



House of Commons

Committee of Public Accounts

The management of staff sickness absence in the Department for Transport and its agencies

**Sixty-fourth Report of Session
2006–07**

*Report, together with formal minutes, oral and
written evidence*

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The Committee of Public Accounts

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Publication

The Reports and evidence of the Committee are published by The Stationery Office by Order of the House. All publications of the Committee (including press notices) are on the Internet at <http://www.parliament.uk/pac>. A list of Reports of the Committee in the present Session is at the back of this volume.

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Summary

Staff of the Department for Transport and its seven executive agencies were absent through sickness for an average of 10.4 working days per full time equivalent employee in 2005. The cost to the taxpayer including indirect costs, was some £24 million.

In four agencies and the centre of the Department, sickness absence levels were between 5.4 and 9.1 average days lost per full time employee, which is below rates found in similar public and private sector organisations. But two agencies had significantly higher sickness rates—the Driving Standards Agency and the Driver and Vehicle Licensing Agency—with levels in excess of 13 days. Both Agencies are large employers, together employing over half of the staff within the Department for Transport group.

Until recently managing sickness absence has not been a priority for any of the businesses within the Department for Transport. Most agencies have made a concerted effort to tackle sickness absence only in the past 12 to 18 months. The Department expects to improve its performance in the future by more consistent implementation of existing policies to manage sickness absence. If all the businesses of the Department were to reduce their sickness levels to those achieved by organisations carrying out similar activities such as administering of paperwork, they could save £3 million each year.

The overall rate of sickness absence for an organisation is influenced by a few people on long term sickness. Around 75% of staff in the Driving Standards Agency and the Driver and Vehicle Licensing Agency took 10 or less days sickness absence in 2006. Mental health and stress issues are the main cause of sickness absence and are a particular cause of long term absence. The Driver and Vehicle Licensing Agency has found that the most common reasons for stress-related absence are non-work related issues.

The Agencies need a better understanding of why some staff take so much sick absence so that measures can be implemented to improve attendance. There appears to be a correlation between high levels of sickness absence and relatively low paid, repetitive, administrative jobs. The recent Capability Review highlighted a number of concerns about leadership within the Department. Measures have been taken to strengthen management capability, which is particularly important in areas where staff are engaged in repetitive administrative tasks.

On the basis of the Comptroller & Auditor General's Report,¹ the Committee examined the Department for Transport (the Department) and two of its agencies, the Driving Standards Agency and the Driver and Vehicle Licensing Agency about their current sickness absence levels and the actions they have in train to meet their 2010 sickness absence targets.

¹ C&AG's Report, *The management of staff sickness absence in the Department for Transport and its agencies*, HC (Session 2006–07) 527

Conclusions and recommendations

1. **The Driving Standards Agency and the Driver and Vehicle Licensing Authority do not have a good understanding of the reasons for higher rates of sickness absence in some parts of their businesses and have only recently undertaken research to address this weakness.**
 - a. The Driving Standards Agency needs to explore regional variations in sickness absence and whether, for example, demographic factors influence levels of sickness absence in test centres; and
 - b. the Driver and Vehicle Licensing Authority should benchmark its levels of sickness absence against local authorities and other local employers of a comparative size, to test if there is a specific problem in Swansea and whether there is any local best practice that the agency can draw on to improve its performance.
2. **The Driver and Vehicle Licensing Agency has succeeded in reducing short term sickness, but long term absence has increased and now accounts for 62% of total absence.** So there is no overall improvement in the Agency's sickness absence rates. The Department and its agencies need to have strategies for managing both short and long term sickness absence and to tackle them continuously.
3. **Management of staff on long term sick leave has generally been poor, and the Department for Transport for example has only in recent months reviewed long-term cases and taken disciplinary action where appropriate.** Long-term absence is the main cause of high sickness absence rates in the Driving Standards Agency and the Driver and Vehicle Licensing Agency, so these Agencies should carry out similar exercises as a matter of urgency.
4. **The central Department and the Government Car Despatch Agency have no annual targets for reducing sickness absence, whilst the Driver and Vehicle Licensing Agency's target is only a one day reduction from the previous year's performance.** All three businesses should set realistic but challenging targets to reduce sickness absence levels.
5. **The Department's recent Capability Review found that only 47% of the Department's staff are proud to work for it and recommended that the new Permanent Secretary should use his vision of the Department to re-energise and motivate staff.** The Department and agencies are taking steps to identify good leaders and to develop their leadership capability. They need to pay particular attention to repetitive work, where sick leave tends to be higher, to make staff feel valued and motivated to come to work.
6. **The Capability Review found that the role of the Department in relation to its agencies and its oversight of Human Resources and other functions is unclear.** So while there are pockets of good practice across the Department and its agencies there is no formal mechanism for sharing them more widely. The Department should take the lead to encourage more systematic sharing of good practice by raising the profile

of staff sickness management within the department and across agencies. It should organise workshops, conferences and training events for line managers and Human Resources Directors.

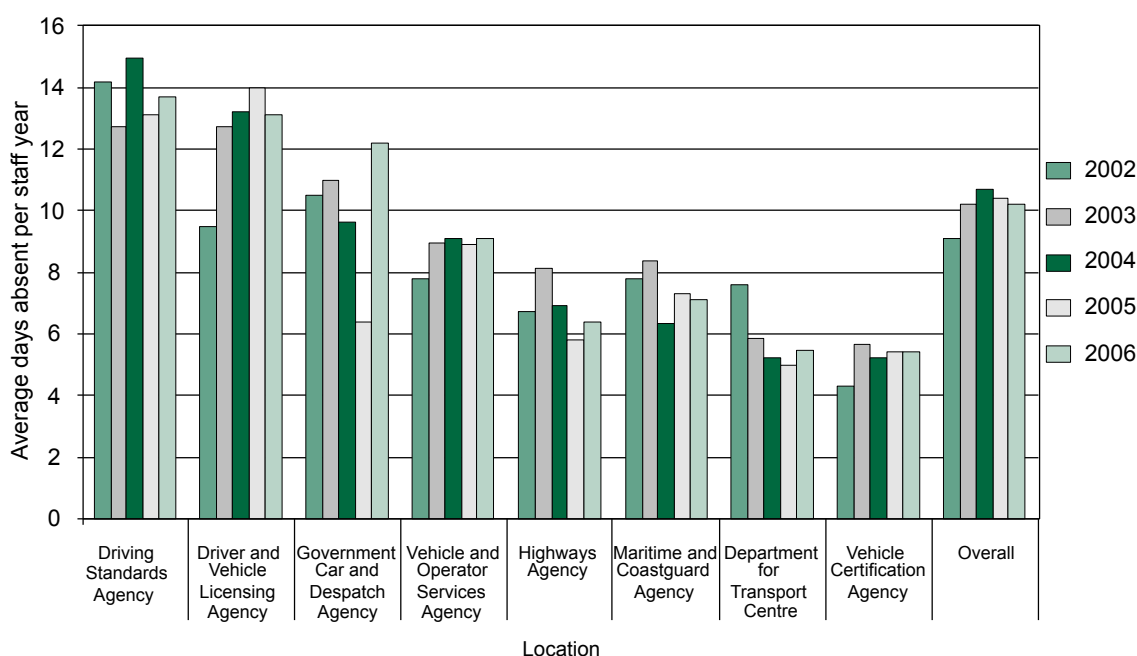
7. **Sickness absence is sometimes used inappropriately by staff in place of annual leave.** Comparatively simple measures which allow staff to use their annual leave more flexibly, for example by requesting a day off at very short notice, appear to have resulted in a significant reduction in sickness absence. The Department and Agencies should:
 - a. draw on information from return to work interviews and other sources to determine if sickness absence is used in place of annual leave to cover unplanned absence; and if so
 - b. implement measures which allow staff throughout the Department and Agencies to use their annual leave provisions more flexibly.

8. **The Highways Agency has shown that if used to good effect, practices such as 'return to work interviews' help line managers identify and deal with underlying issues, such as general ill health and low morale.** The Department and other agencies have policies to deal with sickness absence but line managers are not complying with them. To address this issue:
 - a. the Department and its agencies need to hold managers to account for compliance with existing policies and practices in the management of sickness absence; and
 - b. training for the introduction of the Shared Services Centre will need to reinforce the role of line managers in managing sickness absence.

1 Progress in reducing sickness absence

1. Levels of sickness absence are high in the Driver and Vehicle Licensing Agency and the Driving Standards Agency, both of which have consistently recorded average absence levels of between 12.7 days and 15 days for each full time equivalent member of staff since 2003 (Figure 1).² This rate compares unfavourably with other public and private sector organisations, with average rates for the wider Civil Service of 9.8 days and six days in the private sector. The large numbers of staff in both Agencies—with the Driver and Vehicle Licensing Agency accounting for over 6,500 staff and the Driving Standards Agency for around 2,500 staff—mean that high levels of sickness absence in these agencies have a significant impact on the Department’s overall figure.

Figure 1: Summary of average days of sickness absence per staff member in the Department for Transport and its agencies 2002 to 2006



Note: Some figures may be understated due to under-recording of absences. Total working days sick absence include pregnancy-related absences and sickness absences taken at half pay or nil pay rates.

Source: Department for Transport annual Health and Safety reports (not audited by the National Audit Office)

2. The Department acknowledges that sickness trends across the group have remained essentially flat and that, until recently, managing sickness absence has not been a priority. Some agencies saw a rise in absence in 2006, most notably the Government Car and Despatch Agency, where absence rose from 6.4 days to 12.2 days. In the Government Car and Despatch Agency considerable intervention in 2005 had reduced the rate, but it rose again when management intervention relaxed and there were a number of industrial injuries. Since the Department was established in its current form in 2002 its early priorities have been to put in place appropriate financial and business planning arrangements. Agencies have focused on improving customer services and making wider

efficiency savings. For example, the Driver and Vehicle Licensing Agency is seeking to achieve a reduction of 500 posts over three years which will deliver substantial financial savings.³

3. Agency Chief Executives set their own sickness absence targets each year which are endorsed by the Department's Management Board. While all eight businesses within the group have set targets to achieve a 30% reduction on 2004 absence levels by 2010, the Department's centre and the Government Car and Despatch Agency have no annual targets in the interim. Only the Highways Agency met its target in 2006 and several agencies' performance was well short of their 2010 targeted position (**Figure 2**).⁴ The Driver and Vehicle Licensing Agency's target is not challenging enough and is unlikely to promote continuous improvement, as it aims to improve sickness targets by one day over the previous year's performance, which resulted in the target going backwards in 2005 when sickness absence rose from 13.2 to 14 days. The Agency believes that since then it has turned the corner and it achieved a rate of 11.6 days for the period ending March 2007.⁵

Figure 2: Only one agency achieved its sickness absence targets in 2006 and several agencies remain some way short of their 2010 objective

AGENCY	2006 PERFORMANCE – AVERAGE WORKING DAYS LOST	2006 TARGET – AVERAGE WORKING DAYS LOST	2010 TARGET – AVERAGE WORKING DAYS LOST
Driving Standards Agency	13.7	11.0	10.0
Driver and Vehicle Licensing Agency	13.1	12.2	9.2
Government Car and Despatch Agency	12.2	No target	6.7
Vehicle and Operator Services Agency	9.1	8.0	7.4
Maritime and Coastguard Agency	7.1	6.0	5.0
Highways Agency	6.4	7.9	5.0
Department for Transport (Centre)	5.5	No target	3.7
Vehicle Certification Agency	5.4	5.0	5.0
Overall	10.2		7.5

Note: Some performance data may be understated due to under-recording of absences.

