



Managing Absence

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Report to the Co-ordinating Overview and Scrutiny Committee

Managing Absence

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1: Summary

- 1.1 How the Council manages the attendance of its employees is a high profile issue, of interest particularly for the media (and consequently the public). The public sector has the worst attendance rates of any sector of the economy, and the Government has challenged public sector organisations to perform better.
- 1.2 For the 2001/2 year the BCC Best Value target of 8% lost time / 18 days per employee was met and performance improved against the previous year. There was 7.98% lost time / 17.96 days per employee, compared against 2000/1 where there was 8.50% lost time / 18.55 days per employee.
- 1.3 There has been a great deal of positive effort made by many departments to address the problems with absence. There is unquestionable commitment at senior levels to ensure that absence targets are met; whilst there is still some progress to be made in achieving greater consistency across all departments, this corporate commitment still remains.
- 1.4 It is a positive sign that the Best Value target for 2001/2 was met. This demonstrates that the re-focusing of attention upon absence as an issue has had an impact. It is important to recognise that this may not be the result of one particular action (i.e. changing the procedure), but the combination of a number of different actions.
- 1.5 The Managing Attendance Group (MAG) Peer Audit recognised the progress that has been made with regard to absence. This used an audit method whereby departments audited one another, as well as seeking the view of senior officers and employees. This was an innovative method for the Council, examining how the new procedure had been implemented. It highlighted
 - The inconsistency between departments in issuing Notifications of Concern (NOCs)
 - Managerial training and awareness issues linked to this
 - A perceived unfairness in the criteria used to assess 'unsatisfactory' attendance



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- 1.6 Examining the procedure during this review has identified some further causes of concern, that:
- The procedure is not directly linked to achieving the objectives of the Council
 - The procedure has not been fully implemented by all departments
 - The information available to facilitate managing the process is inadequate
- 1.7 Of these concerns, those related to consistency are the most serious. The revised procedure aimed to remove some of the disparities between departments. Despite the new procedure, there are strong indications that these disparities are still there.
- 1.8 Review of the policy regarding attendance is a matter for the City Council to decide. The key questions are whether change is needed, and if so, when these changes should be made. The general view seems to be that change is needed, but should not take place at the present time.
- 1.9 As part of this review, a meeting was held with MAG. It was agreed that there was great deal of common ground and a large proportion of the recommendations of this report constitute agreeable progress towards better management of attendance.
- 1.10 A key issue is the matter of allowing time for the current procedure to bed in before further review. MAG were unanimously in favour of this.
- 1.11 This is a sensible approach, provided that
- The process of examining and determining necessary procedural change commences as soon as possible
 - Agreed actions to improve information to managers and managerial application are taken as specified
 - This is with a view to completing review of necessary procedural change within the 12-month timeframe.
- 1.12 To ensure progress towards this, a sensible solution would be to establish a joint Executive / Scrutiny team, reporting to Co-ordinating Overview and Scrutiny Committee on a quarterly basis.
- 1.13 We need to accept that inextricably tied in with the performance on absence is the managerial culture and practice of the Council. The authority is not effective at measuring success in key areas of performance relevant to attendance, and then using this to tackle the issues. There is a general need that the Council moves towards a performance-based culture. How attendance is managed is



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symptomatic of the current problems in this area.

- 1.14 It is important in looking now at how attendance is managed in the authority that we take the opportunity this affords. We can now look to revise not only the process by which we manage, but also the way we train, develop and encourage managers to effect that process. To do so now sets in place fundamental steps in working towards future goals, increasing the likelihood of achieving those goals.



2: Summary of Recommendations

2.1 Through discussion with the Cabinet Member for Human Resources and Equalities and officers operationally involved, it has been identified that

- Review of the procedure is necessary, but that this should take place after a further evaluation period of 12 months to let the current arrangements properly bed in, during which time work can be undertaken to address various issues
- There are a number of issues that it is agreed need to be addressed as soon as possible; these form the **Recommendations (R1-23)**
- There are elements that need to be examined, linked to review of the procedure over the forthcoming 12 months; these form **Items for Further Discussion (D1-10)**

2.2 Recommendations R1-23 and Items for Further Discussion D1-10 shown here represent a summary of the detailed recommendations shown in section 7. Suggested responsibilities for appropriate parties to implement these have been identified along the principles of the Devolved Personnel Management Structure in the Authority (see section 3.9). These responsibilities fall broadly into two areas, which are identified under Responsibility in the sections below:

(i) Policy	Frameworks for: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Personnel Information • Procedure • Induction and Probationary Period • Managerial Training and Competence 	Developed by the Chief Personnel Officer, with input from Departmental Personnel Officers
(ii) Delivery	Personnel service provision within departments	Delivery of the framework of personnel policies on behalf of the Service Director / Chief Officer

2.3 The aims of these recommendations are largely at achieving greater consistency and a corporate approach to managing attendance. Some of these recommendations are already in place in some departments, but more energy is still required to ensure that the authority as a whole achieves.



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Recommendations:

No.	Recommendation	Responsibility	Completion Date
R1	Information on attendance should be maintained regularly (at least monthly) for the entire organisation. This should <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Be in a common format • Show performance against relevant measures • Include details of estimated costs • Be timely (i.e. no more than 28 days old at publication) 	Chief Personnel Officer <i>Policy: Information Framework</i>	30 April 2003
R2	Methods of producing the relevant information faster must be explored. This should work towards a target timescale of 14 days or better.	Chief Personnel Officer <i>Policy: Information Framework</i>	31 July 2003
R3	Accurate, relevant and timely information on attendance should be available by each managerial unit.	Chief Personnel Officer <i>Policy: Information Framework</i>	30 April 2003
R4	Performance on attendance should be discussed at least monthly in departments and by Chief Officers, including identifying actions to improve. This should be cascaded as appropriate through the team.	Chief Officers <i>Delivery of Service</i>	30 April 2003
R5	Managerial performance should be routinely and consistently measured across all departments against common key performance indicators. Suggested indicators include: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • % of RTWIs completed • % of RTWIs completed within 3 days • % of NOCs / FNOCs issued, not issued and not issued due to identified exclusions • LTS staff contacted in last four weeks • % of Case reviews conducted for LTS staff beyond 14 weeks • Progress on LTS cases 	Chief Personnel Officer <i>Policy: Information Framework</i>	30 April 2003
R6	Where information is not currently available through HRIS, processes should be in place to collect this in a format that enables it to measure performance against key indicators corporately.	Departmental Personnel Officers <i>Delivery of Service</i>	30 April 2003
R7	Corporate information systems should ultimately deliver information for local managers. Through preference, this should be through the HRIS system. However, other systems should be considered if this is not possible, either practically or to an acceptable timescale.	Chief Personnel Officer <i>Policy: Information Framework</i>	31 July 2003



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R8	There should be clear guidance for managers as to when an employee should be allowed to take leave, and when this should be recorded as absence.	Chief Personnel Officer <i>Policy: Procedure Framework</i>	31 July 2003
R9	Managers should speak to the individual (or in exceptional circumstances, the person calling on their behalf) at the time of notification of the absence.	Chief Personnel Officer <i>Policy: Procedure Framework</i>	30 April 2003
R10	Managers should be encouraged to adopt a welfare and information gathering approach with regard to handling notification of absence.	Chief Personnel Officer <i>Policy: Procedure Framework</i>	31 July 2003
R11	The point at which absence relating to disability or industrial injuries / accidents at work should be referred to Occupational Health as being problematic for service provision should be clear.	Chief Personnel Officer <i>Policy: Procedure Framework</i>	31 July 2003
R12	There should be clear guidance within the procedure over where a manager may consider not issuing an NOC / FNOC.	Chief Personnel Officer <i>Policy: Procedure Framework</i>	31 July 2003
R13	A standard corporate briefing on attendance standards expected throughout the probationary period and further employment must be delivered to every new entrant. This should be an expected outcome of a corporate induction programme.	Chief Personnel Officer <i>Policy: Induction and Probationary Period Framework</i>	31 July 2003
R14	Monitoring of performance must take place regularly within the probationary period. Attendance must be one of the criteria monitored and the criteria expected must be clearly defined.	Chief Personnel Officer <i>Policy: Induction and Probationary Period Framework</i>	31 July 2003
R15	The cases of all current long term sick staff should be reviewed to ensure that: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> All current required actions (such as case reviews and referrals) have been carried out. Identify further action and precise dates for this. 	Departmental Personnel Officers <i>Delivery of Service</i>	30 April 2003



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R16	Information on long term sickness should be consistent across the Council, clearly showing <ul style="list-style-type: none"> The first day of absence and number of days absent The last action that has been undertaken (date) The next required action (date) Clear timescale for managerial action 	Chief Personnel Officer <i>Policy: Information Framework</i>	30 April 2003
R17	Documentation in use should be standardised across all departments. The amount of documentation required should be minimised, combining documents where appropriate.	Chief Personnel Officer <i>Policy: Procedure Framework</i>	30 April 2003
R18	Managerial training should encompass the requirement to keep appropriate documentation, and managers should be given an example of how completed documentation should look.	Chief Personnel Officer <i>Policy: Managerial Training and Competence Framework</i>	31 July 2003
R19	There should be an annual audit of attendance, which should <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Be performed on a 'peer audit' basis, with departments auditing one another Cover implementation of previous recommendations and current application of the procedure Be measured against common key success criteria Be underpinned by departmental self-auditing processes 	Departmental Personnel Officers <i>Delivery of Service</i>	31 July 2003
R20	Work on the corporate framework of managerial competences should continue as currently scheduled, with delivery to commence in April 2003.	Chief Personnel Officer <i>Policy: Managerial Training and Competence Framework</i>	30 April 2003
R21	Identification should take place of <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Specific areas of high absence and / or specific key problems Individuals with appropriate experience and a track record of achieving <p>These individuals should provide support by developing skills and practices within the identified areas. Measures should be put in place to validate that progress made is maintained</p>	Chief Personnel Officer <i>Policy: Managerial Training and Competence Framework</i>	30 April 2003



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R22	As a broad aim of strategy, all managers of people should be working towards achieving competence in the managerial competences identified as appropriate to attendance management. *This process will take a considerable time to achieve overall (longer than 12 months), and therefore such progress towards this should be measurable.	Chief Personnel Officer <i>Policy: Managerial Training and Competence Framework</i>	*
R23	Managers should adopt a welfare and information gathering approach with regard to conducting RTWIs. There should be set criteria for what the RTWI should provide.	Chief Personnel Officer <i>Policy: Procedure Framework</i>	31 July 2003



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Items for Further Discussion:

No.	Items for Further Discussion	Responsibility	Completion Date
D1	<p>Departments should have individual sickness absence targets, which</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Collectively deliver the corporate absence target Take account of individual department issues in the short term Seek improvement from all departments 	<p>Chief Personnel Officer <i>Policy: Information Framework</i></p>	14 January 2004
D2	<p>The criteria stating at what point attendance becomes unsatisfactory should be changed to reflect</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> A number of instances of absence, and A percentage of absence Over a timescale expressed in weeks <p>This should also be reflected in the criteria at further stages of the procedure (i.e. after a Notification of Concern has been issued).</p>	<p>Chief Personnel Officer <i>Policy: Procedure Framework</i></p>	14 January 2004
D3	<p>The criteria defining unsatisfactory attendance should be directly linked to organisational targets (i.e. BV12), and should therefore change in line with corporate targets.</p>	<p>Chief Personnel Officer <i>Policy: Procedure Framework</i></p>	14 January 2004
D4	<p>There should be a clear link between the criteria used for attendance in both the probationary period and further employment. Ideally, these should be the same (i.e. 26 weeks).</p>	<p>Chief Personnel Officer <i>Policy: Procedure Framework</i></p>	14 January 2004
D5	<p>Managers should pay attention to employees who have accumulated days absence equal to or greater than the target average per FTE expressed in BV12, where no formal action has been considered.</p> <p>The action taken at this stage should remain the same as in the current procedure.</p>	<p>Chief Personnel Officer <i>Policy: Procedure Framework</i></p>	14 January 2004
D6	<p>Where a manager considers that a Notification of Concern or Final Notification of Concern should not be issued, prior to advising the individual, they should discuss this with a suitable senior manager and Personnel Officer, to ensure consistency.</p>	<p>Chief Personnel Officer <i>Policy: Procedure Framework</i></p>	14 January 2004



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D7	Prior to issuing a Notification of Concern, managers should be required to adjourn from the RTWI and give reasonable time to consider this. At this point a Personnel Officer may advise them.	Chief Personnel Officer <i>Policy: Procedure Framework</i>	14 January 2004
D8	Clear corporate guidance must be given to managers that they will be expected to consider termination of employment where attendance (and other areas of performance) is unsatisfactory within the probationary period.	Chief Personnel Officer <i>Policy: Induction and Probationary Period Framework</i>	14 January 2004
D9	Where a manager considers that termination of employment for unsatisfactory attendance within the probationary period is not appropriate, they must discuss and justify this with a senior manager and Personnel Officer prior to advising the individual.	Chief Personnel Officer <i>Policy: Induction and Probationary Period Framework</i>	14 January 2004
D10	Standard mechanisms for recognising and rewarding good attendance should be put in place across the Council.	Chief Personnel Officer <i>Policy: Procedure Framework</i>	14 January 2004



3: Introduction

3.1 Background

3.1.1 Managing absence is not a new issue for the City Council. As long ago as November 1999, District Audit examined the management of absence in the City Council and made 31 recommendations in the form of an action plan. A brief chronology of events in relation to absence is shown in **Appendix 1**.

3.1.2 How the Council manages absence has also attracted attention in the local media. In an article on 05 December 2000 the Birmingham Post criticised the management of absence in the Council, dubbing BCC “the sickest of Britain’s big city councils”. Absence rates had risen year on year since the introduction of the previous procedure in 1996, and the Council’s average number of days lost per employee was 16.1 days a year.

3.1.3 The response to this was two-fold, involving

- Setting a Best Value target to achieve top quartile performance (5% absence / 11.4 days per employee per annum) by March 2005
- Establishing the Managing Attendance Group (MAG) to examine how absence was managed in the Council and how this could be improved

3.1.4 MAG highlighted three key problems with how absence was managed:

- (i) Attendance management procedures were not being applied consistently, or in some cases, at all
- (ii) Departments and managers interpreted the procedures as allowing them complete autonomy over issuing formal warnings about attendance
- (iii) A lack of management systems had, in some areas, failed to identify that there was a problem with attendance at all

3.1.5 In terms of having an immediate impact on absence, MAG targeted the issue of resolving long-term absence cases, reporting monthly to Chief Officers’ Group (COG) on progress. MAG felt that in the medium term reviewing the attendance management procedure and ensuring that managers knew what was expected of them could make further impact. Specific issues agreed upon included the need



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for

- The procedure to be used for managing long-term as well as short-term absence
- The level of discretion available to managers in issuing formal notices to be quantified and monitored
- Considering the total duration of absences as well as the number of instances
- Making the procedure clearer

3.1.6 As a result of the work done by MAG, the Managing Attendance procedure was revised with effect from 01 October 2001. This included not only changes to the procedure, but also a package of briefings for managers and staff, and a 'Manager's Toolbox' to provide guidance. The toolbox was intended to set out the role of the manager in implementing the procedure and provide important guidance.

3.1.7 To assess the effectiveness of implementation of the new procedure, MAG has conducted an audit of all departments (referred to hereafter as the MAG Peer Audit) in April to May 2002. Details of this audit process are contained within **Appendix 2**. The audit provided a relatively detailed, all-round, 360° view of the process from the perspective of Chief Officers, managers and employees. It explored many of the anecdotal issues about how the new procedure was implemented, as well as checking that the processes were in place.

3.1.8 How the authority manages its employees is critical in managing attendance. The Best Value Review of People has also identified as strategic themes many of the issues that are related to this. Although not yet complete, this review has recommended at the 'Options for Change' stage that "people management will need to radically change to support the Council's aspiration of becoming a high-performing authority". Other areas of this review focus upon

- The City will need managers and staff with the competence and confidence to do the jobs required in the future
- There will be the need to ensure that people management practices support and contribute to the Council's business and service objectives
- There will be a greater requirement to have effective ways of helping people to perform at their best

3.1.9 As stated above, this review is at the 'Options for Change' stage and there are no firm recommendations at present.



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3.2 The Purpose of this Review:

3.2.1 Attendance and absence is a vast subject area, with extremely complicated inter-relationships between the relevant factors. It is affected by the multitude of factors that go hand in hand with any people-related issue, and consequently it is essential in looking at such a subject that the scope of the examination is defined.

3.2.2 This review covers the wider issues of how attendance is managed within the authority. Whilst it has run concurrently to the MAG Peer Audit, it is aimed at examining the broader managerial issues underlying the Council's performance on attendance.

3.2.3 Members of the Co-ordinating Overview and Scrutiny Committee have expressed concerns that

- (i) The Managing Attendance procedure is not an appropriate instrument with which to address the Council's absence problems
- (ii) Management of attendance within the authority is not of a consistent standard to ensure that Best Value targets are delivered in the future
- (iii) There are underlying issues within the Council's management culture that need to be addressed
- (iv) Managerial information and senior managerial leadership on attendance management are inadequate and ineffective

3.2.3 It is clear that the improvements that have been achieved in absence performance thus far have been the result of considerable managerial effort. This effort has resulted in greater focus and attendance management becoming an item on the agenda for managers once more. The concern of the members is that this is now pursued and taken to the next level.

3.3 Why Managing Attendance is Important

3.3.1 We have to remember that the question of how the Council as an organisation manages attendance will invariably provoke an emotive response. No one likes to have their performance questioned, not least when the cause of poor performance may be very personal or emotionally distressing.

3.3.2 However, we must also remember that the Council exists to provide services and the citizens of the city pay for a significant proportion of this. Those citizens largely perceive the Council as the provider to them of tangible services. When we fail to provide those services, we fail to meet our customers' expectations. In a commercial environment, we would lose those customers; in a public



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environment they have no choice. That makes it even more important that our customers are satisfied that they are receiving value for money. To do that, we must show that we are deserving of their trust and spend public money as if it were our own.

