

# East Herts Council Report Template

**Human Resources Committee**

**Date of Meeting: 21 June 2023**

**Report by: Head of HR and Organisational Development**

**Report title: Employee Health and Wellbeing report 2022/23**

**Ward(s) affected: N/A**

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## Summary

### **RECOMMENDATIONS FOR Human Resources Committee:**

- (a) To consider the annual Employee Health and Wellbeing Report 2022/23 including the actions (in section 8.0) planned for 2023/24 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 2022/23.

## **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 2022/23 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 2021/22 (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 2022' has also been used to make comparisons with other organisations.

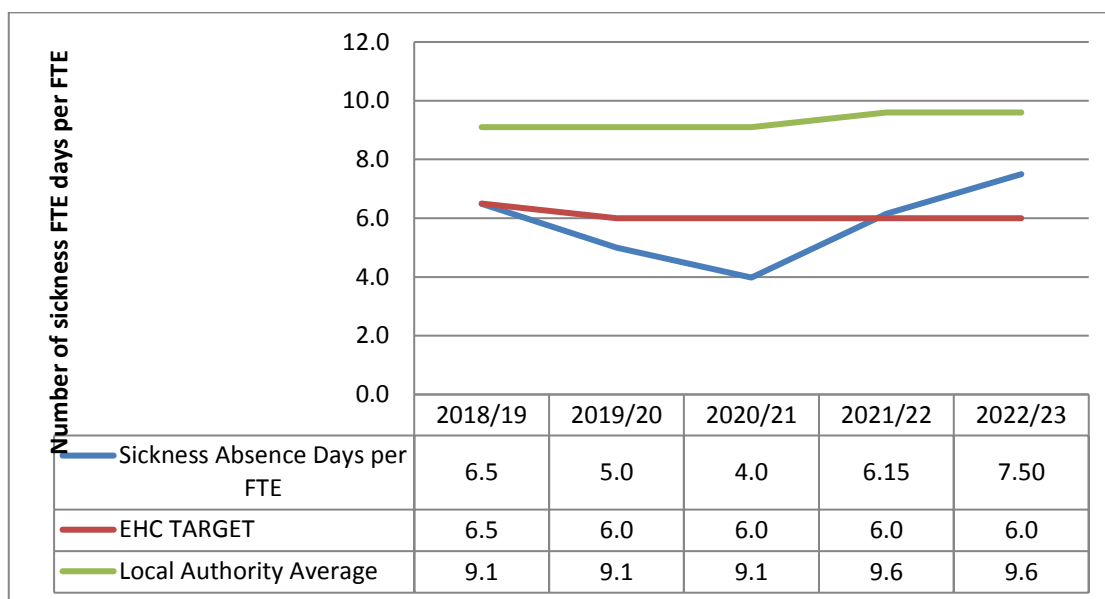
## **4.0 Sickness Absence Levels**

### **4.1 ALL Absences**

- 4.1.1 In 2022/23, the number of sickness absence FTE days per FTE employee was 7.5 days which is above the council's target of 6 days and higher than in 2021/22 (6.15 days). It

is however lower than the local government average in 2021/22 (9.6 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'. The 2021/22 report is the latest report available at the time of writing so this data was used for 21/22 and 22/23. Due to COVID no data was recorded in 19/20 and 20/21 so we have carried over the 18/19 data for these years.

4.1.2 The total number of days taken as sickness absence in 2022/23 was 1989.48 FTE days. 62% (1224.14 FTE days) of these were due to short term absence and 38% (765.34 FTE days) were due to long term absence. The total percentage time lost in 2022/23 due to all absences was 4.21%. This is the same as the local government average (4.2%).

