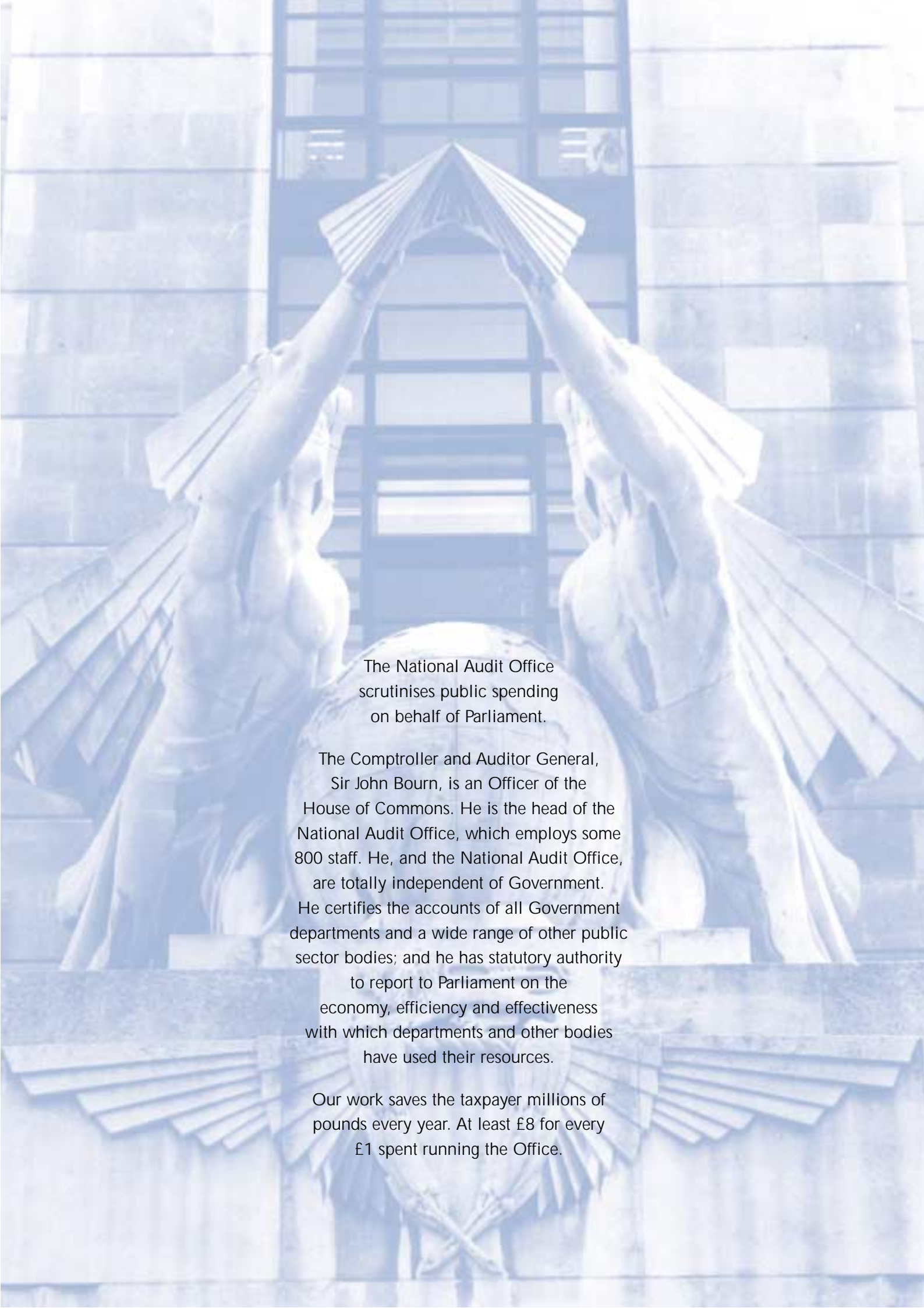


The Management of Sickness Absence in the Prison Service

REPORT BY THE COMPTROLLER AND AUDITOR GENERAL
HC 533 Session 2003-2004: 19 May 2004





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This report has been prepared under Section 6 of the National Audit Act 1983 for presentation to the House of Commons in accordance with Section 9 of the Act.

John Bourn National Audit Office
Comptroller and Auditor General 5 April 2004

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Summary

- 1 The Prison Service employed some 45,400 staff¹ in 2002-03, including 23,300 prison officers, 1,200 nursing staff and 1,200 senior operational managers, at a cost of £1,214 million - some 46 per cent of gross operating costs. The Service recorded 668,337 working days lost due to staff sickness absence in 2002-03, representing a year's work for around 3,000 full time staff. The main causes of illness included psychological conditions, such as anxiety, stress or depression, and musculoskeletal problems, such as back or neck problems. Time lost due to sickness absence cost the Prison Service some £80 million in lost staff time in 2002-03 (6.6 per cent of staff costs), although this figure excludes indirect costs, such as having to bring in additional staff to fill staff shortages.



- 2 The National Audit Office previously examined the Prison Service's management of sickness absence in 1999² and established that the extent of working days lost had a significant impact on performance. Prison Service records indicated that each member of staff took, on average, 12.6 days sickness absence in 1997-98, although the rate could be as high as 15.9 working days as the report had identified under-recording of up to 26 per cent of days lost. As a consequence, the Prison Service set a corporate target to reduce the average number of working days lost by each employee to nine days a year by 2002-03 and set up an Attendance Policy Team to develop sickness absence policies and to provide guidance and advice to establishments. Responsibility for managing sickness absence rests with the management team, in particular the Governor and Head of Personnel, at each of the 128 prisons directly administered by the Prison Service.

¹ Whole time equivalent number.

² *Managing Sickness Absence in the Prison Service, HC 372, Session 1998-99, April 1999.*

Main findings and conclusions

- 3 The Prison Service has made considerable progress in improving its procedures for recording sickness absence and improving the quality of management reports to the Prison Service Board, through greater use of the national integrated personnel computer system at each prison and by introducing new attendance management procedures with effect from November 2002. The Prison Service is also confident its data on sickness absence are now accurate. However, the number of recorded working days lost has increased since 1997-98 and, on average, each member of staff took 14.7 days sickness absence in 2002-03. Prison Service records show the rate declined in 2003-04, however, to 13.3 days per person.
- 4 The Prison Service has a higher sickness rate than other parts of Government, although direct comparisons should be treated with some caution as they do not take into account differences in the nature of the job or any differences in the accuracy of sickness absence data. Progress in reducing sickness rates depends upon closer working with the Prison Service's occupational health provider to deal with staff on long term sick leave and encouraging local managers to motivate their staff to attend and to use existing procedures to take appropriate action when attendance is unsatisfactory. The target of an average of nine days sickness absence per employee is very challenging, and if it is to be achieved, the Prison Service needs to review its staff sick pay entitlements.
- 5 Our main findings are:
 - Recorded sickness absence has increased since 1999 and further efforts by the Prison Service to reverse this trend are dependent on progress by managers in tackling the underlying causes of sickness absence. The number of working days recorded by the Prison Service as lost due to sickness absence increased by 23 per cent between 1999-00 and 2002-03, although staff numbers also increased by five per cent during this period. However, Prison Service records indicate the average sickness rate subsequently decreased by 1.4 days per person in 2003-04, a fall of ten per cent. Much of the increase in the average number of days' sickness absence per member of staff between 1999-00 and 2002-03 was due to under-reporting in earlier years - the earlier National Audit Office report estimated the extent of under-reporting to be between 11 per cent and 26 per cent in 1997-98. A higher number of working days lost due to stress, anxiety and depression appears to be the main reason why sickness rates have increased once changes due to under-reporting are taken into account.
 - Sickness absence rates appear to be higher than many other organisations, although this could be partly due to the nature of the work involved and because of differences in reporting procedures. The average sickness absence rate was broadly similar to comparable rates in the Scottish and Irish prison services in 2002-03. Privately managed prisons have reported lower sickness rates than the Prison Service (an average of 12.5 days compared to 14.7 days in 2002-03), although this may be partly because they have different employment terms and conditions for their staff, such as new recruits not being entitled to paid sick leave until three or six months employment.





- According to Prison Service data, staff on intermediate and long-term sick leave (an absence of 28 days or more) accounted for 10.5 days out of the average of 14.7 days sickness absence per employee in 2002-03. Early indications show that the new Prison Service attendance policies have begun to have an impact during 2003-04 on the management of these cases. There has been a significant reduction in the number of medical retirements of staff and a corresponding increase in dismissals for medical inefficiency since 1997-98, with consequent financial savings for the Treasury. Further progress in reducing the impact of long-term sick leave depends upon a number of factors which would include closer working between prison Governors and the Prison Service's occupational health provider. The Prison Service is confident the re-tendering of the occupational health contract at the end of 2003 should improve performance. Many of the cases are complex, however, and effective case management will require maintaining a productive relationship between the occupational health provider and the responsible manager in the Prison Service.
- Prison Service records indicate that there were wide variations in the average rate of sickness absence per person at establishments in 2002-03 varying from eight days at five establishments to 20 days or more at another ten prisons. If poorer performing prisons could be brought up to the standard for the Prison Service as a whole, the Prison Service would generate additional staff activity equivalent to nearly £9.6 million in staff costs each year.
- Poor performing prisons need to overcome a culture of absenteeism and low staff morale in order to reduce their sickness absence rates. Only 16 per cent of Governors at establishments with a low sickness absence rate³ in 2002-03 thought a culture of absenteeism was a 'very important factor' contributing to levels of sickness absence amongst their staff, compared to 47 per cent of Governors in establishments with a high sickness rate. Progress in overcoming poor staff morale largely depends upon local managers building a good rapport with staff and using new recruits to inject enthusiasm and motivation in teams.

³ Establishments were ranked according to their sickness absence rate. Those in the lowest quartile were defined as having a low sickness absence rate; those in the highest quartile a high rate.

Recommendations

6 We recommend:

- i The Prison Service should use performance monitoring to identify successful establishments and those capable of achieving significant falls in sickness absence rates.
- ii Governors must ensure that they are making best use of local expertise and share best practice. Where appropriate, area managers need to consider clustering or pooling resources to ensure the resolution of long-term and difficult sickness absence cases.
- iii The Prison Service needs to develop a senior management training programme for Governors to highlight good practices in raising staff morale and how to maintain a constructive working environment. These should be incorporated into Prison Service management and leadership programmes to maximise best practice.
- iv The Attendance Policy Team in the Prison Service should work closely with other similar organisations in the criminal justice system to disseminate the lessons they have learned and to identify other good practices in sickness absence management.
- v The Prison Service should explore the costs and benefits of changing its terms and conditions for new recruits to reflect more closely those used by the privately managed prisons.
- vi The Prison Service should set up a system to monitor feedback from establishments on the performance of the new attendance management system in order to be vigilant of any instances where establishments might try to introduce unnecessary discretion in their interpretation of the rules of the scheme.
- vii The Prison Service should seek regular feedback on the performance of the new occupational health service provider from Governors and monitor the elapsed time involved in dealing with each case through the disciplinary process.
- viii The Prison Service should encourage Governors to standardise their sickness absence monitoring reports using the good practices we identified to enable them to compare performance and practices between different teams or grades of staff in their prison.
- ix The Prison Service should encourage Governors to make clear to their staff that attendance rates are an important factor in performance and will be taken into account in any requests for changes in shift patterns or working hours, as well as any applications for promotion or transfer.

Part 1

Introduction

1.1 The Prison Service employed some 45,400 staff⁴ in 2002-03 at a cost of £1,214 million, some 46 per cent of gross operating costs. The staff include 2,400 staff based at regional and headquarters' offices and 43,000 at the 128 establishments in England and Wales directly managed by the Prison Service. Prison Service staff include uniformed officers, administrative workers, and specialists, such as health workers and chaplaincy, as well as senior operational managers (see Figure 1). Appendix 1 provides a description of each category of staff.