- 3.3.3 Many of the concerns voiced about attendance management as a practice emanate from a concern that it is unfair to penalise in employment those who are 'genuinely ill'. We must be cognisant of the fact that we are not seeking to pass judgement on whether sickness is real, feigned or exaggerated. Our driving concern in managing attendance is that we must ensure that we are able as a Council to deliver the services that we have an obligation to provide.
- 3.3.4 In doing so there is the fact that Birmingham City Council employs nearly 50,000 people who deliver those services. It is a fact that people are ill from time to time. Occasionally they have accidents and incidents that cause them to be absent. And in managing people we must not only remember but also accept this to a certain extent. Just as employees have responsibilities to behave reasonably within the terms of their contract of employment, the Council has a responsibility to behave as a reasonable employer. The limit of that reasonability is where it affects the organisation's ability to provide services to the people of Birmingham. The consideration on behalf of the employee is that they in turn accept this fact.
- 3.3.5 How we manage the people who work for us when they do not perform is a matter of concern, but should also be a cause for celebration when they do. Managing people is a skill, not an additional responsibility for technical experts. We need to ensure that
- We recruit, select and develop those who are competent in applying this skill (or who have the potential to develop it)
 - People managers and not pure technical specialists occupy people manager roles
 - We need to manage their performance actively too
- 3.3.6 Managers have a great deal of influence over what the Council achieves. It is a team game in every sense of the phrase: we can only achieve overall if everyone achieves. Managers have the responsibility to manage and motivate staff to deliver. Managing requires consistency and motivation means using positive and negative influences to achieve results. But to expect managers to do so without clear and structured measurement of performance from senior managers, and without the training and expert support necessary to do so, is willing them to fail.



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3.4 Corporate Performance Targets

3.4.1 The Best Value Performance Indicator 12 (BVPI 12) originally set objectives for absence in terms of

- The percentage of working days lost, and
- The average number of working days lost per Full Time Equivalent (FTE)¹

3.4.2 The Government has shown increasing concern with levels of absence in the public sector, challenging the sector to reduce absence levels by 30%². CBI figures show that the public sector lost on average 10.1 days per employee in 2001, in comparison to the private sector, which lost 6.7 days³.

3.4.3 **Fig. 1** below shows that the targets in this area become progressively more challenging, with the aim of achieving top quartile performance among Core Cities by March 2005. The Government has applied a new top quartile target to this indicator for 2002/3, to be achieved by 2007⁴. From 2002/3, BVPI 12 is expressed as an average number of working days lost per FTE.

Year	Percentage Rate	Days Lost per FTE
2001/2	8%	18.00
2002/3	(7%)	15
2003/4	(6%)	12.75
2004/5	(5%)	11.4

Fig. 1: Best Value Performance Targets

3.4.4 When Birmingham's performance is compared to other core cities or the public sector in general, these targets are both reasonable and achievable.

3.4.5 Emphasis on managing attendance is not going to go away. With the introduction of Comprehensive Performance Assessment (CPA), BVPI 12 is almost certain to be included in the factors that are assessed as part of CPA. There will be no respite from the need to achieve better attendance.

¹ A Full Time Equivalent is a means of relating part-time workers to full-time. It is based on the standard 36.5 hour week. If a worker is contracted for 18.25 hours per week, they equate to 0.5 FTE staff.

² David Blunkett, May 2000

³ CBI Absence Survey, 2001

⁴ *Best Value Performance Plan 2002/3*, page 183.



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3.5 The Cost of Absence

3.5.1 Sickness absence does cost the organisation, but this is not a simple matter of expenditure. There are both direct and indirect costs of absence; these are shown in **Fig. 2** below.

Direct Costs	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Covering the absence (overtime or temporary staff, and managerial time in doing this) • Services not provided • Revenue not collected • Materials wasted because there is no one there to use them
Indirect Costs	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Lost productivity: more work could be done in the same time or the same work could be done in less time • Training others to cover the role

Fig. 2: The Costs of Absence

3.5.2 Direct costs can be identified, but this can often mean considerable work in calculating this to any degree of accuracy. Indirect costs are relatively easy to calculate, but have less direct relevance because they are less tangible.

3.5.3 The complexities in both calculating costs accurately and understanding exactly what that calculation represents can lead to sickness absence costs not being calculated. However, it should not be anticipated that the amounts involved are small. For example, the Birmingham Post article of 05 December 2000 quoted the cost of lost productivity at £ 61m. This estimate appears to be reasonably accurate.

3.6 The Nature of Absence

3.6.1 For the 2001/2 year, the Council had lost time of 7.98%, an average of 17.96 days per Full Time Equivalent (FTE)⁵. This means that

- The BV12 target of 8% / 18 days per FTE was achieved
- Performance improved against 2000/1 (8.50% lost time / 18.55 days)
- Absence needs to be reduced by a further 2.96 days per FTE (0.96%) to deliver the target for 2002/3.

⁵ This is the figure given in the Council's Best Value Performance Plan 2002/3, page 177. However, the revised year-end figure for 2001/2 is 6.40% / 14.41 days per FTE. This figure is awaiting Audit approval (expected September 2002) and includes teachers and schools-based staff. These were excluded from the previous figure (*Source: COG Report, 14 August 2002*).



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Department	No. of days sick	FTE	Available Days	Days per FTE 2001/2	% of Corporate Sickness	% of Corporate Staff
Corporate and Democratic Services	5,165	603.73	145,106	8.56	1.74%	3.37%
Economic Development	3,465	305.28	68,287	11.35	1.17%	1.70%
Education	27,840	1,821.52	671,658	15.28	9.38%	10.16%
Environmental and Consumer Services	22,129	1,934.58	437,359	11.44	7.46%	10.79%
Finance	20,173	1,541.50	323,013	13.09	6.80%	8.60%
Housing	33,981	1,835.02	433,852	18.52	11.45%	10.24%
Planning	1,499	247.63	56,089	6.05	0.51%	1.38%
Leisure and Culture	26,595	2,320.15	523,280	11.46	8.96%	12.95%
Shared Management Services	352	77.79	17,704	4.52	0.12%	0.43%
Social Services	139,283	6,124.31	1,520,080	22.74	46.95%	34.17%
Transportation	14,771	868.56	266,255	17.01	4.98%	4.85%
Urban Design	1,440	241.45	54,572	5.96	0.49%	1.35%
TOTAL	296,693	17,921.50	4,517,253	16.56	100.00%	100.00%

Fig. 3: Sickness by Department 2001/2 (excluding Teachers and Schools-Based Staff)
Source: HRIS Team

3.6.2 **Fig. 3** (above) shows the total amount of sickness and numbers of FTE staff by department for 2001/2. This is a revealing insight into the nature of the absence issue facing the Council:

- Four departments (Education, Housing, Social Services and Transportation) stood above 15 days per FTE
- These departments accounted for 72.76% of all absence in the Council
- The same departments account for 59.42% of the staff
- With the exception of Education, the contribution of these departments is disproportionately higher than the number of staff

3.6.3 Research highlighted by the Advisory and Conciliation Service (ACAS)⁶ points to some general trends and common features of attendance:

- Young people tend to have more frequent, shorter periods of absence than older people
- Manual workers generally have higher levels of absence than office workers
- Unauthorised absence is more common among new starters; longer serving workers get to know the organisation's standards and stay within them
- Sick leave due to industrial accidents is also greater for new or inexperienced workers

⁶ *Absence and Labour Turnover*, ACAS, November 2001.



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- Absence tends to increase where there are high levels of overtime or frequently rotating shift patterns
- Absence is likely to be greater in larger working groups

3.6.4 Information is not available within the Council to determine the extent to which each of these general trends is reflected in Birmingham City Council. However, this does provide some important pointers for any process that seeks to manage absence.

	Over 12 months	10-12 months	8-10 months	6-8 months	4-6 months	Total	Change in Total
01 May 2001	72	17	36	44	65	234	
01 June 2001	77	27	39	40	86	269	+35
01 July 2001	68	28	48	43	85	272	+3
01 August 2001	61	24	45	40	89	259	-13
01 September 2001	65	39	38	67	92	301	+42
01 October 2001	86	26	52	51	83	298	-3
01 November 2001	80	23	42	50	86	281	-17
01 February 2002	83	30	44	64	99	320	+39
01 March 2002	68	39	37	48	111	303	-17
01 April 2002	76	26	27	53	84	266	-37
01 May 2002	66	24	28	52	74	244	-22
Change May 01 to Mav 02	-6	+7	-8	+8	+9	+10	
% Change	-8.33%	+41.18%	-22.22%	+18.18%	+13.85%	+4.27%	

Fig. 4: Long Term Sick Cases

Source: COG Absence Report

3.6.5 The focus on achieving improvements in attendance has remained on resolving cases of long-term absence. **Fig. 4** (above) shows the changes in the number of staff who have been absent for four months or more from May 2001 to March 2002 (the latest figures available).

3.6.6 **Fig. 4** shows that

- The number of long-term sick staff has increased over the year by 4.27% from 234 to 244
- There have been increases in numbers of long-term sick staff across all categories up to 12 months absence except eight to ten months
- The number of staff who have been absent for more than 12 months has fallen slightly from 72 to 66 (-8.33%)
- Until March 2002 the number of long term sick was rising, despite the new procedure having been introduced
- The number of long-term sick staff peaked at 320 (a 36.75% increase) in February 2002, since when it has fallen steadily



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3.6.7 It is not possible from the information available to tell whether the contribution of long-term sickness to the overall absence figure has changed. Possible explanations for the fall in overall absence may be

- The level of long term absence has remained the same, whilst short term sickness has fallen
- Short-term sickness has remained the same, but the average length of long term absences has fallen. This could be by short term sickness extending into the long term, replacing the longer cases that have been resolved

3.6.8 One of the core questions this raises is whether the introduction of the revised attendance management policy has actually had a positive effect upon absence. Ultimately this is a difficult question to answer. Arguably, because there was previously inadequate organisational focus on managing absence, any sharpening of focus should logically lead to improvement, irrespective of whether the procedure changes.

3.7 The Relationship Between Procedure, Culture and Management

3.7.1 There is a very complex inter-relationship between the procedure used to manage attendance, the culture of the organisation and the behaviour of managers within the organisation. **Fig. 5** below represents this relationship.

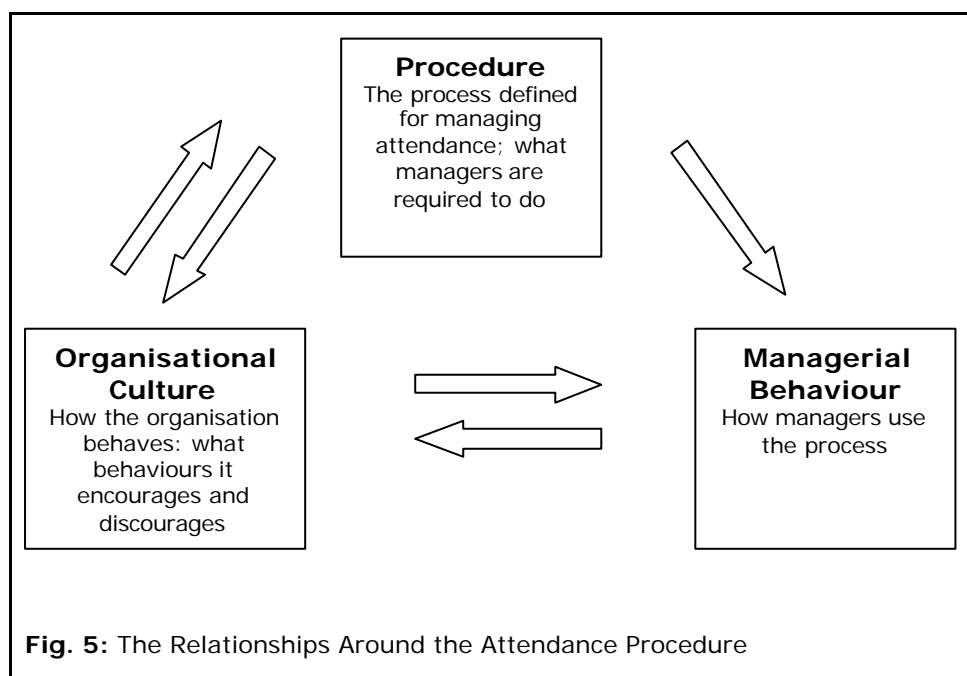
3.7.2 The procedure influences how managers are expected to manage attendance. It also impacts on organisational culture, since it contributes to how the organisation behaves. This is an important relationship.

3.7.3 Organisational culture partly determines the nature of the procedure, emphasising the points that the organisation values. It also affects managerial behaviour by creating a framework of behaviours that are encouraged and discouraged because this is what the organisation deems appropriate.

3.7.4 Managerial behaviour affects the culture of the organisation because, just as it is guided by what is 'acceptable' to the organisation, it influences directly how the organisation behaves.



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3.8 Who is Responsible?

- 3.8.1 The Managing Attendance procedure gives the responsibility to all managers for ensuring that absence is kept within a defined, 'reasonable' level and that the procedure is applied fairly and consistently.
- 3.8.2 Chief Officers and other senior officers of JNC grade have specific absence management targets within their performance contracts. However, formal performance management and appraisal does not extend lower within the organisation.
- 3.8.3 Additionally, there are 'Absence Champions' within Departmental Management Teams (DMTs), who have responsibility for recording and reporting information on absence. This information is shared with DMT members.
- 3.8.4 Managers and supervisors are responsible for making clear to their staff at the outset what standard they are expected to achieve and how they will be measured against this. Where performance is not satisfactory this should be dealt with promptly, taking into consideration what actions both the Council and the employee can take to improve performance.
- 3.8.5 Performance on absence falls into two distinct levels:



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- (i) Managerial responsibility for performance of sections and individuals within them, and
- (ii) Individual responsibility for attending to a satisfactory level

3.8.6 It therefore follows that how the Council manages an individual whose absence is unsatisfactory should be in accordance with how other areas of unsatisfactory performance of individuals are managed. This is ultimately the responsibility of line managers, because they are responsible for managing staff.

3.8.7 Where there is a responsibility, there is a need to hold people accountable for discharging this. This means that senior managers need to manage their teams to achieve the required standards.

3.8.8 Performance management within the Council is not a clear and consistently applied process. In many cases the review of performance is reserved for senior officers with individual performance contracts, or as a measure to rectify individual unacceptable performance.

3.8.9 Without a formal process of establishing what the required levels of performance are, it makes it very difficult to effectively establish the concept and process of achieving against targets. This also requires that there is constant, clear communication on how we are all doing against targets, with the most senior officers setting the example throughout the organisation.

3.9 The Devolved Personnel Structure

3.9.1 It is relevant to explain the structure of personnel management responsibilities in operation within the authority.

3.9.2 The Chief Personnel Officer (CPO) is the 'Head of Profession' for Personnel Management. All Departmental Personnel Officers (DPOs) have a 'dotted line' responsibility to the CPO. The CPO is responsible for

- Oversight of personnel management in the Council
- Development of Personnel policy

3.9.3 Service Directors are responsible for personnel management in their departments and handling their own departmental personnel affairs. Oversight of this is delegated by each Service Director to the DPO, who is responsible for

- Developing and delivering the personnel service in the department



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- Giving advice at the appropriate time in the formulation of service policy

3.9.4 It is not the role of the CPO to shadow or duplicate departmental arrangements. However, departments must handle their personnel affairs within the corporate framework co-ordinated by the CPO. Ultimately, the CPO has authority to direct departments in personnel policy. However, this relationship is based upon a commitment from both parties to work together to resolve difficulties wherever possible, rather than resorting to formal sanctions.



4: The Influence of Culture

4.1 The Importance of Culture

- 4.1.1 Culture and the operation of procedures such as Managing Attendance are inextricably intertwined. How the procedure is perceived affects how it is put into practice. How the procedure is put into practice affects how it is perceived. Whilst the examination of the robustness of the procedure itself can be extracted and dealt with separately, issues relating to culture and operation of the procedure need to be dealt with to some degree in unison.
- 4.1.2 The culture within the Council stems fundamentally from the beliefs, behaviour and aspirations of employees. However, these beliefs and aspirations are themselves influenced by managerial style and practice. Changes in culture can rarely be achieved rapidly, and this generally takes a number of years.
- 4.1.3 Many of the factors covered here have outcomes in how the procedure operates. Where these are specifically related to the operation of the procedure, these are covered in **6: How the Procedure is Operated**.

4.2 Performance Management

- 4.2.1 The concept of performance applies to attendance at both an individual and an organisational level. To achieve the latter requires the former. Whilst it can be relatively easy to make managers understand that they are being measured against the level of attendance they achieve, making individuals understand that their own performance is part of this broader picture is much more difficult. The key link in the process of managing against performance is making people accountable for that performance.
- 4.2.2 In terms of achieving levels of performance management seen in the private sector, the Council is a long way from achieving this goal. This is a factor acknowledged in the current Best Value Review of People. As mentioned in the introduction, formal assessment of performance does not presently exist for employees below JNC level (senior officers) in all departments. Incorporating appraisal of attendance into a wider appraisal of individual performance for all employees is a considerable step away.



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4.2.3 Nonetheless, this is the direction in which the Council must move in order to relate performance at an individual level to organisational achievement. Achieving a level of understanding in this area will also reap benefits in changing employee perceptions of the procedure.

4.3 Channels of Communication

4.3.1 There is a very low level of 'horizontal integration' within the Council (i.e. communication tends to be vertical within departments, rather than across departments at lower levels). This is an issue that has been raised on a number of occasions, most recently perhaps by the I&DeA audit. The impact of this is immediate upon the consistency of the procedure.

4.3.2 There is a tendency for departments to operate as organisations within their own right, rather than integrated elements of a cohesive whole. This is demonstrated by the departmental practices that evolved with the previous attendance management procedure. Equally, departments have their own Personnel professionals who operate under guidance from the Chief Personnel Officer. This can be problematic in issues of people management, where some degree of clear corporate control is required.

4.3.3 In common with many public and former public sector organisations, the Council has relatively high levels of trade union membership. The perspective placed by trade unions upon managerial processes such as managing attendance can often be unreasonably negative. This is a matter of 'winning back' the communication agenda. The effects of not doing this are

- Managers are less energetic about how they approach communication
- Managers may seek to evade controversial issues
- Trade unions can make sweeping statements without being challenged

4.4 Flexibility

4.4.1 Another area that the Council overall has in common with many public sector organisations is the relatively low level of cohesive flexibility in

- (i) Terms and conditions of employment
- (ii) The way employees behave and are encouraged to behave, and
- (iii) The way that the organisation behaves towards the employee



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Whilst individual departments exercise varying degrees of flexibility, these efforts are not co-ordinated towards an overall end.

