



National Audit Office

The Management of Staff Sickness Absence in the National Probation Service

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LONDON: The Stationery Office
£8.25

Ordered by the
House of Commons
to be printed on 24 April 2006

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.

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23 March 2006

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CONTENTS

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY	1
PART 1	
The high sickness absence rates amongst probation staff cost over £32 million in 2004-05	4
Probation staff have a key role in working with offenders	5
Recorded levels of sickness absence in the National Probation Service are above target and high compared to the public sector average	5
There are wide variations in the average sickness absence rate between Probation Service Areas	6
Better information would help the Service manage sickness absence more effectively	6
Sickness absence cost the Service £32 million in 2004-05	8
Cover for those off sick could cost another £2 million per year	9



PART 2

The National Probation Service needs more consistent management to improve sickness absence	10
There is a model national policy on sickness absence	11
Not all policies implemented at Area level include all mandatory elements	11
Procedures for sickness absence are not enforced consistently	12
Long term sickness absence needs proactive management	12
Sickness absence rates for prison and probation staff are similar, but the rate is reducing in the Prison Service	14
Sickness absence levels are lower where good practices in managing sickness absence have been most fully implemented	14

PART 3

One third of all sick leave in the National Probation Service is attributed to stress	16
One third of sickness absence is due to stress, anxiety and depression	17
Working with offenders does not appear to be causing sickness absence	17
Changes to the Service's work have brought major cultural change	17
Organisational change is continuing	18
Staff perceive rising workload to be a cause of work/life imbalance	18
The National Probation Service has introduced measures to tackle stress, but the policies have not yet been rolled out to all staff	20

APPENDICES

1 Methodology	21
2 Staffing levels and roles of probation officers	23
3 West Yorkshire	24
4 London	26
5 How sickness absence rates are calculated	27
6 Mandatory elements in the National Probation Directorate policy for sickness absence	29

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY



Sick leave in the National Probation Service is running at an average of 12.3 days per (full-time equivalent) person in 2004-05 costing £31.6 million. Overtime costs could amount to £2 million.

Value for money could be improved and resource savings made: the difference between 12.3 days' sick leave and the Service's target of 9 days amounts to £11 million, equivalent to 300 full-time staff. Sick leave rates vary between Probation Service Areas and if the Service had reduced rates above the median to 12.1 days in 2004-05, it would have saved £2.5 million.

The Service has limited information on the causes or average lengths of sickness absence or breakdowns by age or gender. Insufficient management information hinders the Service's ability to diagnose the reasons for high levels of sickness absence and take appropriate management action.

Managing sickness absence well needs a clear policy, good information and firm management. In April 2003, the National Probation Directorate circulated the 42 regional Probation Areas with a model national policy, including guidance for managers. As each Area is a body corporate, and the employer of its staff, they can use discretion on action to be taken, however, and procedures are not applied consistently.

Consistent with the average for the public sector, one third of days lost were due to stress, costing £9.8 million. The National Probation Directorate has developed a stress management policy, praised by the Health and Safety Executive, and Areas are implementing it locally. But progress could be faster: only one fifth of staff have had stress awareness training.

Dissatisfaction and workload can impact on sickness absence. Organisationally, the Service has changed much in recent years; changes in community sentences and the introduction of performance targets have created new demands for staff. But sickness absence itself increases burdens on other colleagues and fuels a vicious circle by creating more stress.

Long term sickness absence has a considerable impact on the overall absence rate. Tackling long term sick leave needs a systematic approach and close working with occupational health services to get staff back to work or, if necessary, to terminate employment. Some Areas are not routinely reviewing such cases in line with good practices such as regular case review and are slow to bring cases to a conclusion.



RECOMMENDATIONS

We recommend that:

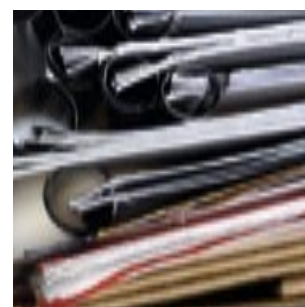
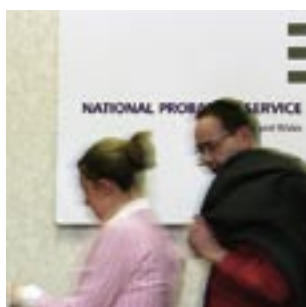
1 The National Probation Directorate should agree with Chief Probation Officers a consistent minimum standard for collecting and reporting sickness absence data in their Areas which could, at a sufficiently high level to comply with data protection obligations, generate the sort of comparative analyses presented in this Report. More detailed information could then be used within each Area to diagnose causes of sickness absence and inform appropriate management responses. A good model for management information that Areas might refer to is provided by the quarterly monitoring reports compiled by the Prison Service which include, among others, analyses by length and cause of absence, grade and gender.

2 Some Areas will need to upgrade their information technology systems in order to provide robust and timely management information. Chief Officers should consider shared systems to avoid unnecessary duplication of effort and improve the comparability of sickness absence data.

3 All Probation Areas should implement the mandatory elements of the national policy on sickness absence, and the National Probation Directorate should ask its internal audit service to confirm that this has been done.

4 All Chief Officers should review their action plans for reducing sickness absence to ensure they incorporate the best practice guidance noted in this report as well as that included in the national policy and that which is being identified by the National Probation Directorate's working group on sickness absence.

5 Chief Officers and Directors of Human Resources should make clear to line managers that sickness absence needs to be managed sympathetically, but actively and firmly, along the lines taken by West Yorkshire Probation Area. Return to Work Interviews are a key part of the process, to distinguish between avoidable and unavoidable sickness absences, address any culture of absenteeism and identify in good time where preventive measures (such as providing access to counselling services, changes to workload or flexible working arrangements) need to be taken.



6 All cases of long term sickness absence need to be reviewed as a matter of urgency to establish which could be resolved either by return to work, staged return, medical retirement or dismissal.

7 Areas should implement all the policies relating to work/life balance which have been agreed nationally and which are included in the national health and safety policy. In particular, the national policy on stress management needs faster implementation at local level to ensure that all staff are aware of its existence, and that line managers have received training in stress awareness and stress management.

8 Some uncertainty among staff is likely to remain for some time as the Probation Service is restructured and managers at all levels should, throughout the process, explain to staff how they are likely to be affected. The National Probation Service should use the results of the staff census we conducted, which shows where staff have most concerns, to brief managers and set the agenda for discussion of the issues with staff, so as to prevent uncertainty evolving into rising sickness absence.

PART ONE

The high sickness absence rates amongst probation staff cost over £32 million in 2004-05



Probation staff have a key role in working with offenders

1.1 The National Probation Service (the Service) has a key role in enforcing sentences and working with individuals to deter them from committing further crimes. The Service is responsible for the supervision of offenders over 18 years of age within the community, and each year supervises nearly 200,000 offenders.

1.2 Staff are the main resource available to the Service: pay and associated costs accounted for £564 million out of the Service's £872 million budget for 2004-05 (around 65 per cent). The Service employed 20,128 full-time equivalent staff in 2004-05, with over 80 per cent in operational roles.¹ The Service comprises 43 distinct employers. Each of the 42 local Area Boards is an employer in its own right, and there is a small central National Probation Directorate (**Figure 1 overleaf**).

1.3 Probation officers require professional qualifications. The National Probation Service trains recruits to graduate level and offers a basic salary range for a probation officer of £21,324 to £28,672.² The typical working week is 37.5 hours (35 hours in London) and, in addition to public holidays, staff have an annual leave entitlement which varies between 20 and 36 days.

Recorded levels of sickness absence in the National Probation Service are above target and high compared to the public sector average

1.4 National Probation Service records show that each member of staff³ in the National Probation Service was absent on sick leave for an average of 12.3 days in 2004-05, compared to the Service's own target of nine days and the public sector average of 10.7 days.⁴ The average sickness absence rate was broadly the same as it had been for the last two years (the average for 2003-04 was 12.3 days, and in 2002-03, 11.9 days).

1.5 The average sickness absence rate for front line probation staff is marginally lower than the average (12.0 days compared to 12.3). Average sickness absence for desk-based administrative support staff is higher at 13.0 days. The additional four days sickness absence above the target nine days is equivalent to an extra 64 staff per year.

¹ See Appendix 2 for more detail.

