



OFFICIAL REPORT
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Local Government and Communities Committee

Wednesday 20 February 2019

Session 5



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LOCAL GOVERNMENT AND COMMUNITIES COMMITTEE
6th Meeting 2019, Session 5

CONVENER

*James Dornan (Glasgow Cathcart) (SNP)

DEPUTY CONVENER

Alex Rowley (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Lab)

COMMITTEE MEMBERS

*Annabelle Ewing (Cowdenbeath) (SNP)

*Kenneth Gibson (Cunninghame North) (SNP)

*Graham Simpson (Central Scotland) (Con)

*Alexander Stewart (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con)

*Andy Wightman (Lothian) (Green)

*attended

THE FOLLOWING ALSO PARTICIPATED:

Johanna Baxter (Unison Scotland)

Nikki Bridle (Clackmannanshire Council)

Stuart Crickmar (Clackmannanshire Council)

Drew Duffy (GMB Scotland)

Paul McGowan (East Ayrshire Council)

Sharon McKenzie (Society of Personnel and Development Scotland)

CLERK TO THE COMMITTEE

Peter McGrath

LOCATION

The Mary Fairfax Somerville Room (CR2)

Scottish Parliament

Local Government and Communities Committee

Wednesday 20 February 2019

[The Convener opened the meeting at 09:45]

Decision on Taking Business in Private

The Convener (James Dornan): Good morning and welcome to the sixth meeting in 2019 of the Local Government and Communities Committee. I remind everyone to turn off their mobile phones. Alex Rowley sends his apologies—he is unwell and cannot make the meeting.

Agenda item 1 is a decision on whether to take business in private. Do we agree to take item 3 in private?

Members indicated agreement.

Local Authorities (Staff Absenteeism)

09:45

The Convener: Item 2 is a round-table evidence session on staff absenteeism in local authorities as part of the committee's 2020-21 pre-budget scrutiny. The committee took evidence on workforce planning in local authorities last year and today's session will build on some of the themes that were explored in that session. I welcome you all here today. I will start by introducing myself and then we will go round the table, starting on my right.

I am the convener of the Local Government and Communities Committee.

Nikki Bridle (Clackmannanshire Council): Good morning. I am the chief executive of Clackmannanshire Council.

Stuart Crickmar (Clackmannanshire Council): I am strategic director at Clackmannanshire Council.

Andy Wightman (Lothian) (Green): I am an MSP for Lothian.

Johanna Baxter (Unison Scotland): I am Unison's head of local government bargaining.

Alexander Stewart (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con): I am an MSP for Mid Scotland and Fife.

Drew Duffy (GMB Scotland): I am senior organiser for public services at GMB Scotland.

Graham Simpson (Central Scotland) (Con): I am an MSP for Central Scotland.

Sharon McKenzie (Society of Personnel and Development Scotland): I am here on behalf of the Society of Personnel and Development Scotland. I am currently its president.

Kenneth Gibson (Cunninghame North) (SNP): I am the MSP for Cunninghame North.

Paul McGowan (East Ayrshire Council): I am head of human resources at East Ayrshire Council.

Annabelle Ewing (Cowdenbeath) (SNP): I am the MSP for Cowdenbeath.

The Convener: To my left, we have the official reporters, researchers and clerks who provide the committee with background support. This is a round-table evidence session, which means that I very much welcome a flow of discussion and exchanges of views. You should feel free to engage directly with one another. However, it would be helpful if you could direct your comments through me in the chair. If you wish to say

anything, just try to catch my eye or the eye of the clerks. I remind people that they do not need to press the button to speak—the microphone will come on automatically.

I will start with a fairly simple question, which is really the reason why we are here today. Does anybody have any ideas about the reasons for the wide variations in absence rates between local authorities, which can be quite stark?

Johanna Baxter: It might be useful, as we have not submitted a paper, to take you through some of Unison's experiences with regard to sickness absence management across the 32 local authorities in Scotland.

The Convener: As long as it does not take too long.

Johanna Baxter: I will try to keep it brief.

First, all the available data out there on the number of days lost through sickness absence does not reflect the full picture of what we see on the ground. That is because there are significant differences between local authorities in terms of what data is collected, what is recorded as sickness absence, the make-up of the workforce, the level of HR support that is available to support people returning to work and the different policies and procedures that apply.

In Unison's experience, sickness absence management should be used as a supportive mechanism to help individuals to return to work. Where that is the case, there are lower levels of sickness absence, fewer days lost to sickness absence and fewer disciplinary proceedings taken as a result of sickness absence. Where that is not the case and procedures are used in a punitive manner, we see higher levels of sickness absence, more sickness absence review meetings and more disciplinary proceedings taking place as a result of sickness absence. We believe that that is time consuming both for management and the trade unions and has a negative effect on employees.

Glasgow City Council had a quite punitive system prior to the most recent administration; when the new administration took over, the procedure did not differ considerably, but the approach to staff absence was much more supportive than in the past.

We have seen recently that triggers for review are getting shorter, as are the review periods for absence. We found that, in every case in the past three years in which an employer had altered its sickness absence procedures, it triggered intervention at an earlier stage of the process. Some local authorities have moved to an entirely metric-based system, such as the Bradford factor. We say that that is entirely the opposite of a

people-centred management programme; it is management by algorithm. East Renfrewshire Culture and Leisure is an example.

Freedom of information request data for the past three years indicates that the most common reason across local authorities for sickness absence that triggers a review process is mental health absence. In our experience, managers often feel more confident and capable about putting in place procedures to support individuals who have a physical disability and find it more difficult to put in place supportive mechanisms for individuals who suffer from mental health issues. The degree of organisational change that is taking place across local authorities has not helped with that. When we made FOI requests to councils about how many staff have been taken through absence management procedures, a significant number of them said that they do not hold that data centrally—that applies in Midlothian, Aberdeenshire, Argyll and Bute, and West Dunbartonshire.

Additionally, we believe that there is a significant problem with presenteeism—individuals attending work when they should be on sick leave. That is driven by the lowering of triggers, so that individuals feel that a review period would be put in place if they took the time off that they need, and it leads to longer absences in the long term, because individuals attend when they should be off sick. The pressure on staff to deliver and concerns about job stability—

The Convener: I will bring you to a close, as a lot of people want to come in.

Johanna Baxter: Okay—thank you very much.

The Convener: Could Unison not have a role in trying to persuade councils to use best practice, with some sort of uniform way of reporting absences, as this does not seem to be working?

Johanna Baxter: Absolutely. We use best practice from across the country in all our negotiations with all 32 local authorities. Our difficulty in those negotiations is the level of HR support that is available in councils and the funding for it. Funding has an impact on the issue, not just in terms of HR support but because of the level of change that is being experienced in councils and the loss of jobs that there has been—15,000 over the past five years. The existing cohort of staff is being expected to do more with less, almost consistently, while councils are ever more restricted in the funding that is available and how they can choose to spend it.

Kenneth Gibson: With regard to the variations in data, what Ms Baxter has said is very significant. In the Scottish Parliament information centre data on all local authorities over the past eight years, I was struck that in the most recent

year, 2017-18, Clackmannanshire has the highest figure for absences for non-teaching staff and East Ayrshire has the lowest. In 2012-13, Clackmannanshire's figure was the highest, at 21.06 sickness absence days, but the following year it became the lowest in Scotland, having gone down to 7.92 days. It has now become the highest in Scotland again. Has there been a change in how the figures are recorded or what they represent? We want to make sure that we are comparing apples with apples, not apples with oranges.