4.4.2 How flexible the Council is towards its staff impacts upon their perception of the Council as an employer. In some respects the Council can be very flexible. For instance, flexitime is a system that gives benefits to employees in terms of flexible starting and finishing times in exchange for the ability to change start and finishing times according to workload. The Council's provisions for Special Leave are also relatively more generous than those found in the private sector.

4.4.3 Within the context of attendance management, flexibility is about empowering managers with the freedom to be flexible. Flexibility is not emphasised within the procedure, with the exception of allowing employees to take annual leave instead of calling in sick. On this point the procedure states that this is a matter for managerial discretion.

4.4.4 This subject was raised on a number of occasions within the MAG Peer Audit. Responses ranged from requesting more guidance on how this should operate, to a perception that this was being used as a means of avoiding accumulating sickness absence that could otherwise lead to an NOC being issued. It was clear in this respect that the rationale for including this in the procedure was not readily apparent.

4.5 The Scope for Changing Culture

4.5.1 That there is a need for far-reaching changes in the culture of the Council in order to achieve what is expected of it is not a matter in dispute.

4.5.2 However, there are important considerations in changing the culture of an organisation. It requires

- *Patience*: It is often a long and arduous process
- *Unstinting commitment*: Particularly from those at the head of the organisation who drive the process
- *Winning hearts and minds*: Throughout the process, the commitment of others to the values of the new culture is won
- *Reinforcement*: There needs to be a constant and consistent reinforcement of the new values during the change
- *Embedding*: Ensuring that behaviours encourage people to adopt the desired values

4.5.3 The issue of cultural change is not uniquely confined to absence. Broader aspects of culture underpin the issue at hand, and the



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organisational attitude to managing absence merely typifies these. It is about more than simply getting people to attend. In many respects it is about changing the way we manage people to encourage them to want to attend. Such changes have consequences for other aspects of performance and achievement.

4.5.4 A programme of cultural change cannot be addressed through sending everyone on a course, changing the organisation logo or even its terminology. It requires

- Widespread belief in the benefits
- Consistent behaviours that are in line with the culture
- Processes that support the culture, and where possible, prevent behaviours being contrary to the culture

4.5.5 Changing processes and behaviours in attendance management will never bring about cultural change alone. But it can

- Start to attack the premises upon which the present culture is founded
- Be used to encourage the desired behaviours
- Prevent 'back sliding' and regressive steps



5: The Managing Attendance Procedure

5.1 The Procedure

5.1.1 A flow chart of the Managing Attendance Procedure is shown for reference in **Fig. 6.1 / 6.2** on pages 30 and 31.

5.2 What Do Other Organisations Do?

5.2.1 The revised Managing Attendance procedure is still relatively new. Although the procedure itself was already examined by the Involved People / Modern Council Overview and Scrutiny Committee in December 2001, it is pertinent to look at some aspects of the procedure and question whether the procedure is indeed 'the right approach' for Birmingham City Council.

5.2.2 Other organisations take a different approach to managing attendance, as can be expected by their differing objectives. How they manage absence may be reflective of those objectives and may not be entirely appropriate for the City Council. Looking at this does however offer alternative ways that absence can be managed procedurally. This is important in considering the solutions to where the current procedure is perceived to be deficient.

5.2.3 The organisations examined included a selection of other large local authorities, but also private sector companies, a university, an NHS trust and a trade union. The aim was to have a broad selection of sectors against which comparisons could be made. The full list of organisations and summary details of their attendance management procedures is shown in **Appendix 3**.

5.2.4 Key points established from this were that, in comparison to the other organisations examined, the Council's procedure

- Is broadly similar in terms of sickness notification, Return To Work Interviews and absence certification
- Is less specific regarding the trigger point for formal action
- Is relatively more detailed regarding managing long-term absence

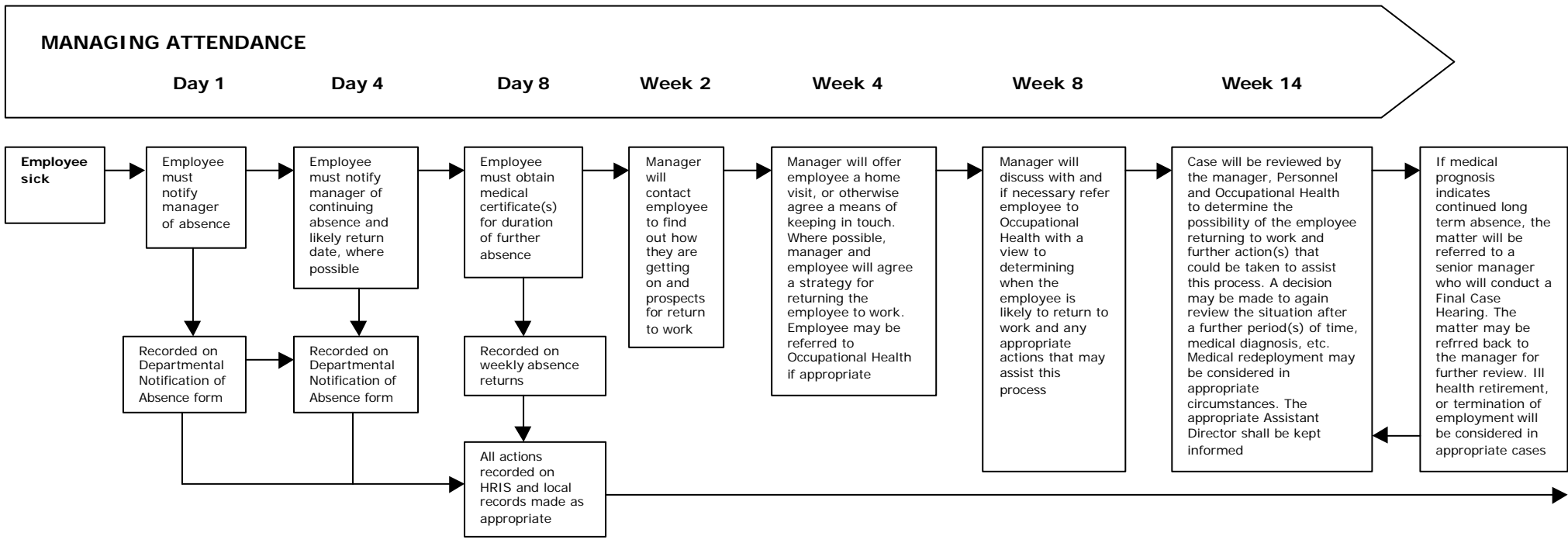


Fig. 6.1: Procedure Flow Chart *Source: Managing Attendance Procedure*

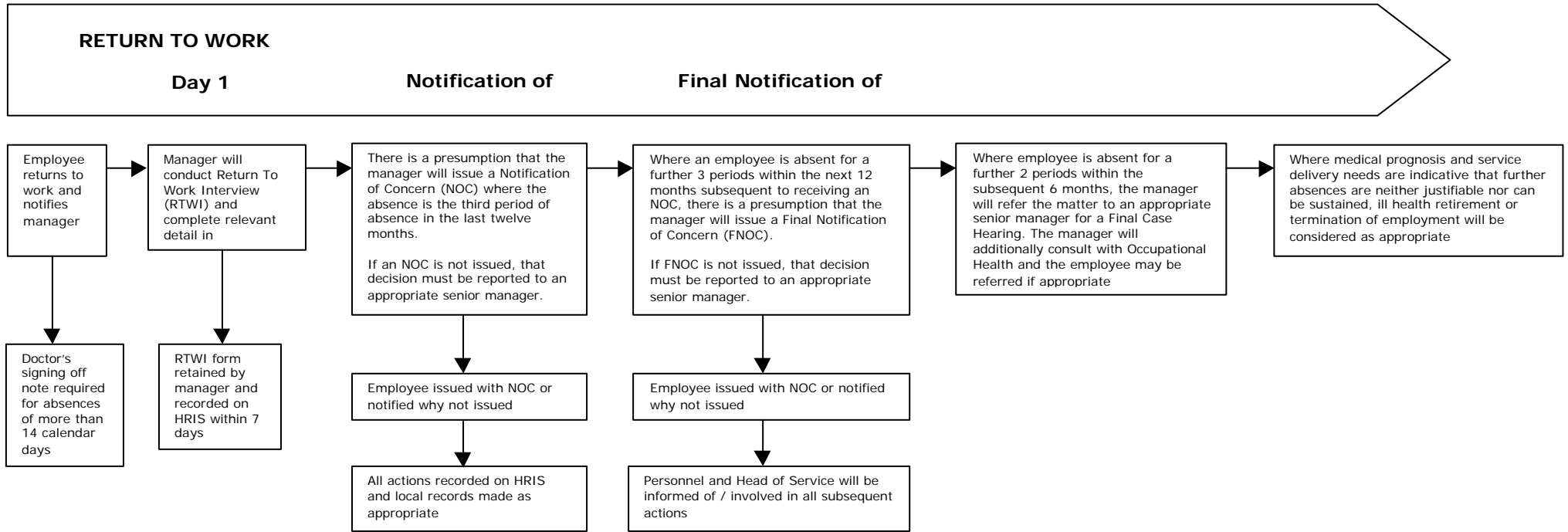


Fig. 6.2: Procedure Flow Chart

Source: *Managing Attendance Procedure*



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5.2.5 Additionally, in terms of performance, the Council performed worse than these organisations. Although information was not available for all the organisations examined, our performance for 2001/2 was significantly worse than the other seven Core Cities (see **Appendix 3**).

5.3 The Criteria for Unsatisfactory Attendance

5.3.1 The starting point for examining the robustness of the Council's procedure was in terms of the criteria used to define unsatisfactory attendance. This is also an area that is easy to identify within other organisations' procedures – the point at which a decision is made about attendance.

5.3.2 The point at which absence becomes a problem for the organisation should determine the point at which management action with individuals becomes necessary. Within the procedure, this is currently set as three instances of absence in a rolling twelve-month period.

5.3.3 Absence becomes a problem for the Council when it is

- High volume
- Frequent
- Unexpected or not notified
- Related to other problems (such as harassment or bullying)

5.3.4 The unexpected nature of absence cannot realistically be dealt with. People do not know when they are going to be ill or have accidents.

5.3.5 Where absence is not notified, the area of the procedure regarding how an individual should report that they are unable to attend work covers this. If this process is not adhered to, this should be either dealt with informally or even as a disciplinary matter.

5.3.6 The relationship of absence to other problems (inside or outside work) is a matter that should be brought out through the Return to Work Interview (RTWI), as a part of ascertaining the circumstances relating to the absence. This is an important part of identifying workplace issues that are affecting attendance and in understanding what the underlying causes are.

5.3.7 A better understanding of any underlying causes is essential in being able to find ways that the organisation can help or take action. This includes measures such as challenging harassment that may be occurring, assisting through adjustments to working roles or



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patterns, or providing assistance through promoting a healthy lifestyle.

- 5.3.8 This leaves the subject of absence criteria to address defining problematic volume and frequency of absence. However, it is pertinent to question whether the current criteria for issuing a Notification of Concern / Final Notification of Concern (NOC / FNOC) are actually appropriate.
- 5.3.9 The first point in relation to the criterion is that it is not reflective of the organisational objectives (in terms of Best Value Performance Indicator 12 – BV12). It expresses only *frequency* and not *volume* of absence.
- 5.3.10 Secondly, this criterion can lead to a ‘scattergun’ approach: the procedure being applied to those whose attendance is ‘less problematic’ than others. It does not distinguish between those who have had three instances of one-day absence and those who have had three instances of two months.
- 5.3.11 The final issue with the criteria is one that came across very strongly within the MAG Peer Audit. Nearly every department made reference to the fairness of the procedure in relation to the criteria to assess *unsatisfactory attendance*.
- 5.3.12 The problems with the perceived fairness of the procedure can be summarised as follows:
- (i) If there is no criterion relating volume of absence to unsatisfactory attendance, then there is no incentive for the employee to resume work as soon as possible
 - (ii) An employee could have three one-day instances of absence in a year and be issued with an NOC. This is a very strict definition of problematic attendance
 - (iii) Conversely, an employee with two, five-day periods of absence could not only self-certify for these, but would not reach the trigger point for issuing an NOC
- 5.3.13 The culmination of this is that this can lead to the procedure being perceived by both employees and managers as unfair and unduly harsh. The effects of this could be that
- Employees may automatically perceive the management of absence as a negative issue, rather than something that is accepted as part of good managerial practice
 - Managers may be less willing to apply the procedure because they consider it harsh
 - Managers would prefer to evade the difficult decisions sometimes



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needed to manage attendance

5.4 Managing Absence from Day One

5.4.1 The induction and probationary period are the most impressionable time that the organisation can have upon a new employee. Establishing clearly the standards of performance that are required of the employee at this stage is very important. In this respect, attendance is no different to any other aspect of performance or standards of behaviour.

5.4.2 Attendance during the probationary period can often be an indicator of future attendance. If there is poor attendance in the probationary period and this goes unchallenged, there is a likelihood of poor attendance continuing into the future.

5.4.3 This was emphasised by the District Auditor in the October 1999 report on Absence. Consequently, Chief Officers have a responsibility to ensure that

- New employees are informed of the requirements of sickness absence as part of induction
- The probationary process considers employee attendance in confirming decisions about permanent employment

5.4.4 There are some key issues in how the Council inducts new staff regarding attendance. These are problems that also apply in other areas of personnel policy within the Council:

- This is not consistent across departments
- In many cases this is done by written brief
- The procedure itself states that it is the responsibility of the employee to familiarise themselves with the procedure, rather than the organisation ensuring that the employee is familiar with this
- There is no guarantee that this will be read and understood

5.4.5 Whilst attendance is a factor that is considered, there is no guidance at present for managers on

- (i) What is unsatisfactory attendance within the probationary period, or
- (ii) What to do about it if this occurs

5.4.6 A new employee can complete their probationary period with unsatisfactory attendance under the criteria. This means that attendance must be managed in accordance with the procedure



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applied to permanent employees (i.e. issue an NOC / FNOC). However, a serious doubt over the ability of the individual to perform has already been raised in this respect, at a point where managers are allegedly making a decision about whether to make them permanent is justified by performance.

- 5.4.7 Failing to induct new starters with the appropriate standards of performance means that managing their performance is at best hit and miss. This is also a missed opportunity for the organisation: at this early stage with the Council, we should be taking the opportunity to impress standards of good behaviour on employees. We should be opening our employment relationship with new staff as we mean to go on.

5.5 Disability-Related Absence

- 5.5.1 The Managing Attendance procedure covers absence related to disabilities. However, disability related absences are not considered for the purpose of determining whether an NOC / FNOC should be issued.

- 5.5.2 The exception is where the extent of disability-related absences becomes *unacceptable* in terms of 'providing a service'. In such cases, after making appropriate adjustments, managers are advised to explore medical redeployment with advice from Occupational Health. It does not however elaborate upon specifically where this point may lie.

- 5.5.3 Whilst the Disability Discrimination Act makes it unlawful to discriminate against a person on the grounds of their disability, it does not state that disability-related absence cannot be managed. In doing so, there is an obligation upon employers to make reasonable adjustments to the workplace, work and pattern of work, in order to reduce the prospects of ongoing absence.

- 5.5.4 The price of getting it wrong in relation to disability is high. In addition to the lack of limits an Employment Tribunal has on compensation, there is a very high cost to the reputation of the employer. In the case of a prominent Council such as Birmingham, with perceived social responsibilities to be a 'model employer', these potential costs to reputation are significantly higher.

5.6 Industrial Injuries

- 5.6.1 Similarly to disability-related absence, absence related to industrial injuries is not considered for the purpose of determining whether an



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NOC / FNOC is to be issued under the procedure. Similar provisions to those for disability exist for how industrial injury-related absence should be managed.

- 5.6.2 This is a change to the previous procedure, where managers were given latitude to take the impact of absence related to accidents at work into consideration in taking action to manage absence.
- 5.6.3 There is anecdotal evidence that some areas of the Council have experienced an increase in industrial injury-related absence since the procedure was changed. The managerial perception of this where this has occurred is that there may be an element of this being used as a means of avoiding an NOC / FNOC being issued.
- 5.6.4 Unless the injury results in disability, there is no specific legislation covering this. The individual has a right to take legal action against their employer where they have been injured as a result of negligence on the part of the employer. However, there is again no legislation that indicates that an industrial injury or accident at work cannot be managed within attendance management processes.

5.7 The Scope for Changing the Procedure

- 5.7.1 It is recognised good practice to consult with recognised trade unions on issues such as the management of attendance. It is important though to acknowledge that trade unions can often provide useful suggestions and improvements to how processes are operated.
- 5.7.2 How attendance is managed can be a thorny subject at best with trade unions. Unison is the largest union among the Council's staff, and has voiced particular concerns about the procedure. Their concerns include that it is
- Used by poor managers as a fast track means of dismissing people
 - Trying to bully people into being healthy
 - Inconsistently applied
 - Caused by poor management of health and safety
- 5.7.3 This is not to say that these concerns are entirely founded upon fact. Each of these is a fair criticism of a procedure that is not applied properly. They are also representative of the concerns that need to be addressed in creating a more positive perception of the issue of managing attendance.
- 5.7.4 A general point to be cognisant of is that trade unions are unlikely in principle to support or fully endorse any process that could ultimately



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lead to the dismissal of their members. They will also naturally play on the fears that this can create to make their case for attracting more members. These are viewpoints that it is extremely difficult to negotiate around.

