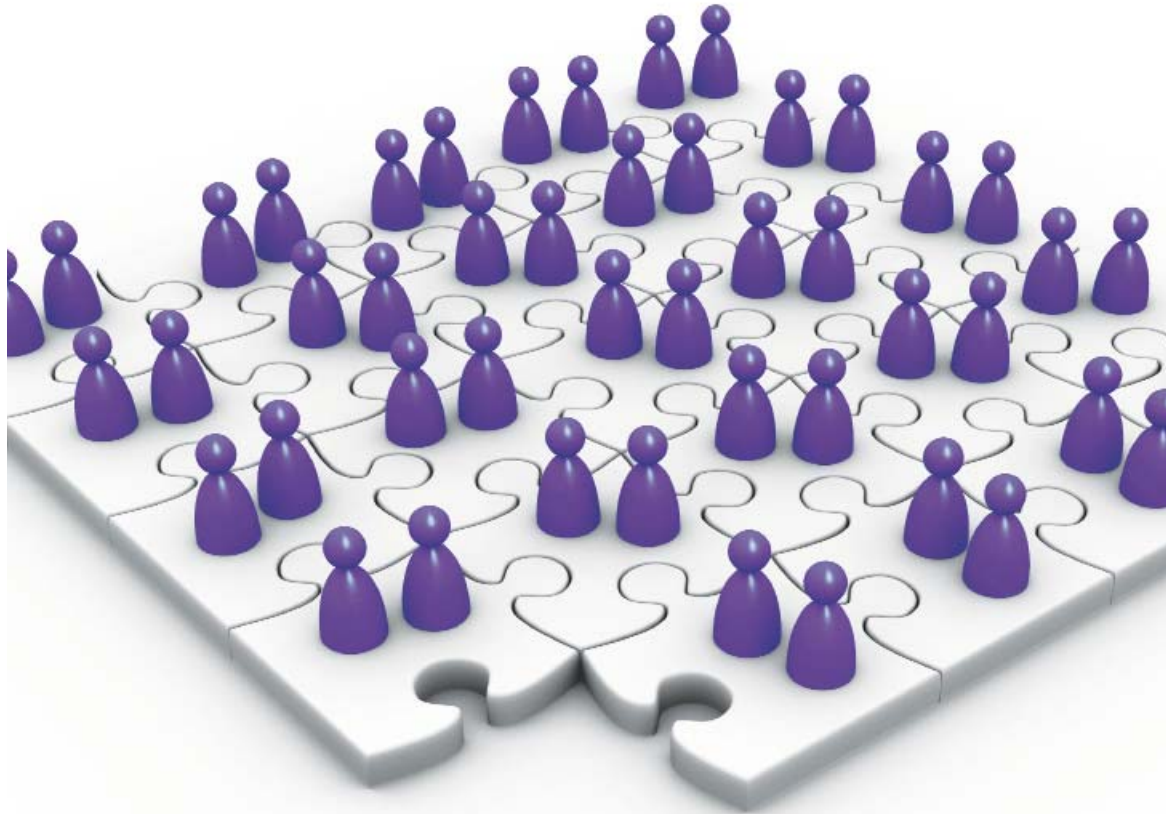




Northern Ireland Audit Office

Absenteeism in Northern Ireland Councils 2007-08

REPORT BY THE CHIEF LOCAL GOVERNMENT AUDITOR
9 January 2009





This report has been prepared under Article 26 of the Local Government (Northern Ireland) Order 2005.

John Buchanan
Chief Local Government Auditor
January 2009

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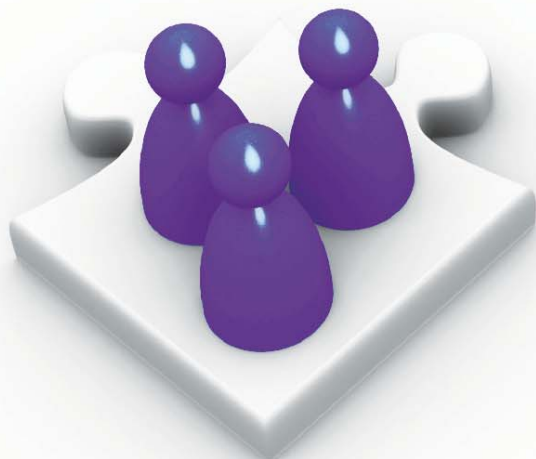
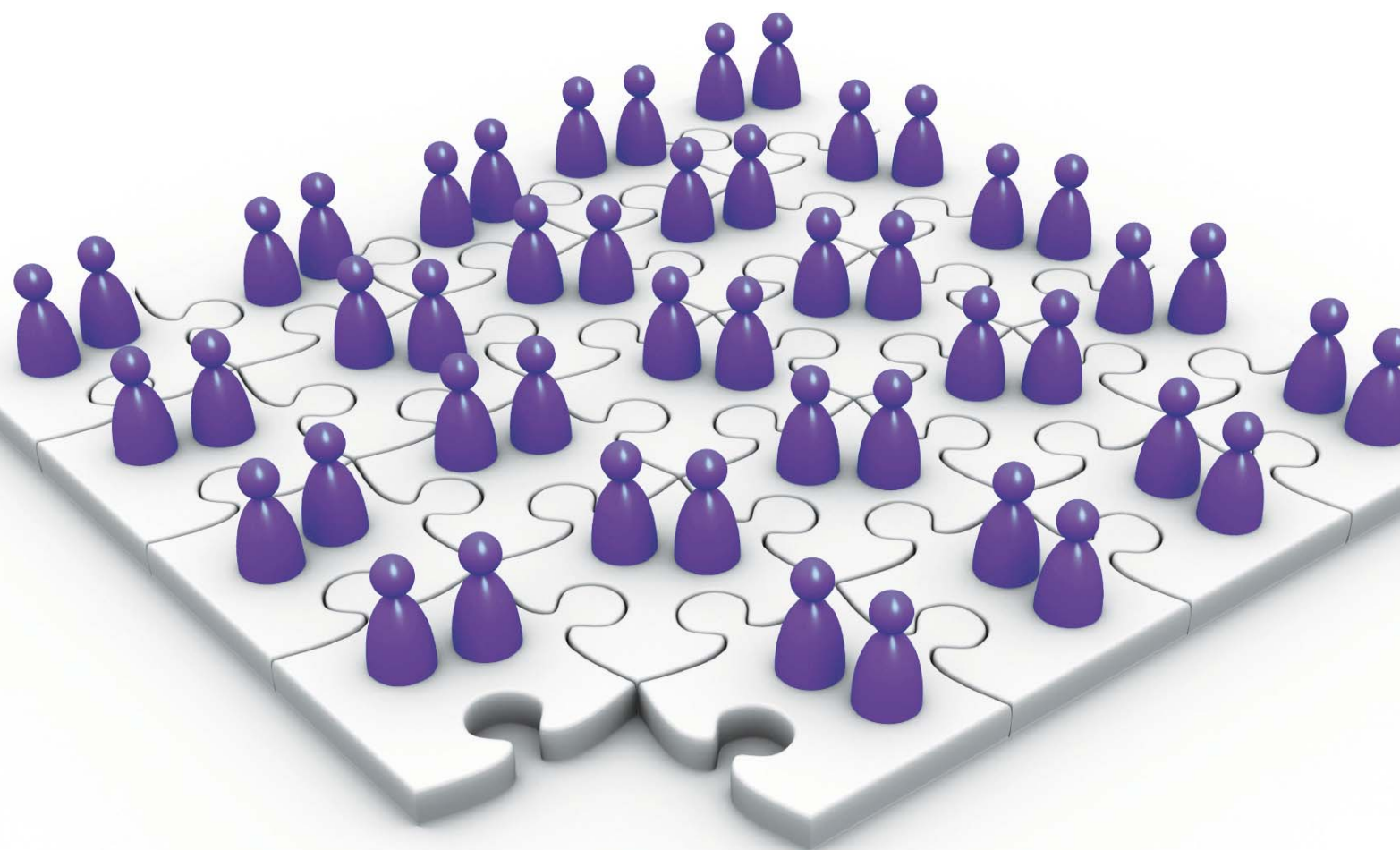
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Executive Summary



Executive Summary

Scope of the report

In accordance with Article 26 of the Local Government (Northern Ireland) Order 2005, the Chief Local Government Auditor requested absenteeism data from each of the 26 district councils for the year ending 31 March 2008:

- numbers of absences;
- duration of absences;
- numbers of full time equivalent employees;
- potential working days available;
- causes of absenteeism;
- absenteeism policies; and
- absenteeism targets.

Unless otherwise stated the analysis contained in this report is based on the data provided by the 26 councils.



Main findings

Absenteeism within councils

- Magherafelt District Council had the lowest average annual absenteeism rate of 8.19 days for the 2005-08 period. Had all councils matched the lowest average annual absenteeism rate, a total of £6.2 million a year could have been gained in productivity (paragraphs 3 and 8).
- Average annual absenteeism rates for five councils were more than double the rate recorded in Magherafelt District Council for the 2005-08 period. These were Larne Borough Council (19.54 days), Carrickfergus Borough Council (18.99 days), Derry City Council (17.89 days), Moyle District Council (16.85 days) and Craigavon Borough Council (16.71 days)(paragraphs 3 and 4).
- In four of the councils with some of the highest annual absenteeism rates (Derry City Council, Craigavon Borough Council, Ballymoney Borough Council and Carrickfergus Borough Council) we have noted issues with the information provided to us. We are concerned that this may be indicative of insufficient attention being paid by these councils to the management of absenteeism (paragraph 5).
- Ballymena Borough Council had the largest increase in average annual absenteeism rate. The rate of 12.87 days recorded for the 2005-08 period is 4.36 days more than the 2002-05 rate of 8.51 days (the lowest rate recorded by a council in 2002-05). This represents an average annual productivity loss of £145,000 for the Council (paragraphs 6 and 12).
- Of the 19 councils showing an improvement over the two periods, Newry and Mourne District Council improved the most with a significant reduction in its absenteeism rate of 6.47 days from 21.43 days in 2002-05 to 14.96 days in 2005-08. This represents an average annual productivity gain of £305,000 for the Council (paragraphs 7 and 11).
- The reduction by Belfast City Council in its absenteeism rate of 1.41 days between 2002-05 and 2005-08 has led to an average annual productivity gain of £405,000 (paragraph 11).
- In Ballymoney Borough Council, 40 per cent of total days lost due to absenteeism was caused by *stress, depression, mental health and fatigue*. This is almost four times the rate of stress-related absence recorded in Armagh City and District Council and North Down Borough Council (paragraph 14).
- Further commentary on each council's three-year average annual absenteeism is at Appendix 3 (paragraph 15).
- Variations in absenteeism rates between councils, and the proportion of this attributable to stress-related absence, appear to have no discernable pattern. One factor which does vary between councils is the management of absenteeism. We recommend that councils with high and rising absenteeism rates should review their own management practices and benchmark these against those councils with low and falling absenteeism rates (paragraphs 18 and 19).
- Based on the period 2005-08 we estimate that there would be a productivity difference of £4.0 million if the 11 new councils, to be established under Review of Public Administration (RPA) reforms, can achieve the lowest absenteeism rate currently found in their constituent councils, as opposed to the highest rate (paragraph 24).

Absenteeism for the sector as a whole

- Northern Ireland councils as a whole lost almost 131,000 days to absenteeism in 2007-08 resulting in an average absenteeism rate of 13.70 days. This rate has reduced marginally from 2006-07 but remains lower than the rates recorded for the years 2002-03 to 2004-05 (paragraphs 26, 27 and 46).

Executive Summary

- Across Northern Ireland councils 37 per cent of full time equivalent employees (over 3,500) had no absence during 2007-08 (paragraph 28).
- The marginally lower level of absenteeism combined with a seven per cent increase in staff costs (£18 million) to produce a rise in lost productivity due to absence in Northern Ireland councils by £0.9 million from £15.5 million in 2006-07 (paragraphs 31 and 32).
- Although the absenteeism rate for Northern Ireland councils is lower than the Northern Ireland Housing Executive rate it is higher than both the Northern Ireland Civil Service rate and the Northern Ireland Health Service rate (paragraph 33).
- The 2007-08 absenteeism rate in Northern Ireland councils is more than 40 per cent higher than the 2006-07 rate recorded for England and Wales local authorities. Had the Northern Ireland rate been similar to this latest available rate for England and Wales local authorities, the gain in productivity would have been £4.9 million, or a gain of 176 staff in post throughout the year at no additional cost. Only three Northern Ireland councils have absenteeism rates below the average for England and Wales local authorities (paragraphs 36 and 38).
- In 2007-08, long term absence cost councils £10.8 million in lost productivity. If councils reduced the proportion of long term absence to the average five per cent rate found in the UK economy, the cost of long term absence could be reduced by £4.2 million. We recommend that when councils benchmark their absenteeism management practices, particular attention is paid to the management of long term absence (paragraph 42).
- *depression, mental health and fatigue* remains the largest cause of absenteeism, responsible for almost one quarter of days lost in 2007-08. Consequently lost productivity due to stress-related absenteeism has increased from £3.1 million in 2006-07 to £3.9 million in 2007-08 (paragraphs 44, 45, 46 and 48). Absences due to this cause of illness last more than six weeks on average (paragraph 55).
- There was little variance in the causes of absence in Northern Ireland councils between 2006-07 and 2007-08 and when compared to the latest information available for England and Wales local authorities. Different causes of absence would not appear to explain the additional £4.9 million absence costs incurred by Northern Ireland councils when compared to England and Wales local authorities. In general, staff appear to be absent for similar reasons. In Northern Ireland councils, however, these same causes of absence lead to longer or more frequent periods of absence and consequently higher absence costs (paragraphs 50 to 52).