Nikki Bridle: Thank you for the question. It is something that has stretched us a bit in the council. Until about four years ago, we had what was basically a manual recording system and then we implemented a full HR system, which has refined the recording of our absence data. What you have probably seen is that, historically, there was an element of underrecording of sickness absence in the council, but now we are super squeaky clean in terms of recording every single absence.

On the point about the comparability of approaches across councils, there is still considerable variability in how things are recorded, even with the benchmarking framework. We would still want to deal with the substantive issue, but the fact that we are comparing apples and pears is also a consideration.

Kenneth Gibson: Has any work been done—through the Convention of Scottish Local Authorities, for example—to ensure that there are standardised measurements?

Nikki Bridle: Definitions come out through the local government benchmarking framework, but even within those parameters there are different applications of the definitions. You will appreciate that I am not an HR specialist; other colleagues may wish to comment. We have just been having a conversation about it. Clackmannanshire includes everything, such as leavers data and maternity absences, but we are aware that that is not necessarily the case in all councils.

Sharon McKenzie: Following on from Nikki Bridle's comments about how absence is captured and recorded, I think that it is fair to say that the local government benchmarking framework guidance is clear about what should and should not be included in the calculations. We have a sense that the guidance is not being applied comprehensively and diligently across all councils, but it may come down to local interpretation of what is said in the guidance as opposed to councils not trying to capture all the absence data.

We were speaking about that prior to the meeting today and it is something that, acting on behalf of the SPDS, I can pick up with the

Improvement Service. We intend to do that, because it is important that, if we have a set of benchmarking information, we are comparing like with like; otherwise, it becomes difficult to interpret what is happening across the 32 councils.

Paul McGowan: To expand on that, one issue is that, although we have national guidance to follow, we are all using different systems. Most councils are probably recording sickness absence through the payroll and management information systems, and we do not have a pan-Scotland system that everyone is using. That is not an excuse for data being different, but it adds to the complexity of the situation.

Within those systems—certainly in my council—we record lots of information and break down absence in different ways relating to reasons. It is for each authority to record the complexity of absence as it sees fit. We have areas such as mental health and personal stress in which we are all pulling together, but I do not think that any of the 32 councils has 14 or 20 definitions of absence that are used consistently. It is a complex area and the complexity of the methods that we use to record absence adds to that.

Alexander Stewart: You have all identified how complex the area is, and we heard evidence in other sessions from local government and individuals in authorities about the ageing workforce and its reduction over the past few years in the majority of councils. Also, a number of you may have long-term sickness to contend with, when one or two individuals may skew the whole process depending on how that is recorded. How are you managing that, with the knowledge that you have an ageing population, a reducing workforce and, potentially, a number of individuals on long-term absence who may give you more information on a level that makes it a priority? Is that being managed in a similar way across the local authorities?

10:00

Nikki Bridle: We made a conscious decision not to include in our submission the issue of comparability, because we are aware that it is an on-going issue. I agree with Sharon McKenzie that it is something that we need to work on. For us, the more important thing is that we are focused on the substantive issue of effectively managing absence and supporting our employee cohorts. I just wanted to make that point because I think that it is quite important. I appreciate that comparability is very important for the committee's purposes, but we still need to deal with the substantive issue, because we are seeing an increase in absence levels.

The Convener: Surely, though, there has to be some sort of way of you dealing with your issues that is the same across the country and can be reported on across the country. I am not saying that everybody does exactly the same thing, but there must be a reporting mechanism that could be used to ensure that the committee and therefore the Parliament get the information that we need to ensure that things go right.

Graham Simpson: I appreciate that councils are using different methods, but perhaps they should not be and should be more uniform. Nevertheless, some councils have done better than others. Your own council, Nikki—I am not picking on you, because I know that you are quite new to the job—has really not done very well, as the absence levels have rocketed since 2010. However, that has not been the case in other councils; for example, the levels have gone down in East Ayrshire Council.

The reason for this evidence session is that we looked at those figures—I accept that they are raw figures—and wondered what was going on in East Ayrshire Council, for example, and what it was doing that Clackmannanshire Council and other councils are not doing. We wondered whether we could roll out what is going on in East Ayrshire Council and other councils that have seen a reduction. The question is whether those practices can be rolled out across the country.

Nikki Bridle: I will make a brief response. That is a perfectly valid question and I can understand it, having reviewed the data. The issue for Clackmannanshire Council is that, as I said, we introduced the new system four years ago and we probably now have much fuller and more accurate reporting of our absences, for all different reasons. That is allowing us to understand the nature of the absences far better. Our policy framework and the level of support that is afforded to staff compares very favourably with the arrangements that are in place in other councils.

One of the things that we are doing with health colleagues is looking at our local health demographic data, because a significant proportion of the council's staff is from the local area. We are aware anecdotally that there has been an increase in general practitioner referrals and that there have been increases in chronic conditions for a number of people in our area. We are therefore looking beyond the traditional bounds of the policy framework and the support mechanisms in order to get a better understanding and to think about whether there are other interventions and supports that we could put in place beyond the traditional approaches.

Drew Duffy: I will not repeat what Johanna Baxter said earlier, but she is spot on. However, I guess that the reason why we are here is to give

some of the real-life stories behind the figures. There is a big problem around how local government workers feel valued, and that varies across local authorities. A lot of GMB members are in the low-paid, bottom 4 or 5 grades in local government and those are the workers who are doing two or three jobs just to make ends meet. They do not have the same rest time, because they do not work Monday to Friday from 8 to 5; they work six or seven days a week on split shifts. They are therefore tired and exhausted. Even in the jobs that they have, they are doing the work of two or three people, because they have lost colleagues who have not been replaced.

In some councils we might have a worker who works in the kitchen in the afternoon for the local government and gets paid the living wage—or the Scottish local government living wage. When she finishes her shift, she walks down the corridor and works for a private company, and is losing over £1 an hour. Within the same building, therefore, she is going back 10 years in pay. She is working in the same place, but her employer changes and she just changes her pinny. How does that worker feel valued at the end of that working week? She is doing that not by choice but by necessity.

We ran a recent survey across pupil support assistance in Aberdeen City Council and Aberdeenshire Council; 90 per cent of the people who responded say that they have suffered violent physical or verbal attacks in work. In Aberdeenshire recently, there was no feedback on 75 per cent of the attacks that were reported. Those workers are being bit, chewed, spat at and verbally abused. One worker had a scarf put around her neck and was choked; she had to fight to get the scarf off. That was reported, but there was no feedback on it. How does that worker feel valued? Such things affect workers' mental and physical health.

Those are just some examples. I could give the committee many examples, but that gives it an idea of some of the real-life stories.

The Convener: Does that take us to how different councils deal with HR issues? We would expect some councils to deal with such situations better than the councils that you are talking about deal with them.

Drew Duffy: To be fair to Aberdeen City Council and Aberdeenshire Council, the three trade unions involved have sat with us, and I think that those councils have accepted that what has happened is not on and that those figures and real-life stories are not acceptable. We were looking to reform the whole reporting process and the training but, fundamentally, it comes down to PSAs—I am sorry for using jargon; I mean pupil support assistants. The demand for help from children is on the increase while the funding for support for

children is on the decrease. That is the result of the direct attack on education funding.

The Convener: That is something for the councils to deal with when they are talking about their HR issues.

In what areas in council services are absence rates higher? Can you think of any particular reason for that? What about care services, for example?

