

Report of the Auditor General for Wales: The Management of Sickness Absence by NHS Trusts in Wales

The Welsh Assembly Government response to the recommendations of the Audit Committee, following the presentation of their report on 5 August 2004.

The Welsh Assembly Government is grateful for the report. We welcome the findings and offer the following response to fourteen recommendations in the Report.

Recommendation i.

In reviewing and monitoring their systems for recording sickness absence, NHS Trusts ensure that procedures are applied consistently and with equal rigour across all staff groups.

Agreed. In order to take forward the recommendations of the Auditor General for Wales report, we have established an all Wales Steering Group to oversee the development and implementation of an action plan based on the report's recommendations. This group is responsible to the Chief Executive, NHS Wales. The Group is chaired by a Chief Executive of a NHS Trust and membership consists of representatives from NHS Trusts and a nominee from the NHS Wales Partnership Forum. Chief Executives of Local Health Boards have also been asked if they wish to be represented.

This Group will develop consistent standards for sickness and absence management including a core methodology for data collection and reporting across NHS Wales.

Recommendation ii.

Following the introduction of a common definition for the measurement of sickness absence, the Assembly's Health and Social Care Department will update us on the levels of sickness absence across the NHS in Wales at the end of 2004-05 financial year.

Agreed. NHS Wales Deputy Directors of Human Resources have developed a common definition. This will be ratified by the Sickness and Absence Management Steering Group and then used by all NHS employers in Wales to provide a common baseline that will allow effective monitoring of sickness and absence across Wales. Health and Social Care Wales Department will update the Audit Committee on these figures at the end of the 2004 –05 financial year.

Recommendation iii.

The Assembly's Health and Social Care Department to ensure that the lessons learned from organisations that have achieved reductions in sickness absence, such as in Gwent Healthcare NHS Trust, are shared across the NHS in Wales.

Agreed. The Sickness and Absence Management Steering Group will be identifying current areas of good practice in sickness and absence management and promoting the adoption of these across the whole of NHS Wales.

Recommendation iv.

In seeking to address their levels of sickness absence, NHS Trusts focus particular attention upon front line staff such as nurses and midwives, as it is among these staff that reductions in sickness absence are likely to deliver the greatest operational and financial benefits.

Agreed. The Sickness and Absence Management Steering Group will examine the feasibility of developing a framework of operational units or staff groups for the purpose of establishing separate sickness absence recording and target setting for specific groups. This will allow for monitoring sickness and absence across similar staff groups. Relevant initiatives can then be developed to target specific staff groups where sickness and absence affect service delivery.

Recommendation v.

In setting revised targets for NHS Trusts and more closely monitoring trends in sickness absence in future years, the Assembly's Health and Social Care Department publicises figures on the levels of sickness absence in the same way as it publicises other key workforce information such as staff numbers and vacancies. This will help to ensure that the management of sickness absence maintains a high profile across NHS Wales.

Agreed. The Health and Social Care Department will set revised targets for NHS Trusts. Trusts will be required to report trends to Trust Board meetings. Trusts Annual Reports will be required to include information on sickness absence rates and trends. The Health and Social Care Department will publish sickness and absence figures as it does other key workforce information.

Recommendation vi.

The Assembly's Health and Social Care Department places particular priority on the work of the high level group tasked with taking forward the recommendations of the Auditor General's report and updates us in a year's time on the progress that has been made.

Agreed. The Sickness and Absence Management Steering Group, chaired by Alison Williams, Chief Executive, Ceredigion and Mid Wales NHS Trust, has the remit to produce a detailed action plan for approval by the Management Board of the Health and Social Care Department. It is tasked with producing a report by April 2005. The Health and Social Care Department will update the Audit Committee on progress with that plan.

Recommendation vii.

Where it is likely to be cost effective to do so, NHS Trusts should seek to reclaim sickness absence costs from liable third parties.

Agreed. NHS Trusts will be directed to reclaim sickness and absence costs from liable third parties where it is cost effective to do so. Some trusts already do so but current accounting arrangements do not allow for this to be easily identified. It is recommended that such reclamation should be accounted for separately.

Recommendation viii.

Good practice in using internal bank nurses is extended across NHS Wales with the aim of greatly reducing the use of agency nurses and thus reducing costs.

Agreed. The Welsh Assembly Government is supporting Trusts in the development of internal nurse bank systems and will be ensuring that good practice is shared across Trusts.

Recommendation ix.

The NHS in Wales places particular emphasis on the need to robustly identify the extent and causes of work related ill health, enabling employers to effectively and proportionately target resources aimed at addressing this problem.

Agreed. Revised monitoring systems for sickness and absence by NHS Trusts will identify the extent and causes of work-related ill health. This will enable problem areas to be identified and resources targeted at those areas.

Recommendation x.

The Assembly's Health and Social Care Department seeks urgent clarification on the categories to be used for recording the causes of sickness absence within the Electronic Staff Record (ESR) system, to enable NHS Trusts to train managers in the use of these categories in advance of the introduction of the system.

Agreed. Clarification is being sought with regard to categories to be used for recording causes of sickness and absence within the Electronic Staff Record

system. Once received, we will be able to identify appropriate training required for managers.

Recommendation xi.

In developing guidance on the management of sickness absence, the Assembly's Health and Social Care Department establishes minimum standards for training in the management of sickness absence.

Agreed. The Sickness and Absence Management Steering Group will consider the development of appropriate standards for training in management of sickness and absence.

Recommendation xii.

In seeking to approve occupational health services across the NHS in Wales, the Assembly's Health and Social Care Department considers whether elements of this provision, such as counselling, would be better provided on an all Wales basis.

Agreed. NHS Wales Department is currently developing an Occupational Health and Safety Framework for all NHS employers in Wales. This will include guidance on the provision specific services such as counselling. Small NHS employers may find benefits in working in partnership with other service providers in the provision of specialist services for their employees. This is already being put in place for GPs, pharmacists and dentists working in primary care. It is intended that the framework will be published in 2005.

Recommendation xiii.

The Assembly's Health and Social Care Department establishes its own guidance and standards for the provision of occupational health services across NHS Wales and actively monitors the progress of trusts in meeting these standards.

Agreed. The Occupational Health and Safety Framework that is currently under development will provide guidance to NHS employers in the provision of Occupational Health services. It is being developed alongside the requirements of the Corporate Health Standard which NHS Trusts in Wales are working towards.

Recommendation xiv.

The possibility of amalgamating approaches to occupational health provision between the NHS and local authorities across Wales is explored with a view to serving better the needs of employees in both sectors.

Agreed. The Health and Social Care Department is considering how best Occupational Health Services can be effectively delivered across Health and Social Care. This includes working with local authorities. Progress in this area will be reported to the Audit Committee along with other developments arising from this report next year.