

Place & Resources Scrutiny Committee

24 September 2026

Workforce Deep Dive: Recruitment, Vacancy Management, Attendance and Wellbeing

For Review and Consultation

Cabinet Member:

Cllr B Wilson, Transformation, Customer & Workforce

Local Councillor(s): Not applicable

Senior Leadership Team:

S Ford - Assistant Chief Executive

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Statutory Authority:

Report status: Public

1. Executive summary (maximum of 500 words)

- 1.1 A motivated, healthy and engaged workforce is fundamental to the performance and sustainability of the Council. Employees who feel valued, supported and able to maintain good physical and mental wellbeing are more likely to be productive, innovative and committed to delivering high-quality services for our residents. Strong workforce health and engagement contribute to lower levels of sickness absence, improved retention, greater resilience during periods of change, and a more positive employee experience, all of which support service continuity and organisational effectiveness.
- 1.2 This report provides an overview of two key workforce areas monitored through Dorset Council's performance framework: recruitment and vacancy management, and attendance and wellbeing. Overall, the council has strengthened controls around workforce planning and recruitment whilst maintaining a supportive approach to employee wellbeing and attendance management. Although recruitment outcomes have improved, challenges remain in several specialist professions. Sickness absence continues to

increase, driven primarily by long-term absence, with mental health and musculoskeletal conditions remaining the leading causes of absence. Findings from the recent employee survey demonstrate generally positive employee sentiment, although experience varies considerably across services.

2. Recommendation(s)

- 2.1 To consider the key trends and data shown in the report and confirm support for planned activity to deliver improvements.

3. Reason for the recommendation(s)

- 3.1 To ensure appropriate oversight and scrutiny of work being progressed to support the long-term wellbeing of our workforce and mitigate any risks to service disruption because of recruitment or retention challenges.

4. Recruitment and Vacancy Management

- 4.1 Dorset Council operates a vacancy factor across all service areas, typically requiring services to manage within budgets that are approximately 3% to 8% below the full cost of all established posts. This approach reflects the expectation that vacancies will arise naturally between employees leaving and replacements commencing employment. Whilst this delivers financial discipline, it also requires robust recruitment and vacancy management arrangements.
- 4.2 During August 2026, Dorset Council spent roughly 93% of it's staffing budget, indicating that around 7% of posts were vacant during the month. However, a proportion of these vacant posts will be occupied temporarily by agency workers, particularly in known hard to recruit areas such as social care.
- 4.2 Measures have been introduced to strengthen oversight of recruitment activity and workforce establishment management. These include Executive Director approval for recruitment requests and enhanced central scrutiny of vacancies. Decisions are taken by balancing service priorities, financial considerations, workforce capacity and associated risks, including the potential impact on employee wellbeing where vacancies are held for extended periods.

5. Recruitment Performance

- 5.1 Recruitment follows a structured ten-stage process covering approval, advertising, shortlisting, interviews, offers and onboarding. Current data from the Eploy recruitment system shows that the average time taken from advertisement to offer is 46.83 days. The period between offer and commencement is dependent upon candidate availability and notice periods.

5.2 The Recruitment and Attraction Team has successfully improved recruitment outcomes whilst reducing advertising costs through:

- Stronger employer branding.
- Increased use of social media.
- More targeted recruitment campaigns.
- Improved recruitment marketing approaches.

6. Recruitment Challenges

6.1 Despite positive recruitment performance overall, Dorset Council continues to experience difficulties recruiting to several specialist professions, including:

- Legal Services
- Social Work
- Housing Services
- Specialist Leisure Roles

To address these challenges, targeted recruitment campaigns have been implemented, using approaches such as:

- Staff-led recruitment videos.
- Dedicated recruitment landing pages.
- Social media advertising.
- Employee stories and case studies.
- Traditional marketing activity, including outdoor advertising.

6.2 The most extensive example is the integrated social work recruitment campaign, developed jointly between Adult and Children's Services, highlighting Dorset Council's learning culture, flexible working arrangements, supportive management approach and quality of life benefits.