Sharon McKenzie: The situation is probably different in different councils. There are probably pockets of our workforce in which there are commonalities. In education, teachers' absence levels are generally reported as being better than non-local government employees' absence levels over the piece, as members can see from the statistics that are before them, but there is a creeping trend towards increasing absence levels in the teaching workforce in different organisations and councils. That has been reported quite widely and extensively in the press in relation to increased workloads, the pressures of the job and issues that Drew Duffy mentioned, such as violence and aggression in schools, which affect not just the teacher workforce but non-teaching workforces.

If we take teachers out of the mix, across the local government workforce in general we might find pockets of absence occurring in parts of organisations that are at the front line and perhaps where front-line services are delivered in manual and traditional areas of work. My colleague Drew Duffy referred to that. Our refuse collectors, street sweepers and others who work in all sorts of weather often experience high levels of sickness absence. In general, shorter-term absences are caused by colds, the flu and musculoskeletal-type issues.

However, I am not sure that we can say absolutely that, across every council, there are the same peaks in types of absence in particular parts of the organisation. There is no doubt that that data would be available. We could each speak on behalf of our own councils about where the different pressure points are.

Kenneth Gibson: I am surprised by what Ms McKenzie has said. According to the figures that we got from SPICe, teacher absenteeism is the lowest it has been in eight years. That contradicts what Ms McKenzie said about absences increasing.

We have heard about different measurements, but in "Local government in Scotland: Challenges and performance 2018", the Accounts Commission said starkly:

"If councils with high absence levels could reduce these to be in line with the top eight performing councils, they

would gain the equivalent staff time of about 730 full-time employees"

and

"the equivalent of about 260 full-time teachers in Scotland."

There has been a discussion about different forms of measurement, but it appears that the matter is addressed differently across councils. Surely there is much to be gained from the sharing of best practice. What is being done to ensure that best practice is shared to minimise absence levels and ensure that there are more staff to deliver the services that we all want and need?

Stuart Crickmar: One thing that we have recognised about variability is that there are areas in the council in which absence is managed favourably and areas in which it is perhaps managed unfavourably.

A key issue that has come through from our analysis is the turnover in managers and the gaps in managerial staff. To reflect on the comments that trade union colleagues have made, employee engagement is absolutely crucial. When there is a lot of churn of managers, employee engagement sometimes drifts a bit and there are gaps.

In Clackmannanshire, we are clear about the need to make sure that we have the right managers with the right skills in the right places. We have a leadership development programme that helps us to make sure that we have the necessary levels of employee engagement. In the past six months, we have done quite a lot of work at senior level to make sure that we get out there and speak to employees. We recognise that that is already starting to make a difference.

As far as other areas of practice in which we feel we could learn from others are concerned, we know that the highest levels of absence in our organisation, by some margin, are among the 45 to 59-year-olds. Those staff are predominantly female, because our workforce is predominantly female. That cohort of staff are likely to have care responsibilities and other pressures, and we think that we need to do more research and look at what other councils are doing in that regard. In past few years, stress-related absence has increased, but it tends to be non-work-related stress. There are other pressures in people's lives. Therefore, we think that we need to look at best practice elsewhere in Scotland when it comes to carer and special leave policies. That is a field in which we believe that we could learn from others.

Paul McGowan: It was mentioned that East Ayrshire Council is at the top of the league. I have to be honest and say that I have no magic bullet to offer as regards what we can do across Scotland. There is merit in making sure that we have robust procedures that are applied consistently in

councils. I do not think that anyone would disagree that that is important.

We are very much looking at prevention. We recognise that people will be ill—that is a fact of life. In our council, 75 per cent of employees live and work in the council area so, in a sense, the council is the community. In our councils, we are seeing what is happening in our communities.

On prevention, there is no single answer. We try as best we can to anticipate hot spots. We look at our profile and—to answer an earlier question—we are not seeing a peak in any particular area. Prior to Christmas, which can be a difficult time from the point of view of personal stress, we ramped up our employee counselling service. We put in place measures to provide that offering for staff to use, and we will get evidence on how that worked.

We are working with trade union colleagues on interventions. We recently rolled out a suicide prevention scheme, because we have an increased rate of suicide and mental health issues in our communities. That suicide prevention work involves having mental health first aiders in the workplace. That has gone down very well with our workforce and our trade union colleagues, who see it as a valuable support.

We need to look forward and anticipate what is on the horizon, but we must not be complacent about our policies and procedures. We must record things consistently and apply what we say we will do.

Johanna Baxter: I agree with Drew Duffy on the difficult issues that members are facing in the workplace, particularly with regard to violence in schools, which is an issue that Unison members on the front line have faced. That has an impact on the number of days of recorded sickness absence and on how individuals feel at work.

There are differences across councils not simply when it comes to recording such information, but in how policies are applied with respect to intervention and at what stage intervention takes place. I am talking about the trigger points. The issue is what happens when somebody has been off for X days and is called to have a conversation with their manager. What form does that conversation take and is it supportive or punitive? We have found that there is often no discretion in the policies with regard to the application of triggers and what those triggers lead to. There needs to be management discretion on individual issues.

10:15

A number of councils are doing things that help to prevent sickness absence. For example, South

Lanarkshire Council has recently introduced, in dialogue and discussion with the trade unions, a menopause policy to support individuals who are going through the menopause. We believe that that will lead to a reduction in the amount of time off through sickness absence.

Some councils have introduced measures to support individuals at work when they are experiencing domestic abuse. There is certainly an issue with compassionate leave for individuals who have caring responsibilities. The workforce is ageing and people have more and more caring responsibilities placed on them—predominantly, those fall on the female workforce. There are also discussions on phased retirement and supporting individuals who want to stay at work but who perhaps need to phase into retirement.

There are good examples, but I am not sure that there are sufficient forums or that sufficient dialogue is taking place to share those instances of best practice. Another issue on which good practice needs to be shared among councils relates to occupational health service referrals, where councils get their occupational health service support from and who provides their employee counselling. There are massive differences across the country in the provision of those services and how robust and supportive they are for employees.

Graham Simpson: I used to be a councillor in South Lanarkshire Council. I was the vice-convenor of a committee that regularly had discussions about absence rates. The convenor of that committee and I constantly asked, “When are you going to review your policies, because the figures are far too high?” Actually, the figures are still too high. Johanna Baxter mentioned the menopause policy in South Lanarkshire, which is to be welcomed, but the figures are still way too high. We encouraged council officials to think about using outside organisations in relation to, for example, occupational health, which Ms Baxter mentioned. We suggested setting up helplines that were not provided by the council but that council employees could use.

From listening to the witnesses today, it strikes me that there does not appear to be a forum in Scotland for sharing best practice, and it would be a good idea if there was one. If anything comes out of today's discussion, it might be that something like that is set up so that councils can discuss things in far more detail and so that Mr McGowan can blow his trumpet a bit more loudly than he has done today.

Sharon McKenzie: On that point about a forum for sharing best practice, intrinsic to the operation of the Society of Personnel and Development Scotland is that we offer support and networking across local councils. We have membership drawn

from 30 of the 32 councils in Scotland and we have a range of portfolio groups that are themed around particular topics that are relevant to the work of councils and the challenges that they face.

One of those groups is the wellbeing portfolio group, which looks holistically at a range of issues that relate to health and wellbeing. It looks at not just the punitive side of managing absence but all the supportive and softer measures that could be applied in councils across Scotland. The group is used to enable councils to share best practice and learn from one another. It is a strong networking group, and membership is open to all the councils that are members of the SPDS. The group concentrates on sharing good practice and providing support and networking across councils in relation to this subject matter.

The Convener: I was going to come in on that, but I will let Graham Simpson back in, as he is probably going to make the same point.

