

The Welsh Assembly Government's response to the report of the National Assembly Audit Committee's report on The Management of Sickness Absence in the National Assembly for Wales: Committee Report (2)01-07

The Welsh Assembly Government is grateful for the report. We welcome the findings and offer the following response to the recommendations in the report.

- 1 The renewed focus on the management of sickness absence over the past two years has clearly had an impact on overall absence rates. **In the spirit of *Making the Connections*, we recommend that the Welsh Assembly Government should seek ways to share with other public sector organisations in Wales the reasons for its success in reducing sickness absence rates, as well as wider lessons from development of a new electronic HR IT system to support the absence management process.**

Accepted

We are keen to share the experience gained over the past 2 years in reducing our sickness absence rates from 10 to less than 7 days per person, a reduction of over 30%, and to glean ideas and other good practice from similar organisations, both in the Welsh public sector and further afield.

Our Occupational Health team are active members of the Royal College of Nursing (RCN) Wales OH Forum and, for example, the team led a workshop at the Health Work & Wellbeing Conference (for the UK public sector) on 15 February 2007 in Swansea on 'OH Best Practice'. The Welsh Assembly Government is also working as a partner on the Health and Safety Executive Government Stress Network and on the Ministerial Task force for Health, Safety and Productivity, headed by the Department of Work and Pensions and chaired by Lord Hunt.

We have made contact with Public Services Management Wales and ACAS Wales to explore how best to share good practice and lessons learned in this field across the Welsh public service, and a meeting will be held within the next few weeks. We shall also explore with the Welsh Local Government Association the scope for disseminating our experience through their network.

We continue to use the Welsh Heads of Government offices HR forum to take forward issues of common interest such as attendance management. We are already in discussion with the Wales Audit Office about involvement in their sickness absence good practice project and disseminating our experiences through their best practice website.

- 2 The new Snowdrop HR IT system promises to deliver much improved management information on sickness absence. **In addition to the measures recommended by the Auditor General, we recommend that the HR Department should use Snowdrop HR IT system to:**
 - a. **record all forms of leave, including paid and unpaid special leave, and monitor, over time, whether there is any relationship between changes in the levels of sickness absence, and the take-up of other types of leave;**
 - b. **Explore whether there is a relationship between the take-up of more detailed attendance management training and levels of sickness absence and, using this evidence, consider whether this training should be mandated for managers in areas with high levels of sickness absence; and**
 - c. **separately record whether absences are in any way work related, focusing particularly on identifying work-related stress where the system should be used to trigger further management interventions.**

Accepted

All Assembly Government staff sickness absence recording is now completed electronically and, from June 2007, will form part of our HR IT database (SNOWDROP). This will create our baseline for future comparisons.

a) From June onwards, annual leave will also be recorded direct on SNOWDROP. The facility will be extended to record other forms of leave by September 07. In the meantime, other forms of leave will be recorded on SNOWDROP via the HR Department so that monitoring and trend analysis can be undertaken – although it may not be possible to prove any statistically significant links, given other potential factors that influence sickness absence rates.

(b) We shall explore the practicalities of using data from the SNOWDROP system to help inform the evaluation and development of our absence management training provision.

(c) Our system already identifies work-related injuries and disease, and we are on course to include the specific identification of work-related stress absences by August 2007. In the meantime, our HR Department continue to trigger automatic management/OH interventions for stress related and for long-term (ie 21 days or over) sickness absences.

- 3 Developing managers who are confident dealing with staff sickness absence is a continuing challenge, but it is also important that they feel well supported, and work closely with colleagues in the HR Department and Occupational Health Service, particularly on more complex cases. **The HR Department should, drawing on the evidence provided by the Auditor General, conduct further work to explore ways in which the provision of HR and occupational health support could be improved to help managers feel more confident in dealing with staff sickness absence.**

Accepted

Proposals for taking forward this recommendation will form part of the remit of the working group being established to develop an overarching action plan on sickness absence management, as detailed in our response to Recommendation 6. The action plan will build on the success we have had with the introduction of an occupational health physician.

In the meantime, our OH team continue to conduct regular open days for staff and managers at all Assembly Government offices throughout Wales. Detailed guidance for managers is also available on our intranet and these arrangements will be reviewed as part of our response to this audit.

A range of training courses and workshops is also provided to assist managers in dealing with staff sickness absence and other attendance and performance issues (including a mandatory course for all line managers). We are working closely with our Core Learning & Development provider to build on our current evaluation process and to ensure that feedback is used to better tailor our provision, as appropriate.

- 4 While we welcome the increased expenditure that has been directed at corporate health services, it is important to consider economy, efficiency and effectiveness of these services to support continuous improvement. **We recommend that the HR Department should reassess its provision of corporate health services in light of the findings and recommendations of the independent audit it has commissioned, and the evidence presented in the Auditor General's report.**

Accepted

As part of our overall response to the findings of this audit, we are reviewing our existing Occupational Health service and formulating proposals and costings for several options for future provision of OH Services. The proposals will be considered in April 2007.

As part of this review, our Occupational Health Physician contract is being re-scoped, with a view to tender by May 07.

- 5 We are concerned that two in five staff across the National Assembly for Wales said they could not get their work done within their contracted hours, and that two thirds of these said they worked more than five hours above their contracted hours. **We recommend that the HR Department should fully analyse the scale of long hours working across the organisation, and develop appropriate actions to ensure that staff at all grades do not regularly work unreasonably long hours, particularly where this risks contravention of wider health and safety and EU working time directive regulations.**

Accepted

In response to the Staff Survey results, the Assembly Government Management Board commissioned a review of long hours working in the organisation, led by a Board Director and conducted during summer 2006. The main recommendation of the review was that accurate recording and monitoring of hours worked was required at all levels in the organisation. The HR Director and the Director of Corporate Information Systems were remitted to come forward with detailed proposals for the electronic recording of working hours. The introduction of an electronic recording system is one of the Permanent Secretary's key corporate objectives for the coming year.

- 6 The measures already taken to improve the management of sickness absence across the National Assembly for Wales are to be commended, but this is an on going management challenge which requires constant vigilance. **To support further improvement, we recommend that the HR Department should develop a clear action plan to implement our recommendations, and those contained within the Auditor General's report.**

Accepted

An action plan to implement the recommendations of the Audit Committee has been prepared. It will be agreed by the HR Director and Permanent Secretary for the forthcoming 2007-08 performance management round, ie by April 2007.