- 5.7.5 Changing the criteria within the Managing Attendance Procedure was a factor that was recommended originally by MAG in the summer of 2001. The recommendation of MAG was that the criteria for the trigger point of an NOC be amended to four instances of absence in 12 months.
- 5.7.6 This was rejected on the grounds that it was considered to increase the complexity of discussions with trade unions on the matter. The reason for this was that the procedure for managing intermittent absence (including the criteria) was considered by the Council to be incorporated into the Contract of Employment. Therefore to change the criteria (or the procedure) for intermittent absence was believed to require collective negotiation to change contracts of employment. Interestingly enough, Unison's stated position is that they believe this is not the case.
- 5.7.7 This brings to the fore two questions:
- (i) Are the criteria part of the contract of employment?
 - (ii) If so, how can the ability of the Council as an organisation be made more responsive to change?
- 5.7.8 There are effectively three options for change regarding the Managing Attendance Procedure. These are summarised in **Fig. 7** below.
- 5.7.9 The view taken by Chief Officers regarding this was that a review of the criteria within the procedure should take place in twelve months' time⁷.
- 5.7.10 The level of difficulty of change that is necessary to achieve our organisational goals cannot be a prohibitive factor in moving for change. Whilst there is a general need when entering a negotiation or discussion to be cognisant of the position of the other party, this does not mean that the subject of change should not be broached. It is important that the Council's relationship with the trade unions is a productive one, even if at times that means having difficult discussions.

⁷ Chief Officers' Group, 28 August 2002.



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Option:	Rationale:
1: No change is needed	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> We are satisfied that the procedure is fit for purpose as it stands. The procedure will deliver our organisational goals.
2: Evaluate further before change	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> It is too soon to evaluate whether the procedure is fit for purpose. Insufficient time has been allowed for the procedure to bed in and the effects to become manifest. The value of change now is outweighed by the effort involved in changing now.
3: Change is needed as soon as possible	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> The procedure is not fit for purpose. Allowing the procedure to remain in place longer than it takes to change it risks managers being led to aim for targets not in line with our goals. Undesirable behaviours, attitudes and practices will become further entrenched by allowing the procedure to remain in place.

Fig. 7: Options for Changing the Procedure



6: How the Procedure is Operated

6.1 The Need to Operate Effectively

6.1.1 For a procedure to achieve what it is supposed to do, it needs not only to be fit for purpose, but also purposefully put into practice. Part of this is to do with the culture of the organisation, and part is to do with the mechanisms that facilitate the process. The culture of the organisation has been covered in section four; this section focuses on how the process is put into operation.

6.2 Measuring Absence Performance

6.2.1 Best Value Performance Indicator BV12 measures the average number of days absence per FTE. This can also be expressed in terms of a percentage of absence corporately (the proportion of time lost), which is how the initial BVPI targets were determined.

6.2.2 Performance against BV12 is provided quarterly from HRIS data to COG, broken down by department and manual / staff grade groupings. The information is also available to Departmental Management Teams (DMTs) via their Departmental Personnel Officer (DPO).

6.2.3 COG has considered a proposal to break down the corporate absence target into individual targets for each department for 2002/3⁸. In formulating this proposal, three possible means of establishing the target of 15 days per FTE were considered:

- (i) The target level for each department is set at the corporate level (i.e. 15 days per FTE)
- (ii) Each department be asked to deliver a proportion of the reduction in sickness required equal to the amount that the department contributes to corporate sickness (i.e. Social Services contributed 46.95% of absence in 2001/2; they would be required to contribute 46.95% of the required reduction of 27,870 days (a reduction from 22.74 to 20.61 days per FTE)

⁸ Chief Officers' Group, 28 August 2002.



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- (iii) Those departments who have the highest absence would be required to deliver a proportionately greater reduction in absence than those with a lower absence rate (i.e. Social Services would be required to achieve a 12.90% reduction in absence (from 22.74 to 19.81 days per FTE; Shared Management Services would be required to achieve a 2.51% reduction (from 4.52 to 4.41 days per FTE))

6.2.4 The decision of COG was to broadly follow option (i) above, with all departments being required to achieve 15 days per FTE. However, for those departments already below the target level, they would be expected to maintain this.

6.2.5 In addition to meeting the overall target for absence, the procedure provides for some important managerial indicators showing that the system is being operated correctly. The procedure states that

- There should be an RTWI carried out for every absence
- RTWIs should be completed within 3 days of the individual resuming work
- Staff who are long term sick should be contacted within the first four weeks of absence by their manager and regular contact maintained thereafter
- There is a presumption that managers will issue an NOC / FNOC where performance passes through the appropriate trigger point, unless this is in relation to pregnancy, disability or industrial injury

6.2.6 Whilst performance against the criteria in BV12 is technically the only issue that is measured externally, each of these points indicates whether we are managing absence well overall. Some of these areas are monitored by DMTs in their departmental information on absence performance. However, this is neither consistent across all departments nor measured overall on a regular basis.

6.2.7 It is important to note that measuring the number of NOCs / FNOCs issued is not an absolute indicator of performance. Whilst a presumption exists that managers will issue notifications, this does not mean that a 100% issue rate should be anticipated. There will be circumstances where notifications should not be issued. However, the expectation within both the procedure and the spirit of how it was drafted that these cases would be in a minority. A low proportion of notifications not issued *may* be an indication that managers

- Are not following the procedure
- Do not adequately understand the procedure
- Have not received adequate training
- Do not have the confidence in being supported in taking difficult



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- decisions (and thereby possibly evade them)
- Are not being managed and directed effectively by senior managers

6.3 Managerial Competence in Applying the Procedure

6.3.1 Competence is a means of measuring ability. It is about being able to consistently achieve a defined standard of performance and defined outcomes. This is essential in not only being able to define the level of success of training and briefing, but also in giving individuals confidence in knowing that they have achieved the standard.

6.3.2 Developing competence falls within the strategy required for training and development. Whilst there is no formal strategy in place for this specifically relating to attendance management, an outline strategy for dealing with this was discussed at an early stage of the MAG process of looking at the policy. This approach is consistent with the broader corporate strategy on training and development, and comprises three strands:

- (i) Developing a corporate framework of general managerial competences
- (ii) Developing a corporate induction programme, including a specific managerial element on managing attendance
- (iii) Focussing on the areas of highest absence and using a process where managers who have experienced success with similar problems can work with managers to find solutions.

6.3.3 The Council is already moving towards identifying the competences required for roles within the organisation. At present, competences have been identified for senior roles, specifically to assist in recruitment and selection (although these generic competences have wider implications). This is a positive move to ensure that those being brought into the organisation have the necessary competence to undertake and develop into their role.

6.3.4 The competence framework under development is due for completion by April 2003. This will mean that

- Levels of competence are specified (in terms of generic, not job-specific areas of competence)
- Assessment processes for competence are defined
- There will be a link between development level and progression, enabling a development route to be identified

6.3.5 The delivery mechanisms to achieve this will be partly in place by April 2003, and it will be possible to commence delivery of this



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framework at this point. In terms of 'completing' delivery of this, this is a long-term process that is ongoing.

- 6.3.6 This is relevant in terms of how managers have and are trained in applying the procedure. 'Training' for managers in the use of the Managing Attendance procedure thus far has consisted of a system of briefings designed to ensure that managers had the underpinning knowledge to operate the procedure. It was accepted that this was so, and this was intended mainly to bridge the gap between the old and new procedures.
- 6.3.7 The Managers' Briefing Pack provided standard briefings both for managers and for managers to brief to their staff. Departments were also expected to supplement this with additional departmental training programmes for managers on managing attendance. This had the benefit of enabling departments to go into greater detail regarding the particular issues that are specific within their departmental operation.
- 6.3.8 Many of the cultural factors that are crucial to the effectiveness of managing attendance are developed and embedded over time by a competence-based approach. These include:
- Managers and employees 'buying-in' to the process, and accepting its use
 - Managers being proficient in managing the procedure, employees perceiving this
 - Consistent application across the organisation
 - An understanding that the procedure contributes to organisational goals
- 6.3.9 However, a corporate training and development programme cannot stand alone and be geared solely to tackling this one issue. This is especially the case because the areas of competence it would be aiming to develop are also applicable in other areas. The development on attendance needs to work towards the overall framework being developed.
- 6.3.10 Instigating a corporate induction process is being examined as part of a review of recruitment and selection processes. The intention is that this is running by April 2003. Computer-based methods are being examined as part of this, as well as a half-day module on attendance for new managers, which could be up and running by January 2003.
- 6.3.11 There are currently no definite proposals to create what would amount to 'task teams' to assist in developing skills and practices in areas of high absence. However, given that significant proportions of



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the Council's total absence originate from a proportionately lower number of staff, this approach is favoured. This is aimed at delivering improvement in the significantly lower performers, thereby achieving overall improvement quicker.

6.4 Getting the Right Information

6.4.1 Having the right information on absence is at the heart of managing it well. The first step in being able to manage a problem is to know the exact nature of the problem. This is about having the right information to manage the job, and show that the job is being managed. There are two driving needs for information:

- (i) For line managers on individual absences, and
- (ii) For senior managers on how the organisation is performing

6.4.2 The provision of information regarding attendance is clearly identified within the process as being the responsibility of Personnel Managers. However, the MAG Peer Audit identified concerns over

- Communication between managers and Personnel
- Problems with monitoring short-term sickness
- Sickness absence information not being available through HRIS for manual employees

6.4.3 Given that the audit was undertaken six months after the implementation of the new procedure it is extremely concerning that such issues should be raised. Chief Officers have expressed concerns over this and are presently seeking more information on the specific issues.

6.4.4 There are some general points to be made here. Inadequate systems for recording absence accurately will quite simply undermine the effectiveness of the monitoring process. An oft-quoted truism is that any information system is only as good as the information that is input to it.

6.4.5 Another important point is that any delay or backlog in inputting information to the monitoring system will result in the system not being current. To have a system that provides up to the minute information is not essential, but managers must have the current absence record available when they carry out the RTWI.

6.4.6 The general process for information being input is for managers to complete a manual return on a weekly basis and then send this to the Payroll section to be entered into the Human Resource Integrated System (HRIS) attendance records. This is still entered on a monthly



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basis in some departments. Even where this is done weekly this does however mean that information is not current, even to the day.

6.5 Chief Officers' Group

6.5.1 There are two levels of senior management that receive information within the Council, Chief Officers' Group (COG) and Departmental Management Teams (DMTs).

6.5.2 COG aim to look at the issue of attendance management on a monthly basis, receiving a report from the Chief Personnel Officer regarding the position with long-term sickness cases within each department. The reason for this is that management of long-term sickness was identified at an early stage in the meetings of MAG as being one of the driving forces behind the absence performance of the Council.

6.5.3 The format and information contained within the Chief Personnel Officer's report and how this is dealt with by COG were explored with the Acting Chief Executive at an early stage in conducting this review. Issues raised in this discussion included

- Information presented to COG being out of date by as much as three months
- The lack of specific and accurate information, reporting on how the Council is performing on attendance
- No real relationship being drawn between departmental performance and the required targets of the Council
- An inappropriate and inconsistent format for reporting on long-term sickness, leading to the actions being taken not being clear
- A lack of any apparent challenge from COG where long-term sickness does not appear to be being managed

6.5.4 In practice, information within the report is generally nearly three months old at the time it is received and sometimes more than three. This raises the question of how actively this is being managed at this level. There is more than six weeks on average between discussions at COG. Examples of this (based on the reports in the last year) are shown in **Fig. 8** below.



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Date of Report to COG	Information As At	Age of Information (Weeks)	Gap Between Discussions (Weeks)
18-Jul-01	01-Jun-01	6.71	
22-Aug-01	01-Jul-01	7.43	5.00
26-Sep-01	01-Aug-01	8.00	5.00
24-Oct-01	01-Sep-01	7.57	4.00
19-Dec-01	01-Oct-01	11.29	8.00
30-Jan-02	01-Nov-01	12.86	6.00
06-Mar-02	01-Dec-01	13.57	5.00
17-Apr-02	01-Feb-02	10.71	6.00
05-Jun-02	01-Mar-02	13.71	7.00
14-Aug-02	01-Apr-02	19.29	10.00
14-Aug-02	01-May-02	15.00	
Average:		11.47	6.22

Fig. 8: Timescales of reports to Chief Officers' Group *Source: COG Reports*

- 6.5.5 The information in the report often does not provide specific details of how departments are performing in managing absence. It does not consistently show key performance indicators, such as
- The current absence performance percentage for each department
 - The extent to which long-term and short-term absence contribute to the overall figure (i.e. number of days and ratio of long term and short term absence)
 - The proportion of RTWIs carried out within the appropriate timescale
 - The proportion of NOCs / FNOCs that have been issued when a trigger point has been reached
 - Whether 14 week case reviews have been completed
 - The number of instances of absence / average duration of absences
- 6.5.6 The reporting of such indicators to COG would provide a clear indication of the extent to which departments are operating the procedure. This could then be used as the basis for further investigation of why certain areas appear to have a problem with attendance. If the procedure is not being operated correctly, then that is the first point that managers should be addressing.
- 6.5.7 It is important that reporting regularly about performance is recognised as a key part of managing the process, and is not perceived as a negative factor. There are also positive achievements that need to be emphasised - the case of Social Services achieving a reduction of 110 long-term sickness cases between 01 February and



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01 May is a case in point.

- 6.5.8 Whilst Best Value Performance Indicators (BV12) exist for absence, the performance of departments and the Council as a whole is not shown against these. There is no real indication of whether departments and the Council as a whole are achieving or not.
- 6.5.9 The item relating to Managing Attendance is generally allocated around 15 minutes of discussion on the COG agenda. Whilst it is never noted without some discussion, it does not appear that aspects of departmental performance are challenged or praised at COG.
- 6.5.10 COG is the most senior level of management within the Council. It is appropriate that its role on issues such as attendance should be from an overview perspective,
- Ensuring that targets are being achieved and
 - Instigating action where they are not.
- 6.5.11 In discussing these points with the Acting Chief Executive, he agreed that the report has been in the same format for some time and would welcome ideas to refresh this. In doing so, he stated that he would look to the Chief Personnel Officer to do this. He however gave no indication of whether he proposed to change the way in which COG manages attendance.
- 6.5.12 COG has considered the matter of the information that they receive on attendance⁹. Agreement was reached that COG would receive a monthly update on the Managing Attendance procedure, showing the extent to which departments are complying with and delivering the procedure. A specific format for this information was not agreed, although would be tabled for discussion at a later date.

6.6 Departmental Management Teams

- 6.6.1 Following the introduction of the new procedure, the means of managing attendance in each department was for Chief Officers to determine. How DMTs manage attendance was covered by MAG as part of the peer audit conducted in April / May 2002. This revealed (not surprisingly) that there is a differing approach taken by each department in terms of managing attendance.
- 6.6.2 There is a marked difference in managerial approach between that of COG and DMTs, with DMTs picking up on more detailed information. Managing attendance is generally a standing item on all DMT agendas, being discussed at a frequency of one to three months.

⁹ Chief Officers' Group, 28 August 2002.



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6.6.3 Issues with how departments manage attendance through DMTs include:

- There is no standard format that departments must report in, which means that this cannot be readily brought together overall for the organisation
- Departments establish objectives for attendance themselves within the performance contracts of Assistant Directors
- The frequency of discussion of attendance in some departments is not appropriate – good practice would suggest that this should be taking place at least four weekly or monthly
- Some departments do not report against key performance indicators; some do, but there is no overall guidance or consistency to these

6.6.4 Whilst there is a degree of reason in allowing departments to take a managerial approach that best suits not only the nature of their own issues, but also their management teams, this does conflict with fundamental tenets of collating information. In order to keep the organisation heading in one direction, this needs all departments to be producing information in the same format, to the same frequency, measured against the same key success areas.

6.6.5 Taking a prescriptive approach to how an issue such as attendance is managed across the organisation has the disadvantage of not allowing departments to tailor the process to their needs. But there is a more important concern that they all deliver and show they are delivering against a set of centrally defined criteria.

6.6.6 Performance contracts (where they are in place) are a good mechanism for setting objectives for attendance, and establishing individual accountability. However, there are two problems within this. Firstly, only our most senior officers have performance contracts – a means of communicating these objectives throughout the organisation is needed. Secondly, allowing the setting of objectives on core human resource issues such as attendance by departments creates the potential for disparate objectives.

6.7 Line Managers

6.7.1 Information available to line managers comes principally from their own local records. This is supplemented by reports requested from Personnel. Personnel do not routinely provide information to managers in all departments. Such reports would prove useful to line managers.



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- 6.7.2 There are problems in this approach. Without some level of guidance and coaching in this area, managers may not maintain adequate information to manage attendance. To counter this effectively it is essential that Personnel sections take a proactive role in supporting line managers with the information that they need.
- 6.7.3 Whilst most staff pay and attendance details are on HRIS, the extension of elements of the system that can provide information on attendance to line managers has been delayed. DPOs can currently use a suite of standard statistical reports to provide overall management information for their departments. However, this is not yet focused at providing information to line managers individually on how their teams are performing.
- 6.7.4 The MAG Peer Audit showed that managers considered that there was a lack of reports available through HRIS and inadequate information to them. The role that HRIS has to play comes into question here: can the system realistically deliver all the information needs of managers to manage attendance issues, or is it reasonable for managers to maintain some of the information that they need themselves? Equally, expectations of HRIS may be unrealistically high, and this may be an issue that needs to be tackled.
- 6.7.5 Within HRIS there is variation in the structure of departments and how they are set up on the system. Some departments have more complex sub-structures to the organisation than others do, which means that collating information by one managerial unit in one department may not necessarily be applicable to another. This makes the development of standard report-writing tools for all departments problematic.
- 6.7.6 There are proposals to give line managers access to information in HRIS via a browser system. This will allow managers to view information according to their managerial unit. As part of making this possible it is acknowledged that there will be a need to ensure managers can only look at appropriate individual information (as part of the Council's responsibilities under the Data Protection Act).
- 6.7.7 There are currently issues considered more pressing that need to be solved within the HRIS project, and browser access for line managers is likely to be one of the later elements incorporated into the system. Presently, this is not even at the stage where the requirements have been specified.



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6.8 Documentation of Absence

6.8.1 Because the management of absence is an issue that employees may be concerned about, it is essential that there is a comprehensive audit trail of documents about how each case is managed. In this way, should any questions be raised about how a case has been managed, there will be detailed records explaining what has occurred at each point.

6.8.2 There are a number of documents that are produced as part of the process of managing absence. Where these documents are sent to Personnel / Payroll, an entry is made into HRIS to record the details. These documents are summarised in **Fig. 9** below.