1.2 Working in a prison can be a difficult and stressful occupation (see Figure 2). In addition to absences for routine illness or injury, staff might be injured as a result of an assault by a prisoner or they might suffer from

stress as a consequence of having to deal with a difficult or unpleasant situation. Most Prison Service staff, in particular those in uniformed officer grades, officer support grade and nursing staff, work a shift rota. Research⁵ has suggested that shift work can have a range of adverse impacts on sleep patterns, digestion, cardiovascular and gynaecological functions, and psychological issues such as stress or anxiety.

1.3 The Prison Service recorded 668,337 working days lost in 2002-03 due to staff sickness absence, equivalent to a year's work for around 3,000 full-time staff. The number of days lost equates to an average of 14.7 days sickness absence per member of staff. Short-term sick leave (one to seven days), which typically does not require a doctor's certificate, accounted for 2.2 days out

1 Staff¹ employed by the Prison Service at the end of March 2003



NOTE

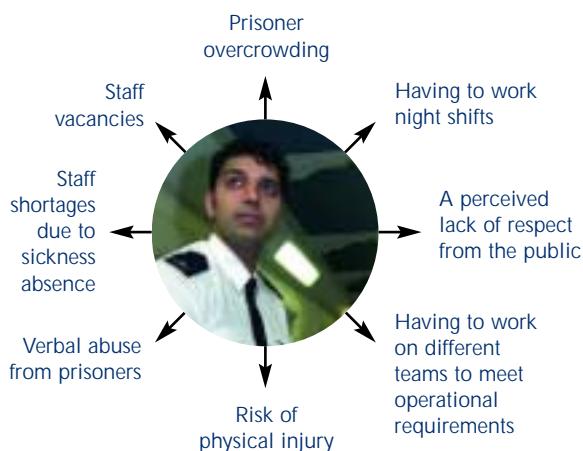
1 Whole time equivalent numbers of staff.

Source: National Audit Office analysis of Prison Service data

⁴ Whole time equivalent number.

⁵ A Wedderburn, European Foundation for the Improvement of Living and Working Conditions - BEST European Studies on Time 2000 - Shiftwork and Health.

2 A range of factors could impact on the extent of sickness absence in the Prison Service



Source: National Audit Office

of the average of 14.7 days sickness absence. Over 97 per cent of the working days lost were amongst staff working in prison establishments. Accidents and assaults by prisoners accounted for seven per cent of working days lost - 1,678 staff took 49,406 days off in 2002-03. Prison Service records indicate the main medical causes of sickness absence amongst prison staff in 2002-03 included:

- **Psychological conditions.** Such conditions include stress, anxiety, depression and a range of other mental illnesses. Some 3,657 staff took time off work for psychological reasons in 2002-03, and 178,625 working days were lost (27 per cent of the total).
- **Musculoskeletal problems.** This category includes a range of conditions involving the back, neck and other joints. Some 8,368 staff were absent in 2002-03 because of such problems, and 170,427 working days were lost (25 per cent of the total).
- **Respiratory and gastro intestinal problems.** This category includes colds, influenza and stomach upsets as well as more serious conditions, such as tuberculosis and pancreatitis. Some 14,494 staff took time off work for respiratory and gastro intestinal reasons in 2002-03, and 66,940 working days were lost (10 per cent of the total).

- **Surgery.** 1,662 staff were absent from work in 2002-03 to undergo and recuperate from surgery. As a result, 45,093 working days were lost (seven per cent of the total).
- **Other.** A wide range of conditions, including pregnancy complications, cancer, trauma and heart conditions accounted for the remaining 207,252 working days lost (31 per cent of the total). Some 21,003 staff took time off for such reasons in 2002-03.

1.4 The National Audit Office previously examined the management of sickness absence in the Prison Service in 1999⁶ and established that the extent of working days lost had a significant impact on performance. The report estimated the salary and related costs of sickness absence to be between £56 million and £62 million in lost working time in 1998-99.

Responsibility for Managing Sickness Absence in the Prison Service

1.5 The Prison Service Management Board is responsible for managing overall sickness absence levels in the organisation. The Board set a corporate target in 1999 to keep the average number of working days lost due to sickness absence by each employee to nine days a year by 2002-03. An Attendance Policy Team, comprised of six staff⁷, in Prison Service headquarters monitors performance and compiles a comprehensive quarterly report on sickness absence across the Prison Service for the Board. The Team is responsible for developing sickness absence policies in the Prison Service, and providing guidance and support to establishments. The consultants we employed to assist us with this examination considered the Attendance Policy Team to be at the forefront in developing approaches to managing sickness absence.

1.6 The Prison Service's approach to managing sickness absence is set out in an instruction to all establishments entitled 'Prison Service Order 8403: Management of Attendance Procedures', issued in October 2002. The Order contains mandatory rules, procedures and best practice guides for managing attendance and was developed in consultation with Prison Service trades unions. **Figure 3** summarises the key elements of the Prison Service's approach to managing sickness absence.

⁶ *Managing Sickness Absence in the Prison Service, HC 372 Session 1998-99, April 1999.*

⁷ *The Attendance Policy Team comprised six staff in December 2003, and was subsequently reduced to four staff when some functions were devolved to establishments.*

3 The Prison Service's approach to managing sickness absence

Occupational health	The Prison Service had a contract with BMI Health Services to provide occupational health support to its staff. This call-off service included pre-employment health assessments, health screening and trauma and counselling services. A new contract was let with Atos Origin from December 2003.
Reporting and recording sick leave	All staff must report their sickness absence - failure to do so without good reason could result in disciplinary action. Personnel teams in establishments must keep a record of sick leave taken. Staff should co-operate with all reasonable attempts to remain in contact with the Prison Service during periods of sickness absence and managers should conduct a return to work interview after the period of sickness absence ends.
Sick pay arrangements	Sick pay is paid if the person will eventually be able to return to work. The normal rate of sick pay is full pay for the first six months, half pay for the next six months and then sick pay at pension rate, if applicable, over a four year rolling period. If the sick leave was due to an assault at work, the period of absence on full pay will be extended for the total period of sick leave.
Attendance monitoring	The attendance score mechanism weighs the number of periods of absence against the total amount of days absent for each person. ¹ Breaching 51 points in a six month period would trigger an oral warning, 201 points in a year a first written warning, 401 points in a year a final written warning and 601 points dismissal. The scoring takes account of previous good attendance and whether the absence was due to an injury incurred at work.
Handling intermediate and long-term sickness absence ²	Where a medical condition is sufficiently serious and there is little prospect of staff returning to work, staff might leave the organisation through medical retirement or termination of employment due to medical inefficiency. The Governor is responsible for managing long-term sickness absence and referring cases to Occupational Health Advisers, provided by Atos Origin. The decision to support medical retirement is made by the Medical Adviser to the Principal Civil Service Pension Scheme.

NOTES

- 1 The formula used for the attendance score mechanism is: (the number of periods of absence) x (the number of periods of absence) x (the total number of days absent). For example, two periods of sick leave, one of three days and one of two days, would score 20 points.
- 2 Defined as a period of absence of 28 days or more.

Source: National Audit Office summary of Prison Service procedures

1.7 Prison Governors are responsible for the overall performance and security of their establishment and for having sufficient staff available to meet operational commitments. All establishments and headquarters teams must produce and maintain, in consultation with local trades unions, local instructions for staff on the application of Prison Service sickness absence rules. Responsibility for managing sickness absence typically rests with a member of the management team in each establishment - either the Governor or the Head of Personnel. Day to day management of sickness absence rests with operational managers, such as Principal Officers. A primary duty of managers in establishments is to respond sympathetically and supportively to staff who cannot work due to sickness. Managers should help staff to return to work, encourage them to seek medical advice and remind them of the help and advice the Prison Service can offer. Clerical staff at each establishment record working days lost due to sickness absence on an integrated personnel computer database.

Our approach

- 1.8 Healthy, motivated staff are essential to the Prison Service's objectives to:
- Protect the public by holding those committed by the courts in a safe, decent and healthy environment;
 - Reduce crime by providing constructive regimes which address offending behaviour, improve educational and work skills and promote law abiding behaviour in custody and after release.
- 1.9 This report follows up the previous National Audit Office examination of sickness absence⁸ to examine the extent and impact of working days lost due to sickness absence and to identify what further action might be taken to reduce sickness absence levels. The two main parts of the report examine:

⁸ *Managing Sickness Absence in the Prison Service, HC 372, Session 1998-99, April 1999.*



- **Part 2: Progress made in reducing sickness absence levels.** This part of the report measures how sickness absence rates in the Prison Service have changed since we previously examined this topic, how the rates compare with other organisations, and examines initiatives to reduce short and long-term sick leave.
- **Part 3: Variations in sickness absence rates between prisons.** This part of the report examines absence rates at each establishment, the role of the Governor in keeping sickness rates to a minimum and to what extent improvements in staff morale and motivation can reduce sickness absence levels.

The Committee of Public Accounts examined the management of sickness absence in the Prison Service in 1999.⁹ **Appendix 2** outlines the recommendations arising from its report and summarises what progress the Prison Service has made in implementing them.

1.10 In carrying out this examination we contracted out the main elements of the examination to DLA MCG Consulting, the Human Resource Consultancy arm of DLA, a national law firm with extensive experience of employment issues. The contractor, on our behalf, conducted a written questionnaire survey of the Governors at all 128 establishments managed by the Prison Service, supported by visits to nine establishments in order to validate the questionnaire and its results, interview the Governor and other managers, examine records and conduct focus groups with line managers. The contractor also interviewed staff and examined records held centrally, and undertook performance benchmarking with other organisations, including the ten privately managed prisons. The National Audit Office also sought the views of other key organisations, including the Prison Officers' Association and other trades unions and the Prison Service occupational health provider. The quotations from staff used in this report are taken from the discussion groups held as part of the Prison Service's review of the causes of sickness absence.¹⁰ **Appendix 3** provides a more detailed explanation of our audit approach.

⁹ Committee of Public Accounts, 33rd Report 1998-99, HC 453, August 1999.

¹⁰ Dr S Milne, *A view of the causes of sickness absence in the Prison Service from the perspective of its staff*, Prison Service, January 2004.

Part 2

Progress in reducing sickness absence levels

2.1 This part of the report examines:

- i Progress in minimising the extent and impact of sickness absence since 1999.
- ii The likely future impact of initiatives to manage sickness absence.

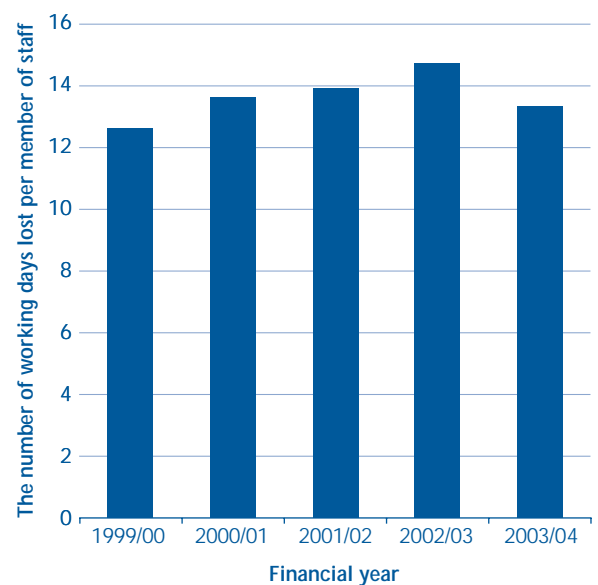
Progress in minimising the extent and impact of sickness absence since 1999

Recorded sickness absence has increased since 1999, especially absence due to stress, anxiety or depression, although much of the overall increase is probably due to under-reporting in earlier years

2.2 The number of recorded working days lost due to sickness absence in 2002-03 increased by 23 per cent compared to 1999-00, from 543,407 days to 668,337 days. The increase in the number of days lost was partly due to an increase in the number of staff employed by the Prison Service, which rose from 43,088 in 1999-00 to 45,419 in 2002-03, an increase of five per cent. Calculating the number of working days lost per member of staff to account for changes in the numbers employed, **Figure 4** shows that the average number of days lost per member of staff increased from 12.6 in 1999-00 to 14.7 in 2002-03 and subsequently decreased to 13.3 days in 2003-04.

