



Northern Ireland Audit Office

# Absenteeism in Northern Ireland Councils 2005-06

Report by the Chief Local Government Auditor

30 March 2007



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

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March 2007

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# 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 2006. This included:

- Numbers of absences;
- Duration of absences;
- Numbers of full time equivalent staff employed;
- 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.

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## Main Findings

### Absenteeism rates within councils

- With 8.37 days, Fermanagh District Council had the lowest average annual absenteeism rate for the 2003-06 period. The equivalent absenteeism rates for Craigavon Borough Council; Derry City Council; Carrickfergus Borough Council; Newry and Mourne District Council; and Larne Borough Council were more than double the rate recorded in Fermanagh District Council (paragraph 3).
- The council with the highest average annual absenteeism rate was Larne Borough Council with 20.30 days for the 2003-06 period. This council also experienced the largest increase in its absenteeism rate. The rate recorded for the 2003-06 period is almost five days more than the 2000-03 rate of 15.41 days. Moyle District Council also experienced a significant increase of more than four days in its average annual absenteeism rate (paragraphs 4 and 5).
- Of the 11 councils showing an improvement over the two periods, Lisburn City Council and Castlereagh Borough Council improved the most with significant reductions of four days in their absenteeism rates (paragraph 6).
- Further commentary on each council's three-year average annual absenteeism rate is at Appendix 1 (paragraph 7).
- Variations in absenteeism rates between councils 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 8 and 9).

- Had all councils matched the lowest average annual absenteeism rate of 8.37 days, a total of £5.6 million a year could have been gained in productivity (paragraph 11).

### Absenteeism for the sector as a whole

- For 2005-06, Northern Ireland councils as a whole had an average absenteeism rate of 13.73 days. This rate has improved by slightly less than a day when compared to the 2004-05 rate. The absenteeism rate for Northern Ireland councils, when taken together, is now lower than at any time since 2001-02. When viewed as lost productivity, absenteeism in Northern Ireland councils cost £14m in 2005-06 (paragraphs 14, 15 and 17).
- A comparison of the councils' 2005-06 absenteeism rate with some other employment sectors shows that Northern Ireland councils as a sector continues to have the highest absenteeism rate. The absenteeism rate for Northern Ireland councils is, however, only marginally higher than the Northern Ireland Civil Service rate (paragraph 19).
- When compared to the latest figures available for local authorities in England and Wales, the 2005-06 absenteeism rate in Northern Ireland councils is more than two days higher. Had the Northern Ireland rate been similar to that of England and Wales, the gain in productivity would have been £2.3 million, or a gain of 90 staff in post throughout the year at no additional cost (paragraph 22).
- In 2005-06, long term absences cost councils £9.0 million in lost productivity. If councils reduced the proportion of long term absences to the average five per cent rate found in the UK economy, the cost of long term absence could be reduced by £3.9 million. We recommend that when councils benchmark their absenteeism management practices



(paragraph 9) particular attention is paid to the management of long term absence (paragraphs 28 and 29).

### Causes of absence in councils

- For 2005-06, 23 councils provided information on causes of absence. This information represents 85 per cent of all days lost and 84 per cent of absences. Projecting this information to all councils indicates that *stress, depression, mental health and fatigue* is the single largest cause of absenteeism, representing one fifth of days lost due to absenteeism in Northern Ireland councils at a cost of £2.8 million in lost productivity (paragraphs 31, 32 and 34).

- Different causes of absence would not appear to explain the additional £2.3 million absence costs incurred by Northern Ireland councils when compared to local authorities in England and Wales. 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 (paragraph 36).

### Absenteeism policies in councils

- All councils have implemented a written absence policy, with the exception of Magherafelt District Council. Most council's absenteeism policies incorporate six standard absence management tools. Councils indicated that they viewed return to work interviews as their most effective absence management tool. Return to work interviews are similarly regarded in the UK economy as a whole (paragraphs 38 and 39).

- More than half of Northern Ireland councils told us that they had taken action to reduce stress-related absenteeism. We particularly welcome this action as stress-related absence is the single largest cause of absenteeism. It is our view that all councils should be proactive in their management of stress-related absence (paragraphs 42 and 44).

### Absenteeism targets in councils

- There is currently no requirement for Northern Ireland councils to set long term targets for the reduction of absenteeism. In 2005-06, half of the 26 councils had established corporate or departmental level targets for managing absenteeism rates. Only three councils achieved the target set. In each case, it could be argued that the targets were not particularly challenging (paragraphs 46 and 47).

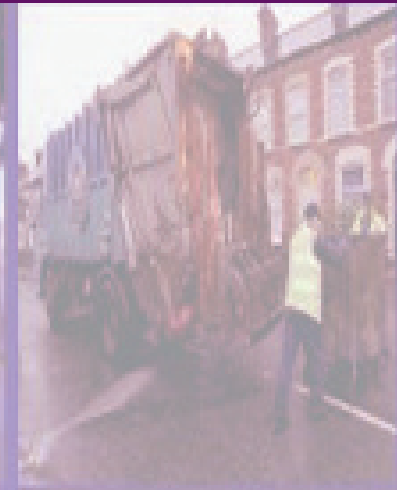
- At paragraph 9, we recommend that councils with higher absenteeism rates should benchmark their management practices against councils with lower absenteeism rates. This should include the establishment and monitoring of targets which, over an established timeframe, will assist councils to focus on progress towards absenteeism levels which match, or improve upon, the lowest rates currently found in Northern Ireland councils (paragraph 48).

### Absenteeism data in councils

- We asked for completed absenteeism data questionnaires to be returned by 30 June 2006. Only five councils had submitted responses on or before this date. By 31 August, some nine weeks later, responses had not been received from three councils: Belfast City Council; Banbridge District Council; and the last council to submit a response, Derry City Council. This council's completed questionnaire was received on 13 October 2006, 15 weeks after the due date. This report has been substantially delayed due to the late receipt of responses. Had all responses been received by the deadline, this report could have been completed earlier (paragraphs 49, 50 and 51).

- 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 55).