Departmental Sickness Absence form *	
Notification of Absence form *	
RTWI notes	
Standard letters regarding issue of NOC / FNOC	
Weekly attendance returns to payroll *	
Records of individual absence *	
Confirmation of reason for non-issue of NOC / FNOC *	
Referrals to Occupational Health *	
Occupational Health reports and recommendations *	
<p><i>* Indicates this is not a standard document contained within the procedure. Departments to assist with administering the process use these documents and letters. As such, they differ from department to department.</i></p>	
<p>Fig. 9: Documentation Related to Absence</p>	

6.8.3 The MAG Audit of Chief Officers and managers raised the points that:

- Individual absence history, issue of NOCs / FNOCs, arrangements for case hearings and reasons for non-issue of NOCs should all be recorded on the RTWI form in a standard way
- The standard letters sent to employees are considered too harsh

6.8.4 With regard to the problems found by Internal Audit in their examination of absence cases, the following issues were identified in some cases:

- Non-completion of Notification of Absence forms
- Continued absence beyond the fourth day not recorded
- Copies of medical certificates not retained by managers
- No record made of home visits / offers of home visits
- RTWIs not being conducted (and hence no documentation being available)



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- No individual sickness records being maintained by one local manager

6.8.5 It is clear, particularly from the recommendations of Internal Audit, that there are difficulties with managers not completing the correct documentation. It is also clear that the documentation is not wholly fit for purpose and that greater consideration needs to be given to this. These two facts are obviously linked. Line managers are more likely to complete documentation and do so correctly if they understand how to do it and why this is important. This is a training and awareness issue.

6.8.6 With regard to the 'harsh wording' of standard letters relating to NOCs / FNOCs, it must be accepted that there is an element of harshness demanded by the very purpose of these letters. The letters are a formal, written statement to the employee that their performance is not satisfactory and an explanation of why that is so. They require a high degree of clarity about the situation and should leave the employee in no doubt about

- (i) What action has been taken
- (ii) What standard is expected, and
- (iii) What will happen if that standard is not met
- (iv) Their right of appeal against any decision

6.8.7 Were an attendance case to go to an Employment Tribunal, the tribunal would expect to see such documentation used where a formal warning regarding performance has been made. Indeed, in an organisation the size of the Council, the tribunal could also reasonably expect such standard letters to be in place as part of the procedure. We need to be getting it right first time, and this helps do this.

6.8.8 As such, there is no demonstrable need to change the letters. However, this does serve to make the point that were informal processes be used more effectively to manage attendance, then there would be less of a perceived 'jump' when the formal process begins.

6.8.9 The other issues raised are a matter of reinforcing application of the procedure, of which a significant element is managers understanding their responsibilities better.



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6.9 Issuing Notifications of Concern / Final Notifications of Concern

6.9.1 One of the key revisions to the Managing Attendance procedure was the introduction of the presumption that line managers would issue an NOC / FNOC where individual attendance triggers this. This does not mean that an NOC / FNOC will always be issued, but it is reasonable to expect that it should occur in a high proportion of cases.

6.9.2 The MAG Audit of Chief Officers asked what percentage of employees meeting the triggers for NOCs and FNOCs have been issued with a notification. The purpose of this was to test the extent to which the presumption that a notification would be issued is actually being carried out. The results are shown in **Fig. 10** (see next page).

6.9.3 **Fig. 10** shows that:

- Although the presumption exists that an NOC / FNOC will be issued, this actually occurs in only slightly more than half of cases across the authority
- There is a marked inconsistency across departments, especially in issuing NOCs
- Some departments are clearly not implementing the procedure as it was intended, notably Corporate and Democratic Services and Economic Development

6.9.4 Even the departments with the highest rate of issuing NOCs in particular, are doing so in 60-70% of cases. This issue was explored in Housing as an example. A significant proportion of cases where an NOC had not been issued was where the procedure specifically dictates that an NOC should not be issued (such as with absence related to disability, pregnancy and industrial injury). It is therefore a reasonable set of conclusions that

- This is the case in the other departments of similarly high percentage issue (Environmental and Consumer Services, Finance and Social Services)
- A reasonable expected level of issue for NOCs is around 60-65%
- Departments where NOCs are less than this may have some issues regarding implementation of the procedure

6.9.5 Given that a relatively small number of FNOCs had been triggered (98), this is probably too small a sample to base any firm conclusions on. However, logic dictates that an appropriate level of issue will be broadly similar to NOCs.



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Department	Employees Triggering Issue of NOC	NOCs Issued	Proportion of NOC
Corporate and Democratic Services	81	6	7.41%
Economic Development	74	18	24.32%
Education	76	35	46.05%
Environmental and Consumer Services	193	118	61.14%
Finance and Performance Review	195	120	61.54%
Housing	378	230	60.85%
Leisure and Culture	253	94	37.15%
Planning	23	14	60.87%
Social Services	392	264	67.35%
Transportation	173	65	37.57%
Urban Design	14	5	35.71%
Total	1852	969	52.32%

Final Notifications of Concern
01 October 2001 to 31 March 2002

Department	Employees Triggering Issue of FNOC	FNOCs Issued	Proportion of FNOC
Corporate and Democratic Services	0	0	0.00%
Economic Development	3	1	33.33%
Education	0	0	0.00%
Environmental and Consumer Services	27	18	66.67%
Finance and Performance Review	12	11	91.67%
Housing	6	4	66.67%
Leisure and Culture	4	3	75.00%
Planning	5	1	20.00%
Social Services	36	17	47.22%
Transportation	4	1	25.00%
Urban Design	1	0	0.00%
Total	98	56	57.14%

Fig. 10: Issue of Notifications of Concern / Final Notifications of Concern
Source: MAG Audit

6.9.6 The issue of NOCs / FNOCs was reflected also in the concerns and comments raised by managers in the Peer Audit. Two important issues raised in a number of departments were the lack of discretion available to managers in issuing notifications and a lack of clarity about how discretion may be used.

6.9.7 It is also pertinent to bear in mind that previously managers had discretion in the issue of notifications, considering

- The previous absence record
- Knowledge of an underlying medical problem
- The nature of absence in relation to the job
- The length of each absence and / or any identifiable pattern
- Serious personal difficulties outside work



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- 6.9.8 In amending the procedure to presume that managers would issue notifications, the intention was to remove the inconsistent application of the formal procedure. However, it is not sensible to remove all discretion in the issue of notifications in the interest of clarity, since this fails to take full account of individual circumstances.
- 6.9.9 The procedure does not give guidance as to what kind of circumstances might warrant the use of discretion in not issuing notifications. Further, the circumstances in which a manager may wish to consider not issuing an NOC / FNOC were not expanded upon in the Managers' Briefing, although this may have been dealt with by departmental training.
- 6.9.10 Once a manager has decided not to issue the NOC / FNOC, they must then report this to a senior manager, *after* they have told the employee. If the purpose of this is to ensure consistency, this does not provide for the senior manager providing guidance on whether the non-issue of a notification is consistent with wider application of the procedure. Although it is the manager who takes the decision on the issue of the NOC / FNOC, senior managers and DPOs have a clear interest in ensuring that the procedure is applied consistently.
- 6.9.12 The consequences of this are clear from the MAG Audit. **Fig. 10** demonstrates that notifications still remain to be issued inconsistently across the Council as an organisation. It also shows that although the presumption is there that a notification will be issued, this does not occur to the extent that should be expected in all departments.

6.10 Handling Long Term Sickness

- 6.10.1 One of the main changes to the Managing Attendance procedure was to how long term (i.e. more than four weeks) absences are managed. Requirements have been introduced for managers to
- Make contact with the employee and arrange a home visit within four weeks
 - Review the case of long term sick staff at 14 weeks with Personnel and Occupational Health, to obtain a prognosis for the future
- 6.10.2 These are very important actions because
- (i) Maintain contact with staff who are absent for extended periods is a key part of showing that they are valued, and
 - (ii) Where there is little or no realistic prospect of return to work,



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there is a means of identifying and resolving the issue at an early stage

- 6.10.3 There are also arrangements for phased returns to work, which assist returning members of staff with the difficulties of adjusting to the workplace that can follow an extended period of absence.
- 6.10.4 The arrangements overall are appropriate to the Council's situation. They enable long term absence to be dealt with positively, but with sensible regard to the realistic prospect of a return to work and the needs of the individual.
- 6.10.5 However, the number of staff who are long term sick has (as **Fig. 4** on page 20 demonstrates) slightly increased since May 2001. Since the introduction of the new procedure in October 2001, these figures have only recently started to fall, with consecutive decreases from March to May. There has also been a significant fall in the number of cases where staff have been absent for more than 12 months.
- 6.10.6 Without accessing long-term sickness records on an individual basis, the causes of the rise in the numbers of long-term sick staff cannot be readily ascertained. Chief Officers' Group (COG) do however, receive a summary report on long term absences. Despite the overall progress, within this are numerous instances where reviews of cases have not taken place and the next stage of action is unclear. Such issues remain on the report from month to month and appear to go unchallenged. This may be the root cause of the rise of long term sickness: a sound procedure but no managerial action, even from the top.
- 6.10.7 The findings of Internal Audit in the MAG Peer Audit were along similar lines. Examining individual case files, they identified that three out of nine long-term sickness cases had no documentation providing evidence of a home visit. Again, this is another area of slack management. If there is no evidence, we are unable to prove that the procedure is being followed.

6.11 Refusal to Co-operate

- 6.11.1 Many of the perceptions of employees should naturally be expected to drive the view expressed by trade unions – the unions do after all exist to serve their members. The position of the trade unions regarding the Managing Attendance procedure is a complex one. Fundamentally, it is driven by a concern that such procedures can be used to treat their members unfairly. However it appears to be underpinned by a tacit acceptance that such procedures are necessary in some form in order to manage the organisation



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effectively. In effect, though they may not like it, the unions appear to accept that this is one of the realities of their role.

- 6.11.2 Nonetheless, there have clearly been some instances of trade union involvement being used to delay Return To Work Interviews (RTWIs) where NOCs are to be considered¹⁰. Such action has been confined to one particular division of one department. There has also been advice from Unison branch in other departments not to sign RTWI forms and not to discuss medical information with managers.
- 6.11.3 The MAG Audit of Chief Officers indicates that whilst there are instances of refusals to co-operate, these are, on the whole, relatively isolated. They could not be deemed to be widespread across the authority.
- 6.11.4 It is important to stress that the involvement of the trade unions in the process of managing attendance is to be welcomed. The intended benefits of this are to provide a check against the consistency of approach of managers and ensure that staff have access to competent representation. In introducing the new procedure, the Council has sought the involvement of the trade unions and whilst there have been protracted discussions around some issues, there have also been some constructive improvements suggested from the trade union side.
- 6.11.5 It is essential that the involvement of trade unions be in a reasonable capacity. Whilst it is reasonable to afford an individual the right to representation, it remains the responsibility of the individual to arrange this according to the timescales of the process. There should be no reason why the application of the process should be delayed, and individuals and their unions need to understand this. Trade unions also need to understand that wilful and repeated use of 'delaying tactics' could ultimately be construed as unofficial industrial action – an illegal act.
- 6.11.6 The indications from the MAG Audit are that DPOs do actively and positively deal with such cases. This is entirely appropriate and should continue to occur.

6.12 Emphasising Informal Processes

- 6.12.1 In handling disciplinary and grievance matters, managers are encouraged to deal with matters informally if possible, rather than using formal processes as an initial measure. In handling unsatisfactory performance, the first indication that an individual has that their performance is not satisfactory should not be in a formal

¹⁰ Managing Attendance Group Peer Audit



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interview. Since absence is performance, it follows that a similar approach should apply. However, there is very little emphasis on using informal means within the procedure.

6.12.2 By dealing with appropriate issues informally, much can be achieved in terms of how people perceive the procedure. Provided that it is appropriate to do so, this allows a more gradual approach to be taken to managing performance, perceptibly increasing by incremental steps rather than jumping straight to formal procedures.

6.12.3 One aspect where informal processes are emphasised in the procedure is the obligation of senior managers to review the absence of individuals who have had 20 or more days absence in a year. This allows managers to deal informally and positively with issues contributing to a high number of days lost.

6.12.4 However, other than this, there is very little emphasis in both the procedure and the briefing material on the use of informal management to improve attendance. As a consequence, the procedure appears to move rapidly from 'monitoring' to formal action. However, using informal processes effectively can forestall the need to use formal processes, if applied correctly.

6.13 Employee Perceptions

6.13.1 Managers have a clear role in influencing perceptions. Whilst employees may have their opinions shaped by reading the procedure, advice from trade unions or anecdotes from colleagues, how managers operate the procedure affects first-hand how it is perceived.

6.13.2 How employees perceive not only the procedure but also how it is applied is an important area of organisational culture. A performance-based culture generates an understanding among employees that there is a link between individual and organisational performance. If we want to be performance-based, we need to establish this link.

6.13.3 The MAG Peer Audit sampled the opinions of managers and employees across departments on the implementation of the Managing Attendance procedure. The questions asked and a summary of responses is shown in **Appendix 4**.

6.13.4 The indications from the audit of employees are that :

- Employees generally consider that the procedure helps the section manage attendance (81.61%)
- A significant proportion (43.53%) do not believe it to be fair



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- A significant proportion (38.96%) do not consider that it encourages people to come to work
- Nearly all (95.35%) surveyed consider that their manager administers the procedure fairly and reasonably

6.13.5 Prevalent issues raised within this included:

- The lack of managerial discretion in issuing NOCs
- No measurement of the length of absences or 'total absence'

6.13.6 This indicates on the surface that although employees consider the procedure to be unfair, they consider that their managers operate it fairly. However, were managers to implement the procedure as intended then this might create the perception of being unfair.



7: Making It Work

7.1 Introduction

7.1.1 The preceding sections of this report highlight the fact that although the Council achieved the Best Value target for attendance in 2001/2, there is little room for complacency. That performance deteriorated continually after the introduction of the previous procedure in 1996 is a warning on this.

7.1.2 The introduction of a new attendance management procedure has refocused attention on the question of managing attendance. But it is difficult to actually say that the new procedure has brought absence under control. There is still a long way to go to ensure that we achieve the 2002/3 target of 15 days absence per FTE. It is still essential that we examine the areas where we could manage attendance better and look to improve.

7.1.3 The focus of this review has been upon how the Council manages attendance. This process is not totally devoid of human feeling or empathy. But as a process it must facilitate the taking of objective decisions and minimise the influence of subjective factors.

7.1.4 Through discussion with the Cabinet Member for Human Resources and Equalities and officers operationally involved¹¹, it has been identified that

- Review of the procedure is necessary, but that this should take place after a further evaluation period of 12 months to let the current arrangements properly bed in, during which time work can be undertaken to address various issues
- There are a number of issues that it is agreed need to be addressed as soon as possible; these form the **Recommendations (R1-23)**
- There are elements that need to be examined, linked to review of the procedure over the forthcoming 12 months; these form **Items for Further Discussion (D1-10)**

7.1.5 A number of these recommendations follow themes already raised in the District Audit report of August 1999. Where appropriate, these have been amended in line with what has been found in conducting this review. This obviously takes account of the progress made with

¹¹ Further detail of the points raised in this discussion is shown in **Appendix 8**.



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the issue of attendance since the audit was conducted.

7.2 Setting Absence Targets

7.2.1 The decision of COG to maintain the corporate target of 15 days per FTE for all departments does provide for a great deal of consistency. Accepting that departments currently achieving below this level already do not slip to 15 days per FTE, this will (if all departments deliver) meet the corporate target.

7.2.2 The key point of this is that, whilst it may deliver the level of absence required corporately, it does set a target for some departments that is very difficult to achieve. In doing so, this runs the risks of

- Losing commitment to achieving a target perceived as being impossible
- Missing the target corporately if the higher absence departments cannot deliver completely
- Not acknowledging that there may be structural and cultural issues within high absence departments that cannot be fully resolved in the short term
- Sending a message to departments achieving below 15 days that further improvement is not necessary.

7.2.3 The approach taken by COG is one that is appropriate in a circumstance where the worst performing departments are close to achieving the corporate target. It is probably not appropriate to the situation of the Council because

- It sends out a message that attendance is not a priority in all departments
- One department contributes nearly half of all absence in the Council
- The four departments who did not meet the level of 15 days per FTE (based on their 2001/2 performance – see **Fig. 3**) comprise over 70% of all absence but nearly 60% of employees
- In the short term, a team effort is required to deliver the corporate target.

7.2.4 There is an attitude whereby it is tacitly accepted that departments such as Social Services have higher rates of absence because this is a national trend, related to the type and nature of work. A long-term solution does not involve accepting this: it involves challenging and resolving the causes of those higher absence rates. However, in the short term it is sensible that targets for poorer performing departments be relaxed to a higher level of absence than those for the organisation as a whole, provided that



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- The departments can still demonstrate that they are progressing and meeting those targets;
- Progress towards resolving the longer term objective of dealing with root causes is demonstrable;
- Absence for the organisation overall does not exceed the corporate target.

No.	Items for Further Discussion	Responsibility	Completion Date
D1	Departments should have individual sickness absence targets, which <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Collectively deliver the corporate absence target • Take account of individual department issues in the short term • Seek improvement from all departments 	Chief Personnel Officer <i>Policy: Information Framework</i>	14 January 2004

7.3 Getting the Right Information

- 7.3.1 Underpinning how attendance is managed within the Council is a lack of timely and appropriate information. COG receive information on the organisation overall, but this is not related to specific performance criteria and is focused particularly on long term absence. The information is not even consistent in format from department to department. Within departments, one of the main issues from managers was the lack of information that they receive.
- 7.3.2 The information collected must be comparable across departments. It should also enable the departments to be compared on their performance in the areas relating to absence that really matter – key performance indicators. For that reason it should also be shared within the departments, so that everyone knows how their department and section are performing.
- 7.3.3 It cannot be acceptable that information presented to Chief Officers regarding an important issue such as absence is over two months old. Information should be current and delivered in a timely fashion; if it is not then this increases the risk that action will be inappropriate.
- 7.3.4 Whilst the timeliness of information naturally increases moving up the organisation, at no stage should a time lag of more than a couple of weeks occur. We need to be examining ways of getting this information faster, and at the present a target of 14 days may not be achievable. In this respect, a timescale initially of 28 days would be



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appropriate, working towards reducing this over time.