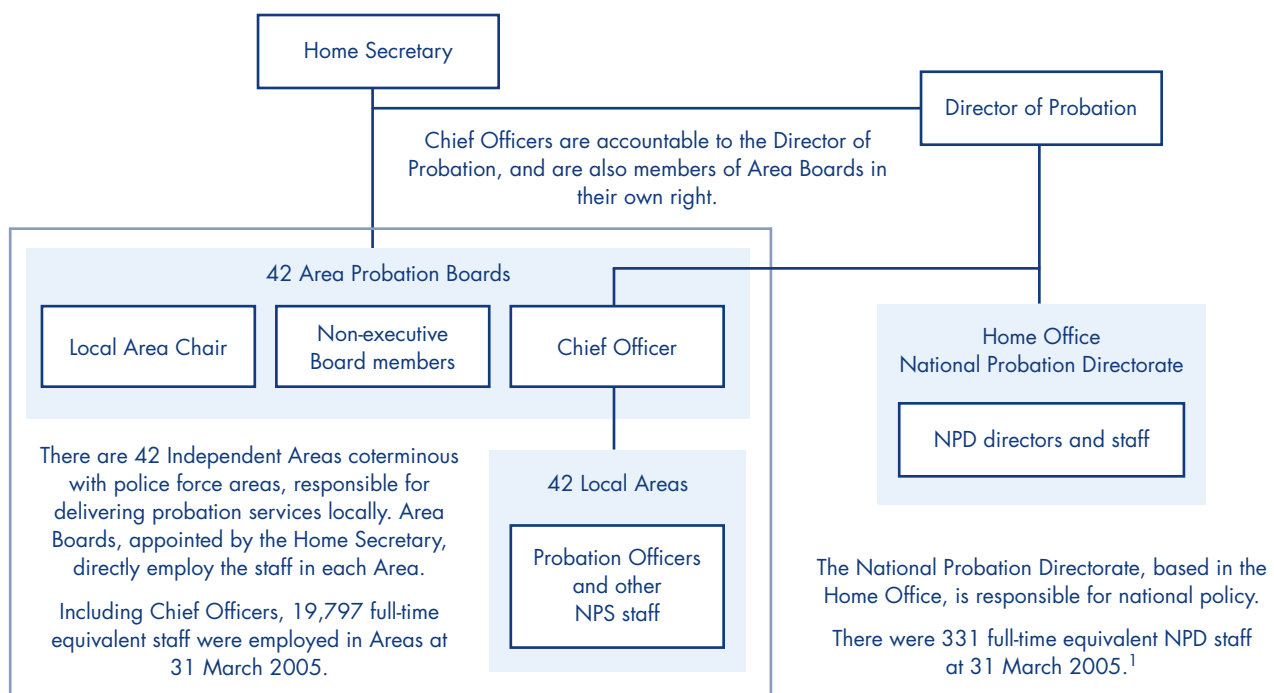
² This amount excludes enhancements to meet serious recruitment and retention difficulties (which can add up to six 1 per cent increments) near London and Fringe Allowances.

³ Full-time equivalent.

⁴ 10.3 days reported for all public services in the Chartered Institute of Personnel and Development's 2005 survey, *Absence management: a survey of policy and practice* (July 2005).

1

Almost all Probation Service staff are employed directly by one of 42 Area Boards



Source: National Audit Office

NOTE

¹ There were 135 full-time equivalent staff in the National Probation Directorate in February 2006.

There are wide variations in the average sickness absence rate between Probation Service Areas

1.6 Data from each Probation Service Area indicate variations in the average rate of sickness absence per person in 2004-05 (and the range is likely to be similar in 2005-06). Three of the 42 Areas⁵ met the target of an average nine days sickness absence (or less) per person in 2004-05, but there were substantial variations between Areas and four Areas⁶ had a rate of more than 14 days (Figure 2). The National Probation Service would have saved 19,668 working days, or £2.5 million, if it had been able to reduce the sickness rates in each Area above the median down to a rate of 12.1 days. Part year data available for 2005-06 suggest the rate could vary just as widely, over a likely range between under six days in North Yorkshire to over 15 days in Northamptonshire.⁷

⁵ North Yorkshire, Surrey and Suffolk. North Yorkshire had the lowest sickness absence rate, at 7.2 days.

⁶ Northamptonshire, North Wales, Cumbria and London. London had the highest sickness absence rate, at 16.5 days.

⁷ Only four months data available for some areas.

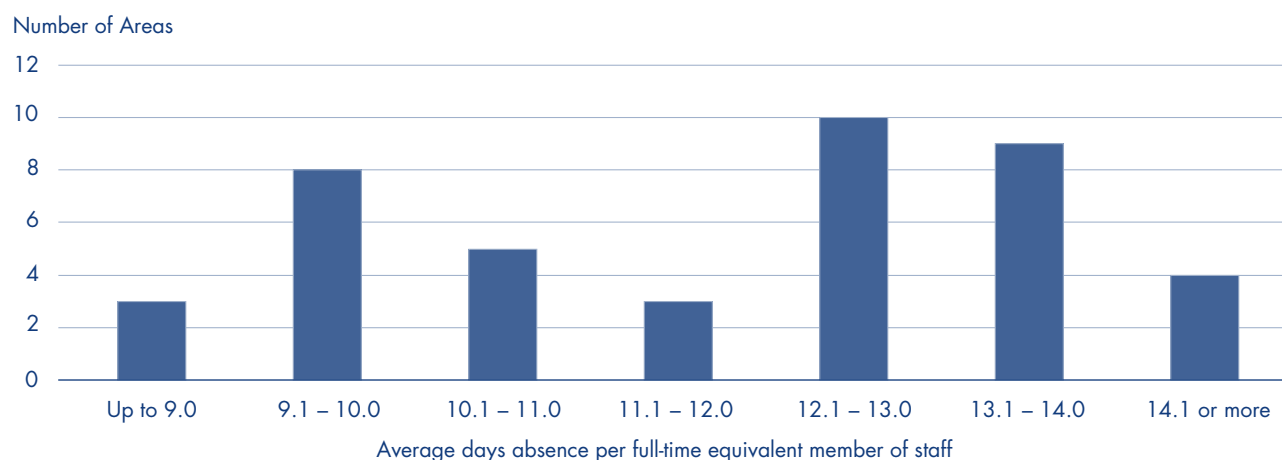
⁸ Their report on Northamptonshire Probation Area noted that the average sickness absence rate for May 2005 was overstated by 1.6 days. The internal audit report for West Yorkshire estimated their sickness absence figures were understated by 1.5 days because the figures did not properly reflect the number of full-time equivalent staff.

Some Areas have historically low levels of sickness absence. This report focuses on what needs to be done to reduce high sickness absence rates in the other Areas.

Better information would help the Service manage sickness absence more effectively

1.7 The information provided by Areas is not wholly accurate and, as a consequence, the reliability of overall data on sickness absence in the National Probation Service is undermined. Only 37 per cent of Chief Officers consider the national data to be 'very accurate', 54 per cent had 'some doubts' and 10 per cent thought data were only indicative. Internal Audit has also raised concerns about the reliability of sickness absence data.⁸ An explanation of the methodology the Probation Service uses to calculate sickness absence rates is at Appendix 5.

2 The average number of days sickness absence in 2004-05, per full-time employee equivalent, ranged from nine days or below in three Probation Service Areas to more than 14 days in four Areas



Source: National Audit Office analysis of National Probation Service data

There are inconsistencies in the National Probation Service's overall data on sickness absence

1.8 Our consultants identified inconsistencies in the way sickness absence data were recorded and analysed by Areas. The overall sickness absence rate may be understated as the national figure did not include data from every team in each Area. Other inconsistencies included:

- **London:** starters and leavers were counted as if they had joined or left at the beginning of a month rather than the day they started or left.
- **Cumbria, Kent and Surrey:** all had concerns that medical appointments were not treated consistently across all Areas and within each Area.
- **Cumbria:** an average figure for days of annual leave, rather than actual days taken, is used to calculate the time available for work in terms of staff years and the average number of working days in a month, an approach which was agreed with the National Probation Directorate.

1.9 As a result of the different approaches adopted by Areas and the lack of detailed information, it proved difficult for our consultants to quantify the extent of under or over recording of sickness absence. In their opinion, however, many inconsistencies will cancel themselves out either over time or between Areas and the difference is likely to be marginal.

There is a lack of reliable information about sickness absence

1.10 The National Probation Service has limited information available on the causes or average lengths of sickness absence. Some 16 of the 42 Probation Areas were unable to provide an analysis of sickness absence by gender. Of the remaining 26 Areas, 11 Areas provided the data in a format incompatible with the majority of others, making collation of national data impossible. Only 13 Areas could provide data broken down by age although, again, four of these presented this data in an inconsistent format, leaving 29 Areas unable to provide analysis by age. Just 28 of the 42 Areas were able to provide information on the number of employees in 2004-05 whose sickness absence had triggered a formal review or who had received a written warning. And only 32 Areas could confirm how many staff had been dismissed for medical inefficiency or retired on ill health grounds.