# 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 rate derived for the period. This counters the impact of annual fluctuations in absenteeism which could distort our findings, particularly within smaller councils. 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 2003 to March 2006. Absenteeism

<b>1 Three-year average annual absenteeism rates for each Northern Ireland council</b>			
Average annual absenteeism rates for 2003-06 range from 8.37 to 20.30 days. The rates for five councils are more than double the lowest rate			
	<b>Three-year period 2000-03</b>	<b>Three-year period 2003-06</b>	<b>Movement</b>
Fermanagh District Council	10.41	<b>8.37</b>	-2.04
Magherafelt District Council	9.37	<b>9.49</b>	0.12
Lisburn City Council	13.97	<b>9.93</b>	-4.04
Strabane District Council	11.45	<b>10.05</b>	-1.40
Ballymena Borough Council	9.51	<b>10.06</b>	0.55
Castlereagh Borough Council	14.42	<b>10.41</b>	-4.01
Armagh City and District Council	8.30	<b>10.92</b>	2.62
Down District Council	9.75	<b>11.23</b>	1.48
Banbridge District Council	13.24	<b>11.77</b>	-1.47
Dungannon & South Tyrone Borough Council	13.35	<b>12.10</b>	-1.25
Newtownabbey Borough Council	14.01	<b>12.79</b>	-1.22
North Down Borough Council	16.43	<b>13.38</b>	-3.05
Antrim Borough Council	15.79	<b>13.56</b>	-2.23
Ards Borough Council	12.00	<b>13.70</b>	1.70
Coleraine Borough Council	11.06	<b>14.14</b>	3.08
Cookstown District Council	11.74	<b>14.26</b>	2.52
Moyle District Council	9.75	<b>14.48</b>	4.73
Limavady Borough Council	11.45	<b>14.76</b>	3.31
Omagh District Council	15.03	<b>15.04</b>	0.01
Ballymoney Borough Council	15.91	<b>15.12</b>	-0.79
Belfast City Council	14.76	<b>16.12</b>	1.36
Craigavon Borough Council	15.08	<b>17.34</b>	2.26
Derry City Council	15.30	<b>17.34</b>	2.04
Carrickfergus Borough Council	15.26	<b>18.80</b>	3.54
Newry and Mourne District Council	20.16	<b>19.09</b>	-1.07
Larne Borough Council	15.41	<b>20.30</b>	4.89

Source: Northern Ireland councils

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rates calculated for the previous three-year period, April 2000 to March 2003, allow comparisons between the two periods to be made<sup>1</sup>.

3. With 8.37 days, Fermanagh District Council had the lowest average annual absenteeism rate for the 2003-06 period. The equivalent absenteeism rates for Craigavon Borough Council; Derry City Council; Carrickfergus Borough Council; Newry and Mourne District Council; and Larne Borough Council were more than double the rate recorded in Fermanagh District Council.

4. The council with the highest average annual absenteeism rate was Larne Borough Council with 20.30 days for the 2003-06 period. This council also experienced the largest increase in its absenteeism rate. The rate recorded for the 2003-06 period is almost five days more than the 2000-03 rate of 15.41 days.

5. Moyle District Council also experienced a significant increase of more than four days in its average annual absenteeism rate, moving from 9.75 days in 2000-03 to 14.48 days in 2003-06.

6. Of the 11 councils showing an improvement over the two periods, Lisburn City Council and Castlereagh Borough Council improved the most with significant reductions of four days in their absenteeism rates. Lisburn City Council's average annual absenteeism rate reduced from 13.97 days (2000-03) to 9.93 days (2003-06). Castlereagh Borough Council's rate reduced from 14.42 days (2000-03) to 10.41 days (2003-06).

7. Further commentary on each council's three-year average annual absenteeism rate is at [Appendix 1](#).

8. Variations in absenteeism rates between councils 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.

9. 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 38 to 45); targets (paragraphs 46 to 49); and data (paragraphs 50 to 57). Our review is not detailed enough to link specific management practices with absenteeism rates but research elsewhere<sup>2</sup> 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.

10. In the short term, it is unlikely that lower absenteeism rates would result in reduced staff costs for councils. However, lower absenteeism rates would give rise to increased productivity due to higher levels of attendance. Hence the comparisons between councils (paragraph 11) consider the potential for gains in productivity. In the longer term, councils should have the option of taking the benefits of reduced absenteeism in either increased productivity or reduced staff costs.

11. Had all councils matched the lowest average annual absenteeism rate of 8.37 days, recorded by Fermanagh District Council, a total of £5.6 million a year could have been gained in productivity ([Figure 2 and Appendix 2](#)).

12. 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, which are in line with the lowest rates found in Northern Ireland councils, remains important to ensure that:

- the existing 26 councils maximise staff productivity over their remaining lifetime;
- the new councils due to be introduced in 2009, following implementation of the Review of Public Administration, inherit management practices which reflect the lowest absenteeism rates within the existing 26 councils.

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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. Cabinet Office: Working Well Together, 1998, the Work Foundation: Attendance management, 2003; and Chartered Institute of Personnel and Development: Absence management, 2006

13. 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.

<b>2 Potential gains in productivity for each Northern Ireland council</b>	
Annual gains of £5.6 million in productivity could be made if all councils matched the lowest absenteeism rate reported by Fermanagh District Council (2003-06)	
Average annual potential gains in productivity based on the absenteeism rate of 8.37 days (£'000)	
Fermanagh District Council	-
Magherafelt District Council	18
Lisburn City Council	75
Strabane District Council	27
Ballymena Borough Council	50
Castlereagh Borough Council	69
Armagh City and District Council	72
Down District Council	86
Banbridge District Council	62
Dungannon & South Tyrone Borough Council	91
Newtownabbey Borough Council	168
North Down Borough Council	180
Antrim Borough Council	118
Ards Borough Council	185
Coleraine Borough Council	174
Cookstown District Council	96
Moyle District Council	70
Limavady Borough Council	90
Omagh District Council	193
Ballymoney Borough Council	77
Belfast City Council	1,908
Craigavon Borough Council	427
Derry City Council	530
Carrickfergus Borough Council	208
Newry and Mourne District Council	451
Larne Borough Council	197
<b>Total</b>	<b>5,621</b>
Source: Northern Ireland councils	

## Absenteeism for the sector as a whole

14. The 26 Northern Ireland councils employed a total of 9,089 full time equivalent staff in 2005-06. During this period, 124,774 working days were lost as a result of sickness absenteeism. This represents an average absenteeism rate of 13.73 days<sup>3</sup>, or nearly three weeks of absence, for each employee during 2005-06 (Figure 3). Lost productivity due to absence represents 6.1 per cent of available working days.