2.3 The increase in the number of recorded working days lost between 1999-00 and 2002-03 probably reflects improvements in data recording over the same period. When the National Audit Office examined Prison Service sickness absence data for 1997-98, records indicated staff took an average of 12.6 days sickness absence a year, although the report identified considerable under-reporting of information on the personnel database, estimated at between 11 per cent and 26 per cent. Better reporting and recording

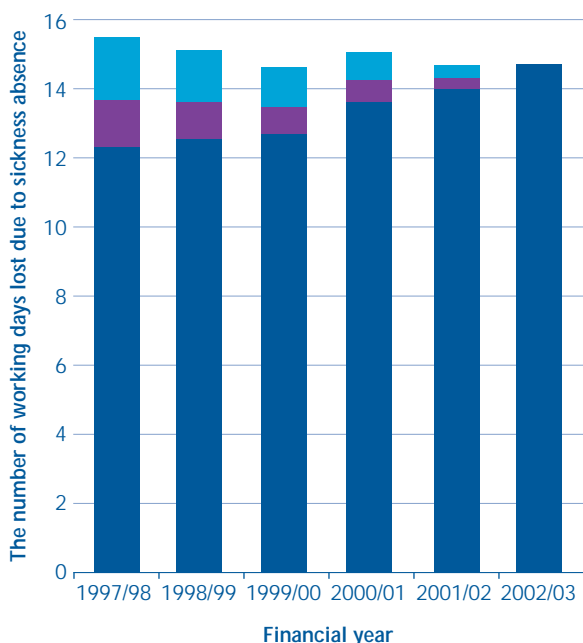
4 The average number of working days per person lost due to sickness absence increased between 1999-00 and 2002-03 and decreased in 2003-04



Source: National Audit Office analysis of Prison Service data

procedures, which include use of the PERSONNEL computer system at every establishment means the Prison Service is confident its sickness absence data for 2002-03 are accurate. Our consultants, DLA MCG Consulting, also confirmed the systems and procedures in place should ensure the data are broadly correct. **Figure 5** indicates the annual trend in the average number of working days lost due to sickness absence per person, once earlier years take account of the under-reporting of between 11 per cent and 26 per cent. Assuming the extent of under-reporting decreased at a steady rate from between 11 to 26 per cent in 1997-98 to zero by 2002-03, the figure shows that the number of working days lost decreased between 1997-98 and 1999-00 and increased in 2000-01.

5 Previous under-reporting of sickness absence might account for a large part of the apparent increase in recorded working days lost since 1997-98



■ additional days to account for 26 per cent under-reporting
 ■ additional days to account for 11 per cent under-reporting
 ■ recorded working days lost

NOTE

We have assumed the extent of under-reporting has declined steadily each year from the 11 to 26 per cent estimated for 1997-98 to zero by 2002-03.

Source: National Audit Office analysis of Prison Service data

2.4 The increase in the average number of recorded working days lost per member of staff between 1999-00 and 2002-03 is due to a combination of factors in addition to earlier under-reporting:

- **A rise in days lost due to depression, anxiety or stress.** The number of working days lost due to all psychological reasons - nearly all of which are some form of depression, anxiety, stress or other nervous debility - increased from 116,744 days in 1999-00 to 178,625 days in 2002-03, a rise of 53 per cent. This equates to an average of 3.9 working days lost per employee in 2002-03, compared with 2.7 days in 1999-00.
- **An increased number of accidents and assaults at work.** The number of recorded accidents at work that resulted in sickness absence has increased from 824 in 1999-00 to 1,201 in 2002-03. Similarly, the number of recorded assaults on staff that resulted in sickness absence has increased from 397 in 1999-00 to 693 in 2002-03. Whilst the average number of working days lost from each accident or assault

decreased from 31 days in 1999-00 to 26 days in 2002-03, the total number of working days lost has increased 30 per cent from 37,907 days to 49,406 over the same period.

- **A higher proportion of female staff.** The proportion of female staff employed by the Prison Service has increased from 26 per cent in 1999-00 to 30.6 per cent in 2002-03. The previous National Audit Office report on sickness absence established a significant difference in sickness rates amongst uniformed staff - an average 18 days a year for women, compared to an average 13 days a year for men. Prison Service figures for 2002-03 show 22 days for female officers and 16 days for their male counterparts.

2.5 During our interviews with prison staff at the establishments we visited, stress, anxiety and depression were frequently raised as a major cause of sickness absence. A Prison Service review of the causes of sickness absence in January 2004¹¹ established that psychological illnesses were the biggest cause of sickness absence and that perceived levels of stress and depression were higher than amongst similar staff in the Ministry of Defence. A survey of all staff in selected establishments determined that 54 per cent had experienced moderate to severe stress in the previous 12 months. The main causes of stress were a feeling of being unappreciated by management and the public, a lack of support at work, a perception of being over-burdened, a lack of communication between management and staff and problems caused by working with prisoners. The report identified high levels of depression arising from the high level of stress, feeling unappreciated by the public, a lack of self-worth at work, having time off disrupted due to staff shortages, and a lack of management support.

2.6 Over 45 per cent of Governors considered staff shortages had an important impact on sickness levels due to stress. The average number of prison officers and operational managers decreased slightly from 25,003 staff

"I don't know a prison officer that's never done a great deal of good but none of that ever seems valued"
Male prison officer at Highdown

"...take the big stick away and, um, um, talk to us as if we are mature adults"
Male prison officer at Belmarsh

"You can feel quite isolated and it becomes a 'them and us' thing"
Female prison officer at Latchmere House

"When has there ever been anything good about the Prison Service?"
Female prison officer at Belmarsh

Source: Prison Service

in 1999-00 to 24,503 in 2002-03. More routine tasks, however, have been delegated to officer support grade staff, whose numbers have increased from 5,762 to 6,982 over the same period. Between 1999-00 and 2002-03, the number of prisoners held in establishments directly managed by the Prison Service increased from 59,857 to 64,833.¹² Over 80 per cent of Governors considered their management style, the extent of over crowding or the types of prisoners held had minimal impact on sickness absence due to stress.

Sickness absence continues to have a big impact on the Prison Service

2.7 Staff costs amounted to £1,214 million in 2002-03 (see Figure 6). Dividing the total staff cost by the 45,419 staff gives an average cost of £26,720, equivalent to around £119 a working day. Multiplying the average staff cost per day by the 668,337 working days lost in 2002-03 suggests the direct staff cost of sickness absence was approximately £80 million in equivalent working time costs, some 6.6 per cent of staff costs. The Prison Service reported that, on average, staff were absent due to sickness for 14.7 days a year in 2002-03, compared to a target of 9 days a year. The difference between the target and performance in 2002-03 cost the Prison Service lost time amounting to some £30.8 million in staff costs.

6 Staff Costs in 2002-03

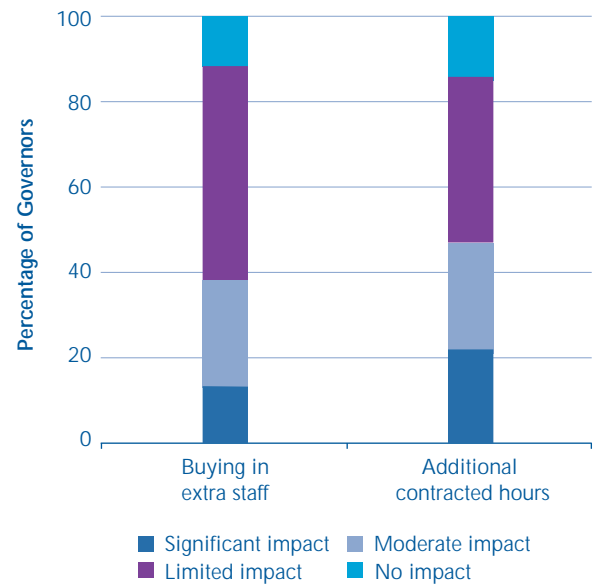
Cost	(£,000)
Wages and salaries	993,294
Social security costs	67,070
Other pension costs	149,916
Provision for accrued leave	3,316
Total	1,213,596

Source: National Audit Office analysis of Prison Service accounts 2002-03

2.8 Establishments can incur additional costs if it becomes necessary to bring in extra people to provide cover for those absent due to sick leave. Whilst prison staff are not entitled to overtime, staff can be given an ex-gratia payment if they agree to work additional contracted hours, or the Governor might buy in additional resources from elsewhere. The Prison Service spent £15.2 million on ex-gratia payments to staff for working additional contract hours (the cost is included within the total costs shown in figure 6) and £15 million on buying in agency staff (excluding medical staff) in 2002-03. A relatively small proportion of the ex-gratia payments and agency costs were due to sickness absence and the majority were due to other reasons, such as covering

staff vacancies, paying a Prison Officer to watch prisoners whilst in hospital, and bringing in extra resources to resolve year end accounts or other tasks. As part of our survey of prison Governors we sought their views on the financial impact of sickness absence on additional contracted hours and buying in extra resources. Nearly 22 per cent of Governors considered sickness absence had a significant impact on their use of additional contracted hours, and 13 per cent that it had a significant impact on their need to buy in extra staff (see Figure 7). Those Governors that did not consider sickness absence to have an impact on their need to use additional contracted hours or agency staff could have cut back on regimes or other activities instead.

7 Prison Governors' assessment of the impact of sickness absence on the need to buy in resources from elsewhere

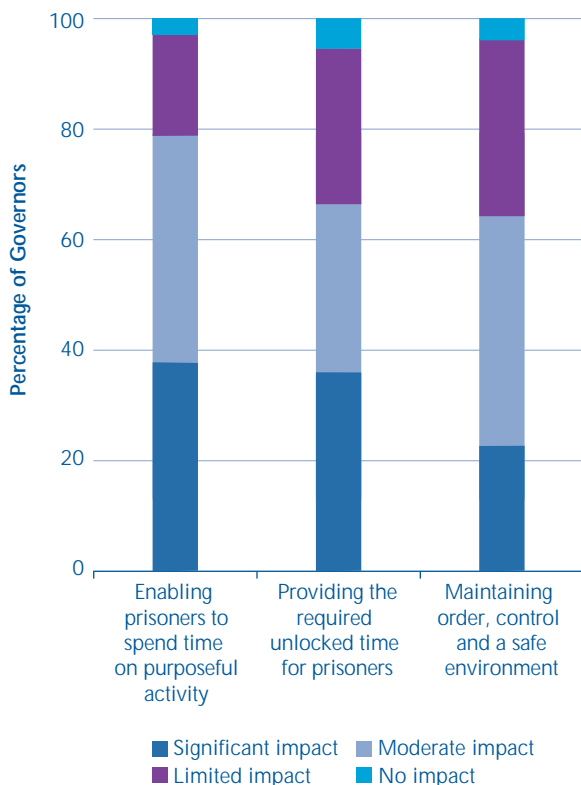


Source: National Audit Office survey of prison Governors

2.9 Sickness absence also has a number of non-financial impacts on staff and prisoners. Prison officers explained to us that colleagues taking excessive sick leave affected the workload and morale of staff - in particular because staff often had to be moved to different sections to cover gaps or had to take on tasks of more senior staff. Some 61 per cent of Governors considered sickness absence had a significant impact on whether they were able to release staff to undergo training and 31 per cent thought it had a moderate impact. Staff shortages arising from sickness absence can also affect the way prisoners are treated, such as having to spend longer locked in their cell because there would not otherwise be sufficient staff to maintain full regimes. The majority of prison Governors considered sickness absence had at least a moderate impact on such areas (see Figure 8).

