

Sickness Absence Update September 2023

Current Position

Sickness absence remains above the Council's monthly target (0.73) for days lost per employee with an average of 1.55 working days lost per employee in August.



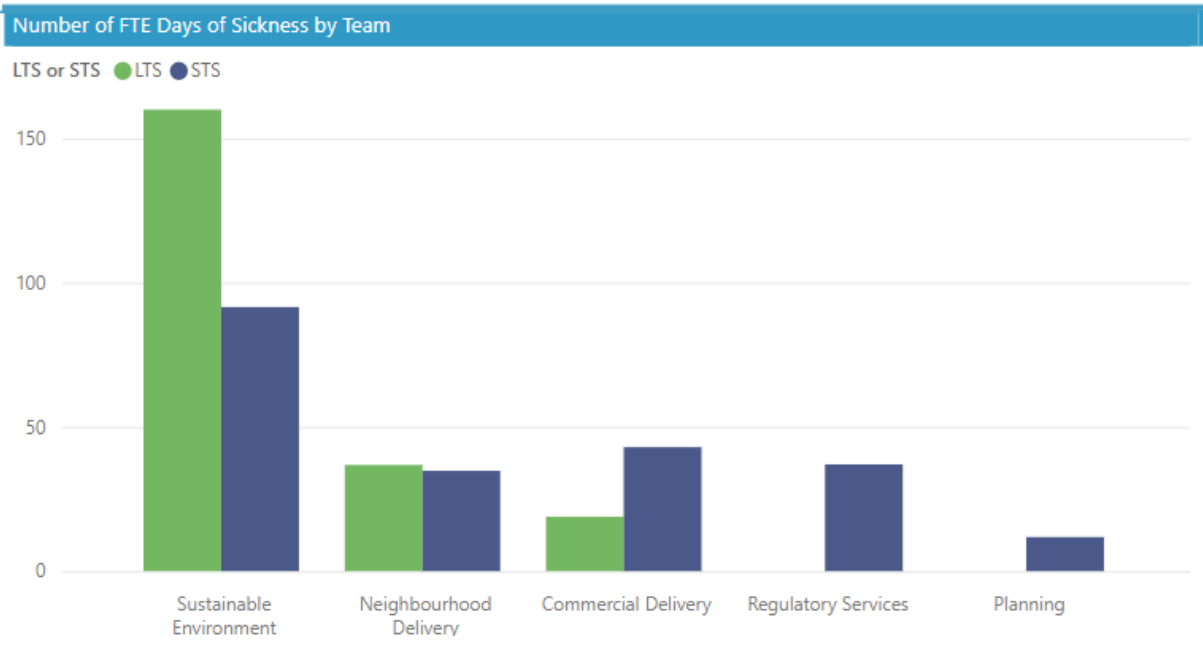
Long term absence remains the higher categorised absence which is to be expected and is consistent with benchmarking.

Absences for stress, anxiety and depression fell to the lowest % since November 2022, and have more than halved since June 2023 which is positive, whilst back and spinal absences also saw a slight decrease.

We are seeing a much wider range of conditions contributing to long term absence, in August over 17% of long term absence was due to joint and muscular problems, but injuries (on and off duty) also contributed to over 11% of absences.

Absences are not highest where change processes or One Council activity and occurring.

80% of days lost due to sickness are within our largest directorate, Sustainable Environment. As this area contains potentially the most physically demanding work and also has an ageing workforce profile, this is to be expected and we are considering ways in which this particular staff group can be supported. A more detailed report for Quarter 1 is contained in appendix a) which looks at the workforce profile against absence.



Contributory Factors and Mitigation

We have an ageing workforce who carry out physically demanding work. Reasonable adjustments that can be made to these roles to keep people in work when unwell are minimal and so therefore, relatively minor ailments may lead to absence in a way that they would not in other areas.

The fact that the majority of our absence remains in these areas and that long term absence in other areas remains so low, demonstrates that we work well to make adjustments and offer flexibility for people to prevent sickness absence where this is possible.

When reviewing data from sickness review meetings and Occupational Health reports, it is increasingly clear that we have a number of individuals absent from work due to long waiting lists for diagnostic tests such as MRIs and CT scans, or for essential treatment such as surgery or physiotherapy. We have at least five long term absence cases that are awaiting diagnosis or treatment due to NHS waiting lists and we also seeing significant delays in obtaining medical reports requested by Occupational Health which are used to inform applications for Ill Health Retirement.