Graham Simpson: What Sharon McKenzie says is all very well, but that sharing of best practice is clearly not happening. We have heard today from representatives of Clackmannanshire Council. That council might be aware of the group, but it appears not to be feeding into it.

Sharon McKenzie: It is a member of the group.

Graham Simpson: It might well be, but there should be something more formal than whatever you have, because it is clearly not working. We have a wide disparity in the figures. Best practice is not being shared, but it should be shared, because we need to get the figures down.

Sharon McKenzie: I would probably disagree with you that we are not sharing best practice—in fact, that is very much a feature of the group. What we have tried to express in our submission to the committee is that there is a common approach across councils. We are all broadly doing very much the same thing; we are looking at our policy interventions and tweaking them where they need to be tweaked, but we recognise and realise that those interventions alone will not solve the problem. It is very much to do with application and practice in councils, and that is where we can truly learn from one another in the wellbeing group.

The Convener: Thank you for that.

Kenneth Gibson: We have talked a lot about how to deal with absenteeism, but I noted the interesting point in the Society of Personnel and Development Scotland's submission that, second to stress, management style is the biggest cause of long-term absence in the public sector. Our union colleagues might have a view on this, too. How can that be improved to ensure that, instead of our having to deal with people once they become ill, people do not get ill in the first place?

The Convener: Would you like to come in here, Drew?

Drew Duffy: Yes. Perhaps I can make two points. First, the trade unions have tried to have some dialogue with COSLA about having more national agreements for terms and conditions. We do not have many such agreements—most of the 32 councils have separate ones. However, although we have been having those conversations, the problem is that Derek Mackay controls 58 per cent of the local government budget, and the councils are using those conversations to discuss what can be cut in order to do that. However, that was never our intention. It is a fact that there is good practice out there, and there are a lot of things that we can do to have the same sort of national agreements that teachers and the national health service have.

As far as local government is concerned, there are not many issues—sick pay is one—that are discussed on the basis of national agreements. There is more that we can do collectively to have more such agreements, but the problem has always been that the local government budget has been hammered so much that councils have to look at such matters on a give-and-take basis. It was never the position of the trade union side that we would give something away to get something back and, as a result, our conversations with COSLA died a death.

With regard to Mr Gibson's question, the word "stress" covers a huge variety of things, such as mental health issues, work-related stress, and issues with personal finances, relationships and addiction. If someone is off with any of those things, it is just called "stress". The issue is massive, but it has been dealt with inconsistently. Some councils do quite well; they use occupational health well and have private counsellors who can be contacted.

Kenneth Gibson: My question was about absenteeism due to management style, not to stress.

The Convener: That goes back to the point that Johanna Baxter made earlier, but I want to bring Annabelle Ewing in first.

Annabelle Ewing: I was wondering the same thing, because I have spoken to people who work on the front line in my part of the country and have heard some of their stories about what they experience and how, when they go back to their manager in their local authority, they get no support at all. That brings us back to the point that Drew Duffy made: all they do is fill in a form, and it gets put in a drawer. Serious attention needs to be given to how front-line workers are supported.

All employers face issues that arise with people with caring responsibilities and so on, but to what

extent is there a pattern of flexible working in local authorities? Many other public and private organisations make a very serious attempt at putting in place a meaningful flexible working policy that can make the difference between people being able to go to work or not, but I have heard no mention of that this morning with regard to local authorities.

What is the Society of Local Authority Chief Executives and Senior Managers doing about all this? I take the point about national collective bargaining, but it is a fact that not all the issues that we are talking about necessarily fall into that framework. There are many other issues to take into account. If the local authority chief executives in SOLACE are getting together, what are they doing? I do not know—perhaps the witnesses can enlighten us. *[Laughter.]* The questions just occurred to me while we were chatting.

The Convener: In the interests of fairness, I will let Nikki Bridle come in at this point.

Nikki Bridle: First, I want to pick up the point about management style and culture, because that is a critical part of the issue; it is also where we see a potential solution.

As has been mentioned, I have been in post only since last summer. However, one thing that I am prioritising is investment to improve the visibility of management at all levels and to equip management with the right skills to have the confidence to properly support staff in different circumstances. A range of circumstances have been described this morning.

A lot of managers are not confident in dealing with some situations. Some things can be very difficult to manage, and managers need support and training to develop the skills to manage those situations effectively. As Stuart Crickmar mentioned, we are investing in leadership development in Clackmannanshire Council, with a focus on maximising attendance and managing change, for example.

Local government is in a constant cycle of change, which we do not see going away. That presents different issues to us. Stuart Crickmar mentioned one significant issue in that regard: the management layer changing and the roles of managers changing. There is a need to make sure that the people in those posts are equipped to carry out the required supportive functions.

The cultural aspect is really important, too. That is not easy to fix. I am sure that you will appreciate that many different actions are needed in order to get to the positive empowering culture that you would like there to be in an organisation. If there is that sort of culture—I suggest that we are on that journey—there is a much more motivating, positive experience for staff coming to work. That is what

we aspire to, and that is more of a medium-term goal. As I said, I do not think that I will be able to fix that in six months, but the cultural aspect is a big part of the solution.

On the comment about SOLACE, I am not sure how well equipped I feel to speak for the other 31 chief executives. However, SOLACE has a significant work programme that covers a number of policy areas. They are prioritised and relevant policy boards are set up to progress negotiations.

In the short time that I have been engaged with SOLACE, the issue of absence has certainly come up quite a lot in the discussions. It consistently comes up across a number of the policy themes that are being looked at. Annabelle Ewing has tapped into quite an important issue, because absence is perhaps currently not being pulled out as an issue in its own right. However, it has certainly been a strong and recurrent theme in all the policy debates to which I have been party.

Johanna Baxter: The SPDS forum that was mentioned is all well and good, but it does not bring our trade union colleagues into the discussions. There needs to be a joint forum for discussing the issues, and COSLA has a role to play in that. As Drew Duffy has already said, that should not take the form of a discussion about what to cut.

A wider point has been made about management style. That is a really significant issue. Currently, the biggest factor in driving management style is change management and the amount of change that local authorities are being asked to undertake. That is driven by cuts to budgets and the reducing amount of control that councils have over their budgets. In recent years, that has meant constant change in local authorities. I cannot tell members the number of meetings that Drew Duffy, other trade union colleagues and I go to in which we discuss reorganisations of departments in which X posts are being deleted and managers are taking on more individuals to manage, their workflow is changing, and they are taking on additional responsibilities. The pressure that that puts on the workforce causes stress, which causes things to be deprioritised in favour of delivering additional work. The things that are deprioritised include management training, which managers need in order to feel confident and capable of delivering as managers for the people whom they support.

The Convener: Earlier, you talked about the example of Glasgow, and you made the point that things changed almost overnight. That was about just a change of attitude. It should not take a lot of expensive training meetings for people to see that they should focus on people rather than figures.

10:30

Johanna Baxter: Things did not change overnight.

The Convener: No—it was over a couple of years.

Johanna Baxter: However, there was a change in tone. That does not need huge amounts of training, but it needs leadership, and leadership is also impacted by the degree of change.

On the Glasgow example, the words of the policy did not change dramatically, but staff engagement did. The culture in relation to the policy's being applied as a supportive mechanism rather than a punitive mechanism did, too. However, I go back to the point that was made previously: we cannot take 15,000 people out of the workforce over a period of five years and not expect that to impact on management style, organisational change and the pressure that individuals feel in doing their jobs.