12 The number of prisoners held in establishments managed by the private sector increased from 4,774 in 1999-00 to 6,665 in 2002-03.

8 Prison Governors' assessment of the impact of sickness absence on the operation of their establishment



Source: National Audit Office survey of prison Governors

Sickness rates are higher than many organisations, although this might be partly due to the nature of the work involved and better recording procedures

2.10 The Prison Service has a higher average sickness rate than many other organisations. A survey in 2002 by the Confederation of British Industry examined responses from 545 organisations representing 1.4 million employees. Its report identified that staff in organisations with over 5,000 staff took an average 9.3 days sickness absence each year and staff in the public sector took 10.1 days. The data collected by the Confederation of British Industry are based on self assessments by each organisation and, therefore, we have not validated the results. However, a separate study of 1,330 organisations employing 1.6 million people conducted by the Chartered Institute of Personnel and Development for the same period broadly confirms the results. According to the Chartered Institute of Personnel and Development survey, the overall working population took 9.0 days sick absence a year and the public sector took 10.6 days. By comparison, the Prison Service recorded an average of 14.7 days in 2002-03. A review of sickness absence in the public sector¹³ established that the Prison Service had the highest sickness rate of those organisations examined,

after results had been weighted to take account of differences in age, gender and grades. The weighted sickness absence rate in the Prison Service was 12 days a year, compared to a Civil Service average of 9.8 days.

2.11 Comparisons between the Prison Service and other organisations, including Government departments, should be treated with some caution as the analysis is dependent on the quality of the data provided by organisations. The Prison Service has sought to eliminate under-reporting in its data (see paragraph 2.3) and we have not validated figures collected from other organisations to determine the possible extent of their under-reporting.

2.12 Direct comparison between the Prison Service and other organisations does not take into account the problems associated with shift work and the physical nature of the work required. Prison Service managers and the Prison Officers' Association have highlighted that staff working with prisoners are more likely to sustain injuries at work and suffer from stress than people working in an office. Staff not required to work with prisoners, such as administrative staff, averaged nine days sick leave a year in 2002, which was less than the Civil Service average of 9.8 days. The Prison Service lost 49,406 working days in 2002-03 due to accidents and assaults. Taking these cases out of any comparison would reduce the average number of days lost to sickness absence per person in 2002-03 by 1.1 days to 13.6 days per person. Prison Service staff also have to work during public holidays - an extra 10.5 days are added to their holiday entitlement instead, which means illnesses on these dates will be recorded as sick leave, whereas organisations that are closed on these dates might not record the absence.

2.13 Typical sickness absence rates in Scottish and Irish prisons are broadly similar to the rates in the Prison Service in England and Wales. The average rate in the Scottish Prison Service in 2002-03 was 18.1 calendar days sick leave for each of its 4,649 employees and 20.3 calendar days for each of the 3,302 staff in the Irish Prison Service. As the rate for England and Wales is based on working days lost rather than calendar days lost, dividing the rates for the Prison Services in Ireland and Scotland by seven and multiplying by five provides an approximate measure on a comparable basis. Using this calculation, the rate in the Scottish Prison Service would have been 12.9 days and the rate in the Irish Prison Service 14.5 days in 2002-03, compared to 14.7 days for the Prison Service in England and Wales.

2.14 The average number of days lost to sickness absence per employee in the privately managed prisons in 2002-03 was 12.5 days. Most of the private prisons did not have systems to analyse sickness rates by grade or cause, although the organisations considered sickness absence

13 Cabinet Office, Analysis of Sickness Absence in the Civil Service, 2002.

to be higher amongst staff in comparable grades to Prison Officers and Operational Support Grades. The disparity in sickness rates could be partly due to differences in the average age of operational staff - 24 per cent of operational staff in privately managed prisons were aged 29 or less, compared to 11 per cent in the Prison Service. Staff aged 29 or less in the Prison Service tend to take less time off for sickness - this age group in the Prison Service averaged 10 days sickness absence in 2002-03. Another key reason why privately managed prisons are able to achieve a lower sickness rate than the Prison Service could be because their staff have different terms and conditions. Sick pay entitlements in privately managed prisons are less than those in the Prison Service:

- In half the privately managed prisons, staff are not entitled to sick pay for the first three or six months of their employment. Initial eligibility for sick pay averages six weeks on full pay, with variation from two to 26 weeks.
- In six prisons, staff are not normally paid for the first three or five days of any sickness episode. One prison reported that it had previously stopped its policy of not paying the first few days of any sick leave. However, sickness absence had risen noticeably and it had to re-introduce the scheme with the consent of staff until sickness absence is under control.
- Maximum eligibility for sick pay averages 15 weeks, with variation from 10 to 26 weeks after varying periods of service.

The likely future impact of initiatives to manage sickness absence

2.15 The Prison Service has developed initiatives tailored towards the length of sickness absence taken by staff. There are four main categories of sickness absence:

- **Short term (1-7 days).** Sick leave of up to seven days is self certified and staff are not required to provide a doctor's note to justify the absence. Whilst the length of absence is relatively short, this type of absence can disrupt the working of the prison as it is difficult to predict the numbers of staff that might be absent each day. Short term sick leave accounted for 2.2 days of the average of 14.7 days sickness absence taken by each member of staff in 2002-03.
- **Medium term (8-27 days).** Staff are required to produce a doctor's note to justify this amount of sick leave, but the length of absence is unlikely to necessitate the Prison Service referring the case to the occupational health service. Medium term sickness absence accounted for 2.0 days absence out of the average of 14.7 days per person.

- **Intermediate term (28-89 days).** Sickness absences of this period are referred to the occupational health service but are unlikely to require the person to be referred for a medical opinion by a doctor. Intermediate periods of absence accounted for 3.5 days out of the average 14.7 days sickness absence per member of staff in 2002-03.
- **Long term sickness absence (90 days or more).** Long term sickness absence accounts for nearly half of the sick leave taken by staff in 2002-03, some 7.0 days out of the average of 14.7 days per person. Long term sickness absences must be referred to the occupational health service.

The Prison Service has introduced a rigorous new system to control short and medium term sick leave, although expected reductions are likely to have limited impact on the overall rate

2.16 The Attendance Policy Team in the Prison Service introduced new attendance management procedures, effective from November 2002, along with a workbook to provide clear guidance to managers on how to manage staff attendance. The revised procedures include an attendance score mechanism - each person's score is based on the number of periods of absence and the total number of days' absence. The attendance score mechanism will trigger mandatory referral to an occupational health adviser at key stages (see Figure 3).

2.17 The Prison Service expects the attendance score mechanism to reduce short and medium term sick leave to a similar extent as an earlier version of the system, known as the 'Bradford Formula'. The Bradford Formula also used a scoring system to determine when it might be appropriate to issue formal warnings to staff for taking too much sick leave. The Bradford Formula was introduced in May 2001 but, due to a legal challenge from the Prison Officers' Association, was subsequently withdrawn from April 2002. Prison Service staff took an average of 4.1 days sickness absence in the 12 months prior to May 2001 for short term sickness (1-7 days) and medium term sickness (8-27 days). The implementation of the Bradford Formula reduced this average to 3.9 days for the 10 months to the end of March 2002 and its subsequent withdrawal resulted in an increase in short and medium term sick leave to an average of 4.2 days between April and October 2002. Prison Service figures indicate the attendance score mechanism has had a similar impact on short and medium term sickness absence; the average rate for its first year of operation was 4.0 days, compared to 4.1 days for the previous 12 months.

2.18 The new attendance management system seeks to minimise management discretion in order to ensure consistency and equality in the way staff are treated. When a member of staff reaches the sickness trigger point a mandatory warning is issued (see Figure 3). Some staff remain sceptical of the new absence management procedures and would prefer to see greater discretion in the way the rules are applied. Comments raised in our interviews with staff included a perception that the new system could be unduly harsh on those people who are sick for genuine reasons and that it increased the likelihood of viruses being spread because individuals who should be off sick feel obliged to come to work.

2.19 Prison Governors, staff and trade unions have recognised the benefits of the new system, although some Governors commented that their line managers might try to introduce some flexibility in the rules if they thought rigorous application of the system would result in them having to issue a formal oral warning to staff when they considered the circumstances inappropriate. We identified instances at four¹⁴ of the establishments we visited where managers had delayed issuing such warnings. The Governors at Onley and Belmarsh had, therefore, decided to delegate the issue of warnings to specified staff instead in order to overcome this problem.

"You are forced as a manager to issue warnings to those people. Now, I've had the situation where I know the people are genuine good workers and everything else is excellent and you're threatening them in some cases with losing their job because of their sickness level where you've got people within the system that are taking the mick and aren't genuinely ill - you need to give managers discretion to deal with people as individuals"

Male Principal Officer, Whitemoor

Source: Prison Service

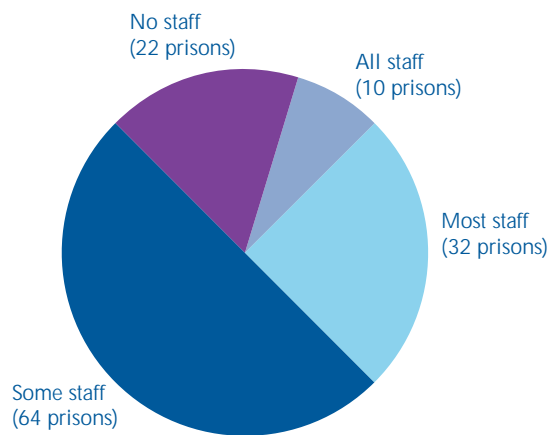
2.20 The Attendance Policy Team confirmed that over 200 Governors and Heads of Personnel have received sickness absence training and it is the responsibility of the senior management team at each establishment to determine how sickness absence policies should be enacted locally. Most prison establishments (82 per cent) have developed local procedures on how to manage sickness absence in accordance with the guidelines developed centrally by the Attendance Policy Team and 87 per cent of Governors confirmed that staff had been issued with some form of guidance on sickness absence. Our discussions with line managers, however, highlighted that some could not recollect or did not understand the procedures. This may be because staff have not read the guidance or protocols developed and some have not received training. The 22 establishments where the Governor said none of their staff had been trained on the new system (see Figure 9) had an average sickness absence rate of 15.6 days per person.

Intermediate and long term sick leave remain high and improved working relations with the occupational health service could have a significant impact on average sickness absence rates

2.21 Our interviews with Prison Governors confirmed that they regarded intermediate and long term sickness absence to be a major problem. Intermediate and long term sick leave resulted in 478,672 working days lost in 2002-03, equivalent to a staff cost of £60 million. The Governors identified tackling intermediate and long term absence as likely to have the greatest impact on overall sickness rates, although they recognise that short term absences are more disruptive of day to day operations. The average number of days lost due to intermediate and long term sick leave has increased since 1999-00, when it accounted for 7.6 days out of a total of 12.6 days per person. The number of working days lost due to intermediate and long term sickness absence had risen from 328,384 days lost in 1999-00 to 478,672 days in 2002-03, the latter accounting for an average of 10.5 days sickness absence per person. The rate has subsequently declined, however, and by September 2003 intermediate sick leave accounted for an average of 4.2 days absence per person (a reduction of 0.5 days compared to September 2002) and long term absence accounted for 3.9 days absence per person (equivalent to a 0.9 day reduction compared to September 2002).