Source: National Audit Office analysis of Departmental and agency data

4. The Department expects to improve its performance in future. Despite the lack of progress in reducing sickness absence levels in recent years, it is confident that agencies will achieve their 2010 sickness absence targets if they apply the management practices

3 Qq 1, 17, 86–90

4 C&AG's Report, para 2.1 and Figure 10

5 Q 112

suggested in the Comptroller and Auditor General's Report.⁶ Achieving the targets would realise a saving in unproductive payroll costs of some £6.3 million each year. Meanwhile, if the Department's businesses reduce their sickness absence rates to those achieved by organisations carrying out similar functions and employing a similar workforce, they could save around £3 million a year.⁷

5. Managing sickness absence so that it falls to and remains at acceptable levels requires constant management attention and there are risks in focusing on some aspects of sickness absence to the exclusion of others. In 2003 for example, short term sickness accounted for 44% of the total sickness absence in the Driver and Vehicle Licensing Agency. The Agency has reduced this proportion to 38%, but long term absence has increased, so there has been little change in the overall rate of sickness absence. Since 2004, the Agency has directed its efforts at reducing long-term sickness levels and the benefits are beginning to emerge. The risks inherent in failing to maintain a sustained effort to reduce sickness absence can be seen in the Government Car and Despatch Agency. Through considerable intervention by human resources staff, the Agency had achieved a significant improvement in sickness rates in 2005 but performance deteriorated the following year partly because of a relaxation of the sickness management regime.⁸

6. Managers at the Driving Standards Agency plan their staff resources on the basis of targeted absence rates, but those at the Driver and Vehicle Licensing Agency factored existing levels of sickness absence into their resource planning assumptions each year. They are therefore in a position to deliver their business objectives without achieving reductions from existing levels, giving them less incentive to reduce sickness absence levels.⁹

7. The Driver and Vehicle Licensing Agency's planning system is intended to ensure that it has the appropriate level of resources overall. As the Agency currently plans to achieve a headcount reduction of 500 staff by 2008 as well as its sickness absence target by 2010, it does not feel able to plan its resources on the basis of a sickness absence target that it has not yet achieved as it might not have enough staff to meet customer requirements. As sickness absence levels reduce they will be used in planning assumptions to continue the Agency's improvement in productivity.¹⁰

8. The overall rate of sickness absence is influenced by a relatively few people on long term sickness absence. Around 75% of staff at both the Driving Standards Agency and the Driver and Vehicle Licensing Agency took 10 days sickness absence or less during 2006. Around 30% of staff at both organisations took no sickness absence at all (**Figure 3**). More than 1,000 staff (over 13%) at the Driver and Vehicle Licensing Agency took more than 21 days in sickness absence, and seven staff at the Driving Standards Agency and nine staff at the Driver and Vehicle Licensing Agency were absent for the whole year.¹¹

6 Qq 3, 4, 17

7 C&AG's Report, Executive Summary para 3; para 1.17; Figure 4

8 C&AG's Report, para 1.5; Qq 81–85

9 C&AG's Report, paras 1.14, Q 18

10 Q 18

11 Qq 43–64; Evidence, para 1 and Annexes A and B

Figure 3: Breakdown of staff sickness absence taken in 2006 at the Driving Standards Agency and the Driver and Vehicle Licensing Agency

Total number of working days absent due to sickness	DRIVING STANDARDS AGENCY		DRIVER AND VEHICLE LICENSING AGENCY	
	Number of staff (Headcount)	% of staff (Headcount)	Number of staff (Headcount)	% of staff (Headcount)
0	771	29	2,580	33
1–5	817	30	2,521	33
6–10	383	14	953	12
11–20	287	11	659	9
21–252	434	16	1,035	13
Total	2,692	100	7,748	100

Notes:

1. Figures based on a 252 day working year (365 days less weekends and bank holidays).

2. Headcount figures refer to the total number staff employed by each agency during the calendar year 2006, including all staff who either joined or left during the year and part time staff.

Source: Department for Transport

9. High levels of sickness absence and the large proportion of days lost to mental health and stress issues (around 25% across the Department) might be a sign of low morale.¹² Both the Driver and Vehicle Licensing Agency and the Driving Standards Agency are going through major change and re-organisation which could lead to low morale and cause stress. In interviews, staff in the Driver and Vehicle Licensing Agency cited the mundane nature of some of their work, an uncomfortable working environment and not feeling sufficiently valued as some of the reasons for high sickness absence.¹³

10. The Agency's data, however, shows that the majority of reasons given for stress-related absences are lifestyle issues and not related to changes at work.¹⁴ Nor is the Agency's performance in achieving customer service targets and delivering award winning products by way of electronic services consistent with an organisation suffering from low morale.¹⁵ The Department and agencies nonetheless need to develop a better understanding of the underlying reasons for high levels of sickness absence. They have undertaken some work in recent months, but at present the information is either incomplete or the evidence is contradictory.

11. Geographical location appears to have a limited impact on sickness absence levels. The Driver and Vehicle Licensing Agency considers that there is no evidence to link the high incidence of sickness absence amongst its staff with its location in South Wales. The problem stems more from the nature of the work and the composition of the workforce in

12 C&AG's Report, para 2.19; Figure 8

13 C&AG's Report, para 1.7

14 Qq 32, 33, 82

15 Q 23

that organisation than its location. The Agency has not benchmarked its sickness absence data against other employers in the locality, such as local authorities and the health service, or carried out any joint analyses with them. It is keen to compare performance, but other employers have been reluctant to release relevant information.¹⁶ The Driving Standards Agency told us that it has noted regional variations in sickness absence rates across its organisation and has recently begun to examine the trend and consider what action might be needed.¹⁷

12. Both the Comptroller and Auditor General's Report and the witnesses identified the type of work undertaken by staff and the composition of the staff grade mix as the most significant factors influencing sickness absence.¹⁸ There is a high correlation between sickness absence and the proportion of repetitive administrative work, which is linked to lower pay. The physical aspect of the work—a particular factor in the Driving Standards Agency—also has a bearing on sickness absence rates. The Driver and Vehicle Licensing Agency has a large proportion of relatively low paid, predominantly female staff carrying out mundane work.¹⁹ The Agency's absence problem is centred in two of its eight directorates: the customer services directorate, including the telephone call centre; and the central operations directorate. These directorates employ a high proportion of staff in the lower grades, most of the Agency's women and younger people and deal with the more repetitive work. These factors have been shown by wider Civil Service sickness reports to correlate with high sickness rates and in that respect the Agency is not out of line with other departments performing repetitive tasks.²⁰

13. We explored whether there was any correlation between sickness absence levels and such factors as age, gender and young families.²¹ At every agency, women account for a higher share of sickness absence than their share of full time equivalent staff numbers, comprising around 41% of the overall workforce in 2006 but accounting for 52% of all working days lost to sickness. This finding is in line with general trends identified in wider surveys of sickness absence. In particular, women make up 64% of the Driver and Vehicle Licensing Agency's workforce and nearly two-thirds are under the age of 40. Pregnancy-related sickness is a particular problem for the Agency, accounting for 8% of absences in the year. There is more sickness absence in the lower grades at all agencies, although this sometimes skipped the lowest grade, but there are no discernable problems by age band.²²

14. The nature of the work undertaken by driving examiners may be a factor in the high levels of sickness absence at the Driver Standards Agency: 7,984 out of a total of 1,988,046 tests were terminated in 2006 in the interests of public safety (0.4% of all tests); and there were 24 physical assaults on staff and 312 verbal assaults.²³ Around 80% of the Agency's

16 Qq 105, 107, 119, 121, 128

17 Qq 99–102

18 C&AG's Report, para 1.6; Q 119

19 C&AG's Report, Executive Summary para 4, Q 22

20 Qq 107, 119

21 Q 126

22 C&AG's Report, para 2.8; Qq 126, 127

23 Ev 15

staff are driving examiners, each of whom carry out some 35 tests a week with novice drivers. Few work-related injuries, however, have been due to the poor standard of driving test candidates. In 2005, the Agency's staff were involved in 828 incidents during driving tests, half of which involved only damage to the car. Medical treatment was required in 124 incidents, of which 10 involved serious injuries.

15. It is difficult for the Agency to predict how accidents might occur but it has now introduced arrangements to investigate fully the circumstances surrounding each test where accidents occur and to learn lessons where appropriate.²⁴ The Agency also recorded 8,478 days lost due to musculoskeletal injuries in 2006, equating to over three days absence for each employee and a much higher rate of musculoskeletal injuries than elsewhere in the Department. The Agency does not know what proportion of these absences is attributable to its work and considers that analysing the causes of sickness absences may not always be straightforward since, for example, work-related incidents may exacerbate pre-existing conditions.²⁵

24 Qq 28–29, 91–94, 96–97

25 C&AG's Report, para 1.10

2 Managing sickness absence

16. The Department's recent Capability Review highlighted a number of concerns about leadership within the Department, commenting for example that only 47% of the Department are proud to work for it and that junior staff are less positive than Senior Civil Servants about the latter's leadership capabilities. The Review urged the new Permanent Secretary to use his vision of the future of the Department to re-energise and motivate staff.²⁶ Motivating staff is particularly important in those areas of the Department where staff are engaged in work which is more administrative and repetitive in nature but are often involved in delivering services to the public. It is also in these areas where sickness absence is at its highest.

17. All parts of the Departmental group have an underlying strategy that absence management is the responsibility of line managers, with guidance and support available from human resources teams and occupational health services and senior managers monitoring performance.²⁷ Successful management of sickness absence, therefore, depends on line managers applying policies and procedures appropriately and consistently, informed by regular, good quality, timely data.²⁸ The Department acknowledges that the Comptroller and Auditor General's Report identified the need for better compliance with sickness absence policies and procedures across its businesses. The new Shared Services Centre, located in Swansea, is intended to underpin the Department's training and support for managers and monitor their compliance with established policies and procedures.²⁹

18. It is also the responsibility of senior officials, Chief Executives and local managers to make staff feel valued and keep them motivated. As with most organisations, the Department has a spread of management capability and some managers are better than others. The centre of the Department has invested a lot of effort in the last year in a leadership development programme, and the Driver and Vehicle Licensing Agency and the Driving Standards Agency have also introduced leadership training which each Chief Executive has attended together with their managers. In 2006, the Driver and Vehicle Licensing Agency also carried out a profiling exercise on its managers to identify where they needed to strengthen management capacity; to reallocate to other jobs those managers whose management skills could not be improved through training; and to move managers with good leadership skills to work with people. In addition, the Driving Standards Agency has done much work to try to improve morale including an employee opinion survey, which revealed a high level of satisfaction in working for the Agency, and holding workshops with around 500 staff from across the organisation to seek their views about the future direction of the Agency and what might be improved.³⁰

19. Several agencies have initiatives to manage and reduce sickness absences in their organisations. Few of the initiatives are common to all agencies and there is little evidence

26 Capability Review of the Department for Transport, June 2007

27 C&AG's Report, para 2.1; Q 116

28 C&AG's Report, paras 2.2, 2.13

29 Qq 2, 4, 35

30 Qq 25-27, 133-137

of formal evaluation or of sharing lessons across the group.³¹ The Driver and Vehicle Licensing Agency has evaluated some, though not all of its initiatives. It found that early intervention was particularly important. The Agency now carries out interviews with staff on long-term absence at an earlier stage than before, which has succeeded in getting people back to work sooner. Other initiatives have also been beneficial. A pilot exercise involving earlier intervention in stress cases by occupational health services and managers resulted in improvements in the speed with which staff returned to work and is now being adopted across the Agency. The Agency has also piloted the redesigning of some jobs to make them more interesting, resulting in reduced sickness absence rates in the piloted areas. Allowing staff in its customer enquiry group more flexibility in using their annual leave so that they can take a day's holiday at very short notice has secured a 63% reduction in short-term sick leave over three months. Previously, managers would have refused such short notice requests and employees would have taken sick leave instead.³² Other than in the Government Car and Despatch Agency, all staff are entitled to an annual leave allowance of 30 days when they take up employment, which in the Department's view should be sufficient to cater for most unforeseen requirements for short periods of absence without recourse to casual sick absence.³³

