

East Herts Council Report

Human Resources Committee

Date of Meeting: 26 May 2021

Report by: Head of Human Resources and Organisational Development

Report title: Employee Health and Wellbeing report 2020/21

Ward(s) affected: N/A

Summary

RECOMMENDATION FOR HUMAN RESOURCES COMMITTEE:

(a) To consider the annual Employee Health and Wellbeing Report 2020/2021 including the actions (in section 8.0) planned for 2021/22 and provide any comments to the Head of HR and OD.

1.0 Proposal(s)

1.1 HR Committee Members are invited to consider the Employee Health and Wellbeing Report 2020/21.

2.0 Background

2.1 Employee absence can be costly for an organisation and therefore it is important that the council accurately measures and monitors absence.

3.0 Introduction

- 3.1 The Employee Health and Wellbeing Report 2020/21 considers sickness absence levels across the council and compares them with previous years and benchmarking data. It also considers what the council can do to support employee health and wellbeing.
- 3.2 The council measures sickness absence in two ways: the number of full time equivalent (FTE) days absence per FTE employee and the percentage time lost due to absence.
- 3.3 The number of FTE days absence per FTE employee is calculated by dividing the number of FTE days sickness absence by the total number of FTE employees in the council.
- 3.4 Percentage time lost due to absence is calculated by dividing the total number of FTE days sickness absence by the total number of available working days.
- 3.5 This report breaks down absences into short and long term.
- 3.6 Comparisons have been made with local government averages which are taken from the LG Inform Benchmarking Metrics report 2018/19 (the latest report available at the time of writing this report). The Chartered Institute of Personnel and Development (CIPD) 'Health and Wellbeing at Work Survey April 2021' has also been used to make comparisons with other organisations.

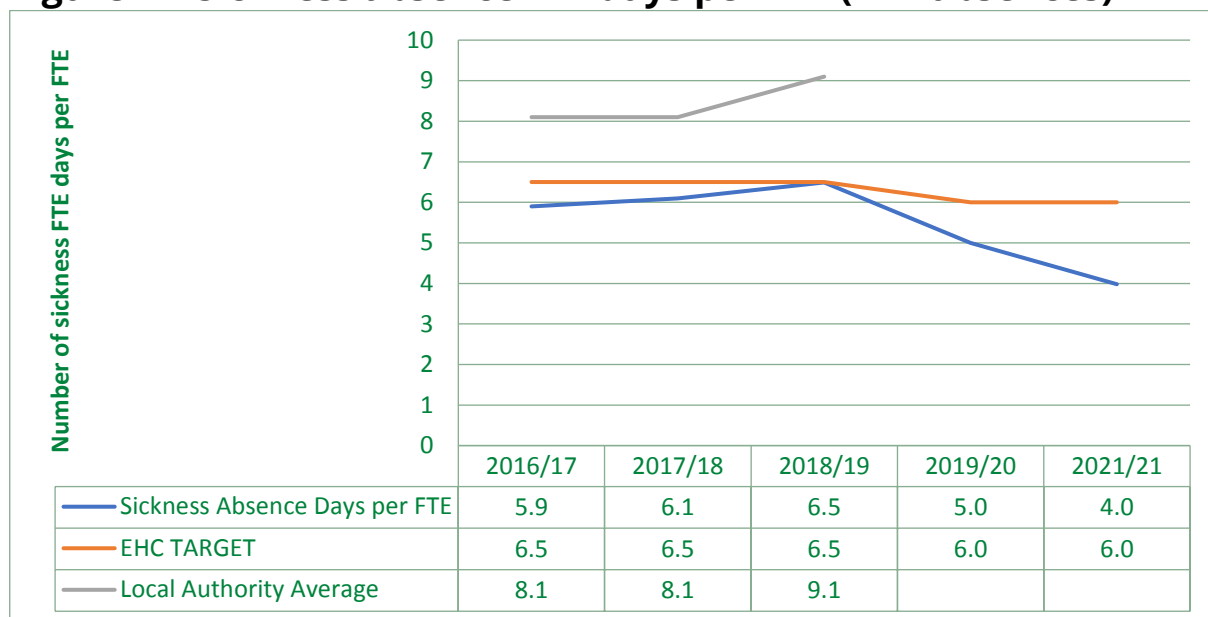
4.0 Sickness Absence Levels

4.1 ALL Absences

- 4.1.1 In 2020/21, the number of sickness absence FTE days per FTE employee was 4 days which is below the council's target of 6 days and lower than in 2019/20 (5 days). It is also lower than

the local government average in 2018/19 (9.1 days). Please see Figure 1 below.