2.22 The Attendance Policy Team has closely monitored absence levels for those staff with the highest sickness absence rates. According to Prison Service records, there were 913 staff on long term sick leave in July 2003, of whom 474 have subsequently returned to work and 272 left the Prison Service. Existing disciplinary procedures enable the Prison Service to

9 How many staff have been trained on the new attendance score mechanism



Source: National Audit Office survey of prison Governors

deal both with long-term cases and those where staff are absent for up to 90 days and then return to work. However, the Attendance Policy Team confirmed that managers often find this last group particularly challenging as it is often more difficult to establish clear medical prognosis or conclusive assessment of capability in such cases. The 500 staff with the worst sick record¹⁵ for intermediate absences in the last two years accounted for over 47,000 working days lost between October 2002 and September 2003. Some 210 out of the 500 staff were from high security establishments, women's prisons, young offender institutions and prisons in North West England.

2.23 The introduction of the attendance score mechanism, effective from November 2002, and closer working between the Attendance Policy Team and local managers should reduce the number of staff on long term sick leave. The use of trigger points to refer staff on sick leave to the occupational health service and to issue automatically formal warnings will help ensure appropriate action can be taken as soon as possible. The Attendance Policy Team also works with local management to resolve long term absences, although it is the responsibility of establishments to maintain regular contact with such staff and to determine what action should be taken. For example, a new management team at Holloway prison, with assistance from BMI Health Services, had managed to reduce the number of long term cases from 55 to 12 in the twelve months prior to our visit. This involved re-establishing contact with staff on long term sick leave, including one person in New Zealand and one in Sri Lanka, and dismissing 14 staff for medical inefficiency.

2.24 The Prison Service has a contract with an occupational health provider to refer staff who have been off sick for 20 working days or more for an independent medical opinion. Staff can also be referred when they have been off work for a shorter period of time, if there is a serious health concern or if the illness involves stress, anxiety, depression or related symptoms. Cases must be referred again after a maximum of six months and again at least every three months thereafter. The Committee of Public Accounts previously recommended that the Prison Service should evaluate its pilot study of using occupational health nurses at establishments in order to determine whether it might be cost effective to employ such staff at each establishment to reduce the numbers of staff on long term sick leave. The Prison Service originally concluded that the pilots did not provide a clear business case, although further examination in March 2002 recommended the appointment of Occupational Health Advisers. However, the Prison Service continued to have

concerns about the appointment of Occupational Health Advisers and there were only three full time and four part-time staff in post by December 2003. The re-letting of the occupational health contract from December 2003 has enabled the Prison Service to provide Governors with the option to purchase on site occupational health advice from Atos Origin instead. A face to face interview and assessment would typically cost £80 for an Occupational Health Advisor or £135 with a Consultant Occupational Physician. Other services, such as counselling services, can also be arranged.

The Prison Service has acted to dismiss staff for medical inefficiency, where necessary, and such cases require close working between establishments and occupational health

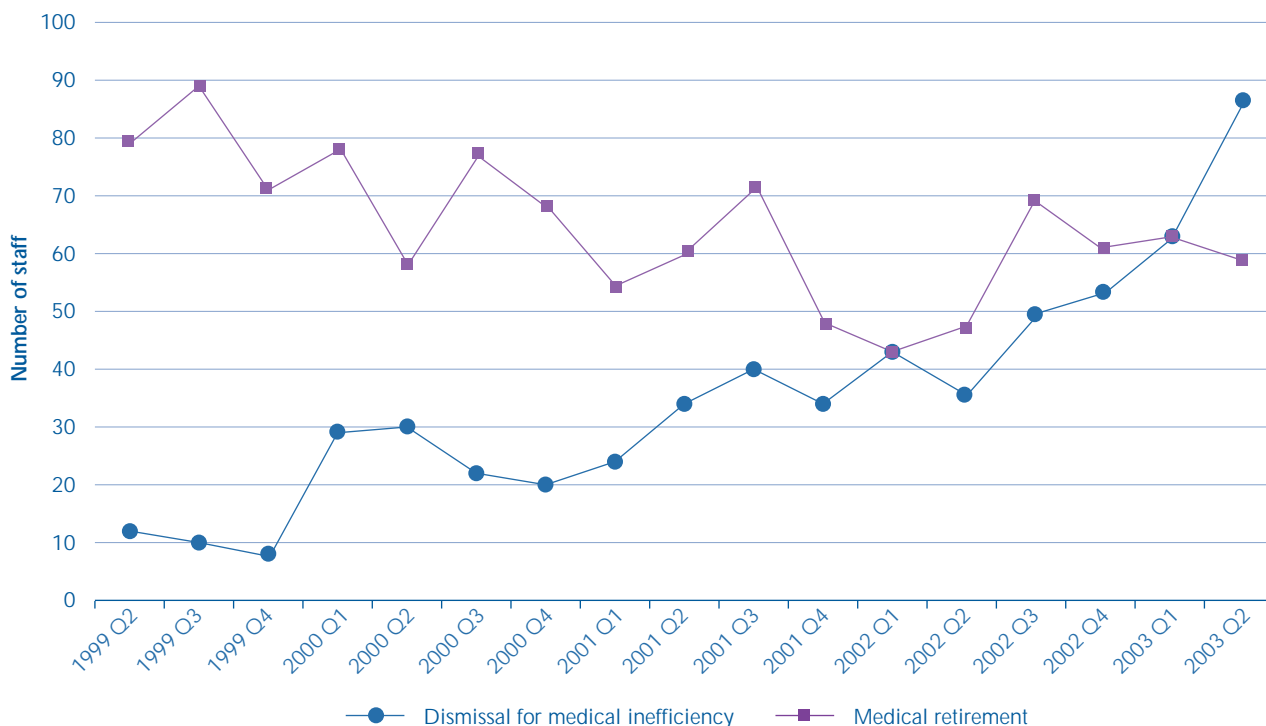
2.25 Whilst it might seem harsh to dismiss or retire someone for being ill, it is not reasonable to continue to pay a salary when there is no likelihood of the person returning to give regular and effective service in the duties of their grade. An occupational health service can help to resolve many staff medical problems, but staff who are regularly absent from work for considerable periods of time remain on an establishment's complement. Permanent replacements cannot be recruited unless the person is dismissed for medical inefficiency or retired on health grounds. The Prison Service can dismiss someone for medical inefficiency if their attendance record is poor. The member of staff is likely to be entitled to medical retirement if doctors confirm their condition will prevent them from returning to regular work.

2.26 The previous National Audit Office examination identified that in 1997-98 just over 50 per cent of retirements in the Prison Service were on medical grounds. The report established that Governors were not taking sufficient action to deal with staff absent on sick leave and that managers might be tempted to offer medical retirement to staff instead, partly because it meant the costs would fall on the Principal Civil Service Pension Scheme rather than directly on the Prison Service. Since that report the Prison Service has made good progress in dismissing staff for poor attendance, where appropriate, rather than offering medical retirement. The number of staff dismissed for medical inefficiency has increased whilst the number given ill health retirement has decreased (see Figure 10). There were 525 medical retirements in 1997-98, when the National Audit Office last examined the issue, compared to 240 medical retirements in 2002-03. The Prison Service estimates that it typically costs £17,000¹⁶ to dismiss someone for medical inefficiency.

15 Defined as those staff still in post on 30 September 2003 who had at least three periods of sickness absence in the previous two years and were not currently on long term sick leave.

16 The cost represents the typical amount paid to the person and excludes management costs, occupational health medical costs and any legal costs associated with each case.

10 The number of staff dismissed for medical inefficiency or retired from the Prison Service due to ill health each quarter



Source: National Audit Office analysis of Prison Service data

2.27 Dealing with staff who have a poor attendance record can be difficult and resource intensive and most cases are likely to be contested. It was not possible to determine the average elapsed time taken for staff dismissed for unsatisfactory attendance in 2002-03 as the data could not readily be extracted from the Prison Service’s computer database, but such cases are likely to take at least nine months from the date of the first oral warning. The elapsed time is required in order to give a reasonable opportunity for the person’s health to improve and to allow sufficient time after each formal warning to seek medical opinions and determine what action might be required. Prison Service staff terms and conditions require two formal written warnings before a final hearing to determine whether dismissal is appropriate. By comparison, private sector prisons typically only give one written warning before the final review.

2.28 The Attendance Policy Team re-tendered the occupational health contract in Summer 2003 and awarded it to Atos Origin with effect from December 2003. The contract provides for a core service of sickness absence referrals and pre-employment medical checks. The Prison Service expects the new contract to lead to an improvement in performance. Our discussions with managers at establishments determined that the success of the new contract will depend on how effectively prisons manage their relationship with the occupational health service

provider. Swansea and Holloway prisons, for example, explained that after they had expressed their concerns to BMI Health Services about the process they had developed a number of good practices that had significantly improved their working relationship (see Figure 11).

11 Good practices in working with occupational health providers

- Ensure you always have the same occupational health professional with the appropriate skills to deal with each case.
- Invite the occupational health professional to the prison to see the environment and brief them on the cases.
- Develop a close working relationship with the occupational health provider. Book the occupational health professional for at least one day a month, with up to 10 appointments, so that the next meeting is never more than four weeks away. Some cases might need to be assessed much more quickly.
- Designate one person, typically the Head of Personnel, to work with the occupational health professional. This person should prepare the notes on cases personally.
- Use the occupational health professional to pick up and feedback any patterns or trends in the number and types of illness.

Source: National Audit Office

Part 3

Variations in sickness absence rates between prisons

3.1 This part of the report examines:

- The extent of variation between prisons.
- Initiatives to overcome local barriers to reducing sickness absence rates.

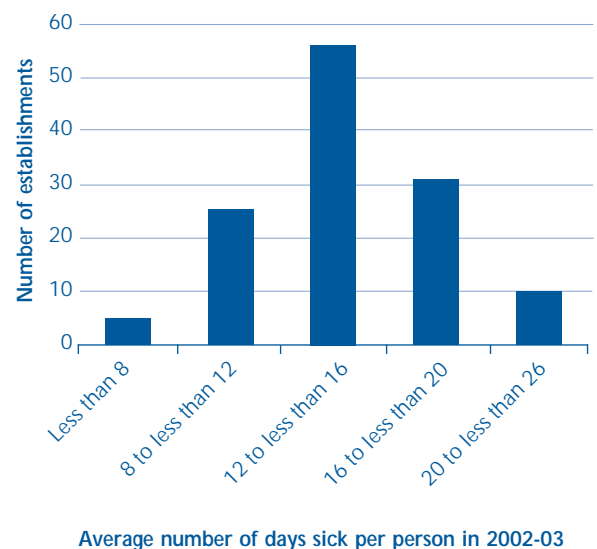
The extent of variation between prisons

There are wide variations in sickness rates between establishments and, to some extent, over time

3.2 There were wide variations in the average rate of sickness absence per person at establishments in 2002-03 and Prison Service data suggest the range is likely to be similar in 2003-04. Whilst five prisons¹⁷ achieved an average rate of less than eight days per person in 2002-03, compared to a median rate of 14.31, ten prisons¹⁸ reached a rate of 20 days or more (see Figure 12). The Prison Service would have saved 80,577 working days, equivalent to a staff cost of £9.6 million, if it had been able to reduce the sickness rates at each establishment above the median down to a rate of 14.31 in 2002-03. The data for the first six months of 2003-04 suggest the rate could vary from 3.1 days at Kirklevington Grange to 24.3 days at Hindley prison.

