

# The Management of Sickness Absence in the Prison Service



REPORT BY THE COMPTROLLER AND AUDITOR GENERAL  
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# Summary

- 1 The Prison Service employed some 45,400 staff<sup>1</sup> 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 1999<sup>2</sup> 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.

<sup>1</sup> Whole time equivalent number.

<sup>2</sup> *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 rate<sup>3</sup> 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.

<sup>3</sup> 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.