Figure 1 – Sickness absence FTE days per FTE (ALL absences)



The council's absence target was reduced from 6.5 days to 6 days in April 2019.

The local authority average is the mean of all English local authorities taken from the 'LG Inform Benchmarking Metrics report 2018/19' (the latest report available at the time of writing).

4.1.2 The total number of days taken as sickness absence in 2020/21 was 1068.56 FTE days. Fifty-two percent (554.08 FTE days) of these were due to short term absence and 48% (514.48 FTE days) were due to long term absence. The total percentage time lost in 2020/21 due to all absences was 1.4%. This is lower than the local government average (4.9%).

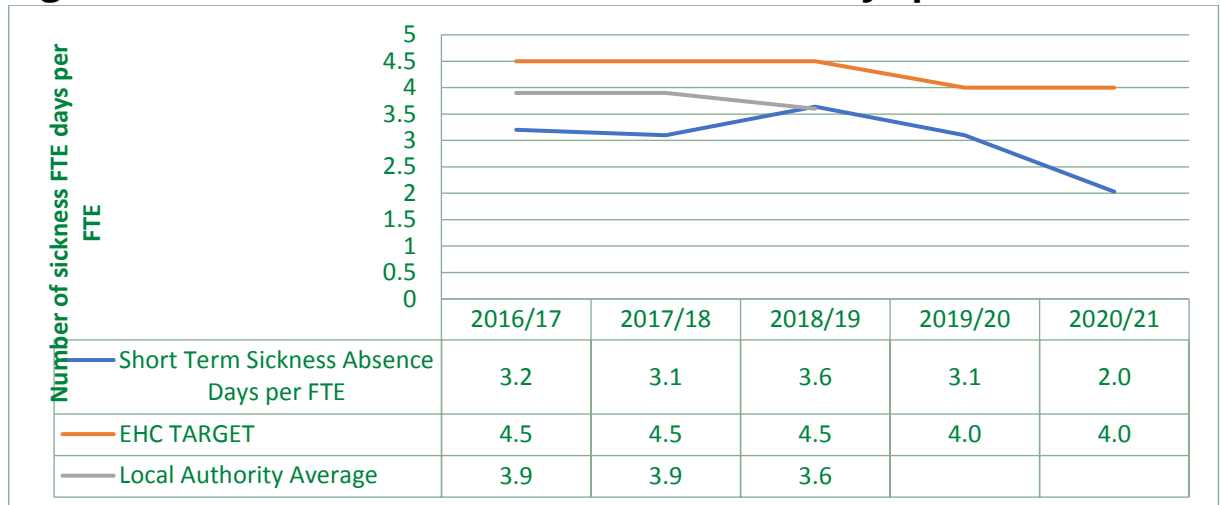
4.2 Short Term absence

4.2.1 Absences of less than four weeks are considered to be short term sickness absence.

4.2.2 In 2020/21, the number of short term sickness absence FTE

days per FTE employee was 2 days which is below the council's target of 4 days and lower than in 2019/20 (3.1 days). It is also lower than the local government average (3.6 days in 2018/19). Please see Figure 2 below.