20. The Driving Standards Agency has also introduced several measures to improve sickness absence over the last 18 months. It now seeks details of applicants' medical histories on initial recruitment and, where it has concerns about their fitness for appointment, refers cases immediately for medical advice. The Agency is also working with Sheffield University on job design in its call centres and is undertaking a major risk assessment of the practical car test. It also offers voluntary health screening to its employees and has increased the amount of time that driving test centre managers devote to managing and monitoring attendance.³⁴

21. There has been inadequate sharing of good practices between agencies in the past. For example, the Highways Agency alone achieved its sickness absence target in 2006, and has consistently had a lower rate of sickness absence than several other agencies since 2002, yet neither the Driver and Vehicle Licensing Agency nor the Driving Standards Agency have looked closely at its practices. The latter tends to look to the Vehicle and Operator Services Agency, which currently has a sickness absence rate of 9.1 days, for examples of good practice in sickness management. The Highways Agency has demonstrated good practice such as holding return to work interviews after every period of sickness absence and comparing recorded sickness absence against its time recording system as a check on accuracy. Within the last 18 months, however, there has been increased sharing of good practices across the Department. For example, all agencies are now proposing to adopt a common trigger point of eight days absence as the stage at which they would begin considering the need for disciplinary action rather than the variety of trigger points

31 C&AG's Report, para 2.25; Appendix 6

32 Qq 34, 120, 124, 129, 137–138

33 Qq 6, 131–133

34 Q 12

currently used. The new Shared Services Centre will also support the adoption of common practices across the individual businesses.³⁵

22. Employees are expected to return to work in their normal employment capacity following a period of sickness absence and, where appropriate, rehabilitation. Where return in that capacity is not possible agencies consider alternative measures such as permanent redeployment, retirement or dismissal on grounds of medical incapacity. Some agencies have been slow to resolve outstanding long-term sickness cases finally or, if staff are refused retirement on medical grounds, to dismiss them with compensation.³⁶ The central Department has recently taken a more robust line with staff who have had five spells of absence or more. Of 42 cases the Department identified in October 2006, around two-thirds have been resolved and the remainder continue to be monitored. Of the cases that had been resolved, seven people have left the Department, five are currently on warnings, six have been referred to the medical adviser and eight have returned to work.³⁷

35 Qq 73–74, 78, 95, 110–111, 117

36 C&AG's Report, para 2.24

37 Qq 65–67

Formal minutes

Wednesday 10 October 2007

Members present:

In the absence of the Chairman, Mr Alan Williams was called to the Chair

Mr Richard Bacon
Angela Browning
Mr David Curry

Mr Philip Dunne
Mr Austin Mitchell
Mr Don Touhig

Draft Report

Draft Report (The management of staff sickness absence in the Department for Transport and its agencies), proposed by the Chairman, brought up and read.

Ordered, That the draft Report be read a second time, paragraph by paragraph.

Paragraphs 1 to 22 read and agreed to.

Conclusions and recommendations read and agreed to.

Summary read and agreed to.

Resolved, That the Report be the Sixty-fourth Report of the Committee to the House.

Ordered, That the Chairman make the Report to the House.

Ordered, That embargoed copies of the Report be made available, in accordance with the provisions of Standing Order No. 134.

[Adjourned until Monday 15 October at 4.30 pm.]

Witnesses

Monday 25 June 2007

Robert Devereux, Permanent Secretary, Department for Transport,
Clive Bennett, Chief Executive and Accounting Officer, Driver and Vehicle
Licensing Agency, and **Rosemary Thew**, Chief Executive and Accounting
Officer, Driving Standards Agency

Ev 1

List of written evidence

Department for Transport

Ev 15

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Fifteenth Report	The termination of the PFI contract for the National Physical Laboratory	HC 359 (Cm 7077)
Sixteenth Report	The Provision of Out-of-Hours Care in England	HC 360 (Cm 7077)
Seventeenth Report	Financial Management of the NHS	HC 361 (Cm 7077)
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Oral evidence

Taken before the Public Accounts Committee

on Monday 25 June 2007

Members present:

Mr Edward Leigh, in the Chair

Mr Richard Bacon
Mr Ian Davidson
Ian Lucas

Mr Austin Mitchell
Mr Alan Williams
Derek Wyatt

Sir John Bourn KCB, Comptroller and Auditor General, **Tim Burr**, Deputy Comptroller and Auditor General and **Geraldine Barker**, Director, National Audit Office were in attendance and gave oral evidence. **Marius Gallaher**, Alternate Treasury Officer of Accounts, was in attendance.

REPORT BY THE COMPTROLLER AND AUDITOR GENERAL

The Management of Staff Sickness Absence in the Department for Transport and its Agencies (HC 527)

Witnesses: **Robert Devereux**, Permanent Secretary, Department for Transport, **Clive Bennett**, Chief Executive and Accounting Officer, Driver and Vehicle Licensing Agency, and **Rosemary Thew**, Chief Executive and Accounting Officer, Driving Standards Agency, gave evidence.

Chairman: Good afternoon. Welcome to the Public Accounts Committee. Today, we are considering the Comptroller and Auditor General's Report, *The management of staff sickness absence at the Department for Transport and its agencies*. We welcome Robert Devereux, who is appearing before us for the first time as the Accounting Officer for the Department for Transport. Would you like to introduce your colleagues, Mr Devereux?

Robert Devereux: Certainly, Chairman. On my right is Clive Bennett, the Chief Executive of the Driver and Vehicle Licensing Agency. On my left is Rosemary Thew, the Chief Executive of the Driving Standards Agency.

Q1 Chairman: Thank you. This is a dreadful Report. It may seem a fairly boring subject, but it is important that you provide leadership. You cannot even get your own people to stay at work. What have you and your predecessors done about that? Why has there been virtually no progress in reducing sickness absence in any part of your Department's business since 2002? This is a fundamental failure of management, for which you, Mr Devereux, are now responsible.

Robert Devereux: The table on page 25, which shows—

Chairman: I see that table on page 25.

Robert Devereux: That table has a combination of two different types of agencies in there. The National Audit Office is describing five of those eight agencies as having levels of sickness that are comparable with or better than private and public sector comparators. It then goes on to say that three agencies, two of which have representatives with me today, are above that level. So you are right to say that these numbers are not changing over time. Their levels, though, are indicative of two different stories;

one where the NAO says the levels are essentially comparable to what goes on in the private and public sector; and three agencies where—

Q2 Chairman: That is not the question that I asked you. I asked you why you have made so little progress.

Robert Devereux: On the progress question, the NAO is again picking up some of the things that we have been doing to try to tackle this problem. One of the things that you will see in the Report, which we have put a lot of investment into in order to prepare, is to get ourselves in a much better position in respect of compliance with the policies that we are operating. That is the reference that you will see towards the end of the Report about our new shared service centre, where the intention is, as part of a drive towards greater efficiency, to ensure that basic financial transactions and basic human resources transactions, including the reporting of sickness absence, are both defined much better and complied with much better.

Q3 Chairman: I did not ask you what you were going to do in the future; I am asking you, for the third time, why you have made so little progress—in fact, as you have failed to answer twice, there is no point asking a third time. I shall leave that matter to my colleagues.

You mentioned the table on page 25. Look at the next page, please—figure 10 on page 26. Is there the remotest chance that you will meet these 2010 sickness absence targets? Look at them. You have absolutely failed to meet such targets so far. Is there the remotest chance that you will meet these 2010 targets? Please, please try to give an honest answer this time.

Robert Devereux: I think that there is a chance that we will meet them, yes.

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Q4 Chairman: Well, explain how you are going to do it, because you have made precious little progress so far.

Robert Devereux: We have a Report in front of us that is recording, in a way that I am perfectly comfortable with, some good observations about the sort of things that need to be done, some of which you can already see in some parts of the Department, none of which are common right across it. So my basic answer to your question is that, if we were to apply the processes and compliance suggestions that the NAO have put in front of us, then I see no reason why we should not reach these targets.

Q5 Chairman: Some of these figures are truly dreadful. For example, Mrs Thew, regarding the Driving Standards Agency's 2006 performance, the figure for average working days lost is 13.7. That is staggering.

Rosemary Thew: I wonder, Chairman, if I could just set out some of the things—

Q6 Chairman: Is this the culture of your business, that people think, "Well, I get"—what is the ordinary holiday that your staff get every year?

Rosemary Thew: It depends on their length of service. For somebody with a maximum length of service, it would be 30 days.

Q7 Chairman: Thirty days. So, is it the thinking in your department, which you run, that, "I get 30 days holiday, then on average I get another 13 days on top of that."?

Rosemary Thew: I wonder, Chairman, if I could just set out some of the things that we are doing—

Q8 Chairman: Which is presumably another three weeks' holiday? Why is this? Why have you not got a grip on it?

Rosemary Thew: May I set out some of the things that we have been doing over the course of the last year, please? We have put a lot of store—

Q9 Chairman: Over the last year? What were you doing before the last year?

Rosemary Thew: We have had a very much increased focus over the course of the last year—

Q10 Chairman: And why have you had an increased focus over the last year?

Rosemary Thew: Because the figures are so poor; I accept that.

Q11 Chairman: Why did it take the NAO Report to tell you what was happening in your own agency? How long have you been the head of this agency?

Rosemary Thew: I have been with the Driving Standards Agency for 18 months. As I came into the agency—

Q12 Chairman: So you have been there 18 months. Tell us how you got a grip on this problem from day one, then.

Rosemary Thew: What we have done over the course of that time, Chairman, is to put a lot of store by recruiting the right people. From the beginning of June this year, we have put on our application forms a question about the applicant's medical history. If, at that stage, there is anything that suggests that we ought to take medical advice, then there would be a referral immediately.

We are also looking after people while they are at work. We are doing a major risk assessment of the car test. Nearly 80% of our staff are car-driving examiners. We are working with Sheffield University to look at job design in call centres. We are doing voluntary health screening for people who want to take that up. We are also making referrals to medical advisers for people who have accidents at work.

We are also doing a lot of work on improving attendance and monitoring people when they are sick. For example, I make more time available within the test centres for managers to manage this and other management processes.

There is now training for all line managers, and 500 of our managers have now gone through that training. I have set objectives for every line manager to ensure that they comply with the processes and I require all my board directors to confirm in writing to me that they are doing that. There is proactive case management of all our long-term sick cases.

Q13 Chairman: Have you seen paragraph 4 on page 5 in which it says there is evidence of low staff morale in both agencies?

Rosemary Thew: Yes, I have seen it.

Chairman: Perhaps that is what is wrong with the organisation. There is just no morale.

Rosemary Thew: Indeed—

Q14 Chairman: So they want to pretend they are sick and go off on a three-week paid holiday.

Robert Devereux: May I just add something? Can we be clear that several of the agencies have some fairly demanding tasks to achieve? One of the things that the Chief Executive is doing is ensuring that the organisation that is delivering such services to customers is fit for purpose. That necessarily means that changes are taking place in the Driving Standards Agency. In the short term, it is perhaps not surprising that that ends up affecting the morale of people who are not in favour of such changes. I draw the Committee's attention to what has been done in terms of customer outcomes, the level of ease with which people can electronically book tests from the DSA and the reduction in waiting times from about 10 weeks to six weeks. Those are signs of an agency that is moving in the right direction both in terms of achieving value for money and meeting its efficiency targets.

Q15 Chairman: Actually, there is evidence that a high proportion of the alleged illness relates to stress and to back problems, back problems are notorious. People often claim they have them, but they are difficult to check up on. Is there a culture in your

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agencies and the Department in which it is considered okay not to work for three weeks in a year, in addition to your paid holiday?

Robert Devereux: It is not considered okay at all.