- 7.3.5 Equally, the nature of the discussion that Chief Officers have regarding attendance (i.e. what they do with the information) needs to be around achievements and further actions. There needs to be a strong message sent out that the senior management team within the Council take absence seriously, and are determined to achieve our targets. As part of this, COG need to acknowledge and praise the departments that achieve, as well as challenging those that don't.
- 7.3.6 Relating information to performance ensures that by gathering information you are measuring what it is important to perform in. Some key indicators have emerged in looking at this, each of which provides indications of how attendance is being managed in departments. Many of these were developed within the MAG Peer Audit, but gathering this information should not just be an 'annual check-up'.
- 7.3.7 Reporting the cost of absence was a recommendation within the District Audit report on absence but this is still not a regular feature of reporting. This is a difficult area to quantify accurately if information is not available through systems such as HRIS, although it can be done by estimating costs. However, the principle that absence is costed should remain and be something that is done as a matter of course. This focuses attention on the issue and puts it into tangible terms that can be readily appreciated.
- 7.3.8 Indicators should enable managers to demonstrate what they are achieving in managing absence, but also demonstrate to senior managers that absence is being managed. Suggested indicators are included in recommendation **R6** below.

No.	Recommendation	Responsibility	Completion Date
R1	Information on attendance should be maintained regularly (at least monthly) for the entire organisation. This should <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Be in a common format • Show performance against relevant measures • Include details of estimated costs • Be timely (i.e. no more than 28 days old at publication) 	Chief Personnel Officer <i>Policy: Information Framework</i>	30 April 2003
R2	Methods of producing the relevant information faster must be explored. This should work towards a target timescale of 14 days or better.	Chief Personnel Officer <i>Policy: Information Framework</i>	31 July 2003



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R3	Accurate, relevant and timely information on attendance should be available by each managerial unit.	Chief Personnel Officer <i>Policy: Information Framework</i>	30 April 2003
R4	Performance on attendance should be discussed at least monthly in departments and by Chief Officers, including identifying actions to improve. This should be cascaded as appropriate through the team.	Chief Officers <i>Delivery of Service</i>	30 April 2003
R5	Managerial performance should be routinely and consistently measured across all departments against common key performance indicators. Suggested indicators include: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • % of RTWIs completed • % of RTWIs completed within 3 days • % of NOCs / FNOCs issued, not issued and not issued due to identified exclusions • LTS staff contacted in last four weeks • % of Case reviews conducted for LTS staff beyond 14 weeks • Progress on LTS cases 	Chief Personnel Officer <i>Policy: Information Framework</i>	30 April 2003

7.4 Information in the Hands of Line Managers

- 7.4.1 That information is not currently available through HRIS is a reason that managers can give for not knowing what the current situation is. It also masks the real problem: that the manager is not active in gathering the information that they require to manage effectively.
- 7.4.2 There are four basic options to remedy the information that is available to line managers:
- (i) Use HRIS to store and provide the information upon which reports are based
 - (ii) Use HRIS to record the information and purchase or develop a system to process this into information to line managers
 - (iii) Purchase or develop a system to record and report upon attendance information
 - (iv) Develop simple tools through packages such as Excel or Access that allow managers to track how they are performing and report on this in a common format
- 7.4.3 A solution involving HRIS (either option (i) or (ii) above) is preferable for this. The purpose of the system is to integrate HR information, and a considerable amount of money has already been invested in implementing the system. All staff are paid through HRIS already.



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- 7.4.4 The problem with this is that HRIS is a considerably long way from being able to put information directly into the hands of line managers. If the preferred means of delivering this is through HRIS alone, then delivery of the necessary elements of HRIS must be expedited to deal with the urgent need for information.
- 7.4.5 Purchasing a system specifically to deal with absence (options (ii) or (iii)) need not be expensive, but it does allow for some innovations in the way that managers work to be considered. Examples of this are
- A web-based browser system, allowing managers to access reports from their PC
 - Managers inputting information on attendance directly through this browser
 - Reports being generated automatically and sent directly to managers by e-mail
 - RTWI forms and sickness certifications being submitted electronically
- 7.4.6 Some of these do involve a big shift in how managers do things and a willingness to embrace the capability of technology to deliver. Making this move is a step change in culture all by itself.
- 7.4.7 The final option of using the tools already at managers' disposal is one that has been explored in the course of conducting this review. This was explored through running a pilot exercise of a simple spreadsheet to provide managers with the information they require. Details on this are contained in **Appendix 5**.
- 7.4.8 Overall this pilot exercise demonstrated that
- The current delays in implementing the HRIS system should not preclude managers obtaining the information that they need to manage attendance
 - With guidance, the effort involved in such a task need not be unduly onerous
 - Assembling this information on a wider basis through this method would involve more work than a system that provides this automatically. However, this is an important issue and should not preclude this being considered as an interim measure until more elegant systems can be brought in
- 7.4.9 There is a clear need to do something about the lack of information. Managers are responsible for achieving the required performance on attendance. The level of feedback within the MAG Audit regarding insufficient information, indicates that they are not equipped with the tools to do this. We should not be in the position where a manager can be asked questions about their team's absence performance and



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not know the answers.

No.	Recommendation	Responsibility	Completion Date
R6	Where information is not currently available through HRIS, processes should be in place to collect this in a format that enables it to measure performance against key indicators corporately.	Departmental Personnel Officers <i>Delivery of Service</i>	30 April 2003
R7	Corporate information systems should ultimately deliver information for local managers. Through preference, this should be through the HRIS system. However, other systems should be considered if this is not possible, either practically or to an acceptable timescale.	Chief Personnel Officer <i>Policy: Information Framework</i>	31 July 2003

7.5 Encouraging Flexibility

- 7.5.1 Some managers indicated in the MAG Audit that they were concerned over employees being able to take annual leave instead of being recorded as absent. These concerns ranged from issues of consistency in application to concerns that it could be used as a means of avoiding an NOC / FNOC being issued.
- 7.5.2 The purpose of this needs to be made clear. This is to allow employees the opportunity to take annual / flexi- / unpaid leave where absence may not be appropriate. Such cases might include exceptional domestic circumstances, such as domestic problems, being stranded abroad on holiday or needing to be at home to ensure urgent (unplanned) repairs are done. In such cases absence is necessary, but it is not correct or fair to the employee to record this as sickness absence. Equally, such circumstances should not merit additional leave with pay and it is therefore entirely appropriate that this should be taken as annual / flexi- / unpaid leave.
- 7.5.3 Managers also need the ability to be as flexible as their employees allow. For example, if the employee is prepared to move their day off instead of going sick, and then work what would have been their day off at the same rate of pay, then this is an alternative. Provided that there is a need for the day being exchanged to be worked, there is no loss of time worked and therefore the organisation does not suffer.
- 7.5.4 There are also a set of behaviours that foster this approach. Encouraging such behaviours is part of the management development and training process, which is covered later in **7.14: Managerial Training and Competence**. However, the broad



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principles are that an individual should expect

- To speak to either their manager or another appropriate manager or supervisor when they notify their absence, and
- That the manager / supervisor will take appropriate consideration of their welfare in determining whether it is absence or whether leave may be appropriate.

7.5.5 Cognisance needs to be given to the fact that establishing and embedding the behaviours that foster this approach is a long process, which will take a number of years to permeate throughout the organisation. However, we can put in place procedural requirements that tell managers clearly what is expected of them. This is to prevent 'back-sliding' against the behaviours we are ultimately trying to introduce.

No.	Recommendation	Responsibility	Completion Date
R8	There should be clear guidance for managers as to when an employee should be allowed to take leave, and when this should be recorded as absence.	Chief Personnel Officer <i>Policy: Procedure Framework</i>	31 July 2003
R9	Managers should speak to the individual (or in exceptional circumstances, the person calling on their behalf) at the time of notification of the absence.	Chief Personnel Officer <i>Policy: Procedure Framework</i>	30 April 2003
R10	Managers should be encouraged to adopt a welfare and information gathering approach with regard to handling notification of absence.	Chief Personnel Officer <i>Policy: Procedure Framework</i>	31 July 2003

7.6 Establishing Satisfactory Criteria

7.6.1 In terms of establishing criteria for unsatisfactory attendance, there are three aspects to determine this:

- Instances of absence
- Volume (i.e. amount of time lost)
- Frequency within a given monitoring period

7.6.2 It is also important to consider that new recruits to the Council are monitored over a six-month probationary period. Given that attendance is part of the performance in the probationary period, there needs to be some measure to enable this to be assessed.

7.6.3 It might be sensible therefore to consider reducing the monitoring period for absence to six months or 26 weeks, and introducing a specific criterion relating to the volume of time lost. This should be



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directly related to the objectives of the organisation as a whole. Then, as the target performance of the organisation becomes more challenging, so does the level of performance being required of employees to meet this.

7.6.4 The immediate consequence of shortening the monitoring period is that an individual's attendance is not monitored over a complete year, with all the seasonal variations in absence that it covers. However, this does focus upon sustained performance throughout the year, and poor performance in any six-month period will trigger managerial action.

7.6.5 In terms of relating the criteria to the objective of volume, this can be done by introducing an additional second criterion to be met relating to this. Setting this criterion at the target percentage (i.e. in 2002/3, 7%) would lead to problematic attendance going unchecked because where performance was higher than the target (such as for long term sick staff), this would take the average for the authority above the target. A more appropriate level would be half the target percentage.

7.6.6 A criterion within the trigger point expressed as a target percentage might be confusing to managers and staff. One possible solution to this would be to

- Calculate the criterion based on the target percentage
- Express this in terms of a number of days over the monitoring period

This would need to be expressed as a different number of days for part time staff, depending on the number of days they work each week.

7.6.7 An example of how this might work is shown in **Fig. 11** below for the targets for both the 2002/3 and 2004/5 years. This is shown for an employee who works five days a week.

Target % (BV12)	2002/3	2004/5
	7%	5%
Criteria	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 3 or more instances and • 3.5% or more absence • in 26 weeks 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 3 or more instances and • 2.5% or more absence • in 26 weeks
Unsatisfactory at	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 3 or more instances and • 4 days absence • in 26 weeks 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 3 or more instances and • 3 days absence • in 26 weeks

Fig. 11: Example of Volume and Frequency Related Criteria



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- 7.6.8 On a par with this, the point at which managers should informally review the absence of individuals should also be directly related to the organisational objective. This is currently 20 days in a year. This should reflect the target average (i.e. in 2002/3, 15 days).
- 7.6.9 Calculating an individual's absence percentage is done by dividing the number of days absence by the number of days that they should have worked in the monitoring period, multiplied by 100. In such a calculation, authorised absence (e.g. annual leave) is treated as a day worked.
- 7.6.10 For example, in a 26 week period, a person working five days per week has 13 days absence and takes two days annual leave. The percentage is calculated as follows:
- *Annual Leave: 2 days. Not included*
 - *Number of days absent: 13*
 - *Number of days that should be worked: 5 days per week x 26 weeks = 130 days*
 - *[13 / 130] x 100% = 10%*
- 7.6.11 This recommendation is in line with the most used measure of absence (according to ACAS¹²). The same publication also explains that if this measure is used for departments and smaller groups of workers, it can be used to highlight particular problem areas.

No.	Items for Further Discussion	Responsibility	Completion Date
D2	<p>The criteria stating at what point attendance becomes unsatisfactory should be changed to reflect</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • A number of instances of absence, and • A percentage of absence • Over a timescale expressed in weeks <p>This should also be reflected in the criteria at further stages of the procedure (i.e. after a Notification of Concern has been issued).</p>	Chief Personnel Officer <i>Policy: Procedure Framework</i>	14 January 2004
D3	<p>The criteria defining unsatisfactory attendance should be directly linked to organisational targets (i.e. BV12), and should therefore change in line with corporate targets.</p>	Chief Personnel Officer <i>Policy: Procedure Framework</i>	14 January 2004

¹² *Absence and Labour Turnover*, ACAS, November 2001.



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D4	There should be a clear link between the criteria used for attendance in both the probationary period and further employment. Ideally, these should be the same (i.e. 26 weeks).	Chief Personnel Officer <i>Policy: Procedure Framework</i>	14 January 2004
D5	Managers should pay attention to employees who have accumulated days absence equal to or greater than the target average per FTE expressed in BV12, where no formal action has been considered. The action taken at this stage should remain the same as in the current procedure.	Chief Personnel Officer <i>Policy: Procedure Framework</i>	14 January 2004

7.7 Industrial Injuries / Accidents at Work and Disability

- 7.7.1 There has been a reported increase in the amount of absence related to industrial injuries. Whilst there is no specific evidence to suggest this, there is also potential that this could be the case for disability related absence.
- 7.7.2 However, the lack of specific guidance of when attendance becomes an issue in delivering a service means that there is potential for inconsistency in decisions between managers. To resolve this issue, specific guidance needs to be put together, in order to ensure that managers referring such cases to Occupational Health do so consistently for the same reasons.

No.	Recommendation	Responsibility	Completion Date
R11	The point at which absence relating to disability or industrial injuries / accidents at work should be referred to Occupational Health as being problematic for service provision should be clear.	Chief Personnel Officer <i>Policy: Procedure Framework</i>	31 July 2003

7.8 Issuing Notifications of Concern

- 7.8.1 There is clear evidence in **Fig. 10** (page 52) that despite there being a procedural presumption that managers will issue an NOC / FNOC, they are still electing to exercise discretion and not do so in a significant proportion of cases.
- 7.8.2 In some respects the reasons for this are understandable due to the lack of clarity in the procedure regarding the limits of managerial discretion and the concerns that managers have voiced regarding



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this. Nonetheless, this does not make this acceptable. The purpose of introducing the presumption was to introduce greater consistency across departments in the issuing of NOCs / FNOCs, but this has not happened.

- 7.8.3 Managers must understand that when they are asked to consider the issue of an NOC / FNOC under the Managing Attendance procedure they are evaluating whether the employee's attendance has given rise to concern in relation to the acceptable organisational standards. It is incorrect for managers to arbitrarily assess attendance against whether they themselves are concerned about it.
- 7.8.4 This is at heart a matter of enforcing this with line managers. In doing so it is essential that the boundaries of discretion for managers be clarified and that there is a level of support for managers to ensure that they have appropriate guidance in taking decisions.
- 7.8.5 In clarifying the limits of discretion, guidance for managers should show examples of the kind of situations in which they might consider issuing or not issuing an NOC / FNOC. A detailed discussion around these situations should form a key part of ongoing managerial training.
- 7.8.6 In order to support the manager and ensure consistency, where the manager intends **not** to issue an NOC / FNOC they should be required not only to report on this but to discuss the merits of their decision with a Personnel Officer and / or senior manager. They will be able to provide advice on the wider consistency of decisions, to ensure that the manager is able to evaluate their decision compared to other decisions taken in the organisation.
- 7.8.7 Such a discussion must clearly take place after they have gathered all the relevant information at the RTWI and before the manager gives their decision to the employee. The employee should also see that there is a clear period of consideration given to the decision to issue an NOC / FNOC.

No.	Recommendation	Responsibility	Completion Date
R12	There should be clear guidance within the procedure over where a manager may consider not issuing an NOC / FNOC.	Chief Personnel Officer <i>Policy: Procedure Framework</i>	31 July 2003

No.	Items for Further Discussion	Responsibility	Completion Date
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D6	Where a manager considers that a Notification of Concern or Final Notification of Concern should not be issued, prior to advising the individual, they should discuss this with a suitable senior manager and Personnel Officer, to ensure consistency.	Chief Personnel Officer <i>Policy: Procedure Framework</i>	14 January 2004
D7	Prior to issuing a Notification of Concern, managers should be required to adjourn from the RTWI and give reasonable time to consider this. At this point a Personnel Officer may advise them.	Chief Personnel Officer <i>Policy: Procedure Framework</i>	14 January 2004

7.9 Managing Attendance from Day One

- 7.9.1 To have any continued emphasis on absence as our workforce changes we need to ensure that all new entrants to the organisation understand the importance we place on satisfactory attendance. It needs to be clearly and consistently communicated at this early stage that this is a matter of performance. New entrants must understand clearly that if they do not perform satisfactorily within their probationary period, then we will give serious consideration to their continued employment.
- 7.9.2 There needs to be a consistent corporate emphasis on this. A standard briefing should be delivered to all new entrants. This should be done personally, rather than stipulating that it is a requirement that all new entrants familiarise themselves with the procedure. In making this clear and giving the new entrant the opportunity to achieve, we must as an organisation stipulate what standard of performance we are expecting to be achieved.
- 7.9.3 Regular reviews must take place throughout the probationary period, at which attendance must be discussed. Additionally, RTWIs conducted during the probationary period should make clear that attendance is one of the criteria upon which we make a decision about continued employment. Should two instances of absence occur in the probationary period, the individual must be told that their continued employment will be considered if there is a third instance.
- 7.9.4 Managers must understand through the procedure that, rather than issue an NOC for unsatisfactory attendance in the probationary period, they will be expected to consider termination of employment. Where new entrants trigger this action and the manager believes that there is not a valid case to dismiss, then they must discuss this with their Personnel Officer and a senior manager (in the same way that they would if they intended not to issue an NOC).



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- 7.9.5 This may seem harsh. However, we must operate to the ethos that the probationary period is the initial opportunity for the new entrant to impress the authority with their performance. If we are to give this any meaning, we must be prepared to terminate employment where they have failed to impress. This should also be consistent in other areas of probationary performance.

No.	Recommendation	Responsibility	Completion Date
R13	A standard corporate briefing on attendance standards expected throughout the probationary period and further employment must be delivered to every new entrant.	Chief Personnel Officer <i>Policy: Induction and Probationary Period Framework</i>	31 July 2003

This should be an expected outcome of a corporate induction programme.