Figure 2 – Short Term Sickness absence FTE days per FTE



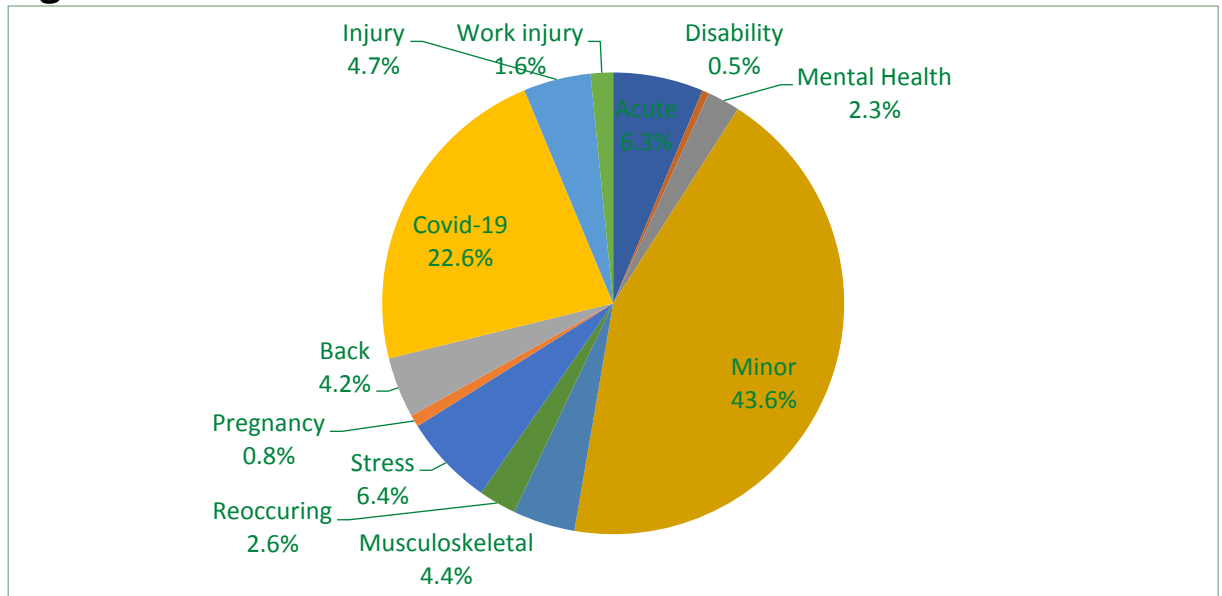
The council's short term absence target was reduced from 4.5 days to 4 days in April 2019.

The local authority average is the mean of all English local authorities taken from the 'LG Inform Benchmarking Metrics report 2018/19' (the latest report available at the time of writing).

4.2.3 The percentage of time lost due to short term sickness in 2020/21 was 0.75% which is lower than the local government average (2.6% in 2018/19).

4.2.4 Figure 3 below shows the causes of short term absence in 2020/21.

Figure 3 – Causes of Short Term absence in 2020/21



KEY:

- *Minor illnesses (e.g. colds/flu, stomach upsets, headaches and migraines minor operations)*
- *Musculoskeletal injuries (e.g. neck strains and repetitive strain injury, but excluding back pain)*
- *Recurring medical conditions (e.g. asthma, angina and allergies)*
- *Mental ill health (e.g. clinical depression and anxiety)*
- *Acute medical conditions (e.g. stroke, heart attack and cancer)*
- *Home/Family Responsibilities (e.g. bereavement)*

4.2.5 The most common cause of short term absence in 2020/21 was minor illnesses, such as colds/flu, headaches/migraines, stomach upsets, and minor operations, accounting for 43.6% (82 employees) of all short term absences. According to the Chartered Institute of Personnel and Development (CIPD) 'Health and Wellbeing at Work Survey April 2021' 88% of organisations responding to their survey reported that minor illnesses were in their top three causes of short term absence.

4.2.6 The second most common cause of short term absence was Covid-19, which accounted for 22.6% of all short term absences (17 employees). According to the CIPD Survey 39% of organisations responding to their survey reported that Covid-19 (including confirmed cases, self-isolation, quarantine and

shielding) was in their top three causes of short term absence. It is also worth noting that short-term absences ranging from 1-3 days have been seen in late Q3 and Q4 due to staff feeling unwell following a COVID Vaccination.