Q16 Chairman: If it is not, you have to convince me and my colleagues, who will now ask you questions, how you have managed to change things over the past few years, at least since 2002. If we look at paragraphs 7 and 8 of the Report, there is evidence that your own central Department, let alone the agencies, is not following good practice. Therefore, you are not giving a good example. How can you expect others to provide leadership if your central office in Marsham Street is not providing leadership?

Robert Devereux: Let me answer that in two ways. First, may I remind the Committee where the Department was in 2002? It was recreated at the point of the separation with what was then the Office of the Deputy Prime Minister.

Q17 Chairman: Oh, I see. It is all to do with reorganisation, is it? If I am a driving instructor, the fact that I was once under the *aegis* of the Deputy Prime Minister makes a difference. That is a nonsensical reply. You know that it is.

Robert Devereux: I am sorry, but I had not finished. I had a reason for drawing attention to that. When the change took place, the Department had a number of things to put right straight away. For example, all the heads of both the professional finance and the professional HR functions went across to the new Department. We had to ensure absolutely that we were in a position to run our financial systems properly and that we had decent business planning. In other words, a substantial body of work was needed to be done in the new Department to ensure that a £14 billion programme was kept under proper control.

If you are saying that over the past five years, as a consequence of doing that and of engaging in some of the work that I have already referred to, such as the DVLA producing substantial changes in Mr Bennett's organisation in terms of customer services, we have not had enough focus on sickness absence then, in retrospect, I would agree with that. What I am acknowledging today is that given the clarity of what the NAO has said with which I concur, you can expect us to do better in the future.

Q18 Chairman: I had better give Mr Bennett a chance to say something. Please look at paragraph 1.14 on page 11, which states: "Our further examination revealed that, while managers at the Driving Standards Agency planned on the basis of targeted absence rates, managers at the Driver and Vehicle Licensing Agency routinely factored existing levels of sickness absence into their resource planning assumptions each year. This means that managers are able to deliver their business objectives without achieving reductions from current absence levels." The truth is that you have just gone soft, is it not, Mr Bennett?

Clive Bennett: There are two issues, if I may say so. One relates to performance and the other one relates to planning. We attack both of those in a different way. As far as performance is concerned, we set targets at a level for the board, so each member of my board has a target and so do the managers right down to the staffing level to ensure that sickness and absence are dealt with at the best possible level. Obviously, they are not tight enough—I am sure that we will come back to that—but we target people, and that becomes part of the performance measurement of those individuals during the course of each year.

The planning system to which the NAO Report refers involves making sure that we have, overall, the right resources in the Department. I am, for example, setting out a plan in my business plan to achieve by 2008 a 500 head count reduction as well as a sickness and absence target. We need to chart our progress across all the parameters, of which sickness and absence is one, and make sure that we get there. We cannot plan in at an aspirational level, because we might just not have enough people to meet the customer requirements. The planning puts in the right number of people to meet the customer requirements at the operating level and the targeting deals with sickness and absence. As sickness and absence comes down, that is entered into the planning methodology to make sure that we continue to improve our productivity.

Q19 Mr Mitchell: To follow up that premise a bit, you cannot be planning all that well if 22,000 driving tests are cancelled in a year. It indicates that you are not allowing for sickness, and you have too few examiners.

Robert Devereux: Sorry, that is not for this agency.

Rosemary Thew: The number of tests cancelled as a result of sickness, I think, is what you are referring to. That equals about 1% of the total number of tests that we conduct.

Q20 Mr Mitchell: But it is still intensely frustrating. I get regular complaints about cancelled tests. People work themselves up into a nervous frenzy, and then all of a sudden it is all pulled away.

Rosemary Thew: I fully understand that. We will do everything that we possibly can to make sure that we do not cancel tests. For example, we use examiners from other test centres, bring back people who have previously been examiners with the agency and have now retired.

Q21 Mr Mitchell: But that is make do and mend. You probably do not have enough examiners.

Rosemary Thew: I think that we do have enough examiners, actually. What we do is resource to the level that we ought to be at, assuming an 11-day sickness absence, which is our target.

Q22 Mr Mitchell: Mr Devereux, these are, in the main, two customer-facing Departments, are they not? When you look at a problem like this in an office, there are four possible explanations. One is that morale is low, and that might well be the case; I

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do not know. Another is that the staff have been subject to too much pressure. The third could be that the customers are an obnoxious lot—I know that some of them are when it comes to driving and licensing. The fourth is low wages. Of those four, what is the explanation for the high sickness rates in those two Departments?

Robert Devereux: Perhaps I can do them in reverse order, to make sure that I remember them. There is an interesting appendix to the Report in which the NAO explains how it has arrived at its suggestions for the targets for each of the agencies—it is Appendix Four. You will find in there that the NAO contractors concluded that two factors are well known to be highly correlated with sickness absence. One is the proportion of work that might be called administrative, which is highly correlated with low wages, and the second is the physical aspect of the work. The NAO has basically said for both agencies, looking at comparators across the outside world with those characteristics, that we should expect them to look at targets of about 10. They are setting a completely different target—about five—for the centre of the Department, because of the nature of the work involved. In response to the question whether it has to do with low pay—

Q23 Mr Mitchell: That is dodging the question. Surely it must basically be a question of morale and leadership. If people are feel that they are being led and that they are doing a worthwhile job, they will turn up for work.

Robert Devereux: Sure, but you adduced four possible causes. I was answering one of them. In respect of low morale, let us consider the Driver and Vehicle Licensing Agency, which is essentially meeting the targets that have been set for it by the Secretary of State in relation to customer service and which is delivering award-winning offerings by way of its electronic services to customers. That is not consistent with the idea that the organisation is down on its luck and having a hard time.

Q24 Mr Mitchell: Yet the Report says that morale is still low.

Robert Devereux: No. The Report records that that observation was made by some people who decided that they wanted to take part in the focus group on sickness absence. I do not think that I would accept that it applies across the DVLA.

Q25 Mr Mitchell: Whose responsibility in the civil service is it to deal with such morale issues and to make people feel involved, loved and cosseted—to talk to people and give a personal appeal to the operation?

Robert Devereux: Mine and my Chief Executive's.

Q26 Mr Mitchell: And managers'?

Robert Devereux: Yes.

Q27 Mr Mitchell: Do they know that they should do that, or do they just leave people alone?

Robert Devereux: I think you will find that, across the piece, and as is the case in most organisations, we have a spread of management capability. Some people are very good at it. To take the centre of the Department—the area in which I am working now, we have consciously invested a lot of effort in the past 12 months in a leadership development programme. The programme is broadly based and does not focus simply on sickness absence. It refers to findings both in staff surveys and elsewhere in suggesting leadership methods.

Q28 Mr Mitchell: The Report says in paragraph 4 of the summary introduction that: “the Driving Standards Agency has a high incidence of work-related injury.” What's up? Are people crashing cars, or are customers beating them up, or what?

Robert Devereux: Rosemary can add to my answer, but essentially I would say that, if you go out driving with people who are trying to pass a test, not all of those people will actually be competent to pass. There are work-related injuries that are a consequence of drivers not being up to the job of driving.

Mr Mitchell: Yes, but—

Robert Devereux: How we would know that before testing them is an interesting philosophical question. We do not.

Q29 Mr Mitchell: You would probably get out at an early stage if you sensed that there was a problem.

Rosemary Thew: We have to terminate some tests. May I set out some more context?

Approximately 80% of staff in the Driving Standards Agency are examiners. Typically, they do about 35 tests a week with novice drivers. Plainly, before the tests start we do not know the standard of those drivers. In 2005, there were 828 incidents during tests; that is about one in every 2,600 tests that are conducted, and half of the incidents involved only damage to the car—possibly a clipped wing mirror or a scratch. Of the injuries that were sustained, approximately 25% required either no treatment or only self-treatment. In saying that, I do not underplay the fact that there are accidents on test that result in injury, but the numbers are quite small. There were 124 incidents that resulted in medical treatment.

Q30 Mr Mitchell: I am interested in the number of terminations. Will you send us a note, because it would be interesting to find out how the injuries are acquired?

Rosemary Thew: We do have to terminate a number of tests if the standard is so poor that a serious or dangerous fault has been committed early in the test. I shall send you a note with the number.¹

¹ *Note by Witness:* DSA conducted 1,988,046 tests in 2006, of which 7,984 were terminated in the interests of public safety. This equates to 0.40%. Of these, 1,788,140 were car tests and 7,434 of these tests were terminated on public safety grounds, a total of 0.42%.

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Q31 Mr Mitchell: I remember that my wife's test was terminated when she drove the wrong way round a roundabout, but that was at a late stage. If you supply us with a figure on what proportion of tests are terminated, that would be useful.

On the DVLA, I thought it was a fairly comfortable and cushy existence down in Wales. Is there something wrong with the climate, or have you employed a broken-down work force? I see that 86% of days lost to mental health and stress illness were accounted for by long-term cases. It looks as though the staff are unhealthy.

Clive Bennett: May I set the context? The DVLA is quite a complex organisation, as you probably know. In 2002, the problems were with short-term sickness absence, but there has been a lot of effort to address that and the figures have come down. More recently, long-term sickness and absence have started to increase.

Q32 Mr Mitchell: Do you have an explanation?

Clive Bennett: I will come back to that.

Something that needs to be addressed is that you are seeing two different things in the statistics. Short-term sickness and absence is one issue, and is controlled in one way. Long-term sickness and absence, when people are genuinely off for long periods, is something else.

We have had a problem in the DVLA because short-term absence has been falling, but long-term absence has risen. It is true that long-term sickness represents something like 60% of total sickness absence, and of that 49% is stress related, which is the point that you are raising. I guess the question is, why are people stressed? It is difficult to know, but it is certainly true from our statistics that the vast majority of stress-related days off are for non-work stress. For example, of the top reasons, 58 are stress-related, of which 48 are non-work stress, so one of the things we are tackling is people's lifestyle, broadly speaking. I cannot draw a correlation directly between Wales and lifestyle, but clearly we are coping with sickness and absence for stress brought on both through work-related issues and non-work-related issues.

Q33 Mr Mitchell: Are you saying that the stress of living in Wales is greater than that of living in Yorkshire? If you are going to transfer the agency, let us have it in Grimsby.

Clive Bennett: There is a serious issue in terms of stress, and I think that that is behind your question. A huge amount of work has been going on. I think Robert mentioned just now that there has been a large transformation in the type of work in the agency. We have moved increasingly away from paper-based transactions to electronic transactions. There has been a huge change in the physical infrastructure and organisational structure of the agency to make sure that it is fit for purpose for moving forward with customer services. The staff have quite a lot of change to cope with, and they have difficult customers, but those are not the major reasons for the stress. That is the point that I am trying to get across.

Q34 Mr Mitchell: That is interesting. Paragraph 2.25 says that you have introduced a range of initiatives to manage sickness absence, but you have not evaluated what works and what does not. Why is that?

Clive Bennett: We evaluate quite a lot, but not every single activity. We have found that early intervention is most important, with early return to work interviews and triggers for having the interviews with managers. That is the biggest single approach to dealing with longer-term sickness, which is a different process from that for short-term sickness. If someone is off long term, we now set the trigger earlier, talk to them at an interview and seek to get them back to work earlier. We are succeeding in that.

Q35 Mr Mitchell: I have just had a note from the Chairman saying that I have failed my test, so I shall get in a defiant question. Did you realise that there was a problem on this scale before this Report?

Robert Devereux: It was clear from our discussions with the board over several years that we are behind the target that we set ourselves for 2010, so yes I knew that. What the Report has done, particularly for me, is to make it clear from a sample exercise that some of the issues are to do with compliance as much as to do with policies. When Clive talks about whether things have been trialled and piloted, many of them are slightly in the motherhood-and-apple-pie category in terms of policy. The extent to which we support managers, train them and keep track of whether they comply with, for example, return-to-work interviews, is clear from the Report and is absolutely being underpinned by the new shared service centre that we are building in Swansea.

