

Slough Borough Council

Report To:	Employment Committee
Date:	20 th January 2026
Subject:	Sickness Absence and Internal Audit Action review
Chief Officer:	Will Tuckley Managing Director Commissioner/Chief Executive
Contact Officer:	Tracy Walters – Head of HR Policy and Strategy
Ward(s):	All
Exempt:	No
Appendices:	None

1. Summary and Recommendations

1.1 This report provides an update on actions taken following the Internal Audit review of sickness absence management and sets out progress against agreed recommendations. It also presents a detailed analysis of sickness absence trends, underlying causes, and demographic insights over the past three years.

Recommendations:

- Note the progress made in implementing audit actions and revised policy guidance.
- Endorse the continued focus on improving sickness absence management through system enhancements, manager capability building, and wellbeing interventions.

Commissioner Review

This report has been reviewed by Commissioners and agreed it can be considered.

2. Report

Introductory paragraph

Sickness absence remains a key workforce metric, impacting service resilience and financial sustainability. Following the May 2025 audit, HR has strengthened policies, improved compliance, and introduced targeted interventions to address identified

weaknesses. These include clearer guidance for managers, enhanced training, and proactive HR support.

Background

Sickness absence is a key metric which HR routinely reviews and reports to Employment Committee. Reducing absences is always preferential and is critical to maintaining operational resilience and achieving our strategic objectives.

This report sets out the progress made by HR following the recommendations from the sickness audit conducted in May 2025. It provides an overview of sickness absence demographics and key trends over the past three years, identifies underlying drivers, and highlights priority areas for improvement.

By understanding these patterns and their financial implications, we can target interventions that strengthen workforce health, improve service continuity, and support the council's long-term sustainability.

Audit Actions:

Following the Audit undertaken in May 2025, HR have been working towards strengthening key controls in relation to the absence management process. Internal Audit found that the current process had partial assurance with the following key findings:

- **Policy and Procedures in place:** An up-to-date sickness absence policy is accessible to staff that clearly outlines the employee and line managers' responsibilities for the management of short and long-term sickness absence, supported by a suite of letter templates covering informal and formal meetings.
- **Failure to record sickness absences on Agresso on a timely basis:** Audit informed of instances of sickness absences not recorded on Agresso on a timely basis, resulting in Payroll having to calculate sickness benefit relating to absences that occurred in prior periods and undertaking additional work writing to employees informing them of deductions from their salary.
- **RTW meetings not always recorded on Agresso:** For a random sample of twenty-four sickness absences that covered all Directorates, the Agresso (Unit 4) Systems Team ran a query within Agresso to identify whether an RTW form had been completed based on the first day of absence. The findings showed a compliance rate of 17%. Semi-structured interviews were held with seven line managers and Audit informed that in the case of one Line Manager RTW meetings would not be recorded on Agresso for short-term absences but rather an informal meeting would be held and they further advised that in the case of one long-term absence the outcome of a return to work meeting was held on a local folder rather than recorded on the RTW form on Agresso.

- **Lack of audit trail to fit notes uploaded onto Agresso.** There is an inconsistent approach followed by line managers in the way fit notes are uploaded onto Agresso. The Agresso (Unit 4) Systems Team informed Audit that for the sample of sickness absences, the majority of fit notes had been archived on Agresso, which would indicate the line manager had not attached the document to the relevant RTW form on Agresso, which would provide a clear audit trail.
- **Lack of understanding of the Council’s sickness absence triggers:** Of the Council’s four sickness absence triggers listed in the Council’s Managing Sickness Absence Policy, staff are aware of only one: 6 or more days of absence incurred within the past 6 months.
- **Line Managers not automatically informed when certain sickness absence triggers are activated:** Line Managers are not automatically sent email notifications from Agresso when the following two triggers are activated: three separate periods of absence in the previous six months; and a single period of sickness absence that goes beyond 28-day days.
- **Stage One formal absence meeting procedures not being applied consistently:** Audit informed that some Line Managers apply their discretion in determining whether to convene a stage one formal absence meeting on receipt of a sickness absence trigger notification whereas in the case of the Customer Services Centre team an invitation to attend a stage one formal absence meeting is sent to all members of staff who appear on the email notification.
- **MI Dashboard:** Comprehensive sickness absence reporting forms part of the Monthly HR DLT Report.

