

THE HOUSE COMMITTEE
COFNODION PWYLLGOR Y TY

**The House Committee'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**

February 2007

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The House Committee welcomes the findings of the report and offers the following response to the 5 recommendations in the report applicable to the Assembly Parliamentary Service (APS).

Recommendations

- ii. 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 the 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;**

Accepted

The Assembly Parliamentary Service (APS) has a clear strategy in place to ensure the continued access and development of the Snowdrop HR IT system, currently shared with the Government, following the establishment of the Third Assembly. Within APS the system is already used to store and provide bespoke management information relating to attendance, to individual line managers and highlight reports to the Senior Management Team. Attendance management data forms a key part of the monthly HR staffing report presented to SMT. The development of the U access facility, during the autumn, will mean staff have direct access to the IT system for the recording of attendance information. The introduction of the U access facility will be used to capture more comprehensive information on leave in general and to undertake the comparisons recommended by the Committee.

- 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;**

Accepted

In launching the Attendance Management Policy within APS all line managers attended a mandatory training module to equip them to discharge their responsibilities in relation to managing attendance. In the one area of APS experiencing high levels of absence, dedicated HR support is being provided to line managers and a joint union / management group has been established to identify and address the underlying causes. This approach to managing attendance will be evaluated in line with the committee's recommendation.

- 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

The number of staff supporting APS allows for all self certificates and medical certificates to be reviewed, in confidence, by APS's Occupational Health Advisor. Based on this review, by a medical professional, any issues relating to stress can be identified and appropriate monitoring and support provided. Cases involving stress are, as a matter of course, referred to a welfare officer. Data relating to the incidence of stress related absence are provided to SMT monthly. APS in conjunction with the Government have invested in an Employee Assistance Programme (EAP) providing 24 hour telephone assistance and access to confidential counselling. The EAP will complement existing mechanisms for managing cases of stress. The effectiveness of the aforementioned approaches will be reviewed in line with the committee's recommendation.

- iii. 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 services, 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

It is not clear as to the extent that feedback from managers included staff working within the APS, where the training was mandatory. Never the less it is accepted that the findings are likely to reflect the views of managers within APS given the often sensitive people issues that surround the management of attendance. The committee's recommendation will be embraced as HR and corporate health services are developed in readiness for the Third Assembly and there after.

- iv. While we welcome the increased expenditure that has been directed at corporate health services, it is important to consider the economy, efficiency and effectiveness of these services to support continuous improvement. **We recommend that the HR Department should re-assess 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

The investment made by APS in corporate health is broadly in line with that made across the wider organisation. The scope of the independent audit did not include APS, however the committee's recommendation will be embraced as occupational health provision is developed in readiness for the Third Assembly and there after.

- v. 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

The survey results quoted for the National Assembly for Wales are in line with the results reported for APS staff. As part of the action plan to address the findings of the survey HR conducted an informal review of long hours working within the APS. The findings of the review suggested that while some staff was unable to complete their work within the more traditional 9 to 5 hour of work, during term time, the balance was in the main addressed when recess periods were taken in to account. APS's HR branch are in the process of reviewing the changed requirements that will arise as result of the Third Assembly's increased powers and their impact on working hours / patterns of attendance. The ongoing work will embrace the committee's recommendation.

- vi. 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 ongoing 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 with the Auditor General's report.**

Accepted

A draft action plan has been prepared and shared with AP