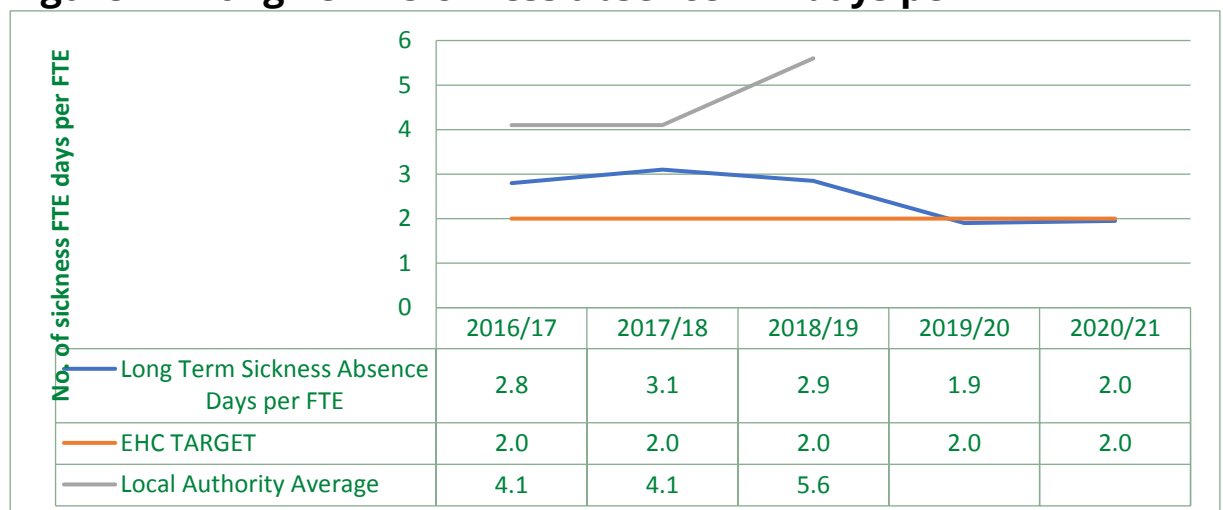
4.2.7 Stress was the third most common cause of short term absence accounting for 6.4% of all short term absences (5 employees). The CIPD Survey reported that 33% of organisations said that stress was in their top three causes of short term absence.

4.3 Long Term Absence

4.3.1 Absences in excess of 4 weeks/28 consecutive calendar days are considered to be long term sickness absence.

4.3.2 In 2020/21, the number of long term sickness absence FTE days per FTE employee was 2 days which is the same as the council's target of 2 days and slightly higher than in 2019/20 (1.9 days). It is also lower than the local government average (5.6 days in 2018/19). Please see Figure 4 below.

Figure 4 – Long Term Sickness absence FTE days per FTE



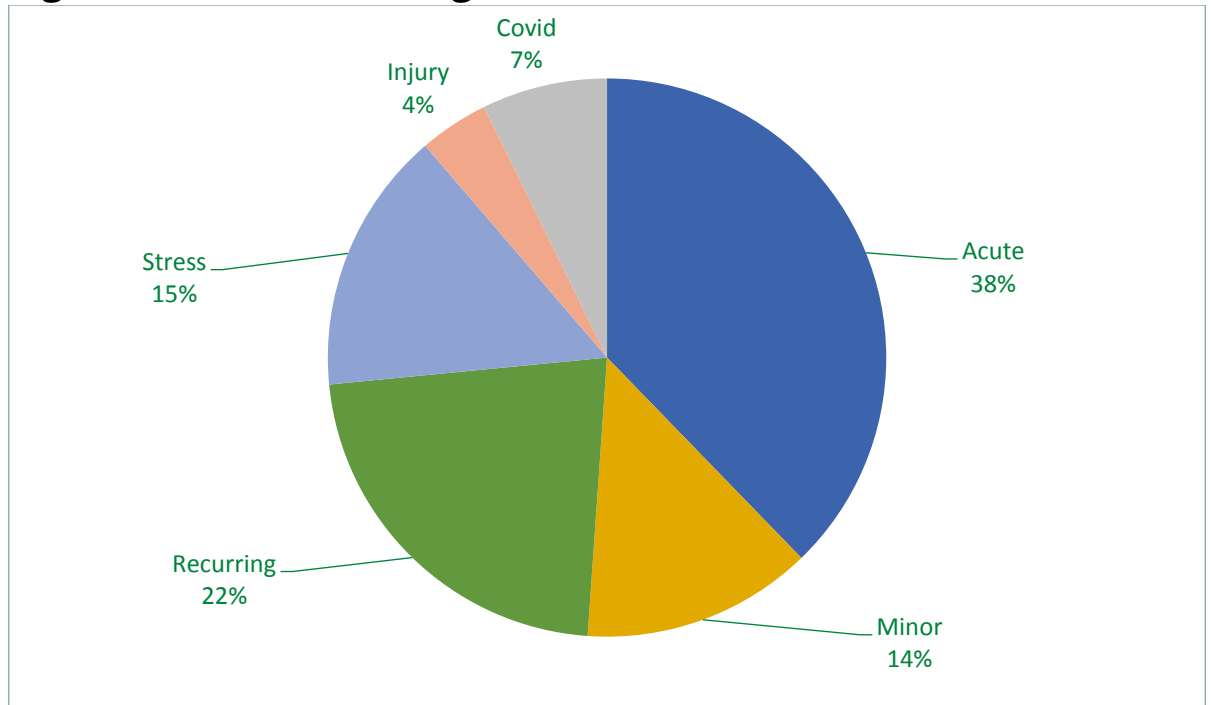
The local authority average is the mean of all English local authorities taken from the 'LG Inform Benchmarking Metrics report 2018/19' (the latest report available at the time of writing).