In conjunction with Internal Audit, HR completed the following Action Plan. Progress on this has been made and is indicated on the below action plan:

Assessed Risk 1: The Council may not maintain appropriate sickness absence policies and procedures resulting in a failure to provide quality services efficiently and effectively.

Expectation	Implication	Recommendation	Priority	Action	Status Update
Clear guidance is provided on the process of submitting and retaining fit notes.	There is a risk that fit notes are not retained in line with Council procedures.	The Managing Sickness Absence Policy to be reviewed to ensure instructions on submission and	Low	Development of revised sickness absence policy and accompanying guidance	Completed

Assessed Risk 2: Periods of sickness absence may not be properly recorded and supported by appropriate documentation leading to a risk that sickness leave is inappropriately taken.

Expectation	Implication	Recommendation	Priority	Action	Status Update
Line Managers record sickness absence on Agresso on a timely basis.	Staff are paid incorrectly if absence not entered onto Agresso in good time.	Line Managers to be reminded of the need to record sickness absence on Agresso as soon as possible after being informed by the employee that they will be absent due to sickness	Medium	Development of revised sickness absence policy and accompanying guidance	Completed
Periods of sickness absence are properly recorded	Incomplete sickness absence information undermines management information reporting.	HR to examine the feasibility of including an additional checkbox in the sickness absence form that enables the employee to state that they do not wish to declare the reason for absence, thereby enhancing management reporting	Low	The Agresso team to change the absence recording parameters	Delayed due to Unit 4 (Agresso) reprioritisation – work due to commence in January 2026

Expectation	Implication	Recommendation	Priority	Action	Status Update
<p>A return-to-work (RTW) meeting should be carried out after every instance of sickness absence – even one day</p>	<p>Where return to work interviews are not recorded on Agresso there is a lack of audit trail to confirm the meeting took place.</p> <p>There is also a risk that the Council is unaware of returning employees and action plans for returning staff are not put in place where necessary, leading to staff not being provided with sufficient support.</p>	<p>Line Managers to be reminded of the importance of adhering to the Managing Sickness Absence Policy with regards to conducting return to work and for a record of the meeting to be documented on the RTW form within Agresso.</p>	<p>High</p>	<p>The current return to work form needs to be disaggregated from the absence declaration form. The revised sickness absence policy emphasises the requirement for return-to-work discussions to allow for formal management</p>	<p>Delayed due to Unit 4 (Agresso) reprioritisation – work due to commence in January 2026</p>

<p>Clear policy in place on the retention of manual return to work forms to ensure a robust audit trail.</p>	<p>Lack of clear guidance on the retention of manual return to work forms may risk supporting documentation becoming lost or misfiled and thereby preventing a clear audit trail.</p>	<p>The Managing Sickness Absence Policy to be updated to reflect the Council's policy on the retention of manual completed return to work forms.</p>	<p>Low</p>	<p>All sickness forms must be stored within Agresso to ensure consistency and compliance. The revised sickness policy and guidance do not support manual processes, as these add unnecessary complexity. Therefore, any forms completed manually must also be uploaded to Agresso, alongside those completed directly in the system</p>	<p>Completed – ongoing reminder communications</p>
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<p>Fit notes are obtained from individuals for sickness absences longer than seven days and retained on Agresso to ensure clear audit trail.</p>	<p>There is an increased risk that clear trails are not maintained in order to demonstrate compliance with the absence management policy and procedures</p>	<p>HR to liaise with the Agresso (Unit 4) Systems Team to determine the most appropriate method of uploading fit notes on to Agresso and this information to be made available to Line Managers.</p>	<p>Medium</p>	<p>Agresso looking at feasibility of this being uploaded to either their RTW form or the absence recorded.</p>	<p>Delayed due to Unit 4 (Agresso) reprioritisation – work due to commence in January 2026</p>
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Assessed Risk 3: Sickness absence is not managed in a consistent manner across the council.