R14	Monitoring of performance must take place regularly within the probationary period. Attendance must be one of the criteria monitored and the criteria expected must be clearly defined.	Chief Personnel Officer <i>Policy: Induction and Probationary Period Framework</i>	31 July 2003
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No.	Items for Further Discussion	Responsibility	Completion Date
D8	Clear corporate guidance must be given to managers that they will be expected to consider termination of employment where attendance (and other areas of performance) is unsatisfactory within the probationary period.	Chief Personnel Officer <i>Policy: Induction and Probationary Period Framework</i>	14 January 2004
D9	Where a manager considers that termination of employment for unsatisfactory attendance within the probationary period is not appropriate, they must discuss and justify this with a senior manager and Personnel Officer prior to advising the individual.	Chief Personnel Officer <i>Policy: Induction and Probationary Period Framework</i>	14 January 2004

7.10 Managing Long Term Absence

- 7.10.1 As stated in section 6.10.4, the process in place for managing long-term absence is broadly appropriate to the Council's situation. However, reports to COG have indicated that whilst the overall number of long term sick staff has now started to decrease, there has been a lack of visible progress in a number of cases.
- 7.10.2 It is difficult to ascertain the effect that COG has on managing this. In comparing consecutive reports to COG (between two and three months apart) it is possible to see a lack of progress in a number of long term absence cases. Were COG to seriously challenge this, it



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would clearly be a catalyst for action within departments. What is needed is straightforward:

'It is about getting managers to commit to definite actions in definite timescales and then go out and achieve them. COG (or indeed any other management team) should not be expected to receive reports of inaction and delay and not to challenge this.'

- 7.10.3 Whether COG is an appropriate forum for questioning progress on numerous individual cases within each department is questionable, and is something that COG itself has questioned. An acceptable solution might be for departments to have in place a standard process for collating the information to enable senior managers to check progress. This would provide for greater managerial visibility of the level of progress, without burdening COG with too much detail.

No.	Recommendation	Responsibility	Completion Date
R15	The cases of all current long term sick staff should be reviewed to ensure that: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> All current required actions (such as case reviews and referrals) have been carried out. Identify further action and precise dates for this. 	Departmental Personnel Officers <i>Delivery of Service</i>	30 April 2003
R16	Information on long term sickness should be consistent across the Council, clearly showing <ul style="list-style-type: none"> The first day of absence and number of days absent The last action that has been undertaken (date) The next required action (date) Clear timescale for managerial action 	Chief Personnel Officer <i>Policy: Information Framework</i>	30 April 2003

7.11 Managing Documentation

- 7.11.1 The Internal Audit section of the MAG Peer Audit demonstrated that there are difficulties and inconsistencies in creating an appropriate audit trail for absence cases. This leaves the authority potentially exposed should a case go to an Employment Tribunal, allowing these gaps to be exploited.
- 7.11.2 Whilst a standard form is in use for RTWIs, there are other forms in use to record Notification of Absence, records of contact whilst off sick and reasons for not issuing an NOC / FNOC. These forms are not standard across all departments.



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- 7.11.3 A slight change in philosophy should be considered here. The RTWI form is the core of the process and is a relatively good document for this. However, the purpose of the form can also be to record all the details of an instance of absence, the history prior to this and the consideration that the manager has given to this. This means that the information a manager needs to consider attendance should be available to them in one place (whether this be stored on paper, electronic means or both).
- 7.11.4 The RTWI form could be thus used to provide:
- (i) Detail on the instance of absence being discussed (dates, duration, reason, contact with the manager whilst absent / attempts to contact made by the manager)
 - (ii) Detail on previous absences within the preceding monitoring period (in summary)
 - (iii) Guidance for managers as to the points that may need to be discussed (the current tick list is adequate, although some re-wording to increase clarity may be sensible)
 - (iv) Evidence of the discussion that has taken place in the RTWI, expanding on the points in (iii) above
 - (v) Actions that will be taken by both parties to improve the situation
 - (vi) A rationale for the decision of the manager to issue / not issue an NOC / FNOC
- 7.11.5 An example of what this might look like is shown in **Appendix 6**. Managers do not like completing paperwork at the best of times. So this needs to be made as easy as possible to use (e.g. the tick list for general points covered, and under 'Details of Issues Discussed', a note to indicate that this is in addition to the items ticked).
- 7.11.6 Finally, as with any form, it is essential that those using it be given explicit guidance in what to include. Providing an example, showing 'what a good job looks like' is a good idea in this.

No.	Recommendation	Responsibility	Completion Date
R17	Documentation in use should be standardised across all departments. The amount of documentation required should be minimised, combining documents where appropriate.	Chief Personnel Officer <i>Policy: Procedure Framework</i>	30 April 2003
R18	Managerial training should encompass the requirement to keep appropriate documentation, and managers should be given an example of how completed documentation should look.	Chief Personnel Officer <i>Policy: Managerial Training and Competence Framework</i>	31 July 2003



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7.12 Future Reviews of the Procedure

- 7.12.1 Reviewing implementation of the procedure is a fundamental stage in ensuring effective implementation. That the Managing Attendance Group returned to examine implementation six months into the new procedure is an important step. That they were able to gain the commitment of departments in carrying out the audit in doing so is an important achievement.
- 7.12.2 Of course, the ultimate measure of success is what happens as a result of the audit. Many a good report or audit has fallen down due to a lack of a will to implement its recommendations.
- 7.12.3 Change to the way that absence is managed is, by virtue of a number of factors, almost certain. It is again essential that the extent of such change be measured. Such measurement needs to be against clear success criteria. If there is a criticism to be levelled at the MAG Audit, it is that it was not able to measure the full effectiveness of change in the procedure. Future audits should seek to remedy this, because there will not be the same effect achieved by re-focusing attention on attendance (which may or may not be partially responsible for the improvements seen).
- 7.12.4 However, the MAG Audit has proven that a departmental peer audit is an effective mechanism for gathering information on the operation of a procedure. This is a worthwhile practice that should be more widespread within the Council, especially for procedures that it is suspected are not being put into effect.
- 7.12.5 Following changes to the procedure and the way in which the organisation shapes the behaviour of managers a full annual review should be undertaken to ensure that the procedure works and continues to do so.

No.	Recommendation	Responsibility	Completion Date
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Managing Absence

R19	There should be an annual audit of attendance, which should	Departmental Personnel Officers <i>Delivery of Service</i>	31 July 2003
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Be performed on a 'peer audit' basis, with departments auditing one another • Cover implementation of previous recommendations and current application of the procedure • Be measured against common key success criteria • Be underpinned by departmental self-auditing processes 		

7.13 Managerial Training and Competence

- 7.13.1 Without a robust mechanism to equip managers with skills and behaviours that they need to put the attendance management process into effect, it is clear that however sound the procedure is, it is doomed to fail.
- 7.13.2 The overall (albeit informal) three-strand strategy regarding development in this area is broadly sound, and fits with other corporate initiatives being taken. Recommendations regarding the areas that an induction needs to address from the perspective of making employees aware of the corporate emphasis are contained in section **7.10: Managing Attendance from Day One**.
- 7.13.3 There is a need to have a consistent corporate approach to this. Whilst it is sensible that there should still be scope to cover certain areas that cause departments particular issues in more detail, the core content and message must be the same.
- 7.13.4 There is an issue with the level of corporate resource available to design and implement corporate level training. The underlying ethos is that management development is aimed at a strategic level in the organisation, with implementation of training carried out by DPOs. In doing this, the DPOs have a great deal of flexibility in how they choose to achieve this.
- 7.13.5 It is fundamental to creating a consistent approach that this issue is driven from a corporate perspective. Whilst DPOs have important inputs to shape this process, the overall direction must be determined corporately. Whilst training may be delivered by departmental trainers, this must be to a corporate standard, covering a corporate course format.
- 7.13.6 Managerial training needs also to work towards the broader development of competence. Whilst the competences required to



Managing Absence

manage absence are by no means unique to managing absence, encouraging competent behaviour in these areas should be part of a programme of achieving wider objectives in managerial behaviour. Ultimately, through this process, a position will be reached whereby all managers who manage people have reached an appropriate level of competence in doing so.

7.13.7 A process of identifying areas of specific problems within the Council and identifying 'task teams' of experienced individuals to develop skills and practices in those areas is a very sensible solution to a highly specific problem. It prioritises training needs to maximise impact in the early stages of the programme. It will also be relatively fast to implement compared to other developmental processes.

7.13.8 Efforts to do this require a clear means of identifying

- The areas that would benefit most from this support and development – this could be evaluated through a combination of statistical and anecdotal evidence
- Individuals with appropriate experience and a track record of achieving to provide this support
- Measures to validate that progress made is maintained

No.	Recommendation	Responsibility	Completion Date
R20	Work on the corporate framework of managerial competences should continue as currently scheduled, with delivery to commence in April 2003.	Chief Personnel Officer <i>Policy: Managerial Training and Competence Framework</i>	30 April 2003
R21	<p>Identification should take place of</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Specific areas of high absence and / or specific key problems • Individuals with appropriate experience and a track record of achieving <p>These individuals should provide support by developing skills and practices within the identified areas. Measures should be put in place to validate that progress made is maintained</p>	Chief Personnel Officer <i>Policy: Managerial Training and Competence Framework</i>	30 April 2003



Managing Absence

R22	As a broad aim of strategy, all managers of people should be working towards achieving competence in the managerial competences identified as appropriate to attendance management.	Chief Personnel Officer <i>Policy: Managerial Training and Competence Framework</i>	*
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*This process will take a considerable time to achieve overall (longer than 12 months), and therefore such progress towards this should be measurable.

7.14 Return To Work Interviews

7.14.1 To deal with the lack of understanding on the purpose of the RTWI, there needs to be more explicit guidance and training for managers on how the interview should be conducted.

- 7.14.1 The purpose of a RTWI is to
- Welcome the employee back to work, let them know they have been missed, and update them on any changes that have occurred
 - Gather appropriate information about the reason for the absence and how it may further impact upon their work
 - Explain the Managing Attendance policy and procedure
 - Discuss the employee's attendance record in the context of why we manage attendance
 - Agree any actions necessary (on both sides) to improve attendance

7.14.2 Managers must understand this purpose and the reasons why RTWIs must be carried out in every case of absence. Managers need to be monitored on completion of RTWIs, ensuring that they conduct all RTWIs within three days of the individual returning to work.

7.14.3 There needs to be a process of training all people managers in the Council to a consistent standard of conducting RTWIs. Such training should (as is proposed within the Economic Development Department) also encompass carrying out mock RTWIs to give managers experience of this.

No.	Recommendation	Responsibility	Completion Date
R23	Managers should adopt a welfare and information gathering approach with regard to conducting RTWIs. There should be set criteria for what the RTWI should provide.	Chief Personnel Officer <i>Policy: Procedure Framework</i>	31 July 2003



Managing Absence

7.15 Recognising Good Attendance

- 7.15.1 Attendance management, like many performance tools, is all too often perceived as a tool for chastisement. There are also incentives. Part of winning the psychological battle involves changing peoples' minds: getting people to reconsider whether they do genuinely need to be off sick. Clearly, this generally only applies to short term absences.
- 7.15.2 Some areas of departments already have good practice in this area. This does however need to be consistently applied across the organisation. Measures that might be considered here include:
- (i) Praising good attendance – showing it is valued
 - (ii) Offering incentives for good attendance – showing it can be valuable
 - (iii) Showing what the team has achieved from good attendance
- 7.15.3 It is important to note that even where absence is high, there will still be people who do not have any absence at all. This is above average performance. Openly praising such people (for example, those who have not lost any time in the last six months) shows them and others that good attendance is valued. This can be done in team meetings (when discussing performance), on staff notice boards and in newsletters to the team.
- 7.15.4 Incentives can be a double-edged sword. To achieve satisfactory performance is an obligation of all employees and can be thus assumed to have already been 'paid for' in paying the person's salary. However, above satisfactory performance can be rewarded simply and cheaply. This could include offering additional days off with pay, gift vouchers, small presentation awards and so forth. This could even be done in a 'prize draw' for sections of people.
- 7.15.5 Recognising good attendance is about communicating effectively what attendance delivers. Demonstrating tangibly to the team how service has improved, as a result of attendance is something that people can relate to and readily understand.
- 7.15.6 It is just as vital to be positive about good performance as it is to challenge poor performance. As an organisation we need to be imaginative and enthusiastic about how we do this.

No.	Items for Further Discussion	Responsibility	Completion Date
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Managing Absence

D10 Standard mechanisms for recognising and rewarding good attendance should be put in place across the Council.

Chief Personnel Officer
*Policy: Procedure
Framework*

14 January 2004

7.16 Introducing Change

- 7.16.1 In introducing change to the way that attendance is managed the Council needs to emphasise that we are constantly looking to learn from experience and review how we work accordingly. Although there is progress on some issues regarding absence, the process for managing attendance is not directly linked to our objectives. We cannot defer action on this. This is about finding the right answers that will enable Birmingham City Council to operate on a more business-like footing, capable of delivering these targets.
- 7.16.2 The Council also needs to accept that absence is a high profile issue. That newspapers consider the authority's absence performance headline material gives a strong indication of the measure of public sensitivity about how efficiently we spend their money. Demonstrating to our employees the importance that the media attach to this cannot be negative.
- 7.16.3 We also need to accept that there are some changes required in the way both managers and employees behave. In the large part, the responsibility for changing the attitude of employees lies with managers. In the same way, the responsibility for training managers in the right ways to behave and manage lies with the organisation.
- 7.16.4 Changing the procedure and the way it is managed may not prove popular and nor will it be easy. But it is and always will remain that a fundamental part of being able to deliver a service is to have the right number of people available to do it.



Appendix 1: Brief Chronology of Events

05 December 2000	<i>Sick-note city faces £60m bill</i> – Birmingham Post
Spring 2001	The Managing Attendance Group (MAG) was formed to look at the attendance policy and procedure, developing the procedure flow chart and the Managers' Toolbox
June 2001	Negotiations progressing with trade unions, working towards a launch date for the revised process of 01 July 2001.
July 2001	District Audit commence examination of sickness absence across departments, management action taken, and a comparison of policies and procedures with similar authorities
August 2001	District Audit action plan produced. 31 recommendations made
05 September 2001	<i>Council purge on sickness victory</i> – Birmingham Evening Mail
01 October 2001	The revised Managing Attendance Procedure was introduced
March 2002	MAG re-formed to examine implementation of the procedure, through a peer audit process
April 2002	MAG peer audit of Chief Officers carried out
May 2002	MAG peer audit of departmental managers and staff carried out
28 August 2002	MAG peer audit results reported to Chief Officers' Group



Appendix 2: Methodology of the MAG Peer Audit

The Managing Attendance Group Peer Audit

Following the implementation of the revised Managing Attendance procedure in October 2001, it was agreed that MAG would return to audit the implementation of the procedure after six months. This audit was carried out from April to May 2002.

MAG was led by Ian Coghill (Assistant Director, Environmental and Consumer Services), and comprised at least one representative from each department, as well as numerous representatives from central departments.

The MAG audit comprised five sections:

- (i) A questionnaire to departmental Chief Officers
- (ii) One to one interviews with managers and DPOs in each department to a standard framework, conducted by members of MAG from one department auditing another
- (iii) Interviews with staff in each department to a standard framework, both one to one and over the telephone, conducted by members of MAG from one department auditing another
- (iv) Internal Audit examining the management of individual absence cases within each department
- (v) Discussion with Chief Officers individually of the results of stages (ii) to (iv)

The MAG audit comprises a significant and detailed source of information on how attendance is managed in the Council. It was an important consideration in conducting this Scrutiny review that in gathering information it did not overlap with the work of MAG. This would have caused unproductive duplication.

Questions for Chief Officers

1. What specific measures would you point to, to demonstrate that DMT members individually and collectively support the corporate efforts to measure and more effectively manage employee absence levels?
2. Within the written performance contract of DMT members (and / or other senior managers), what specific objectives exist that respond to their important role in managing sickness absence? Please provide examples of the actual measures where they exist.
3. Is there a nominated member of the DMT with overall responsibility for absence management and is there evidence of that nominated officer being involved in Action Plan Progress / Co-ordination? Please provide a copy of any Departmental Action Plan with your response.
4. In what ways have the revised procedures positively impacted upon the management of attendance? Equally, are there any issues of concern you would wish to draw attention to?
5. What processes exist to monitor the extent to which line managers are performing their specific responsibilities?



6. What progress has been made in the development of departmental policies to actively pursue health promotion?
7. How will you ensure that newly appointed managers / employees receive appropriate briefing in the future?
8. Is there any evidence that employees are not complying with their responsibilities under this scheme by
 - (i) Not making all reasonable efforts to respond to attempts by their line manager to maintain contact during their period of absence?
 - (ii) Not communicating with their line manager either on the first day of absence or at day four in cases of longer-term absence?
 - (iii) Refusing to participate in the return to work interview process or refusing home visits?
9. During the period 01 October 2001 to 31 March 2002, what percentage of employees meeting 'triggers' for NOCs have been issued with them?
10. During the same period, what percentage of employees meeting 'triggers' for FNOCs have been issued with them?
11. During the same period, what percentage of employees absent for more than four weeks have received home visits?
12. What percentage of managers have attended briefing sessions and has any evaluation been undertaken of the effectiveness of those briefing sessions?

Questions for Managers

1. Have you been adequately briefed on the Managing Attendance procedure? (Agree Strongly / Agree / Disagree / Disagree Strongly)
2. Have you received a copy of the Managers' Toolbox for Managing Attendance? (Yes / No)
3. Did you attend specific Managers' briefings? (Yes / No)
4. Did you brief your staff? (Yes / No)
5. Has there been an incident where an officer has had three periods of sickness and a Notification of Concern has not been issued? (Yes / No/ If no, why not?)
6. Do you feel you are competent and confident to fulfil your responsibilities for Managing Attendance? (Yes / No)
7. Have you encountered any hindrance or difficulties in managing attendance since October? (Yes / No / If so, what are they?)
8. What would help you to manage attendance better?
9. Do you believe that the policy helps the section manage and monitor sickness absence? (Yes / No)
10. Do you believe that the Managing Attendance policy is reasonably fair? (Agree Strongly / Agree / Disagree / Disagree Strongly)

Questions for Departmental Personnel Officers

1. How regularly do you report on sickness absence to DMT? Can you give an example of a report?
2. What interventions have you made to ensure proper application of the procedure?
3. What arrangements have been made to include the Managing Attendance procedure in induction?



4. What health promotions policies have you implemented or are currently developing?
5. What action is the department taking to ensure Managing Attendance continues to be a high priority?
6. What evidence have you got to demonstrate that the policy is being implemented consistently throughout the department?
7. What problems have you encountered?

