MERSEYSIDE FIRE AND RESCUE AUTHORITY			
MEETING OF THE:	**SCRUTINY COMMITTEE**		
DATE:	**25 APRIL 2024**	**REPORT NO:**	**CFO/24/24**
PRESENTING OFFICER	**MONITORING OFFICER, RIA GROVES**		
RESPONSIBLE OFFICER:	**RIA GROVES**	**REPORT AUTHOR:**	**RIA GROVES**
OFFICERS CONSULTED:	**DIRECTOR OF PEOPLE, ORGANISATIONAL DEVELOPMENT AND LEGAL, NICK MERNOCK HEAD OF HUMAN RESOURCES MIKE PILKINGTON**		
TITLE OF REPORT:	**SCRUTINY TASK & FINISH GROUP**		

APPENDICES:	**NONE**

Purpose of Report

1. To inform Members of the outcome of the Scrutiny Task and Finish Group convened to scrutinise staff sickness absence.

Recommendation

2. It is recommended that Members:

   a) note the conclusion of the Task and Finish Group into the review of staff sickness absence as detailed in this report;

   b) note the recommendation to promote the health benefits of walking, cycling and expanding the health promotions to also include diabetes;

   c) note the recommendation to collaborate nationally on any trends or best practice in managing staff sickness absence (including feeding back to the NFCC);

   d) note the recommendation for Officers to continue to review the mental health and wellbeing support provided to staff; and

   e) instruct the Monitoring Officer to include the outcomes in any scrutiny annual review.

Introduction and Background

3. As part of the Scrutiny Forward Work Plan, Members were presented with a review of staff sickness absence levels by Director of People, Organisational Development and Legal, Nick Mernock and the Health and Wellbeing Manager

Kelly Patterson at the meeting of the Scrutiny Committee on the 25th January 2024.

4. Members will recall Nick Mernock presented an overview of the sickness absence, detailing the Authority's journey of implementing practices to tackle staff absence including the capability process, which over the longer term has seen significant reductions in sickness absence levels. Nick Mernock however confirmed to Members there had been a negative impact as a result of the Covid-19 pandemic on staff sickness absence within the last 3 years.

5. Further to Members wishing to scrutinise in more depth the impact of staff sickness within the Authority it was agreed a Task and Finish Group would be convened. It was agreed Councillors Dave Hanratty, Linda Maloney, Pat Moloney, Ed Lamb and Paul Tweed would be members of this Task and Finish Group.

6. The Scrutiny Task and Finish Group met on the 28th February 2024 and the 4th April 2024.

Long Term Sickness Absence

7. Members noted there were higher figures of long-term staff sickness as opposed to short term absences. In particular, in respect of long-term sickness, a high proportion of staff sickness absences related to musculoskeletal issues/injuries.

8. Members were advised that this was in part due to increased waiting times in the NHS such as doctors' appointments, and consultations for scans and operations. It was confirmed that while the Authority has had a longstanding successful referral process for staff, which includes paying for an initial referral for diagnostics, due to long waiting lists the benefit of this process has been less effective with staff still having to wait for a significant amount of time to progress in their treatments.

9. Members were reassured that the Authority offered a comprehensive health and wellbeing service for staff with sickness monitored and regular appointments made with the Authority's Occupational Health Doctor or Nurse. Members were reassured that adjustments to a staff members role are always considered while the staff member is unable to undertake their full work duties. For example, this may include considering what other duties can be fulfilled based on medical advice to allow operational staff to continue to work in a non- operational role contributing to delivery of the Station Plan (Prevention, Protection and Preparedness work).

10. At Members request, Members were informed of the notional costs in respect of staff absences which were musculoskeletal related. The costs were based on an hourly rate multiplied by the number of hours in a shift and then multiplied by the number of shifts 'lost' due to staff unable to work their shift due to sickness absence. For the years 2021/2022 and 2022/2023 the total costs attributed to musculoskeletal sickness absence across all sections of the organisation was

£393,448.92 (for 1547 absences) and £409,594.86 (for 1626 absences) respectively.