Expectation	Implication	Recommendation	Priority	Action	Status Update
Decisions to convene a stage one formal absence meeting are applied consistently.	The Council's policy on convening formal stage one meetings is not being applied consistently	Line Managers to be reminded of the importance of adhering to the Managing Sickness Absence Policy with regard to moving to formal stage one absence meetings.	Medium	HR has updated the sickness absence policy and is supporting implementation through targeted training sessions for managers. The team also proactively alerts managers when an employee reaches a trigger point, ensuring timely and consistent action	Completed and ongoing

Assessed Risk 4: Reports on sickness absence may not be received and reviewed regularly and/or no follow up action may be taken leading to poor management of staff with serious sickness concerns and increased risk of inappropriate use of sickness leave.

Expectation	Implication	Recommendation	Priority	Action	Status Update
Line Managers have a clear understanding of the Council's sickness absence triggers.	Line Manager fail to take appropriate and timely action to manage and analyse occurrences of short-term sickness absence	Line Managers to be reminded of sickness absence triggers that the Council use to manage and analyse occurrences of short-term sickness absence.	Medium	1. HR has updated the sickness absence policy and is supporting implementation through targeted training sessions for managers. The team also proactively alerts managers when an employee reaches a trigger point, ensuring timely and consistent action	Completed and ongoing

Line Managers informed when sickness absence triggers are activated in respect of their employees.	Line Managers are given insufficient information to enable them to identify when a sickness absence trigger event has occurred and to take appropriate action in accordance with the Council's policy	HR Team to liaise with the Agresso (Unit 4) Systems Team to agree upon a specification that would lead to automatic email notifications being sent to Line Managers where the following the sickness absence trigger events have occurred	Medium	HR has updated the sickness absence policy and is supporting implementation through targeted training sessions for managers. The team also proactively alerts managers when an employee reaches a trigger point, ensuring timely and consistent action. 2. Agresso defects to be resolved and new triggers as per the revised policy to be changed within the system.	Action point 1 – completed and ongoing Action point 2 - Delayed due to Unit 4 (Agresso) reprioritisation – work due to commence in January 2026
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N.B. While progress has been made within the HR remit with skill byte sessions, Tiers 1-3 upskilling sessions and Unit 4 videos, several audit actions remain outstanding due to the reprioritisation of Unit 4 development. Work on these system fixes, originally scheduled to begin on 1 December 2025, has been deferred to January and is expected to take a minimum of three months.

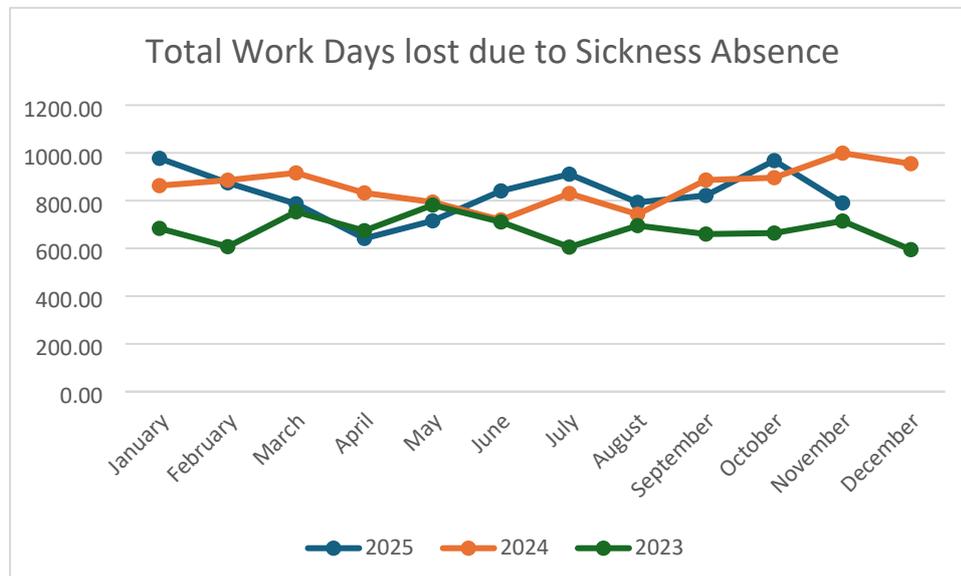
Once these developments and Unit 4 enhancements are delivered, HR will commence further engagement across the council to embed improved functionality and processes for recording, reporting, and managing sickness absence