15. The 2005-06 absenteeism rate has improved by slightly less than a day when compared to the 2004-05 rate. The absenteeism rate for Northern Ireland councils, when taken together, is now lower than at any time since 2001-02 (Figure 4).

16. Annual absenteeism rates for 2005-06 reduced in 18 councils when compared to 2004-05. For the majority of councils the year-on-year changes are relatively small.

### 3 Combined absenteeism data for the 26 Northern Ireland councils (2004-05 and 2005-06)

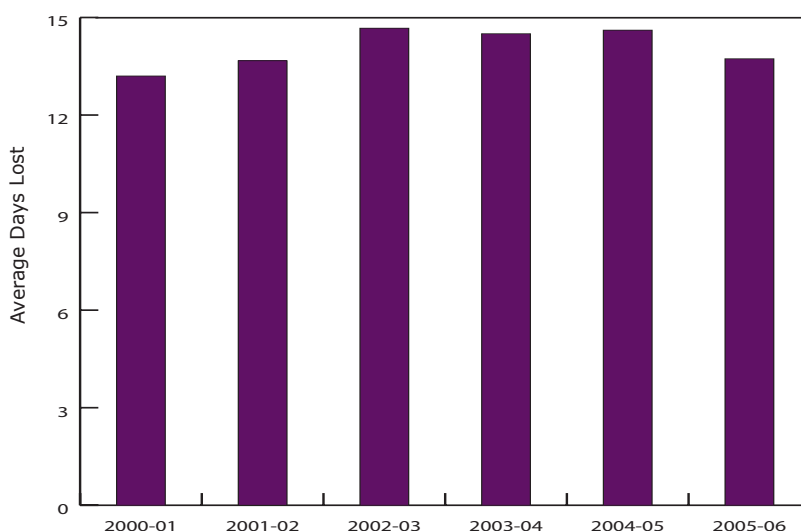
The 2005-06 absenteeism rate improved to 13.73 days

	2004-05	2005-06
Potential working days available	1,944,141	2,046,445
Number of full time equivalent employees	8,743	9,089
Days lost due to absence	127,693	124,774
Lost productivity rate (per cent)	6.57	6.10
Average absenteeism rate (days)	14.61	13.73

Source: Northern Ireland councils

### 4 Northern Ireland council absenteeism rates for six years to 2005-06

The 2005-06 absenteeism rate has improved from the higher levels experienced in the previous three years



Source: Chief Local Government Auditor

3. The average absenteeism rate for 2005-06 is the mean rate for all 9,089 full time equivalent staff in Northern Ireland councils. The median absenteeism rate across all 26 councils for 2005-06 is 12.85 days.

17. In 2005-06, total gross staff costs for councils were £229 million<sup>4</sup>. Based on the average absenteeism rate of 13.73 days, the 2005-06 cost of absenteeism, when viewed simply as lost productivity, is projected to be £14 million (Figure 5). This compares with £13.7 million in 2004-05. The estimated cost does not include replacement costs such as temporary staff, additional overtime, or other indirect costs.

<b>5 Comparison of the costs of absenteeism in Northern Ireland councils (2004-05 and 2005-06)</b>		
The projected 2005-06 cost of absenteeism is £14m		
	2004-05	2005-06
Average absenteeism rate (days)	14.61	13.73
Lost productivity rate (per cent)	6.57	6.10
Gross staff costs	£209m	£229m
Projected cost of absenteeism	£13.7m	£14.0m
Source: Northern Ireland councils		

18. Although the 2005-06 absenteeism rate has reduced from the previous year, the application of this rate to increased gross staff costs results in proportionately higher absence costs for councils. The 10 per cent increase in gross staff costs, from £209 million in 2004-05 to £229 million in 2005-06, has enough impact to increase the projected cost of absence by £0.3 million, despite the reduction in the average absenteeism rate.

19. A comparison of the councils' 2005-06 absenteeism rate with some other employment sectors shows that Northern Ireland councils, as a sector, continue to have the highest absenteeism rate (Figure 6). The absenteeism rate for Northern Ireland councils is, however, only marginally higher than the Northern Ireland Civil Service rate.

<b>6 Absenteeism rates in relevant employment sectors</b>		
Northern Ireland councils have the highest absenteeism rate		
	2004-05 (days)	2005-06 (days)
Northern Ireland councils	14.6	13.7
Northern Ireland Civil Service <sup>5</sup>	14.2	13.4
England and Wales local authorities <sup>6</sup>	11.5	-----
UK Economy <sup>7</sup>	6.8	6.6
Source: Chief Local Government Auditor		

20. 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.

4. Based on the sum of employment cost figures included in councils' accounts for 2005-06.

5. Northern Ireland Statistics and Research Agency: *Analysis of Sickness Absence in the NI Departments 2005-06*.

6. Local Government Employers: *Sickness Absence in Local Government 2004-05* - mean average reported figure from a survey of 104 councils. The figure for 2005-06 is not available.

7. Confederation of British Industry: *Absence Minded* (Absence and labour turnover 2006), based on a survey of 404 employers). These are calendar year figures for 2004 and 2005 respectively.

21. Although all the public sector absenteeism rates we examined are higher than the UK economy as a whole, the 2005-06 absenteeism rate in Northern Ireland councils is more than double that of the UK economy. Had the absenteeism rate for councils matched the UK economy figure of 6.6 days, the approximate gain in productivity would have been £7.3 million (Figure 7). This is equivalent to having an additional 287 staff in post throughout the year at no additional cost.