4.3.3 The percentage of time lost due to long term sickness in

2020/21 was 0.7% which is lower than the local government average (2.3% in 2018/19).

4.3.4 Figure 5 below shows the causes of long term absence in 2020/21.

Figure 5 - Causes of Long Term absence in 2020/21



KEY:

- *Minor illnesses (e.g. colds/flu, stomach upsets, headaches and migraines minor operations)*
- *Musculoskeletal injuries (e.g. neck strains and repetitive strain injury, but excluding back pain)*
- *Recurring medical conditions (e.g. asthma, angina and allergies)*
- *Mental ill health (e.g. clinical depression and anxiety)*
- *Acute medical conditions (e.g. stroke, heart attack and cancer)*
- *Home/Family Responsibilities (e.g. bereavement)*

4.3.5 The most common cause of long term absence was for acute reasons (e.g. stroke, heart attack and cancer). Two of the four employees have returned to work, one has taken retirement and the third remains absent and is receiving support through their manager, HR and Occupational Health. According to the CIPD Survey, 45% of organisations reported that acute reasons

were in their top three causes of long term absence.

4.3.7 The second most common cause of long term absence was recurring medical conditions, such as asthma, angina and allergies, which accounted for 22% of all long term absence (2 employees).

4.3.8 The third most common cause of long term absence was stress which accounted for 15% (1 employee) of all long term absence. The employee is receiving support from their manager and HR and is likely to be due back to work in April 2021 on a phased return to work. According to the CIPD Survey, 48% of organisations reported that stress was in their top three causes of long term absence.

5.0 How is the council addressing employee absence

5.1 Absences due to minor illnesses are mostly unavoidable. Managers hold return-to-work meetings with employees after every absence, provide support, monitor absences against the council's triggers and take the appropriate action in line with absence policy and procedures.

5.2 Managers are supporting employees with acute and recurring medical conditions by e.g. allowing them time off to attend medical appointments/treatment, allowing flexible working where possible and referring them to occupational health where appropriate.

5.3 It is important that managers recognise the signs of stress at an early stage so that action can be taken to support employees. Employees experiencing stress are referred to the council's occupational health service where appropriate and are supported through a stress risk assessment. Managers use the Health and Safety Executive's (HSE) stress risk assessment tool (with HR support) which looks at the key causes of stress (e.g. demands of the job, control over their work, support from their

manager and colleagues, relationships at work, the role, and organisational change) and identifies actions to help reduce the stress. Employees can also seek confidential support from the council's Employee Assistance Programme (EAP).

5.4 Absences due to Covid-19 were carefully monitored by HR and a special Covid-19 reason code was set up on the HR system to enable this. Monitoring also ensured that employees with Covid-19 (including those who were not absent but were well enough to be able to continue to work from home) did not attend the workplace without completing the full isolation period and thereby avoiding the potential spread of the virus to other employees.

5.4 Although absences due to mental health were low in 2020/21 (2.3% of all short term absences and 0% of all long term absences), the council recognises that there may be under-reporting in this area due to the perceived stigma of having mental health issues. The council has taken the following action to support employee mental health in 2020/21:

- Promotion of the support available from the council's trained Mental Health First Aiders (MHFAs),
- Promotion of mental health awareness through events such as Time to Talk and mental health awareness week,
- Arranging lunchtime bitesize wellbeing sessions on topics such as mindfulness,
- Arranging Mental health awareness training for all managers (some sessions have been delayed due to Covid-19),
- Promotion of the mental health services available via Able Futures, the council's partner, which provides up to 9 months free mental health support for employees.

5.5 Managers and HR are supporting all employees with health issues through e.g. home visits, referrals to Occupational Health, undertaking stress risk assessments and implementing action plans, making adjustments to their work/workplace to

assist them in returning to work at the appropriate time, and offering flexible working.