Senior managers in the Service need better information

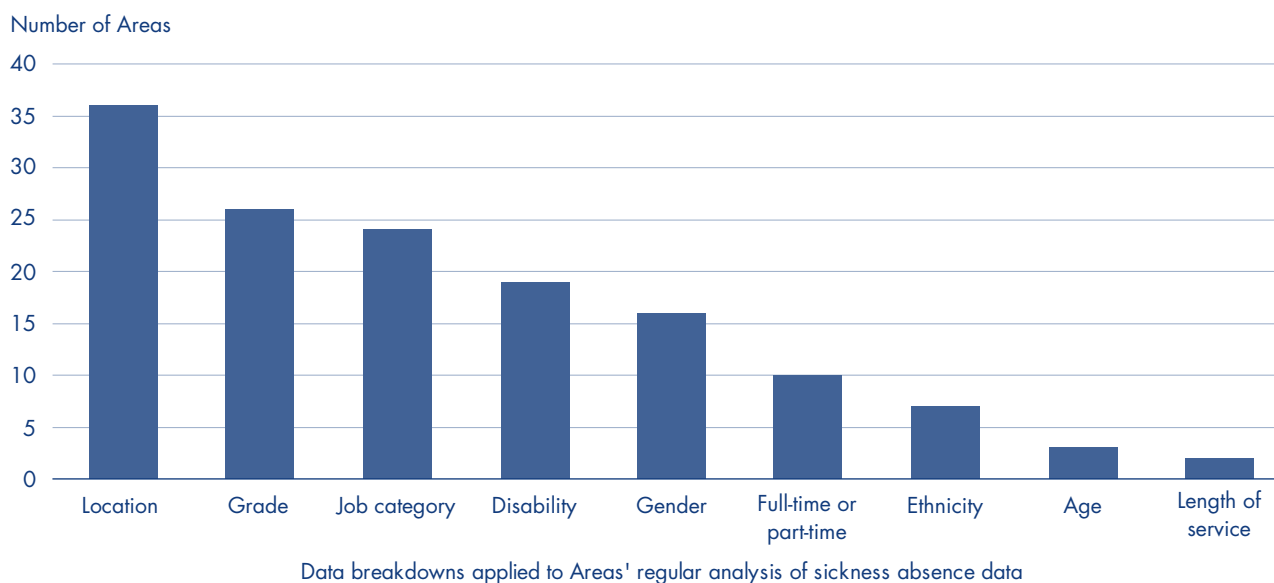
1.11 Effective management of sickness absence depends upon regular, good quality, timely data to identify trends.⁹ As **Figure 3** illustrates, the lack of information available to the management board mirrors the difficulty in getting comprehensive data from each Area. As a comparator, we looked at the Prison Service which, historically, has had sickness absence levels similar to that of the Probation Service but which in 2003-04 reversed what had been an upward trend in sickness absence rates. Senior managers in the National Probation Service do not have as much management information as their equivalents in the Prison Service to manage sickness absence effectively. In comparison, Prison Service data summarises monthly the performance of each prison, the length and causes of sickness absence and numbers of staff dismissed for medical inefficiency or medically retired. Only a third of senior management teams in the Probation Service

received individual absence records to review, and only 54 per cent received reports which compared the sickness absence rate for their Area with other Areas.

Sickness absence cost the Service £32 million in 2004-05

1.12 Reducing the level of sickness absence would lead to significant savings. Sickness absence cost approximately £31.6 million¹⁰ in equivalent working time costs, some 5.6 per cent of staff costs. The difference between the target of nine days and the out-turn of 12.3 days amounts to 66,420 working days lost, equivalent to some £11 million or around 300 full-time equivalent staff. The extent of variation in sickness absence rates between Areas suggests that reductions could be achieved. We examined how much sick leave was costing, the underlying reasons and possible solutions.¹¹

3 Very few Probation Areas regularly analyse sickness absence rates by length of service or age



Source: National Audit Office analysis of Chief Officers' questionnaire¹

NOTE

1 39 out of 42 Areas provided information.

⁹ Our earlier report *The management of sickness absence in the Prison Service* (HC 533, Session 2003-04), concluded that the Prison Service had made considerable progress in improving its management reports.

¹⁰ Dividing the total staff cost of £564.4 million in 2004-05 by the 19,857 full-time equivalent staff gives an average cost of £28,400, equivalent to around £129 a working day, then multiplying the average staff cost per working day by the 245,240 working days lost due to sickness absence in 2004-05. Based on an average 220 working days a year, taking into account weekends, public holidays and annual leave.

¹¹ For a full description of the methodology for the study see Appendix 1.

Cover for those off sick could cost another £2 million per year

1.13 Probation Areas also incur additional costs to provide cover for those absent. Twenty one of the 42 Areas were able to identify the costs of overtime and the hire of temporary staff which ranged typically from £10,000 to £50,000 in 2004-05. If these costs were replicated nationally, overtime payments and temporary staff would amount to some £2 million a year.

Sickness absence amongst probation staff has a knock-on impact on the efficient running of the courts

1.14 The courts rely on advice from probation staff to determine suitable sentences for offenders and to act when someone does not comply with the terms of their community penalty.¹² According to the National Probation Service, 73 per cent of pre-sentence reports were delivered on time in 2004-05. Where reports are delayed, the hearing has to be re-arranged which is inconvenient and can result in nugatory or additional expenditure because, for example, offenders may have to stay on remand when they would otherwise receive a community penalty.

1.15 The nature of team working in each Probation Area means it is difficult to measure the direct impact of sickness absence on the preparation of reports to courts. In the absence of any reliable data, we engaged Atkins Management Consultants to examine a sample of reports

produced by probation teams in two Areas: Kent and Warwickshire, to see whether any were delayed because of sickness absence. Atkins examined 196 reports and in 15 cases (9 per cent) the reports were not available by the due date. Most were delayed because the defendant had failed to attend an interview, and the probation team had subsequently been unable to arrange another interview date within the timetable. It is not clear whether inflexibility in rescheduling or lack of resource, or both, account for the difficulty in arranging another interview. But Probation staff failed to give at least one day's advance notice of the delay in eight (53 per cent) of the 15 delayed cases Atkins reviewed. Our analysis also found that 10 of the delayed reports had occurred during periods of higher than average sickness absence.

1.16 The sample examined by Atkins is not statistically representative and is insufficient to demonstrate a direct causal link, but it does suggest that sickness absence contributed to delay in reports reaching the courts. This is supported by our interviews with Court staff, who estimated that no notice was given for a high proportion, typically around 80 to 90 per cent, of non-reports. The National Probation Service are not convinced, on this evidence, of the impact of sickness absence among probation staff on the courts. But as an indicative figure the work undertaken by Atkins on our behalf suggests that the wider impact of Probation Service sickness absence on the criminal justice system, if replicated nationally, could be a cost¹³ to Crown Courts of around £0.5 million a year and around £4 million to Magistrates' Courts.¹⁴

¹² The National Probation Service's Service Level Agreement is to provide advice within 21 days for pre-sentence reports and five days for fast delivery reports.

¹³ Amongst the sample examined the average number of days a case was adjourned because of a non-report by the Probation Service was 25 days. Drawing upon the work we commissioned from Atkins, we estimated that each time a report was not prepared by probation staff on time, it would cost the courts £33 in administration and around £79 a day if the offender has to be kept on remand or in probation approved accommodation in the interim. If the probation staff did not provide advance notice that the report was not ready, the wasted court time would cost between £182 and £273, depending on whether the hearing was due to take place in a Crown Court or Magistrate's Court. In addition, the average cost of escorting a remand prisoner to and from custody costs £150.

¹⁴ The figures do not take into account any perceived public loss of confidence in the criminal justice system which could arise if victims or witnesses felt that sentencing decisions had been unnecessarily delayed.

PART TWO

The National Probation Service needs more consistent management to improve sickness absence



There is a model national policy on sickness absence

2.1 In April 2003, the National Probation Directorate agreed with the unions and circulated to Areas a model national policy on managing sickness absence. It aimed to meet the requirements of the Cabinet Office paper 'Working Well Together'¹⁵ and the recommendations of the 2001-02 National Probation Service 'Thematic Audit Review on Sickness Absence Monitoring'¹⁶, as well as taking into account good practice in and outside the Service. Our review established that it complies with good practice and includes useful practical guidance for managers. The policy is long, however, which could make it difficult to read and apply. Advice on long term cases of sickness absence could be more specific.

Not all policies implemented at Area level include all mandatory elements

2.2 National policy includes mandatory elements (Appendix 6), although Areas can decide whether or not to incorporate other policies if they want. Most Areas believe that their policy is similar to the National Policy, while three Areas thought theirs was more strict and seven felt it was more flexible. Twenty five of the 42 Areas provided

us with a copy of their sickness absence policy and, for these, we confirmed that local policies incorporate most mandatory elements. However, we noted several instances where local policies diverged from the mandatory national standards:

- **Two Areas¹⁷ do not require a separate Sickness Management file to be maintained and in other Areas there are wide variations in practice.** Divergence from the national model makes audit of the records more difficult and is liable to make it harder to manage sickness absence effectively.
- **Four Areas¹⁸ do not require self-certification for absences of less than three days.¹⁹** In three, employees are required to sign the return to work interview record, which includes reasons for absence. In the fourth²⁰, it is not clear whether this is a requirement, and our visit revealed that signed records are most unlikely to accompany each case of short term absence. Requiring staff to confirm the reason for their sickness absence helps to deter some from taking advantage of the system.
- **Twelve Areas do not specify a clear timetable of actions to be taken when an employee is absent on sick leave.** Proactively managing sickness absence helps an individual who is ill and encourages staff to return to work as soon as possible.²¹

¹⁵ *Working Well Together: Managing Attendance in the Public Sector*, Cabinet Office, 1998.

