



Northern Ireland
Assembly

Committee for Employment and Learning

OFFICIAL REPORT (Hansard)

Northern Ireland Audit Office Report
'Sickness Absence in the Northern Ireland
Public Sector': Northern Ireland Audit Office

26 February 2014

NORTHERN IRELAND ASSEMBLY

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Members present for all or part of the proceedings:

Mr Thomas Buchanan (Deputy Chairperson)
Mr David Hilditch
Mr Fra McCann
Ms Bronwyn McGahan
Mr Pat Ramsey
Mr Alastair Ross

Witnesses:

Mr Neil Gray Northern Ireland Audit Office
Mr David Murdie Northern Ireland Audit Office

The Deputy Chairperson: I welcome Mr Neil Gray and Mr David Murdie, assistant manager of the Northern Ireland Audit Office. Gentlemen, you are very welcome. We have the paperwork in front of us, and you have five or 10 minutes to make a short presentation. It will then be open to Committee members to ask any questions that they have.

Mr Neil Gray (Northern Ireland Audit Office): Thank you, Chair. I will take only five minutes to run you through the key points of the report as they relate to DEL. This is a follow-up report to a report that we did in 2008 on the management of sickness absence in the Civil Service. This report, which we published in 2013, widened the scope slightly to take in the health and education sectors as well. It is probably important to note for the Committee that, in this, we did not look at the effectiveness of the policies and procedures. We did not attempt to get behind the numbers in individual Departments, trusts and schools. So it is very much an overview, focusing squarely on the data itself. That said, there is stuff in here that is directly relevant to DEL and will help to build a picture. Overall, the trend of absence in DEL is downwards. In the 2008 report, we identified a high of around 19 days in 2001-02. By 2006-07, that had come down to 14.5 days, and by 2011-12 that had come down further to 11.4 days.

I draw your attention to figures 5 and 6, which are on pages 14 and 15 of the report. Figure 5 shows that DEL has the second highest absence rate, at an average of 11.4 days lost. It is behind only the Department of Justice. Figure 6 shows a standardised rate of absence in order to enable comparability between the Departments. That shows that DEL's rate of absence is the equal fourth highest. I move on to figure 13 on page 23. That looks at DEL's performance against the targets that have been set. You will see from that that DEL did not achieve the target that was set in 2009-10. On page 25, figure 15 updates that position for 2010-11 and 2011-12. Again, that shows that DEL did not achieve the target for sickness absence that had been set for those years.

We did look across the piece at the causes of absence. In general terms in the Civil Service, it is long-term sickness absence that accounts for the majority of overall sickness absence. Within that, mental health issues are recognised as the main cause of long-term sickness absence. That is about all that we can tell you about sickness absence specific to DEL. If there are any questions, we will be happy to take them.

The Deputy Chairperson: It is obviously a broad overview that we have been given. Can you give us any indication about what is happening in DEL that is not happening in other Departments, that has the sickness absence level so high?

Mr Gray: I really cannot answer that, Chair, I am afraid. The policies and procedures that we looked at in 2008 are generally what you would expect. There are policies and procedures and controls that, if applied consistently, would be delivering benefits. The evidence from 2008 is that they are not applied consistently across the Civil Service, but that is about all that I can tell you because, when we did the work in 2013, we did not go into the individual Departments at that level to assess how well they were working.

The Deputy Chairperson: So, you do not know whether DEL is applying the policies and procedures that are in place.

Mr Gray: Correct.

Mr P Ramsey: You are very welcome. Clearly, you have identified long-term sickness as one of the most prevalent reasons for the figures being high. In Northern Ireland, because of the conflict, we have a higher level of mental health-related issues such as post-traumatic stress. The question to be asked is this: has any study been carried out to determine whether the sickness absence of the existing DEL workforce is related to the Troubles in any way? We have identified an issue. In the Civil Service generally, are people being given help to come to terms with stress and mental health-related issues?

Mr Gray: I will take those two questions separately. I am not aware of any specific work around the issue in DEL.

Mr P Ramsey: Generally.

Mr Gray: Are you aware?

Mr David Murdie (Northern Ireland Audit Office): No, I am not aware of any specific research.

Mr Gray: Generally, while there is a focus on mental health in managing long-term sickness absence, I am not aware that that is being addressed specifically as a cause of mental health issues. Is that fair to say?

Mr Murdie: Yes. Page 16 of the report shows that, generally, around 70% of absences are due to long-term sickness. That has been the consistent level for some time.

Mr P Ramsey: Is any Department carrying out good practice to try to resolve these high levels? Is any work ongoing with the trade union movement, for example, to try to identify areas where they could assist in reconciling some of the ill-health issues?

Mr Gray: I do not think that I can comment on that. Again, we did not look at the detail of what is going on behind these figures. I do not think that we addressed that at all.

Mr Murdie: As Neil said, in this report, we wanted to set out the level of absence, show the comparators across the Civil Service and, for the first time, bring in the health and education sectors.

Mr P Ramsey: I am a wee bit concerned that there has not been any. Carrying out an audit and giving the statistics for long-term sickness is fair enough, but do you not have a role in making recommendations? Can you look at models of practice elsewhere, where things are done much better than here?

