

East Herts Council Report

Human Resources Committee

Date of Meeting: 25 May 2022

Report by: Head of Human Resources and Organisational Development

Report title: Employee Health and Wellbeing report 2021/22

Ward(s) affected: N/A

Summary

RECOMMENDATIONS FOR Human Resources Committee:

- (a) To consider the annual Employee Health and Wellbeing Report 2021/22 including the actions (in section 8.0) planned for 2022/23 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 2021/22.

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 2021/22 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.

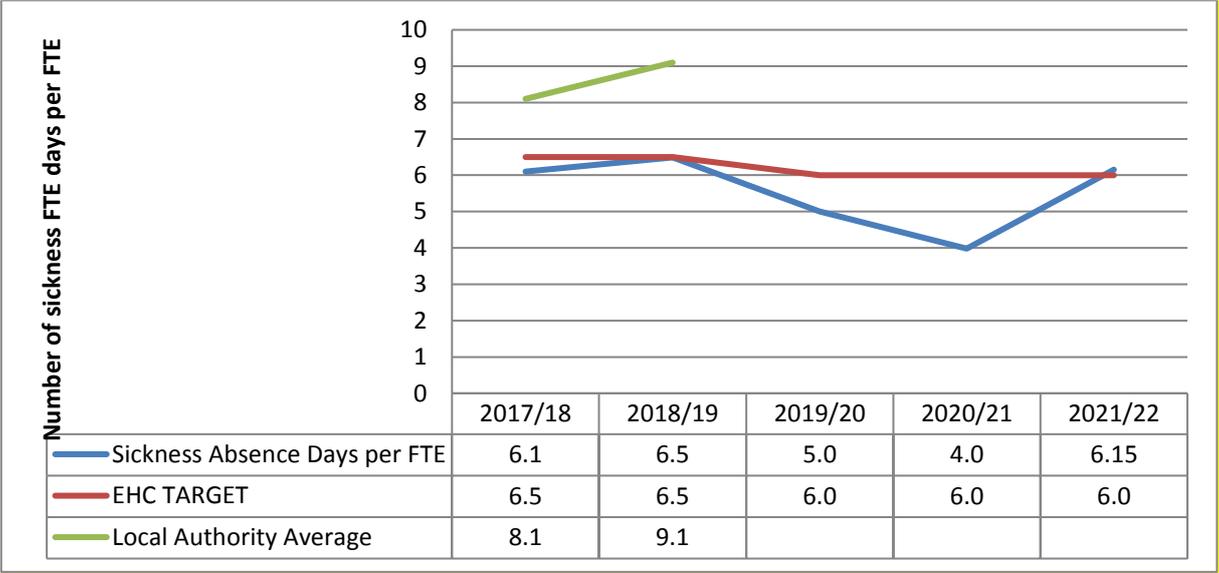
- 3.2 The council measures sickness absence in two ways: the number of full time equivalent (FTE) days absence per FTE employee and the percentage time lost due to absence.
- 3.3 The number of FTE days absence per FTE employee is calculated by dividing the number of FTE days sickness absence by the total 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 2021/22, the number of sickness absence FTE days per FTE employee was 6.15 days which is slightly above the council’s target of 6 days and higher than in 2020/21 (4 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).

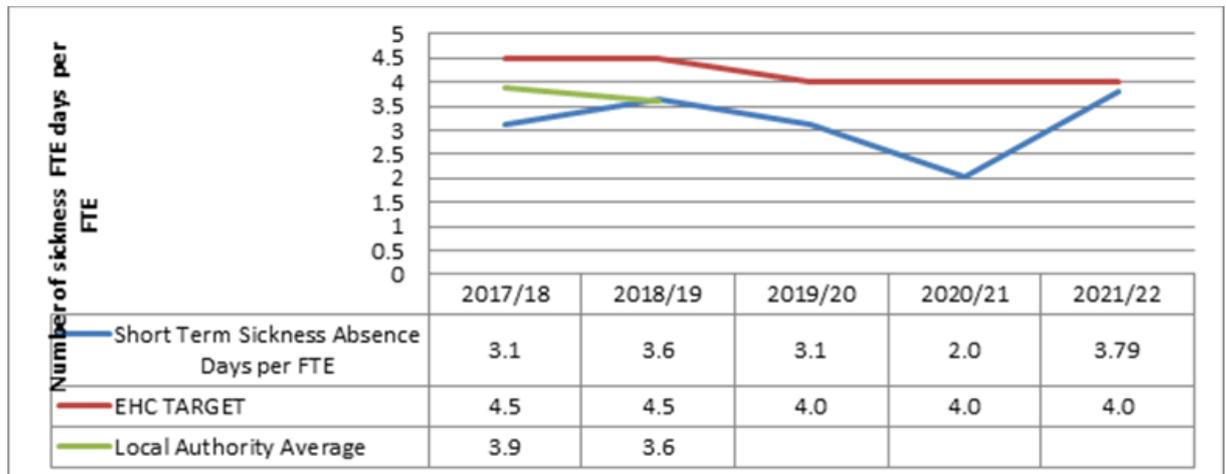
4.1.2 The total number of days taken as sickness absence in 2021/22 was 1710.39 FTE days. 61% (1042.69 FTE days) of these were due to short term absence and 39% (667.7 FTE days) were due to long term absence. The total percentage time lost in 2021/22 due to all absences was 2.38%. This is lower than 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 2021/22, the number of short term sickness absence FTE days per FTE employee was 3.79 days which is below the council's target of 4 days but is higher than in 2020/21 (2 days). It is slightly higher 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