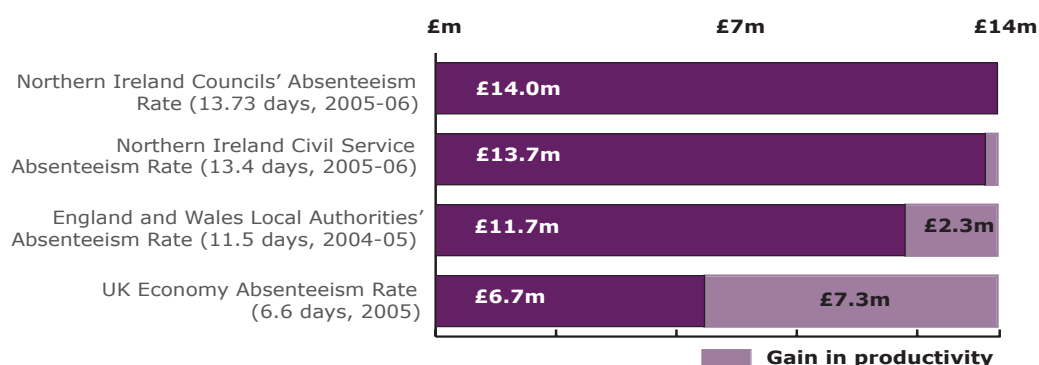
22. When compared to the latest figures available for local authorities in England and Wales, the 2005-06 absenteeism rate in Northern Ireland councils is more than two days higher. Had the Northern Ireland rate been similar to that of England and Wales, the gain in productivity would have been £2.3 million (Figure 7), or a gain of 90 staff in post throughout the year at no additional cost.

23. Reducing the Northern Ireland council's absenteeism rate to that of the Northern Ireland Civil Service would have had only a marginal impact (£0.3 million) on council productivity (Figure 7).

24. Currently only seven Northern Ireland councils have absenteeism rates below the average for England and Wales. At paragraph 9, 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 England and Wales.

## 7 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



25. 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 10 per cent of 2005-06 absences were long term (Figure 8).

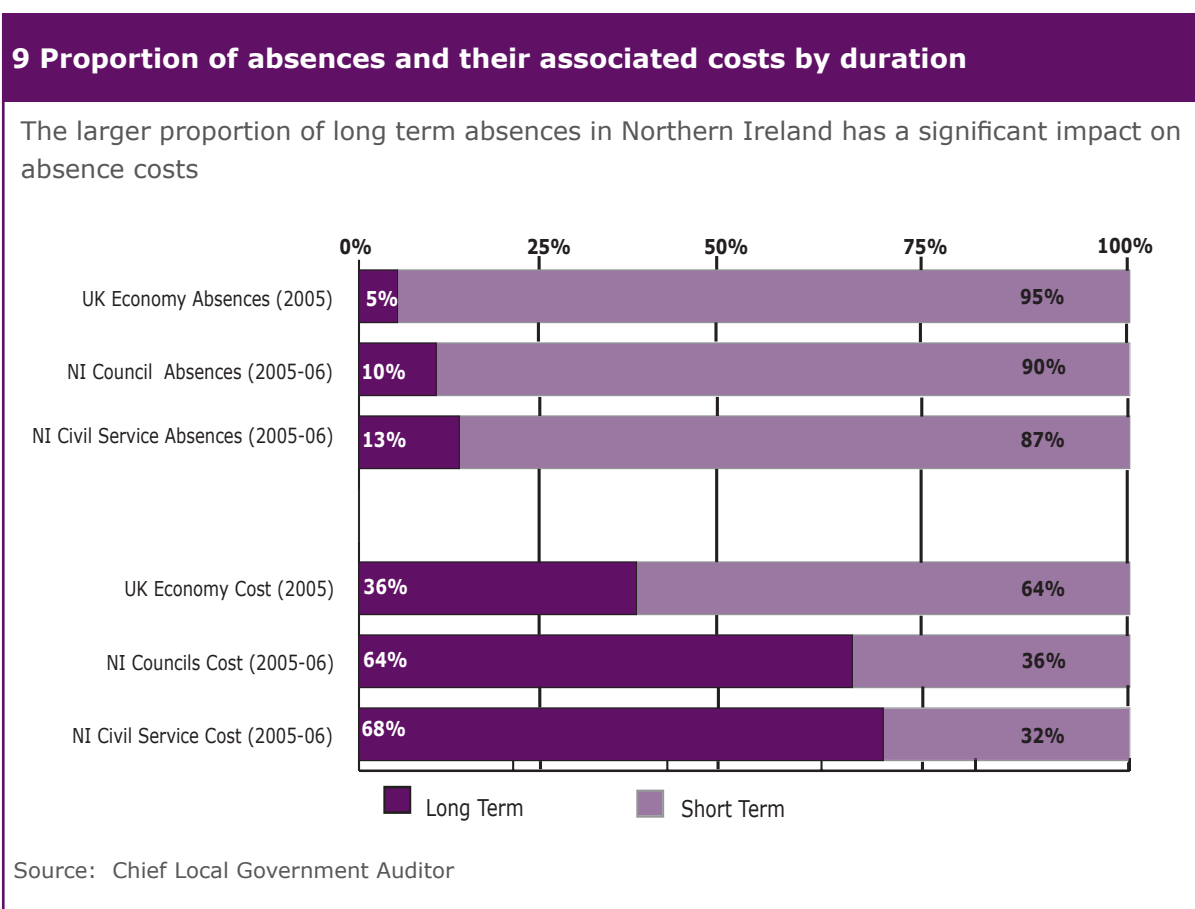
26. In the UK Economy, five per cent of absences were classified as long term, which is half the Northern Ireland council rate (Figure 9).

**8 Analysis of 2005-06 absences in Northern Ireland councils by duration**

10 per cent of absences were long term

	Short Term	Long Term	All Absences
Days lost due to absence	45,374	79,400	124,774
Number of absences	13,102	1,477	14,579
Average length of an absence (days)	3.46	53.76	8.56
Days lost due to absence (per cent)	36	64	100
Absences (per cent)	90	10	100

Source: Northern Ireland councils



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27. The larger proportion of long term absences in councils has a significant impact on the cost of absenteeism. In the UK economy, long term absences represent 36 per cent of the total time lost due to absence. In Northern Ireland councils, 64 per cent of the total time lost due to absence in 2005-06 was as a result of long term absence. The proportion of long term absences 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.

28. In 2005-06, long term absences cost councils £9.0 million in lost productivity. If councils reduced the proportion of long term absences to the average five per cent rate found in the UK economy, the cost of long term absence could be reduced by £3.9 million. It was not possible to ascertain the proportion of absences in England and Wales local authorities which were long term.

29. At paragraph 9, 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.

## Causes of absence in councils

30. Councils were asked to categorise absences by cause, based on a classification developed by Local Government Employers<sup>8</sup>. In 2004-05, 20 councils reported summary information on the causes of absence. For 2005-06, the number of councils reporting this information increased to 23.