6.0 Ongoing support for employee health and wellbeing

The council has a lot in place to support the health and wellbeing of its employees (for a full list please see the Employee Wellbeing Framework in Appendix 1) including:

6.1 Employee wellbeing programme, 'Live Well, Work Well' (LWWW)

6.1.1 The council has an employee wellbeing programme, 'Live Well, Work Well' (LWWW), which includes a variety of offers/activities to support employees' physical and mental health and wellbeing. The Community Wellbeing and Partnerships Team in conjunction with Human Resources develops and delivers a comprehensive programme of events each year to support employee health and wellbeing.

6.1.2 The LWWW programme, which was launched in 2018, has three overarching principles, to:

- support greater social interaction, thus strengthening informal support networks;
- provide practical help and advice in a fun and inclusive way;
- demonstrate employer care.

6.1.3 The programme runs each year from 1 April - 31 March and the wellbeing offers are intended to support chosen national awareness campaigns e.g. stress awareness month. Many offers are provided at no cost to the council however where a cost is incurred a small budget is sought from existing budgets before the programme is finalised. The vast majority of offers are free for employees.

6.1.4 The programme is refreshed each year taking into account:

- feedback from employees, for example from the 2020 Staff Survey and in the future will be from, for example Pulse Surveys and via Wellbeing Champions;
- national and local wellbeing initiatives throughout the year, for example Mental Health Awareness Week;
- activities already scheduled as part of the Healthy Hub East Herts programme;
- the success of previous events based on employee feedback and attendance levels;
- value for money of events;
- the diverse wellbeing needs and working patterns of employees;
- to cover a variety of wellbeing offers, for example mental, physical, financial health and wellbeing.

6.2 Wellbeing Hub

6.2.1 The council has a wellbeing hub on its intranet which provides a one stop place where employees can access wellbeing support. It is where employees are signposted to sources of support e.g. how to contact a Mental Health First Aider, access to support from the Samaritans, how to contact the employee assistance programme. It will also include upcoming events in the LWWW programme.

6.3 Wellbeing Centre on the MyRewards website

6.3.1 Through the council's contract with MyRewards, employees have access to the Wellbeing Centre on their website. Support includes free education, support and tools e.g. helping improve their quality of sleep, healthy recipes, online exercise programmes and advice on how to improve their financial wellbeing.

6.4 Employee Assistance Programme (EAP)

6.4.1 The council has continued to offer an Employee Assistance Program (EAP). The service is 24/7, easy to access, confidential and free of charge. Employees have unlimited access to information, support and guidance on a wide range of topics including work/career, relationship/family, money management/debt and health/wellbeing.

6.5 Mental Health Support from Able Futures

6.5.1 The council actively promotes the services available from Able Futures which delivers the Access to Work Mental Health Support Service on behalf of the Department for Work and Pensions.

6.5.2 Employees (and family members provided they are in employment) who wish to access the service can receive 9 months of mental health support from a qualified professional called a Vocational Rehabilitation Consultant (VRC). The service is 100% confidential and employees can self-refer which means that they don't need to go through their manager or HR to access it.

6.5.3 A VRC will support the employee through providing information and advice on a range of issues; coaching and teaching on how to manage mental health difficulties; as well as help in accessing services. Able Futures is not a counselling, treatment or diagnostic service.

6.5.4 The support available via Able Futures is designed to help with a range of mental health issues which result from both inside and outside the workplace, including:

- Stress
- Anxiety
- Depression

- Financial Management
- Bereavement

6.6 HR Officers continue to support managers in consistently and proactively managing sickness absence

6.6.1 HR Officers meet regularly with managers to ensure they are consistently and proactively managing sickness absence in their teams

7.0 Actions taken in 2020/21 to improve employee health and wellbeing

2020/21 was a difficult year due to the Coronavirus pandemic and therefore some of the scheduled wellbeing events were unable to take place face to face. Where possible, events were held virtually and where that wasn't possible they were cancelled or postponed. In addition to the ongoing support already mentioned in Sections 5 and 6 above, the council has achieved the following in 2020/21 to improve the health and wellbeing of its employees:

7.1 Promotion and delivery of the 2020/21 Live Well, Work Well Wellbeing programme.

7.1.1 A variety of events were held each month to support employee mental, physical and social wellbeing.

7.1.2 The national awareness campaigns that were supported and promoted included Stop Smoking Day, Mental Health Awareness Week, Diabetes Awareness, Talk to Us Month (promoting the local Samaritans), National Fitness Day (included finding out about and promoting Everyone Active staff discounts), Suicide Prevention Day, and Back Care Awareness.