7. Employee Retention and Onboarding

7.1 Recruiting employees is only one aspect of building workforce capacity. Ensuring employees have a positive onboarding experience is equally important in supporting retention. Dorset Council is currently reviewing its onboarding and induction arrangements to ensure new starters receive appropriate support whilst maintaining a positive employee experience.

7.2 A new onboarding framework has been developed around six principles:

- Prepare
- Connect
- Learn
- Support
- Grow
- Improve

7.3 The framework aligns onboarding with the probation process through four phases:

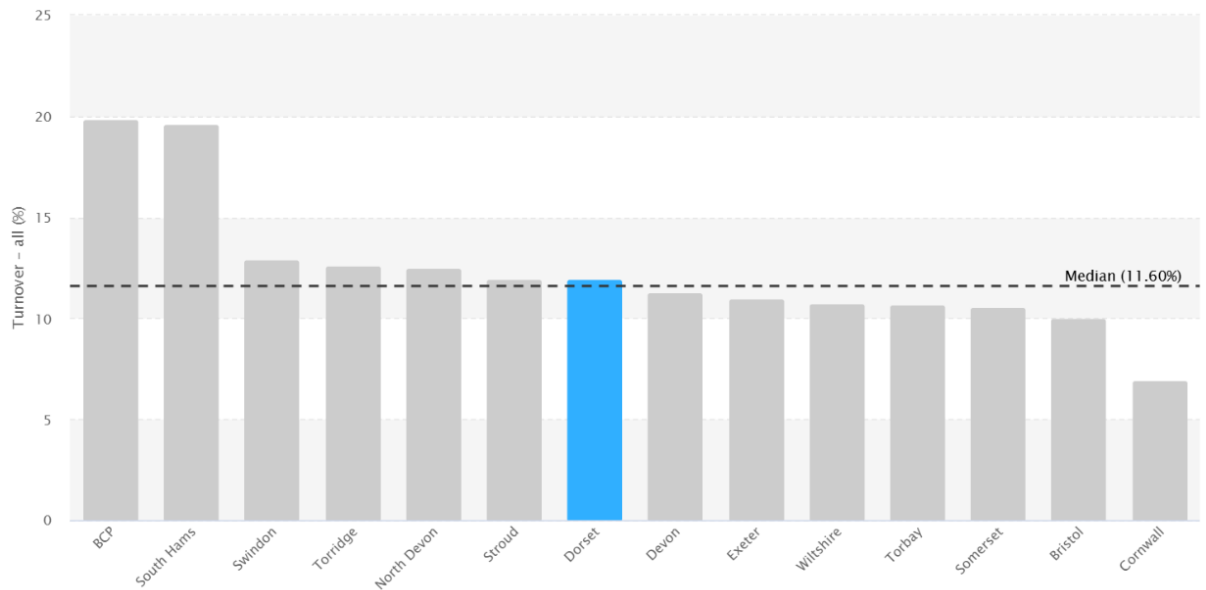
1. Learn and Understand (Weeks 2 to 4)
2. Connect and Contribute (Months 2 to 3)
3. Embed and Grow (Months 3 to 6)
4. Thrive and Retain (Month 6 onwards)

A dedicated working group is overseeing implementation, supported by the development of a mandatory learning pathway within Thrive, the Council's Learning Management System.