Q36 Mr Bacon: Mrs Thew, how many staff are there in the Driving Standards Agency?

Rosemary Thew: We have around 2,500 permanent staff.

Q37 Mr Bacon: You said that around 80% of your staff are examiners. Are they on top of that 2,500.

Rosemary Thew: No, that includes the examiners.

Q38 Mr Bacon: So 80% of those 2,500 are instructors.

Rosemary Thew: Examiners.

Q39 Mr Bacon: Mr Bennett, how many staff do you have at the DVLA?

Clive Bennett: We have 6,130 staff, of which a large number—around 64%—are female, and a large number are clearly doing administrative duties, which is slightly different from what happens in the DSA. The work environment is different.

Q40 Mr Bacon: Am I to take it—I have no idea—that driving examiners are more likely to be male than female?

Rosemary Thew: Yes.

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Q41 Mr Bacon: Significantly so?

Rosemary Thew: Yes. We have a split of around 75% and 25%. The majority of our admin staff are female; most of our examiners are male.

Q42 Mr Bacon: That is interesting, but I shall not go into it any further in case I get into trouble.

So you have 6,000 staff, Mr Bennett. In 2006, you had 85,000 sick-day absences; there were 92,000 the year before. According to the chart, the 85,900 absences in 2006 comes to 13.1 days per staff year. Does that mean per member of staff?

Clive Bennett: That would be on average across the staff.

Q43 Mr Bacon: I find these averages potentially misleading. What I should like to know is this: of those 6,130 staff, how many always turn up and how many nearly always turn up?

Clive Bennett: It is probably easier to put it the other way around and to tell you how many are off sick.

Q44 Mr Bacon: I should like to know both. I would rather have the answer to my question than to a different one. I should like to know all the figures. On page 27, there is a chart that might crudely answer my question. Am I right? Perhaps the National Audit Office can help with this. Is that bar chart trying to tell us how many staff have two days' sickness absence and how many—as a percentage—have six days' sickness absence and so on?

Geraldine Barker: It is trying to show the effect that the number of support and administrative staff has on the average number of absence days.

Q45 Mr Bacon: You are correlating them: the higher the number of admin staff, the higher the sickness level?

Geraldine Barker: Yes.

Q46 Mr Bacon: It is not what I am after then. You could send the answer to the Committee; I do not expect you to have it right now. It would be best in a table, because you could publish loads of numbers going down and across. Of those 6,130 staff, how many have zero days off? Do you know the answer to that question?

Clive Bennett: I can tell you the number of people who are on warnings, who have had excessive time off.

Q47 Mr Bacon: I should like an answer to my question if that is possible, Mr Bennett. How many of the 6,130 staff—I think that this is the third time that I have asked, although it might be the fourth—have zero days off? Do you know the answer to that?

Clive Bennett: No, I can send you a letter on that.²

Q48 Mr Bacon: Right. But I do not want just that; I should like to know how many of those 6,130 staff have one day off? How many have two days off?

How many have three days off? Some must be on the average of 13.1 days off. Presumably, there are some who have 28 days off.

Clive Bennett: Yes.

Q49 Mr Bacon: What I want, therefore, is a chart with the 6,130 staff cut up numerically—not into percentages or bar charts—into zero days off, one day off, two days off, all the way until you get to the ones with the highest numbers of days off. Can you do that?

Clive Bennett: I am sure we could. I will have to look at what is involved.

Q50 Mr Bacon: Could? Is it information that you hold?

Clive Bennett: It is, yes.

Q51 Mr Bacon: It cannot be that difficult for you to send it to us, then.

Clive Bennett: We will have to—

Q52 Mr Bacon: Averages probably conceal more than they reveal. I want to know how many days off each stratum of employee has, from zero up to the top level.

Clive Bennett: I understand the question. Regardless of grade or job?

Q53 Mr Bacon: Yes, I do not care which grade it is. Disaggregate the figures. Is there also a correlation with junior grades?

Clive Bennett: No, I just wondered whether you wanted it correlated in that way. We can give you the figures by person, by number of people and by number of days.

Q54 Mr Bacon: I am looking for raw rather than processed and desiccated data.

Chairman: He is going to make us ill, because he wants information.

Mr Bacon: I am sure that it will just be a chart.

Robert Devereux: It will not make us ill, because we have that information. The table on page 16 shows that 25% of the DVLA sickness absence is short-term.

Q55 Mr Bacon: Roughly 1,500?

Robert Devereux: No, 1,500 have five or fewer days.

Q56 Mr Bacon: It would be nice to see it day, by day, by day.

Robert Devereux: Can I check that you mean absences over the course of the year, which is what the tables are all about? Or do you mean absences as of today?

Q57 Mr Bacon: It would be best if it followed the table on Appendix 3, and gave figures for the whole of 2006, for example.

Robert Devereux: Yes.

Q58 Mr Bacon: It would probably be too much to go back through all the previous years, so just tell us how many people had how many days off—whether

² Ev 16–22

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29 days, one day or zero days—in 2006, the most recent complete year. Could you do the same, Mrs Thew?

Rosemary Thew: I can give you some of that information now, if that would help. Some 30% of my staff have taken no sickness at all.

Q59 Mr Bacon: Some 30%? So out of your 2,500 staff, 750 people have had zero days off? Is that mixed between examiners and admin staff?

Rosemary Thew: It is.

Q60 Mr Bacon: That is interesting. If you could send us the same data as Mr Bennett will send us, in the same form, that would be helpful.³ How do you account for the fact that 30% seem happy to turn up all the time? Is it because they are all on five fruit a day, or because they enjoy their job? What is it?

Robert Devereux: I think you will find that is a pretty common average across the civil service. There is a reference in the footnotes to the National Audit Office Report, which the Cabinet Office sends each year. In that Report it identifies how many people have what proportions of sickness. By and large, the proportion of sickness accounted for by short-term or no sickness is a bigger number of staff, as you would imagine. The total is driven, essentially, by the relatively few people on relatively long sickness, not the other way round.

Q61 Mr Bacon: Off the top of your head, Mr Bennett, what is the highest number of days off of any one individual?

Robert Devereux: A whole year.

Clive Bennett: It can be a whole year, in some cases.

Q62 Mr Bacon: What, 365 days?

Robert Devereux: Yes.

Q63 Mr Bacon: Really? How many are there of those individuals?

Clive Bennett: Not very many.

Q64 Mr Bacon: Will they will be in my chart when you send it?

Clive Bennett: I will send it to you and you will see it on the chart.⁴

Robert Devereux: Let me give you an example from our area. We have had one person who was diagnosed with breast cancer; she was off for nine months' treatment, which appears to have been successful. She has now come back part-time. If I put her in the list, she will appear as someone who has had about 250 days off sick.

Q65 Mr Bacon: I do not have a problem with an asterisk saying: "This was breast cancer" or whatever. You do not have to identify the individuals. As someone who has extremely bad back problems from time to time, I understand that sometimes people do take time off. I would never say that all sickness absence is skiving, but I presume—

perhaps you will tell me if I am wrong—that some of it is just that people cannot be bothered to turn up and they want to have a day off. Is that correct?

Robert Devereux: It is true that we are already in the process of running disciplinary processes against some of our people who are currently on sickness absence. I have the figures for the central Department if you are interested in them. They show, for example that of the 40 cases to which we referred, which are basically cases that have five spells of absence as well as an aggregate total in excess of 15, two thirds of those cases are either resolved—i.e. they have left the Department or have come back to work satisfactorily—and one third are still in the process of being monitored. I have five people who are currently on warnings, and six who have been referred to the medical adviser.

Q66 Mr Bacon: When you said an aggregate total of 15, did you mean an aggregate total of 15 incidents of absence?

Robert Devereux: No.

Q67 Mr Bacon: You referred earlier to an aggregate total of 15. What did you mean? Fifteen what?

Robert Devereux: If I said 15, I did not mean to say 15. What I am saying is that of the 42 cases that we deliberately targeted in October and followed through to the present, two thirds have essentially been dealt with, which means that seven of them left in one way or another, five are now on warnings, six are with the medical adviser, 13 are being monitored and eight are back at work.

Q68 Mr Bacon: Can I be clear? When you send the information in for 2006, the fact that they have now left the Department should not alter the figure. I should like the figures that you send in for the whole of 2006 to take account of all the people who were employed during 2006, even if they have now left the Department.

Robert Devereux: I quite agree. In some cases, the fact that they have left the Department is a good-news story.

Q69 Chairman: I hazard a guess that none of you three took many, if any, days off last year. Is this a question of seniority? People at the top of the tree who are doing interesting jobs tend not to take days off. Or is that an unfair observation?

Robert Devereux: You may be accurate in your suppositions about the three of us. I am not sure that the National Audit Office or its contractors found a strong correlation—

Q70 Chairman: Is there a strong correlation?

Robert Devereux: They did not find a strong correlation with individual grades, but what they have observed is that Departments with very large numbers of administrative staff, which is definitely the case in the DVLA and the DSA, will end up with high levels of sickness.

³ Ev 16–22

⁴ Ev 16–22

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Q71 Mr Bacon: I have one or two more quick questions on the tables on pages 28 and 29 of appendix 4, which show that the DSA has a target for 2010, three years hence, of 10 days and the DVLA has a target of 9.2 days. Why is there a difference between the two? How did you come up with 10 days and 9.2 days and why are they nearly one day different when you are both faced with similar problems?

Robert Devereux: Those targets are, in the first instance, being driven by the requirement to produce sickness levels in 2010 that are 30% less than sickness levels—

Q72 Mr Bacon: So it is not driven by any standard of what you think you ought to be able to get; it is merely where you started from? If you started from a worse position, you have a higher target. Is that right?

Robert Devereux: If you then compare those targets with the NAO's own recommendations, in many cases they are lower than what the NAO is offering us as basic targets. What I am observing is, to date, the targets were generated in terms of making improvements on where we were in the past. The NAO has put in front of you these recommendations for targets that, if you like, are done by comparator. Doing it by comparator has produced for both these agencies a suggested target of 10 days.

Q73 Ian Lucas: Mr Devereux, may I ask you about the Highways Agency, which appears to be doing something right in this area? It is the one agency that has achieved its sickness absence target in 2006, and consistently since 2002 it has had a much lower rate of absence than all other departments. Have you looked at that?

Robert Devereux: Yes.

Q74 Ian Lucas: Are there any examples of good practice within the Highways Agency?

Robert Devereux: There are. The Highways Agency in particular has put quite a bit of effort into this issue over the last few years. It is doing things that, essentially, the NAO recommends we should all be doing consistently. For example, it has put effort into return to work interviews. Best practice across the private sector and public sectors means that when anybody takes a sickness absence, their manager should speak to them when they come back to the office. Basically, their manager should make sure that they understand why they have been ill, and catch up with work. You may not believe it, but this process has a profound effect on whether people then have further periods of illness. The Highways Agency has been doing that consistently.

Secondly, the Highways Agency has been underpinning that process with good systems for ensuring that managers actually do it. It is one thing to have the policy to say that that is what should happen; it is another thing to make people do it. What it has been doing is ensuring, through the way in which sickness absences are actually closed on their recording system, that that particular transaction has taken place and is recognised by

both the members of staff and their line managers as having happened. It is that attention to the detail of the implementation of the policy that the Highways Agency has been very good at.

Q75 Ian Lucas: Is the Highways Agency doing a very different type of work from either the DVLA or the DSA?

Robert Devereux: Yes, in one sense. It basically has two sorts of functions. In one sense, it is managing the nation's roads; managing contracts for people to make sure that the roads are gritted and salted—

Q76 Ian Lucas: So it is an outside job?

Robert Devereux: No, the contracts are managed by the Highways Agency. The people actually shovelling salt are private contractors. More recently, in the last year, the agency has taken on about 1,000 traffic officers, who you sometimes see up and down the motorways and are there essentially to help the police to clear up accidents. That is a completely different sort of work—it is actually being out in vehicles all day in all weathers.