31. The information on causes of absence provided by these 23 councils was used to project estimated costs for the causes of absence in respect of all 26 councils.

32. Some caution should be taken in interpreting the projected cost calculations as the actual cost for each cause of absence may have differed had information for all councils been available. The projection should, however, provide a reasonably reliable indication of the underlying position (Figure 10). It is based on a cross-section of councils and comprises:

- 85 per cent of all 2005-06 days lost due to absenteeism; and
- 84 per cent of all 2005-06 absences.

33. The accuracy of the absenteeism projection to all Northern Ireland councils will be enhanced when the remaining three councils provide causes of absence information. Each council expects to record such information by 2007-08 at the latest:

- Ards Borough Council (2006-07);
- Derry City Council (2007-08); and
- Lisburn City Council (2007-08).

**10 Proportion of Northern Ireland council absences with a reported cause in 2005-06**

	Days lost due to absenteeism	Absences
All Northern Ireland councils	124,774	14,579
Councils reporting information on causes	106,440	12,298
Proportion	85%	84%
Source: Northern Ireland councils		

8. 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.

34. Based on information provided by the 23 councils, *stress, depression, mental health and fatigue* is the largest cause of absenteeism, and causes one fifth of days lost due to absenteeism in Northern Ireland councils. For 2005-06, this category of absenteeism represents £2.8 million in lost productivity (Figure 11).

## 11 Projected Northern Ireland council costs of absence by cause (2005-06)

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

	Councils reporting information		All Councils
	Days lost due to absenteeism	Days lost due to absenteeism (%)	Projected Cost (£m)
Stress, depression, mental health & fatigue	21,130	20	2.8
Musculo-skeletal problems	16,406	15	2.1
Back and neck problems	13,493	13	1.8
Other	12,732	12	1.7
Stomach, liver, kidney & digestion	11,731	11	1.5
Infections	10,091	9	1.3
Heart, blood pressure & circulation	5,938	6	0.8
Chest & respiratory	4,605	4	0.6
Eye, ear, nose & mouth /dental	3,571	3	0.4
Pregnancy (excluding maternity leave)	2,676	3	0.4
Neurological	2,359	2	0.3
Genito-Urinary /Gynaecological	1,708	2	0.3
<b>Total</b>	<b>106,440</b>	<b>100</b>	<b>14.0</b>

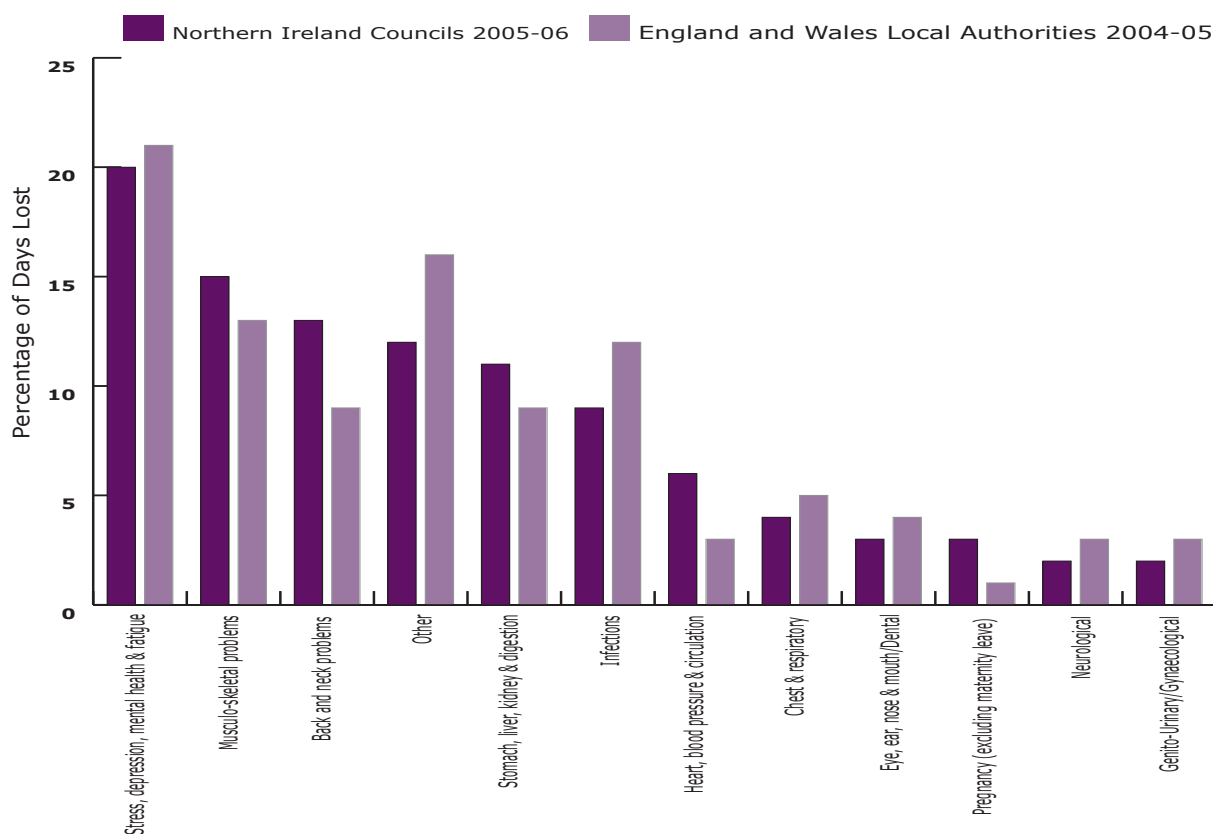
Source: Northern Ireland councils

35. The causes of absence in Northern Ireland councils have been listed in Figure 11 according to total days lost (commencing with the cause of absence leading to the greatest time lost). Local Government Employers<sup>9</sup> also ranked each of the causes of absence for local authorities in England and Wales on the basis of total days lost. There is some similarity between Northern Ireland councils, and England and Wales councils in the proportions of absence occurring by category. Stress, depression, mental health and fatigue is also the single biggest cause of absence in England and Wales (Figure 12).

