

Agency Spend and Sickness Absence

1. Background

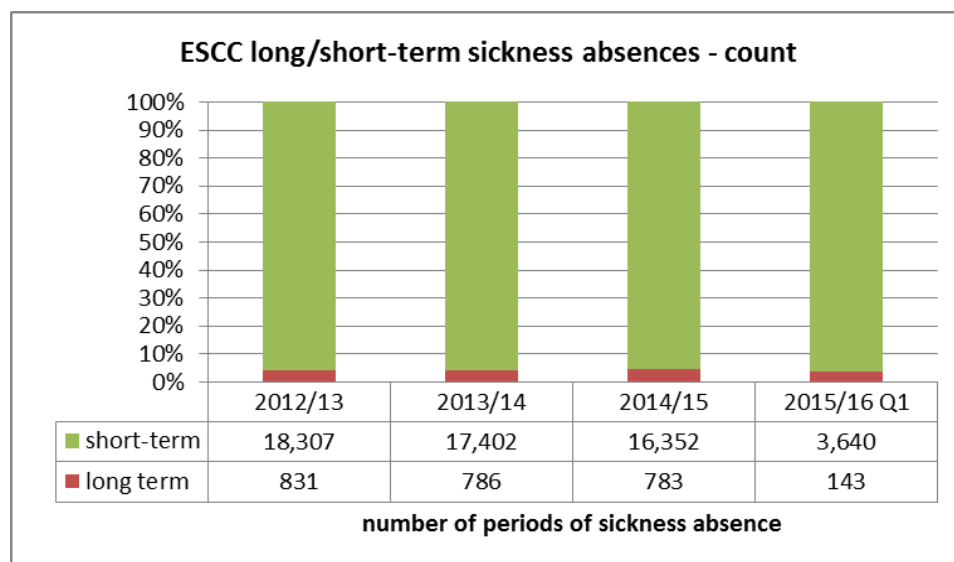
1.1 East Sussex County Council consistently spends between approximately £6.5 - £7 million pounds annually on the procurement of agency cover. Invariably this is in situations where business critical frontline services need staff such as care workers or social workers supplemented due to absence.

1.2 As agency cover for absences such as paternity, annual leave and sick leave incur additional cost without generating additional output, it is important to review and manage, as far as possible, the number of absence related agency assignments. It is significant that 27% of the overall agency expenditure relates to the cover of sickness absence. There are essentially two types of sickness absence: long term and short term.

2. Long Term Sickness and Initiatives

2.1 When an employee has been absent for over 28 calendar days, the absence is considered as 'long term'. On average, across both corporate and school employees, there are 65 (FTE) members of staff on long term absence at any one time. Out of a staff group of approximately 8500 (FTE), this equates to approximately 0.7% of employees. This is a relatively small proportion of staff and consists of employees who are genuinely very unwell with often, life limiting illness. Cancer is a common cause for long term absence and an absence of this nature can extend for up to one year in order to allow sufficient treatment and recovery time. Chart 1 highlights the number of employees (FTE) absent over the last three years:

Chart 1



2.2 Each long term case is supported by a dedicated HR Adviser. In the event an absence extends beyond 15 weeks the HR Adviser will support the manager by attending the meeting in order to provide additional support around exploring all available options. HR recommends Occupational Health advice to be sought at an early stage in order to ensure any reasonable adjustments are considered to secure a timely return to work. Each long term case is dealt with in a timely manner, along with robust adherence to procedure and with the necessary sensitivity and compassion.

3. Short Term Sickness and Initiatives

3.1 Short term sickness absence can span between 1 – 27 days in length, with the causes ranging from musculoskeletal and stress, through to coughs and colds. Given the range of factors that can affect these reasons for absence, managers are advised to apply the Short Term Attendance Procedure in a robust manner.

3.2 HR produce a monthly report highlighting employees who have experienced high levels of short term absence and this is shared with the appropriate manager to support the case as appropriate. However, the majority of short term management of attendance takes place within departments.