¹⁶ Home Office Audit and Assurance Unit, August 2002.

¹⁷ Kent and Surrey maintain documentation relating to sickness absences in a section of the personnel file. Return to work records are held by line managers at the employee's local workplace.

¹⁸ Greater Manchester, Staffordshire, Surrey and Sussex. The Greater Manchester Area explained that this was because statutory sick pay is not paid for absences of less than four days, and that this was reflected in local conditions of service.

¹⁹ National Audit Office review of National Probation Service Area sickness absence policies.

²⁰ Surrey.

²¹ National Audit Office review of National Probation Service Area sickness absence policies.

2.3 There is no evidence that the introduction of the National Probation Directorate model policy on sickness absence in 2003 has yet had a significant impact on sickness absence. In the absence of complete and reliable information on the extent to which Areas have fully implemented the national standards (and some Areas were still rewriting their policies), we were unable to assess the effectiveness of the mandatory elements by correlating them with Areas' sickness absence rates. However, Chief Probation Officers in only 24 Areas (57 per cent) believed their sickness absence policy had been at least reasonably effective in helping to reduce absence rates. Among those, between 2002-03 and 2004-05 the sickness absence rate decreased in 15 Areas and increased in nine.

Procedures for sickness absence are not enforced consistently

2.4 The proper application of sickness absence procedures depends on line managers enforcing procedures appropriately and consistently. Our visits confirmed that procedures were not applied consistently and, in some cases, that there was a relaxed attitude to sickness absence.²² We identified 26 instances with no evidence of case review and 10 with no referral to occupational health, despite the length and frequency of sickness absence being sufficient to trigger this. In 25 cases there was no evidence of a return to work interview; in 28 no self-certificates or medical certificates were available, and in one, the employee had not been put onto half pay despite having had enough absences to use up his/her entitlement to full pay.

2.5 Over 95 per cent of Chief Probation Officers confirmed that their line managers had a copy of their sickness absence policy and had been offered briefing. Many we interviewed, however, thought line managers were reluctant or unable to manage sickness absence assertively, and, as one respondent explained, 'many staff believe that the current levels of sickness absence are acceptable'. Nearly fifteen per cent of staff considered return to work interviews were poorly managed or did not follow procedures specified.

2.6 The inconsistency between Areas is partly due to the different approaches adopted by managers. Those Areas we visited tended to regard themselves as 'caring employers'. Whilst this is laudable, there is a risk that managers will be reluctant to take difficult decisions. Eighty two per cent of staff thought their managers were 'always' or 'usually' approachable and supportive. Yet over 35 per cent of staff noted that their managers 'seldom' or 'never' dealt with poor performance appropriately. A quarter of staff thought their managers 'seldom' or 'never' treated staff fairly and consistently. Focus groups had also raised concerns about inconsistencies in the way people were treated.

Long term sickness absence needs proactive management

2.7 Underlying the average sickness absence rates there is a wide variation in the number of days sick leave taken by individual members of staff. A small number of staff on very long term sick leave can have a disproportionately large impact on the number of working days lost. A third of staff had taken no sick leave at all in the previous twelve months. The highest proportion of staff, 38 per cent, took between one and five days leave. Seven per cent, one member of staff in fourteen, had been off sick for over six months (**Figure 4**).

2.8 The number of staff on long term sickness absence²³ has a considerable impact on the overall average sickness absence rate for each Area. Although long term sickness absence accounts for only 5.9 days out of the average of 12.3, (48 per cent), there is a strong correlation between an Area's long term sickness absence and its overall sickness absence^{24, 25} (**Figure 5**).

22 From our examination of 204 personnel files at 12 of the Probation Areas visited (in three Areas no audit of individual files was carried out as these were located at individual managers' offices), and interviews with line managers.

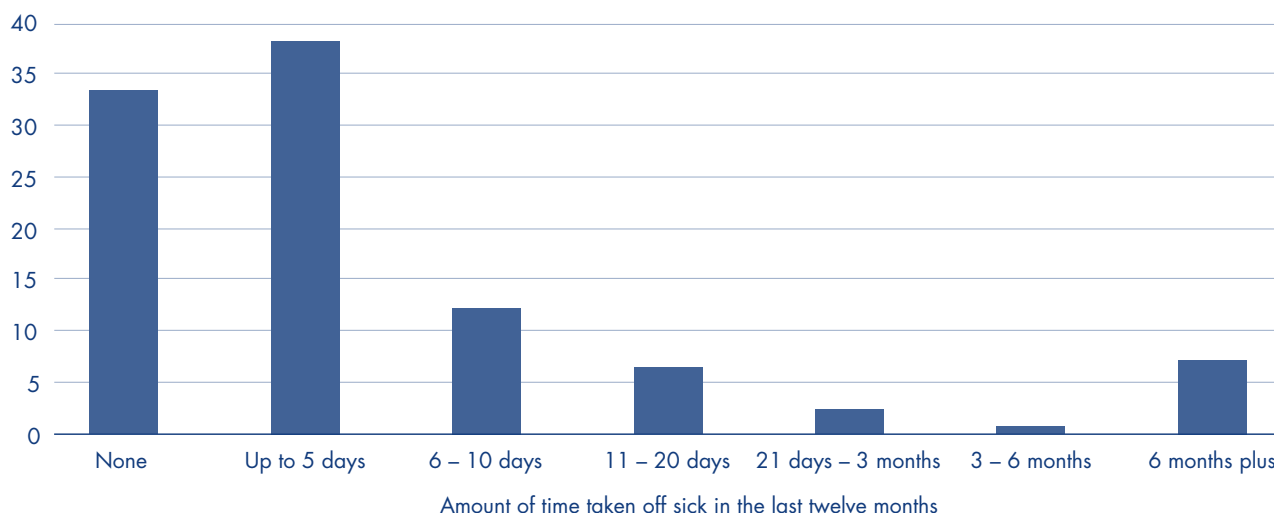
23 Defined as a period of absence of 28 days or more.

24 Correlation co-efficient $r = 0.74$.

25 In comparison, the correlation was weaker between short term absence and overall sickness absence. Correlation co-efficient $r = 0.42$.

4 A third of staff took no sick leave in the previous twelve months

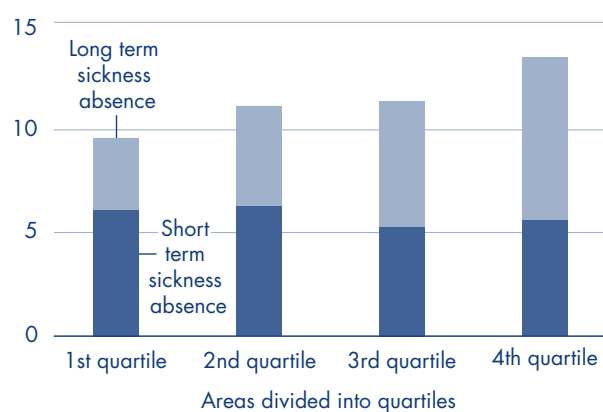
Proportion of staff (per cent)



Source: National Audit Office survey of Probation Service staff

5 Areas with lower rates tend to have a lower proportion of long term sick leave

Average days sickness absence



Source: National Audit Office analysis of National Probation Directorate 2004-05 sickness absence data

NOTE

Absences related to disability (excluded from Figure 5), account for an average of fewer than 0.5 days in all four quartiles.

2.9 Tackling long term sick leave depends on a systematic approach and working closely with occupational health services²⁶ to help staff back to work or, if necessary, terminate employment.²⁷ Our consultants found that Areas were slow to bring long term cases to a conclusion. In 26 out of the 204 case files examined, there was no evidence of any case review, despite circumstances warranting it. Areas are not routinely reviewing and managing such cases: fewer than two thirds maintained data showing how many staff had reached different stages in the formal procedures. The National Probation Service model policy includes a number of good practices in how to deal with such cases (Figure 6 overleaf).

26 Of the 39 Areas which answered the question, 27 (69 per cent) said they were satisfied with the service they received from their occupational health provider.

27 According to data supplied by Chief Probation Officers, the National Probation Service dismissed 25 out of its 21,100 staff in 2004-05 for medical inefficiency (1.2 per thousand employees). There was a 76 per cent response rate to this question. If the same proportion were applied to the whole of the Probation Service the rate would be 1.6 per thousand employees. As a comparison, the Prison Service dismissed 212 out of 48,000 staff (4.4 per thousand employees).

6 The National Probation Service model sickness absence policy includes a number of good practices in how to manage long term sickness absence cases

- Maintain regular telephone contact with employees and a Home Visit (where agreed) within the first 28 days and thereafter as appropriate. All contacts must be recorded.
- Refer the case to occupational health services after 20 days.
- Hold a case conference after 40 days, and have regular reviews thereafter.
- Forewarn the employee and take appropriate payroll action when the length of sickness absence triggers such actions.
- Offer some flexibility in arrangements in order to help the employee return to work. Such options could include changes to working hours or modified duties.