36. Different causes of absence would not appear to explain the additional £2.3 million absence costs incurred by Northern Ireland councils when compared to local authorities in England and Wales (Figure 7). 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.

## 12 Causes of absence in Northern Ireland councils and 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 local authorities



Source: Chief Local Government Auditor

9. Local Government Employers: *Sickness Absence in Local Government 2004-05*.

37. For 2005-06, 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 almost all other causes of absence (Figure 13). Absences due to heart, blood pressure or circulation difficulties last the longest with an average duration of almost seven weeks or 34 working days.

### 13 Number of absences recorded by Northern Ireland councils for each cause (2005-06)

*Infections or stomach, liver, kidney & digestion ailments cause almost half of all absences*

	Days lost due to absenteeism	Absences	Average duration (days)	Absence (%)
Stomach, liver, kidney & digestion	11,731	2,833	4	23
Infections	10,091	2,785	4	23
Other	12,732	1,389	9	11
Musculo-skeletal problems	16,406	1,032	16	8
Back and neck problems	13,493	980	14	8
Stress, depression, mental health & fatigue	21,130	878	24	7
Eye, ear, nose & mouth /dental	3,571	802	5	7
Neurological	2,359	562	4	5
Chest & respiratory	4,605	556	8	5
Heart, blood pressure & circulation	5,938	174	34	1
Genito-Urinary /Gynaecological	1,708	161	11	1
Pregnancy (excluding maternity leave)	2,676	146	18	1
<b>Total</b>	<b>106,440</b>	<b>12,298</b>	<b>9</b>	<b>100</b>

Source: Northern Ireland councils

## Absenteeism policies in councils

38. By 2005-06, all councils had implemented a written absence policy, with the exception of Magherafelt District Council. Most councils' absenteeism policies incorporate six standard absence management tools (Figure 14). In particular, the use of return to work interviews and formal notification of absence procedures are included in all 25 written policies. In 2005-06, these tools were ranked by 19 councils in the order they regarded as being most effective. The results indicated that return to work interviews are regarded as the most effective absence management tool.

41. Four of the 25 councils with a documented absence policy indicated that they do not perform any internal monitoring to ensure the policy is followed. These four councils are: Coleraine Borough Council, Craigavon Borough Council, Limavady Borough Council and Newtownabbey Borough Council. 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.

<b>14 Management tools for absence ranked by Northern Ireland councils (2005-06)</b>		
Councils consider return to work interviews to be the most effective absence management tool		
	<b>Councils Incorporating Tool</b>	<b>Perceived Effectiveness Ranking</b>
Return to work interviews	25	1st
Occupational Health Service	24	2nd
Giving absence statistics to supervisors	25	3rd
Formal Notification Procedures	23	4th
Discipline Procedures	23	5th
Workplace counselling	22	6th
Source: Northern Ireland councils		

39. In the UK economy as a whole, return to work interviews are similarly regarded as the most effective absence management tool<sup>10</sup>.

40. All councils with written policies stated that staff were made aware of their absence policy. Methods used to raise staff awareness of absence policies varied. These included:

- providing new staff members with a copy of the policy on induction to the council;
- holding awareness sessions for staff members;
- making electronic copies available on council intranets or shared network drives.

42. More than half of Northern Ireland councils told us that they had taken action to reduce stress-related absenteeism. Some councils have introduced a confidential counselling service as a means of managing stress in the workplace.

43. Seven councils have implemented a stress or mental health policy. 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. The policy is likely to indicate how it relates to the council's absence management policy.

10. Confederation of British Industry: Absence minded (Absence and labour turnover 2006)

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44. As stress-related absence is the single largest cause of absenteeism in Northern Ireland councils (paragraph 34), 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.

45. Staff are notified of absence information in twelve councils. A variety of notification methods are used, including providing managers with absence information to relay to staff through team briefing sessions. The communication of absence information to staff helps ensure that staff are aware of the importance of absenteeism and the role each individual can play. We recommend all councils routinely notify staff of a range of absenteeism information including rates, targets and policies.



## Absenteeism targets in councils

46. 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 departments<sup>11</sup>. This involves an overall reduction in sickness absence, from 15.5 days in 2003-04 to 9.5 days by 2009-10, which represents an annual eight per cent reduction target over the six year period.

47. In 2005-06, half of the 26 councils had established corporate or departmental level targets for managing absenteeism rates. Only three councils achieved the target set. In each case, it could be argued that the targets were not particularly challenging:

- Carrickfergus Borough Council's target was to reduce their absenteeism rate to below that of their 2004-05 rate. The council has a high absenteeism rate when compared with almost all other Northern Ireland councils.
- Castlereagh Borough Council's target was to reduce by 50 days the total number of days lost through sickness absence year-on-year, a reduction of less than 0.01 per cent.
- Lisburn City Council's target lost time rate was virtually the same as the actual rate achieved in 2004-05, a reduction of 0.07 per cent on the 2004-05 absenteeism rate.

48. At paragraph 9, 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.

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11. Northern Ireland Statistics and Research Agency: *Analysis of Sickness Absence in the Northern Ireland Departments 2005-06*.

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## Absenteeism data in councils

49. Data collection questionnaires, seeking details of absenteeism during the financial year to 31 March 2006, were issued to all 26 councils in May 2006. We asked for completed questionnaires to be returned by 30 June 2006. Only five councils had submitted responses on or before this date. By 31 August, some nine weeks later, responses had not been received from three councils: Belfast City Council; Banbridge District Council; and Derry City Council.

50. Derry City Council was the last council to submit a response. The council's completed questionnaire was received on 13 October 2006, 15 weeks after the due date.

51. This report has been substantially delayed due to the late receipt of responses. Had all responses been received by the deadline, this report could have been completed earlier.

52. The apparent inability of the majority of councils to produce comparative 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. Consequently, opportunities to react promptly to any increased absenteeism may be lost. To assist internal management, and the preparation of our 2006-07 report, we recommend all councils should ensure absenteeism data is compiled on a timely basis.

53. Absenteeism returns from councils were subject to reasonableness tests to provide assurance on the integrity and consistency of the information presented. For 2005-06, we visited six councils and their returns were subjected to more detailed scrutiny. This included the examination of supporting documentation on a sample basis. This examination uncovered missing documentation and inconsistencies in four of the six councils.