Absenteeism policies in councils

- All councils except Magherafelt District Council have a documented absenteeism policy. We recommend all councils, including Magherafelt District Council, should establish written absenteeism policies which are subject to councillor approval and published for the benefit of ratepayers, electors and council staff. We recommend that policies are routinely monitored and adjusted as required. (paragraph 57 and 59).
- 19 councils have implemented a stress or mental health policy. As stress-related absence is the single largest cause of absenteeism in Northern Ireland councils, we particularly welcome the action being taken by some councils to address this. It is our view that all councils should be proactive in their management of stress-related absenteeism (paragraphs 60 and 61).
- Absence information is not notified to staff in twelve councils. It is our view that councils should pay particular attention to ensuring all staff are fully aware of the policy that applies to them (paragraph 62).

Causes of absence in councils

- For 2007-08, all councils provided information on causes of absence but the information from Derry City Council was incomplete. The information provided by the other 25 councils represents 91 per cent of all days lost and 92 per cent of absences. Projecting this information to all councils, *stress*,



Absenteeism targets in councils

- There is currently no requirement for Northern Ireland councils to set long term targets for the reduction of absenteeism. In 2007-08, 20 of the 26 councils had established corporate or departmental level targets for managing absenteeism rates (paragraph 65).
- Of the 20 councils that had set targets, less than half indicated to us that they notified staff of the target. As with past absenteeism performance we recommend future targets are communicated to staff (paragraph 67).
- At paragraph 19, we recommend that councils with higher absenteeism rates should benchmark their management practices against councils with lower absenteeism rates. This should include the establishment and monitoring of targets which, over an established timeframe, will assist councils to focus on progress towards absenteeism levels which match, or improve upon, the lowest rates currently found in Northern Ireland councils (paragraph 68).
- Of the 20 councils with established absenteeism reduction targets, only 13 of these indicated their target had been approved by councillors. Given the importance of absenteeism management and the potential productivity gains arising from falling absenteeism rates, we recommend that absenteeism policies established by councils should include realistic targets (paragraph 69).
- Key elements of supporting documentation requested at both Ballymoney Borough Council and Carrickfergus Borough Council were not provided for inspection, both during and after the audit visit (paragraph 74).
- The effective management of absenteeism in councils requires reliable absence data. Councils should ensure the integrity of the data used to calculate and monitor absenteeism rates, and to set absenteeism targets (paragraph 75).

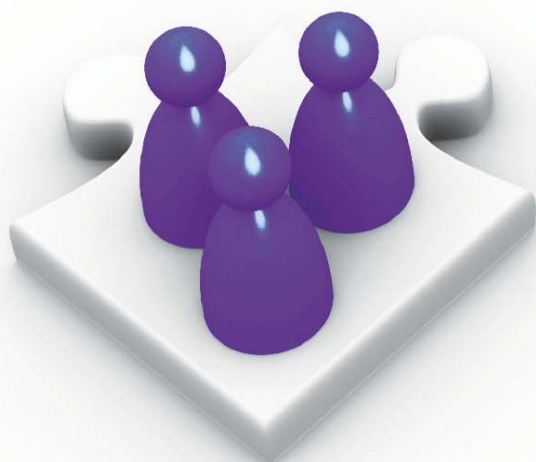
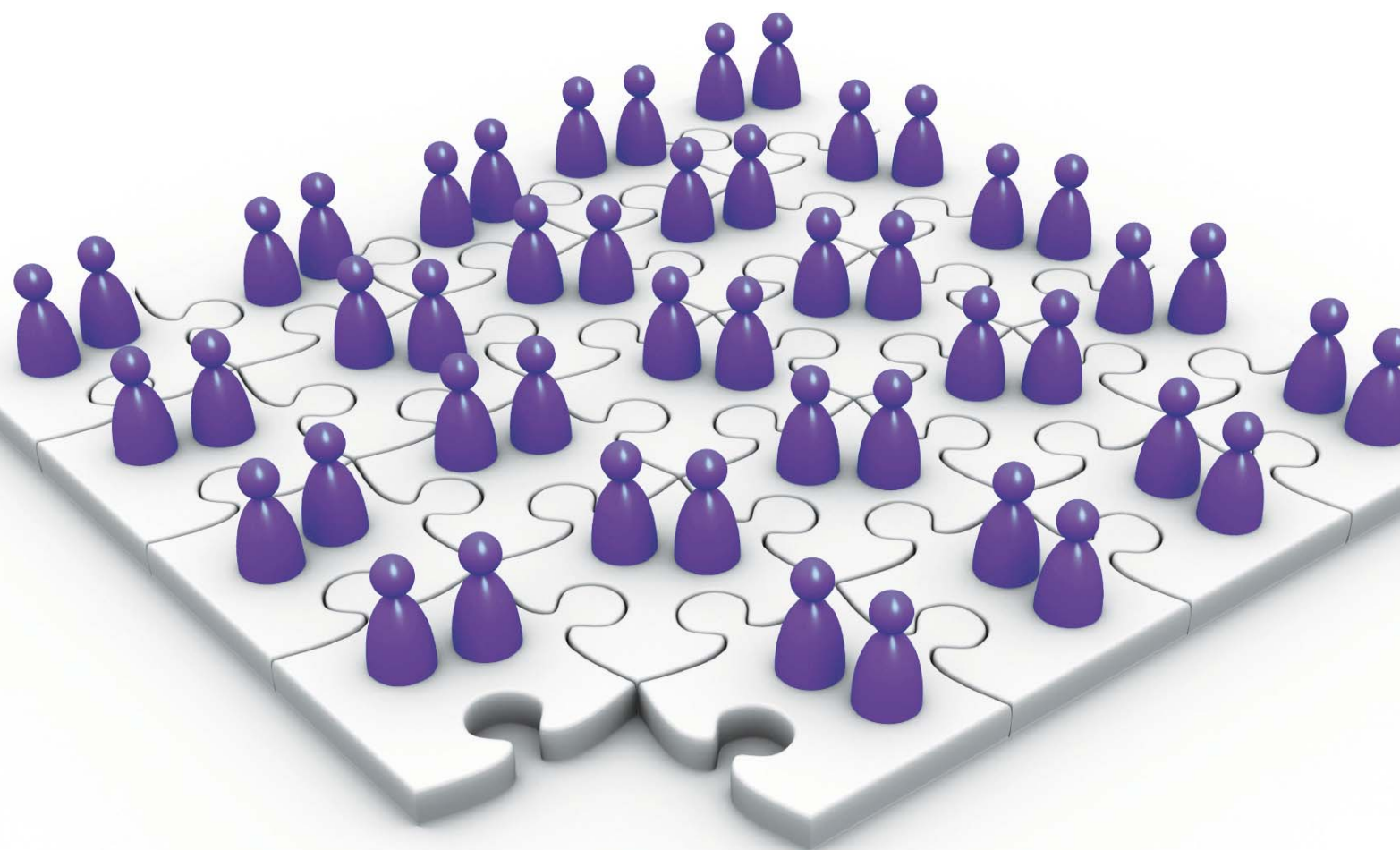
Absenteeism data in councils

- We asked for completed absenteeism data questionnaires to be returned by 30 June 2008. Fourteen councils had submitted responses on or before this date. Castlereagh Borough Council was the last council to submit a return on 28 August 2008. Due to errors in the data, Craigavon Borough Council submitted revised data on 6 November 2008, 18 weeks after the due date. Consequently this report has been delayed until January 2009 by the late receipt of the Craigavon Borough Council response (paragraphs 70 to 72).



Northern Ireland Audit Office

Report



Report

Absenteeism within councils

1. For the purposes of this section of the report, absenteeism data for each council has been analysed over a three-year period and an average annual absenteeism rate¹ derived for the period. This counters the impact of annual fluctuations in absenteeism which could distort our findings, particularly within smaller councils (paragraph 29). The resulting three-year derived rate provides a better illustration of the underlying absenteeism

position for each council. All councils should, however, continue to monitor their absenteeism regularly as part of an ongoing process of absenteeism management.

2. Figure 1 sets out the three-year average annual absenteeism rate for each council for the period April 2005 to March 2008². Absenteeism rates calculated for the previous three-year period, April 2002 to March 2005, allow comparisons between the two periods to be made.

I Three-year average annual absenteeism rates for each Northern Ireland council

Average annual absenteeism rates for 2005-08 range from 8.19 to 19.54 days. The rates for five councils are more than double the lowest rate

	Three-year period 2002-05 (days)	Three-year period 2005-08 (days)	Movement (days)
Magherafelt District Council	10.70	8.19	-2.51
Armagh City and District Council	10.58	8.81	-1.77
Lisburn City Council	11.19	9.46	-1.73
Fermanagh District Council	9.61	9.82	0.21
Castlereagh Borough Council	11.55	10.26	-1.29
Down District Council	11.19	10.73	-0.46
Banbridge District Council	12.68	11.73	-0.95
Newtownabbey Borough Council	14.30	12.54	-1.76
Strabane District Council	9.95	12.60	2.65
Limavady Borough Council	14.35	12.62	-1.73
Cookstown District Council	13.29	12.80	-0.49
Ballymena Borough Council	8.51	12.87	4.36
Omagh District Council	15.04	12.98	-2.06
Antrim Borough Council	13.78	13.06	-0.72
Ards Borough Council	14.22	13.14	-1.08
Dungannon and South Tyrone District Council	13.31	13.25	-0.06
North Down Borough Council	13.73	13.27	-0.46
Coleraine Borough Council	12.41	14.89	2.48
Belfast City Council	16.31	14.90	-1.41
Newry and Mourne District Council	21.43	14.96	-6.47
Ballymoney Borough Council	14.94	15.38	0.44
Double the lowest rate (Magherafelt District Council)		16.38	
Craigavon Borough Council	17.69	16.71	-0.98
Moyle District Council	14.23	16.85	2.62
Derry City Council	17.08	17.89	0.81
Carrickfergus Borough Council	19.14	18.99	-0.15
Larne Borough Council	19.93	19.54	-0.39

Source: Northern Ireland councils



3. With 8.19 days, Magherafelt District Council had the lowest average annual absenteeism rate for the 2005-08 period. The equivalent absenteeism rates for five councils (Larne Borough Council, Carrickfergus Borough Council, Derry City Council, Moyle District Council and Craigavon Borough Council) were more than double the rate recorded in Magherafelt District Council.
4. The council with the highest average annual absenteeism rate was Larne Borough Council with 19.54 days for the 2005-08 period. This has, however, reduced by 0.39 days when compared with the 2002-05 rate.
5. In four of the councils with some of the highest average annual absenteeism rates we have noted issues with the information provided to us. These are Derry City Council (paragraph 44), Craigavon Borough Council (paragraph 72), Ballymoney Borough Council and Carrickfergus Borough Council (paragraph 74). We are concerned that this may be indicative of insufficient attention being paid by these councils to the management of absenteeism.
6. The council that experienced the largest increase in its average annual absenteeism rate was Ballymena Borough Council. The rate of 12.87 days recorded for the 2005-08 period is 4.36 days more than the 2002-05 rate of 8.51 days (the lowest rate recorded by a council in 2002-05). Strabane District Council and Moyle District Council both experienced significant increases of 2.65 and 2.62 days respectively in their average annual absenteeism rates.
7. Of the 19 councils showing an improvement over the two periods, Newry and Mourne District Council improved most with a significant reduction in its absenteeism rate of 6.47 days. At this council the average annual absenteeism rate reduced from 21.43 days in 2002-05 to 14.96 days in 2005-08.
8. The average annual staff cost for each council for the 2005-08 period is set out in Figure 2. By applying the three-year average absenteeism rates (Figure 1) to these figures, average annual lost productivity has been derived from both the absenteeism rate and the total staff costs incurred by a council. They range from £152,000 in Magherafelt District Council to £4,278,000 in Belfast City Council. Had all councils matched the lowest average annual absenteeism rate of 8.19 days recorded by Magherafelt District Council, a total of £6.2 million a year could have been gained in productivity (Figure 2 and Appendix 1).
9. Councils with higher rates of absenteeism will secure the greatest proportionate productivity gains by a reduction to the rate recorded for Magherafelt District Council. In the case of Larne Borough Council a reduction in absenteeism rate, from the current rate of 19.54 days to 8.19 days, would lead to potential productivity gains of £227,000, equivalent to 5.1 per cent of staff costs.

1 The absenteeism rate is the average number of days a full time equivalent employee was absent in a period. The absenteeism rate is measured in working days lost per full time equivalent employee, referred to as 'days' in this report. If an employee who works reduced hours is absent, the absence is calculated on a full time equivalent basis.

2 Average annual absenteeism rates reported in *Absenteeism in Northern Ireland Councils 2006-07* (April 2004 to March 2007) have not been compared to the rates included in this report, due to the overlapping nature of this period with 2002-05 and 2005-08.