Q77 Ian Lucas: But even though it has increased its work force—and that is evident from the figures showing days of absence—it has maintained the low level of sickness absence.

Robert Devereux: Correct.

Q78 Ian Lucas: Mr Bennett, have you looked at the Highways Agency?

Clive Bennett: Not closely, but we have looked at methods—for example, the work it has done on return to work interviews and so on. As I said earlier, we have put a lot of effort into those, and that has paid big dividends.

Q79 Ian Lucas: So, why are those not reflected in your figures?

Clive Bennett: One of the things I was going to mention—it has not yet come up—is that broadly speaking, last year, the period until the end of March, our agency business plan had a target of 12.2 days, and we got that down to 11.6. So, absences are coming down, if you exclude pregnancy-related sickness. The core business that is controllable is now down to 11.6 days and, in fact, the target for this year is another day off that—10.6. We are working towards that target. I am pleased to say that a lot of the work we have done on targeting the long-term sick, which includes some of the things that the Highways Agency has done, is starting to pay off.

Q80 Ian Lucas: You have been in your post since 2000, have you not?

Clive Bennett: Yes.

Q81 Ian Lucas: Since 2002 there has been very little change in the rate of sickness absence.

Clive Bennett: That is a fair point in terms of headline level, but as I said earlier, if you look at the short-term sickness—

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Q82 Ian Lucas: I am not talking about headline levels; I am talking about the figures.

Clive Bennett: I am talking overall. There are two types of sickness and absence in the agency and both are difficult. For example, in 2003, short-term absence was 44% of the total. It is now only 38%, so we have been bringing that down. However, long-term absence has been going up, and has gone from 56% to 62%.

Q83 Ian Lucas: So the short term has gone down 6% and the long term up.

Clive Bennett: Yes, so overall the change has not been as large as it should have been. However, it is now coming down and, as I said, this year, it came down effectively from 12.1% to 11.6%.

Q84 Ian Lucas: Why did it not come down before? Why have you not done anything about it before?

Clive Bennett: We have. That is what I am saying.

Q85 Ian Lucas: Excuse me, you have not done anything effective, because the figures overall have not changed.

Clive Bennett: On the short term, in the early days, we were effective, and the figure did come down. We are now putting a lot of emphasis on the long term. In fact, in the last three years, we have put in quite a lot of effort, and we are starting to see the benefits—bear in mind that these are rolling 12-month figures so it takes a while to come in.

It is true to say that my big effort in the agency—I do not want to divert from the topic too much—has been to gain an overall efficiency level for the agency. We have put a huge amount of effort into that, which actually has taken about 500 heads out of the day-to-day running of the agency, from productivity points of view. Some of that is sickness absence, which for me has the opportunity to reduce spend, which is what the Report says. However, I see that as part of a much bigger opportunity to reduce spend.

Q86 Ian Lucas: Are you saying that sickness absence has not been your priority?

Clive Bennett: It has been one of the priorities, certainly, on a day-to-day basis, but we are seeking overall productivity across the whole of the agency, of which sickness absence is one part.

Q87 Ian Lucas: But the essence is that you have not made any progress in the last five years.

Clive Bennett: Well, we have on the short term and we have made progress on the long term in the last year. As I said, it is down quite substantially.

Q88 Ian Lucas: Mr Devereux, you want to say something?

Robert Devereux: I want to put that in context. The target that Clive has of reducing sickness absence by one percentage point in a year would effectively for an organisation of 6,000 full-time people save you about 6,000 days—about 25 years. The DVLA has an efficiency target to take out 500 heads over three years. I think that you will find that delivering 500 head reductions over that period is a much bigger

and more demanding target, on which it is actually delivering, than the simple element of purely sickness absence. You seem to be right to conclude that the trend line on sickness absence is essentially flat. That has happened in a period in which very much larger value-for-money and efficiency savings are being delivered by the agency. If it was more successful on sickness absence, it would be contributing towards the achievement of that target, which at the moment it is having to meet by other means.

Q89 Ian Lucas: Are you saying that more value for money means more sickness absence?

Robert Devereux: No, I am not.

Q90 Ian Lucas: You are suggesting somehow—

Robert Devereux: No, I am saying that the agency is—this is from memory—a net 420 heads lighter already than it was two and a half years ago. That is a real efficiency gain, because it is delivering increased business on much reduced numbers. I have observed that that number is substantially larger than the consequences of simply delivering on sickness absence would be. Potentially, with a degree of retrospective consideration, it could have done more on sickness absence, but it is delivering substantial savings to the public purse by delivering on its Gershon targets in the first place.

Q91 Ian Lucas: Mrs Thew, may we go back to the accidents about which we were talking earlier? You said that there were 124.

Rosemary Thew: Some 124 needed medical treatment.

Q92 Ian Lucas: What sorts of accidents were they? Were any of them very serious? Was anyone hospitalised?

Rosemary Thew: Yes.

Q93 Ian Lucas: How many?

Rosemary Thew: There were 10 that involved serious injuries.

Q94 Ian Lucas: So 10 required hospitalisation?

Rosemary Thew: Well, 10 were serious injuries.

Q95 Ian Lucas: Have you looked at the Highways Agency's figure yourself?

Rosemary Thew: No, we compare more to our sister agency in the Vehicle and Operator Services Agency. We have looked there to see what good practice we can glean. Quite a lot of what we are now doing, as I explained earlier, has been gleaned from there.

Q96 Ian Lucas: So what guidance do you give to driving test examiners concerning the conduct or driving of those taking their tests? Some 10 have been hospitalised. Can you provide any detail on how those accidents happened?

Rosemary Thew: The way in which a test is conducted is very prescribed. There will be manoeuvres in a road. For example, they will be asked to make a turn in a road or things such as

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parallel parking and to drive on a dual carriageway. It is very difficult to say how accidents might occur. Someone might go into the back of a car, in a rear shunt, for example. There might be other cases in which the candidate loses control.

Q97 Ian Lucas: What sort of investigation is carried out when an accident happens?

Rosemary Thew: When an accident happens, the driving examiner will complete a form, which goes through the test centre manager. One of the things that we are now doing is making sure that the test centre manager does a much fuller investigation of all the circumstances of the test, and the accident that has occurred. That will be sent to a central source, and if there are lessons to be learned they will be taken.

Q98 Mr Davidson: May I ask Mrs Thew first? Your staff presumably are dispersed across the country.

Rosemary Thew: Indeed.

Q99 Mr Davidson: Are there particular hot spots in terms of absence?

Rosemary Thew: We have done an analysis of that and there are regional variations, yes.⁵

Q100 Mr Davidson: Can you tell us what those are?

Rosemary Thew: I am afraid that the work is at a very early stage at this point; it is something that we are just starting to do. What we are trying to do now is to get below the surface of why there might be regional variation and whether there is anything that we ought to be doing on that.

Q101 Mr Davidson: So am I correct in thinking that you are only looking at it on a regional basis now? This has been a problem for a long time and it is only now that you are looking at whether there are regional variations.

Rosemary Thew: What we have been trying to do over the course of the last 18 months is to make sure that we have got—

Q102 Mr Davidson: That is a yes, basically. You are only looking at it now. I just wanted to be clear about that.

Can I just come to the question of fraud in the agency? I am told—I am sure that I saw it in the papers recently—that people masquerade as others and come along. Presumably if that is happening, more of the people are passing, and therefore there are fewer accidents; presumably since they are already qualified and trained drivers, there is less stress on the instructors. Is there any inverse correlation between fraud and the number of sickness absences?

Rosemary Thew: No; I do not think we can draw that sort of correlation.

Q103 Mr Davidson: So you have figures about fraud that are comparable on an area basis or a regional basis?

Rosemary Thew: Yes. May I just set in some context the work that I think you are talking about—impersonations on tests? We have seen an incremental increase in the number of referrals of suspected impersonators over the course of the last three years, and we are investigating all of those. We anticipate this year we will have something like 600 referrals made to us for this, and some of the people who are impersonating are quite prolific in the number of impersonations that they make, but I do not think that the numbers would be such that they would make a real impact against the 2 million tests that we do each year.

Q104 Mr Davidson: All right. That is fair enough. What areas are the worst for impersonations?

Rosemary Thew: We get impersonations, I am afraid, right the way across England. We have now started to see some in Scotland and Wales.

Q105 Mr Davidson: So there is no pattern at all. Could we have a note indicating where those that are being investigated are geographically situated, so that we can have a look at that?

May I turn to the DVLA? We are told that relocating things out of London is generally good in terms of staff tending to have higher morale. Is this not the case in South Wales? Is this a South Wales issue about sickness in Government service, or is it exclusive to the DVLA?

Clive Bennett: I do not think it is necessarily a geographical issue. Of course, we have not moved. It has been there for all this time.

Mr Davidson: All this time—

Clive Bennett: What I am saying is that since it was formed in the 1970s the DVLA has been in Swansea, so I do not think we can say the geography plays a part in it. I think all the evidence from the NAO Report—and it certainly backed up my own view—is that it is very much a matter of the type of work. A lot of the work is mundane. A large number of people in the agency—

Q106 Mr Davidson: I understand all that. I wonder if I can just ask the NAO in that case: in terms of the type of job that is being undertaken, you will benchmark. I accept that. Have you benchmarked with anything else in South Wales? Is this particularly a South Wales issue, or is it the type of work that they have in the DVLA in particular? Is there a correlation with the other symptoms of low morale that we might identify, such as turnover?

Sir John Bourn: Of course, we do not operate in South Wales now to any extent, because that is the responsibility of the Auditor General for Wales. Generally speaking, in the work that we have done in relation to sickness absence—

⁵ *Note by witness:* Since 1 January 2004 the Fraud and Integrity Team has investigated 1,200 allegations of candidate impersonation at theory and practical driving test centres. To date 320 people have been arrested and 207 have been charged, cautioned or convicted. 879 driving licences or pass certificates have been considered for revocation or invalidation. The team is currently investigating 319 cases.

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Q107 Mr Davidson: May I clarify that point? Surely, in South Wales, you would not look at things that were the devolved responsibility of the Welsh Assembly, but if there were any other central functions in South Wales, you would still cover them. Presumably, you have access to the information from the Welsh Assembly.

Sir John Bourn: We have, but we have not made comparisons or sought to make them, although it is a fair point to say that one could seek to do that. Overall, in the work that we have done on sickness absence, looking at areas such as the Department for Work and Pensions and Revenue and Customs across the country, the work involved tends to be relatively mundane, while still of the important character that Mr Bennett refers to. You tend to find higher levels of absence for sickness in that sort of work, which tends to get correlated with questions of management capacity and capability. The DVLA is not out of line with the experience that we have seen in other parts of the civil service that are doing that sort of work.

Q108 Mr Davidson: That is helpful. In terms of turnover, if that is another indicator of unhappiness, is there a similar level of turnover in Swansea to what we would expect in equivalent tasks being conducted elsewhere? Who can help me there?

Robert Devereux: I believe that what you have in Appendix Four is a cut-down version of the work that was done. I do not think that administrative and clerical staff or the nature of the physical work have been offered as contributory factors in relation to sickness absence, because the other factors have not been looked at, although I believe that such things as geography have been looked at internally. The conclusion was that those things were not significant factors. What you have in front of you is the best that NAO contractors could find by way of patterns, as it were, so they were not adducing that there are other factors that they just did not get round to reporting.

Q109 Mr Davidson: Right. I was just wondering whether you would plead that you are no worse than anyone else, and whether that was a reasonable assumption. The converse of that is that you are worse than other people, and I am trying to identify which is which.