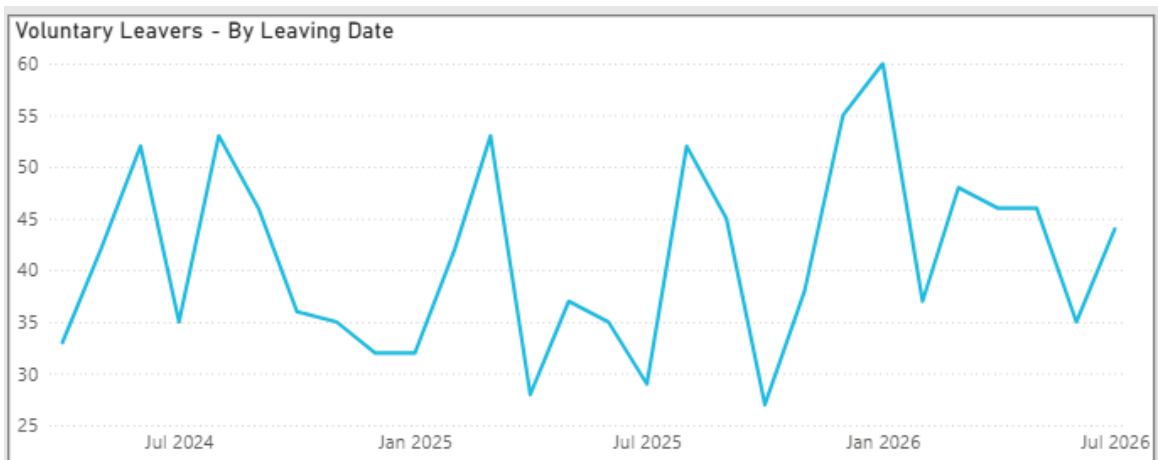
8. Turnover

8.1 Overall employee turnover has remained relatively stable, fluctuating between 11.59% and 12.87% over the last two years. However, voluntary turnover has shown a gradual increase, rising from 9.56% in June 2025 to 10.89% in June 2026.

8.2 Whilst we saw a slight increase in turnover, this was largely reflected across the sector, with Dorset Council around the midpoint of the range across councils in the South-west, as illustrated in the chart below:



- 8.2 When looking specifically at voluntary turnover, the chart below shows the high levels of fluctuation in the number of leavers each month. Analysis suggests this fluctuation is not specifically linked to organisational transformation activity, as trends are broadly consistent across all service areas, with no obvious correlation with the number of employees choosing to leave the Council and areas going through change.



- 8.3 Within the last year:

- 439 employees commenced employment.
- 61 employees subsequently left.
- 55 departures were voluntary.

- 8.4 Whilst this indicates a slightly higher proportion of new starters leaving within their first year (12.52%), current data does not suggest a significant retention concern relating to people within their first year of employment with the

Council. Improvements to recruitment and onboarding processes are expected to support further reductions in early attrition.

9. Wellbeing Strategy

9.1 Dorset Council adopts a proactive, supportive and preventative approach to employee wellbeing and attendance. Key elements include:

- Promoting healthy workloads and supportive leadership.
- Offering flexible working arrangements.
- Providing occupational health and wellbeing support.
- Encouraging early intervention through wellbeing discussions.
- Managing attendance fairly and consistently.
- Monitoring workforce data to identify emerging trends and risks.

The overall objective is to maintain a healthy, engaged workforce whilst ensuring effective service delivery.