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2 Average annual staff costs and associated potential gains in productivity for each Northern Ireland council (2005-08) if the lowest absenteeism rate was equalled

Annual gains of £6.2 million in productivity could be made if all councils matched the lowest absenteeism rate reported by Magherafelt District Council

	Average annual staff costs 2005-08 (£'000)	Average annual lost productivity 2005-08 (£'000)	Average annual potential productivity gains based on an absenteeism rate of 8.19 days (% of staff costs)	Average annual potential productivity gains based on an absenteeism rate of 8.19 days (£'000)
Magherafelt District Council	4,173	152	-	-
Armagh City and District Council	7,566	294	0.3	21
Lisburn City Council	12,091	513	0.6	69
Fermanagh District Council	6,685	292	0.7	48
Castlereagh Borough Council	8,856	406	0.9	82
Down District Council	7,692	377	1.2	89
Banbridge District Council	4,654	247	1.6	75
Newtownabbey Borough Council	9,863	579	2.0	201
Strabane District Council	4,572	257	2.0	90
Limavady Borough Council	3,688	207	2.0	73
Cookstown District Council	4,785	265	2.0	95
Ballymena Borough Council	7,473	428	2.1	156
Omagh District Council	7,277	419	2.1	155
Antrim Borough Council	6,663	373	2.1	139
Ards Borough Council	9,526	582	2.3	219
Dungannon and South Tyrone Borough Council	6,755	403	2.3	154
North Down Borough Council	9,123	538	2.3	206
Coleraine Borough Council	8,281	559	3.0	252
Belfast City Council	64,825	4,278	3.0	1,927
Newry and Mourne District Council	10,483	705	3.0	319
Ballymoney Borough Council	2,951	204	3.2	95
Craigavon Borough Council	12,532	955	3.9	487
Moyle District Council	3,175	238	3.8	122
Derry City Council	15,279	1,230	4.4	667
Carrickfergus Borough Council	4,872	419	4.9	238
Larne Borough Council	4,475	391	5.1	227
Total				6,206

Source: Chief Local Government Auditor (see Appendix 1)



Case study

Belfast City Council

At Belfast City Council the average annual absenteeism rate fell by 1.41 days (9 per cent) from 16.31 days in the period 2002-05 to 14.90 days in the period 2005-08. This represents an average annual productivity gain of £405,000.

At the start of every week Belfast City Council produces a Priority List of absent employees. The list was initially introduced to tackle the long term continuous sickness that had been occurring within the council. However, it is now also used to highlight instances where frequent spells of short term absence are apparent. The Head of Human Resources and staff from the Employee Relations Unit review the list, concentrating on the steps to be taken to comply with the Council's Attendance Policy. The Council's Human Resources section then liaises with line managers and the occupational health service to ensure all steps are being followed as quickly as possible.

All referrals to occupational health and employee counselling services require the completion of a detailed form. Information is required on many aspects of the employee's work environment, including the degree of contact with the public, the use of machinery and a description of the physical aspects to the job. Following the assessment of the individual, the occupational health professional is asked to determine whether a likely return to work date can be established in the foreseeable future; whether there are any Disability Discrimination Act implications and whether, in appropriate circumstances, permanent ill-health retirement should be considered.

The Council may fund private medical care such as physiotherapy treatments or MRI scans for certain employees if this is considered to be beneficial to the Council as well as the individual. Each application for such medical assistance is considered on its own merits. These benefits can help the employee and also assist the Council in determining a realistic view on the amount of time the employee will be unable to work in their current role. There is also the potential for the employee to return to work earlier than would have occurred had they joined the waiting list for the National Health Service.

Quarterly sickness absence reports are reviewed by departments, chief officers, and Council members at departmental committees, while staff are regularly kept informed about absence performance through the Council's periodical staff magazine and through its team brief system. These sickness absence reports compare departmental and service level sickness rates against those achieved for the same period in the previous year and against targets for reduction agreed with Human Resources. These targets vary, dependent on the levels achieved in previous years - the higher the absenteeism rate within a service area, the higher the reduction target will be. Human Resources consider that each service or department has the potential to achieve the absenteeism reduction targets which have been set.

Report

3 Changes in average annual productivity for each Northern Ireland Council resulting from a comparison of 2002-05 and 2005-08 absenteeism rates

Changes in average annual productivity resulting from a comparison of 2002-05 and 2005-08 absenteeism rates range from a gain in Belfast City Council of £405,000 to a loss in Ballymena Borough Council of £145,000

	Average absenteeism rate for the 2005-08 period (days) (Figure 1)	Average annual staff costs 2005-08 (days) (Figure 2)	Movement in three-year rate from 2002-05 to 2005-08 (days)	Average annual increased productivity gain/loss based on 2005-08 costs using 2002-05 rate (£'000)
Magherafelt District Council	8.19	4,173	-2.51	47
Armagh City and District Council	8.81	7,566	-1.77	59
Lisburn City Council	9.46	12,091	-1.73	94
Fermanagh District Council	9.82	6,685	0.21	-6
Castlereagh Borough Council	10.26	8,856	-1.29	51
Down District Council	10.73	7,692	-0.46	19
Banbridge District Council	11.73	4,654	-0.95	20
Newtownabbey Borough Council	12.54	9,863	-1.76	81
Strabane District Council	12.60	4,572	2.6	-54
Limavady Borough Council	12.62	3,688	-1.73	28
Cookstown District Council	12.80	4,785	-0.49	10
Ballymena Borough Council	12.87	7,473	4.36	-145
Omagh District Council	12.98	7,277	-2.06	66
Antrim Borough Council	13.06	6,663	-0.72	21
Ards Borough Council	13.14	9,526	-1.08	48
Dungannon and South Tyrone Borough Council	13.25	6,755	-0.06	2
North Down Borough Council	13.27	9,123	-0.46	16
Coleraine Borough Council	14.89	8,281	2.48	-93
Belfast City Council	14.90	64,825	-1.41	405
Newry and Mourne District Council	14.96	10,483	-6.47	305
Ballymoney Borough Council	15.38	2,951	0.44	-6
Craigavon Borough Council	16.71	12,532	-1.03	56
Moyle District Council	16.85	3,175	2.62	-37
Derry City Council	17.89	15,279	0.81	-56
Carrickfergus Borough Council	18.99	4,872	-0.15	3
Larne Borough Council	19.54	4,475	-0.39	8

Source: Chief Local Government Auditor (see Appendix 2)

10. At Figure 3 and Appendix 2 we have estimated the gain or loss in average annual productivity resulting from the

change in council absenteeism rates between the 2002-05 and 2005-08 periods, as shown in Figure 1.



11. With £64.8 million of staff costs, the reduction by Belfast City Council in its absenteeism rate of 1.41 days between 2002-05 and 2005-08 has led to an average annual productivity gain of £405,000. Although Newry and Mourne District Council has much smaller staff costs (£10.5 million), the 6.47 day reduction in its absenteeism rate over the same period represents an average annual productivity gain of £305,000.
12. Ballymena Borough Council's increased absenteeism rate of 4.36 days between 2002-05 and 2005-08 represents an average annual productivity loss of £145,000 for the Council.
13. At paragraph 48 we have noted that *stress, depression, mental health and fatigue* is the largest cause of absenteeism in Northern Ireland councils and is responsible, on average, for almost one quarter of total days lost. Figure 4 sets out for all councils, except Derry City Council where information was not available, the proportion of absenteeism caused by stress-related absence in the period 2005-08.
14. In Ballymoney Borough Council, 40 per cent of total days lost due to absenteeism was caused by *stress, depression, mental health and fatigue*. This is almost four times the rate of stress-related absence recorded in Armagh City and District Council and North Down Borough Council.
15. Further commentary on each council's three-year average annual absenteeism is at Appendix 3.
16. In the short term, it is unlikely that lower absenteeism rates would result in reduced staff costs for councils through a reduction in staff numbers. However, lower absenteeism rates would give rise to increased productivity due to higher levels of attendance. Hence the comparisons between councils consider the potential for gains in productivity (paragraph 8). In the longer term, councils should have the option of either maintaining increased levels of productivity or alternatively reducing staff numbers and costs.

4 Three-year average proportion of days lost due to *stress, depression mental health and fatigue* for each Northern Ireland council (2005-08)

The average proportion of days lost due to stress-related absence ranges from 11 to 40 per cent.

Proportion of days lost due to *stress, depression, mental health and fatigue* (%)

Ballymoney Borough Council	40
Larne Borough Council	32
Craigavon Borough Council	29
Castlereagh Borough Council	28
Omagh District Council	27
Limavady Borough Council	23
Belfast City Council	22
Down District Council	21
Moyle District Council	20
Strabane District Council	20
Coleraine Borough Council	20
Newry and Mourne District Council	20
Ards Borough Council*	20
Ballymena Borough Council	19
Antrim Borough Council	18
Carrickfergus Borough Council	18
Lisburn City Council**	18
Banbridge District Council	18
Newtownabbey Borough Council	17
Dungannon and South Tyrone Brough Council	15
Fermanagh District Council	14
Cookstown District Council	14
Magherafelt District Council	12
North Down Borough Council	11
Armagh City and District Council	11
Derry City Council***	-

* Information on causes of absence was not available for 2005-06.

** Information on causes of absence was not available for 2005-06 and 2006-07.

*** Information on causes of absence was not available for 2005-06, 2006-07 and 2007-08 (paragraph 44).

Source: Northern Ireland councils

Report

17. An immediate benefit of lower absenteeism should be a tangible reduction in overtime and temporary staff costs. We recommend councils monitor these costs to ensure that falling absenteeism is reflected in cost reductions. Similarly we recommend that councils with increasing absenteeism rates should monitor the additional costs resulting through overtime and the employment of temporary staff.
18. Variations in absenteeism rates between councils, and the proportion of this attributable to stress-related absence, appear to have no discernable pattern. It is unlikely that differences in activity have been a factor. For the most part, councils operate within the same legislative framework, providing essentially the same services. In addition, neither the size of a council, nor its geographical location, appear to significantly influence its absenteeism rate. High and low absenteeism rates are found in both large and small councils, and in both urban and rural councils. Similarly, there appears to be no relationship between the political control of councils and absenteeism.
19. One factor which does vary between councils is the management of absenteeism. The report addresses, at a high level, three absenteeism management issues: policies (paragraphs 57 to 63); targets (paragraphs 64 to 69); and data (paragraphs 70 to 76). Our review is not detailed enough to link specific management practices with absenteeism rates or causes of absence but research elsewhere³ has shown the significant impact that effective management has in reducing absenteeism. We recommend that councils with high and rising absenteeism rates should review their own management practices and benchmark these against those councils with low and falling absenteeism rates. To assist this process we have included case studies in our report. These illustrate aspects of absenteeism management practice which is currently being applied within some of the Northern Ireland councils where absenteeism rates have fallen.
20. A recent Chartered Institute of Personnel and Development report⁴ places importance on the role of line managers in the practice of absenteeism management:

“...one of the challenges of managing absence for many employers is that absence management tends to become an organisational priority only when absence levels climb to a particular point – leading to management action and often to changes to policies and procedures. However, once absence levels fall again it ceases to be a management priority and it [the level of absence] creeps back up. The only way to prevent this pattern being repeated is to ensure that line managers are made accountable for their absence management performance through their annual appraisals and performance targets.”
21. We recognise that line managers have a key role to play if a council is to implement effective absenteeism management procedures. Several councils informed us that they provide line managers with specific absenteeism management training to enable them to perform their role to a higher standard, and to promote consistency across their organisations. Ensuring line managers are equipped to be an effective part of a council's processes to address absenteeism should be a particular priority for those councils with high or rising absenteeism rates.
22. It is our view that the potential gains in productivity for councils noted in [Figure 2](#) are both significant and attainable. We accept, however, that councils with high absenteeism rates are likely to take longer to realise these gains. Progress towards improved absenteeism rates in line with the lowest rates found in Northern Ireland councils remains important as:
 - the existing 26 councils should maximise staff productivity over their remaining lifetime; and
 - the 11 new councils, introduced following implementation of the Review of Public Administration (RPA), should inherit management practices which reflect the lowest absenteeism rates within the existing 26 councils.

3 Cabinet Office: *Working Well Together*, 1998; The Work Foundation: *Attendance management*, 2003; and Chartered Institute of Personnel and Development: *Absence Management*, 2006

4 Chartered Institute of Personnel and Development: *Absence Management Annual Survey Report 2008*



Case study

Omagh District Council

At Omagh District Council the average annual absenteeism rate fell by 2.06 days (14 per cent) from 15.04 days in the period 2002-05 to 12.98 days in the period 2005-08. This represents an average annual productivity gain of £66,000.

The Council provided chief officers, heads of departments and line managers with absence management training in October 2007. The training focused on identifying and exploring preventative, managerial and corrective approaches to encourage attendance and manage absence. An action plan to address individual and departmental areas for improvement was produced at the end of the course. The Council felt such training was necessary to support line managers in achieving its absence targets by ensuring line managers had the necessary competencies to meet the responsibilities set out in the Council's Absence Management Policy and Procedures.

The Council continues to organise events and activities designed to promote the good health and wellbeing of staff through a long-established cross-departmental Health Promotion Group. The Group arranges an annual programme of events including 'Fitness Checks', consisting of weight, blood pressure and fitness level checks, the provision of advice on making health improvements and a subsequent follow-up check to assess improvements. Other initiatives include sampling sessions of alternative therapies and initiatives to encourage healthy eating, such as a colour coded menu in the staff canteen, highlighting the daily 'healthy options', and quarterly 'Free Fruit Days' which remind staff of the importance of a healthy diet. Free fruit is provided to staff, posters are put on notice boards and messages are displayed on the Council's intranet.

In addition to such events, the Health Promotion Group has established a small library of books and tapes to help staff members deal with stress and promote relaxation using approved methods. The number of days lost due to *stress, depression, mental health* and *fatigue* has reduced by 21 per cent in this Council from 2006-07 to 2007-08.

The Council operates a healthcare scheme for all employees, providing benefits towards healthcare needs including quick access to MRI, CT and PET scans and a range of counselling and advisory services. The scheme also provides refunds (up to maximum agreed values) towards the cost of routine healthcare such as dental and physiotherapy treatments.