Robert Devereux: No, I tried to make this clear to the Chairman at the start. The NAO has taken comparators with public and private sector organisations that it thinks properly reflect the different nature of the different parts of the Department for Transport. In five out of eight parts of the Department, it finds that today's sickness absence is actually as good in relation to public and private sector comparators. In three parts of the Department, it finds that it is higher, so I am not pleading, since two members of the NAO are here with us today, that that is an acceptable position. The target that the NAO is recommending is 10 days for two agencies that at the moment have numbers north of 10 days, which is unacceptable. I am not

making that plea, but I am observing that different parts of the organisation are correctly being given different targets, reflecting the nature of their work.

Q110 Mr Davidson: That is helpful. Given that we heard earlier that the Highways Agency seems to have adopted best practice, why has best practice not been adequately disseminated across all the agencies for which you have responsibility?

Robert Devereux: The practice in the last 12 or 18 months, driven by the fact that we have these targets out for 2010, has been increasingly to share what is going on in the rest of the place. There are references in the Report to—

Q111 Mr Davidson: Right, so it is being done now, you are saying, basically?

Robert Devereux: No, I am saying it has been done over the last 18 months. By all means ask why it has not been done before, but it has been done over the last 18 months. One of the signals of that, for example, is the proposition that each of these agencies would move to a common trigger position, so you could start considering disciplinary action at eight days, not at the variety of points that you find in the appendix. The other illustration is that we are going to the trouble of building a shared service centre to support common processes.

Q112 Mr Davidson: May I pick up one point that may have been made before I came in? If so, I apologise. It is the question of targets not being challenging enough. It was drawn to our attention that the DVLA has a target to improve absence rates by one day each year based on the previous year's experience, so that if you have a bad year, your target moves. Does that not seem a trifle lax to you? Surely there should be continuous improvement, rather than saying, "Well, if you have a bad year we'll just go back again."? You could clearly manipulate that system. Is any part of any of the staff's performance bonus related to sickness absence cover?

Clive Bennett: It is one of the factors. The DVLA measures staff performance against a number of characteristics, including sickness absence. That is one issue that staff are taken up as part of their personal performance.

It is true that in 2005 the agency went backwards because absence rose from 13.2 to 14 days. There was no point in setting a target that was lower than our starting point, which is how we arrived at the target of 12.2 for 2006. We hit 13.2, excluding pregnancy-related sickness absence, (to which we should come back) in 2005, and so set ourselves an annual report figure of 12.2 days—an improvement of one day—and we hit 11.6 days for the period to the end of March 2007. We have now turned the corner, by taking one day off the target each year. Our target this year is 10.6 days, which is one day lower than the current rate. We are now attacking the problem quite hard, but it is true that 2005 was a turning point.

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Q113 Derek Wyatt: I am sorry that I am late—I had to sit on a statutory instrument Committee. My first question, which may have been asked while I was not here, is do you know what the absentee rate per day is? Does someone ring the figure in? Do you know how many people are missing every day?

Robert Devereux: No, not off the top of my head.

Q114 Derek Wyatt: I do not mean for you to come up with the actual number, I meant to ask whether there is a procedure. Do you know the number of people who are missing on a given day, be it 1,251 or whatever?

Clive Bennett: The count is triggered off if someone is absent for a number of days.

Q115 Derek Wyatt: Do you know that someone is off on the first day that they are off? Is there a daily system that operates after one day rather than, say, three days?

Robert Devereux: The manager of the absentee would know and is required to report on the first day of absence. That is a different question from asking whether I know.

Q116 Derek Wyatt: I wish to know how far up the tree that information goes. Does it stay down with the lower management?

Robert Devereux: The responsibility for recording that a member of staff is absent lies with the line manager. Having been recorded, the information is accessible by whoever takes reports out of the system. I do not go through the sickness absence list on a day-to-day basis. I get reports month by month for every director at the centre of the Department, so I know what the totals are. I have a monitoring ability, but I do not look on a daily basis.

Q117 Derek Wyatt: I understand that.

I looked at the goresponse.com site, and I recommend it to all of you. It is a telephone service that shows you what is happening in your absentee system. When the company has been employed by public and private companies, they have found the absentee rate to be much higher than the organisation ever thought. Who audits your figures? How do you know about absenteeism? I am interested to know because goresponse.com proves that the figures are higher.

Robert Devereux: You will see in the documents work done at the Highways Agency that the NAO picked up on, which is a good example of what you were talking about. The agency has parallel systems, which enables them to make a comparison. There is a sickness absence regime, which I described, and a time-recording system that records logging in and out and when people are present. Comparing the two together, the Highways Agency's internal auditors, I believe, concluded that there was a degree of under-reporting, but only a degree—it was computed as three quarters of a person per year on a total of 5.5. That substantiates your point about under-recording, but it is not that 5 turns into 15.

Q118 Mr Williams: There is a danger in my colleague Mr Davidson's question, who kept referring to the matter as a South Wales problem. As the NAO said, it is not out of line with other parts of the civil service that carry out similar work. With what do you compare the work, and with what other locations? Are there regional differences as well as in the make-up of the work?

Sir John Bourn: Many of the comparisons are based on the nature of the work. I mentioned major areas of work from around the country, such as the DWP's and Revenue and Customs'. It seems that it is more to do with the kind of work, leadership and management than with the region.

Robert Devereux: On page 28 there is a table of five other Government Departments against which the DVLA is compared. The Child Support Agency had 11.2 absence days, HM Revenue and Customs 9.7, UK Passport Services—

Q119 Mr Williams: So I would be right in saying that this is not a phenomenon with a Welsh accent. It is not locally confined, as the NAO has said.

Robert Devereux: Let me be clear: at the moment the DVLA is above even the target that the NAO thinks we should have. There is a problem in Swansea, but I agree that there is no evidence on the table that it is a Welsh problem. It is to do with the nature of the work and the way in which it is being managed.

Clive Bennett: May I help a little? If you take the directorates of the DVLA in Swansea, only two of the eight have a sickness and absence problem. It is not a Swansea problem, even in DVLA. It is work-related and the two areas that have the highest sickness absence, which we put a lot of effort into, are customer service—the people who deal with customers and the telephone side—and central operations, where a lot of the lower-level staff, in grade terms, and most of the women and younger people are, and where the more mundane work is. The RED report that has been published shows a clear correlation between those factors. What is unique about Swansea, if I dare say it, is that we happen to have a lot of the reasons why sickness absence becomes a problem, but not because of the geography as far as I can see.

Q120 Mr Williams: Paragraph 2.22 refers to your six-month "stress pilot" exercise. What can you tell us about that? What did it do, what did it achieve and where does it go next?

Clive Bennett: The stress pilot was very powerful in making a difference in the DVLA. We had quite a problem with stress; I mentioned earlier that stress caused 49% of the total long-term sickness. We have put a lot of effort into the area, and we have now brought down the trigger to get occupational health involved to seven days. So when somebody has been off for seven days with stress we bring in occupational health early to work with them, long before we even go through the full medical process. That earlier intervention has definitely had quite a large impact. For example, from September 2005 to March 2006, 82% of staff had returned after two months and 93% within three months. Before it had

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been 73% and 78% That is a 12 to 19% improvement, simply through earlier intervention by both occupational health and managers.

Q121 Mr Williams: How do you compare with other employers in the locality? Do you have local comparators?

Clive Bennett: We have endeavoured to get some information, but it is very difficult. I was interested in what the NAO was saying, but we have endeavoured to get information from some of the bigger employers, such as the council and the health service. They are not too keen to part with it. I would really value that, and we will continue to try. It would be worthwhile benchmarking data.

Q122 Mr Williams: Why will they not co-operate? What overtures have you made?

Clive Bennett: I know that it has been HR to HR. I have not gone as far as Chief Executive to Chief Executive—perhaps I should—but we have made attempts to get information. I am not sure what it would tell us, unless we benchmarked it at the level that we have talked about, on a like-for-like basis, but it would be worth knowing.

Q123 Mr Williams: So if the pilot was due to be completed in May, it is just about coming to an end.

Clive Bennett: The stress pilot finished in March. What we did is still going on, but the pilot formally ended in March when we examined the results that I mentioned earlier.

Q124 Mr Williams: Now that you have reached the end of it, is it too early to tell whether the figures are levelling off at the level that the pilot had achieved by the end or whether there is continuing progress of the type that you indicated?

Clive Bennett: As far as I can find out from what we are currently looking at, there is continuing progress. Indeed, we are now branching it out into the rest of the agency. I believe that it is much of the reason why long-term absence has started to come down consistently over the past few months. Stress was one of our major issues in long-term sickness.

Q125 Mr Williams: Are there any other Departments, not only in South Wales, with figures comparable to your own?

Clive Bennett: Not of the same size. They are small offices, dealing with planning and so on.

Robert Devereux: Do you mean in Swansea or nationwide?

Mr Williams: Nationwide.

Robert Devereux: As I say, on page 28, the National Audit Office has provided a list of comparators of other Departments, which are nationwide and which do what it describes as similar work, and we would accept that.

Q126 Mr Williams: Is there any age relationship? What correlations are there to age, gender, young families and so on in the group that is subject to long-term stress?

Clive Bennett: As I mentioned earlier, our big problem—if I can call it that, because they are good employees—is that 64% of our staff are women. Of that 64%, 64% are under 40. Of those, quite a large number are affected by pregnancy-related sickness, which is now legally protected. For example, last year, 8% of our sickness and absence involved pregnancy-related sickness.

Q127 Mr Williams: If you take those elements out, because they are not within your control, but result from decisions taken by Parliament, how would your figures look?

Clive Bennett: I am glad that you asked that question. For example, the 13.1 days at the end of 2006 would come to 12.1 days if you took out pregnancy-related sickness. One full day is made up by the impact of pregnancy-related sickness, as far as we are concerned, and that is part of the population issue.

Robert Devereux: And as I understand it, because of changes in the legislation to do with sickness absence and pregnancy, that number is now twice as large as it was two years ago. So there is an upward trend in the numbers, which is a consequence of that one factor.

Q128 Mr Williams: Again, it would be useful to get some comparators just to see how far this is an isolated problem for you and how far similar problems exist in, say, local authorities, which have an enormous range of administrative skills and fairly low-providing jobs. Is there any value in doing a joint analysis with local authorities to see whether there is any common experience?

Clive Bennett: There is certainly value. As I say, the problem has been getting together to do that, but I am certainly keen to do it. I agree with the point that you are making, and if we can do that, it would be very useful.

Chairman: I think that there are a couple of supplementaries.

Mr Bacon: First—

Chairman: I think that Mr Mitchell was first. He is older and wiser than you.

Mr Mitchell: Thank you very much. I just want to follow up Alan Williams's point. The DVLA moved to Swansea in the 1970s. If there was a proposal now to shift a major agency with Government functions to, say, Grimsby, we would all be fighting to get it and we would all regard it as a prestigious development. The development in Swansea must certainly have been prestigious, given that unemployment there is high, as it is in Grimsby. The area needs development, and the DVLA offers jobs. The work may be mundane—I do not know, although that is what the Report says—but these are civil service jobs, so they are fairly secure jobs for life.

Chairman: I will have to cut you off there. I am afraid that there is a Division in the House. We have almost got to the end of our questions, but I am afraid that we will have to go to vote. We will then come back. I do apologise.

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Sitting suspended for a Division in the House.

On resuming—

Chairman: Mr Mitchell was asking his last question.

Q129 Mr Mitchell: You will see what is coming. It was a prestige development and one that we would all have given our eye teeth to have in our constituencies. It was in an area of high unemployment where it brought the prestige of a civil service job. In those situations, the rates of absenteeism, long-term sickness and general failure to turn up to work should have been better. Sir John Bourn said that that was the average for comparable occupations, but the figure should have been better because of the propitious circumstances. That must indicate a real failure of leadership at the DVLA.

Clive Bennett: I think that two things come out of that question. One is that, clearly, we could always be better at management leadership. On the point that you made, we are putting a lot of effort into education, training and working with managers. You are only as good as your manager on the spot, so that is a fair challenge and there must be improvement.

