

NEATH PORT TALBOT COUNTY BOROUGH COUNCIL

Children and Young People Cabinet Board

7th April 2016

Report of the Director of Education, Leisure & Lifelong Learning Mr. Aled Evans

Matter for Information

Wards Affected:

All Wards

Scope for long term sickness projects in Schools

Purpose of the Report

1. The purpose of this report is to provide Members with details of the Long Term Sickness in Schools Project and the implementation of an early intervention and effective communication methodology pilot within 4 schools, before gradually rolling out to all Comprehensive and Special schools.

Executive Summary

2. It is proposed that a Schools' Long Term Sickness Project is undertaken in order that we:
 - support school leaders to manage sickness levels,
 - support members of staff to return to work; and
 - ensure that associated costs and disruption are minimised.

3. In April 2016, it is proposed that a Pilot Phase will commence with 4 schools initially, piloting the early intervention and effective communication strategy, with the intention that it is rolled out to all Comprehensive Schools and Special Schools by September 2016.
4. One additional HR Officer (37hrs) will be employed on a fixed term basis for an 18 month period. The manager/Head Teacher still retains managerial responsibility and accountability, but the support of the HR Officer will ensure that Bursars and Head Teachers are trained in the new early intervention principles, and have access to advice and support. The role of the Bursars, once trained in the methodology, will be to prompt management action at each stage of the process to ensure that sickness is addressed at an early stage through the use of case management and rigorous application of the key stages.

Background

5. An assessment of schools' sickness absence between 1st November 2014 and 31st October 2015 shows that schools would benefit significantly from a project that would support the management of staff absence. The majority of the current absence profile is due to long term sickness (28 calendar days or more). A significant amount of the days lost to long term sickness relate to stress related absence.
6. Whilst there is an obvious financial cost to this sickness absence, it should also be noted that there is a substantial hidden cost in the impact of staff absence on the performance of schools. In a recent Estyn report, 'The impact of teacher absence' (September 2013), it is noted that 'learners make less progress in developing their skills, knowledge and understanding when the usual class teacher is absent. Teacher absence impacts on pupils across the ability range.' The report states that 'in most schools visited, the teaching by supply staff not employed by the school is often ineffective and that the greatest negative impact of teacher absence on pupils' learning occurs in secondary schools.' The report recommends, amongst other things, that schools should manage teacher absence more efficiently. There is, therefore, an obvious imperative to address these issues.

7. A taskforce has already undertaken a central staffing pilot and their findings identified that where long term sickness is addressed at an early stage, the outcome for both the employees and the Council are more positive. Research of best practice nationally and across industries led to the development of a good practice strategy, evidence based on the principles of early intervention. Research identified that absent rates can potentially be halved over time with immediate intervention strategies that include informal contact maintained through absence. This strategy, Early Intervention and Effective Communication Strategy, was developed with the support and input of the trade unions.
8. Our intention is to build upon the work undertaken by the central pilot, initially in 12 -15 schools and in 4 tranches. To facilitate this, a Human Resource Officer will be appointed for 18 months on a temporary basis. The Human Resource Officer will work with senior leaders, mainly within our secondary sector, and their bursars to build capacity to manage sickness absence in a more dynamic way.
9. The early indications of the central project were that the strategy, whilst not preventing employees from being absent due to sickness, was proving effective at facilitating an earlier return to work.
10. There was a 'no blame' approach taken by the central team, enabling them to scrutinise and examine every aspect of managing absence, and develop a thorough understanding of the constraints in processes. This approach has helped support positive change.
11. The early intervention approach and in particular, holding the 'Return to Work Plan Meeting' at an early stage of absence (in some cases of planned surgery, before the absence has begun) creates a solid foundation for managing the absence. Roles and responsibilities are clear, interventions and support are planned and have meaningful purpose, a communication plan is established and most importantly, it establishes a clear focus on returning to work.
12. The additional HR resource will ensure that Bursars are trained in case management and are able to prompt Head Teachers to ensure that cases are being move forward through rigorous application of the key stages. The HR Officer will also be able to provide advice, guidance and support to enable Bursars and Head teachers to

improve their ability to manage sickness, as well as ensuring that data is captured and regular reports are provided to the ELLL management team to enable monitoring of the pilots and early identification of any additional interventions which may need to be made.

13. That partnership working with the trade unions, and in this case, embedding the trade union in the identification of constraints and development of solutions, ensures trust in new ways of managing absence.
14. The Central project has reported back to P & R Scrutiny Committee and the cost/ benefit analysis has a reduction in sickness costs.
15. The Early Intervention and Effective Communication Strategy combines the following:
 - Early intervention;
 - Effective communication;
 - Information Return to Work Plan Meetings with a clear focus on the return to work;
 - Additional HR resources utilised for training, advice and manager prompting at each key stage;
 - Clear roles and responsibilities - managers retain responsibility and accountability for managing absence;
 - Personal managers briefings;
 - Stress risk assessments to be carried out for every instance of identified work related stress (even where employee is not absent);
 - How to Guides on managing long term absence;
 - Occupational Health Referral Hotline to ensure referrals are necessary and add value.
16. It is proposed that the designated HR Officer initiates the project in the following order:

Group 1

Dwr Y Felin Comprehensive

Dyffryn Comprehensive

St. Joseph's Comprehensive

Cefn Saeson Comprehensive

Group 2

Cwmtawe Comprehensive

Maes Y Coed Special School

Cymer Afan Comprehensive

Llangatwg Comprehensive

Group 3

YGG Ystalyfera

Ysgol Hendrefelin

Bae Baglan Comprehensive

Group 4

Primaries (tbc)

Financial Impact

17. The estimated costs of the project over an 18 month period is £60k.
18. The local authority is committed to funding 50% of this cost from central budget.
19. The Education Directorate will fund the project by £10k.
20. Participating schools are expected to fund the remaining £20k.

Based on the outcomes of the central model, it is anticipated that this project will lead to a reduction in days lost due to long term absence.

The delivery of the project will be monitored on a regular basis and reported to elected members. The monitoring process will include a cost benefit analysis.

Equality Impact Assessment

21. There are no equality impacts associated with this report.

Workforce Impacts

22. The workforce impacts of this project are anticipated to be positive as it will support staff back into work and allow for earlier identification of support from managers.

Legal Impacts

23. There are no legal impacts associated with this report.

Risk Management

24. There are no risk management issues associated with this report.

Consultation

25. There is no requirement under the Constitution for external consultation on this item.
26. However, this proposal has been discussed with secondary school headteachers in a NAASH meeting on 28th January and an in principle agreement secured to formally progress its development.
27. Trade Union representatives also discussed the proposal at an LSPG meeting on 8th February and agreed in progressing this project subject to regular updates being brought back for discussion.

Recommendations

28. It is recommended that members note the proposal to implement an 18 month Long Term Sickness project in schools with the intention to update members quarterly on its development.

Reasons for Proposed Decision

29. N/a.

Implementation of Decision

30. N/a.

Appendices

31. None

List of Background Papers

32. Maximising Attendance Policy.

Officer Contact

33. Mr. Aled Evans, Director of Education, Leisure and Lifelong Learning.
01639 763298 or a.evans@npt.gov.uk