7.1.3 Events included Everyone Active delivering a pilates taster session, Living Streets leading a guided health walk, and

lunchtime bitesize sessions were held on different days on Introduction to Wellbeing, Sleeping Soundly and Mindfulness.

7.2 Promotion of Mental Health Awareness Week (18-24 May 2020)

7.2.1 A series of articles were developed to appear in Connect each day during Mental Health Awareness Week to support employees during lockdown including:

Day : Introducing the theme of Kindness and how Able Futures can help support employee mental health;

Day 2: Promoting the role of the council's Mental Health First Aiders, how they can be contacted and their tips on managing wellbeing during lockdown;

Day 3: Highlighting how physical activity can improve mental health and promoting the council's various offers such as online yoga, online exercise videos on the MyRewards website, home workouts from Everyone Active, promotion of the Cycle to Work Scheme, and Virtual Walk and Talk events;

Day 4: Explaining why kindness was chosen as the year's theme by the Mental Health Foundation and three things you could do during the week to improve your mental health and wellbeing;

Day 5: Providing advice from the Nuffield Department of Clinical Neuroscience at the University of Oxford on how to improve sleep during lockdown.

7.3 Development of an Employee Wellbeing Framework

7.3.1 The council has developed an Employee Wellbeing Framework outlining the council's commitment to supporting employee wellbeing. Having a Framework ensures the council has a

joined up holistic approach to wellbeing.

7.3.2 The Framework compliments the East Herts Health and Wellbeing Strategy 2019-23 which outlines the council's commitment to helping the community to look after their health and wellbeing.

7.3.3 The aims of the Employee Wellbeing Framework are:

- to empower staff to take responsibility for their health and wellbeing;
- to create a wellbeing culture;
- for the council to be recognised as an employer that supports employee wellbeing, adding value to recruitment and retention.

7.4 Organisation of a Virtual Health and Wellbeing Week in December 2020

7.4.1 The council held its first virtual health and wellbeing week for staff in the week commencing 14 December 2020. The event was planned by members of the Live Well Work Well Steering Group. It was arranged in response to the difficult year during the Covid-19 pandemic and the importance of looking after our wellbeing.

7.4.2 There were a range of activities (22 in total) to choose from including a Christmas singalong and laughter yoga as well as physical activity sessions to get employees moving more. Most of the sessions were led by external organisations who were experts in the areas and all sessions could be done from employees' homes. Most of the sessions were between 30 to 40 minutes and were held during the lunchtime period however there were some sessions taking place at different times and some were slightly longer.

7.4.3 To encourage and support participation employees staff were

able to record their attendance (with the exception of the evening sessions) as work time as long as service provision was not affected and their manager had agreed.

7.5 Recruitment of Employee Wellbeing Champions

7.5.1 The recruitment of wellbeing champions has been delayed due to the pandemic however progress has been made in defining the role and outlining the plan to seek volunteers. Volunteers will be sought in April/May 2021.

7.5.2 The role of Wellbeing Champions will be to:

- represent their service on matters of employee wellbeing;
- input into wellbeing offers for the Live Well, Work Well programme;
- ensure employee wellbeing offers are promoted in their service area;
- play an active role in the Wellbeing Group which will include Wellbeing Champions and Mental Health First Aiders.

7.5.3 Wellbeing Champions will not require any formal training for their role. It is anticipated that some of the existing Mental Health First Aiders may wish to also become Wellbeing Champions.

7.6 To pledge publicly to support employee mental health

7.6.1 In 2019 the council had planned to sign the Time to Change Pledge however this has now been superseded by the Mental Health at Work commitment. The Commitment is based upon the Thriving at Work standards and is a set of actions that any organisation can follow to improve and support the mental health of their employees. Signing up to the Commitment is a way of declaring publicly that mental health at work is a priority for the council which will help support the council to become an

employer of choice.

7.6.2 The council has measures in place that mean it is likely that it already meets the six standards however the proposed framework sets out our commitment more clearly and joins up current/emerging practice. By signing the commitment, the council will also be able to access tools that will help identify potential improvement and access best practice.