23. The Department of the Environment has recently issued guidance to councils on the establishment of transition committees and transition management teams to assist the implementation of RPA reforms. The current 26 district councils will be merged into 11 councils from 2011. We appreciate that there are a range of pressing issues to be addressed by the transition committees and management teams. However this process offers the opportunity for councils coming together to benchmark their absenteeism management practices against each other and ensure good practice can be extended from the better performing pre RPA councils to the 11 post RPA councils.
24. The varying impact of absenteeism rates being brought forward from the pre RPA councils to the 11 new councils following reorganisation is potentially significant. Based on the period 2005-08 we estimate that there would be a productivity difference of £4.0 million if the 11 new councils can achieve the lowest absenteeism rate currently found in their constituent councils, as opposed to the highest rate (Figure 5). This estimate takes no account of the additional central government staff who will transfer to district councils as part of the wider RPA reforms.
25. References in the remaining sections of this report to Northern Ireland councils as a whole reflect an annual position, as opposed to the three-year derived annual absenteeism rates calculated for individual council analysis. When grouped together, Northern Ireland councils provide absenteeism data which is less susceptible to year-on-year fluctuations.

5 Impact of potential differences in absenteeism rates following Review of Public Administration (RPA) mergers (based on 2005-08 absenteeism rates)

There would be a productivity difference of £4.0 million if the 11 new councils can achieve the lowest absenteeism rate currently found in their constituent councils, as opposed to the highest rate

	Rate (days)	Projected cost of absenteeism (£m)
Absenteeism if post RPA 11 councils move to worst rate currently found in pre RPA constituent councils	14.88	16.72
Absenteeism if post RPA 11 councils move to best rate currently found in pre RPA constituent councils	11.43	12.68
Productivity difference of RPA impacting positively/negatively on existing council absenteeism rates	3.45	4.04

Source: Northern Ireland councils



Absenteeism for the sector as a whole

26. The 26 Northern Ireland councils employed a total of 9,551 full time equivalent staff in 2007-08. During this period almost 131,000 working days were lost as a result of sickness absenteeism. This represents an average absenteeism rate of 13.70 days⁵, or nearly three weeks of absence, for each employee during 2007-08 (Figure 6). Lost productivity due to absence represents 6.17 per cent of available working days.
27. The 2007-08 absenteeism rate has reduced marginally when compared to the 2006-07 rate of 13.82 days. The absenteeism rate for Northern Ireland councils, when taken together, still remains lower than the rates recorded for the years 2002-03 to 2004-05 (Figure 7).

6 Combined absenteeism data for the 26 Northern Ireland councils (2006-07 and 2007-08)

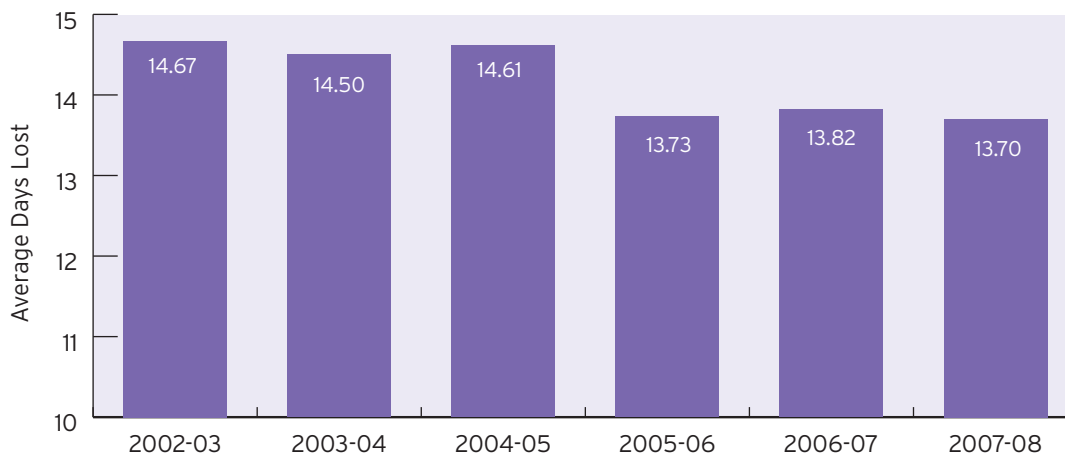
The 2007-08 absenteeism rate reduced to 13.70 days

	2006-07	2007-08
Potential working days available	2,082,318	2,121,133
Number of full time equivalent employees	9,343	9,551
Days lost due to absence	129,153	130,849
Lost productivity rate (per cent)	6.20	6.17
Average absenteeism rate (days)	13.82	13.70

Source: Northern Ireland councils

7 Northern Ireland council absenteeism rates for the six years to 2007-08

Absenteeism rates for the last three years have settled around a day lower than the rates for the previous three years.



Source: Chief Local Government Auditor

⁵ The average absenteeism rate for 2007-08 is the mean rate for all 9,551 full time equivalent staff in Northern Ireland councils. The median absenteeism rate across all 26 councils for 2007-08 is 13.31 days.

Report

8 The proportion of full time equivalent staff with no absence in each Northern Ireland council (2007-08)

The proportion of full time equivalent staff with no absence in 2007-08 ranges from 55 to 22 per cent.

	Proportion of staff with no absence (%)
Lisburn City Council	55
Castlereagh Borough Council	50
Craigavon Borough Council	48
Armagh City and District Council	46
Down District Council	45
Antrim Borough Council	45
Ballymoney Borough Council	43
Magherafelt District Council	43
Larne Borough Council	42
Ballymena Borough Council	41
Omagh District Council	40
Fermanagh District Council	39
Banbridge District Council	37
Newtownabbey Borough Council	37
Coleraine Borough Council	35
Derry City Council	35
North Down Borough Council	34
Carrickfergus Borough Council	33
Moyle District Council	32
Cookstown District Council	32
Belfast City Council	32
Newry and Mourne District Council	31
Limavady Borough Council	31
Dungannon and South Tyrone Borough Council	30
Strabane District Council	23
Ards Borough Council	22

Source: Northern Ireland councils

28. Across the Northern Ireland councils, 3,512 full time equivalent employees (37 per cent) had no absence during 2007-08. There is considerable variation between councils in the proportion of staff with no absence. This ranges from Lisburn City Council (55 per cent) to Ards Borough Council (22 per cent) (Figure 8). This information is included in our report for the first time. It will be of interest to note in future years if the extent of annual variations in council absenteeism rates (paragraph 29) is repeated in the numbers of full time equivalent employees with no absence.
29. Although we recommend absenteeism performance should be benchmarked against others, the most important comparisons are to be made with performance in the same organisation or sector over time. Annual absenteeism rates for 2007-08 increased in 12 councils when compared to 2006-07. The extent of these increases ranged from 9 to 29 per cent. In the 14 councils where absenteeism rates were reduced in 2007-08, these reductions ranged from one to 29 per cent.
30. In 2007-08, total gross staff costs for councils were £267 million⁶. Based on the average absenteeism rate of 13.7 days, the 2007-08 cost of absenteeism, when viewed simply as lost productivity, is projected to be £16.4 million (Figure 9). This compares with £15.5 million in 2006-07. The estimated cost does not include replacement costs such as temporary staff, additional overtime, or other indirect costs.

9 Comparison of the cost of absenteeism in Northern Ireland councils (2006-07 and 2007-08)

The projected 2007-08 cost of absenteeism is £16.4m

	2006-07	2007-08
Average absenteeism rate (days)	13.82	13.70
Lost productivity rate (per cent)	6.20	6.17
Gross staff costs	£249m	£267m
Projected cost of absenteeism	£15.5m	£16.4m

Source: Northern Ireland councils

6 Based on the sum of employment costs reported in councils' 2007-08 annual accounts



31. There has been a seven per cent increase in gross staff costs in Northern Ireland councils, from £249 million in 2006-07 to £267 million in 2007-08. Two main factors resulted in this rise of £18 million:
- councils employed an additional 231 full time equivalent staff; and
 - some councils implemented revised grading agreements.
32. Increased staff costs of £18 million in 2007-08, when combined with the marginally lower level of absenteeism, have increased lost productivity due to absence in Northern Ireland councils by £0.9 million.
33. The absenteeism rate for Northern Ireland councils as a sector is lower than the Northern Ireland Housing Executive but higher than both the Northern Ireland Civil Service rate and the Northern Ireland Health Service rate (Figure 10). Statistics quoted for the Northern Ireland Civil Service do not include the small proportion of staff designated as industrial staff.
34. As was the case when comparing one council with another, absenteeism comparisons for the sector as a whole in the first instance consider the potential for gains in productivity.
35. All the Northern Ireland public sector absenteeism rates we examined are considerably higher than the UK economy as a whole, however rates reported for the UK economy are calculated on a different basis. Public sector absenteeism across the UK is generally recorded at higher levels than the private sector.
36. The 2007-08 absenteeism rate in Northern Ireland councils is more than forty per cent higher than the rate recorded for England and Wales local authorities in 2006-07 (2007-08 figures were not available). Had the Northern Ireland rate been similar to that of the latest available rate in England and Wales local authorities, the gain in productivity would have been £4.9 million (Figure 11), or a gain of 176 staff in post throughout the year at no additional cost.
37. Reducing the Northern Ireland councils absenteeism rate to that of the Northern Ireland Civil Service would have resulted in a gain of £1.0 million on council productivity (Figure 11), or a gain of 36 staff in post throughout the year at no additional cost.

10 Absenteeism rates in relevant employment sectors

The 2007-08 absenteeism rate for Northern Ireland councils is lower than the Northern Ireland Housing Executive but higher than the rates for the Northern Ireland Health Service and Northern Ireland Civil Service

	2006-07 (days)	2007-08 (days)
Northern Ireland Housing Executive ⁷	14.0	14.8
Northern Ireland councils	13.8	13.7
Northern Ireland Health Service ⁸	13.9	13.2
Northern Ireland Civil Service ⁹	13.7	12.9
England and Wales local authorities ¹⁰	9.6	-
UK Economy ¹¹	7.0	6.7

Source: Northern Ireland councils

7 Northern Ireland Housing Executive: 37th Annual Report 1 April 2007 to 31 March 2008, KPI 6.5.5 page 72
 8 Department of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: Base information from *Monitoring of Human Resource Activity* reports (available at www.dhsspsni.gov.uk); days lost figures calculated by NIAO. 2007-08 figure quoted is for the first six months only and does not include the Northern Trust.
 9 Northern Ireland Statistics and Research Agency: *Analysis of Sickness Absence in the NI Departments 2007/2008*
 10 Local Government Association and Local Government Employers: *Local Government Sickness Absence Levels and Causes Survey 2006 -2007*
 11 Confederation of British Industry: *At work and working well? (Absence and labour turnover survey 2008)*, (based on a survey of 503 employers with over 1 million employees in total, equivalent to 3.6% of the UK workforce). These are calendar year figures for 2006 and 2007 respectively.

11 Comparison of the costs of absenteeism across relevant employment sectors

Reducing the Northern Ireland councils' absenteeism rate to that of other employment sectors would result in varying gains in productivity



Source: Chief Local Government Auditor

38. Currently only three Northern Ireland councils have average absenteeism rates below the latest available average for England and Wales local authorities. At paragraph 19, we recommend that councils with higher absenteeism rates benchmark their management practices against councils with lower absenteeism rates. Significant improvements by councils with high absenteeism rates would close the current absenteeism gap between the Northern Ireland council sector and the equivalent sector in the rest of the UK.

39. Absences were classified as short term or long term, with a long term absence defined as lasting 20 or more working days. Councils reported that 12 per cent of 2007-08 absences were long term (Figure 12), an increase from 11 per cent reported in 2006-07. Councils reported a total of 35 employees had been on long term sickness absence for more than 12 months.

12 Analysis of 2007-08 absences in Northern Ireland councils by duration

12 per cent of absences were long term

	Short Term	Long Term	All Absences
Days lost due to absence	44,738	86,112	130,849
Number of absences	11,998	1,588	13,586
Average length of an absence (days)	4	54	10
Days lost due to absence (per cent)	34	66	100
Absences (per cent)	88	12	100

Source: Northern Ireland councils



Case study

Limavady Borough Council

At Limavady Borough Council the average annual absenteeism rate improved by 1.73 days (12 per cent) from 14.35 days in the period 2002-05 to 12.62 days in the period 2005-08. This represents an average annual productivity gain of £28,000.

The Council offered a comprehensive health check to all employees during 2007-08. Around 70 per cent of employees took the opportunity to have their health assessed by nursing professionals. A Step Challenge was coordinated across all Council departments with employees using pedometers to measure their activity levels. The Council also received a visit from the Action Cancer Big Bus during the year when employees were able to receive advice and information from experts.

Limavady Borough Council's line managers attended workshops on managing absenteeism and the Council's Absenteeism Policy. They attended structured training on Managing and Recognising Stress within the Workplace. In addition all employees were able to take part in stress management workshops. The Council used the Annual Staff Development Day to focus on health and well-being issues and provide further support to employees. Training has been targeted to address specific causes of absence and manual handling training has been provided recently in an effort to reduce the number of absences caused as a result of back and neck problems.

