

Sick days and stress cost city council £6.2 million



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STAFF sick days are costing council taxpayers more than £6 million a year, according to latest figures.

New statistics show that Stoke-on-Trent City Council, which is trying to save £30 million in the next two years, lost an estimated £6.2 million in wages due to staff absences last year.



The figure is based on average salary levels in each department, and does not include extra costs such as employing agency staff to cover staff shortages.

Data from the council scrutiny report also shows that 76,263 working days were lost to sickness during 2009/10, which amounts to almost 10 days for each of the council's 8,000 employees.

Despite tighter restrictions on absences, the average of 9.55 days lost per worker is actually slightly higher than the 9.51 recorded in March.

In the worst-affected directorate, housing, environmental and neighbourhood services, the 1,033 staff took 12,764 days off, equivalent to 12.35 days each.

And the chief executive's department, which has just 194 staff, accounted for 2,132 days lost, or 11.02 per employee.

Absences in the children's services department cost council taxpayers the most in lost wages.

The directorate's 4,573 staff took 40,522 days off, averaging almost 8.9 days each and costing an estimated £2.9 million.

The council wants to cut absence rates to fewer than nine days by April next year.

Apart from children's services, only the regeneration department met this target, losing just 5.9 per worker.

Analysis reveals that stress and anxiety are the top reasons for sick days, followed by spinal problems, gastric illnesses and recuperating after surgery.

In the chief executive's department stress accounted for up to 41 per cent of absences, compared to just over 20 per cent in other sections.

The figures include the month-long absence of former interim chief executive Chris Harman, who went on sick leave on September 30 after being overlooked for the permanent top post.

He subsequently left on October 30, after accepting a £65,616 pay-off.

The report comes after it was revealed in April that the council had sacked 212 sick staff in the last four years, compared to 120 dismissed for other reasons.

But union leaders believe the tougher policy on absences and anxiety over looming budget cuts are fuelling the problem.

Unison's city council branch secretary, Colin Walton, said: "People are on edge and the environment we are working in as a public service is going to create some real pressures on people's lives."

He added: "Behind each of these statistics is an individual, often with very real and pressing needs."

But Lib-Dem Councillor Kieran Clarke, cabinet member for finance, performance and governance, said he did not believe anxiety over cuts was to blame.

He said: "Stress about the financial situation won't help matters, but I don't think it is having a major impact.

"We have reduced absence rates tremendously over the last few years, and stopped staff taking odd sick days.

"However, we are now left with longer-term illnesses, and one or two of those in a department can really skew the figures."