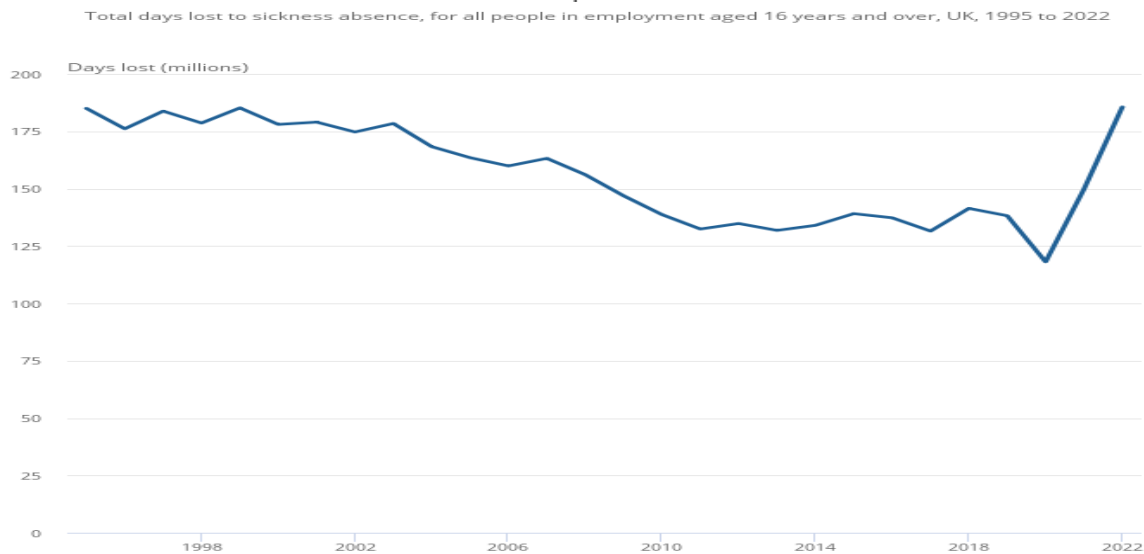
The fact that we are seeing a reduction in stress, anxiety and depression related absences, despite the impact of the cost of living, demonstrates the effectiveness of the proactive work we are doing to promote mental health support within the Council, in particular with the introduction of the mental health first aiders. We have had some very positive feedback about how beneficial these roles have been and how our MHFA team have supported people to remain in work and signpost to wider support. . We also continue to receive positive feedback around the Dove counselling service and have supported some requests to extend counselling sessions to assist people to remain in work.

When benchmarking our data against the National and local picture, most areas seem to be seeing increased levels of sickness absence, but there seems to be a variance between those who have a larger % of physically demanding roles vs those that can offer flexibility such as home based working.

The LG Inform benchmark average increased in September by 50% (from average of 5.8 days per FTE to average of 8.8 days per FTE). Included in this benchmark group are councils in which manual roles are largely outsourced.

National data (taken from the Sickness Absence in the UK labour Market ONS 2022 survey¹) shows that 2022 has seen a record high in absence rates and it is likely that this trend continues and impacts into 2023.

Figure 2: The number of days lost to sickness absence has increased to a record high in 2022 after remaining relatively flat in the 10 years leading up to the pandemic



Source: Labour Force Survey from the Office for National Statistics

<https://www.ons.gov.uk/employmentandlabourmarket/peopleinwork/labourproductivity/articles/sicknessabsenceinthelabourmarket/2022#sickness-absence-data>

Action plan and next steps

The People and OD team are working to deliver an action plan to target sickness absence, an apprentice People Assistant is expected to start in late September 2023 which will create some capacity for the newly created People Advisor post to focus on primarily offering support around sickness absence.

Actions included on the plan are included in appendix 2, but essentially involve deeper analysis of data, support and training for managers, auditing absence documents and trying to improve the process. The People Advisor will proactively be contacting all managers around their sickness cases each month and monitoring feedback and compliance.

Consideration is also being given, and costings gathered, for some additional staff benefit schemes which some employers are offering to see if these could have a positive impact on sickness absence levels. Some suggestions include a buying annual leave scheme and an employee funded healthcare plan which could include fast tracked physio and appointments.

Appendices

Appendix 1 Sickness Absence Quarter 1 2023-23 Detailed Analysis



Sickness Absence Quarter 1 2023-23 – Detailed Analysis

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Background

The purpose of this report is to deep dive into the data gathered around sickness absence to understand trends and potential reasons which are impacting the increasing sickness figures within the council. For Quarter 1 2023/24 the average sick days per employee is calculated at 3.71 days. This value is calculated by using the total number of sick days and dividing it by the established FTE total of the work force; this is done on a monthly basis, with the quarterly value being the sum of the three months in the specific quarter. Graphs below show the deviation between this figure and the actual average time lost due to sickness per employee. The key purpose of the analysis is to understand which services are most impacted, with what type of absence are they most affected by and understand potential reasons for the absence.