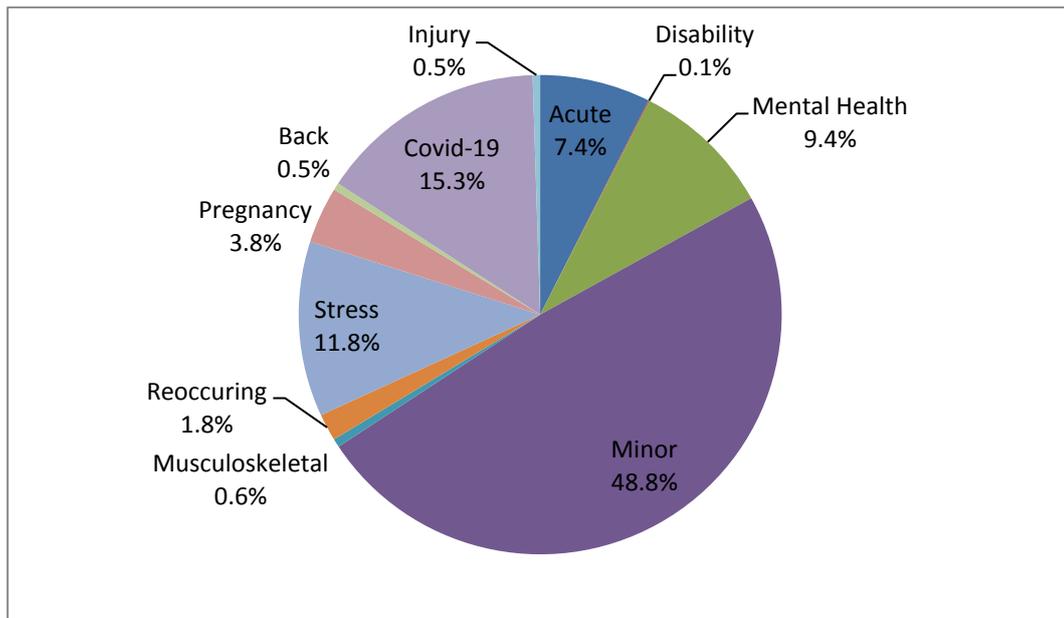
The council's short term absence target was reduced from 4.5 days to 4 days in April 2019.

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 2021/22 was 1.42% 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 2021/22.

Figure 3 – Causes of Short Term absence in 2021/22



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)*

4.2.5 The most common cause of short term absence in 2021/22 was minor illnesses, such as colds/flu, headaches/migraines, stomach upsets, and minor operations, accounting for 48.8% (147 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 15.3% of all short term absences (42 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.

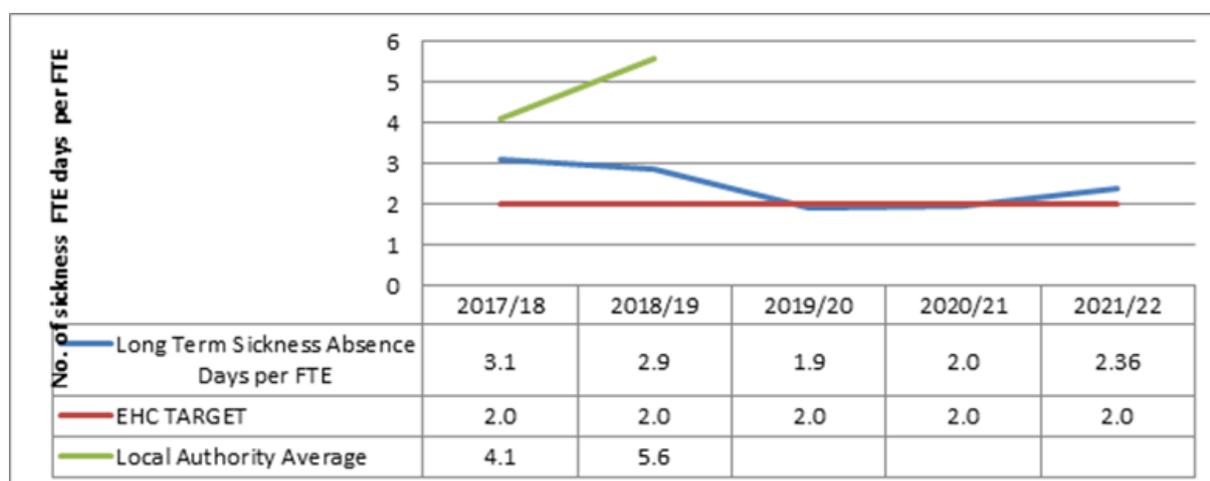
4.2.7 Stress was the third most common cause of short term absence accounting for 11.8% of all short term absences (9 employees). The CIPD Survey reported that 33% of organisations said that stress was in their top three causes of short term absence.