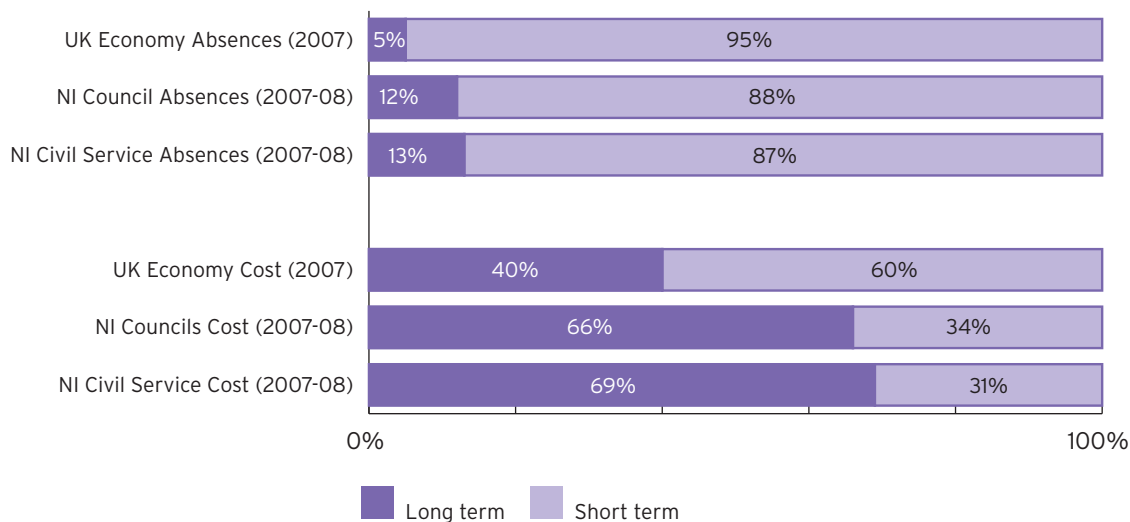
Absence management information has been reviewed. Managers in the Council now receive monthly reports detailing absences categorised by duration and cause. The Senior Management Team reviews absence levels against agreed targets. At each corporate briefing session the Chief Executive informs employees of recent absence levels and discusses progress concerning health and wellbeing initiatives.

Report

- 40. In the UK economy¹², five per cent of absences were classified as long term, which is just under half of the Northern Ireland council rate (Figure 13).
- 41. The larger proportion of long term absence in councils has a significant impact on the cost of absenteeism. In the UK economy, long term absence represent 40 per cent of the total time lost due to absence. In Northern Ireland councils, 66 per cent of the total time lost due to absence in 2007-08 was as a result of long term absence. The proportion of long term absence in the Northern Ireland Civil Service is similarly significantly higher than the UK economy. The issue of more frequent long term absences would appear to extend beyond councils into other parts of the Northern Ireland public sector.
- 42. In 2007-08, long term absences cost councils £10.8 million in lost productivity. If councils reduced the proportion of long term absence to the average five per cent rate found in the UK economy, the cost of long term absence could be reduced by £4.2 million.
- 43. At paragraph 19 we recommend that councils with higher absenteeism rates should benchmark their management practices against councils with lower absenteeism rates. Given the relatively high levels of long term absenteeism in councils, and the associated costs, this benchmarking should pay particular attention to the management of long term absence.

13 Proportion of absences and their associated cost by duration

The larger proportion of long term absences in Northern Ireland has a significant impact on absence costs



Source: Chief Local Government Auditor

12 Confederation of British Industry: At work and working well? (Absence and labour turnover survey 2008)



Causes of absence in councils

44. Councils were asked to categorise absences by cause, based on a classification developed by Local Government Employers¹³. In 2007-08, 25 councils reported summary information on the causes of absence. Derry City Council is the only council not included in this analysis. The Council had intended to provide this information for 2007-08, however, their return was incomplete and had to be excluded from this report.
45. The information on causes of absence provided by the 25 councils was used to project estimated costs for the causes of absence in respect of all 26 councils.
46. Some caution should be taken in interpreting the projected cost calculations as the actual cost for each cause of absence may have differed had complete information for Derry City Council been available. The projection (Figure 14) should, however, provide a reliable indication of the underlying position as it comprises 91 per cent of all 2007-08 days lost due to absenteeism and 92 per cent of all 2007-08 absences.
47. There would be no need to derive the projection included in Figure 14, for all Northern Ireland Councils, if Derry City Council provided complete information on causes of absence. We recommend the Council addresses this issue as a matter of urgency to facilitate its own monitoring of absenteeism.

14 Projected proportion of Northern Ireland council absences with a reported cause in 2007-08

	Days lost due to absenteeism	Absences
All Northern Ireland councils	130,849	13,586
Councils reporting information on causes	119,257	12,483
Projected proportion	91%	92%

Source: Northern Ireland councils

¹³ Local Government Employers was formerly known as the Employers' Organisation for Local Government. It is a support organisation to England and Wales local authorities. Their classification was based primarily on those generally used in England and Wales local authorities and supplemented by the views of medical experts.

Report

48. We found that *stress, depression, mental health and fatigue* remains the largest cause of absenteeism, responsible for almost a quarter of the days lost in 2007-08 (a 4 per cent increase from 20 per cent in 2006-07). This rise, when taken together with the increase in the total cost of absenteeism from £15.5 million to £16.4 million, has meant that lost productivity due to *stress, depression, mental health and fatigue* has increased from £3.1 million in 2006-07 to £3.9 million in 2007-08 (Figure 15).
49. The causes of absence in Northern Ireland councils have been listed in Figure 15 according to total days lost (commencing with the cause of absence leading

to the greatest time lost). A recent report¹⁴ by the Work Foundation highlighted that there has been a significant increase in the number of long term absences as a proportion of total absences. The report points to the fact that the majority of these longer term absences can be attributed to two conditions: stress and musculoskeletal problems, the latter of which includes back and neck problems classified separately in our report. This trend is reflected in the 25 reporting Northern Ireland councils, with 50 per cent of days lost due to these illnesses in 2007-08, a rise from 47 per cent reported in 2006-07.

15 Projected lost productivity in Northern Ireland councils by cause of absence (2007-08)

The cause of absence which results in the highest amount of lost productivity in councils is *stress, depression, mental health and fatigue*

	Projected days lost due to absenteeism	Days lost due to absenteeism (%)	Projected lost productivity (£m)
Stress, depression, mental health and fatigue	30,845	24	3.9
Musculoskeletal problems	21,786	17	2.8
Other	14,693	11	1.8
Infections	12,686	10	1.6
Back and neck problems	12,019	9	1.5
Stomach, liver, kidney and digestion	11,981	9	1.5
Heart, blood pressure and circulation	6,858	5	0.8
Chest and respiratory	5,693	4	0.7
Eye, ear, nose, mouth and dental	4,280	3	0.5
Neurological	3,794	3	0.5
Pregnancy-related	3,429	3	0.5
Genito-urinary and gynaecological	2,785	2	0.3
Total	130,849	100	16.4

Source: Northern Ireland councils

14 The Work Foundation: *Fit for Work? Musculoskeletal Disorders and Labour Market Participation*, 2007

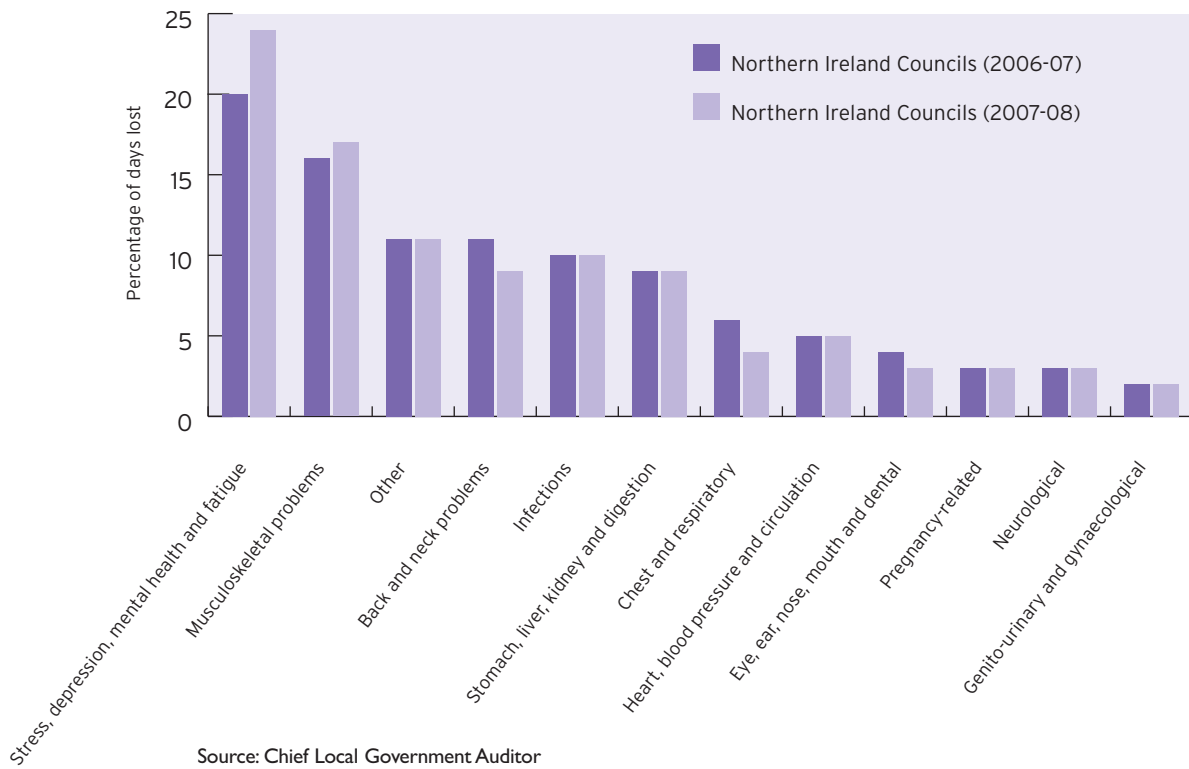


50. There was little variation in the causes of absence in Northern Ireland councils between 2006-07 and 2007-08 (Figure 16). The largest change was the four percent increase in the stress, depression, mental health

and fatigue category. Councils reported two per cent less days lost due to back and neck problems and a one percent increase in musculoskeletal problems.

16 Causes of absence in Northern Ireland councils for 2006-07 and 2007-08

There has been a 4 per cent increase in days lost due to stress, depression, mental health and fatigue between the two years



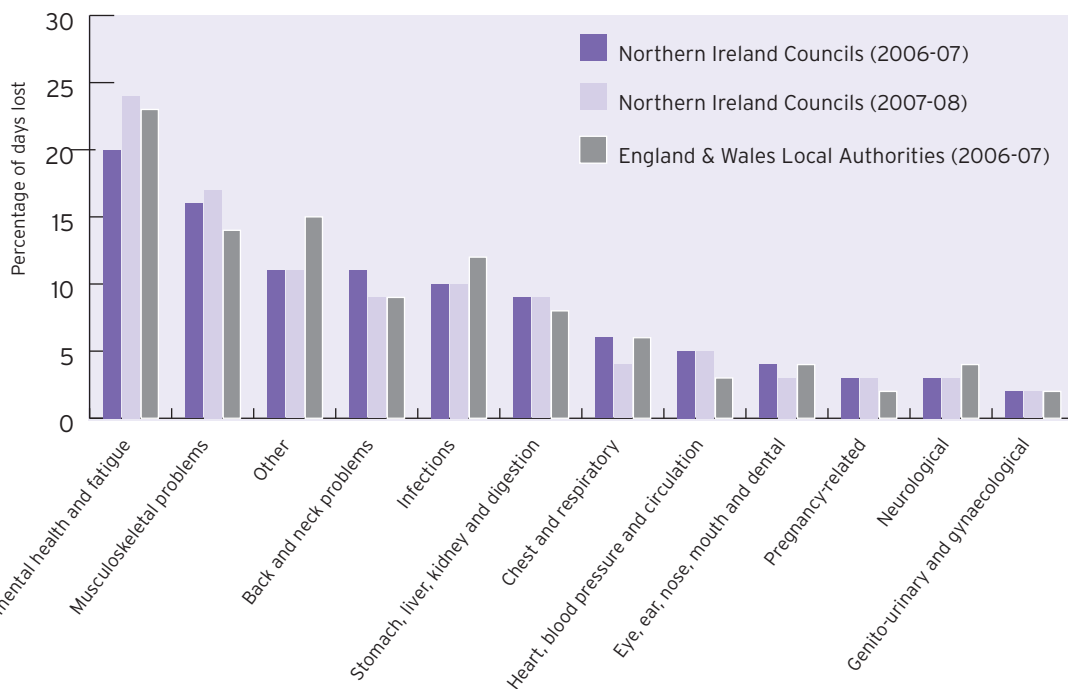
Report

51. In our 2006-07 report on *Absenteeism in Northern Ireland Councils* we noted that historically there was some similarity between Northern Ireland councils and England and Wales local authorities in the causes of absence, but the England and Wales information was dated. Since our last report information has been made available on the 2006-07 causes of absence in England and Wales local authorities¹⁵. This confirms the similarity in the causes of absence between Northern Ireland councils and England and Wales local authorities (Figure 17).

52. Different causes of absence would not appear to explain the additional £4.9 million absence costs incurred by Northern Ireland councils when compared to England and Wales local authorities (Figure 11 and paragraph 36). In general, staff appear to be absent for similar reasons. In Northern Ireland councils however, these same causes of absence lead to longer or more frequent periods of absence and consequently higher absence costs.

17 Causes of absence in Northern Ireland councils compared to England and Wales local authorities

There is some similarity between the causes of absence in Northern Ireland councils and local authorities in England and Wales



Source: Chief Local Government Auditor

15 Local Government Association and Local Government Employers: *Local Government Sickness Absence Levels and Causes Survey 2006 -2007*



Case study

Newry and Mourne District Council

At Newry and Mourne District Council the average annual absenteeism rate fell by 6.47 days (30 per cent) from 21.43 days in the period 2002-05 to 14.96 days in the period 2005-08. This represents an average annual productivity gain of £305,000.