Questions to Employees

1. Have you been briefed on the Managing Attendance policy? (Yes / No)
2. Have you a reasonable understanding of it? (Yes / No)
3. Do you believe that the policy helps the section manage and monitor sickness absence? (Strongly Agree / Agree / Disagree / Strongly Disagree)
4. Do you believe that the Managing Attendance policy is reasonably fair? (Yes / No)
5. Does it encourage people to come to work? (Yes / No)
6. Do you consider your line manager is fair and reasonable in the way in which they administer the Managing Attendance policy? (Yes / No)



Appendix 3: Attendance Procedures in Other Organisations

Methodology

Details were obtained of Sickness and Absence policies used by various public and private sector organisations. These include other local authorities, universities, a health trust, a trade union and the retail sector. The list of organisations used is shown below.

Organisation	Sector	Activity
Bradford Metropolitan District Council	Public	Local Authority
Croydon Council	Public	Local Authority
Leicester City Council	Public	Local Authority
Leeds City Council	Public	Local Authority
Manchester City Council	Public	Local Authority
Newcastle City Council	Public	Local Authority
University of Leicester	Public	University
Nottingham City Council	Public	Local Authority
Liverpool John Moores University	Public	University
North Manchester NHS Trust	Public	NHS
Royal College of Nursing	Public	Trade Union
Asda Stores Ltd	Private	Retail
Virgin Trains	Private	Transport

Whilst these do not give any indication of how effectively the procedures are being implemented within the organisation, they do show the varying means by which organisations manage attendance.

Five main categories were selected which encompassing the main points of each procedure. These were:

- Sickness reporting procedure
- Return to Work Interviews
- Certification of absence
- Notices Of Concern / formal action
- Long term absence review procedure

Summary of Findings

Full details of the policies examined are available upon request from the Scrutiny section. A summary of the range of the policies in the above five areas is given below.

Some policies were more detailed than others were. This was particularly the case with those from local authorities and in general terms the criteria were very similar. Generally, employees were expected to report by a given time on the first day of their absence.



Area	Range of Measures
Sickness Reporting Procedure	<p>The employee is generally required to notify that they will not be able to attend work by their normal or latest possible starting time. Further notification is required by some organisations of the fourth day. One organisation (Leeds City Council) requires employees to be in contact every day, unless they can give a specific date for return.</p>
Return To Work Interviews	<p>RTWIs are used by most organisations examined, and in all but one case these were required to be done on the first day back at work. Nearly a third of organisations did not use RTWIs, although one (Virgin Trains) recommend that managers should see employees on their return.</p>
Certification of Absence	<p>All organisations examined require a Doctor's Note for absences beyond the eighth calendar day. There was great variation in certification required for absences of seven days or less. The requirements included</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • No certification required • Self-certification required from day four to seven • Self-certification required from day one to seven <p>Some organisations also stipulated that after a period of time absent a Doctor's Note certifying fitness to resume work is required.</p>
Notices of Concern / Formal Action	<p>Only two organisations (Bradford Council and Liverpool John Moores University) made no reference to formal monitoring criteria. Most organisations defined the trigger point for formal action in terms of a volume criterion (number of days), a frequency criterion (number of instances) or both. Many use combinations of different levels of volume and frequency criteria. The most common monitoring period was over twelve months / 52 weeks. The next most common was 3 months.</p>
Long Term Absence Review	<p>Organisations generally considered long term absence to be absences of four weeks / one month or more. Many were not specific about action to be taken. Where actions were specified, these generally included involving Occupational Health services and a discussion of return possibilities.</p>



In comparison to these organisations, Birmingham's procedure rates as follows:

Area	Rating	Notes
Sickness Reporting Procedure	=	BCC's requirements are broadly similar to the other organisations examined.
Return To Work Interviews	=	BCC's requirements are broadly similar to most of the other organisations examined.
Certification of Absence	=	BCC's requirements are broadly similar to the other organisations examined.
Notices of Concern / Formal Action	x	The trigger point for formal action is less specifically defined in BCC's procedure, compared to the other organisations examined.
Long Term Absence Review	✓	BCC's procedure is relatively more detailed than those of the other organisations examined.

Key to Rating:

The BCC procedure is generally:

✓	More specific / defined in this area
x	Less specific in its requirements in this area
=	Similar in this area

Than procedures in the other organisations examined.

Comparison against Core Cities

In comparison to the other seven Core Cities (four of whom were included in the review of attendance procedures), the Council rates as follows:

Core City Authority	Days Absence per FTE
Bristol	8.27
Manchester	10.13
Leeds	11.70
Sheffield	13.70
Nottingham	13.72
Newcastle	14.58
Liverpool	16.48
Birmingham	17.96



Appendix 4: The MAG Peer Audit: Summary of Results

This appendix summarises the results of the Managing Attendance Group Peer Audit, providing a summary of

- The issues raised by those audited within departments
- The relative weight of those responses (i.e. in how many departments the issue was reflected)
- The responses of line managers to the questionnaire

Responses to the Audit:

Line Manager Audit		Yes	No
1	Have you been adequately briefed on the Managing Attendance Procedure?	92.77%	7.23%
2	Have you received a copy of the Managers' Toolbox for Managing Attendance?	96.39%	3.61%
3	Did you attend specific Managers' briefings?	86.75%	13.25%
4	Did you brief your staff?	92.77%	7.23%
5	Has there been an incident where an officer has had three periods of sickness and a Notification of Concern has not been issued?	45.78%	54.22%
6	Do you feel you are competent and confident to fulfil your responsibilities for Managing Attendance?	92.77%	7.23%
7	Have you encountered any hindrance or difficulties in Managing Attendance since October?	34.94%	65.06%
9	Do you believe that the policy helps the section manage and monitor sickness absence?	83.13%	16.87%
10	Do you believe the Managing Attendance Procedure is reasonably fair?	73.49%	26.51%



Employee Audit		Yes	No
1	Have you been briefed on the Managing Attendance Procedure? *	80.00%	20.00%
2	Have you a reasonable understanding of it?	88.18%	11.82%
3	Does the policy helps the section manage and monitor sickness absence?	79.63%	20.37%
4	Do you believe the Managing Attendance Procedure is reasonably fair?	57.55%	42.45%
5	Does it encourage people to come to work?	60.20%	39.80%
6	Do you consider that your line manager is fair and reasonable in the way in which they administer the Managing Attendance Procedure?	95.33%	4.67%

Main Issues Raised, Question 8:

The issues in the table below are those that were raised by respondents in three or more departments to question 8:

“What would help you manage attendance better?”

Subject:	Issue:	No. of Departments Reflecting This:
The Procedure	The procedure is unfair because it fails to take into account volume of absence.	7
Performance Monitoring and Information	There is a lack of information / appropriate reports available (from HRIS).	5
Performance Monitoring and Information	Inadequate information available to managers.	4
Induction and Training	Lack of clarity about the use of managerial discretion.	4
The Procedure	Lack of discretion available to managers when issuing an NOC.	4
The Procedure	Inconsistent application across departments (especially with regard to issue of NOCs).	4
The Procedure	Penalises genuine absence.	4
Induction and Training	Perceived misuse of annual leave, instead of recording as sickness.	3



Appendix 5: Attendance Information

To demonstrate how information can be collected by line managers, a small pilot exercise was carried out in two contrasting environments:

- The Scrutiny team: An office environment with 16 staff in total, and
- Thimble Mill Lane Direct Labour Organisation: A predominantly manual environment, with around 170 staff

Through carrying out this pilot exercise the aim was to ascertain:

- The difficulty of managers maintaining information themselves
- The quality of the information managers can compile in terms of
 - Accuracy
 - Timeliness
 - Relevance to performance
- How this can be used in communicating with staff

A spreadsheet was designed to store and calculate information regarding attendance, in a format that would provide information to the line manager on areas of managing attendance that might require attention.

Feedback was sought from the users involved in this pilot exercise. The feedback indicated that the information provided was

- Easy to maintain and quickly available
- Timely, easy to understand and did not duplicate other information received on absence
- Relevant, enabling the action to be taken to be clearly identified and application of the procedure to be clearly monitored
- Useful for communicating performance to both the team and managers

An example of the information provided by this sheet is shown below.



Week Ending			
Target	Vacancies	Performance	Target Achieved?
5.00%	Maximum Vacancy Gap	%	No
	Permanent Vacancies	0	
Turnover			
	Turnover in last 26 weeks	0	
Attendance			
7.00%	Maximum Absence	%	No
15.00	Maximum Annual Days Per Employee	0.00	Yes
	Cost of Absence (This Week)	£ -	
7.00%	Absence in last 12 weeks	%	No
15.00	Annual Days Per Employee in last 12 weeks	0.00	Yes
7.00%	Absence Year To Date	%	No
15.00	Annual Days Year To Date	0.00	Yes
Return To Work Interviews			
100%	RTWIs Completed	100.00%	Yes
100%	Within Three Days of Resuming	100.00%	Yes
Long Term Sick			
100%	Contacted in last four weeks	100.00%	Yes
	Cost of Long Term Absence (To Date)	£ -	
Redeployees			
	Redeployees	0	
100%	Centrally Registered	100.00%	Yes
	Medical Redeployees	0	
	At Risk Redeployees	0	
	Average Duration (Days)	0	
	Current Cost To Date of Redeployees	£ -	



For Week Ending:		DD-MMM-YY	
Recorded Absences			
Performance Measures		Performance	
7% Maximum Absence			
15.75 Maximum Annual Days Per Employee			
Employee Number:	Name	First Day Absent	Resumed Work
		Days Lost (This Week)	Hours Lost (This Week)
		Paybill Cost	Other Costs
		Total Cost	
1	None		£ -
2	None		£ -
3	None		£ -
4	None		£ -
5	None		£ -
6	None		£ -
7	None		£ -
8	None		£ -
9	None		£ -
10	None		£ -
Total			£ -
Return To Work Interviews			
Performance Measures		Performance	
100% RTWI Completed		100.00%	
100% Within Three Days of Resuming		100.00%	
Employee Number:	Name	Date Resumed	Date RTWI Done
		Days Taken	Acceptable ?
1	None		Yes
2	None		Yes
3	None		Yes
4	None		Yes
5	None		Yes
6	None		Yes
7	None		Yes
8	None		Yes
9	None		Yes
10	None		Yes
(Final) Notifications of Concern Triggered			
Employee Number:	Name	Issued?	Reasons for Non-Issue
1	None		
2	None		
3	None		
4	None		
5	None		
Long Term Sick			
Performance Measures		Performance	
100% Contacted in last four weeks		100.00%	



Appendix 6: Sample Return To Work Interview Form

Personal Details:

Name: _____ Payroll No.: _____
 Department: _____ Section: _____

This Absence:

First day of absence: _____ Date resumed work: _____

Working days lost: _____

Reason for this absence: *

*Terms such as 'illness' or 'unwell' are insufficient. Be specific.

Previous absence in the last 12 months:

First day of absence:	Working days lost:	Date resumed work:	Reason:
_____	_____	_____	_____
_____	_____	_____	_____
_____	_____	_____	_____
_____	_____	_____	_____
_____	_____	_____	_____
_____	_____	_____	_____
_____	_____	_____	_____

Contact while absent:

Date:	Type of contact:	Notes:
_____	_____	_____
_____	_____	_____
_____	_____	_____
_____	_____	_____
_____	_____	_____
_____	_____	_____



Return to Work Interview:

Date of Interview: _____

Present: _____

Areas covered during the interview: *

	May be accompanied by a representative
	How are you now? Glad to have you back
	Was the absence related to any problems at work?
	Was the absence due to an accident at work?
	Was the absence due to pregnancy?
	Was the absence related to a disability?
	Explain the difficulties that absence creates for the organisation: covering work, pressure on colleagues, service suffers
	Explain the absence policy
	Explain flexible alternatives to taking sickness absence
	Is there anything that we can do to help?

* Ticked as applicable. Further detail provided below where required.

Details of interview:

Actions agreed to improve attendance:

Signed: _____ (Manager)

_____ (Employee)

Data Protection Act, 1998:

The information used on this form will be used for the control and monitoring of sickness absence. Information will be processed in accordance with the requirements of the above Act.

The manager should keep the original copy of this form. A copy of the completed form must be given to:

- The employee, immediately following the interview
- The Personnel section



Appendix 7: Background Documents

The following documents are additional documentary sources of information regarding the management of attendance within the Council.

Date	Title	
March 2001 to August 2002	Reports to Chief Officers' Group on Managing Attendance	Chief Personnel Officer
August 2001	Managing Sickness Absence	Birmingham Audit
October 2001	Managing Attendance Procedure and documentation: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • A Guide for Employees • Managers' Toolbox • Managers' Briefing Pack 	
July 2002	Best Value Review of People – Options for Change	
August 2002	Peer Audit of the Implementation of the Managing Attendance Procedure, including report to COG (28 August).	Managing Attendance Group



Appendix 8: Comments on Items for Further Discussion

The following comments are those made during discussions with the Managing Attendance Group and the Cabinet Member for Human Resources and Equalities.

No.	Items for Further Discussion	Comments by MAG	Scrutiny Comments
D1	<p>Departments should have individual sickness absence targets, which</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Collectively deliver the corporate absence target • Take account of individual department issues in the short term • Seek improvement from all departments 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Chief Officers' Group has already expressed a view on this issue on 28 August 2002. • An issue was raised whereby the targets need to have consistency across the new Directorates if this is to be done (e.g. the differences between rates in Urban Design, Planning and Transportation). • Views were also expressed that we need to avoid giving the implication that we believe working in certain departments makes you more ill than in others. This was despite the nationally recognised issues with attendance in areas such as Social Services. • It was also suggested that differential targets between departments require different tools to address the issues. • The Cabinet member for HR and Equalities has also added that where there are different targets between departments, each department will inevitably seek to negotiate an easier target. Having one target makes this easy to control. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • This is a 'short' term situation over the next few years, whilst departments take action to address the underlying issues that lead to differential performance on attendance. • This is very much about not setting departments up to fail. Setting impossible targets will lead to inevitable failure, risking not achieving corporate targets. • All departments should contribute to achievement. Whilst there is indubitably a residual level of absence that is the minimum level of absence, further improvements can still be sought from departments.
D2	<p>The criteria stating at what point attendance becomes unsatisfactory should be changed to reflect</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • A number of instances of absence, and • A percentage of absence • Over a timescale expressed in weeks <p>This should also be reflected in the criteria at further stages of the procedure (i.e. after a Notification of Concern has been issued).</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Chief Officers' Group has already expressed a view on this issue on 28 August 2002. • The additional point was made that any such review should be based upon deeper research into patterns of frequency and recurrence of absence. This was agreed. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Further research into the precise nature of short and long term absence should underpin the revision of the criteria.



D3	<p>The criteria defining unsatisfactory attendance should be directly linked to organisational targets (i.e. BV12), and should therefore change in line with corporate targets.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Chief Officers' Group has already expressed a view on this issue on 28 August 2002. A view was also expressed that targets that change make the matter more complicated for managers. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> This is an essential part of being able to achieve increasingly more difficult targets. As the target becomes more difficult, the criteria to measure performance should move with this.
D4	<p>There should be a clear link between the criteria used for attendance in both the probationary period and further employment. Ideally, these should be the same (i.e. 26 weeks).</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> This issue is linked to other issues relating to the probationary period (R21-24). These should be addressed as a whole with the probationary period process. There must be a consistent standard between the standard of attendance expected in the probationary period and further employment. It was agreed that attendance in the probationary period should be one of the factors assessed in making a suitability decision. However, a means of achieving a linkage in the criteria was not known. 	
D5	<p>Managers should pay attention to employees who have accumulated days absence equal to or greater than the target average per FTE expressed in BV12, where no formal action has been considered.</p> <p>The action taken at this stage should remain the same as in the current procedure.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> This issue is linked to the review of the criteria (D2). The point of 20 days was considered a felt-right norm for a trigger point, with the aim of keeping the process simple for managers. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> This is a part of ensuring that the criteria within the procedure reflect the targets that we are required to achieve. The target for 2003/4 is 11 days per FTE. Yet managers should be managing the absence against a figure almost twice this.
D6	<p>Where a manager considers that a Notification of Concern or Final Notification of Concern should not be issued, prior to advising the individual, they should discuss this with a suitable senior manager and Personnel Officer, to ensure consistency.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> It was felt that a line manager should be seeking advice ahead of the RTWI, not during. An example was cited where the Trade Union representative alleged that when a manager took an adjournment the decision on issuing an NOC was being made by the Personnel Officer (who was not present). 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> These items aim to address the inconsistencies in NOC issue, by ensuring that this is done correctly in the first place. This issue is about not pre-judging cases before all the facts have been gathered. A manager is not in a position to make a decision on whether to issue an NOC until they have all the information, including that gathered at the RTWI.
D7	<p>Prior to issuing a Notification of Concern, managers should be required to adjourn from the RTWI and give reasonable time to consider this. At this point a Personnel Officer may advise them.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> It was felt that the means of addressing inconsistencies should be addressed after the manager has made the decision. 	



D8	Clear corporate guidance must be given to managers that they will be expected to consider termination of employment where attendance (and other areas of performance) is unsatisfactory within the probationary period.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • These issues were felt to be tied to those of the probationary period criteria.
D9	Where a manager considers that termination of employment for unsatisfactory attendance within the probationary period is not appropriate, they must discuss and justify this with a senior manager and Personnel Officer prior to advising the individual.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • These issues were felt to be tied to those of the probationary period criteria.
D10	Standard mechanisms for recognising and rewarding good attendance should be put in place across the Council.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Some simple mechanisms are already in place, with the practice being cited of sending letters of thanks to staff in Housing and Audit. • However, Trade Unions cite that this is discrimination against women and people with disabilities (because these groups statistically in general have higher levels of absence). • Members of the group on the whole consider that this is divisive and causes more resentment than it creates goodwill. • They also questioned how this could be informed through HRIS. • This is not about paying people for attendance, as paragraph 7.16.4 makes clear. • Just as the organisation must be prepared to challenge unsatisfactory performance, it should be prepared to acknowledge good performance. • This could be reflected through measures as simple as letters of thanks. • This is not an issue of penalising either the genuinely sick or those with disabilities. There should be no financial element attached to this.