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 2021/22, the number of long term sickness absence FTE days per FTE employee was 2.36 days which is slightly above the council’s target of 2 days and an increase on 2020/21. It does however remain 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

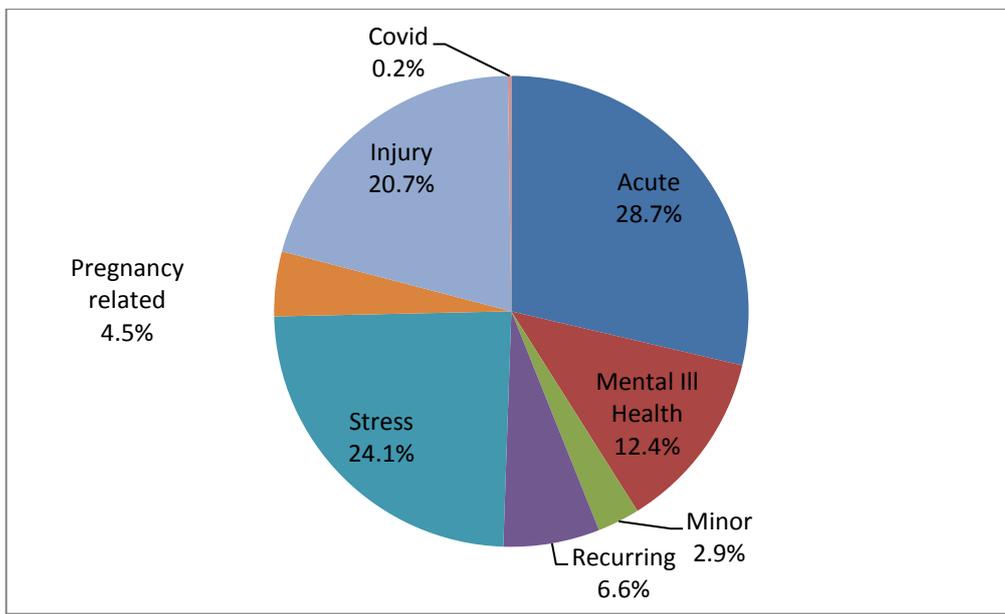


The local authority average is the mean of all English local authorities taken from the 'LG Inform Benchmarking Metrics report 2018/19' (the latest report available at the time of writing).

4.3.3 The percentage of time lost due to long term sickness in 2021/22 was 0.96% 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 2021/22.

Figure 5 – Causes of Long Term absence in 2021/22



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)*

4.3.5 The most common cause of long term absence was for acute reasons (e.g. stroke, heart attack and cancer). All employees have been supported by Line Management, 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 stress, which accounted for 24.1% of all long term

absence (7 employees). According to the CIPD Survey, 48% of organisations reported that stress was in their top three causes of long term absence, clearly the pandemic has also increased causes of stress.

4.3.8 The third most common cause of long term absence was injury which accounted for 20.7% (3 employees) of all 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 Absences due to mental health have increased in 2021/22 (9.4% of all short term absences and 24.1% of all long term absences), the council recognises that there may be under-reporting in this area previously due to the perceived stigma of having mental health issues. The council has continued to take action to support employee mental health in 2021/22 and especially in relation to the Pandemic:

- 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),
- Delivering Coping with Change Training.
- Undertaking Wellbeing surveys and following up with support sessions and Line Manager Follow up.
- Implementing a Resilience Training Programme from April 2022.
- 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 previously provided) 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, further signposting will be added when MyRewards ceases. 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 Resilience and Wellbeing Programme for Staff and Managers from Art of the Brilliant

Resilience Workshops

In true Art of Brill style, there'll be no big words or fancy jargon, just MASSIVE action. Our wellbeing workout is an 8-week online programme that gives you an opportunity to enjoy 8 of our favourite modules, focusing on your strengths, goals, resilience, self-esteem, confidence and overall wellbeing.

