initiatives, such as support for mental and physical health and wellbeing, health and safety, and the Employee Assistance Programme. The team built on this model to raise awareness and provide opportunities for input to the organisational restructure, with a 'Transformation Special – Frontline

Newsletter' which was issued to managers in all frontline operational areas. It is intended to continue building on this approach in future.

3.3.10 The work from the teams within the services to improve absence figures has been well received and everyone in the services has seen a benefit. It is appreciated that any ongoing measures are not a short term fix, and the work will continue to ensure there is continuous and sustained improvement, continuing to utilise the support provided by P&CS. The teams will continue to take a fully holistic approach in managing absence by planning and managing each service's staff absence and performance in line with corporate people policies, be supportive and flexible in their approach, and continue to promote and ensure staff are informed about and encouraged to engage with health and wellbeing initiatives and support programmes in place.

4. FINANCIAL IMPLICATIONS

4.1 Financial implications of sickness absence rates include costs incurred for salary or sick pay for absent employees and additional costs incurred for temporary cover. Financial impact will reduce as a result of decreasing long term sickness cases across all three operational services.

4.2 Failure to comply with legislation in ensuring a safe and healthy workplace has the potential to result in enforcement action by the Health and Safety Executive (HSE). Changes in the Sentencing and Fines Guidance for health and safety non-compliances are resulting in increased financial penalties.

5. LEGAL IMPLICATIONS

5.1 Failure to comply with legislation in ensuring a safe and healthy workplace has the potential to result in enforcement action by the Health and Safety Executive (HSE). Such intervention can result in potential prosecution (criminal), equally, employees (civil claims) are more likely to succeed following a successful HSE prosecution. Changes in the Sentencing and Fines Guidance for health and safety non-compliances are resulting in increased financial penalties. Fine starting points are based on an organisation's turnover. As Local Authorities do not have turnover, Annual Revenue Budget is deemed to be the equivalent. This amount is then altered depending on the culpability of the organisation and harm factors to employees and members of the public.

5.2 Under the Health and Safety at Work Act 1974 and Management of Health and Safety at Work Regulations 1999 there is a legal requirement to ensure the health, safety and welfare at work of our employees. This includes minimising the risk of stress-related illness or injury to employees.

6. ENVIRONMENTAL IMPLICATIONS

6.1 None

7.   RISK

Category	Risks	Primary Controls/Control Actions to achieve Target Risk Level	*Target Risk Level (L, M or H) *taking into account controls/control actions	*Does Target Risk Level Match Appetite Set?
Strategic Risk	Service disruption or failure where absence levels are persistently high.	Management of absences using the Supporting Attendance Policy and supporting health and wellbeing of staff. Data capture and reporting to monitor trends and improvements.	L	Yes
Compliance	Failure to meet a service's statutory duties. Failure to comply with H&S legislation can lead to enforcement by HSE.	Management of absences using the Supporting Attendance Policy and supporting health and wellbeing of staff. Data capture and reporting to monitor trends and improvements.	M	Yes
Operational	Service disruption or failure where absence levels are persistently high.	Management of absences using the Supporting Attendance Policy and supporting health and wellbeing of staff. Data capture and reporting to monitor trends and improvements.	L	Yes
Financial	Costs incurred for salary or sick pay for absent workers and additional costs for temporary cover.	Management of absences using the Supporting Attendance Policy and supporting health and wellbeing of staff. Data capture and reporting to monitor trends and improvements.	M	Yes

	Failure to comply with H&S legislation can lead to enforcement by HSE.			
Reputational	Failure to deliver service standards.	Management of absences using the Supporting Attendance Policy and supporting health and wellbeing of staff. Data capture and reporting to monitor trends and improvements.	L	Yes
Environment / Climate	Failure to deliver waste and environmental services resulting in overflowing bins and increased litter.	Management of absences using the Supporting Attendance Policy and supporting health and wellbeing of staff. Data capture and reporting to monitor trends and improvements.	L	Yes

8. OUTCOMES

COUNCIL DELIVERY PLAN 2023-2024	
	Impact of Report
Aberdeen City Council Policy Statement **Working in Partnership for Aberdeen**	Delivery of vital local services on which people depend.
Local Outcome Improvement Plan	

9.   IMPACT ASSESSMENTS

Assessment	Outcome
Integrated Impact Assessment	No assessment is required. I confirm this has been discussed and agreed with Mark Reilly, Chief Officer, Operations and Protective Services, on 21/05/2024.
Data Protection Impact Assessment	Not required.
Other	None

10.   BACKGROUND PAPERS

10.1   Net Zero, Environment & Transport Performance Report – COM/24/088
   • Performance report appendix

10.2   CIPD Health and Wellbeing at Work Report 2023

11.   APPENDICES

11.1   Appendix 1 - Monthly Number of Short and Long Term Absences for the period April 2023 to April 2024.

11.2   Appendix 2 - Monthly Days Lost Per FTE for the Period April 2023 to April 2024.

11.3   Appendix 3 – Absence Reasons the period April 2023 to April 2024.

11.4   Appendix 4 – Current 12 Month Rolling Averages for the period April 2023 to April 2024.

12.   REPORT AUTHOR CONTACT DETAILS

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