Sickness analysis:

To complement the audit findings and action plan outlined above, it is important to consider the wider context of sickness absence across the council. The following analysis summarises key trends, demographics, and underlying causes over the

past three years. This insight helps us target interventions that strengthen workforce wellbeing, improve service resilience, and reduce financial impact.

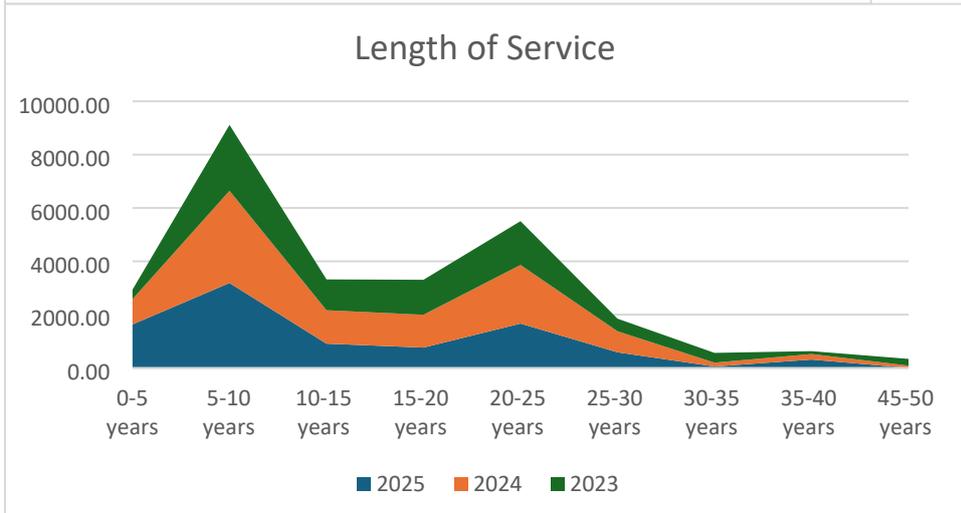
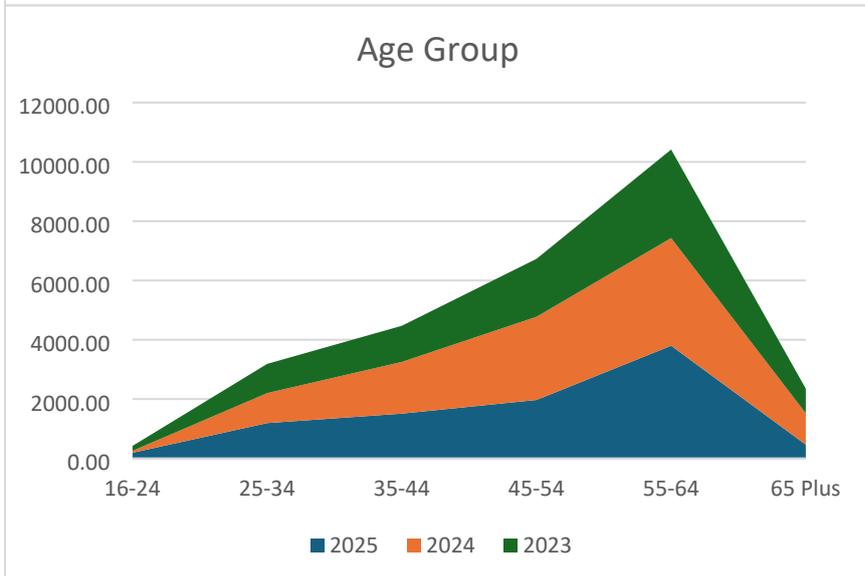
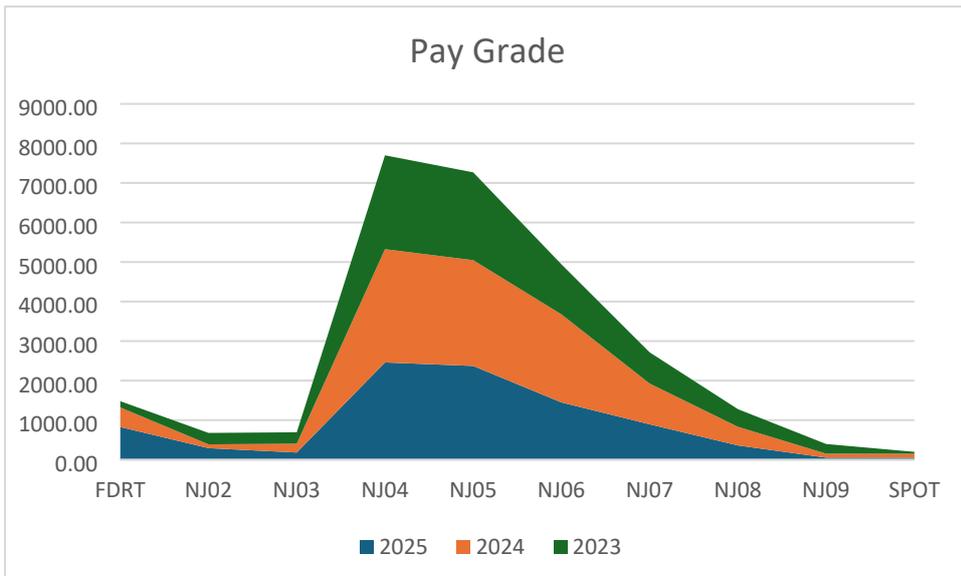
Sickness Analysis (2023–2025)