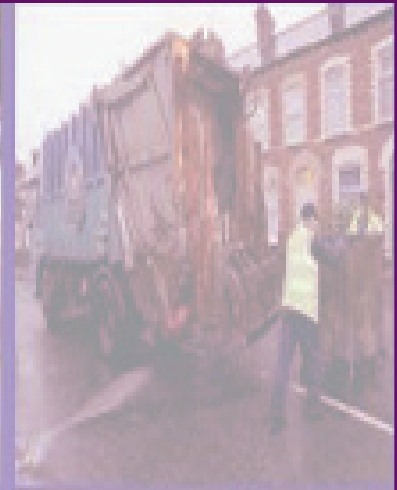
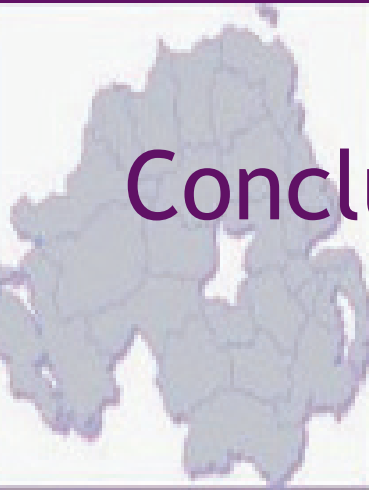
54. One council's return was based on a spreadsheet that had been completed from weekly absence returns. On review, there appeared to be a number of discrepancies between the return and the spreadsheet. It is doubtful whether this approach would enable the council to fully rely on its absenteeism data.

55. The effective management of absenteeism in councils requires reliable absence data. Councils should ensure the integrity of the data used to calculate and monitor absence rates, and to set absenteeism targets.

56. In five of the 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. These policies also stated that a return to work form, recording the interview, should be completed by the returning employee's line manager. On review, it was apparent that a return to work form was not always completed, or it was not readily available for inspection. This would appear to be in contravention of councils' absenteeism policies. As the return to work interview has been ranked as the most effective absence management tool (paragraph 38), councils should ensure that, where required, line managers carry out these interviews and formally document them.



# Conclusions



### Conclusions

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 welcome the reduction in the overall 2005-06 Northern Ireland council absenteeism rate, which means this is now lower than at any time since 2001-02. However, this rate remains high when compared with other employment sectors.

Given the substantial impact on increased productivity, which would arise from a further reduction in absenteeism, it is our intention to review this matter again for the year ending 31 March 2007.

# Appendices



## Appendix 1: Commentary on Northern Ireland councils' three-year average annual absenteeism rate (paragraph 7)

### Antrim Borough Council

The 2003-06 three-year absenteeism rate of 13.56 days for this council is slightly below average. The council's comparative position has improved by more than two days from 2000-03 when it had one of the highest rates at 15.79 days.

### Ards Borough Council

Ards Borough Council has experienced an increase in absenteeism rate since 2000-03. Whilst the increase was less than two days, it was enough to move the council from a better than average rate of 12.00 days in 2000-03 to a rate of 13.70 days in 2003-06, which is similar to the current Northern Ireland council average.

### Armagh City and District Council

An increase of more than two and a half days has taken the absenteeism rate of Armagh City and District Council from 8.30 days in 2000-03 to 10.92 days in 2003-06. This council had the lowest absenteeism rate for the 2000-03 period. The absenteeism rate for 2003-06, however, remains well below the Northern Ireland council average.

### Ballymena Borough Council

Ballymena Borough Council has experienced a half day increase in its absenteeism rate over the two periods from 9.51 days in 2000-03 to 10.06 days in 2003-06. The council continues however to have significantly low absenteeism rates when compared with the Northern Ireland council average.

### Ballymoney Borough Council

With a 2003-06 absenteeism rate of 15.12 days, Ballymoney Borough Council's absenteeism rate is above the Northern Ireland council average. However, the council has reduced its rate by half a day which is a small improvement on the 2000-03 average of 15.91 days.

### Banbridge District Council

Banbridge District Council experienced a reduction in its absenteeism rate of one and a half days from 13.24 days in 2000-03 to 11.77 days in 2003-06. This improves on a relative absenteeism rate which was already better than the Northern Ireland council average.

### Belfast City Council

Belfast City Council has had absenteeism rates above the Northern Ireland council average in respect of both the 2000-03 and 2003-06 periods. In the latter period however the council has experienced an increase of almost a day and a half from 14.76 days to 16.12 days. Belfast City Council's absenteeism rate is now considerably above the Northern Ireland council average.

### Carrickfergus Borough Council

Carrickfergus Borough Council experienced an increase in its absenteeism rate of three and a half days from 15.26 days in 2000-03 to 18.30 days in 2003-06. The council's absenteeism rate, although previously above the Northern Ireland council average, is now very significantly above average.

### Castlereagh Borough Council

Castlereagh Borough Council has reduced its absenteeism rate significantly when comparing the two three-year periods, a reduction of four days from the 2000-03 rate of 14.42 days to 10.41 days in 2003-06. This reduction has meant that Castlereagh Borough Council has moved from an absenteeism rate which was above the Northern Ireland council average to a rate which is well below the Northern Ireland council average.

### Coleraine Borough Council

Coleraine Borough Council experienced an increase in its absenteeism rate of three days from 11.06 days in 2000-03 to 14.14 days in 2003-06. The council's absenteeism rate, although previously below the Northern Ireland council average, is now slightly above average.

### Cookstown District Council

Cookstown District Council's absenteeism rate has increased by two and a half days from 11.74 days in 2000-03 to 14.26 days in 2003-06. The council absenteeism rate although previously below the Northern Ireland council average is now slightly above average.

### Craigavon Borough Council

Craigavon Borough Council experienced an increase in its absenteeism rate of two days from 15.08 days in 2000-03 to 17.34 days in 2003-06. As a result an absenteeism rate which was above the Northern Ireland council average is now significantly above average.

### Derry City Council

Derry City Council experienced an increase in its absenteeism rate of two days from 15.30 days in 2000-03 to 17.34 days in 2003-06. As a result an absenteeism rate which was above the Northern Ireland council average is now significantly above average.