The programme is backed by 20 years of research

into the science of positive psychology; cutting-edge content, delivered by a team of world class trainers.

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

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

7.0 Actions taken in 2021/22 to improve employee health and wellbeing

2021/22 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 2021/22 to improve the health and wellbeing of its employees:

7.1 Promotion and delivery of the 2021/22 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

- 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 1: 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 in 20/21 continued in 21/22

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 To pledge publicly to support employee mental health

7.4.1 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.

- 7.4.2 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.

7.5 Promotion campaign to support employees' financial wellbeing

- 7.5.1 In the lead up to Christmas 2021, 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.

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

7.6.1 The Absence Management Policy and procedure has been significantly redeveloped and was approved by HR Committee in February 2021. A reminder 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).

7.6.2 Managers have been trained on the new Sickness Absence Management Policy and this will be further supported by the 5 day Management Development Programme.

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

7.71 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.

7.9.4 The wellbeing survey is being re-run later this month (May 2022).

8.0 Actions planned in 2022/23 to improve employee health and wellbeing, to:

- Deliver the Live Well, Work Well programme, seeking feedback from employees and input from the Wellbeing Champions
- Deliver the Resilience Programme over 8 months (8 modules) and ensure staff who cannot attend can access recordings. In addition to the 8 modules for staff there are also two face to face workshops for Managers to be scheduled:

1. The Art of Being Brilliant: Your Wellbeing Launchpad

Based on the science of positive psychology, this session is evidence-based but with the big words surgically removed and replaced with common sense, doable principles and great fun. The challenge is quite straight-forward; it's about raising your 'new normal' to world class.

2. Rising Stronger: From Mental Health to Mental WEALTH

Rising Stronger is about showing up to work as your best self. Lose the doubt, let go of any negativity and come back fully charged. This session is about unmuting yourself in real life.

3. The Why-Factor: (Re)Discovering Your Purpose

Finding your purpose is like motivational rocket fuel. The Why-Factor will jog some memories by going back to basics and daring to ask a fundamental question... why do you do what you do? Beware. Contains life-changing content.

4. Self-Care: It's All About YOU!

With your work routine shot to pieces it's vital to stay physically and mentally healthy. Self-care is about looking after #1. If you're getting the basics right, everything else is a lot easier to cope with.

5. Mindfulness: It's All About NOW!

Taking a little time to pay attention to the present moment, on purpose and without judgement' gives us an immediate calming effect, by re-oxygenating our blood and brain. But the real magic happens over time. With repeated practice, mindfulness helps to quieten the stress centres of our brain so we become less reactive to stressful situations and more able to deal with everyday challenges with calm rationality.

6. Brilliant Strengths: Getting in the Zone

Research suggests that playing to your strengths is the smallest change that can have the biggest impact on employee engagement. This session is designed to be a journey of strength-self-discovery. In our signature fun and interactive way, we will re-ignite inherent strengths - and uncover new ones. The result is revitalised and re-energised individuals who are able to operate as a high-performance team.

7. The Wow-Factor: How to Create Raving Fans

We've all heard of paranoia; the whispering behind your back. But what about the opposite - paranoia - when people are saying wonderful things about you behind your back? Customer paranoia is a magical thing. Raving fans are the key to organisational growth. The starting point is to create staff with the WOW-FACTOR. This session provides the 'how?'

8. Bouncebackability: Rolling With Life's Punches

Change has always happened, but recently it's got a whole lot faster and when life is rattling along at this speed, we need to be more psychologically resilient and adaptive than ever. Whilst a lucky few seem hardwired to bounce back and grow in the face of adversity and setbacks, it doesn't come automatically to most of us. The brilliant news is that BOUNCEBACKABILITY is a learned behaviour. We can all cultivate personal skills and resources which help us not just cope better with stress and adversity, but embrace change and use challenges as opportunities to grow.

- Conduct another Wellbeing Survey c. May 2022 to ensure employees continue to be supported during the pandemic

- Seek more volunteers to become Employee Wellbeing Champions
- Roll out management training including on 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 2022
- Promote Mental Health Awareness Week

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

None

Contact Officer

Simon O'Hear, Head of HR and OD

Simon.O'Hear@eastherts.gov.uk

Report Authors

Simon O'Hear (above) and
Claire Kirby, HR Officer

Contact Tel No 01992 53 1652

Claire.kirby@eastherts.gov.uk