Source: National Audit Office analysis of the National Probation Service model policy on sickness absence

Sickness absence rates for prison and probation staff are similar, but the rate is reducing in the Prison Service

2.10 The National Probation Service has a level of sickness absence similar to that in the Prison Service, but the Prison Service has reversed an upward trend whereas the average in the National Probation Service is increasing.

2.11 Unlike the Prison Service policy on sickness absence, the National Probation Directorate policy enables line managers to use discretion when determining what action should be taken when someone is absent. The Prison Service system affords little discretion: a points system for the number and length of sickness absences will trigger specific actions that managers must take.²⁸ By comparison, most Probation Areas adopt a case by case approach which requires more management time and, from our discussions with staff, has led to perceptions of inconsistency.

2.12 Non-discretionary sickness absence policies can have an adverse impact on staff morale, but do usually reduce sickness absence. West Yorkshire Probation Area adopted a non-discretionary sickness absence policy in response to high sickness absence rates (the rate had reached 26 days per person in one of the six districts within the Area). Our discussions with staff established that this approach was considered 'draconian' and staff felt that employees who were genuinely ill were being unfairly penalised. The system was effective, however, in reducing sickness absence and in encouraging employees to return to work quicker in order to avoid triggering an improvement notice for having two or more periods of absence that together total 12 working days in a year. (See Appendix 3 for more detail).

Sickness absence levels are lower where good practices in managing sickness absence have been most fully implemented

2.13 Seven Chief Probation Officers offer some incentives for good attendance in their Areas, and 64 per cent of staff said they thought attendance bonuses would significantly improve attendance. We examined one scheme in South Wales, under which a member of staff who had not taken a day's sick leave in the last twelve months is eligible for an extra day's holiday. Line managers and staff, however, considered the scheme did not offer clear benefits and had made little difference to their sickness absence rates. Our consultants also identified in discussions with managers, staff and human resources staff at the Areas they visited, a reluctance on behalf of managers to grasp the nettle in short term absence cases. Effective sickness management depends upon managers pro-actively tackling the issue.

²⁸ Further details of the approach used by the Prison Service can be found in the National Audit Office report on *The Management of Sickness Absence by the Prison Service* HC 533, Parliamentary Session 2003-04.

2.14 Figure 7 summarises key good practices necessary to manage sickness absence properly. In summer 2005, following the start of our study, the National Probation Directorate asked Chief Officers to prepare action plans for improving attendance. The Directorate suggested that these plans should identify priorities and actions for managing both short term and long term absences, identify who would be responsible for delivering the actions and the mechanisms for reporting progress. The Directorate has set up a working group to monitor progress, which is preparing a best practice guide picking up five ‘top tips’ from the action plans all the Areas have written and examples of local successes.

2.15 Whilst all of the Areas we visited had adopted these good practices in part, West Yorkshire Area had done so more rigorously and has lower sickness absence. We have selected two case examples from the nine Areas visited to illustrate the impact of the way sickness absence is managed: West Yorkshire and London. These illustrate that firm and consistent management will bring about improvement. (See Appendices 3 and 4.)

7 Key good practices in sickness absence management

- Return to work interviews.
- A defined process for taking formal action.
- Measures to address long term sick absence including occupational health services.
- Supportive measures (access to counselling, health screening, flexible working).
- Senior management commitment.
- Good quality information.

PART THREE

One third of all sick leave in the National Probation Service is attributed to stress



One third of sickness absence is due to stress, anxiety and depression

3.1 Thirty one per cent of the 245,240 working days lost in 2004-05 were due to stress, costing the Service £9.8 million in 2004-05.²⁹ Stress is a leading cause of sickness absence, and these figures are consistent with the average for the whole of the public sector, in which one third of days lost were attributed to stress. According to the Health and Safety Executive, it is one of the most common reasons for ill health in Great Britain and an estimated 12.9 million working days were lost due to work-related stress, depression and anxiety in 2003-04.³⁰

Working with offenders does not appear to be causing sickness absence

3.2 Working with offenders is demanding. Staff have to maintain a working relationship with all offenders on community penalties or released on licence from prison, whatever offence they committed and irrespective of the offender's attitudes towards the criminal justice system, authority or other factors. The probation staff we interviewed appeared to relish this aspect of their work, however, and it does not appear to be a significant contributory cause of stress or sickness absence. The National Probation Service data show that only 0.1 per cent of sickness absence was due to assaults and accidents from working with offenders in 2004-05. The Probation Areas with high sickness absence rates are

not necessarily those parts of England and Wales which might be perceived as more difficult places to work. London had a high sickness absence rate in 2004-05, but North Wales and Cumbria Probation Areas also had an average of 14 days or more.

Changes to the Service's work have brought major cultural change

3.3 Changes in community sentences specified by the courts and the introduction of performance targets within the National Probation Service have changed the demands on staff. A Community Service Order, for example, will typically require the probation officer to organise programmes to address the offender's criminal behaviour by encouraging them to find employment, carry out reparation activities, and to attend offending behaviour courses. The introduction of electronic monitoring of offenders requires staff to undertake home visits to determine whether a prisoner due to be released on Home Detention Curfew has a home environment suitable for electronic monitoring. The number of prisoners released on Home Detention Curfew has increased from 9,000 in 1999-2000 to 53,000 in 2004-05. Courts are also more likely to require a pre-sentence report from the probation officer so that a Community Service Order can be targeted effectively. According to National Probation Service data, the number of reports required by the courts has increased by three per cent from 237,500 in 1999 to 244,500 in 2003.

²⁹ Multiplying the 76,000 days lost by the average staff cost per day of £129.

³⁰ Jones JR, Huxtable CS, Hodgson JT, Chapter 7 *Self-reported work related illness in 2003-04: Results from the Labour Force Survey*. Also see *The 6th Chartered Institute of Personnel and Development Annual Absence Survey*, July 2005.

3.4 The total number of staff in the Probation Service has also increased. There were 13,968 full-time equivalent staff in the Probation Service in 1997, and this number had increased to 20,138 by September 2005 (excluding policy staff in the National Probation Directorate). Our visits to Areas and analysis of National Probation Service data indicate that there are no widespread staff shortages or recruitment and retention problems. Vacancies reported by the Service in March 2005 comprised three per cent of the total number of posts.

Organisational change is continuing

3.5 The work of probation staff has undergone a considerable amount of change in recent years and further changes are likely with the introduction of the National Offender Management Service (NOMS). The Home Office is considering removing the legal requirement for local Probation Boards to deal with offenders, so that it can invite other providers to bid for probation work.

3.6 Most probation staff confirmed that they are satisfied with their current job and 55 per cent stated that they were fully or 'fairly' informed. Nevertheless, dissatisfaction can impact on sickness absence: 237 staff (4.2 per cent of respondents) confirmed that they had been absent on sick leave in the last two years because they were disenchanted with their work (comments raised by staff are reflected in **Figure 8**).³¹ We found that the eight Areas with the lowest levels of sickness absence also tended, on a range of measures, to have more positive views about their jobs than did those in the eight Areas with highest sickness absence. Where the difference in staff satisfaction between the two groups was most significant was in provision for flexible working and recognition of training and development needs.

Staff perceive rising workload to be a cause of work/life imbalance

3.7 Chief Probation Officers and probation staff have raised concerns that the changes in their day to day work have led to stress and, in some cases, a work/life imbalance. More than two thirds of Chief Probation Officers felt that stress caused by workload was an

'important' or 'very important' reason for avoidable sickness absence (**Figure 9**). Although around half of staff believe that they are at least 'sometimes' required to work long hours, fewer than 10 per cent feel they cannot take a break or to request help from colleagues.

8 Comments raised by Probation Staff in our census

Survey results: Nearly a third of staff felt it was 'never' or 'seldom' the case that "When changes are made at work, I am clear how they will work out in practice".