3.3 There is a fairly strong similarity between the sickness absence rates at establishments in 2001-02 and 2002-03, although the rates can vary significantly for some prisons. There is a relatively strong correlation ($r = 0.7$) between the sickness rates in 2001-02 and 2002-03. If the 74 establishments where the rate increased between 2001-02 and 2002-03 had been able to maintain that earlier year's performance, the Prison Service would have saved 64,990 working days, equivalent to some £7.7 million in staff costs.

12 The average number of days sickness absence per person ranged from less than eight days at five prisons to 20 days or more at 10 prisons in 2002-03



Average number of days sick per person in 2002-03

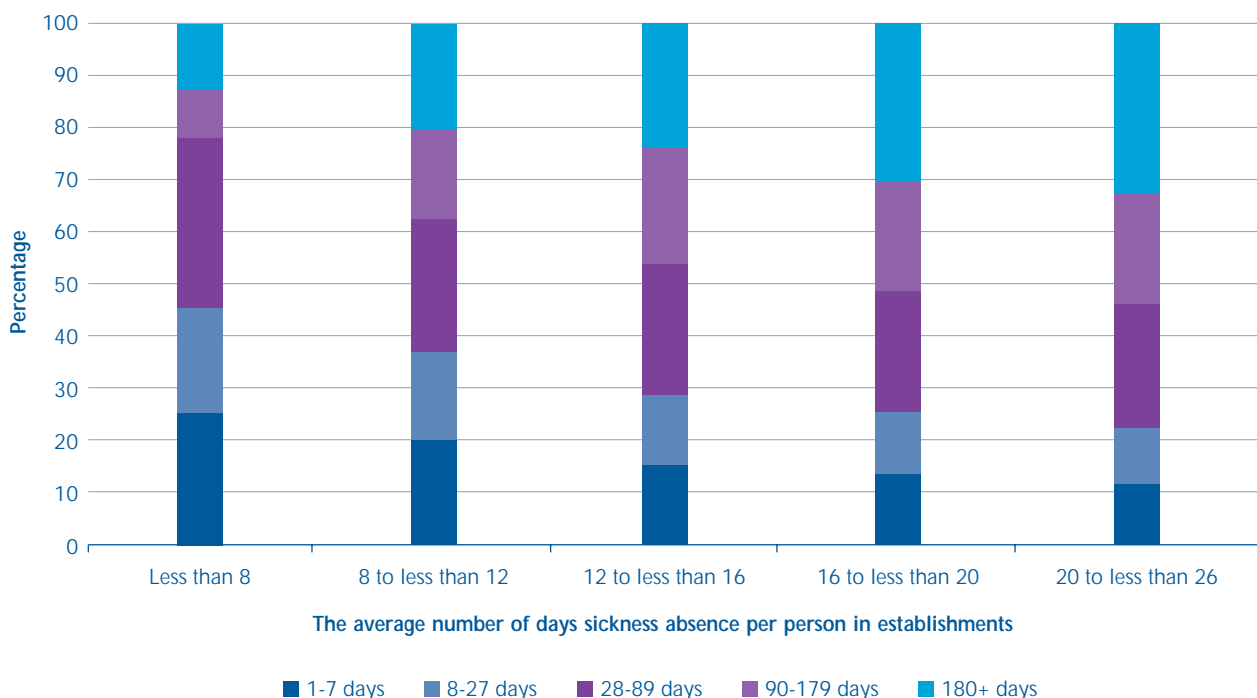
Source: National Audit Office analysis of Prison Service data

3.4 Prisons with a high number of working days lost due to intermediate and long term sick leave are likely to have a higher average sickness absence rate. Figure 13 shows that short term sickness absence accounted for a quarter of working days lost at the five prisons with a sickness absence rate of eight days or less in 2002-03. By comparison, short term sickness absence accounted for 12 per cent of working days lost at the ten establishments with the highest sickness rate and sickness periods of 180 days or more accounted for 33 per cent of working days lost.

¹⁷ Blantyre House, Kirklevington Grange, Stocken, Usk/Prescoed and Wayland.

¹⁸ Brixton, Edmunds Hill, Eastwood Park, Hindley, Holloway, Kingston, Liverpool, Onley, Risley and Rochester.

13 Establishments with a higher average sickness rate per person tend to have a greater proportion of working days lost to intermediate and long term sick leave and fewer working days lost to short term sick leave



Source: National Audit Office analysis of Prison Service data

Some of the variations in sickness absence rates between establishments are due to the type, size and location of prisons

3.5 There are a number of different types of prison to deal with the different categories of prisoner held and the staff sickness rate in 2002-03 varied between each type of establishment. The sickness rate varied from an average of 13.0 days per person for staff in Open and Semi Open prisons - establishments without an outer security wall - to 17.6 days in women's prisons, (see Figure 14). Whilst sickness absence could be linked to the likelihood of prisoner unrest leading to more assaults on, or psychological problems with staff, there is no correlation between sickness rates and those establishments with prisoner overcrowding. Our analysis of Prison Service data found only a minimal difference in sickness rates between those establishments that experienced overcrowding in 2002-03 and the performance of the whole prison estate. Key reasons why the rate will vary between establishments include:

- **Staff are at greater risk of assault or more likely to incur psychological problems at some establishments.** Accidents and assaults by prisoners account for seven per cent of working days lost due to sickness absence. Our discussions with line

managers indicated that some types of prison are more difficult to work in than others. Juveniles and young offenders were considered by some staff to be more difficult to manage than adult prisoners. Local prisons were also cited as being difficult as the constant turnover of prisoners either being released after a short period in custody or transferred elsewhere means it can be more difficult to maintain control and discipline. According to Prison Service records, there were 6,479 assaults on prisoners and staff in 2002-03, of which 35 per cent occurred in local prisons, 15 per cent in establishments for juveniles and young offenders and 10 per cent in women's prisons. The other assaults (40 per cent) occurred in category B and C prisons, dispersal establishments and open prisons. There were 30 assaults per 100 prisoners in establishments for juveniles and young offenders, 18 assaults per 100 prisoners in women's prisons and 8 assaults per 100 prisoners in local prisons.

- **A greater proportion of female staff in some establishments.** Women's prisons tend to employ more female staff than other types of establishment. Female staff are more likely to be absent on sick leave than men - on average, each female uniformed member of staff has six more days' sickness absence a year than male uniformed staff.

14 Average sickness absence rate by type of establishment in 2002-03

Type	Description	Number of prisons	Sickness rate
Women's prisons	Suitable for female prisoners, including juveniles and young offenders aged 15 to 21 years.	15	17.6
Local	Suitable for adult male prisoners.	35	16.2
Juvenile and Young Offender Institutions	Suitable for juvenile and young offenders aged 15 to 21 years old.	18	16.1
Category B	Suitable for adult male prisoners that pose a serious risk to society but do not warrant the highest security conditions.	8	14.8
Dispersal	High security establishments.	5	13.5
Category C	Establishments for adult male prisoners and with an emphasis on training.	31	13.1
Open and Semi Open	Establishments for adult male prisoners that pose little risk to society.	16	13.0

Source: National Audit Office analysis of Prison Service data

3.6 The average number of working days lost to sickness absence per person varies according to the size and location of a prison. Smaller prisons (with less than 250 employees) recorded a sickness absence rate of 13.7 days per person in 2002-03, compared to 16.1 days for establishments with over 500 employees. Establishments in some areas of the country are more likely to have a high sickness rate than prisons elsewhere. Excluding high security, juvenile and women's prisons, which might distort any regional analysis, prisons in London and North West England averaged over 17.5 days sickness absence per person in 2002-03, whereas prisons in Yorkshire and Humberside, Eastern England and Wales averaged less than 13 days per person.

Governors and staff consider staff shortages impact on sickness rates, although there was no evidence of a direct link

3.7 Prison Service records indicate there was a shortfall of 1,522 staff in post against forecast complement in December 2003, equivalent to 3.2 per cent of the complement. The shortfall was mostly amongst unified grades (865 vacancies) and in women's prisons, young offender institutions and juvenile establishments. During our visits to establishments staff raised concerns about the extent of staff shortages and their likely impact on sickness absence rates. Forty-five per cent of Governors considered stress caused by staff shortages to be an 'important' or 'very important' factor in their sickness absence rates. Staff shortages meant individuals might be unable to take ad hoc leave, affecting staff morale and increasing the risk that they would take the day off anyway as sick leave. The survey conducted as

part of the Prison Service review of the causes of sickness absence established that 65 per cent of staff considered staff shortages had increased their workload and 10 per cent reported they had had leave revoked in the last year because of staff shortages.

3.8 Whilst staff shortages are likely to have some impact on sickness rates, our analysis indicated there was no correlation between establishments with too few staff and those with high sickness absence rates in 2002-03. The absence of any correlation might be because the staff shortages reported by establishments are not necessarily an indicator of workload. Staff shortages depend on the accuracy of the original forecasts of numbers required and when a lack of staff is likely to impact on regimes and activities in the Prison, the Governor might opt to postpone tasks rather than put further demands on staff. The Prison Service estimates that 2,554 officers need to be recruited to fully staff the Service by April 2005, although the numbers depend on how many staff will leave during the period. Precise numbers of leavers are difficult to estimate - staff may leave for a variety of reasons and nearly 6,000 staff have reserved rights that enable them to retire at any time after their 55th birthday.

"It's a vicious circle. On a daily basis staff go sick which means that areas of the jail haven't really got adequate levels of cover so everybody who is working has to work that bit harder...which means they feel like coming in less the following day and so some of those will undoubtedly then be sick."
Male Senior Officer, Holloway

Source: Prison Service

Initiatives to overcome local barriers to reducing sickness absence rates

Poor performing prisons need to overcome a culture of absenteeism and low staff morale in order to reduce sickness absence rates

3.9 A lack of staff motivation can lead to a culture of absenteeism and a consequent decrease in attendance rates. In our interviews with staff at establishments we visited, many prison officers were able to cite at least one example of a work colleague who they thought was taking advantage of the system. If staff are more prone to take time off sick because they are not committed to attending work every day it will increase staff shortages. Some 45 per cent of Governors considered staff shortages were likely to lead to increased stress and thus more staff going off sick. Whilst a Prison Service survey¹⁹ of over 2,000 staff established that just over half (55 per cent) reported being happy at work, two-thirds reported that work caused them stress.

3.10 Our survey of Prison Governors established that 36 per cent thought there was a culture of absenteeism at their establishment and 30 per cent that there was poor staff motivation. Whilst only 15.6 per cent of Governors at establishments with a low sickness absence rate²⁰ in 2002-03 considered a culture of absenteeism was a very important cause of sickness absence at their establishment, this compared to 47 per cent of Governors whose staff had a high sickness rate. And 28 per cent of Governors at establishments with a low sickness rate said poor staff motivation was an issue, compared to 59 per cent of Governors with a high staff sickness rate in their prison.

3.11 The Prison Service conducts a staff satisfaction survey each year²¹ and the results indicate that overall morale declined between 2000 and 2001, although results did improve in some areas in 2002. The results of the 2002 survey indicated that staff working in establishments with low sickness levels were generally more satisfied than staff in other prisons. Conversely, staff in establishments with high sickness rates were more likely to report staff shortages on shifts and perceived problems with the level of control and discipline in their work area. Forty-one per cent of respondents said they 'often' (34 per cent) or 'always' (seven per cent) experienced stress as a result of their work.

3.12 One possible factor for low staff satisfaction levels at some establishments might be due to problems with the accuracy of salary payments. Prison Service salaries are paid through the Home Office Pay and Pensions Service. Administrative errors in calculating amounts due and delays in updating records, some of which emanated from the Home Office Pay and Pensions Service and some from the relevant prison establishments, meant that at least 0.9 per cent of the payments to Prison Service staff were less than they should have been in November 2003. Our review of selected cases identified staff dissatisfaction and anxiety due to financial concerns and a perception that their work was not sufficiently valued. The Prison Service explained the payroll problems have meant it has had to recruit 5.5 additional staff, pay £7 million in advances and led to a decline in staff morale.