The Convener: To go back to your example, no local authority will have seen a greater change in its staff than Glasgow City Council has done.

Johanna Baxter: Absolutely. I am not saying that that is the only issue or that Glasgow is now perfect.

The Convener: Not even I would try to say that. *[Laughter.]*

Johanna Baxter: I am sure that my colleagues in the Glasgow City Council branch would have something to say if I said that. I am saying not that it is perfect but that there was a change in culture, which is often driven by leadership style. We find that leaders in our local authorities are under pressure because of cuts to their budgets, so we have not seen the Glasgow example being replicated in many other places. At the moment, people are struggling to deal with such issues, which is why things such as flexible working policies—which we advocate and which exist in many areas—are among the first things to go when employers are under pressure. Things such as the flexibility for an employee to leave a bit earlier to pick up their kids or to look after an elderly parent are the first to go when people are stretched.

Annabelle Ewing: I am sorry to interrupt, but the key thing about flexible working is that it should be regarded not as largesse on the part of the employer but as a right or an entitlement on the part of the employee.

Johanna Baxter: Absolutely.

Annabelle Ewing: I am not talking about a discretionary policy whereby an employer can say that a member of staff can go home at 2 o'clock on a particular day, but about flexibility being built into

the employment practices of the relevant organisation. That is what seems to be missing.

Johanna Baxter: Yes—I agree with you. However, discretion is the first thing to go. Although flexibility should not be at the whim of a manager's discretion, it very often is. That is our experience on the ground. We advocate greater flexibility in workplaces because that supports people, but that approach is under pressure because of cuts to budgets.

Alexander Stewart: We have talked about the culture and the engagement in the panellists' management roles in their organisations. Like many members, I have had the privilege of being a councillor—I was on Perth and Kinross Council for 18 years. We did not look only at what was happening in local authorities; we went out to the private sector and looked at the practices of large employers in the community, such as Scottish and Southern Energy and Aviva. We talked to them about what they were doing and how they were managing resources to see whether lessons could be learned from that sector. What are you doing in that regard? Have you had similar experiences? Are you using those experiences to manage the change in culture and management styles that you are all dealing with?

The Convener: I take it that that was directed at Nikki Bridle. Mr Stewart was certainly looking in her direction.

Nikki Bridle: I am happy to deal with the question. The short answer is yes. Prior to coming into the meeting this morning, my colleagues and I reflected on our personal experiences of the private sector. Perhaps we are seeing more flexibility in the ways in which policies are deployed. We discussed an example from the financial sector, in which a large company—which I will not name—had issues with sickness absence. Because of its understanding of the factors that underlie short-term sickness absences, it realised that many of them had arisen because of situations involving care responsibilities or domestic emergencies. It therefore introduced a specific leave entitlement in relation to caring responsibilities.

We are looking at that particular area because we think that we have that issue, too. A person may wake up in the morning to a pressing domestic emergency from a childcare responsibility or something of that ilk. The company that I mentioned created an allowance of around five days per annum for that. That was at managerial discretion, but the organisation found that it had a dramatic impact on its sickness absence levels. Staff knew that they had a go-to place for such emergencies, which meant that they did not have to use sickness absence or

annual leave as the automatic panacea for the emergency.

Sharon McKenzie: Family-friendly policies are well embedded across councils, and research would show that there is a suite of family-friendly provisions in all councils. They may be different in their nuances, but the broad principles are the same. The issue may be in the application of those policies. Perhaps that goes back to Johanna Baxter's point. We have seen changes in councils over the years. They have become smaller employers—there are fewer people working for local government now, and layers have been taken out at the management and supervisory levels—so the needs of new managers or supervisors are quite different from what existed before.

In councils, there is now an emphasis on building managers' confidence about having conversations and developing relationships with the people whom they manage so that, when they need extra support in times of crisis, they do not revert to sickness absence to cover a caring responsibility, for example. They will have an up-front conversation with their manager who, because they will understand their empowered role, will feel equipped to exercise discretion and give the individual some leeway.

It is difficult, because much of the workforce has gone, and we have a whole cohort of new managers and supervisors who are both learning their professional area of work and developing their management skills. We are trying hard to bolster managers in councils to be more confident in carrying out those conversations with individuals.

The Convener: It seems that there is still a fair bit of work to be done on that.

Health and social care integration has been mentioned to the committee as a possible factor behind an increase in sickness rates. Does anybody have any evidence or comments on that? If it is, why is that the case?

Nikki Bridle: We need to think about the services that are in the scope of health and social care partnerships. The sectors that traditionally involve a lot of manual lifting and handling or 24/7 shift arrangements for the staff typically have higher absence rates, and that would be the same whether it was in the council or the health and social care partnership.

That said, we had a particular issue in Clackmannanshire with high sickness absence levels in the group of staff who deliver services on behalf of the health and social care partnership. We supported the management staff in the partnership to deploy the policies properly, and they have had significant success in bringing down

the level of sickness absence. However, that requires all the things that we have talked about this morning. It is not about taking a punitive approach but about understanding the situation and having the right managerial approach to deal with it. People are carrying out very demanding roles in those areas of service delivery.

Drew Duffy: I will use an example from Dundee City Council. It used to have managers who dealt predominantly with sickness absence, particularly when it was long term but also anything serious. There was always a manager for that in HR, but there is no longer an HR presence at any of the meetings; it is all done by phone. The support from that manager has changed

The knowledge and expertise of management has also changed dramatically over the years, because most of the managers who had 10, 20 or 30 years of experience have taken packages to leave or retire through restructuring and there is a large group of new managers in place.

You may have seen reports in the press this week about how that same council is starting to look at home carers doing split shifts. One of our home carers, who is a single mum, had to say to the councillors on Monday night that their proposal meant that she would have to find childcare for her daughter on 144 nights of the year, whereas at the moment she does not have to find any. She asked how she could work around it, because it would cost her money, and the council's response was that she could reduce her working hours, which would mean that she would lose £3,000 a year. Those are the options that she faces. There is no possibility of flexible working because the staff numbers have been cut—they only have the bare minimum quota. She can ask for flexible working but because of business needs, the response will be, "Sorry, we can't accommodate that—but we could cut your hours," so she is left with that choice. I imagine that those issues are mirrored across health and social care—I am just using Dundee as the most recent example.

The Convener: I am sure that Dundee council will be delighted.

Annabelle Ewing: There is another way to look at this. There are many issues involved and we have discussed a lot of them, but in any organisation, the responsibility for management comes from the very top down—from the chief executive and the directors, who are all pretty well remunerated, then the managers and so forth.

It is as though some people feel that nothing can be done, but lots of things can be done. Management can be improved, starting with the chief executive taking more responsibility for this issue. Would people agree with that?

Nikki Bridle: I completely agree with that. I hope that that has come across this morning because, for me, that is a big part of this. Having the right philosophy and the right leadership style across the organisation makes a significant difference to how people feel when they come into work. Getting to a point at which people feel motivated and empowered in the organisation is something to which we aspire. I am working quite hard to establish a new management group just now and these are things that we are discussing quite a lot.

I absolutely agree with the comments that union colleagues have made. There is a lot of pressure in the system. I am very clear that in Clacks, where the council is staffed by a predominantly local workforce, we have an incredibly committed bunch of people whose contribution I value highly, as do my colleagues in the management group. We need to make sure that that is known and visible and that we do as much as we can to support people.