“Lots of changes due to NOMS but staff are left in the dark as to how they will be affected”

“Confusion reigns and this is corrosive to staff commitment and morale”

“We need more opportunities to talk about the issues and be able to express our fears”

“Staff are confused about the future role NOMS will have and the impact on the staff's work”

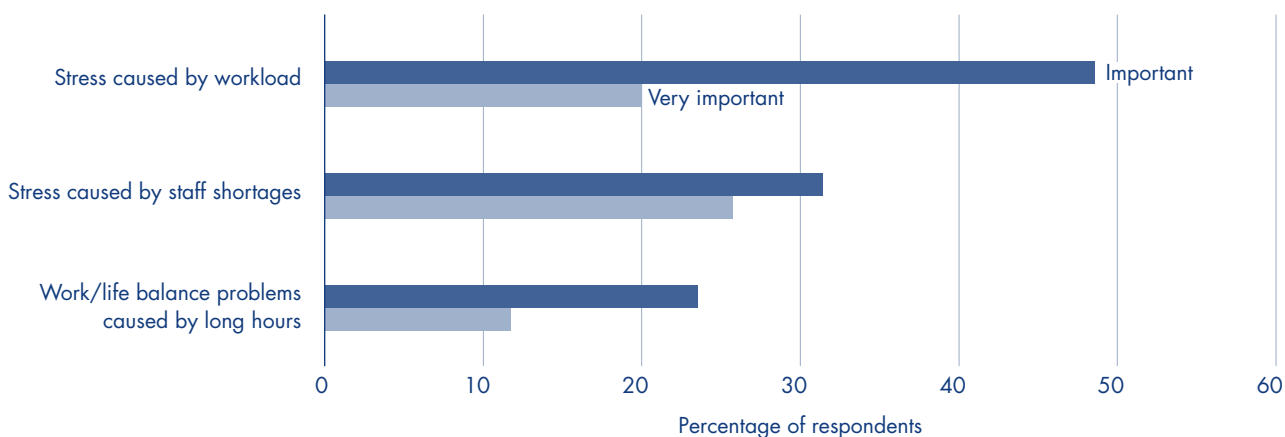
“The national service appears to be in a constant state of flux with the creation of NOMS providing nothing more than considerable uncertainty”

Source: National Audit Office survey of all National Probation Service staff

³¹ Some staff dissatisfaction is to be expected. Our consultants confirmed that staff surveys tend to provide an opportunity for some individuals to express their dissatisfaction.

9 Almost 70 per cent of Chief Probation Officers consider stress caused by workload to be an 'important' or 'very important' cause of avoidable sickness absence amongst probation staff

To what extent each factor was a cause of stress in the last 12 months



Source: National Audit Office survey of all Chief Officers of Probation

3.8 The National Probation Directorate has been developing a workload measurement tool as part of discussions with staff union representatives of a 'Workload Prioritisation and Employee Care Agreement', although these had not yet been finalised or introduced by Areas. As a high level indicator of workload we found that there is no statistically significant correlation between the sickness absence rate in each Area and the number of probation cases handled per member of staff. Participants in focus groups considered, however, that probation work had changed and that it had become more difficult to balance work and family commitments. Seven per cent of respondents to the staff survey stated that they had taken sick leave in the last two years because of family commitments. These staff were almost twice as likely to have day-to-day caring responsibilities as those who had not taken sick leave for this reason.

3.9 Line managers raised concerns that staff who take time off sick because of stress or work/life imbalance are likely to add to the pressures on colleagues at work. Fifty seven per cent of Chief Probation Officers considered stress caused by staff shortages to be an important cause of sickness absence. We found that there is no statistical correlation between sickness absence rates and vacancy levels, as a proportion of headcount, in different Areas. However, 55 per cent of staff feel that sickness absence among colleagues causes stress on staff who are at work (**Figure 10 overleaf**). High levels of sickness absence can only exacerbate this problem. Absences of between one and six months duration were believed to cause the most disruption to work.

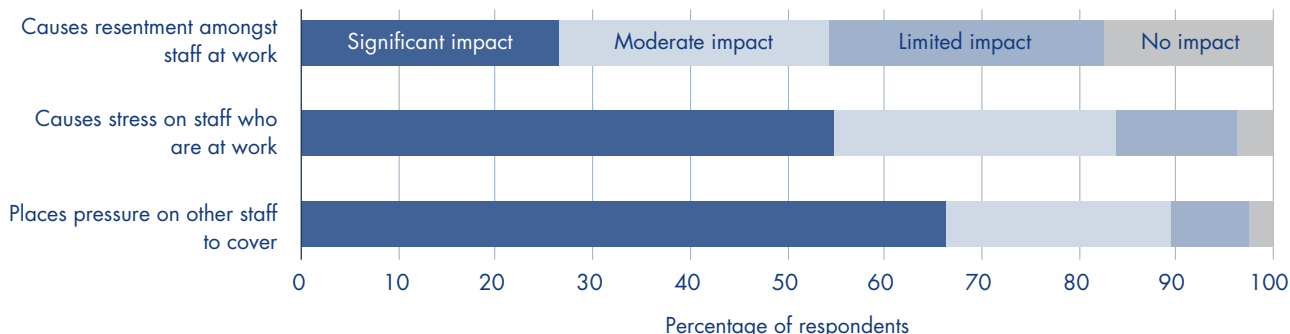
Staff in Areas with a below average sickness absence rate are more likely to be able to work flexible hours

3.10 The National Probation Directorate has issued a number of national policies, agreed with staff unions, addressing work/life balance issues. These include policies on the right to apply for flexible working; maternity, paternity and adoption leave; job sharing, part-time working and flexitime arrangements; religious observance policy; and a model special leave policy.

3.11 Getting work/life balance issues right can have a direct impact on sickness absence rates. Our data analysis confirmed that staff in the 25 per cent of Areas with low sickness absence were more likely to be able to work flexible hours than staff in the 25 per cent with highest sickness absence rates. Areas offered different schemes, including different start and finish times, part-time or term-time working and job sharing. Flexible working may not be possible for all staff, however, especially for those working in the Service's approved probation hostels, and with offenders on bail, community services and post custody licences, where 24 hour cover has to be given.

10 Most probation staff consider that sickness absence has a significant impact on them

Does sickness absence amongst colleagues at times have any of the following impacts?



Source: National Audit Office survey of Probation Service staff

The National Probation Service has introduced measures to tackle stress, but the policies have not yet been rolled out to all staff

3.12 In December 2004 the National Probation Directorate issued a Stress Management Arrangement and statement of best practice, which had been agreed in consultation with the Probation Boards Association, staff and unions and which forms part of the national health and safety policy manual. The health and safety policy has won praise from the Health and Safety Executive and Probation Areas are developing local strategies to implement the guidance. The National Probation Directorate is supporting Areas by running briefings and workshops for senior managers, and plans to monitor implementation of the new Arrangement as part of the national internal audit of health and safety compliance scheduled for 2007.

3.13 Our consultants, MCG Consulting, noted that there are three key features of an effective stress management policy: identify risks and put in place arrangements to minimise them; encourage and support employees to adopt a healthy lifestyle and cope with the reasonable pressures of their jobs; and support employees who are stressed. All these aspects are addressed in the Probation Service's Stress Management Arrangement document. Our visits to nine Probation Areas confirmed that they are assessing risks, and drawing up action plans. It is too early to say whether measures will be effective. Their success depends on whether staff understand the need to tackle stress. Our staff survey found that 17 per cent of staff were not aware of the procedures and services available for tackling stress in their Area, and only 21 per cent of staff had undertaken stress awareness training.

APPENDIX ONE

Methodology

- 1** The majority of the fieldwork was carried out by MCG Consulting under the direction of the NAO. The main aspects of methodology and the evidence they elicited are listed below:
 - 2** Meetings with National Probation Directorate
 - To identify the current standing of policy development and initiatives in the field of sickness absence and related areas such as health and safety.
 - To clarify the relationship and responsibilities between National Probation Directorate and the Areas in these fields.
 - To ascertain the extent of, and findings from, internal audit inspections in the field of sickness absence.
 - To discuss training initiatives and their relationship with the management of sickness absence.
 - To identify and examine statistical information gathered and held by National Probation Directorate in relation to sickness absence.
 - 3** Principal Area Visits (Nine)
 - To meet with staff from Areas carefully selected to represent a cross-section of the National Probation Service in terms of size, geographic spread, urbanisation, and performance in relation to sickness absence.
 - To interview senior management with overall responsibility for the management of sickness absence, and to ascertain the views of line management and staff through conducting focus groups.
 - To identify any particular problems that might impact on sickness absence such as recruitment and retention, workloads, etc.
 - To ascertain how information on sickness absence is gathered, analysed and reported, and to carry out an assessment of the veracity of the data and compliance with prescribed procedures.
 - 4** Chief Officers' Questionnaire (to all Chief Officers)
 - To collect and assess more detailed statistics on sickness absence, and associated reports.
 - To collect information about, and views upon, such issues as management, causes, impact, training and occupational health.
 - To understand the policies and procedures of each Area.
 - To provide a means of comparing the issues confronting, and actions taken by, different Areas.
 - 5** Subsidiary Area Visits (Six)
 - To follow up the Chief Officers' questionnaires on shorter visits to a cross-section of Areas.
 - To discuss issues underlying responses to the questionnaire.
 - To check statements against actual practice, and to review the processes of data collection and recording.
 - 6** Staff Attitude Survey sent out to all National Probation Service staff with responses received over a ten week period between late June and early September 2005. There were 7,555 returns (over 34 per cent response rate).
 - To assess objectively staff attitudes towards, and actions in relation to, the management of sickness absence.
 - To gain a deeper understanding of their views on employment by, and work within, the Service, and to assess what impact they may have upon sickness absence.
 - 7** Use of an external comparator (Prison Service)
 - To gain an insight to, and lessons potentially arising from, the actions of other organisations in managing sickness absence.

8 Analysis

- To analyse all the information collected, undertaking inter-Area comparisons, and checking conformity with procedures and best practice.
- To draw conclusions, on the key issues.