However, the other side of the coin relates to the business of the type of work. We have done some work on a job design pilot to look at whether we can intrinsically change the nature of the work to make it more interesting for people. In March 2006, we completed a pilot, which showed a 2% improvement in sickness absence, better productivity and empowerment of people. Therefore, something about the quality of the work is important in this issue, and we are certainly using that job design to look at how we can move much more of the work on to an improved platform that gives people interest. That helps a lot. The issues are about changing the work for the people and—you are right—to do with how well the manager manages those people. Both those issues need equal work.

Q130 Mr Mitchell: It is a shame that you had not thought to do that before.

Clive Bennett: Well, it is. But, as I have said, we had a problem with short-term sickness and we put a lot of effort into that before. Once we realised that there was a problem with long-term sickness, we tended to change the direction a little. Now we are returning to the short-term sickness problem, which is where the job design really figures. We are doing both.

Q131 Mr Bacon: Ms Thew, you mentioned that the DSA had a maximum of 30 days' holiday. What is the minimum, on day one?

Rosemary Thew: I will need to check that, but I believe that it is 25 days, which is common across the civil service.

Q132 Mr Bacon: Mr Bennett, is a minimum of 25 days and a maximum of 30 the same for you?

Clive Bennett: I thought that we were at 30 right across, but I will check that.

Q133 Mr Bacon: If that figure is not common across the civil service, I would be interested to know what is. Perhaps you could send us a note of what the minimum and maximum figures are for each agency, and the criteria by which entitlement advances. That would be interesting.⁶

Ms Thew and Mr Bennett, what specific steps do you take to improve the way that people feel valued, in terms of motivational schemes, away-days or whatever?

Rosemary Thew: We have done a lot of work within the DSA to seek to improve morale. If I may take a moment of the Committee's time, the Report features work that was going on in 2006, when we were doing quite a big organisational review to make the best use of public money, and that was going to result in some closures. In fact, sickness levels in those closing offices did not increase. We have recently done an employee opinion survey that shows that only 12% of staff disagreed with the statement, "I am proud to work for the DSA." I have undertaken very recently a full-scale leadership programme within my own board, aimed at ensuring that all of them are providing good levels of leadership—

Q134 Mr Bacon: You have answered my next question, by the way. You went on that course, yourself, did you?

Rosemary Thew: Indeed so. Other things to do with engaging the staff themselves have been that we have had an outside organisation—a firm of contractors called Threshold—has organised workshops for about 500 people from across the DSA, seeking their views about the future direction of the agency, about things that we might do better, and things that we do well, as well.

Q135 Mr Bacon: Thank you very much. Mr Bennett?

Clive Bennett: Going back to the point that Mrs Thew made, we have done several things. Certainly, at management level, we have brought in leadership training. Last year, for example—

Q136 Mr Bacon: Did you go on that training as well?

Clive Bennett: Yes. We did a complete profiling exercise of our managers as well, and we are looking at where they need strengthening in their management capability, and working with them on that, and we have launched a whole training—

Q137 Mr Bacon: Have any of the profiles indicated that someone is wholly unsuitable to be a manager and that, actually, they should be a librarian or something?

Clive Bennett: In some cases, the profiling showed that some people doing management jobs were not really cut out for them and, perhaps, could not be trained. So, we have used that to organise the agency

⁶ *Note by witness:* I can confirm that staff in the Government Car and Despatch Agency are entitled to 26 days leave which rises to 28 days after 2 years service and 30 days after 5 years. All other staff are entitled to 30 days leave.

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more appropriately; we are putting people who have good leadership skills to work with people, and the specialists who, perhaps, do not have the leadership skills are doing the rest. So, that is at leadership level. At the working level, we have done one thing a lot with the teams, which has been very successful. I will give you an example: in our customer inquiry group—I mentioned it earlier and it had a problem—we have looked at putting in greater management. For example, we have put in an absence manager as a specialist, to work with all the other managers to keep a really tight rein on things. They have put in things such as guaranteed *duvet days*—that sounds interesting. Broadly what they do is, if someone phones in in the morning and says, “I don’t feel like coming to work today,” we will accommodate that out of their holiday pay. That sounds very strange, but it actually works, and out of doing that—

Q138 Mr Bacon: You call them *duvet days*?

Clive Bennett: In cases over three months, we have seen a 63% change, as a result of allowing them more flexible use of their own holiday. Whereas, before, managers tended to refuse that day off, and employees would just go off sick.

Q139 Mr Bacon: You advertise them as *duvet days*?
Clive Bennett: We call them *duvet days*. They can phone in for them, but they have to pay for them out of their holiday allowance.

Chairman: Mr Davidson has one last question.

Q140 Mr Davidson: I come back to the question of assaults upon staff. Do you have figures for physical and verbal assaults by geographical area, and, if so, could we have them?⁷

Rosemary Thew: Indeed.

Q141 Mr Davidson: Secondly, in terms of action taken to protect staff in those circumstances, do you also have figures for prosecutions that are followed up?⁸

Rosemary Thew: Yes.

Mr Davidson: That would be helpful for us, as well.

Chairman: Thank you. That concludes our hearing. I particularly thank you, Mr Bennett, for the way you have answered the questions this afternoon.

⁷ Ev 15–16

⁸ Ev 15–16

Supplementary memorandum submitted by the Department for Transport

Questions 30 (Mr Austin Mitchell) & 140-141 (Mr Ian Davidson) *Number of physical/verbal assaults and number of prosecutions by geographical areas*

The following tables and charts show the breakdown of physical and verbal assaults which occurred in 2006 by area:

<i>Area (as structure 2006)</i>	<i>Physical assaults</i>
Scotland	0
Northern	7
Midlands	8
Wales	0
London	9
Total	24

<i>Area (as structure 2006)</i>	<i>Verbal assaults</i>
Scotland	25
Northern	79
Midlands	89
Wales	49
London	70
Total	312

The following table records police involvement/prosecutions:

<i>Date</i>	<i>Centre</i>	<i>Incident</i>	<i>Police involvement</i>	<i>Outcome</i>
July 2006	Scotland	Threatening and aggressive behaviour	Y	Pending court hearing
	Northern	Verbal and physical assault	N	
September 2006	Northern	Threatening and aggressive behaviour	Y	Police Caution
September 2006	Northern	Assault	Y	No action. Insufficient evidence.
November 2006	Northern	Battery	Y	Found guilty, adjourned for sentence

 Questions 43-46, 60 & 64 (Mr Richard Bacon) *Staff sickness levels by number of days absent*

You will see from these tables that 54% of DSA staff and 59% of DVLA staff took less than five days sickness absence with 29% and 33% respectively taking no sickness absence at all.

SICKNESS ABSENCE IN DSA

The following table shows the DSA total number of days sick per employee for 2006. This represents the number of working days lost.

<i>Total days sick per person</i>	<i>Headcount</i>
0	771
1	195
2	200
3	150
4	135
5	137
6	98
7	76
8	79
9	75
10	55
11	54
12	37
13	39
14	35
15	23
16	23
17	25
18	12
19	24
20	15
21	8
22	17
23	13
24	15
25	15
26	18
27	7
28	15
29	6
30	8
31	10
32	10
33	13
34	12
35	8
36	4
37	6
38	5
39	5
40	7
41	7
42	9
43	6
44	3
45	4
46	7
47	6
48	4
49	8
50	4
51	3
52	2
53	4
54	5

<i>Total days sick per person</i>	<i>Headcount</i>
55	5
56	3
57	3
58	6
59	6
60	3
61	1
62	7
63	2
64	1
66	4
67	3
68	3
69	2
70	5
71	4
72	2
73	2
75	2
76	4
77	2
79	1
80	2
81	1
82	1
83	2
85	2
86	5
87	2
88	3
89	3
90	4
91	1
92	2
93	2
94	2
95	2
96	2
97	1
98	1
99	3
100	2
106	1
107	2
109	3
110	2
112	1
113	1
115	1
117	2
118	2
121	1
123	1
127	1
128	2
129	2
132	1
135	1
140	2
141	1
144	1
145	1
148	1

<i>Total days sick per person</i>	<i>Headcount</i>
151	1
152	1
167	1
191	1
199	1
207	1
211	1
231	1
238	1
252	7
Grand Total	2,692

SICK ABSENCES BY TOTAL ABSENCE LENGTH—DVLA CALENDAR YEAR

The table below is constructed by counting the number of days of sick absence for each member of staff in the 2006 calendar year and is based on a 252 day working year (365 days less weekends and bank holidays).

Staff numbers refer to the headcount including all staff who either joined or left the Agency during the year and part-time staff—a total of 7,748 people were employed by the Agency in the calendar year 2006.

In calculating the number of working days lost, no adjustment has been made for the working patterns of part-time staff.

<i>Total Length of Sick Absences (Working Days)</i>	<i>Number of Staff (Headcount)</i>
0	2,580
1	482
2	585
3	520
4	432
5	502
6	233
7	228
8	190
9	153
10	149
11	101
12	95
13	71
14	81
15	82
16	59
17	46
18	38
19	46
20	40
21	36
22	31
23	41
24	29
25	25
26	23
27	25
28	21
29	28
30	21
31	15
32	21
33	18
34	24
35	14
36	15
37	10

<i>Total Length of Sick Absences (Working Days)</i>	<i>Number of Staff (Headcount)</i>
38	16
39	20
40	19
41	14
42	13
43	10
44	22
45	11
46	16
47	9
48	5
49	7
50	11
51	8
52	12
53	11
54	7
55	11
56	13
57	9
58	15
59	5
60	8
61	8
62	7
63	6
64	4
65	12
66	6
67	10
68	6
69	5
70	2
71	6
72	5
73	8
74	5
75	3
76	6
77	7
78	2
79	7
80	3
81	9
82	7
83	2
84	3
85	6
86	7
87	3
88	5
89	5
90	7
91	5
92	3
93	3
94	3
95	6
96	2
97	4
98	5
99	0
100	5

<i>Total Length of Sick Absences (Working Days)</i>	<i>Number of Staff (Headcount)</i>
101	4
102	3
103	2
104	3
105	3
106	3
107	1
108	3
109	2
110	1
111	2
112	4
113	2
114	0
115	3
116	2
117	2
118	1
119	5
120	3
121	1
122	0
123	3
124	1
125	1
126	4
127	2
128	4
129	1
130	2
131	3
132	1
133	4
134	2
135	2
136	5
137	1
138	1
139	1
140	1
141	2
142	0
143	2
144	0
145	2
146	1
147	2
148	2
149	0
150	0
151	0
152	0
153	1
154	0
155	0
156	1
157	1
158	1
159	0
160	0
161	1
162	0
163	1

<i>Total Length of Sick Absences (Working Days)</i>	<i>Number of Staff (Headcount)</i>
164	1
165	1
166	0
167	1
168	2
169	0
170	1
171	1
172	0
173	0
174	0
175	1
176	1
177	2
178	1
179	1
180	0
181	0
182	0
183	1
184	0
185	1
186	0
187	0
188	0
189	1
190	0
191	0
192	0
193	1
194	3
195	1
196	2
197	2
198	0
199	2
200	0
201	0
202	0
203	0
204	0
205	0
206	1
207	1
208	0
209	1
210	0
211	4
212	0
213	0
214	0
215	0
216	1
217	1
218	0
219	0
220	1
221	0
222	0
223	0
224	0
225	0
226	0

<i>Total Length of Sick Absences (Working Days)</i>	<i>Number of Staff (Headcount)</i>
227	0
228	1
229	0
230	0
231	0
232	0
233	1
234	1
235	0
236	0
237	0
238	0
239	0
240	0
241	0
242	1
243	1
244	0
245	0
246	0
247	0
248	0
249	0
250	0
251	1
252	9
Total	7,748