1) Overall Trends

- Average sickness days per full-time equivalent (FTE) reduced from 9.98 days in 2024 to 8.58 days in 2025 (Jan–Nov), indicating progress while remaining above some neighbouring authorities.
- Absence consistently spikes in winter (Oct–Jan), mainly due to seasonal illness and increased pressure on services.
- Mental health remains the leading cause, accounting for over 20% of cases each year.
- The average duration of long-term absence rose from 43.11 to 54.52 working days, reflecting the complexity and severity of cases; short-term absence remained stable at around 2.7–2.8 days.
- Repeat absences are falling, suggesting early contact and RTW conversations are having an impact.
- Operational frontline services (e.g., Environment & Highways) continue to show the highest rates.

2) Sickness Demographics:



- Sickness rates increase with age, with higher levels among staff aged 55+.
- Employees with 5–10 years' service shows higher sickness levels; the 0–5 years group also warrants attention, given its size.
- Operational roles and grades 4–6 carry the highest absence levels, consistent with the physical demands and service pressures in these areas.

3) Main Reasons for Absence

Top 10 Sickness Reasons in 2025	%
Mental health (e.g. stress, anxiety, depression, psychological illness)	21.31%
Stress at Work	6.74%
Cold, cough, influenza	5.64%
Pain - Leg	5.26%
Back pain	5.14%
Other (not back) musculoskeletal (e.g. joints, ligaments, muscles, nerves, tendons)	5.14%
Injury, fracture	4.71%
Post Operation Convalescence	4.05%
Back problems	3.37%
Heart Disease/Problem	2.79%
Top 10 Sickness Reasons in 2024	%
Mental health (e.g. stress, anxiety, depression, psychological illness)	21.90%
Stress at Work	7.08%
Cold, cough, influenza	6.02%
Post Operation Convalescence	5.46%
Undisclosed	4.11%
Heart, cardiac & circulatory problems	3.56%
Nervous system disorders	3.42%
Hospital Treatment	3.12%
Back pain	3.01%
Pain - Leg	2.70%
Top 10 Sickness Reasons in 2023	%
Mental health (e.g. stress, anxiety, depression, psychological illness)	20.51%
Stress at Work	11.16%
Post Operation Convalescence	6.47%
Cold, cough, influenza	5.28%
Undisclosed	4.89%
Other (not back) musculoskeletal (e.g. joints, ligaments, muscles, nerves, tendons)	4.12%
Heart, cardiac & circulatory problems	3.21%
Benign and malignant tumours, cancers	3.15%
Stomach Disorder/Upset	2.87%
Covid/Corona	2.65%

- Mental health remains the leading driver, with stress, anxiety and depression accounting for over 20% of cases annually (rising to nearly 30% when work-related stress is included).
- Musculoskeletal issues (e.g., back and joint pain) are prominent, especially in manual and frontline roles.