Data

Data has been collected from MyView and is reliant on line managers of absent staff to input the data on time and correctly.

Comments

The data used includes staff who have been absent with long term sickness prior to the start of Quarter 1 and have remained off during Quarter 1. It must be noted that the average FTE days takes into account any time an employee has had off and includes time lost since the start of the sickness regardless of if the sickness started prior to Quarter 1.

It must also be noted that measure of average FTE days used within the report only takes into account staff who have lost days due to absence within Quarter 1 and is not representing an average against the entire workforce establishment.

Analysis

The scatter graph (Fig1a.) plots each service using the average number of FTE days that an employee loses due to sickness and also the total number of staff that have had time off within the quarter. The size of the marker relates to the total sum of FTE days lost by the service; therefore if the marker is larger this translates as more FTE days lost as a total sum and vice versa for a smaller marker. This visual uses the overall sickness and the split between long term and short term sickness is shown later in the report.

To help with understanding how each service compares, a constant line has been added to show the overall average FTE days lost by an employee, this measure is shown at 24.51 FTE Days. Also included is another constant line showing the average number of staff that each service has off within the quarter; this measure sits at 12.71 and is also used to help understand how each service compares.

Using the average lines, outliers can be quickly identified. The bottom left quadrant indicates services which have below average sick days and below average number of staff off within the quarter. Any services outside this have been highlighted below;

- Sustainable Environment – Shown to have a much higher than average number of staff off and a slightly higher than average number of days off per employee within Quarter 1. The large marker size indicates that this service has lost the most FTE days out of all sickness absence within the council. This is also demonstrated by Table 1a and Fig 1b.
- Strategy, People and Performance (SPP) – This service is showing a smaller staff count but the average time staff had lost is sitting well above the average number of days lost. It sits 4th in terms of sum of FTE days lost to sickness absence.
- Neighbourhood Delivery – This is the second highest service in terms of the sum of FTE days lost to sickness absence. The time staff lost due to absence is lower than the overall average but the number of staff who have had time off is greater.
- Commercial Delivery – This service also has a higher than average staff count but a below average FTE days lost.

Fig 1a. Overall Average FTE Days Lost by Division

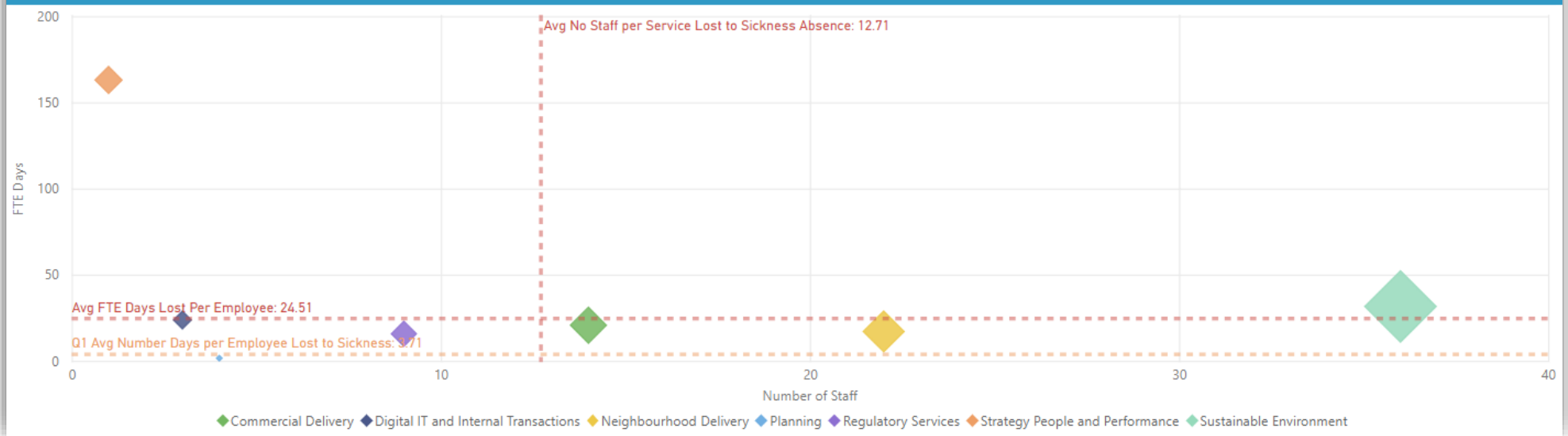
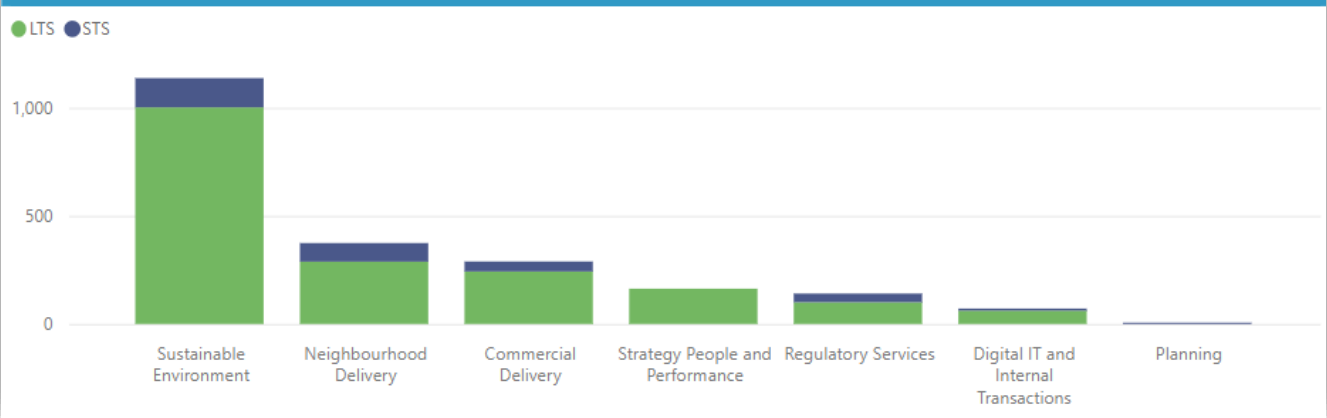