Alongside that, however, we also have to run the business, so there is a balance to be struck. I do not say that in mitigation because I heard Drew Duffy's comments, but we cannot always do everything for everybody. However, if we create the right environment, it goes a long way towards helping people to feel that they want to come to work and continue to make their contribution. I would not want that to be the cause of things such as presenteeism, which we have discussed. We have been tackling that issue and we have been sending a few people home when they should not have been at work because they have been clearly quite ill.

Graham Simpson: The point is well made that management style can have an effect; I have seen that throughout my career. Believe or not, I was once a union rep in a previous workplace. I have seen that good and bad management styles and practices have an effect on absenteeism.

Annabelle Ewing asked the pertinent question: what does SOLACE do? I would ask the question: what does the Improvement Service do? My understanding is that we asked it along to this session, as we were thinking that the session might have been about improving things, but it did not think that it was appropriate to come. Do the people round the table think that there is a role for the Improvement Service in this?

Sharon McKenzie: I will comment on that particular point, then I will add to what Nikki Bridle just said. We suggested to those who are involved in selecting witnesses that the Improvement Service might have a role to play in giving evidence. That suggestion came through from the Society of Personnel and Development Scotland. We were fairly clear that you would be looking at

the recent benchmarking report, which was just published a couple of weeks ago. The Improvement Service had a key role in the production of that report, so we thought that there might be an opportunity for some questions to be directed to it. It also has an overview role in terms of working with councils to capture the statutory performance indicator information and to condense that into the information that you have before you.

That is why we suggested that the Improvement Service could add value to the discussion. Right at the beginning, we discussed the data, how it is captured and defined, and how well it is applied. That would most definitely have been an area for the Improvement Service to comment on. That was where the suggestion came from.

10:45

The Convener: You also wanted to comment on a previous point.

Sharon McKenzie: I just want to pick up on Nikki Bridle's point about the commitment in SOLACE, which is the body of chief executives. The evidence that we have as councils—I am speaking on behalf of the councils that are represented here as well as those that are not—is that there is a strong strategic commitment from the chief executives, who really value the importance and benefits of a healthy organisation and who push that approach down into the organisations. Some of that is directed at HR departments to take a lead on and some of it is directed at managers and leaders in the organisation as a whole, to cascade and embed that approach.

We are striving to ensure that managers act as good role models. We are doing that with different approaches, although there is a great degree of commonality. We want to ensure that good workplace culture is respected and valued as something that should be embedded into organisations alongside work-life balance for everyone, no matter what job they do and what level they are at in the organisation. The role is to ensure that line managers are aware that supporting employees with regard to health and wellbeing is a key part of their job. We need to encourage managers to recognise when they have competency issues in that space and to seek support if it is not being offered, so that we can find ways to support them.

That picks up on a few of the comments that have been made. I am not saying that we have all the answers, but we recognise that it is a strategic imperative to turn around the absence figures, and our focus is on embedding that into organisations through good health and wellbeing practices.

Kenneth Gibson: We have talked about best practice and local authorities sharing what they do well with other local authorities, but I wonder what local authorities do to share best practice within their organisations. Many years ago, when I was a member of the Education, Lifelong Learning and Culture Committee, we noticed that the difference in educational attainment between departments within schools was often much wider than the difference from school to school or even from authority to authority. If our local authority colleagues here have an issue with a department in which absenteeism is significantly higher than in others, how do you tackle that? If you have a different work culture in one area of a local authority compared with others, how do you change the culture in that specific department in order to impact positively on the whole?

Nikki Bridle: That is a really good question, but there is not a single solution—it depends on the circumstances. I can give you a couple of examples from Clacks.

We had a continuing increase in absence levels in the housing service over a period, and I had several discussions about that with the then head of service. In his view, all the policies were being deployed effectively and the service was trying to make all the correct interventions. We therefore had external experts look at a selection of cases to consider the interventions that could have been made at different points. The conclusions went back to our senior team so that, corporately, we reviewed them and there was an opportunity for shared learning. The clear message was that there was probably a lack of confidence among some of the managers in the service to deploy the right interventions at the right points in the particular cases that were looked at. That learning was taken back into the service and, as a consequence, absence levels in it have improved considerably relative to those in other sections in the council.

Another example is our development and environment service, which as you will appreciate is a large collection of discrete services. One issue there has been to do with change and organisational redesign resulting in a number of managerial vacancies. We are finding that more junior staff are needing to step up and take responsibility for the sort of things that more senior or experienced managers did in the past.

In that case, the director has created an extension to his regular engagement with trade unions and managers, in which they look in more detail at the reasons for absence. He is trying to work in partnership with trade union colleagues to look at how those absences can be managed across the service. Particularly in areas such as development and environment, in which there is a

high level of union membership, we are conscious that trade union colleagues can be incredibly helpful in reinforcing the policy and practice that we want to see in not just absence but things such as health and safety, which is another important theme.

Different approaches can be taken, depending on the particular issues that you are looking at. Those are just a couple of examples.

Johanna Baxter: Trade unions have a huge role to play in councils in understanding the differences that exist and, perhaps, helping to address them. We very often spot trends in councils sooner than the local authorities themselves, because we can see the numbers going up when more members come to us seeking support for attendance review or disciplinary meetings. We can see the departments in which that is taking place and spot trends in approach. Very often, we will have conversations with managers in those departments or with HR and raise it more formally, where it is appropriate to do so. That is about ensuring that there is a supportive culture, and that where we see that managers need a bit of training or development, that is provided.

Andy Wightman: I want to follow up on the question about management. The Improvement Service has observed that the human resources services of some councils are very corporate and provide a central function, whereas in others the HR function has been rolled out more to managers. Does that matter? Is it a recent trend, and what impact has it had?

Sharon McKenzie: I think that that does matter. You have a range of data before you today showing the picture across councils over the years, and the ups and downs in their reported figures. That evidence will show that, generally, where a more concentrated effort is in place through HR, absence levels will be lower. Again generally, where such support is not in place, absence levels will tend to be higher. That emphasises the need for us to ensure that where concentrated HR support is not in place, the managers who are charged with managing absence, and who are doing so much more on their own without dedicated support, are equipped to do so. They need to be skilled and competent, and to understand the importance of the relationship between them and the person who is suffering from an illness or a particular condition.

I do not think that there has ever been a fully-worked-through piece of research on that, but anecdotally across councils you would find that that is the picture. I think that trade unions might also support that position.

Paul McGowan: I work in East Ayrshire Council now, but I have worked in larger councils. In terms of employees, the whole corporate mass of East Ayrshire Council might be the size of a service in Glasgow City Council or another of the larger local authorities. We have a corporate HR function that services the council. That allows me to ensure that we have consistent practice, as far as that is possible. I am not averse to pull in outlying managers or HR professionals to ensure that our policies are being implemented correctly. The model works, in that we can allocate resources to service areas.

We talked about demands and peaks, and about issues in particular services. I have at my disposal resources that I can allocate for particular interventions in particular areas, but that is because I have a central or corporate HR function. I argue that for my authority that system works well, but that might not be the case for much larger authorities.

Stuart Crickmar: There are some basic hygiene factors that are quite important. As a director, I will quite often chair a capability or disciplinary hearing, and in listening to the evidence from both parties, I have found myself thinking that a couple of years ago the issue could have been stopped at source with just one conversation. Time and again, it comes back to having a relationship with employees and having in place systematic processes to allow dialogue and discussion. I know that it seems to be really simple and straightforward, but such a relationship is fundamental. It comes down to basic things such as whether the employee in question has a performance review and development meeting at least once a year, whether they understand how they fit with the organisation's context, whether the organisation values them, irrespective of their role, whether they know who their manager is and where they can come to talk, and whether they know that they will have a one-to-one discussion at least monthly to allow any issues to be resolved.

