

Keeping London on the move



First London & Berkshire Buses

5,000 working days gained in one twelve month period

When bus drivers call in sick, members of the public can be left standing in the rain – but this is just one reason why First London & Berkshire Buses wanted to better manage absence. The company also wanted to reduce the cost of providing sickness cover, improve healthcare provision for staff and introduce consistent processes. Through its work with Active Health Partners, it has reduced absence by 19%.

The Challenge

As with most business improvement projects, the absence management initiative at First London and Berkshire Buses was driven by the desire to improve performance, efficiency and services.

"We knew that our absence rates needed improvement but we faced inconsistent approaches in the ways it was being tackled," said Dave Fielding, Business Support Manager, First London & Berkshire Buses (First London). "We were wasting money on absence cover and had to take steps to address this."

Every time that a driver does not turn up for work, the company must pay another driver to cover the shift as well as sick pay where appropriate. This results in higher operating costs. If First London is unable to find a substitute driver to cover a shift in time, the knock-on effect can potentially be even more significant. The company risks inconveniencing passengers, leading to an increase in customer complaints and performance penalties, all of which could detrimentally impact on its contractual obligations with Transport for London.

The challenges that First London faced didn't stem from a lack of appropriate absence management processes. The company already had an absence policy in place; it just wasn't being applied consistently. "What we needed was a new, clear approach to absence management that could be rolled out across all grades within our business," says Fielding.

The company has a large number of depots throughout London and Berkshire, and the lack of consistency in how absence management processes were applied contributed to a significant disparity between sites and across grades. "Similar depots, with the same numbers of employees, had different success when applying our absence policies – and consequently very different absence rates," explains Fielding. "This inconsistency led to allegations of unfairness and inequality from the unions."



Highlights

- ➔ Absence rate reduced by 19% in first twelve months
- ➔ Number of days lost to absence reduced by over 5,000 days
- ➔ Average number of sickness spells reduced from 2.7 to 2 per employee
- ➔ Direct cost savings from fewer cover payments
- ➔ Indirect cost savings from more effective use of manager time
- ➔ High quality management data available instantly
- ➔ Expert medical advice for employees

The Solution

First London conducted a tendering exercise involving three potential suppliers of absence management services and selected Active Health Partners (AHP). "We were impressed by AHP's unique selling point that the calls were led by qualified nurses," recalls Fielding. "With AHP, we saw a way to tackle absenteeism and provide our staff with 24 hour access to free, qualified medical advice at the same time."

Initially, the absence management services from AHP were deployed for a six month trial. The company rolled out the service to over 4,200 employees based at fifteen depots, as well as First London's headquarters and MOT centre.

During the implementation phase, AHP offered briefings to thirty six union representatives, to explain how the new processes would work. "Initially the unions had concerns, but AHP addressed them comprehensively," says Fielding.

When employees are ill, they now phone a dedicated number, which is available 24 hours a day, 365 days a year, to report their absence and discuss their symptoms with qualified nurses. The nurses agree their likely return to work date with them and provide them with medical advice to speed their recovery. An absence notification is then sent directly to the appropriate line manager by email and/or text message.

AHP provides detailed absence records for each employee. Fielding says: "We stress to everyone that AHP does not manage our absences, but it gives our managers effective support and the tools to do the job."

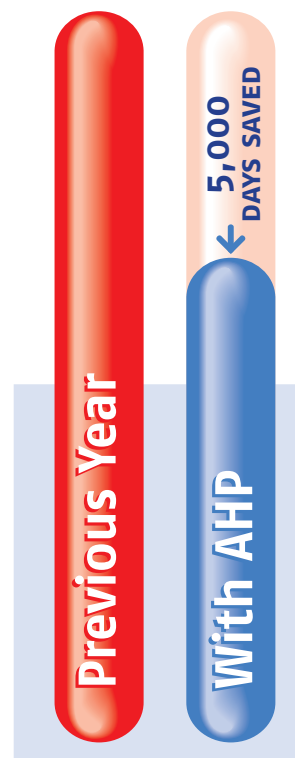
"I am happy to recommend the service, because of the results we have achieved."
**Dave Fielding, Business Support Manager,
 First London & Berkshire Buses**

The Results

In the first twelve months of using the AHP absence management service, First London succeeded in reducing its absence rates by 19%. "Obviously a low absence rate is a big commercial advantage in delivering services to our passengers and in striving for our goal of zero cancellations," says Fielding. "Passengers expect to see our services, and we want them there on time, all of the time."

First London calculates that it saved over 5,000 lost working days in one twelve month period. This reduction in absence has led to a corresponding reduction in costs. "Cover payments have come down," says Fielding. "In addition, we have reduced indirect costs by reducing the amount of time managers spend rushing around at the last minute trying to find replacement drivers."

One of the key benefits of the system is the management information that it provides. "We can now instantly see the number of absences at company, depot or individual level," says Fielding. "The ability to analyse trends, types of absences, spells and patterns which would simply not have been possible based on our paper driven systems."



Now that First London has clear absence data, it is able to deal more effectively with individuals who have attendance issues. "As well as focussing on getting people back to health, we can ensure we do not get bogged down in arguments about who said what, why and when. We now have greater clarity and auditable records," observes Fielding.

Employees who have used the service have provided positive feedback about the quality of advice provided by the nurses. Fielding concludes: "We have a great relationship with AHP and I am happy to recommend the service, because of the results we have achieved."