



National Audit Office

The Management of Staff Sickness Absence in the National Probation Service

LONDON: The Stationery Office
£8.25

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

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.