3.13 Improving staff morale and creating a positive working environment depends on positive and visible leadership from the senior management team at an establishment. Our discussions with Governors highlighted a number of good practices that help to improve existing staff attitudes:

- **Build a rapport with the staff.** This might include taking time to talk to staff during regular walks around the establishment, listening to grievances and getting to know people on a first name basis. Other initiatives might include arranging training events outside the prison or encouraging members of the management team to participate in social activities.
- **Acknowledge work well done.** Managers should give suitable praise when it is deserved. All staff should be entitled to advice, help and constructive feedback on their performance so that they can improve. The Prison Service's performance recognition arrangements (revised in April 2003) include a range of ways to reward staff; such as saying 'thank you', giving a small gift, nominating the person for an award, or giving a special bonus of up to £2,000.
- **Keep a constructive attitude towards maintaining a proper work/life balance.** Wherever possible within operational limits, establishments should take account of the difficulties of shift work and family responsibilities when scheduling staff work.
- **Consider bringing in new staff.** Recruiting new staff helps overcome staff shortages and is also an opportunity to shake up existing working practices and to break down any cultural barriers to change amongst existing staff.

¹⁹ Dr S Milne, *A view of the causes of sickness absence in the Prison Service from the perspective of its staff*, HM Prison Service, December 2003.

²⁰ Establishments were ranked according to their sickness absence rate. Those in the lowest quartile were defined as having a low sickness absence rate, those in the highest quartile a high rate.

²¹ The 2002 survey was sent to 36 per cent of staff. Nearly 8,000 staff replied, equivalent to a 50 per cent response rate.

Establishments with a low sickness absence rate are more likely to have a management team that is proactive in monitoring and managing the issue

3.14 The performance of the management team at each establishment is likely to have an impact on sickness absence rates. The performance rating system (see Figure 15), provides a proxy measure of the performance of the management team. Comparison of sickness rates and the assessed performance of each establishment need to be interpreted with some caution, as sickness rates are one of the many measures used to determine the rating of each establishment. An establishment with a high sickness absence rate is more likely to have a lower performance rating than those with lower sickness absence rates. The analysis does indicate, however, that those establishments considered to be performing well by mid 2003-04 have a lower sickness absence rate than other prisons for the same period.

3.15 Managers have a key role to play in motivating their staff. Some 28 per cent of Governors in establishments with a high sickness absence rate considered stress caused by line management style to be a factor, compared to nine per cent of Governors whose establishments had a low sickness absence rate. Our visits to 5 prisons²² identified recent problems with the level of management competence, sometimes at a senior level. At Onley, for example, there had been major changes in the management team with the arrival of a new Governor and only one of the eight senior managers had remained in post.

3.16 The difficulties of working with prisoners in an enclosed environment can often lead to disillusionment amongst staff - to some extent it is an inevitable by-product of the job. Prison Service staff often consider themselves undervalued by their managers, Governors, Prison headquarters' staff and the public at large. Participants perceived that managers and Governors kept themselves apart from uniformed staff and did not communicate

15 Prisons with a good performance rating tend to have a lower sickness absence rate

All prisons are rated on a 1 to 4 performance scale. Level 4 is awarded to excellent establishments that are delivering exceptionally high performance, whilst level 1 indicates poor performance. The performance rating, assessed quarterly, is based upon:

- Cost performance and output data from the weighted scorecard, showing performance against key targets.
- Compliance with Prison Service standards.
- Findings from external inspections by HM Chief Inspector of Prisons and Independent Monitoring Boards.
- The views of Prison Service Area Managers and the Prison Service Management Board, allowing for assessment of more subjective factors, such as decency and the prison's commitment to delivering change.

Our assessment of the sickness rates by establishment for the first six months of 2003-04 according to their performance for the same period indicates that better performance prisons tend to have a lower rate:

Rating	Criteria	Sickness rate ¹	Number of prisons ²
4	High performing establishments that consistently meet or exceed targets, have no significant operational problems, and achieve significantly more than similar establishments with similar resources.	5.9	11
3	Prisons that meet the majority of targets, experience no significant problems and deliver a reasonable and decent regime.	6.4	94
2	Establishments that are basically stable, secure and provide a limited but decent regime, although they are likely to experience significant problems in meeting targets or experience major operational problems.	8.4	21
1	Prisons that fail to provide secure, ordered, or decent regimes or have significant shortfalls against the majority of key targets.	9.1	1

NOTES

- 1 The data show the sickness rates (average number of days absence) for the first six months of 2003-04.
- 2 The number of prisons total 127 as Highpoint South did not have a rating.

Source: National Audit Office analysis of Prison Service data

22 Haverigg, Holloway, Onley, Grendon and Wandsworth.

sufficiently. All of the focus groups conducted as part of the Prison Service's review of sickness absence in 2003 thought there was a lack of management support when difficult situations arose and that this issue must be addressed if sickness absence rates are to be reduced. Our analysis of the Prison Service staff survey (2002) would also appear to support these findings - there was a strong correlation ($r = 0.6$) between respondents who thought that attendance was effectively managed and those who thought staff's efforts were acknowledged by managers. Thirty six per cent of respondents agreed or tended to agree that attendance was effectively managed at their establishment, while 48 per cent disagreed or tended to disagree.

3.17 Successful sickness absence management requires a local champion to drive the process forward and to enforce rigorously the rules and procedures set out in the Prison Service's attendance policy. The vast majority of prisons (97 per cent) had nominated a single person to oversee the management of sickness absence - in 94 per cent of cases it was the Head of Personnel. Our visits found that those establishments that were reducing sickness absence rates had appointed someone with enthusiasm and commitment to addressing the issue and who was capable of overcoming any doubts or concerns raised by staff or other managers. Our survey of prison Governors found that establishments with low sickness absence rates were more likely to be proactively managing sickness absence than those with high sickness absence rates. Eighty-four per cent of Governors with low sickness absence rates in their prison thought the new attendance score mechanism effective, compared to 69 per cent of those whose staff had a high sickness absence rate in 2002-03. And two thirds of Governors with a low sickness absence rate thought the procedures for dealing with long term sick staff and the general guidance available on sickness absence management was effective, compared to 41 per cent and 44 per cent respectively of those prisons with a high sickness absence rate.

3.18 The Prison Service is taking action to tackle sickness absence rates in those establishments with a high sickness absence rate. We identified a number of instances where the Governor had been brought into the prison with a specific remit to tackle sickness absence rates. Seventy two per cent of Governors at establishments with a high sickness absence rate said they had taken specific steps to learn from the experience of other similar establishments, compared to just 28 per cent of Governors whose establishments had a low sickness absence rate in 2002-03. The Prison Service confirmed that the Heads of Personnel at every establishment are qualified or working towards graduate membership of the Chartered Institute of Personnel and Development.

3.19 We identified a number of initiatives by Governors to encourage staff to attend work and to reduce the extent of sickness absence in their establishment. The initiatives were in accordance with Prison Service performance recognition arrangements (specified in Prison Service Order 8480). The main types of incentive used by Governors included:

- **The Governor writes and congratulates staff with a good attendance record.** Most establishments would appear to operate such a scheme. The prison staff we interviewed tended to be somewhat sceptical, although Governors explained that most staff tended to welcome the recognition. The Governor at Haverigg prison, for example, considered this was best achieved through a personal 'thank you' at an appropriate moment.
- **The Governor offers a small reward, such as a pen or gift voucher, for good attendance.** Some establishments offer a small reward in recognition for a good attendance record, although 60 per cent of Governors said they did not operate such a scheme in 2002-03. At Onley, for example, the Governor issues leisure vouchers to staff that have not taken a day's sickness absence in the last five years.

Progress in reducing sickness absence rates across the Prison Service depends on improving the skills and experience of managers in how to tackle the issue

3.20 Prisons tend to use a variety of different methods for monitoring sickness absence rates and maintaining contact with staff absent from work. Every establishment uses the PERSONNEL computer system to monitor sickness absence, although 61 per cent of establishments also keep manual records. Whilst 95 per cent of Governors confirmed that they regularly received comprehensive management reports showing overall statistics for the Prison Service, including reports showing overall absence rates in their own and other establishments, only 39 per cent of establishments generated local management reports that showed comparisons between different teams or grades within their prisons. **Figure 16** outlines some key good practices in monitoring sickness absence drawn from our visits to establishments. Maintaining contact with staff absent from work can be difficult - too regular a contact might lead to staff feeling pressurised and delay their recovery; too little contact might lead to feelings of isolation or lack of care. Whilst 21 per cent of prisons contact absent staff by letter at least once a month, 62 per cent said they would never contact staff this way. Most prisons maintain monthly contact either by telephone or through home visits.

16 Good practices in monitoring sickness absence

Monthly reports to the senior management team at each establishment should include:

- Data on the average amount of sickness absence per member of staff for the prison as a whole, and highlighting any unusual patterns when data are broken down by gender, grade, team, day of week and shift.
- A list of all staff who have been absent during the month and showing the length of absence and the cause.
- A list of all long term sick cases showing duration, status and actions taken. The actions should include a summary of the last contact with the person and progress made by the occupational health provider.
- A list of all staff due to be issued with a warning during the month and whether that has been actioned. The report should flag up any specific cases that require discussion.
- Submissions from line managers about any potential absence concerns they might have for their team.

Source: National Audit Office analysis of reports and interviews with staff at those prisons visited.

3.21 Some Senior Officers and Principal Officers might lack the skills required to manage staff effectively and, therefore, to manage sickness absence rates. Whilst 50 per cent of Governors confirmed they were satisfied with the ability of their line managers to help motivate staff to come to work, 26 per cent were dissatisfied. Of those that were dissatisfied, 60 per cent thought it was due to insufficient training. Our visit to Swansea indicated that staff training in 'people skills' was key to motivating staff and driving down sickness absence rates, although other establishments noted that a 'lack of training' might be used by line managers as an excuse for poor performance.

3.22 Managers in prisons have been issued with guidance from the Attendance Policy Team on how to manage sickness absence, although some of the staff we interviewed during our visits indicated that they could not recollect it. Whilst it might be inevitable that some managers will not read the guidance they are given, only 10 Governors confirmed that all their managers had been trained in how to discharge their responsibilities. The Prison Service has recognised that some of its managers might lack the skills and experience to manage sickness absence effectively and in Autumn 2003 tasked the Prison Service College at Newbold Revel to provide assistance to prisons. The College is developing an Attendance Management Course to focus on inter-personal skills, how to spot problems before they escalate into long absences and how to conduct and record back to work interviews.