- Seasonal illnesses (colds/flu) contribute to predictable winter surges.

4) Financial Impact:

Directorate	2025	2024	2023
Adults Services	£81,538	£138,016	£96,914
Chief Execs Office	£96,000	£69,598	£41,173
Children's Services	£114,712	£135,016.61	£126,029
Corporate Resources	£120,620	£79,220.09	£81,509
Law and Governance	£20,196	£24,922	£11,647
Public Health & Public Protection	£60,150	£60,072	£28,880
Regeneration, Housing & Environment	£357,724	£443,890	£323,580
Total	£850,940	£950,735	£709,733

- The estimated productivity loss due to sickness absence was £850,939 in 2025, down from £950,736 in 2024. This is calculated using the sickness data for the relevant financial year down to the number of days multiplied by the day rate of the individual off sick.
- Regeneration, Housing & Environment consistently shows the highest cost, reflecting workforce size and the nature of roles.

5) Frequency & Repeat Absence

Average length of absence	2025	2024	2023
LT	54.52	43.11	44.62
ST	2.74	2.79	2.68
Repeated absences by individual	2025	2024	2023
Average occurrence (no. of times per individual)	2.41	2.73	2.63
No. of Repeated absences	2025	2024	2023
2 – 5 times	477	539	468
6 – 9 times	51	85	70
10 times or above	5	8	7

- Repeat absence per employee fell to 2.41 occurrences in 2025 (from 2.73 in 2024), with fewer cases of 6+ occurrences.

6) Service Hotspots

- Which teams have the highest absence rates...

Top 10 Teams with highest sick days	No. of sick days in 2025 (Jan - Nov)
Director of Environment & Highways	2510.03
Education and Inclusion	1287.99
Director, Property and Assets	920.98
Customer Services	686.06
Revenues and Welfare Services	598.68
Housing (excluding HRA)	367.05
Strategy & Innovation	297.50
HRA	272.73
Commissioning	270.70
Rehabilitation, Recovery and Reablement & Long Term Occupational Therapy	236.34

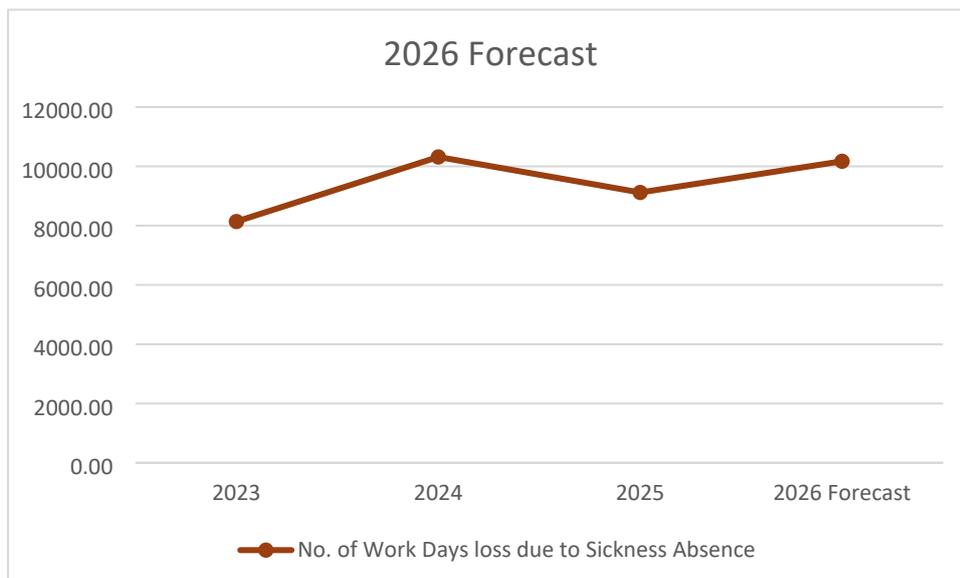
- *Director of Environment & Highways* shows the most days lost, consistent with workforce scale and operational demands.
- Small, specialist teams (e.g., Emergency Planning, Registrars, Mental Health) can experience disproportionate impact when long-term absence occurs.