3.3 Whilst HR is available to support, guide and advise, it is the driving action from managers in the service that successfully makes a sustainable positive difference to attendance levels. With this in mind, HR aim to coach and support managers to have the necessary 'difficult conversations'. Discussions have been ongoing with the Human Resources Management Board to understand what additional support would be beneficial, along with initiatives that will have a positive impact on attendance levels. Alongside this, 'employee health and wellbeing' is one of the four themes of our People Strategy. The Year 2 action plan includes a range of initiatives to support the wellbeing of our staff and ensure a healthy workplace. Within Q1, absence has reduced and it is anticipated this will continue as these initiatives take effect.

4. Broader Strategy

4.1 As noted above, in order to continue to improve attendance levels there are a number of ongoing corporate and departmental initiatives:

Musculoskeletal Absence

Absence due to musculoskeletal causes is one of the highest reasons for time lost. In order to effectively target this, a more detailed level of reporting has been instigated which has enabled identification on the location of the musculoskeletal ailment, e.g. neck or elbow. This also allows a review of service areas where there may be clusters of specific conditions. In addition, a pilot commenced in ASC on 24 August 2015 for a localised provision of physiotherapy. This will be measured in order to establish its impact on absence levels.

Mental Health and Stress absence

This is now one of the most common reasons for time lost. A higher level of reporting is now in place to identify the particular condition which will allow for better analysis and therefore more focused solutions. In addition to this the function of appraisal and 1-2-1 meetings is being reviewed to enable managers and employees to discuss any wellbeing concerns at an early stage and put in place a shared agreement to prevent future related absences. A revised Individual Stress Action Plan and policy was released in January 2015, designed to promote active resolution from the manager and the employee in order to prevent any issues escalating into further absence. A report is run by HR on a weekly basis to capture any employees who are absent with stress or mental health in order to ensure the manager is equipped with the tools and knowledge to support the employee effectively

Return to Work Interviews

As part of our Attendance Management Policy, when an employee returns from a period of sickness, the manager should have a 'Return to Work discussion' with the employee. The purpose of this is to understand the reason for the absence, ensure that they are well enough to return, check if there is any support that needs to be put into place, particularly in the context of preventing any further absences and feedback on any key pieces of work which may have been missed.

Research from Firstcare (our absence management service provider) has shown that return to work interviews have a positive impact on helping to prevent future absence. As such we have in place a Council wide target for the completion of return to work interviews and are currently working with departments to ensure that this target is met.

Wellbeing Forum

A Wellbeing Forum took place on 6 February 2015 where members of staff from across the organisation, including the Chief Executive, came together to consider initiatives that could be put in place that would have a positive impact but at minimal cost.

The four key areas identified were:

1. Introduce Wellbeing into Supervision Meetings
2. Promote existing Information and resources
3. Launch an ESCC Wellbeing App
4. Launch a 'Five Weeks to Wellbeing' campaign

An action plan has now been developed to take this work forward.

Global Corporate Challenge (GCC)

GCC is a national campaign that aims to provide employers with a simple and engaging way to create a true culture of health right across the business. Individuals are provided with a step counter, working together in teams to compete for the highest number of steps collectively. The challenge lasts for 100 days in total. The commitment over this period of time has succeeded to encourage some sustainable positive behavioural changes. The majority of ESCC participants have reported to leading more active lifestyles as a result of this.

Five Weeks to Wellbeing Campaign

A Five Weeks to Wellbeing' Campaign will commence in the coming months. This initiative invites all employees to partake in a series of activities aiming to improve both mental and physical wellbeing. For example having a range of 'taster' activities taking place at key sites (this could span from rambling to yoga) and providing opportunities to find out more about local volunteering opportunities, healthy eating and mindfulness.

A successful pilot has already taken place within Adult Social Care Learning Disability (LD) during July 2015. The Team ran their own cost effective version of the steps challenge which had a significant positive impact on attendance levels:

- 0.69 % reduction in absence rate from last month with 13 less absence spells reported
- 24 spells reported in July 2015, this is the lowest amount of absence spells reported in the last 13 months (the average for LD being 42 days)

Mindfulness Pilot

A mindfulness programme is currently being run for the Leaders of the Orbis change programme. This offers all participants the opportunity to explore how to 'mindfully lead' themselves and others through change and provide practical tools and techniques. The impact will be evaluated in order to determine whether or not further roll-out is appropriate.

Conclusion

The initiatives highlighted above are indicative of the range of interventions to improve attendance and demonstrates a clear commitment to reducing absence.