At my monthly meetings with my managers, the first item on the agenda is always outturns, budgets and savings—that is just the way of the world—but the second is attendance, and we have discussions about how it is managed. I know about every long-term case in my directorate—whether the triggers have been met and what support mechanisms are in place. It is a wee bit like the “Plan, do, check, act” approach; you have to check whether your managers are actually doing the basics.

If you had asked me four years ago whether Clackmannanshire Council had the right suite of policies in place and whether they were in line with best practice, I would have said no. I think that we are now getting there, but we still have lessons to

learn. We are deploying lots of policies, but we need to make sure that the basics are being done and that the basic relationships are in place. The role of the manager is to check whether that is happening, whether an employee with an issue has a safe place to go and whether their issue can be resolved early on.

The Convener: Do you want to come back on that, Andy?

Andy Wightman: No—but I found it quite interesting.

You mentioned relationships. Councils are still quite traditionally hierarchical places with managers—bosses—employees and the rest of it. Is there any experience that you can tell us about of work being done differently? For example, the co-operatives, mutuals and employee-owned companies in the private sector have much better rates of work satisfaction, much less absenteeism and so on. Could people in your services work in different ways that might help to reduce absenteeism?

Stuart Crickmar: Nikki Bridle and, perhaps, others have alluded to this already, but there is a visibility element. Years ago, when I first started working in local government, the directors were gods with a wall of personal assistants around them. You just did not get anywhere near them. However, speaking as a director, I think that the culture now is completely different, and people generally expect directors to be more approachable. There are things that we can do: we can make ourselves available and ensure that our door is open, that we go round the office saying hello and engaging with people, and that our managers do the same thing.

This is not rocket science; as I have said, it is about relationships and being human. We have all suffered bereavements and gone through various life events, so it is about understanding that we expect, when our turn comes, to be treated the same as we treat others.

Paul McGowan: An aspect of the relationship and conversation that needs to be promoted is our employees knowing that it is okay to talk to their managers. Sometime there is a culture in which people feel that they cannot talk to their managers about things, so we need to embed a new approach in organisations. That will require a two-way conversation.

In terms of doing things differently, looking at small pockets of our council, I like to think that we have created, by empowering our workforce more, a bigger sense of ownership and commitment. With that comes a much better employee-manager relationship.

11:00

It is ultimately about how we respond to our communities. We are trying to roll out some of the models into that area. I am not suggesting that people do not do this—we have very hard-working and committed employees—but if we can push a bit further and get employees absolutely embedded in what is happening in their communities, being critical to their success and valued within them, they can add much to embedding the culture of value. We need to push that as far as we can and make sure that people understand.

If we look at the matter in terms of developing a wellbeing culture, there is a sense that everyone, whether they are employees, managers or trade unions, has a tendency to leave their home person at home, so a different being comes into the workplace. I like to think that we are all caring people with our husbands, wives, partners and kids: we are caring at home, but we leave that at home. If we were to treat each other at work as we treat our families, friends and siblings, that would embed that wellbeing culture. It is about changing.

Nikki Bridle: With respect to Mr Wightman's question, I think that part of the management role is to make the space in which creativity and different things can happen. Traditional local government structures have not been the places for that, but I think that that is changing. My experience suggests that it needs a bit of investment before staff feel comfortable in that space or think that it is okay to come up with different ways of doing things.

I want to create for middle-tier managers a forum on promoting change and empowering them to be part of the leadership of the organisation. However, we have found that they do not consistently have the skills to engage in that discussion, so we are investing in those first in order to create the capacity for them to participate fully. It does not matter what grade in the organisation a person is—we will probably keep coming back to those principles. However, what is needed is the management will to create that space in the first place.

Johanna Baxter: On that and what Stuart Crickmar said earlier, the relationship between the employee and their manager is crucial. Stuart was right to say that the fundamentals need to be there—regular dialogue, performance review discussions, one-to-one meetings and so on.

I impress on the committee, however, that those things are all very well if we are talking about a workforce who are based in an office and who pass the manager's desk daily, say hello and all the rest of it. However, a huge number of the members whom we represent are the types of

people that Drew Duffy mentioned earlier. Those people are on split shifts and are out on the front line—for example, care workers who receive text messages to tell them where to visit. A text message telling you where to go is not a relationship with your manager. Such individuals might not see their managers for days or weeks on end.

Something about the nature of that type of work has to change in order to ensure that space and time are created in the employment relationship for dialogue. Some services do it better than others; there is an issue about consideration of the nature of some work.

Graham Simpson: I have a substantive question, but first I want to check something that Johanna Baxter said at the start, which I did not catch. You were talking about having made FOI requests to councils and the fact that some of them did not keep the requested information. I did not pick up what the information was about.

Johanna Baxter: The FOI request to councils was about how many staff had been taken through absence management procedures, including going through trigger processes, having absence management discussions and/or having punitive interventions such as disciplinary hearings as a result of absence. A significant number of councils claimed that they do not hold figures on how many members of staff have been taken through absence management processes. The ones that I specifically mentioned were Midlothian, Aberdeenshire, Argyll and Bute, and West Dunbartonshire.

Graham Simpson: Okay. It is of concern that there are councils that do not hold that information. They certainly should hold it.

Johanna Baxter: Yes. I assume that the information will exist somewhere, but the councils claim that it is not held centrally. That says to me that the HR department is not collating the information. I assume that the information will have to be held by line managers and departmental managers, for example. I find it surprising that councils' HR departments are not holding it centrally.

Graham Simpson: I have another question, but I see that Mr Duffy is keen to come in.

Drew Duffy: GMB is in dispute with Aberdeenshire Council about the pupil support assistants that I talked about. We asked it for a breakdown of the accident reports that our members and staff have submitted. It said that it did not know and that it would cost £1,800 to find out, so it has refused our request because it says that that is too much. However, we are talking about people's health and safety—people are being bitten and spat at. It would not be

unreasonable for the council to spend £1,800. Some councils are very reluctant to share information.

The Convener: It is helpful for us to hear that today.

Graham Simpson: It is really helpful. My other question is also about absences. There is a big difference between the absence rate for teachers, which is running at an average of about six days a year, and the rate for non-teachers, which is running at just over 11 days a year. Why do you think that is?

Johanna Baxter: I cannot comment on what is happening in the teaching profession because Unison does not represent teachers.

However, I will go back to the point that I made earlier about the nature of work. Some of our members work right on the front line and are out in the field every day, often working split shifts. Also, many of our members have multiple contracts of employment with the local authority. They will be contracted to do, for example, 12 hours as a home care worker and eight hours as a cleaner in a local school. If we look only at the numbers who are contracted as cleaners in schools or as home carers, we get a misrepresentation of what is happening on the ground, because that will not take into consideration that some of those people are doing both jobs daily and weekly. There is an issue about the nature of work and the different pressures that exist for council staff, which we rehearsed earlier.

Sharon McKenzie: A comment was made earlier about teachers' absence, and I made the point that it is increasing. I know that it is not increasing in terms of the figures that are reported, but the feedback that is coming through from the teaching trade unions is that there is more evidence of stress, anxiety and workload pressures in schools. The teaching trade unions—in particular, the Educational Institute of Scotland—have done a survey, as have trade unions that are represented round the table, and I think that they will be bringing to the table quite soon their evidence to show that there is a slow creep in teachers' absences. It might not be showing a reported increase in absences in terms of the SPI, but teachers, PSAs and everyone else who works in schools sense that there is a lot of pressure in schools just now. That might ultimately result in increased absences.