7) Policy & Compliance

Directorate	Cases not managed	Cases managed
Adults Services	40.00%	60.00%
Chief Execs Office	37.50%	62.50%
Children's Services	43.75%	56.25%
Corporate Resources	50.00%	50.00%
Law and Governance	0.00%	100.00%
Public Health & Public Protection	50.00%	50.00%
Regeneration, Housing & Environment	48.39%	51.61%
Average	44.71%	55.29%

- Across Directorates, 55% of long-term sickness triggers were actively managed, while 45% were not, indicating inconsistency in application.

8) Outlook for 2026



- A modest increase in overall absence is possible, driven by an ageing workforce and a shift from interim to permanent staffing (which records absence more consistently).

HR Actions Underway

1. Building Manager Capability

- **Skill Byte sessions** for all line managers focused on:
 - Managing attendance and understanding triggers
 - Conducting effective return-to-work meetings
 - Applying policy consistently across all teams
- Agresso training to improve the accuracy and timeliness of recording sickness, uploading documentation, and understanding workflow.

2. Wellbeing & Early Support

- **New Occupational Health & Employee Assistance Programme (from 1 Feb)**, including:
 - A broader wellbeing offer, with improved access to mental health, physical health, and lifestyle support
 - Faster referrals and clear performance standards
- On-site Mental Health Advisors providing early intervention, support with complex cases, and guidance for managers.

3. Improving System Agresso defect fixes under development to:

- Reinstate automatic trigger notifications
- Improve the accuracy of sickness workflows

- Ensure fit notes and documentation are stored in a single auditable place
- New KPIs and account management built into the OH/EAP contract, including service credits if performance standards are not met.

4. Strengthening HR Partnership with Managers

- HR now notifies managers immediately when an employee hits a sickness trigger.
- HR business partners provide early guidance to help managers take timely action.
- Policy updates and guidance reflecting audit recommendations are already complete and supported by ongoing training.

Although we have made good progress, there is still a considerable amount of work to do before our sickness management approach is where it needs to be. Some actions remain dependent on upcoming Agresso system changes, and sustained focus will be required to ensure consistent practice across the organisation.

That said, the steps already taken, including clearer policies, upskilling managers, closer HR support, and the introduction of a new Occupational Health and Employee Assistance provider with a stronger wellbeing offer, put us in a much better position moving forward.

As these improvements bed in and the new systems come online, we expect to see a steady improvement in sickness absence over the next six months – nine months, helping us strengthen service delivery and better support our workforce.

3. Implications of the Recommendation

3.1 Financial implications

3.1. The estimated productivity loss as a result of sickness absence remains significant, the calculate financial impact of the lost days productivity due to absences is estimated at £850,939 in 2025 (down from £950,736 in 2024). If the number of days continues to reduce this will reduce the impact on productivity caused by sickness and improve service delivery.

3.2 Legal implications

3.2.1 Revised policy ensures compliance with employment legislation and audit recommendations, HR are supporting services to ensure that are complaint with policy application, this is supported through some of the targeted training interventions we are starting in January 2026.

3.3 *Risk management implications*

3.3.1 Failure to manage sickness absence effectively risks service disruption and increased costs. Actions underway mitigate these risks.

3.4 *Environmental implications*

3.4.1 None Identified

3.5 *Equality implications*

3.5.1 Policy updates and wellbeing initiatives promote fairness and support for employees, including reasonable adjustments.

3.6 *Workforce implications*

3.6.1 Improved processes, training, and wellbeing support will strengthen resilience and engagement.

4. Background Papers

None.