### Down District Council

Down District Council has experienced an increase in its absenteeism rate since the previous three-year period of one and a half days, from 9.75 days in 2000-03 to 11.23 days in 2003-06. The council's absenteeism remains below the Northern Ireland council average, but is no longer significantly below average.

### Dungannon and South Tyrone Borough Council

Dungannon and South Tyrone Borough Council experienced a reduction in its absenteeism rate of one and a quarter days from 13.35 days in 2000-03 to 12.10 days in 2003-06. This improves on an absenteeism rate which was already better than the Northern Ireland council average.

### Fermanagh District Council

Fermanagh District Council has achieved the lowest three year absenteeism rate out of all 26 councils, with an average of 8.37 days for 2003-06. This is an improvement of more than two days on the 2000-03 rate of 10.41 days.

### Larne Borough Council

Larne Borough Council's three year average for 2003-06 of 20.30 days is the highest of all 26 councils. The 2003-06 rate is almost five days higher than the 2000-03 rate of 15.41 days. This increase was the highest experienced by any councils over the period. Within the 2003-06 period, however, the council has reduced absenteeism from a peak in 2003-04.

### Limavady Borough Council

Limavady Borough Council experienced an increase in its absenteeism rate of more than three days from 11.45 days in 2000-03 to 14.76 days in 2003-06. The council absenteeism rate although previously below the Northern Ireland council average is now above average.

### Lisburn City Council

Lisburn City Council has reduced its absenteeism rate significantly when comparing the two three-year periods, with a reduction of four days from the 2000-03 rate of 13.97 days to 9.93 days in 2003-06. This was the largest improvement over the period by any council. Lisburn City Council has moved from an absenteeism rate which was slightly above the Northern Ireland council average to a rate which is significantly below the average.

### Magherafelt District Council

Magherafelt District Council has experienced a marginal increase in its absenteeism rate from 9.37 days in 2000-03 to 9.49 days in 2003-06. The council continues to have absenteeism rates which are significantly below the Northern Ireland council average.

### Moyle District Council

Moyle District Council's absenteeism rate has increased by four and three quarter days from 9.75 days in 2000-03 to 14.48 days in 2003-06. This increase was one of the highest experienced by any council over the period. From having a rate which was significantly below the Northern Ireland council average, Moyle District Council now has a rate which is above the average.



### Newry and Mourne District Council

Newry and Mourne District Council's absenteeism rate has improved by a day from the 2000-03 rate of 20.16 days to the 2003-06 rate of 19.09 days. Although the council no longer has the worst absenteeism rate in Northern Ireland, its rate continues to be very significantly above the Northern Ireland council average.

### Newtownabbey Borough Council

Newtownabbey Borough Council experienced a reduction of over a day in its absenteeism rate from 14.01 days in 2000-03 to 12.79 days in 2003-06. This improvement moves the council from an absenteeism rate above the Northern Ireland council average to one which is below the average.

### North Down Borough Council

North Down Borough Council has reduced its absenteeism rate considerably when comparing the two three-year periods, a reduction of three days from the 2000-03 rate of 16.43 days to 13.38 days in 2003-06. This reduction has meant that the council has moved from an absenteeism rate which was above the Northern Ireland council average to a rate which is below the Northern Ireland council average.

### Omagh District Council

Omagh District Council's absenteeism rates for 2000-03 and 2003-06 were virtually identical, 15.03 days and 15.04 days respectively. Across the two periods the council's absenteeism rate was above the Northern Ireland council average.

### Strabane District Council

Strabane District Council experienced a reduction in its absenteeism rate of one and a half days from 11.45 days in 2000-03 to 10.05 days in 2003-06. This improves on an absenteeism rate which is now significantly below the Northern Ireland council average.

## Appendix 2: Potential gains in productivity for each Northern Ireland council (paragraph 11)

<b>Potential gains in productivity for each Northern Ireland council</b>					
Annual gains of £5.6 million in productivity could be made if all councils matched the lowest absenteeism rate reported by Fermanagh District Council (2003-06)					
	<b>Average absenteeism rate for the 2003-06 period</b>	<b>Average annual staff costs (£'000)</b>	<b>Average annual lost productivity 2003-06 (£'000)</b>	<b>Difference from absenteeism rate of 8.37 days</b>	<b>Average annual potential productivity gains based on the absenteeism rate of 8.37 days<sup>1</sup> (£'000)</b>
Fermanagh District Council	8.37	5,756	215	-	-
Magherafelt District Council	9.49	3,576	152	1.12	18
Lisburn City Council	9.93	10,703	475	1.57	75
Strabane District Council	10.05	3,618	162	1.69	27
Ballymena Borough Council	10.06	6,656	299	1.69	50
Castlereagh Borough Council	10.41	7,526	350	2.04	69
Armagh City and District Council	10.92	6,338	309	2.56	72
Down District Council	11.23	6,703	336	2.86	86
Banbridge District Council	11.77	4,074	214	3.40	62
Dungannon & South Tyrone Borough Council	12.10	5,451	295	3.74	91
Newtownabbey Borough Council	12.79	8,501	485	4.42	168
North Down Borough Council	13.38	8,017	479	5.02	180
Antrim Borough Council	13.56	5,094	308	5.19	118
Ards Borough Council	13.70	7,794	477	5.33	185
Coleraine Borough Council	14.14	6,734	425	5.77	174
Cookstown District Council	14.26	3,652	232	5.89	96
Moyle District Council	14.48	2,574	166	6.12	70
Limavady Borough Council	14.76	3,154	208	6.40	90
Omagh District Council	15.04	6,472	435	6.67	193
Ballymoney Borough Council	15.12	2,561	173	6.76	77
Belfast City Council	16.12	55,110	3,966	7.76	1,908
Craigavon Borough Council	17.34	10,659	825	8.97	427
Derry City Council	17.34	13,241	1,025	8.97	530
Carrickfergus Borough Council	18.80	4,454	374	10.44	208
Newry and Mourne District Council	19.09	9,408	802	10.73	451
Larne Borough Council	20.30	3,688	334	11.94	197
<b>Total</b>		<b>211,514</b>	<b>13,521</b>		<b>5,621</b>

1. The potential productivity gain is derived from the difference in absenteeism rate when compared to a rate of 8.37 days (Figure 1), staff costs and the potential working days available to a full time equivalent employee over the period (224 days per year).

Source: Chief Local Government Auditor



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