11. It was impressed on Members that calculating costs as a result of staff sickness can also be difficult to predict or quantify as there can be occasions when a member of staff is absent from work due to sickness, whether operationally or non- operationally, the need for additional staff to cover their absence may not be required, circumstances dependant.

12. Members were assured however that the budget incorporates the overall staffing model with a predicted sickness level, which is currently 4%. As well as the predicted sickness level the staffing model will also take into account annual leave entitlement and maternity/paternity absences. It has been noted as part of the regular benchmarking undertaken across the Metropolitan Fire and Rescue Services, Merseyside Fire and Rescue Service for the end of 2023 had the lowest sickness levels for duty days lost due to sickness absence.

13. Members also enquired as to the impact on appliance availability related to staff sickness absence. Members were informed that the appliance availability had increased significantly since 2018/2019 and for the years 2021/2022 and 2022/2023 the appliance availability had been maintained at 99.60% and 98.2% respectively. It was noted that the appliance availability had been maintained at over 98% throughout the increase in absence during the Covid-19 pandemic and the local industrial action regarding an overtime ban.

Health and Well-Being

14. Members discussed the Authority's support for staff with their mental health and wellbeing and it was acknowledged from the HMICFRS inspection the feedback received that the support offered through occupation health was well understood and effective.

15. While it was acknowledged the Authority has set a high standard for the support provided to staff, Members were also informed of the continuing work undertaken to raise awareness. This includes the annual health awareness promotions being delivered in conjunction with Hot News (internal publication) promoting awareness of health conditions and signposting staff for more support. Members recommended that within the health promotion the symptoms and support for those with diabetes should also be included as well as promotion of the health benefits to staff of walking and cycling. It was confirmed that diabetes would be included in the August 2024 Hot News and the health and wellbeing network will assist in the promotion of healthier lifestyles and exercise.

16. Members also considered whether hybrid working had impacted on sickness absence levels which may also include those with caring responsibilities. While hybrid working is still currently in a trial phase and therefore such trends were still under review the impact of hybrid working to date is to be presented to Members as part of the Scrutiny Forward Work Plan in the near future.

Conclusions

17. Members of the Task and Finish Group commended the Service on how staff were supported with regards to mental health and urged them to continue with the good work being done.

18. Members also encouraged continued collaboration both nationally and regionally in respect of any trends or learning identified regarding staff absence which may assist with absence management. Further consideration was being given as to how information could be shared regionally. Whilst Officers acknowledged collaboration is undertaken it was agreed this would be reviewed and any other best practice and opportunities for sharing be explored.

Equality and Diversity Implications

19. There are no direct implications arising out of this report, however, it is noted that all absence management policies and procedures are supported by an appropriate EIA

Staff Implications

20. The department responsible for managing staff sickness absence as part of their role continue to review and execute their processes.

Legal Implications

21. There is no direct implications arising out of this report however it is noted that the Authority is fulfilling its duty of care to its employees by the support detailed within the report.

Financial Implications & Value for Money

22. There are no direct financial implications are a result of the task and finish review into staff sickness absence although any costs implication as a result of staff sickness are detailed within the report.

Risk Management and Health & Implications

23. As part of the Task and Finish Groups review the support provided by the Service to staff was scrutinised to ensure the Authority is meeting its requirements for the welfare of its staff.

Environmental Implications

24. The promotion of the benefits of walking and cycling will also have an additional impact of the environment and potentially reducing the number of vehicles on the road.

Contribution to Our Vision: ***To be the best Fire & Rescue Service in the UK.***

Our Purpose: *Here to serve, Here to protect, Here to keep you safe.*

25. Scrutiny of the Authority's practices and procedures ensures greater transparency and assurance in managing the organisation and that the welfare of its staff remains paramount.

BACKGROUND PAPERS

NONE

GLOSSARY OF TERMS

MFRA	**M**erseyside **F**ire and **R**escue **A**uthority
MFRS	**M**erseyside **F**ire and **R**escue **S**ervice
HMICFRS	**H**is **M**ajesty's **I**nspectorate of **C**onstabulary and **F**ire and **R**escue **S**ervices