7.6.3 The council will sign the commitment as soon as possible and will work on the actions throughout 2021/22.

7.7 Promotion campaign to support employees' financial wellbeing

7.7.1 In the lead up to Christmas 2020, several articles on financial wellbeing were written and appeared each week in Connect including:

Article 1: Advice from Citizens Advice East Herts on how to maximise income, minimise expenses, manage debts and budget plan, and their contact details for further support.

Article 2: Practical tips from the mental health charity, Mind, on managing money and improving mental health. The support available from the Samaritans was also provided for those struggling.

Article 3: Promotion of the various shopping discounts available for employees on the MyRewards website and signposting to financial advice on their website e.g. how to talk to your children about money when you're on a budget.

Article 4: Advice from Able Futures on managing money worries over Christmas.

7.8 The council's Sickness Absence Management Policy has been reviewed

7.8.1 The Absence Management Policy and procedure has been significantly redeveloped and was approved by HR Committee in February 2021. A reminded of the key changes are:

- It ensures greater consistency and a clearer framework which allows matters to move from short-term to long-term and vice-versa. HR will be rolling out management training on the new policy shortly.
- Short-term absence triggers have been changed from 7 days sickness absence within any twelve-month period and 3 separate periods of sickness absence in a 6 month period to 3 spells or more in any 3-month period, and/or where an employee has been absent for 10 days or more over the previous 12 months.
- Stress management guidance (which was an appendix in the previous policy) has been incorporated into the policy itself with addition of the stress risk assessment form to ensure transparency.
- An addition of 4-weekly face-to-face catch up (on top of weekly telephone calls) for long term sickness cases to ensure employees are supported appropriately.
- Makes it clear that employees should be referred to Occupational Health at the 4 week point for long-term sickness. The old policy was not as prescriptive to use Occupational Health but the medical opinion is best sought at this stage to inform reviews so is sought up front (this was a possible outcome at the informal stage if considered appropriate previously).

7.8.2 Managers will be trained on the new Sickness Absence

Management Policy shortly.

7.9 To review the impact of Covid-19 on employee wellbeing via a Wellbeing survey and put actions in place to support employees;

7.9.1 A Wellbeing Survey was developed by HR and sent to all employees in June 2020 to identify how they could be supported further whilst working from home during the Covid-19 pandemic. The response rate was excellent (89% of all staff completed the survey) and the results were very positive overall. Where staff experiences have not been so positive, managers with HR support contacted staff to follow up discussions and put further support in place.

7.9.2 The results of this survey were communicated in full to the HR Committee in August 2020 in the HR & Payroll Update Report.

7.9.3 Employees were also asked to respond to questions concerning their wellbeing as part of the Staff Survey in December 2020. The results on wellbeing were positive overall, actions were followed up as appropriate, and the findings were communicated in full to the HR Committee in February 2021 in the HR & Payroll Update Report.

8.0 Actions planned in 2021/22 to improve employee health and wellbeing, to:

- Deliver the Live Well, Work Well programme, seeking feedback from employees and input from the Wellbeing Champions (once recruited)
- Conduct another Wellbeing Survey c. June 2021 to ensure employees continue to be supported during the pandemic
- Seek volunteers to become Employee Wellbeing Champions

- Roll out management training on the new Sickness Absence Management policy.
- Review the council's Occupational Health Provider to find a more proactive provider in helping advise on complex cases and supporting employees back to work.
- Sign the Mental Health at Work Commitment and work towards demonstrating the actions within it
- Organise a further financial wellbeing promotion campaign in the lead up to Christmas
- Promote Mental Health Awareness Week 2021

9.0 Reason(s)

N/A

10.0 Options

N/A

11.0 Risks

The risks are that if wellbeing is not supported or managed that staff absences increase, staff resilience is weakened which affects the corporate risk: Staff capacity and skills to deliver services.

12.0 Implications/Consultations

Community Safety

No

Data Protection

No

Equalities

No

Environmental Sustainability

No

Financial

No

Health and Safety

No

Human Resources

As covered by the report

Human Rights

No

Legal

No

Specific Wards

No

13.0 Background papers, appendices and other relevant material

Appendix 1 - Employee Wellbeing Framework (this will be finalised with a statement from the Deputy CEO (as Wellbeing Sponsor) outlining commitment to employee wellbeing.)

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