Mr Gray: We could do that. If the C&AG were to commission another report on sickness absence, which I would say is distinctly possible some time down the line given the ongoing nature of the issue, we could scope it in such a way that it did that kind of thing. The problem is that we were trying to do a huge piece of work, post hoc, to look at the Civil Service, education and health. If we had gone into that level of detail, it is possible that we would still be trying to do it now and would not have a report in front of us.

The Deputy Chairperson: You say that the last report was done in 2008. This report is a broad-brush sweep across the issue. Given the level of sickness absence and what it is costing in financial terms, I find it strange that it has not been looked at in more detail to see if the correct policy is being applied — and if not, why not — and to bring the level of sickness absence down. I find it strange that only a broad report has been done and that you have not looked at it in finer detail.

Mr Gray: They are all very good questions, Deputy Chair. As I say, if we had done that, we would probably not have this report in front of us now. The scale of the work involved in doing that across the Civil Service, health and education would be massive.

Mr F McCann: Thanks for the presentation. Obviously, I know that this is not a new thing. Back in 2007, when I was on the Finance and Personnel Committee, we got a similar report that came up with similar findings. The same questions were asked, and we got the same answers. Nothing seems to have been done in the meantime, although I appreciate that there has been a slight decrease. I was on the council for a lengthy period of time before this. Even in councils, you usually find that people on long-term sick are those who work in front line services. In the case of DEL, it may be in benefit offices. That is the type of information that you need. People talk about mental health; mental health issues cover a wide range of illnesses. I know that for the long-term unemployed, it can skew figures unless you actually identify that, out of the workforce, there are 10 people on long-term sick leave. It is that type of stuff that you need in front of you.

You are right; if all of those questions that have been asked this morning had been dealt with, we would not have had a report. To be perfectly honest, I would have preferred not to have had the report and to have had something done about it, and I think that that is what Pat is saying. That may not lie directly with you. However, going back to 2007, all of those questions were asked and the same answers were given. Surely we need to start identifying what is a serious problem. I come at it from the point of view that if there are people off on long-term sickness, whether they are suffering from mental health issues or other issues, we need to deal with them compassionately, but we need to deal with it. We need to offer whatever help and assistance we can. I would like to have a Committee meeting sometime where we actually say, "That is it down. These are the reasons, this is the type of person who may be off on long-term sick, and this is what is being done to try to help them."

Mr Gray: I would not disagree with any of that. It is all perfectly reasonable. Clearly, you have the option to make inquiries with the Department as to what specifically it has done.

Mr Ross: I am a little bemused. The figures are certainly interesting, but you have to wonder what the value is if we do not have any detail behind them. Is there any value in us having this as a Committee session, because we do not actually know what is driving the figures? There is no doubt that it is a massive issue. If it is costing the public purse between £25 million and £30 million, clearly there is an issue. The gap between GB and Northern Ireland is significant, so there is an issue. I do not think that you can put all of that down to the legacy of the Troubles. We are long enough past that now for there not to be that gap between GB and Northern Ireland. I often wonder whether publishing those figures is self-defeating. Although you need to be able to monitor public sickness levels, I often wonder whether certain individuals will view the average figure, realise that their figure is significantly lower and feel that they can top up their sick days and still come in under average. They may not be alerting any attention to themselves, but they are claiming days off when they do not need to. That is more of a comment than anything else, because I do not think that we are going to get any substantial answers, because no work has been done behind the figures. However, I often wonder whether it is self-defeating to publish the figures regularly.

Ms McGahan: My point has been covered by the previous two members. However, with regard to the overall numbers who are off on long-term sick, what percentage of those are off for mental health reasons?

Mr Murdie: Paragraph 1.19 on page 17 talks about the principal causes of absence and gives some figures: 29% of working days lost in 2006-07 were due to psychiatric/psychological illnesses, so there is some analysis there. Obviously, those absences tend to be longer term. There is an average of 35.7 days in 2011-12, which was a slight decrease from the 2006-07 level.

Ms McGahan: So 29% of the overall numbers are off on mental health?

Mr Murdie: Yes, that is what paragraph 1.19 states.

Mr F McCann: What is probably even more concerning is paragraphs 1.19, 1.20 and 1.21. I think there needs to be more explanation. It tells me that there is a problem, and that is that, in terms of gender, it is 17.7 days, which is twice as much. What has been done in the Department or Departments to try to deal with that? What assistance can be offered to ensure that the workplace is a better place for women to work in? It tells you that there is a problem.

Mr Gray: That is a perfectly valid question.

The Deputy Chairperson: OK, folks. No other members have indicated that they want to ask a question. We thank you for coming to the Committee and giving us that brief overview. Obviously, it has perhaps raised more questions in the minds of members than it has provided answers.

I think that we will write to the Department and seek information on what it is doing to reduce it, what its policies are and whether it has carried out any internal audit of this during the past six years. Are members agreed?

Members indicated assent.

The Deputy Chairperson: OK. Thank you very much for your attendance.

Mr Gray: Thank you very much, Chair.