Newry and Mourne District Council uses an occupational health provider to ensure that the Council is able to make informed decisions about staff who have been absent, or who may become absent due to ill health. The primary focus of all referrals is to find out what reasonable adjustments can be made to the work place to support the employee's return to work or to prevent their absence. Referrals are made immediately where stress is identified as the reason for an absence, and in the fourth week of absence for other potentially long term illnesses. Referrals are also made for those staff who have periodic absences to ascertain if there are any underlying reasons for the absence. In appropriate circumstances the occupational health provider can make recommendations on lifestyle changes which may lead to better health and fitness and, as a consequence, an improved attendance record.

Four sessions of physiotherapy, if recommended by the occupational health service, can usually prevent or remedy the impact of musculoskeletal injuries and wear and tear. If an employee is absent, then physiotherapy appointments can be built into their rehabilitation plan so that they are able to return to work in full health. Staff who experience musculoskeletal pain, but are not absent from work, may also request a referral to the occupational health service who may recommend physiotherapy for the individual. This proactive approach can help to prevent the occurrence of ill health issues and subsequent sickness absence. During 2007-08, around half of employees referred to physiotherapy were not absent from work. The Council states that the cost of providing four sessions of physiotherapy, whether forming part of a rehabilitation plan or seeking to prevent an ill health absence, represents good value for money.

The Council recognises that employees can have both physical and mental barriers to overcome in making a return to their work environment. Rehabilitation plans are developed and managed, in consultation with the occupational health provider, line management, Human Resources and the employee to suit individual circumstances. A typical rehabilitation plan for a person returning to work after a serious ill health issue would last a maximum of four weeks and could include, by agreement, a mix of reduced workload, or hours, or some working from home.

Report

53. Although the total number of days lost due to absenteeism has increased from 129,000 to 131,000 (Figure 6), the number of absences has fallen by almost 1,000 to 13,586 (Figure 18). Consequently the average duration of an absence has increased from 9 days in 2006-07 to 10 days in 2007-08.
54. For 2007-08, almost half of all absences in Northern Ireland councils were accounted for either by *infections* or by absences due to *stomach, liver, kidney and digestion illnesses*. The average duration of these absences, four days, is less than all other causes of absence (Figure 18).
55. Absences due to *stress, depression, mental health and fatigue* last the longest with an average duration of 31 working days, equivalent to more than six working weeks. This average has increased by four days from the average duration reported in 2006-07.
56. A large proportion of councils, 18 of the 26, told us that they seek to determine whether each incidence of stress is work-related or not. This recognises that action can be taken by a council to alleviate at least some of the stress considered to be related to the work environment. The Health and Safety Executive encourages organisations to tackle work-related stress in order to reduce sickness absence, to benefit the business and to comply with the law. It recommends that organisations assess the risk of stress-related ill health arising from work activities and take measures to control that risk. The Health and Safety Executive has produced management standards for tackling work-related stress and these have been adopted in 14 councils. More information on what councils are doing to tackle stress-related absenteeism can be found at paragraph 60.

18 Number of absences recorded by Northern Ireland councils for each cause (2007-08)

Infections and stomach, liver, kidney and digestion ailments cause almost half of all absences

	Projected days lost due to absenteeism	Projected Absences	Average Duration (Days)	Absence (%)
Infections	12,686	3,340	4	25
Stomach, liver, kidney and digestion	11,981	2,942	4	22
Other	14,693	1,489	10	11
Musculoskeletal problems	21,786	1,172	18	9
Stress, depression, mental health and fatigue	30,845	1,002	31	7
Back and neck problems	12,019	924	13	7
Eye, ear, nose, mouth and dental	4,280	827	5	6
Chest and respiratory	5,693	706	8	5
Neurological	3,794	549	7	4
Heart, blood pressure and circulation	6,858	236	29	2
Pregnancy-related	3,429	220	15	2
Genito-urinary and gynaecological	2,785	179	15	1
Totals (2007-08)	130,849	13,586	10	100
Totals (2006-07)	129,153	14,561	9	

Source: Northern Ireland councils



Absenteeism policies in councils

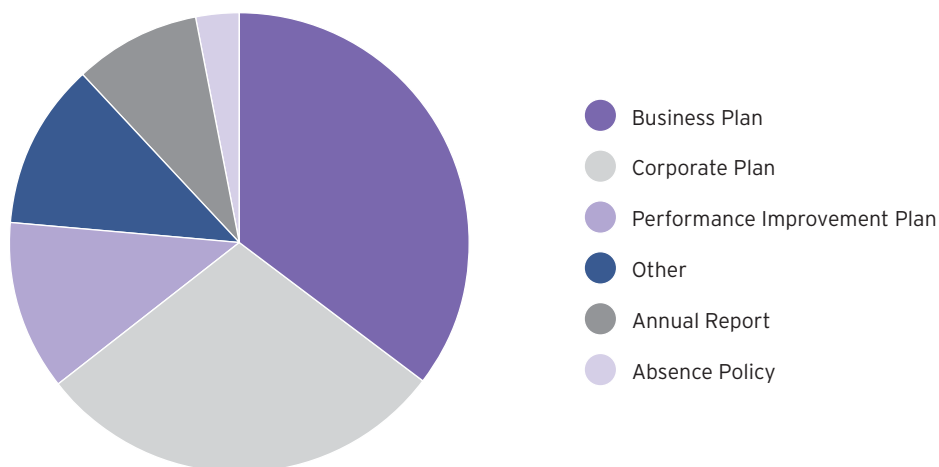
57. By 2006-07, all councils had implemented a written absenteeism policy, with the exception of Magherafelt District Council. This Council's record of low absenteeism may suggest that a written absenteeism policy is not a pre-requisite to managing absenteeism effectively. We recommend all councils including Magherafelt District Council should establish written absence policies which are subject to councillor approval and published for the benefit of ratepayers, electors and council staff. It is our view that the effective communication of absenteeism policies should include an indication of past performance and future targets (paragraphs 67 to 68).
58. All councils with written policies stated that staff were made aware of their absenteeism policy. Methods used to raise staff awareness of absence policies varied:
- providing new staff members with a copy of the policy on induction to the council;
 - holding awareness sessions for staff members; and
 - making electronic copies available on council intranets or shared network drives.
59. Carrickfergus Borough Council and Moyle District Council indicated that they do not perform any internal monitoring to ensure the policy is followed. To ensure that absenteeism policies have the maximum possible impact on the management of absenteeism, we recommend that policies are routinely monitored and adjusted as required.
60. The number of councils implementing a stress or mental health policy has risen from 8 to 19 since our last report. A typical policy for managing stress in the workplace identifies the responsibilities of directors, line managers, the Health and Safety Officer, and employees. The policy may also set out the roles of the Occupational Health Service and the Staff Care Service, and the procedure to be followed if a member of staff feels they are suffering from the negative effects of stress. This policy is also likely to indicate how it relates to the council's absenteeism management policy.
61. As stress-related absence is the single largest cause of absenteeism in Northern Ireland councils (paragraph 48), we particularly welcome the action being taken by some councils to address this. It is our view that all councils should be proactive in their management of stress-related absenteeism.
62. Absence information is not notified to staff in twelve councils. The communication of absence information helps ensure that staff are aware of the importance of absenteeism and the role each individual can play. At paragraph 57 we have recommended that councils should publish their absenteeism policies. It is our view they should pay particular attention to ensuring all staff are fully aware of the policy that applies to them.
63. Where councils notify staff of absence information, a variety of notification methods is used, for example where managers relay this information to staff at team briefing sessions.

Absenteeism targets in councils

- 64. There is currently no requirement for Northern Ireland councils to set long term targets for the reduction of absenteeism. Targets for absenteeism in 2010 have been set for the 11 Northern Ireland Civil Service departments¹⁶. This involves an overall reduction in sickness absence, from 15.5 days in 2003-04 to 9.5 days by 2009-10, which is approximately a seven per cent reduction target each year over the six year period.
- 65. In 2007-08, 20 of the 26 councils had established corporate or departmental level targets for managing absenteeism rates; an increase by one from 2006-07. The most common form of target to reduce absenteeism to a certain percentage of lost working time was used by 9 of the 20 councils. These targets ranged from 4 per cent to 6.69 per cent. Cookstown District Council was the only council having set this form of target (5 per cent) to achieve it.
- 66. Most councils with an absenteeism target include the target in at least one council document, as illustrated in Figure 19. The majority of these councils document their absence targets in business and corporate plans.
- 67. Of the 20 councils that had set targets, less than half indicated to us that they notified staff of the target. For the other councils the most common method of communication to inform staff was briefing sessions. As with past absenteeism performance we recommend future targets are communicated to staff.
- 68. At paragraph 19, we recommend that councils with higher absenteeism rates should benchmark their management practices against councils with lower absenteeism rates. This should include the establishment and monitoring of targets which, over an established timeframe, will assist councils to focus on their progress towards absenteeism levels which match, or improve upon, the lowest rates currently found in Northern Ireland councils.
- 69. Of the 20 councils with established absenteeism reduction targets, only 13 of these indicated their target had been approved by councillors. Given the importance of absenteeism management and the potential productivity gains arising from falling absenteeism rates, we recommend that absenteeism policies established by councils (paragraph 57) should include realistic targets.

19 Where the 20 councils with absenteeism targets record this

The majority of councils with absence targets document these targets in business and corporate plans



Source: Chief Local Government Auditor



Case study

Armagh City and District Council

At Armagh City and District Council the average annual absenteeism rate fell by 1.77 days (17 per cent) from 10.58 days in the period 2002-05 to 8.81 days in the period 2005-08. This represents an average annual productivity gain of £59,000.

Armagh City and District Council makes use of pre-employment health screening to test all new recruits for potential health issues. Screening tests are performed by the Occupational Health Nurse. Issues discovered during the screening process do not necessarily result in non-appointment of the prospective employee. In one case, for example, frequent long term back ache difficulties were identified, leading to the provision of a special chair and foot rest to meet the individual's needs. Health advice on healthy eating and exercising can be provided as part of the process. Existing employees can also nominate themselves to undertake a health screen by the Occupational Health Nurse. The Council considers the scheme to be beneficial in reducing absence rates as the provision of specific equipment, altered working patterns or other agreed arrangements can reduce the likelihood of an employee requiring time off work due to illness.

The Occupational Health Nurse is called upon to perform ergonomic tests at an employee's workstation if the employee complains of or is absent due to back ache, neck strain, or related conditions. This can identify a custom seating position for the individual to prevent further strain and reduce the likelihood of absence.

In 2007 the Council introduced a 'Free Flu Jab' scheme which entitled all Council staff to a free vaccination designed to prevent flu illnesses. The vaccination was administered by the Occupational Health Nurse to several employees, some of whom had suffered flu in the previous year and had taken sickness absence then. There was a subsequent reduction in absenteeism due to infections in 2007-08. The Council has rolled the scheme forward to 2008-09, making vaccinations available to all staff including those vaccinated in 2007.

Trigger Meetings, initiated when an employee has had a relatively long absence or a number of successive short absences due to illness, are held by senior officers of the Council. Discussions centre on the employee's pattern of illnesses and whether there is any underlying cause. If there is no explanation for the absences the employee will be informed that closer monitoring of their absenteeism will take place. The Council considers that these meetings have been particularly useful in dealing with employees who have had several short term absences over a period of time.

Absenteeism data in councils

70. Data collection questionnaires, seeking details of absenteeism during the financial year to 31 March 2008, were issued to all 26 councils on 2 June 2008. We asked for completed questionnaires to be returned by 30 June 2008. Fourteen councils submitted responses on or before this date. Returned data collection questionnaires were subjected to reasonableness tests to provide assurance on the integrity and consistency of the information presented.
71. Castlereagh Borough Council was the last council to submit a return, on 28 August 2008, more than eight weeks after the due date. We were unable to complete our analysis for several weeks after receipt of the Castlereagh Borough Council return due to the poor quality of some of the earlier returns.
72. Whilst a completed questionnaire was received from Craigavon Borough Council on 27 June 2008, subsequent reasonableness tests pointed to errors in the data. The Council reviewed its original findings and submitted revised data on 6 November 2008, 18 weeks after the due date. Consequently this report has been delayed until January 2009 by the late receipt of the Craigavon Borough Council response.
73. We commend those councils who provided us with good quality absenteeism information by 30 June 2008. The apparent inability of some other councils to produce accurate absenteeism statistics within a reasonable period of time is a matter of concern. This suggests that internally generated absenteeism information is often not available to councils on a timely basis and may not be reliable. Consequently, opportunities to monitor absenteeism and to react promptly may be lost. To assist internal management, and the preparation of our 2008-09 report, we recommend that all councils should ensure absenteeism data is compiled on a timely basis and the accuracy of it is tested.
74. For 2007-08, we visited ten councils and their returns were subjected to more detailed scrutiny. This included the examination of supporting documentation on a sample basis. This examination uncovered cases of missing documentation and inconsistencies in the majority of the ten councils, although in most cases these were of a minor nature. Key elements of supporting documentation requested at both Ballymoney Borough Council and Carrickfergus Borough Council were not provided for inspection, both during and after the audit visit.
75. The effective management of absenteeism in councils requires reliable absence data. Councils should ensure the integrity of the data used to calculate and monitor absenteeism rates, and to set absenteeism targets.
76. In nine of the ten councils visited, absence policies stated that a return to work interview should be completed each time an employee returns from any absence due to sickness. On review, it was apparent that a record of the return to work interview was not always completed, or the associated documentation was not readily available for inspection. As the return to work interview has been ranked as the most effective absence management tool both in our previous reports¹⁷ and in UK economy reports, councils should ensure that, where required, line managers carry out these interviews and formally document them.