Table 1a.

DIVISION	Number of Staff	Average FTE Days in Service	Sum of FTE Days in Service
Commercial Delivery	14	20.63	288.80
Digital IT and Internal Transactions	3	23.72	71.16
Neighbourhood Delivery	22	17.01	374.25
Planning	4	1.50	6.00
Regulatory Services	9	15.62	140.62
Strategy People and Performance	1	163.00	163.00
Sustainable Environment	36	31.59	1,137.16

Fig 1b. FTE Days of Sickness Loss by Team



Due to the potential differences between short term and long term sickness, the overall sickness has been split into these two categories using the same format; these are shown below as short term sickness (STS) Fig2a and long term sickness (LTS) Fig2b. Short term sickness has been defined as being 19 days or less.

Looking at STS the average FTE Days lost per employee sits at 5.14 whilst the average number of staff lost per service due to STS sits at 9.83. Again using these average lines, outliers can be identified.

- Sustainable Environment – Similar to the overall value this service is showing high numbers in terms of staff absence with STS and is also showing an above average in terms of days lost by employee, with an Average FTE Days lost sitting at 6.14. It also has the largest marker showing that it has lost the most FTE days in total within quarter 1 – being 135.14 FTE days.
- Neighbourhood Delivery – This service also shows a similar pattern to the overall value in having high staff numbers on STS. The service sits just below the average FTE days lost but it is still relatively high. Neighbourhood Delivery also has the second highest sum of FTE days lost for short term sickness.
- Commercial Delivery – This service sits around the centre mark and has been highlighted due to being over the average number of staff with STS. It is however third in terms of total FTE days lost due to STS within Quarter 1.
- Regulatory – This Service is an outlier in having a lower number of staff off for an averaged longer time period. The average time lost due to short term sickness within Regulatory sits at 6.68 FTE Days.

Table 2a.

DIVISION	Number of Staff	Average FTE Days in Service	Sum of FTE Days in Service
Commercial Delivery	10	4.63	46.34
Digital IT and Internal Transactions	2	4.72	9.43
Neighbourhood Delivery	15	4.41	66.20
Planning	4	1.50	6.00
Regulatory Services	6	6.68	40.08
Sustainable Environment	22	6.14	135.14