Details of the visits undertaken are as follows:

Principal Area Visits

These were made to:

TABLE 1: PRINCIPAL AREA VISITS		
Area	Staff Numbers (FTE) at 31.3.05 ¹	Average Days Sickness Absence Per Employee 2004-05 ²
Bedfordshire	193	10.3
Greater Manchester	1,326	13.6
Kent	466	13.1
London	2,377	16.5
Norfolk	258	13.1
South Wales	569	12.9
Surrey	253	8.8
Warwickshire	169	12.6
West Yorkshire	1,028	9.7

NOTES

1 Taken from NPS Workforce Information Report, July 2005.

2 Taken from NPS Performance Report 16, table on sickness absence.

In each case, the visits involved meeting with the Chief Officer, Head of Human Resources and Human Resources staff (with responsibility for sickness absence and occupational health). Focus groups were held with line managers, and separately, staff. We observed the processes by which sickness absence is recorded, and reviewed a cross-section of records.

Subsidiary Area Visits

These were made to:

TABLE 2: SUBSIDIARY AREA VISITS		
Area	Staff Numbers (FTE) at 31.3.05 ¹	Average Days Sickness Absence Per Employee 2004-05 ²
Avon and Somerset	510	12.1
Cumbria	175	15.7
Northamptonshire	221	14.4
Northumbria	677	13.2
Suffolk	209	9.0
West Midlands	1,286	12.2

NOTES

1 Taken from NPS Workforce Information Report, July 2005.

2 Taken from NPS Performance Report 16, table on sickness absence.

In general, the visits involved a meeting with the Head of Human Resources, or a senior Human Resources representative, and the Chief Officer if available. We discussed each Area's submission under the Chief Officers' Questionnaire, and the issues surrounding sickness absence. We discussed the way sickness absence is recorded, and reviewed a cross-section of records.

APPENDIX 2

Staffing levels and roles of probation officers

The day to day work of probation staff can involve a range of different tasks:

- **The supervision of offenders.** Probation staff supervise over 210,000 offenders in the community, including 128,000 on community sentences and 83,000 on pre- or post-release supervision.³² The supervision of offenders typically involves regular meetings to monitor progress, arranging and supervising work on required community activities, and liaison with employers, education establishments, social workers or other relevant parties to rehabilitate the offender. Probation staff will warn the offender if they do not comply with the conditions of their sentence and, if appropriate, notify the courts. Some 47,000 offenders breached their community sentence in 2003.
- **Preparing reports for the courts.** Probation staff wrote over 200,000 pre-sentence reports and nearly 50,000 specific sentence reports in 2004-05 to assist the courts in determining a suitable sentence for each offender. Each pre-sentence report involves interviewing the offender and other key parties in order to prepare a risk assessment and a proposed sentence the courts might wish to impose. The fast delivery report is a simplified version of a pre-sentence report, typically required by Magistrates for less serious offences.
- **Contacting victims.** Probation staff will consult and notify victims of more serious crimes when an offender is due to be released from prison. Staff should offer face-to-face contact with the victim (or family) within eight weeks of the offender being sentenced. In 2003-04, the National Probation Service reported that 91 per cent of the 15,650 victims of more serious crimes were contacted within eight weeks, compared to a target of 85 per cent.

- **Criminal inquiries.** Probation staff undertake a range of inquiries on behalf of other criminal justice organisations. According to Home Office statistics, there were 56,000 such inquiries in 2003-04, including 22,000 home visit assessments to determine whether a prisoner can be released on Home Detention Curfew, 5,000 assessments to help Parole Boards determine if a prisoner should be released, and 22,000 reports on behalf of the Home Office to assist in sentencing planning and to monitor prisoners released on licence.

11 Operational roles make up over 80 per cent of staff in the National Probation Service

Job title	Number of full-time equivalent staff	Percentage
Chief Officer, Deputy Chief Officer, Assistant Chief Officer, District and Support Managers	932	4.6
Senior Probation Officer	1,174	5.8
Senior Practitioner	370	1.8
Probation Officer	5,022	25.1
Trainee Probation Officer	1,756	8.7
Probation Services Officer	5,850	29.1
Other Operational Staff	593	2.9
Administrative Support	3,498	17.4
Other Support Staff	349	1.7
Other Specialist Staff	253	1.3
National Probation Directorate staff	331	1.6
Total	20,128	100.0

32 Offender Management Caseload Statistics, 2004, Home Office, December 2005.

APPENDIX 3

West Yorkshire

West Yorkshire is a large, predominantly urban Area with a high level of crime, including gun crime and sex offences. The Probation Service had the eighth lowest sickness absence rate of all Areas in the 2004-05 period. Comparable Areas such as Greater Manchester ranked 37th; London 42nd; Merseyside 31st; and West Midlands 24th. West Yorkshire has achieved an on-going reduction in its sickness absence record:

- 2002-03 11.8 days
- 2003-04 10.2 days
- 2004-05 9.7 days (the national average for 2004-05 was 12.3 days)

West Yorkshire's sickness absence policy was developed locally, was one of the first, and has been operational for over 4 years.

1) Implementation of short term absence control measures

West Yorkshire had a short term sickness absence rate of 4.2 days per employee in 2004-05 (the average for the National Probation Service was 6.1 days).

- The policy states that a return to work interview will be conducted after every absence.
- The policy has a trigger point for formal management action.
- The policy goes on to define further actions such as Improvement Notices, formal warnings and dismissals.

The numbers of employees under formal review and the numbers of warnings given show that the policy is being implemented robustly (see Figure 12).

There were some complaints, in evidence from the focus groups, of inconsistency, but the most frequently voiced complaint from the staff was about the application of draconian procedures.

12 Where absences meet the criteria for formal review they are dealt with formally

	W Yorks	Total (all Areas)	Average (all Areas)
Absences met criteria for a formal review	179	1322	51
Met criteria but formal review deemed unnecessary	8	165	7
Formal review instigated	171	918	33
First written warning given	82	96	4
Final written warning given	1	6	0
Dismissed	1	25	1
Retired on health grounds	2	65	2

Source: National Audit Office

2) Implementation of long term absence control measures

West Yorkshire had an average of 5.3 days long term sickness absence per employee in 2004-05 (the average for the National Probation Service was 5.9 days). There are clearly laid down procedures for managing long term absence. These include referral to occupational health services and making alternative working arrangements.

3) Supportive measures such as health promotion

From our interviews and focus groups we found that: annual health checks (voluntary) have been introduced for all staff; a 24 hour counselling service is provided for staff and family members; there is specialist counselling for those who deal with high risk offenders; there has been good encouragement of phased return to work; and managers are sympathetic to requests for changed hours/ flexible working.

4) Occupational health services provision

The policy states that occupational health referrals should be made after 20 days absence. Case conferences are held with occupational health to review long term sickness cases. Managers are gaining wider feedback from occupational health services on sickness patterns. The Area has specified the questions they want answered by the occupational health service provider, for example:

- Are symptoms consistent with diagnosis?
- Is the treatment appropriate?
- When can a return to work be expected, or what adjustments to work are needed to facilitate the process?

The National Probation Service's internal auditors found that occupational health referrals had not always been made after 20 days absence. The Human Resources Director confirmed that some discretion is applied in making referrals. In examining 20 records, we found one instance where, despite long absence over a period, no action was taken.

5) Leadership from senior management and support from Area Human Resources

The relatively newly appointed Chief Officer, and her predecessor, had worked closely with the Head of Human Resources to develop and apply policy. The critical role of, and contribution from, the Head of Human Resources was acknowledged, in 'championing the subject'. Sickness absence management is included as a key objective for line managers. Training provided by Human Resources included:

- Sickness absence included in induction training.
- There is a compulsory managing absence course.

The managers at the focus group we held in the Area had attended seminars on sickness absence and described the training as good.

6) Reports on sickness absence are provided to managers at all levels

Reports prepared at various times show breakdowns by employee, by length of absence, by job and by principal cause. Reports are prepared and distributed on a monthly basis covering the following (Figure 13):

13 Distribution of absence reports to managers

	Area Board	Chief Officer	Senior Mgt Team	Middle Managers	1st Line Managers	Head of Personnel	Manager responsible for Sickness Absence
Individual absence records				✓	✓		✓
Absences for a particular team/function		✓	✓	✓		✓	✓
Comparisons between different teams/functions	✓	✓	✓	✓		✓	✓
Absence in the Area as a whole	✓	✓	✓	✓		✓	✓
Comparisons with other Areas	✓	✓	✓	✓		✓	✓

Source: National Audit Office

APPENDIX 4

London

London had the highest sickness absence rate 2004-05 and its rates have increased over the last three years:

- 2002-03 10.2 days
- 2003-04 14.6 days
- 2004-05 16.5 days

London established an Attendance Project Team of five Human Resources staff in May 2005 to tackle the problem and the sickness absence rate for the first half of 2005-06 has fallen to 14.3 days, (the National Probation Service average for 2004-05 was 12.3 days).