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Conclusions



Conclusions

Conclusions

77. We have noted the variation in absenteeism rates within councils including that five councils have rates which are double the lowest rate recorded by a Northern Ireland council. We note the marginal fall in the overall Northern Ireland council absenteeism rate to 13.70 days. Whilst the rate is lower than that experienced between 2002-03 and 2004-05, it remains high when compared with England and Wales local authorities.
78. We projected the cost of absenteeism in Northern Ireland councils in 2007-08 to be £16.4 million in lost productivity. While the absenteeism rate has fallen marginally, the application of this rate to staff costs which have increased by £18 million has resulted in a £0.9 million increase in the cost of absenteeism between 2006-07 and 2007-08.
79. We have noted our concern at the timeliness of absenteeism information prepared by some councils and instances where accuracy could be improved. We have noted that such examples have been found in councils with some of the highest annual absenteeism rates.
80. To assist councils, absenteeism information is included in the annual audit letters issued to each council by the Local Government Auditor following his audit of the 2007-08 accounts. Consequently absenteeism matters will be raised directly with council audit committees. In addition, we are prepared to address this report specifically with council audit committees if requested to do so.
81. Given the substantial impact on increased productivity in Northern Ireland councils which would arise from reductions in absenteeism, it is our intention to review this matter again for the year ending 31 March 2009.

Appendices



Appendices

Appendix I: Potential gains in productivity for each Northern Ireland council (2005-08) if the lowest absenteeism rate was equalled (paragraph 8)

Annual gains of £6.2 million in productivity could be made if all councils matched the lowest absenteeism rate reported by Magherafelt District Council (2005-08)

	Average absenteeism rate for the 2005-08 period (days)	Average annual staff costs 2005-08 (£'000)	Average annual lost productivity 2005-08 (£'000)	Difference from absenteeism rate of 8.19 days	Average annual potential productivity gains based on an absenteeism rate of 8.19 days* (% of staff costs)	Average annual potential productivity gains based on an absenteeism rate of 8.19 days (£'000)
Magherafelt District Council	8.19	4,173	152	-	-	-
Armagh City and District Council	8.81	7,566	294	0.62	0.3	21
Lisburn City Council	9.46	12,091	513	1.27	0.6	69
Fermanagh District Council	9.82	6,685	292	1.63	0.7	48
Castlereagh Borough Council	10.26	8,856	406	2.07	0.9	82
Down District Council	10.73	7,692	377	2.54	1.2	89
Banbridge District Council	11.73	4,654	247	3.54	1.6	75
Newtownabbey Borough Council	12.54	9,863	579	4.35	2.0	201
Strabane District Council	12.60	4,572	257	4.41	2.0	90
Limavady Borough Council	12.62	3,688	207	4.43	2.0	73
Cookstown District Council	12.80	4,785	265	4.61	2.0	95
Ballymena Borough Council	12.87	7,473	428	4.68	2.1	156
Omagh District Council	12.98	7,277	419	4.79	2.1	155
Antrim Borough Council	13.06	6,663	373	4.87	2.1	139
Ards Borough Council	13.14	9,526	582	4.95	2.3	219
Dungannon and South Tyrone Borough Council	13.25	6,755	403	5.06	2.3	154
North Down Borough Council	13.27	9,123	538	5.08	2.3	206
Coleraine Borough Council	14.89	8,281	559	6.70	3.0	252
Belfast City Council	14.90	64,825	4,278	6.71	3.0	1,927
Newry and Mourne District Council	14.96	10,483	705	6.77	3.0	319
Ballymoney Borough Council	15.38	2,951	204	7.19	3.2	95
Craigavon Borough Council	16.71	12,532	955	8.52	3.9	487
Moyle District Council	16.85	3,175	238	8.66	3.8	122
Derry City Council	17.89	15,279	1,230	9.70	4.4	667
Carrickfergus Borough Council	18.99	4,872	419	10.80	4.9	238
Larne Borough Council	19.54	4,475	391	11.35	5.1	227
Total		248,315	15,311			6,206

* The potential productivity gain is derived from the difference in absenteeism rate when compared to a rate of 8.19 days (Figure 1), staff costs and the potential working days available to a full time equivalent employee over the period (222 days per year)

Source: Chief Local Government Auditor



Appendix 2: Changes in annual productivity for each Northern Ireland council resulting from a comparison of 2002-05 and 2005-08 absenteeism rates (paragraph 10)

Changes in annual productivity resulting from a comparison of 2002-05 and 2005-08 absenteeism rates range from a gain in Belfast City Council of £405,000 to a loss in Ballymena Borough Council of £145,000

	Average absenteeism rate for the 2005-08 period	Average annual staff costs 2005-08 (£'000)	Average annual lost productivity 2005-08 (£'000)	Average annual lost productivity 2005-08 using 2002-05 rate (£'000)	Movement in three-year rate from 2002-05 to 2005-08	Average annual increased productivity gain/loss based on 2005-08 using 2002-05 rate (£'000)
Magherafelt District Council	8.19	4,173	152	199	-2.51	47
Armagh City and District Council	8.81	7,566	294	353	-1.77	59
Lisburn City Council	9.46	12,091	513	607	-1.73	94
Fermanagh District Council	9.82	6,685	292	286	0.21	-6
Castlereagh Borough Council	10.26	8,856	406	457	-1.29	51
Down District Council	10.73	7,692	377	393	-0.46	19
Banbridge District Council	11.73	4,654	247	267	-0.95	20
Newtownabbey Borough Council	12.54	9,863	579	660	-1.76	81
Strabane District Council	12.60	4,572	257	203	2.65	-54
Limavady Borough Council	12.62	3,688	207	235	-1.73	28
Cookstown District Council	12.80	4,785	265	275	-0.49	10
Ballymena Borough Council	12.87	7,473	428	283	4.36	-145
Omagh District Council	12.98	7,277	419	485	-2.06	66
Antrim Borough Council	13.06	6,663	373	394	-0.72	21
Ards Borough Council	13.14	9,526	582	630	-1.08	48
Dungannon and South Tyrone Borough Council	13.25	6,755	403	405	-0.06	2
North Down Borough Council	13.27	9,123	538	557	-0.46	16
Coleraine Borough Council	14.89	8,281	559	466	2.48	-93
Belfast City Council	14.90	64,825	4,278	4,683	-1.41	405
Newry and Mourne District Council	14.96	10,483	705	1,010	-6.47	305
Ballymoney Borough Council	15.38	2,951	204	198	0.44	-6
Craigavon Borough Council	16.71	12,532	955	1,011	-1.03	56
Moyle District Council	16.85	3,175	238	201	2.62	-37
Derry City Council	17.89	15,279	1,230	1,174	0.81	-56
Carrickfergus Borough Council	18.99	4,872	419	422	-0.15	3
Larne Borough Council	19.54	4,475	391	399	-0.39	8

Source: Chief Local Government Auditor

Appendices

Appendix 3: Commentary on Northern Ireland councils' three-year average annual absenteeism rates (paragraph 15)

Antrim Borough Council

The 2005-08 three-year absenteeism rate of 13.06 days for Antrim Borough Council is below the Northern Ireland council average. The Council's absenteeism rate has improved in 2005-08 with a reduction of almost one day from 13.78 days in 2002-05.

Absenteeism cost the Council an average of £373,000 in lost productivity each year during the 2005-08 period. This cost could have been reduced by £139,000 each year if the Council had matched the lowest average annual absenteeism rate for the period (Appendix 1).

The fall in absenteeism rates, between the 2002-05 and 2005-08 periods, has meant an average annual productivity gain of £21,000 (Appendix 2).

18 per cent of absenteeism in the Council was the result of stress, depression, mental health and fatigue (Figure 4). The average for Northern Ireland councils was 24 per cent (paragraph 48).

Ards Borough Council

Ards Borough Council has experienced a decrease of one day in its absenteeism rate since 2002-05 when the rate was 14.22 days. The rate for 2005-08 of 13.14 remains below the Northern Ireland Council average.

Absenteeism cost the Council an average of £582,000 in lost productivity each year during the 2005-08 period. This cost could have been reduced by £219,000 each year if the Council had matched the lowest average annual absenteeism rate for the period (Appendix 1).

The fall in absenteeism rates, between the 2002-05 and 2005-08 periods, has meant an average annual productivity gain of £48,000 (Appendix 2).

20 per cent of absenteeism in the Council was the result of stress, depression, mental health and fatigue (Figure 4). The average for Northern Ireland councils was 24 per cent (paragraph 48).

Armagh City and District Council

Armagh City and District Council has experienced a decrease of just under two days in its absenteeism rate over the two periods from 10.58 days in 2002-05 to 8.81 days in 2005-08. The Council continues however to have absenteeism rates that are significantly below the Northern Ireland council average.

Absenteeism cost the Council an average of £294,000 in lost productivity each year during the 2005-08 period. This cost could have been reduced by £21,000 each year if the Council had matched the lowest average annual absenteeism rate for the period (Appendix 1).

The fall in absenteeism rates, between the 2002-05 and 2005-08 periods, has meant an average annual productivity gain of £59,000 (Appendix 2).

11 per cent of absenteeism in the Council was the result of stress, depression, mental health and fatigue (Figure 4). The average for Northern Ireland councils was 24 per cent (paragraph 48).

Ballymena Borough Council

Ballymena Borough Council had the lowest absenteeism rate of all Northern Ireland councils for the 2002-05 period. However an increase of more than four days has taken the Council's absenteeism rate from 8.51 days in 2002-05 to 12.87 days in 2005-08. The 2005-08 absenteeism rate has taken the Council from well below the Northern Ireland council average to just below the average.

Absenteeism cost the Council an average of £428,000 in lost productivity each year during the 2005-08 period. This cost could have been reduced by £156,000 each year if the Council had matched the lowest average annual absenteeism rate for the period (Appendix 1).

The rise in absenteeism rates, between the 2002-05 and 2005-08 periods, has meant an average annual productivity loss of £145,000 (Appendix 2).

19 per cent of absenteeism in the Council was the result of stress, depression, mental health and fatigue (Figure 4). The average for Northern Ireland councils was 24 per cent (paragraph 48).



Appendix 3: (continued)

Ballymoney Borough Council

Ballymoney Borough Council has experienced a slight increase of less than half a day in its absenteeism rate from 14.94 days in 2002-05 to 15.38 days in 2005-08. The 2005-08 rate places the Council above the Northern Ireland council average.

Absenteeism cost the Council an average of £204,000 in lost productivity each year during the 2005-08 period. This cost could have been reduced by £95,000 each year if the Council had matched the lowest average annual absenteeism rate for the period ([Appendix 1](#)).

The rise in absenteeism rates, between the 2002-05 and 2005-08 periods, has meant an average annual productivity loss of £6,000 ([Appendix 2](#)).

40 per cent of absenteeism in the Council was the result of stress, depression, mental health and fatigue ([Figure 4](#)). The average for Northern Ireland councils was 24 per cent (paragraph 48).

Banbridge District Council

Banbridge District Council experienced a reduction in its absenteeism rate of almost one day from 12.68 days in 2002-05 to 11.73 days in 2005-08. This Council has an absenteeism rate which is well below the Northern Ireland council average.

Absenteeism cost the Council an average of £247,000 in lost productivity each year during the 2005-08 period. This cost could have been reduced by £75,000 each year if the Council had matched the lowest average annual absenteeism rate for the period ([Appendix 1](#)).

The fall in absenteeism rates, between the 2002-05 and 2005-08 periods, has meant an average annual productivity gain of £20,000 ([Appendix 2](#)).

18 per cent of absenteeism in the Council was the result of stress, depression, mental health and fatigue ([Figure 4](#)). The average for Northern Ireland councils was 24 per cent (paragraph 48).

Belfast City Council

Belfast City Council experienced a reduction of just over a day in its absenteeism rate from 16.31 days in 2002-05 to 14.90 days in 2005-08. The 2005-08 rate continues to place the Council above the Northern Ireland council average.

Absenteeism cost the Council an average of £4.27 million in lost productivity each year during the 2005-08 period. This cost could have been reduced by £1.93 million each year if the Council had matched the lowest average annual absenteeism rate for the period ([Appendix 1](#)).

The fall in absenteeism rates, between the 2002-05 and 2005-08 periods, has meant an average annual productivity gain of £405,000 ([Appendix 2](#)).

22 per cent of absenteeism in the Council was the result of stress, depression, mental health and fatigue ([Figure 4](#)). The average for Northern Ireland councils was 24 per cent (paragraph 48).

Carrickfergus Borough Council

Carrickfergus Borough Council experienced a slight reduction in its absenteeism rate from 19.14 days in 2002-05 to 18.99 days in 2005-08. The Council's absenteeism rate remains significantly above the Northern Ireland council average and is more than double the lowest rate.

Absenteeism cost the Council an average of £419,000 in lost productivity each year during the 2005-08 period. This cost could have been reduced by £238,000 each year if the Council had matched the lowest average annual absenteeism rate for the period ([Appendix 1](#)).

The fall in absenteeism rates, between the 2002-05 and 2005-08 periods, has meant an average annual productivity gain of £3,000 ([Appendix 2](#)).

18 per cent of absenteeism in the Council was the result of stress, depression, mental health and fatigue ([Figure 4](#)). The average for Northern Ireland councils was 24 per cent (paragraph 48).

Appendices

Appendix 3: (continued)

Castlereagh Borough Council

Castlereagh Borough Council has reduced its absenteeism rate by just over one day from the 2002-05 rate of 11.55 days to 10.26 days in 2005-08. This reduction means that Castlereagh Borough Council has an absenteeism rate well below the average.

Absenteeism cost the Council an average of £406,000 in lost productivity each year during the 2005-08 period. This cost could have been reduced by £82,000 each year if the Council had matched the lowest average annual absenteeism rate for the period ([Appendix 1](#)).

The fall in absenteeism rates, between the 2002-05 and 2005-08 periods, has meant an average annual productivity gain of £51,000 ([Appendix 2](#)).