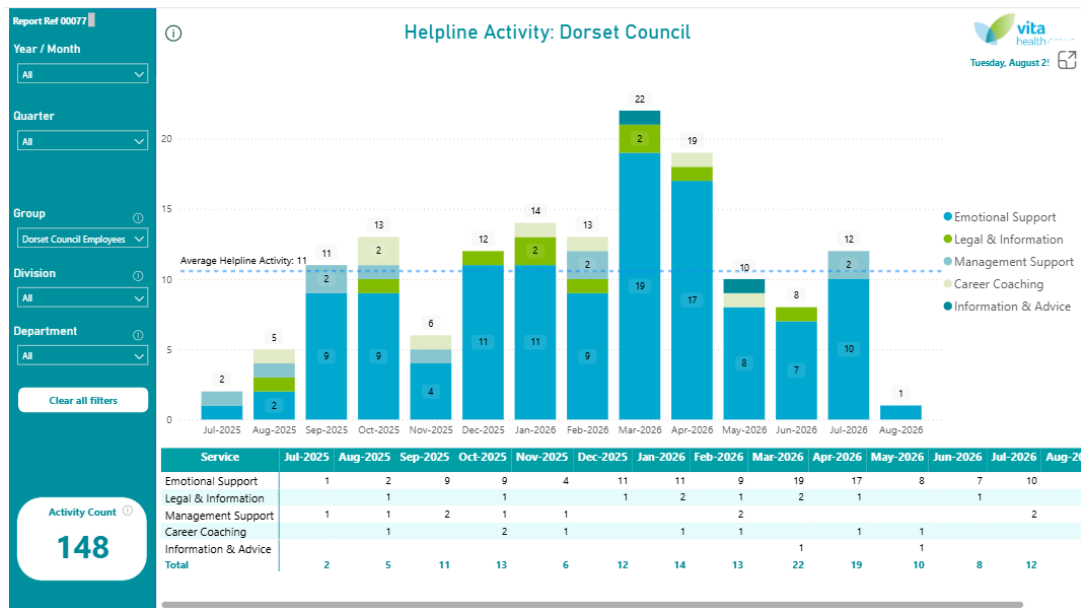
10. Support Available

10.1 Managers and employees are supported through four specialist services:

Service	Role
HR Advisory Team	Attendance management advice and support
Employee Wellbeing Team	Wellbeing initiatives and proactive support
Occupational Health Team	Specialist workplace health advice and assessments
Health & Safety Team	Support for safe and legally compliant workplaces

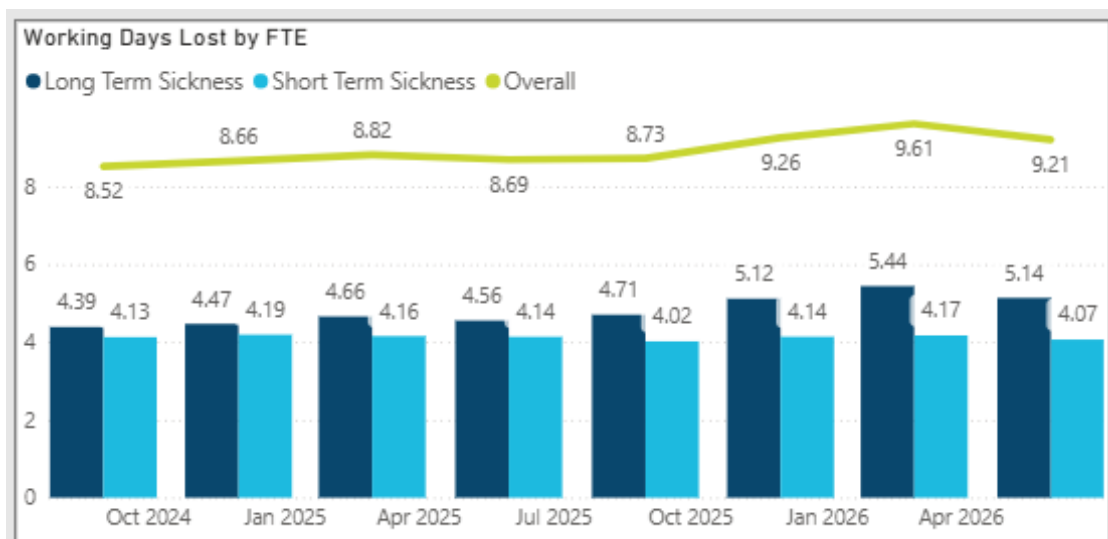
10.2 In addition, employees have access to an Employee Assistance Programme (EAP) provided by Vita Health. Since its launch in August 2025, 148 employees have accessed support through the programme.

Details of services accessed through Vita Health is shown in the table below:

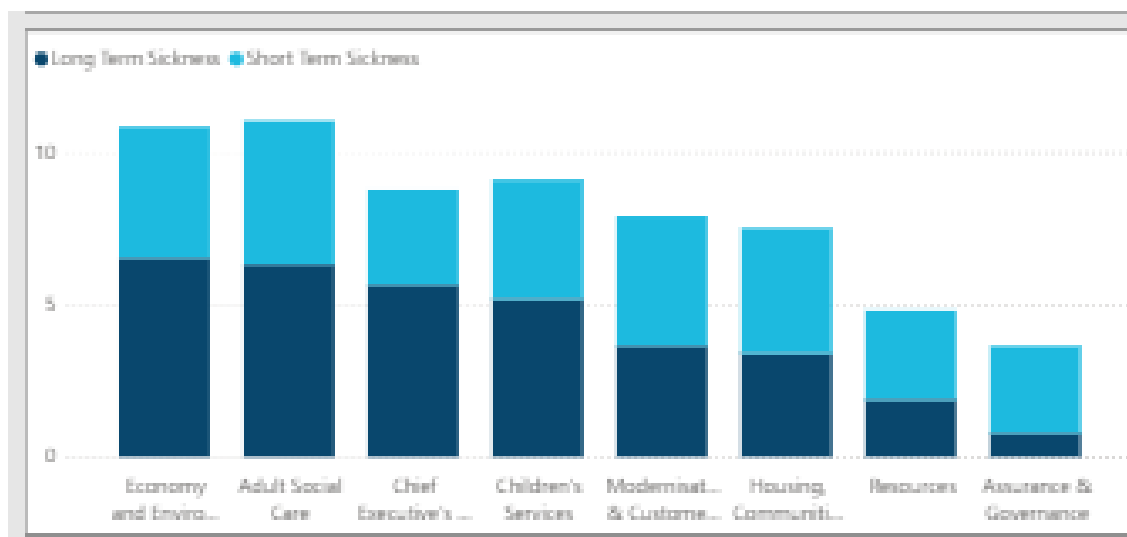


11. Sickness Absence

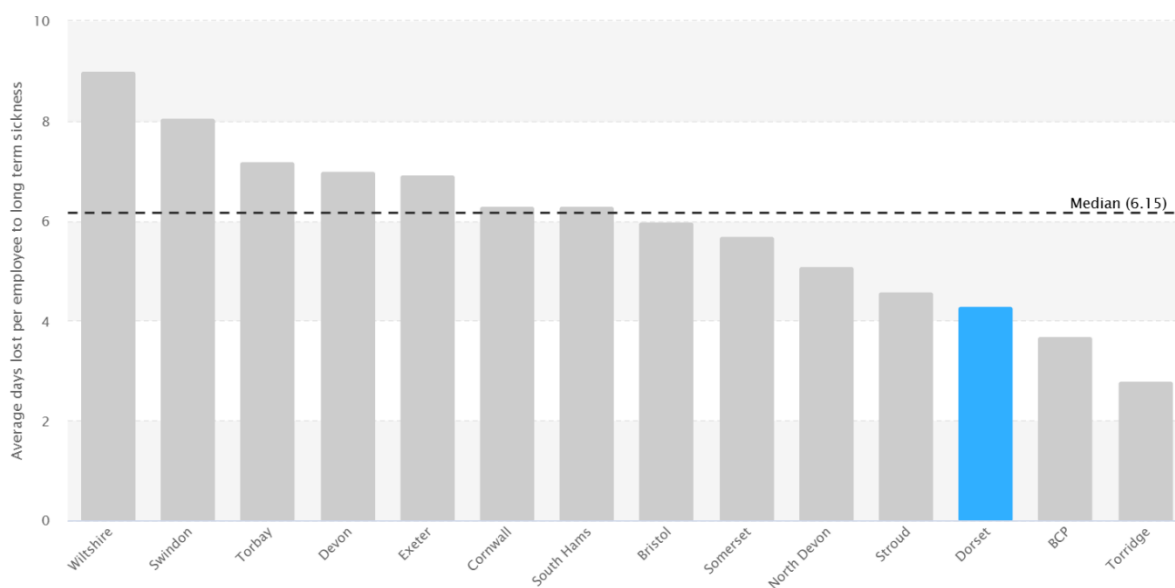
11.1 As shown in the table below, sickness absence has shown an upward trend over the past two years. Analysis indicates that this increase is largely attributable to growth in long-term sickness absence, whilst short-term absence rates have remained relatively stable. This pattern is consistent across most service areas.