Fig 2a. STS Average FTE Days Lost by Division

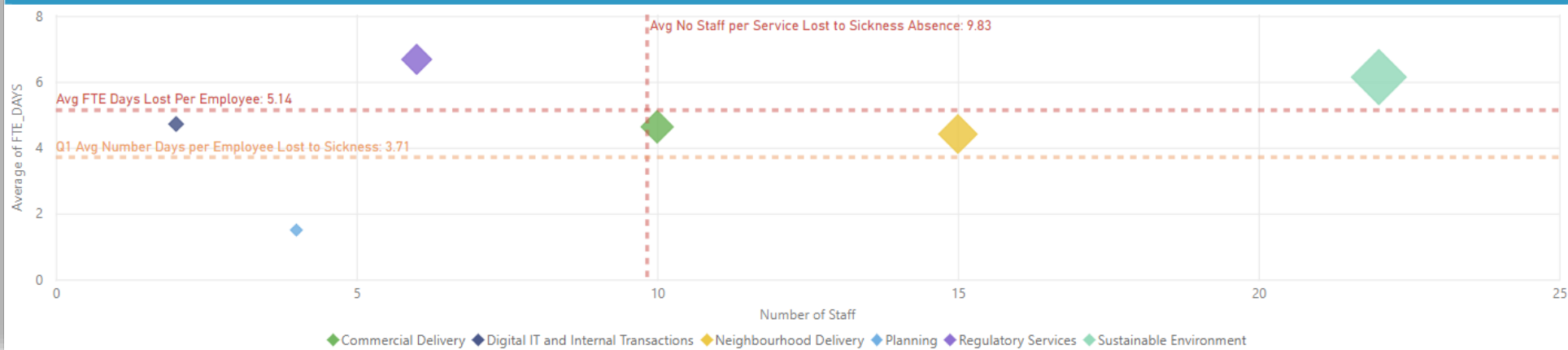
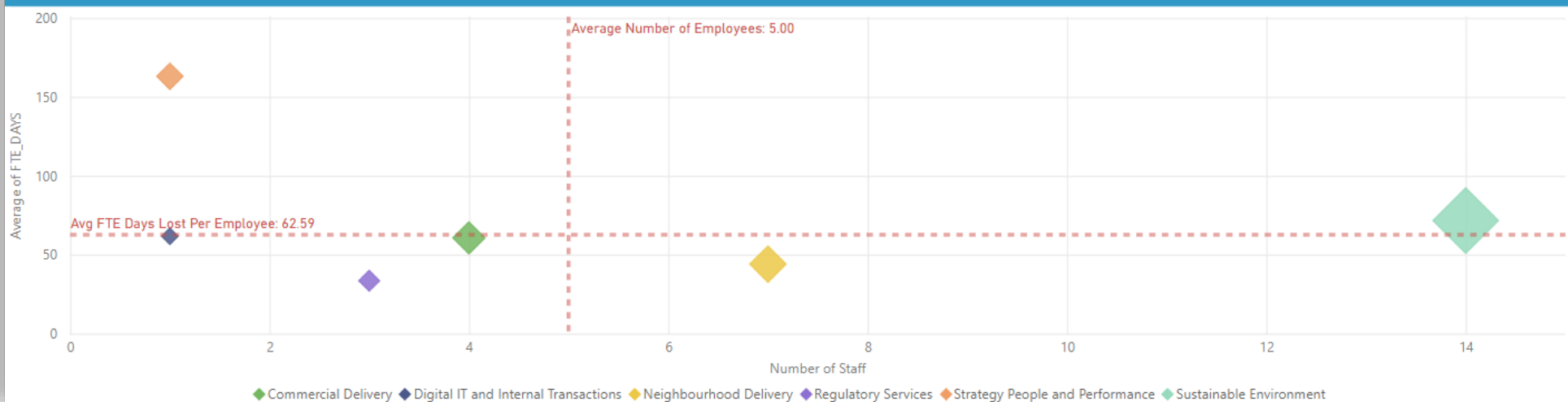


Fig 2b. LTS Average FTE Days Lost by Division



Within LTS the average FTE days lost per employee is much higher as expected as per the definition of being 20 days or higher. The average as shown within Fig2b sits at 62.59 FTE Days however the average number of staff each service has off with LTS sits much lower at 5. Using the averages again the outliers can be seen and are listed below;

- Sustainable Environment – This service again has a high number of staff on LTS; the service is also showing a slightly above average FTE days lost by employee at 71.57. It also shows the highest sum of FTE days lost within Quarter 1, losing 1002.02 FTE days due to LTS.
- Neighbourhood Delivery – Whilst having a below average number of FTE days lost per employee, this service has shown a higher than average count of staff who have been off with LTS. This has impacted the total sum of FTE days the service has lost due to LTS causing it to have the second highest FTE days lost.
- Strategy, People and Performance (SPP) – This service is an outlier in having a small number of staff on LTS but a higher than average FTE days lost.
- Commercial Delivery – Whilst this service sits below average for both number of days lost per employee and the average staff count, it has shown the third highest sum total of FTE days lost for LTS in Quarter 1 – losing 242.46 FTE days.

Table 2b.

