

STAFF SICKNESS ABSENCE

Report By: Directorate Personnel Officer, Education

Wards Affected

Countywide

Purpose

- To consider levels of staff sickness and absence in the Education Service

Monitoring

- The following staff absence figures have been produced for the Education Service from the period 01.01.01 to 31.08.04:

	Blackfriars %	Teachers %	School Support Staff %
01.01.01 – 30.04.01	2	5	4
01.05.01 – 31.08.01	1	3	4
01.09.01 – 31.12.01	2	3	5
01.01.02 – 31.04.02	3	4	6
01.05.02 – 31.08.02	2	3	6
01.09.02 – 31.12.02	2	6	7
01.01.03 – 31.04.03	2	5	3
01.05.03 – 31.08.03	3	3	5
01.09.03 – 31.12.03	5	4	6
01.01.04 – 31.04.04	5	3	7
01.05.04 – 31.08.04	2	5	7

Information from 01.01.04 is not directly comparable following the introduction of a new payroll system

- At Blackfriars, a small number of staff have had significant periods of absence for serious reasons. Given that the overall number of staff is not large, their total lost time accounts for the increased absence percentage in the last quarter of 2003, and into the first quarter of 2004, according to the provisional figures for that period.
- In the case of school-based employees, teachers' absence averages around 5%. School support staff absence continues at a higher level and has been influenced by a number of long-term cases where there are complications about finalising arrangements for ill-health retirement. At the beginning of the Autumn term, there were 27 long-term absence cases in schools comprising 10 teachers and 17 support staff.

For further information on the subject of this report is available from
Nick Austin, Directorate Personnel Officer, Education on (01432) 260932

Stress as a Problem in Schools

5. In recent years, there has been growing concern about levels of pressure and stress as experienced by employees in schools, much of it associated with the volume and pace of innovation, and the development of regular systems for monitoring improvement, including target setting and testing, and formal inspection by Ofsted. Such national concern is a principal reason for the National Workload Agreement discussed in the preceding item on this agenda.
6. At any given time, of Education Personnel's current referrals to the Occupational Health Unit, about a third will be on grounds of stress. The spectrum of conditions that qualify to be called "stress" is very broad and the term needs to be used with some caution. The Senior Occupational Health Physician, says that "Stress arises where there is a mismatch between the pressures placed on an individual and the individual's perceived ability to manage these pressures. In work stress situations, both personal and organisational interventions may be helpful at addressing the problem."
7. The experience of Education Personnel shows a broad range of situations in which "stress" is seen to be a factor. Sometimes, stress is associated with concerns about professional capability or with the day to day pressure of meeting professional and parental expectations.
8. There are also cases, of course, that are far more complicated from a medical point of view, and may arise from personal rather than from work-related circumstances.

Remedial Measures

9. There are a number of measures and activities that have been put in place and are on-going that should ultimately have an effect on staff absence and stress in particular.
10. Schools have been advised of "Teacherline", a national 24 hour helpline service run by the Teachers' Benevolent Fund, which is supported by both the employers' and employees' organisations within education. The service is based upon teachers being able to telephone trained counsellors who will offer help over a wide range of circumstances that might affect teachers. This service is totally confidential, free of charge and involves no reference back to any employer.
12. Schools have also been advised of the opportunity for employees to self refer to the team of trained counsellors, retained by the Council via the Occupational Health Service. Again this is confidential. The identity of employees is not revealed to either the head teacher or anyone else in the Council.
13. This service runs in parallel with employee referrals to Occupational Health, initiated by Education Personnel and head teachers. A constant *cri de coeur* of the Council's counsellors is that they do not see enough people **before** they go off sick as early assistance is the most effective way of averting periods of ill health.
14. The national campaign for school **workforce remodelling**, backed up by statutory changes to teachers' terms and conditions in relation to administrative tasks, covering for absent colleagues and 10% preparation and planning time (to be introduced in September 2005), should create a better balanced working

environment for teachers. There will probably also be a further increase in school support staff, subject to the ability of school budgets to fund such additions.

15. In the long term these measures should change the working environment for both teachers and school support staff, and thus, perhaps, also lead to a lowering of the absence rate.

RECOMMENDATION

THAT the report be noted with comments upon any further action that might be appropriate.

BACKGROUND PAPERS

- **None identified.**