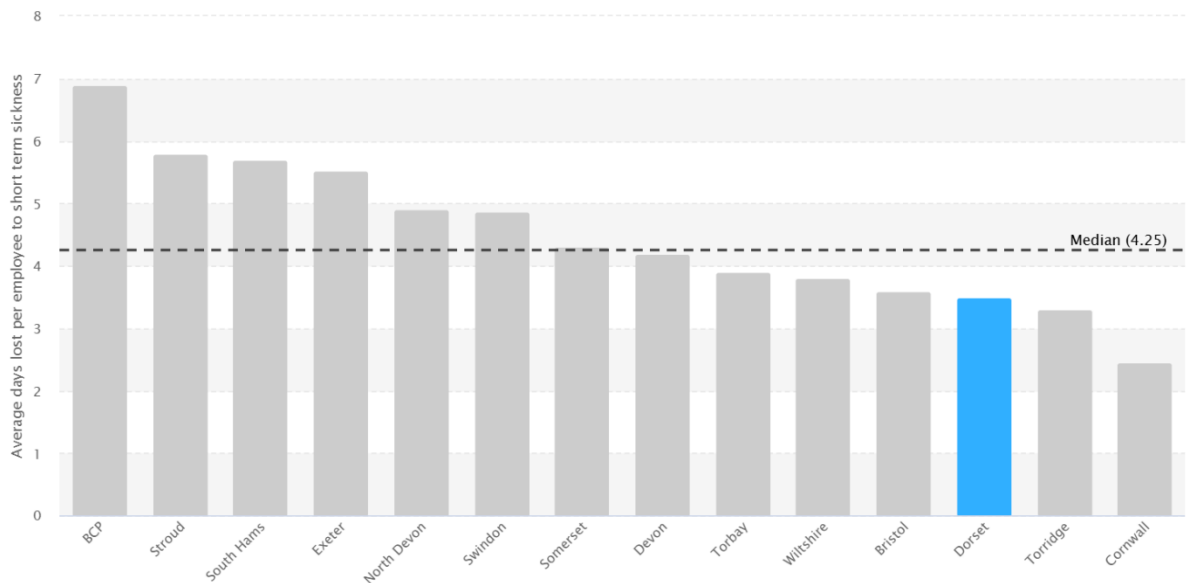


11.2 There is a variation across directorates, with Economy and Environment and Adult Social Care currently recording the highest levels of absence, as shown in the table below:



11.3 Whilst we have seen an upturn in sickness absence over the last year, this is a trend seen across most local authorities, with Dorset Council placed in the lower quartile of sickness ranges for both short-term and long-term in 2025/26, as shown below:





11.4 The two most significant causes of absence continue to be Mental Health conditions and Musculoskeletal disorders. The table below shows the volume of sickness attributable to these two categories of absence over the last three years.

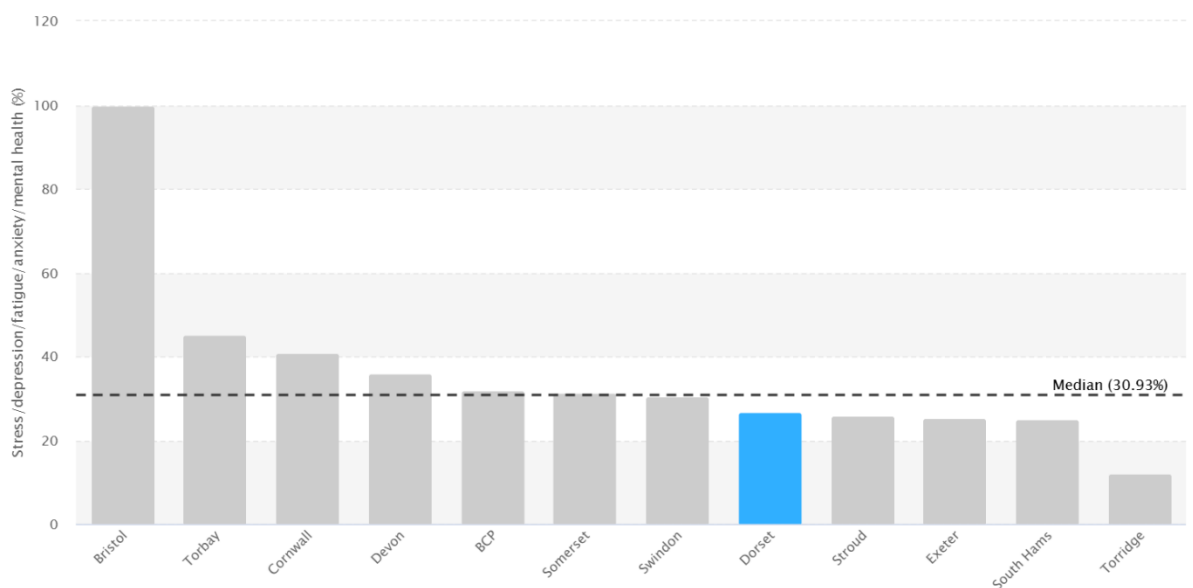
		Total Absence		
		2023-24	2024-25	2025-26
Mental Health	Total Days Lost	11767.5	12935.5	14545.5
	Average Length of Absence	16.27	16.27	17.76
Musculoskeletal	Total Days Lost	6657.00	7991.50	9047.50
	Average Length of Absence	23.23	17.31	14.98
		Short-Term		
		2023-24	2024-25	2025-26
Mental Health	Total Days Lost	2379.5	2240.5	2516.5
	Average Length of Absence	5.17	4.39	4.72
Musculoskeletal	Total Days Lost	1962.00	2061.00	2151.00
	Average Length of Absence	7.45	6.38	5.32
		Long-Term		
		2023-24	2024-25	2025-26
Mental Health	Total Days Lost	9388	10695	12029