28 per cent of absenteeism in the Council was the result of stress, depression, mental health and fatigue ([Figure 4](#)). The average for Northern Ireland councils was 24 per cent (paragraph 48).

Coleraine Borough Council

Coleraine Borough Council experienced an increase in its absenteeism rate of two and a half days from 12.41 days in 2002-05 to 14.89 days in 2005-08. This has resulted in the Council moving from a rate which was below the Northern Ireland council average to one which is above the average.

Absenteeism cost the Council an average of £559,000 in lost productivity each year during the 2005-08 period. This cost could have been reduced by £252,000 each year if the Council had matched the lowest average annual absenteeism rate for the period ([Appendix 1](#)).

The rise in absenteeism rates, between the 2002-05 and 2005-08 periods, has meant an average annual productivity loss of £93,000 ([Appendix 2](#)).

20 per cent of absenteeism in the Council was the result of stress, depression, mental health and fatigue ([Figure 4](#)). The average for Northern Ireland councils was 24 per cent (paragraph 48).

Cookstown District Council

Cookstown District Council's absenteeism rate has decreased by half a day from 13.29 days in 2002-05 to 12.80 days in 2005-08. The Council's absenteeism rate continues to be below the Northern Ireland council average.

Absenteeism cost the Council an average of £265,000 in lost productivity each year during the 2005-08 period. This cost could have been reduced by £95,000 each year if the Council had matched the lowest average annual absenteeism rate for the period ([Appendix 1](#)).

The fall in absenteeism rates, between the 2002-05 and 2005-08 periods, has meant an average annual productivity gain of £10,000 ([Appendix 2](#)).

14 per cent of absenteeism in the Council was the result of stress, depression, mental health and fatigue ([Figure 4](#)). The average for Northern Ireland councils was 24 per cent (paragraph 48).

Craigavon Borough Council

Craigavon Borough Council experienced a decrease in its absenteeism rate of one day from 17.69 days in 2002-05 to 16.71 days in 2005-08. The Council's absenteeism rate remains well above the Northern Ireland council average and is more than double the lowest rate.

Absenteeism cost the Council an average of £955,000 in lost productivity each year during the 2005-08 period. This cost could have been reduced by £487,000 each year if the Council had matched the lowest average annual absenteeism rate for the period ([Appendix 1](#)).

The fall in absenteeism rates, between the 2002-05 and 2005-08 periods, has meant an average annual productivity gain of £56,000 ([Appendix 2](#)).

29 per cent of absenteeism in the Council was the result of stress, depression, mental health and fatigue ([Figure 4](#)). The average for Northern Ireland councils was 24 per cent (paragraph 48).



Appendix 3: (continued)

Derry City Council

Derry City Council experienced an increase in its absenteeism rate of almost a day from 17.08 days in 2002-05 to 17.89 days in 2005-08. The Council's absenteeism rate is significantly above the Northern Ireland council average and is more than double the lowest rate.

Absenteeism cost the Council an average of £1.23 million in lost productivity each year during the 2005-08 period. This cost could have been reduced by £667,000 each year if the Council had matched the lowest average annual absenteeism rate for the period (Appendix 1).

The rise in absenteeism rates, between the 2002-05 and 2005-08 periods, has meant an average annual productivity loss of £56,000 (Appendix 2).

The Council does not currently record the causes of absenteeism (paragraph 44). Consequently the proportion of absenteeism due to stress, depression, mental health and fatigue cannot be determined (Figure 4). The average for Northern Ireland councils was 24 per cent (paragraph 48).

Down District Council

Down District Council has experienced a decrease in its absenteeism rate of half a day, moving from 11.19 days in 2002-05 to 10.73 days in 2005-08. This is well below the Northern Ireland council average.

Absenteeism cost the Council an average of £377,000 in lost productivity each year during the 2005-08 period. This cost could have been reduced by £89,000 each year if the Council had matched the lowest average annual absenteeism rate for the period (Appendix 1).

The fall in absenteeism rates, between the 2002-05 and 2005-08 periods, has meant an average annual productivity gain of £19,000 (Appendix 2).

21 per cent of absenteeism in the Council was the result of stress, depression, mental health and fatigue (Figure 4). The average for Northern Ireland councils was 24 per cent (paragraph 48).

Dungannon and South Tyrone Borough Council

Dungannon and South Tyrone Borough Council experienced a marginal decrease in its absenteeism rate from 13.31 days in 2002-05 to 13.25 days in 2005-08. This Council remains below the Northern Ireland council average.

Absenteeism cost the Council an average of £403,000 in lost productivity each year during the 2005-08 period. This cost could have been reduced by £154,000 each year if the Council had matched the lowest average annual absenteeism rate for the period (Appendix 1).

The fall in absenteeism rates, between the 2002-05 and 2005-08 periods, has meant an average annual productivity gain of £2,000 (Appendix 2).

15 per cent of absenteeism in the Council was the result of stress, depression, mental health and fatigue (Figure 4). The average for Northern Ireland councils was 24 per cent (paragraph 48).

Fermanagh District Council

Fermanagh District Council has experienced a slight increase in its three-year absenteeism rate, from 9.61 days in 2002-05 to 9.82 in 2005-08. This rate remains well below the Northern Ireland council average.

Absenteeism cost the Council an average of £292,000 in lost productivity each year during the 2005-08 period. This cost could have been reduced by £48,000 each year if the Council had matched the lowest average annual absenteeism rate for the period (Appendix 1).

The rise in absenteeism rates, between the 2002-05 and 2005-08 periods, has meant an average annual productivity loss of £6,000 (Appendix 2).

14 per cent of absenteeism in the Council was the result of stress, depression, mental health and fatigue (Figure 4). The average for Northern Ireland councils was 24 per cent (paragraph 48).

Appendices

Appendix 3: (continued)

Larne Borough Council

Larne Borough Council's three-year average absenteeism rate of 19.54 days for 2005-08 is the highest of all 26 councils and is more than double the lowest rate. The 2005-08 rate is slightly lower than the 2002-05 rate of 19.93 days.

Absenteeism cost the Council an average of £391,000 in lost productivity each year during the 2005-08 period. This cost could have been reduced by £227,000 each year if the Council had matched the lowest average annual absenteeism rate for the period ([Appendix 1](#)).

The fall in absenteeism rates, between the 2002-05 and 2005-08 periods, has meant an average annual productivity gain of £8,000 ([Appendix 2](#)).

32 per cent of absenteeism in the Council was the result of stress, depression, mental health and fatigue ([Figure 4](#)). The average for Northern Ireland councils was 24 per cent ([paragraph 48](#)).

Limavady Borough Council

Limavady Borough Council experienced a decrease in its absenteeism rate of almost two days from 14.35 days in 2002-05 to 12.62 days in 2005-08. This change moves the Council to below the average for Northern Ireland councils.

Absenteeism cost the Council an average of £207,000 in lost productivity each year during the 2005-08 period. This cost could have been reduced by £73,000 each year if the Council had matched the lowest average annual absenteeism rate for the period ([Appendix 1](#)).

The fall in absenteeism rates, between the 2002-05 and 2005-08 periods, has meant an average annual productivity gain of £28,000 ([Appendix 2](#)).

23 per cent of absenteeism in the Council was the result of stress, depression, mental health and fatigue ([Figure 4](#)). The average for Northern Ireland councils was 24 per cent ([paragraph 48](#)).

Lisburn City Council

Lisburn City Council has experienced a reduction of almost two days from the 2002-05 average absenteeism rate of 11.19 days to 9.46 days in 2005-08. This rate is significantly below the average.

Absenteeism cost the Council an average of £513,000 in lost productivity each year during the 2005-08 period. This cost could have been reduced by £69,000 each year if the Council had matched the lowest average annual absenteeism rate for the period ([Appendix 1](#)).

The fall in absenteeism rates, between the 2002-05 and 2005-08 periods, has meant an average annual productivity gain of £94,000 ([Appendix 2](#)).

18 per cent of absenteeism in the Council was the result of stress, depression, mental health and fatigue ([Figure 4](#)). The average for Northern Ireland councils was 24 per cent ([paragraph 48](#)).

Magherafelt District Council

Magherafelt District Council has achieved the lowest absenteeism rate of all 26 Northern Ireland Councils for the 2005-08 period. The Council experienced a considerable reduction of two and a half days in its absenteeism rate from 10.70 days in 2002-05 to 8.19 days in 2005-08.

Absenteeism cost the Council an average of £152,000 in lost productivity each year during the 2005-08 period ([Appendix 1](#)).

The fall in absenteeism rates, between the 2002-05 and 2005-08 periods, has meant an average annual productivity gain of £47,000 ([Appendix 2](#)).

12 per cent of absenteeism in the Council was the result of stress, depression, mental health and fatigue ([Figure 4](#)). The average for Northern Ireland councils was 24 per cent ([paragraph 48](#)).



Appendix 3: (continued)

Moyle District Council

Moyle District Council's absenteeism rate has increased considerably by over two and a half days from 14.23 days in 2002-05 to 16.85 days in 2005-08. The Council's 2002-05 rate was above the Northern Ireland council average but the 2005-08 absenteeism rate is now well above average and is more than double the lowest rate.

Absenteeism cost the Council an average of £238,000 in lost productivity each year during the 2005-08 period. This cost could have been reduced by £122,000 each year if the Council had matched the lowest average annual absenteeism rate for the period ([Appendix 1](#)).

The rise in absenteeism rates, between the 2002-05 and 2005-08 periods, has meant an average annual productivity loss of £37,000 ([Appendix 2](#)).

20 per cent of absenteeism in the Council was the result of stress, depression, mental health and fatigue ([Figure 4](#)). The average for Northern Ireland councils was 24 per cent ([paragraph 48](#)).

Newry and Mourne District Council

Newry and Mourne District Council's absenteeism rate has improved by six and a half days from the 2002-05 rate of 21.43 days to the 2005-08 rate of 14.96 days. This is the largest improvement in all Northern Ireland councils. The 2005-08 absenteeism rate has moved from significantly above the Northern Ireland council average to a rate which is much closer to the average.

Absenteeism cost the Council an average of £705,000 in lost productivity each year during the 2005-08 period. This cost could have been reduced by £319,000 each year if the Council had matched the lowest average annual absenteeism rate for the period ([Appendix 1](#)).

The fall in absenteeism rates, between the 2002-05 and 2005-08 periods, has meant an average annual productivity gain of £305,000 ([Appendix 2](#)).

20 per cent of absenteeism in the Council was the result of stress, depression, mental health and fatigue ([Figure 4](#)). The average for Northern Ireland councils was 24 per cent ([paragraph 48](#)).

Newtownabbey Borough Council

Newtownabbey Borough Council experienced a reduction of almost two days in its absenteeism rate from 14.30 days in 2002-05 to 12.54 days in 2005-08, a rate which is below the Northern Ireland council average.

Absenteeism cost the Council an average of £579,000 in lost productivity each year during the 2005-08 period. This cost could have been reduced by £201,000 each year if the Council had matched the lowest average annual absenteeism rate for the period ([Appendix 1](#)).

The fall in absenteeism rates, between the 2002-05 and 2005-08 periods, has meant an average annual productivity gain of £81,000 ([Appendix 2](#)).

17 per cent of absenteeism in the Council was the result of stress, depression, mental health and fatigue ([Figure 4](#)). The average for Northern Ireland councils was 24 per cent ([paragraph 48](#)).

North Down Borough Council

North Down Borough Council has experienced a reduction of more than half a day from the 2002-05 average annual absenteeism rate of 13.73 days to 13.27 days in 2005-08. This rate is below the Northern Ireland council average.

Absenteeism cost the Council an average of £538,000 in lost productivity each year during the 2005-08 period. This cost could have been reduced by £206,000 each year if the Council had matched the lowest average annual absenteeism rate for the period ([Appendix 1](#)).

The fall in absenteeism rates, between the 2002-05 and 2005-08 periods, has meant an average annual productivity gain of £16,000 ([Appendix 2](#)).

11 per cent of absenteeism in the Council was the result of stress, depression, mental health and fatigue ([Figure 4](#)). The average for Northern Ireland councils was 24 per cent ([paragraph 48](#)).

Appendices

Appendix 3: (continued)

Omagh District Council

Omagh District Council has experienced a considerable reduction of two days in its absenteeism rate from 15.04 days in 2002-05 to 12.98 days in 2005-08. The reduction in the Council's absenteeism rate brings it from above the Northern Ireland council average to below the average.

Absenteeism cost the Council an average of £419,000 in lost productivity each year during the 2005-08 period. This cost could have been reduced by £155,000 each year if the Council had matched the lowest average annual absenteeism rate for the period (Appendix 1).

The fall in absenteeism rates, between the 2002-05 and 2005-08 periods, has meant an average annual productivity gain of £66,000 (Appendix 2).

27 per cent of absenteeism in the Council was the result of stress, depression, mental health and fatigue (Figure 4). The average for Northern Ireland councils was 24 per cent (paragraph 48).

Strabane District Council

Strabane District Council experienced a considerable increase in its absenteeism rate of over two and a half days from 9.95 days in 2002-05 to 12.60 days in 2005-08. This rate remains below the Northern Ireland council average.

Absenteeism cost the Council an average of £257,000 in lost productivity each year during the 2005-08 period. This cost could have been reduced by £90,000 each year if the Council had matched the lowest average annual absenteeism rate for the period (Appendix 1).

The rise in absenteeism rates, between the 2002-05 and 2005-08 periods, has meant an average annual productivity loss of £54,000 (Appendix 2).

20 per cent of absenteeism in the Council was the result of stress, depression, mental health and fatigue (Figure 4). The average for Northern Ireland councils was 24 per cent (paragraph 48).



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