DIVISION	Number of Staff	Average FTE Days in Service	Sum of FTE Days in Service
Commercial Delivery	4	60.62	242.46
Digital IT and Internal Transactions	1	61.73	61.73
Neighbourhood Delivery	7	44.01	308.05
Regulatory Services	3	33.51	100.54
Strategy People and Performance	1	163.00	163.00
Sustainable Environment	14	71.57	1,002.02

The top reasons for sickness in Quarter 1 2023/24 can be quickly identified using the below pie chart (Fig3a.) where Stress (incl Work related stress), Anxiety, Depression and Musculoskeletal absence reasons make up 65.22% of the total reasons.

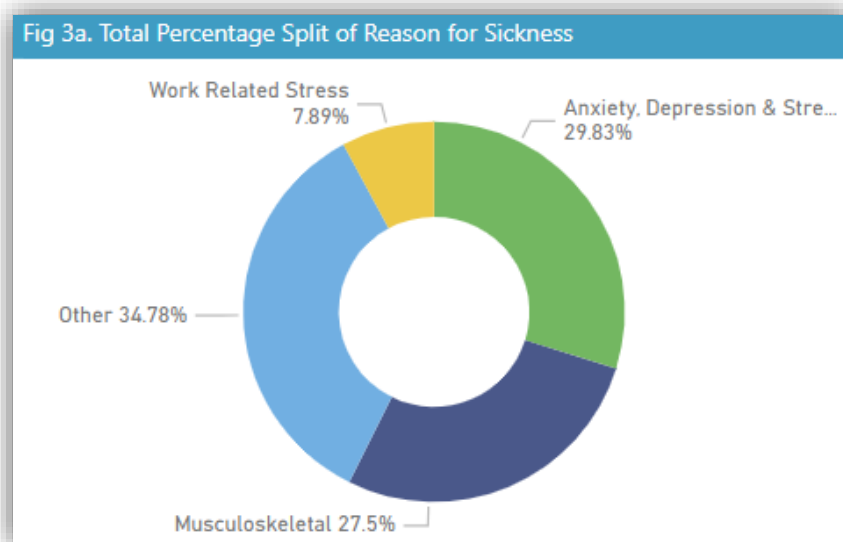


Table 3a shows the breakdown of the top ten reasons for sickness absence within Quarter 1 with the average FTE days lost per employee and the total FTE days lost because of the reason. It identifies again the top two reasons being Musculoskeletal and Stress, Anxiety and Depression.

Table 3a

REASON (groups)	Number of Staff	Average FTE Days lost per Employee for Reason	Sum of FTE Days for Reason
Accident at Work	2	63.50	127.00
Anxiety, Depression & Stress	14	41.89	586.45
Cold/Influenza	8	5.99	47.92
Ear/Nose/Throat Disorder	4	1.19	4.74
Eye Condition	2	23.40	46.80
Migraine/Headache	6	4.37	26.24
Musculoskeletal	17	35.29	599.88
Other	15	16.63	249.42
Post Operative Debility	9	26.84	241.54
Virus	4	16.28	65.13
Vomiting and Diarrhoea	6	2.31	13.87
Work Related Stress	2	86.00	172.00

Additional scatter graphs have been created to show the two top sickness reasons against each service to understand and compare. These have been split in terms of STS and LTS to ensure data is not skewed.

Anxiety, Stress and Depression (including Work Related Stress).

When focusing on short term sickness, the average FTE Days lost per employee for this reason sits at 9.43 whilst the average number of staff lost per service due to sickness falls relatively low at 1.6. The average FTE days lost per employee is significantly higher than the overall average for short term sickness suggesting that this type of sickness results in a longer absence period. This is also reiterated when looking at long term sickness where the average FTE days lost is 83.01 for Anxiety, Stress and Depression which is over 20 days longer than the overall LTS average FTE days lost per employee.

For short term sickness Anxiety, Stress and Depression (including Work Related Stress) scatter graph Fig 3b helps to show the significant outliers.

- Neighbourhood Delivery – This service has an average STS FTE Days lost per employee at 12.74 with a Sum FTE days lost for the service sitting at 38.21 for Quarter 1. The latter measure being the largest for the 5 services affected. It also shows the highest number of staff off for this reason within Q1.
- Sustainable Environment – There was 9.5 average STS FTE days lost per employee for this service sitting slightly above the overall average. This service was the second highest in terms of total summed FTE days lost falling at 19 in total for Quarter 1.

Long term sickness Anxiety, Stress and Depression (including Work Related Stress) scatter graph Fig 3c has been created to show the significant outlying services. For LTS there are a high number of services which are above average for both staff count and average FTE days lost per employee.