However, to pick up on points that the trade unions have made, I note that there is also a degree of presenteeism, with people not necessarily taking time out of the system. That is also something to watch.

Graham Simpson: What do you mean by "presenteeism"?

Sharon McKenzie: Presenteeism is when people who are feeling under par or under the weather in terms of their health turn up for work because they fear the consequences of not being at work, or feel unable to report as sick.

Kenneth Gibson: It is about a sense of duty, as well. Some people just do not take time off work.

The Convener: This is no criticism of anybody, but I am not sure that that explains the difference. I would say two things about that. First, surely most workers have that sense of duty and sense of responsibility to get to their work. Secondly, if the figures that we have are not telling us the facts—you say that, anecdotally, you are hearing that there are more teachers off—what is the point of them?

Sharon McKenzie: I am not saying that I hear anecdotally that more teachers are off. I hear that more teachers struggle with pressures of work.

The Convener: Your point was that you heard that the teacher absence figures were higher than those in front of the committee. That is what you said.

Sharon McKenzie: No. I am sorry if that is how it came across. I said that it is reported nationally, predominantly through the teaching trade unions, that there is growing pressure on the teacher workforce in schools. Teachers cope with additional workload and with pressures from some of the situations that they are in. Violence and aggression have been mentioned in relation to PSAs, but more incidents of violence and aggression are reported in relation to teachers. Those factors do not always follow through into teacher absence. In local government, there may be more of that.

The reported SPI figures for 2017-18 are good for teachers compared with local government workers, but 15 of the 32 councils reported a slight increase in teacher absence. Although that is fewer than half, it is still a significant number and something to pay attention to.

The Convener: It still leaves a huge gap between teachers and non-teachers. That is the point that Graham Simpson wants to get to.

Graham Simpson: That is right. Sharon McKenzie used the word "presenteeism" and seemed to suggest that teachers have a different attitude to taking time off from that of non-teachers. That was the implication of what was said.

Sharon McKenzie: I was trying to explain why there is such a gap. I do not know whether that is the answer, but it could be. There is a stark difference in the two sets of figures and yet they both relate to a local government workforce. I do not know whether presenteeism is the underlying

reason for the difference in the figures, but that might be worth exploring. Outside the context of the reported figures, I know that the teaching trade unions report pressures that exist in schools from the areas that I mentioned.

Stuart Crickmar: I do not necessarily have the answer. However, the non-teacher age profile is predominantly 45 to 59 years, while the teacher age profile is predominantly below 44. There is a marked difference in age profile.

The Convener: That is very helpful.

Johanna Baxter: Presenteeism exists in the non-teacher local government workforce as well. I do not believe that it explains the difference in the figures, which is more to do with demographics and the nature of the work—whether people have a stable place of work and more regular hours, for example, and whether there are fewer short-term contracts.

Drew Duffy: We are comparing two very different groups of people. If teaching staff are taken out of the picture, local government workers are low paid and work part time. I gave examples of how such workers do not feel valued as much as, say, teaching staff. There can be conflict between the two groups of workers, even though they have the same employer. That is well known. Teachers can have more favourable terms and conditions, which can create conflict even in the same workplace.

Kenneth Gibson: I agree with trade union colleagues. The figures that the committee has from SPICE on the local government benchmarking framework are not anecdotal. My wife was a teacher for 23 years, and I am aware that teachers have security of employment once they have a permanent contract. That makes a significant difference.

The general figures for the wider local government workforce are not broken down by department to show the difference between care workers and those who work in housing or libraries, for example. A breakdown would be useful, to show more about where the pressures that face individual workers lie.

11:15

Annabelle Ewing: Even if we pick up on all those points, we still come back to the fundamental one. If we look simply at the non-teacher and school-related statistics, it has been accepted that local authorities collate those in different ways. Notwithstanding that there is an overarching policy that is supposed to be followed, its application is clearly different across councils. As we have heard, that is the case just between East Ayrshire Council and Clackmannanshire

Council. Therefore I have a wee bit of a reservation about reaching too many conclusions based on statistics that are not necessarily collated in exactly the same way. It then begs the question of how the teacher statistics would be collected and whether any comparison between the figures for teaching and non-teaching staff would be worth its salt.

My last point is that there needs to be far greater impetus on the part of SOLACE and COSLA in addressing such issues, because we are talking about people's lives. The Scottish Government's budget has been slashed by £2 billion since 2010. I say to Drew Duffy that we can repeat stale discussion about the budget if he wishes, but the bottom line is that a lot can be done now. I feel that a drift is going on, in which people say that certain principles are the best practice, when, instead, things could actually be done. Instead of SOLACE looking across however many workstreams have absenteeism as an element of the issue that they examine, it should make that the issue and focus on it. We could then make immediate differences to the working lives of many thousands of people across Scotland.

The Convener: Over to you, Nikki.

Nikki Bridle: I will make two comments if I may, convener. First, Mr Gibson's comment about getting into the detail of the individual service areas is absolutely spot on. We use that as a can opener for understanding the reasons for absence and then thinking about what the strategies for dealing with them might be, so his point is very important.

I apologise if I have underplayed the work that SOLACE has done. I know that it has been a significant theme over a great number of years. I am thinking about the policy priorities that are there just now. It is probably a recurrent theme, but I would be very happy to take that message back through SOLACE and to reflect on the experience with the committee.

Graham Simpson: I want to back up what Annabelle Ewing has just said. Over the years, there has been an acceptance in local government that those are the figures. It is almost as though there is a collective shrug of the shoulders from councils, which say, "We will do what we can, but that's the way it is." As Annabelle Ewing said, if we were to tackle it, we would improve people's lives; we would also save money, because we would not be employing people to fill the gaps, which has an impact on stress in the existing workforce. It should be a priority but it never has been, which is why we are having this session.

Sharon McKenzie: I reaffirm that absenteeism is an absolute priority for councils, out of the range of priorities on which they face challenges. As Mr

Simpson said, it has been on the agenda for many years. However, there is not a shrug of the shoulders when we look at the outcome: we are very focused on improving both our staff attendance levels and the health and wellbeing of our workforce. I know that the figures perhaps do not evidence that, despite our best efforts. However, an awful lot of work to support that position goes on in councils, on all the issues that we have been talking about.

Nikki Bridle: As members might remember, not many years ago, SOLACE took the lead in a considerable amount of work that was done on refining the approach to performance information across Scottish local authorities. That work was led by Ronnie Hinds when he was chair of the SOLACE branch. Many of the issues that have come up today on the comparability of measures could usefully be explored in the same way, as a further refinement of that original work.

I agree completely with Mr Simpson's comments about the value of sickness absence information. I am keen to stress to the committee that, from Clackmannanshire Council's point of view, it is a huge priority, because we recognise where we sit in the performance table. However, our approach is not just because of that; it is about the philosophy that I would want to promote in the council. The staff resource—the people who work for the council—deliver a huge contribution locally and need to feel like a valued part of the organisation. However, with that come all the things that we have been talking about, with regard to requirements for support and so on. The benefit that we get in return for the staff contribution is exactly the point that Mr Simpson made: financial and qualitative benefits for both the council and the area then flow through.

The Convener: As members have no final comments to make, that brings the meeting to a natural conclusion. I thank everyone for attending today's evidence session. Under the next agenda item, which will be taken in private, the committee will discuss the evidence that it has heard today and decide whether it wishes to take any further action. I thank everyone for their evidence—that was a very useful session.

11:20

Meeting continued in private until 11:40.

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