

The Reality of Sickness Absence

Introduction

Stories about sickness absence in Scotland's public services make a regular appearance in the media and elsewhere. Explicitly or implicitly they seek to perpetuate the myth that public servants are always on the lookout for an excuse to pull a 'sickie'. This leads to targets for reducing sickness absence and new sickness absence procedures. Managers are told that there are easy savings to be had from cracking down on absence in the public sector.

To find out the reality behind the headlines, UNISON Scotland surveyed members to discover their experience of sickness absence in Scotland's public sector.

Sickness Absence Rates

There is limited hard data on sickness absence mainly due to variations in recording systems. Surveys across sectors often reach false conclusions because they fail to take account of different job types, gender and other workplace demographics.

The last annual CIPD survey found absence rates of 7.7 days per employee per year but this average hides high variation across organisations in all sectors. In the public and non-profit sector the average is around 9 days per employee although it fell by 0.5 day last year. Private services sector is just over 7 days. Overall, more organisations reported that their absence levels decreased (41%) compared with the previous year than increased (27%). The public sector was most likely to report their absence levels have improved compared with the previous year. A higher proportion of absence in the public and non-profit sectors is due to long-term absences of four weeks or longer compared with the private sector, where nearly three-quarters of absence is short term.

The TUC report *The Truth About Sickness Absence* (2010) took the first detailed look at the public sector sickness myths. They found that public sector workers are more likely than private sector colleagues to work when too ill to do so and less likely than private sector staff to take a 'sickie' - a short period off sick. While public sector workers take longer periods off work on absence, many work in stressful and dangerous public sector jobs that can cause injury. Private sector workers are much more likely to work for employers who are quick to sack people with genuine health problems rather than help them return to work.

KEY POINTS:

- **There is plenty of misleading data on sickness absence.**
- **Public sector suffers from more long term absence.**
- **UNISON survey shows most staff come to work when ill**
- **Sickness absence policies are poor and badly applied**
- **Stress is major cause of absence yet policies not effective.**
- **Better sickness absence policies would help staff to return to work.**



Contact UNISON's Bargaining & Campaigns team:

Dave Watson
d.watson@unison.co.uk

0141 342 2811
0845 355 0845

UNISON Scotland Survey

UNISON Scotland surveyed members in our public service sectors to get their experience of sickness absence in Scotland. We asked about working when ill and why they did it, then about their employers sickness absence policy and how it dealt with the biggest cause of sickness absence, stress. They said:

- Almost exactly a quarter (25%) have worked in the last month when really too ill. Around 60% worked when ill in the last year.
- More than a quarter (27%) did so because concerned that manager would take action against them. Most of the rest for the altruistic reasons such as letting colleagues or service users down.
- Nearly a half (47%) say the sickness policy at work encourages people to work when they really shouldn't. One in seven (14%) say the policy at their workplace is "unfair". A quarter (26%) say it is badly implemented by management.
- 60% say there is a stress policy in place but it is not effective - a further 28% say there is no stress policy at all.

Given the sort of jobs UNISON members do we should all be concerned at nurse, care workers, school staff and others going to work when they are ill – even when they have positive motives. Even more concerning is the evidence of poor sickness absence policies and little effective action on stress.

Sickness absence policies

It is in no one's interest, other than those chasing crude targets, that staff turn up ill or injured while at work. A good management of sickness absence policy can help. From this survey it appears that many public service employers in Scotland see managing sickness absence as forcing employees back to work as soon as possible, or disciplining those who are off work more regularly than others.

Positive sickness absence policies, developed in partnership with unions, can help in reducing absenteeism, especially if combined with measures aimed at stopping workers being made ill through stress and other common illness and injury. These are most effective when targeted at preventing illness and supporting the rehabilitation of those workers who are off sick. As the data shows the priority in the public sector should be to tackle the causes of long-term absence, especially stress-related illnesses. The priority must be to find ways of getting those who are ill, healthy and back to work as early as is practical.

The Health and Safety Executive (HSE) offers guidance for a good sickness absence policy and UNISON's Health & Safety Zone has examples of good agreements and positive approaches.

Conclusion

This survey shows that the reality in Scotland is a long way from the 'sickie culture' that is often portrayed. Absence rates have been falling over time and it is a myth that there are easy savings from new policies that assume that sickness absence is mostly skiving. Positive sickness absence policies are important, but there is most to gain from tackling the causes of absence, particularly stress, and helping people return to work.

Further Information:

Truth about Sickness
Absence – TUC

<http://www.tuc.org.uk/workplace/tuc-17767-f0.cfm>

UNISON Health & Safety
Zone – sickness absence

http://www.unison.org.uk/safety/pages_view.asp?did=6078

HSE sickness absence

<http://www.hse.gov.uk/sicknessabsence/index.htm>

Scottish Centre for Health
Working Lives

<http://www.healthyworkinglives.com/home/index.aspx>

CIPD Absence

Management Survey

[http://www.cipd.co.uk/binaries/5632%20Annual%20AbMan%20SR%20\(WEB\).pdf](http://www.cipd.co.uk/binaries/5632%20Annual%20AbMan%20SR%20(WEB).pdf)



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