Appendix 1

Staff employed by the Prison Service at the end of March 2003

Category	Description	Number ¹
Senior operational managers	Governors and senior operational managers responsible for the overall management of prisons and major divisions within area and headquarters offices. The category excludes specialist support functions, such as Finance and Personnel.	1,225
Officer grades (Principal Officer, Senior Officer and Officer)	Officer grades are uniformed staff responsible for maintaining day to day security and discipline, and assisting with the assessment, training and rehabilitation of offenders. Some officers might have specific responsibilities for catering, physical education or work regimes. Major areas of work (such as a large residential wing) typically comprise a Principal Officer, supported by Senior Officers each managing a team (on one shift) of about four Officers.	23,278
Officer support grades	Uniformed staff assisting Officer grades by carrying out reception, gate and control room duties and assisting with maintaining security and escorting prisoners within the establishment. The role does not usually require extended contact with prisoners.	6,982
Nursing grades	Professional nurses and support staff responsible for providing medical services in establishments.	1,175
Other specialists	Staff in other specialist and professional roles such as medical officers, psychologists, counsellors, chaplaincy, education, personnel and procurement.	3,195
Industrial staff	A wide range of staff with mainly manual skills and typically providing infrastructure maintenance and support in establishments.	3,027
Non-operational managers and administrative staff	Support staff carrying out a wide range of managerial, clerical, secretarial and other administrative duties in prisons, area and headquarters' offices.	6,537
Total		45,419

NOTE

1 Based on whole time equivalent numbers of staff.

Appendix 2

Summary of progress made by the Prison Service against the Committee of Public Accounts' conclusions

Committee of Public Accounts conclusion	Action taken by the Prison Service
<p>i The Prison Service's levels of sickness absence are higher than comparable institutions. The Prison Service is expected to apply the good management practices from other organisations.</p>	<p>Levels of sickness absence in the Prison Service remain higher than those in most organisations, although comparisons should be treated with some caution as the analysis is dependent on the quality of the data provided by organisations. The rate in the Prison Service was broadly similar to comparable rates in the Scottish and Irish Prison Services in 2002-03. Our contractors undertaking our examination of sickness absence concluded that the Attendance Policy Team was probably amongst the most knowledgeable organisations in managing sickness absence that they had worked with in England and Wales.</p>
<p>ii Levels of sickness absence vary considerably across prisons which may reflect poor management practice. Reasons should be explored and poor performing prisons should benchmark their practice against better performers.</p>	<p>The Attendance Policy Team in the Prison Service has devoted considerable attention to those prisons with the highest sickness absence rates. Our interviews identified there was regular communication between the Attendance Policy Team and Governors, and the training function at the Prison Service College at Newbold Revel has been specifically mandated to provide assistance to establishments with sickness absence problems. Further progress is required, however, as our report indicates wide differences continue to exist and only 53 per cent of Governors had taken specific steps to learn from the experience of other establishments.</p>
<p>iii There is a wide difference between male and female officers' average sickness absence, at almost 18 working days for women compared to some 13 for men. We are pleased that the Prison Service is to examine the reasons for this difference and how officers with childcare responsibilities might be supported.</p>	<p>There continues to be a wide difference between male and female officers' average sickness absence. The Prison Service had not made much progress in examining how officers with childcare responsibilities might be supported, but we did identify a willingness by some Governors to allow some staff to alter their shift patterns where such changes could be justified operationally. The Prison Service Staff Survey for 2002 showed that 84 per cent of female staff surveyed and 75 per cent of male staff surveyed believe that their current hours of attendance enable them to balance their personal and work responsibilities.</p>
<p>iv Sickness absence was perceived by Governors to affect their ability to provide purposeful activity for prisoners. The Prison Service should assess the impact of the new sickness absence strategy on prison regimes.</p>	<p>Sickness absence continues to impact on prison regimes. In response to our questionnaire, 79 per cent of Governors stated that sickness absence has a 'significant' or 'moderate impact' on their ability to allow prisoners time on purposeful activity, compared to 58 per cent in 1998. The increase might reflect a greater awareness of the importance of managing sickness absence.</p> <p>The attendance management procedures, effective from November 2002, seek to minimise short term sick leave, which, because of its unpredictability, tends to disrupt regimes.</p>
<p>v The Prison Service has a set target for reducing the annual average level of sickness absence from 14.5 working days - taking into account the under-recording identified by the National Audit Office - to 12.5 working days in 1999-00. Performance against the target will be closely monitored, with Governors accountable for achieving the required improvements in their own establishments.</p>	<p>The annual average level of sickness absence has subsequently increased from 12.5 days in 1999-00 to 14.7 days in 2002-03. Much of the overall increase, however, might be due to under-reporting in earlier years.</p>
<p>vi The poor performance of the 56 per cent of prisons assessed as "deficient" or "unacceptable" in meeting statutory health and safety requirements in 1998-99 is worrying. The Prison Service should secure permanent improvements in performance at these prisons.</p>	<p>The Prison Service has confirmed a service wide Health and Safety policy has been developed and was being circulated for consultation in March 2004. The strategy is based on best practice guidance from the Health and Safety Executive. One hundred and six prisons have a Health and Safety Advisor.</p>
<p>vii All staff should get a pocket guide on sickness absence and line managers should ensure their staff understand the importance of effective sickness absence management.</p>	<p>The Prison Service has confirmed that guidance was sent to line managers, although staff we interviewed revealed some uncertainty as to whether they had received a copy. We did establish from our visits, however, that line managers had taken the time to explain the procedures to their staff.</p>

Committee of Public Accounts conclusion		Action taken by the Prison Service
viii	Governors should ensure that prescribed procedures for sickness absence management are carried out.	The Governor at each of the establishments we visited had demonstrated an active interest in sickness absence management. Our analysis suggests there continue to be wide differences in sickness absence rates and the Governor has a key role in driving through change in some establishments.
ix	A planned programme of improvements at Prison Service headquarters should be implemented, and performance appropriately benchmarked.	Individual functions within headquarters are charged with implementing policies in the same way as individual prisons. The sickness rate in Prison Service headquarters was 8.1 days in 2002-03. This was below the average for the Civil Service.
x and xi	Procedures relating to staff with unsatisfactory attendance were not being followed and this should be rectified. Procedures for discipline and dismissal should be applied consistently across the Service, and strengthened as necessary.	The Prison Service introduced new attendance management procedures, effective from November 2002, which seeks to minimise management discretion in order to ensure consistency and equality in the way staff are treated. Our visits to establishments indicated that procedures were generally followed, although there were some instances where there had been delays in issuing warnings.
xii	In a special study in three prisons, 40 per cent of staff cited harassment and bullying as a cause of stress. Action should be taken wherever this is found, and the situation assessed by a wider study in 12 months time.	The Prison Service undertook a review of the causes of stress in January 2004. The results found that 40 staff out of 2,181 that responded to the survey said they had suffered stress as a result of bullying. Following extensive consultation and negotiations with all the relevant trades unions and other key stakeholders, the Prison Service introduced a revised disciplinary procedure in March 2003. Bullying is now identified, specifically, as one of the areas of misconduct that, if proven, constitutes gross misconduct and the person is liable to be dismissed.
xiii	Following the pilot study on the employment of occupational health nurses, the Prison Service should review results and expand occupational health provision if there is a business case for so doing.	The Prison Service concluded the results of the pilot study did not demonstrate a clear business case for the expansion of occupational health services. Further independent analysis of the situation in March 2002 led to recommendations to appoint Occupational Health Advisers at each establishment. However, there were only three full-time and four part-time advisers in post by December 2003, although the Prison Service expects numbers to increase following the re-letting of the occupational health service contract.
xiv	The Committee welcomed the decision of the Prison Service to discuss with the Prison Officers' Association the introduction of annual fitness tests for prison officers, and its commitment to providing guidance to staff on how they might improve their health.	A comprehensive system of fitness testing was introduced for all prison officers joining the Service after April 2001. Officers who joined after that date are required to take and pass the test annually.
xv	All related surveys should in future be completed by prisons.	Every prison Governor responded to our survey.
xvi	The Prison Service must ensure the full and accurate recording of all sickness absence data, and audit it.	Our consultants concluded that the Prison Service's recording of sickness absence data appeared to have greatly improved and the Prison Service is confident its figures in 2002-03 are accurate. The data are audited by Internal Audit.
xvii	Weaknesses in establishments' ability to produce sickness information should be remedied as quickly as possible with appropriate training and full use of systems.	All the prisons we visited had a dedicated Sickness Absence Clerk, or in the larger prisons, a dedicated team. The staff were all fully conversant with the system, and we were given demonstrations of the use of the system during each visit.
xviii	Improved recording arrangements should be introduced to prevent overpayments of salary due to understatement of sickness absence.	Our examination of the Home Office payroll system suggests there continue to be errors in calculating monthly pay, although the errors have tended to be clerical mistakes resulting in underpayments of salary rather than overpayments.
xix and xx	In managing long-term sickness absence, the Prison Service should take into account the cost to the Exchequer of medical retirements. The Prison Service, and other public service contributors to the Principal Civil Service Pension Scheme, are urged to minimise costs to the scheme in considering medically related cessations of employment.	The Governors interviewed during our visits demonstrated an awareness of the costs of medical retirements to the Exchequer. Our analysis of Prison Service data indicated that numbers of medical retirements had decreased since 1999, whereas the numbers of staff dismissed for medical inefficiency had increased.

Appendix 3

Study methods

Survey of prisons

- 1 We undertook a questionnaire survey of the Governor of each of the 128 prisons administered directly by the Prison Service in England and Wales. The survey was administered and the results analysed by our contractor DLA MCG Consulting. The questionnaire addressed:
 - The impact of sickness absence on the operational performance of prisons.
 - The causes of sickness absence.
 - The effectiveness of initiatives and procedures for managing sickness absence.
 - Arrangements for monitoring sickness absence rates.
 - The impact of occupational health services on sickness absence rates.
 - Local barriers to reducing sickness absence rates.

Every establishment completed and returned the questionnaire.

Visits to establishments

- 2 Our contractor, DLA MCG Consulting, visited nine establishments in order to validate the questionnaire results and to follow up any issues arising. We selected establishments that provided a cross section of different types of prison, different levels of performance in managing sickness absence and a reasonable geographic spread across England and Wales - see [Table 1](#).
- 3 At each establishment interviews were held with the Governor, head of personnel, staff responsible for monitoring and managing sickness absence and, where applicable, the occupational health advisor. We also held discussions with a group of Principal Officers and discussions with a group of Senior Officers. The objective of the meetings was to discuss the questionnaire response, problems encountered in managing sickness absence and to examine any initiatives undertaken.

Table 1: Establishments visited as part of the examination

Establishment	Location	Type of establishment	Sickness rate in 2002-03
Belmarsh	South East England	Local prison	19.7
Birmingham	Midlands	Local prison	12.3
Grendon	South East England	Category B prison	18.3
Haverigg	North West England	Category C prison	12.6
Holloway	South East England	Women's prison	25.3
Onley	East Midlands	Young Offender Institution	20.2
Sudbury	East Midlands	Open prison	10.1
Swansea	Wales	Local prison	18.2
Wandsworth	South East England	Local prison	19.3

Source: National Audit Office analysis of Prison Service data

Performance benchmarking

- 4 In order to put Prison Service sickness absence levels in perspective and to ascertain what initiatives or problems are faced elsewhere, we examined the management of sickness absence in comparator organisations. We asked the privately managed prisons and the Scottish and Irish Prison Services to complete a simplified version of the questionnaire sent to Governors of establishments run by the Prison Service and followed the responses up with discussions to explore key findings. In addition, we have drawn information from other published sources, in particular the Confederation of British Industry's Absence and Labour Turnover Report of 2003, the Chartered Institute of Personnel and Development's Employee Absence Survey of 2003 and the Cabinet Office's Analysis of Sickness Absence in the Civil Service.

Interviews and analysis of data from the Prison Service

- 5 We interviewed key staff in the Prison Service to examine and understand how sickness absence is recorded and to seek explanations for variations in performance. We drew on the data recorded on the PERSONNEL computer system and in quarterly monitoring reports to examine performance and trends in managing sickness absence.

Examination of the payroll function

- 6 We have undertaken an examination of the Home Office pay system. The examination included an analysis of the number and type of payroll errors made in 2002-03, a review of a selection of files to determine what action had been taken when mistakes had arisen, and correspondence with the individuals involved to determine the impact and consequences of payroll mistakes.

Consultation with third parties

- 7 We wrote to all the staff associations and trade unions associated with the Prison Service in September 2003 to seek their views of the management of sickness absence and the impact of Prison Service initiatives on staff. We held discussions with the Prison Officers' Association and we contacted BMI Health Services and Atos Origin to seek their comments on the management of the occupational health contract by the Prison Service.