London's policy is broadly compliant with the national model, but management would like to update it. There has been a lack of consistency, however, in understanding and applying the procedures.

1) Implementation of short term absence control Measures

The short term sickness absence rate was 8.3 days per employee in 2004-05, (the average for the National Probation Service was 6.1 days).

- The policy states that a return to work interview will be conducted after every absence but these were not being carried out before the Attendance Project was set up.
- The policy has a trigger point for formal management action.
- The policy goes on to define further actions such as Improvement Notices, formal warnings and dismissals.

The results of the staff opinion survey show that the quality of management of sickness absence was significantly below average in London. Staff satisfaction generally was also below average.

2) Implementation of long term absence control measures

London had an average 8.1 days long term sickness absence per employee in 2004-05 (the average for the National Probation Service was 5.9 days). An audit of records showed that in three out of 20 files sickness absence documentation was missing.

3) Supportive measures such as health promotion

Health screening and health promotion measures are being considered but do not exist at present. There are flexible working policies in place which are strongly supported by staff and which managers also felt were helpful in tackling sickness absence.

4) Occupational health services provision

Since the Attendance Project Team began work, audit evidence shows that referrals to occupational health services are handled in a timely and consistent fashion.

5) Leadership from senior management and support from Area Human Resources

London has had three Chief Officers in 12 months and has an interim Human Resources Director. The establishment of the Attendance Project shows a commitment at senior levels to managing sickness absence better. High turnover has caused a shortage of experienced Human Resources staff to support line managers and to monitor absence.

Most of the staff members at the focus group we held were not aware of the existence of the Attendance Project Team.

6) Sickness absence data is of poor quality

The London Area was able to provide us with the majority of sickness absence data we requested. Senior management, however, describe the quality of absence data as poor.

APPENDIX 5

How sickness absence rates are calculated

The counting and calculation of sickness absence used by the National Probation Service is based on the guidance contained in Annex 'E' to the 1998 Cabinet Office document *Working Well together: Managing Attendance in the Public Sector*, but with the addition of some further guidance recommended by the Service's internal auditors. The relevant calculation, given at paragraph E9 of *Working Together*, is the average number of days sick lost per staff year. A 'staff year' is the number of working days in the year for a full-time member of staff.

The internal auditors expressed concern that smaller Areas could be disadvantaged by long term sickness absence in respect of individuals recuperating from major operations and that absence which may be considered as falling within the remit of the Disability Discrimination Act 1995 (DDA). Within the overall total of sickness absence recorded, Areas break down the number of days lost through absence into short term sickness absence, long term sickness absence and DDA related sickness absence.

As a rule of thumb, the total staff years for the quarter will be approximately one quarter of the number of full-time equivalent (FTE) staff (or one twelfth if calculating staff years for the month). This is because a 'staff year' is defined as one full-time person working for one year. So, for example, if the FTE figure were 100, the total staff years for the year would be 100, and hence the staff years for the quarter would be 25.

In practice, an Area's full-time equivalent number of staff may well have fluctuated, so in order to make a precise calculation of total staff years for the period, Areas will need to take account of those staff who were employed for part of the period and the working patterns of part-time employees, and so calculate their contribution in terms of staff years during the period. Because the 'staff years' figure represents the number of working days, not the total number of days in the year, it should also exclude weekends and holiday entitlements, including bank holidays.

(From Annex E to *Working Well Together: Managing Attendance in the Public Sector*, Cabinet Office, 1998)

Measuring absence

1 We recommend adopting a standard minimum method of recording sickness absence:

days lost by sickness absence out of the number of days on which an employee was expected to work.

2 To compare sickness absence rates between organisations or between parts of an organisation the number of days lost needs to be expressed as a percentage in order to take account of different leave entitlements. We recommend for comparative purposes, using percentages calculated as follows:

Days lost by sickness absence

Days on which an employee was expected to work

3 The following paragraphs recommend good practice for recording absence for individuals, and discuss how to calculate the recommended statistics for comparison between organisations.

Recording absence for individuals

4 Organisations should aim to record all sickness absence on a database for all employees. We do not recommend the minimum information which organisations should hold about staff, but they should consider how they may want to use the aggregated dataset for analysis. However useful data for each employee might include age, sex, grade, location, whether full-time or part-time with contracted hours, the number of days attendance expected per week and the date employment started or finished.

- For full-time staff, record the number of days an individual is absent when contracted to work as a spell, a continuous period of absence.

- For part-time staff record the number of hours absent in a spell (excluding hours not contracted to work and meal breaks). Convert to days by dividing the number of hours by the length of the standard working day. If it is not feasible to record hours, record in fractions of the standard working days.
- Include all spells of sickness and industrial injury but exclude maternity leave.
- Record a half day if absent for that time for a medical or dental appointment, or if the employee reports for work but later returns home due to illness.
- Do not include periods of annual leave, or days not contracted to work, for example weekends if contracted to work Monday to Friday.

5 Many organisations record detailed causes of sickness with which to monitor an individual's sickness absence. This is for individual organisations to decide and we make no recommendations here. It is only of value to record detailed specific causes of sickness if the information is accurate and there is a defined need for the data.

6 An employee's absence record over a period will show the total number of days absent out of those contracted and the number and length of spells of absence. The results can be used to trigger management action for various types of absence.

Measuring absence for groups of individuals

7 A well organised data set collected as defined above can provide a variety of analyses to inform management and provide information from which valid comparisons can be made across and within organisations.

8 Aggregate records for individual staff to calculate the percentage of time lost or average number of days lost through sick absence. All staff records should be included in the analyses whether absence is recorded or not.

9 Assuming the period to be analysed is a full year the most simple measure is the average number of days lost per staff year which can be converted for comparison across organisations to the percentage of time lost due to absence. It is calculated

$$\frac{\text{Total number of days lost through absence}}{\text{Total staff years during the year}}$$

"A staff year" equals the number of days a full-time employee is contracted to work, i.e. excluding weekends or other rest days, annual leave including bank holidays and any other "privilege" leave days. This is usually about 225 to 230 days depending on leave entitlement.

Include all staff employed during the year. Where staff work part-time or for part of the year a fraction of the year should be derived.

Assuming for this example 225 days:

- Full-time all year = 1 staff year (225 working days)
- Full-time part year: employed for 100 working days = $\frac{4}{9}$ staff years (i.e. $100/225$)
- Part-time all year: contracted 18.5 hours a week where full-time hours are 37 = $\frac{1}{2}$ staff year (i.e. $18.5/37$, equivalent to 112.5 working days)
- Part-time part of year: employed 18.5 hours a week for 100 weeks = $\frac{1}{2} \times \frac{4}{9} = \frac{2}{9}$ staff years equivalent to 50 working days.

A section with the above 4 staff was contracted to work for $2 \frac{1}{6}$ (2.167) staff years. If the section were absent for a total of 20 days this would be equivalent to 9.23 days absent ($20/2.167$) per staff year.

10 The percentage of time lost due to absence is calculated

$$\frac{\text{Total days lost through absence}}{\text{(Total staff years x Working days in year)}}$$

or

$$\frac{\text{Average days lost}}{\text{Working days in year}}$$

Using the above example $20/(2 \frac{1}{6} \times 225)$ or $9.23/225 = 4.1\%$ of time lost due to sickness absence.

Combining results for several organisations

11 Where the results for several organisations are to be aggregated centrally the individual organisations should supply the following information:

- Average number of days lost for the specified period
- Total staff years for the period
- The assumed number of working days in the period

12 The average of all the organisations should be calculated by weighting each average by the number of staff years in that organisation.

APPENDIX 6

Mandatory elements in the National Probation Directorate policy for sickness absence

The National Probation Directorate policy for sickness absence includes a number of mandatory elements that each Area should adopt. Many of these elements are described in quite a generalised way, although the policy also sets out detailed procedures and a suite of proposed forms.

- Chief Officer and Probation Board to have overall responsibility for sickness absence.
- Chief Officers and Boards to be aware of relevant legislation.
- Chief Officers and Board actively to promote and monitor sickness management policies and the health, safety and welfare of staff.
- Chief Officers to designate the Human Resources unit to have day to day responsibility for sickness management.
- Recognition that the management of sickness absence is the responsibility of line managers supported by Personnel/Human Resources where appropriate.
- Involvement of line managers at the earliest possible stage.
- All members of staff to be aware of the policy and their responsibilities within it.
- An effective and accountable system for reporting and recording sickness absence.
- A Sickness Management File (SMF) for each employee containing a record of all sickness absences, contacts, meetings, occupational health (OH) referrals, case conferences, and Return to Work (RTW) contacts.
- Recorded RTW contact for every sickness absence.
- Trigger points for specific management actions such as home visits and OH referrals.
- Named individuals or units for each action.
- Active use of OH, where appropriate, to ensure return to health and work as soon as possible, including provision of OH facilities and help for staff to avoid sickness, especially work-related.
- Where appropriate, help for any member of staff to return to normal work through a rehabilitation programme including temporary modification of duties.