Average Length of Absence		38.79	40.01	43.95
Musculoskeletal	Total Days Lost	4695.00	5930.50	6896.50
Average Length of Absence		68.59	52.50	57.14

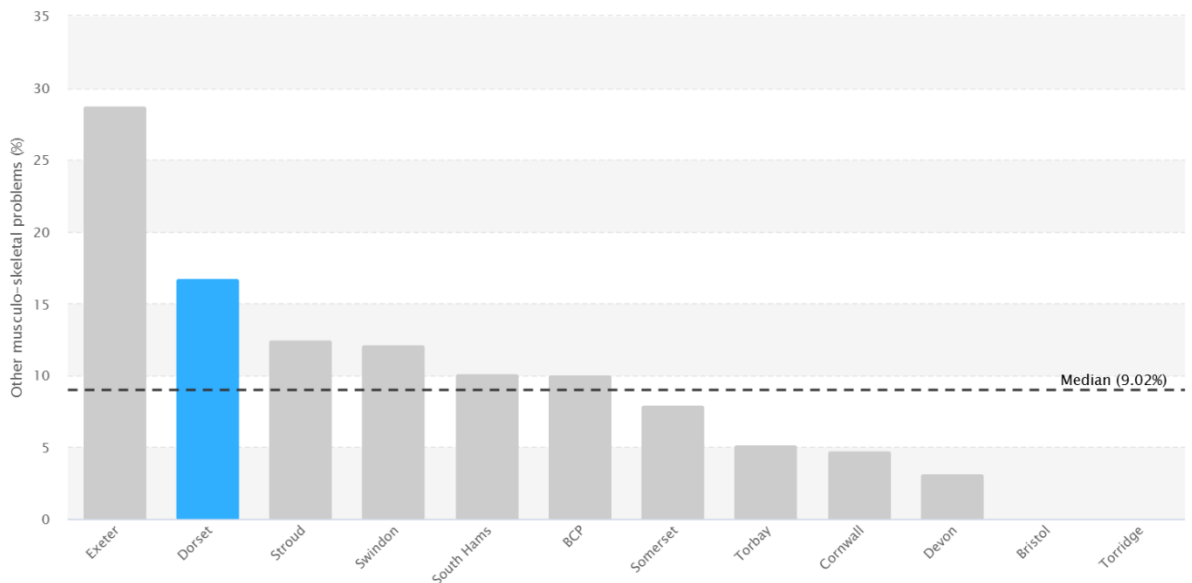
11.5 The above data illustrates a continued increase in the volume of absences against each of these categories over the last three years, with increases more profound when looking at periods of long-term absence. This is consistent with the wider sickness picture for the Council.

11.6 Whilst the number of days absence associated with musculoskeletal illness is significantly lower than the number of recorded days of absence associated with mental health, the length of time colleagues are absent when experiencing long-term absence is higher on average.

11.7 Similarly to the wider sickness absence picture, whilst we have seen an increase in absence levels attributable to mental health, Dorset Council compares favourably when considering our absence levels against those experienced by other councils in the South-west, as shown below:



11.8 However, Dorset Council is in the upper quartile when looking at musculoskeletal absences, as shown below:



- 11.9 The challenge with comparing Dorset Council's levels of musculoskeletal absence with other councils is that there will be considerable variation around what type of service continues to be delivered in house and which are outsourced. One reason for Dorset Council being towards the upper end of the range for musculoskeletal related absences could be the continued internal provision of services such as Waste Collection and Highways, which carry notably higher levels of risk in this area.