- Neighbourhood Delivery – Shows a high number of staff lost due to sickness absence but the average time lost by employee is below the average, this service’s average FTE Days lost per employee sits at 49.51. It also has the second highest total FTE days lost within quarter 1 with a measure of 198.05 days lost. Given the higher FTE days per employee lost under STS, this service could soon show the most FTE days lost for LTS if STS sickness isn’t improved for this sickness reason.
- Sustainable Environment – Falls just above the average for both FTE days lost per employee and number of employees. It has the largest total LTS FTE days lost for the quarter with a measure of 204 days lost for this reason.
- Commercial Delivery – This service has a lower than average staff count but the staff who have lost LTS FTE days have lost a higher number of days.
- Strategy, People and Performance – as per Commercial Delivery, this service has a low staff count for long term sickness absence but the average time these staff lose is much higher than the average for this reason type.

Musculoskeletal

For at short term sickness for this sickness reason, the average FTE Days lost per employee measured at 5 whilst the average number of staff lost per service due to sickness measured at 4. There are only two services which have this type of sickness absence under STS, with only Sustainable Environment showing a key outlier, detail of which is listed below;

- Sustainable Environment – Shows a higher than average number of staff and also the average FTE days lost per employee is higher with a measure of 6.26. As a sum total for short term sickness this service has lost 37.57 FTE days within Quarter 1.

Long term sickness for this reason shows a similar trend. Average FTE days lost per employee for this reason falls at 62.21 with the average number of staff lost per service is 2.25. The key outlier again is Sustainable environment;

- Sustainable Environment – As per Short term sickness this service has a higher number of staff absent due to this reason and also a higher than average FTE days lost per employee with a measure of 79.67 days. In total this service lost 478.02 FTE days in quarter 1 because of this reason.

Fig 3b. STS REASON AVERAGE FTE Days Lost by Division



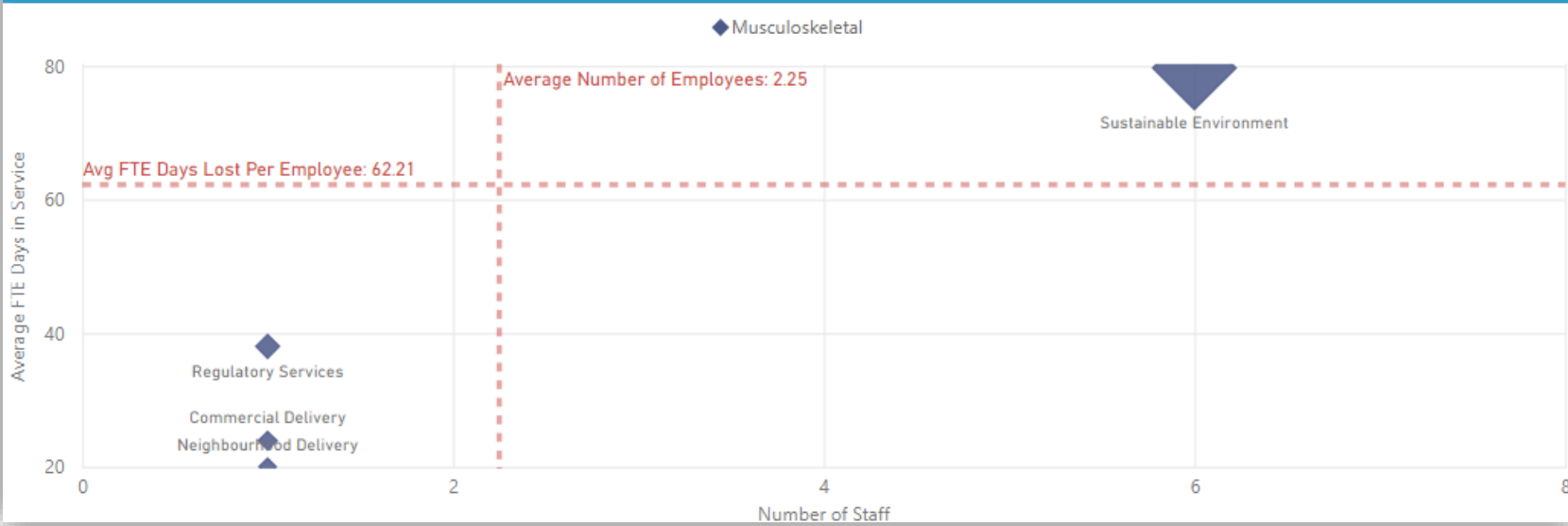
Fig 3c. LTS REASON AVERAGE FTE Days Lost by Division