12. Targeted Improvement Activity

- 12.1 The Employee Wellbeing Team is currently working with the Health and Safety Executive to develop a comprehensive work-related stress action plan focused on:

- Updating the Council's stress management policy.
- Aligning practice with HSE standards.
- Strengthening stress-related data and reporting.
- Equipping managers with the skills required to manage and reduce workplace stress.

- 12.2 Work is also underway to strengthen support for employees experiencing musculoskeletal conditions through:

- Review of training provision.
- Enhanced manual handling support.
- Consideration of improved access to physiotherapy services.

13. Occupational Health Referrals

13.1 During the last year, 306 employees were referred to our Occupational Health for assessment of their fitness:

- Place: 114
- Children's Services: 97
- Adults: 54
- Corporate Development: 29
- Chief Executive's Office: 9
- Public Health: 3

13.2 Referral patterns broadly align with sickness absence levels, indicating that managers are actively utilising available support mechanisms when attendance concerns arise.

14. Employee Experience and Job Satisfaction

14.1 A recent employee survey provides insight into workforce engagement and satisfaction.

Key findings include:

- Average survey score: 7.32 out of 10
- 71% of responses scored 7 or above
- Overall employee sentiment is positive, although there remains scope for improvement.

Highest scoring directorates:

- Assurance & Governance: 7.65
- Adult Social Care: 7.61
- Resources: 7.58

Lowest scoring directorates:

- Economy & Environment: 7.09
- Chief Executive's Office: 7.20
- Modernisation & Customer Delivery: 7.40

14.2 Variation is more pronounced at service level, with scores ranging from 8.66 within Pensions Benefits to 6.07 within Assets & Property. This suggests

local leadership, working environment and operational pressures are key drivers of employee experience.

15. Correlation Between Absence and Satisfaction

- 15.1 Analysis found no clear organisational relationship between low employee survey scores and high sickness absence levels. However, Economy & Environment recorded both comparatively lower survey outcomes and higher sickness absence levels, suggesting further local analysis may be warranted.

16. Conclusion

- 16.1 Dorset Council has established strong governance arrangements around recruitment and vacancy management, resulting in improved recruitment outcomes and more effective workforce planning. Targeted approaches are being used to address persistent recruitment challenges in nationally competitive professions, while a redesigned onboarding framework aims to further improve retention.
- 16.2 Attendance and wellbeing remain areas of strategic focus. While employee survey results indicate generally positive levels of engagement and satisfaction, sickness absence continues to rise due to increasing long-term absence. The Council's focus on mental health, musculoskeletal wellbeing, early intervention and manager capability provides a clear and evidence-based response to these challenges. Continued monitoring and targeted support will be essential to sustain workforce wellbeing and service delivery performance

17. Legal considerations

- 17.1 No legal considerations have been highlighted within this report.

18. Financial implications

- 18.1 Any increase in sickness absence will introduce costs to the council, which underlines the importance of supporting colleagues to be healthy and at work.

19. Natural environment, climate & ecology implications

- 19.1 No climate implications have been identified within this report.

20. Well-being and health implications

- 20.1 The report outlines Dorset Council's approach to supporting the health and wellbeing of its workforce. The provision of the support outlined enables

employees to remain well and active at work, which will ultimately benefit them directly and also those connected with them.

21. Other implications

21.1 No other implications have been identified.

22. Risk implications

22.1 HAVING CONSIDERED: the risks associated with this decision; the level of risk has been identified as:

Current Risk: HIGH

Residual Risk: MEDIUM

23. Equalities

23.1 No equalities issues are highlighted within this report. Work is currently underway to understand the effectiveness of our recruitment practices on different groups, the results of which can be brought back to a future meeting of the Committee.

24. Appendices

24.1 Not applicable

25. Background papers

25.1 Not applicable

26. Report sign-off

26.1 This report has been through the internal report clearance process and has been signed off by the Director for Assurance & Governance (Monitoring Officer), the Director for Resources (Section 151 Officer) and the appropriate Cabinet Member(s)