Fig 3d. STS REASON AVERAGE FTE Days Lost by Division



Fig 3e. LTS REASON AVERAGE FTE Days Lost by Division



Possible causes

In looking at all the data available from across the council, there is a potential relationship between musculoskeletal sickness absence and the age of the workforce within Sustainable Environment. This service has a higher number of roles that require manual labour and is partnered alongside an aging workforce; with the service having the highest number of staff aged between 50 and 64 (Fig 4a). Given these two metrics there is the suggestion that the two variables are related however due to limitations on the MyView data, age of absent staff members is not available so this cannot be verified at present. If more metadata around the absentee staff was available then further additional analysis could be undertaken.

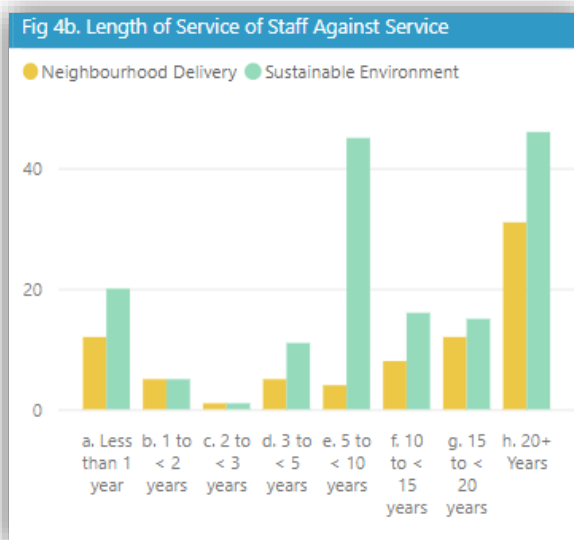
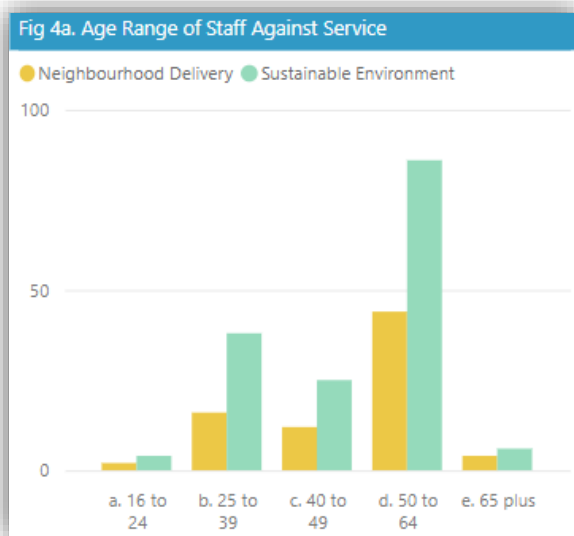


Fig 4b shows the number of staff and the length of service. Again, the longest timeframe of 20+ years' service for Sustainable Environment is the highest in the council. Due to data limitations, it cannot be confirmed if the staff who have worked for the council for 20+ years

have done so in the same role, however it is likely that they may have been doing similar roles which could potentially require some form of manual labour, in turn this could provide another relationship to musculoskeletal sickness absence reason.

Anxiety, Stress and Depression can have numerous factors impacting it. Given this nature of the sickness absence reason the relationship between possible causes cannot be fully confirmed. However, it must be noted that Neighbourhood Delivery has currently been undergoing an organisational restructure. This service has shown one of the higher numbers in terms of staff who have been absent and also the average time lost due to this reason as per Fig3b and Fig3c. Whilst it cannot be confirmed in terms of data, the uncertainty of people's roles is likely to have had an impact on Staff sickness. Due to the high STS volumes within quarter 1, it is likely to result in greater LTS for future quarters for this service and sickness reason.

Summary

The main service areas for review based on the data from quarter 1 would be Neighbourhood Delivery and Sustainable Environment which feature regularly across the report; specifically in terms of the two main sickness reasons. These two services will have impacted the overall measure and likely to be impacting the Councils Quarter 1 performance measure for average sick days per employee being calculated at 3.71 days (sitting above the targeted 2.2 days.). Services such as Strategy, People and Performance and Commercial Delivery have a small number of staff on long term sick due to Stress, Anxiety and Depression and whilst the number of staff is low, the length of time lost is well above average and should also be reviewed as an outlier. To help with further review, additional metadata could also be sourced to help identify trends and causes to absentee staff to help gain a greater understanding.

Appendix 2 Extract from Sickness Absence Action Plan



Extract of sickness
action plan.xlsx