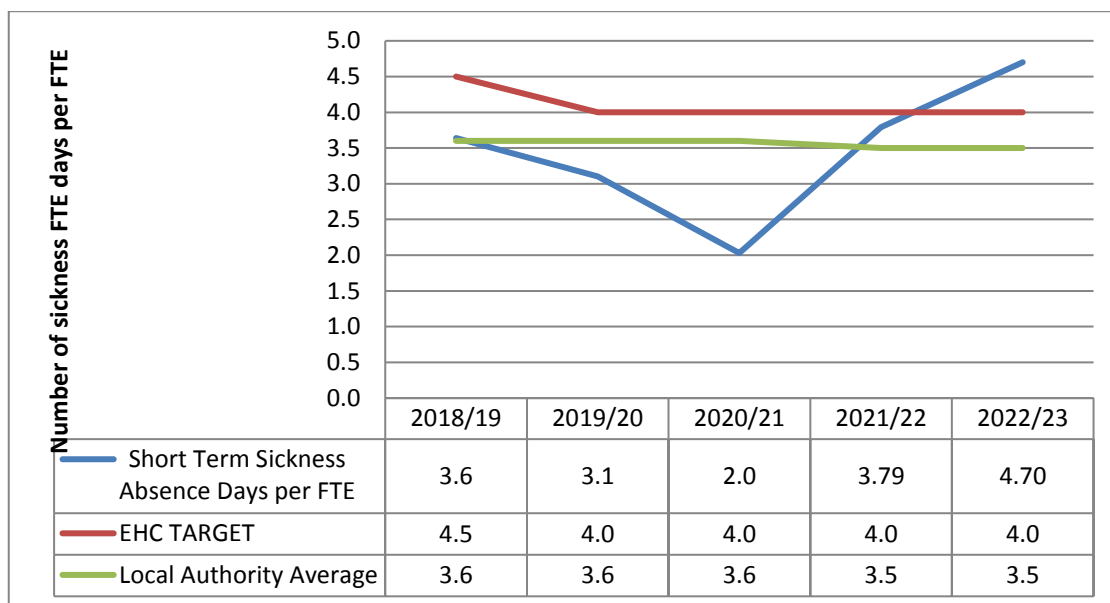
## 4.2 Short Term absence

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

4.2.2 In 2022/23, the number of short term sickness absence FTE days per FTE employee was 4.7 days which is above the council's target of 4 days and is higher than in 2021/22 (3.79

days). It is also higher than the local government average (3.5 days in 2021/22). Please see Figure 2 below.

**Figure 2 – Short Term Sickness absence FTE days per FTE**

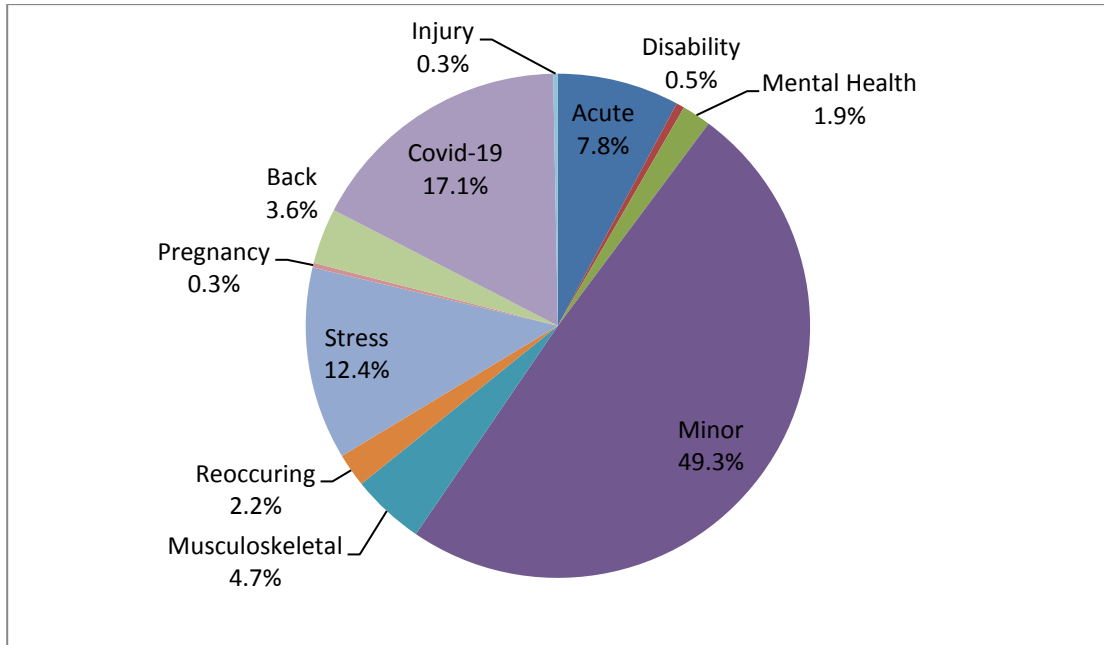


The council's short term absence target was reduced from 4.5 days to 4 days in April 2019. The local authority average is the mean of all English local authorities taken from the 'LG Inform Benchmarking Metrics report'. The 2021/22 report is the latest report available at the time of writing so this data was used for 21/22 and 22/23. Due to COVID no data was recorded in 19/20 and 20/21 so we have carried over the 18/19 data for these years.

4.2.3 The percentage of time lost due to short term sickness in 2022/23 was 2.59% which is higher than the local government average (1.7% in 2021/22).

4.2.4 Figure 3 overleaf shows the causes of short term absence in 2022/23.

**Figure 3 – Causes of Short Term absence in 2022/23**



**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 2022/23 was minor illnesses, such as colds/flu, headaches/migraines, stomach upsets, and minor operations, accounting for 49.3% (222 employees) of all short term absences. According to the Chartered Institute of Personnel and Development (CIPD) 'Health and Wellbeing at Work Survey April 2022' 84% 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 17.1% of all short term absences (64 employees). According to the CIPD Survey 67% 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.

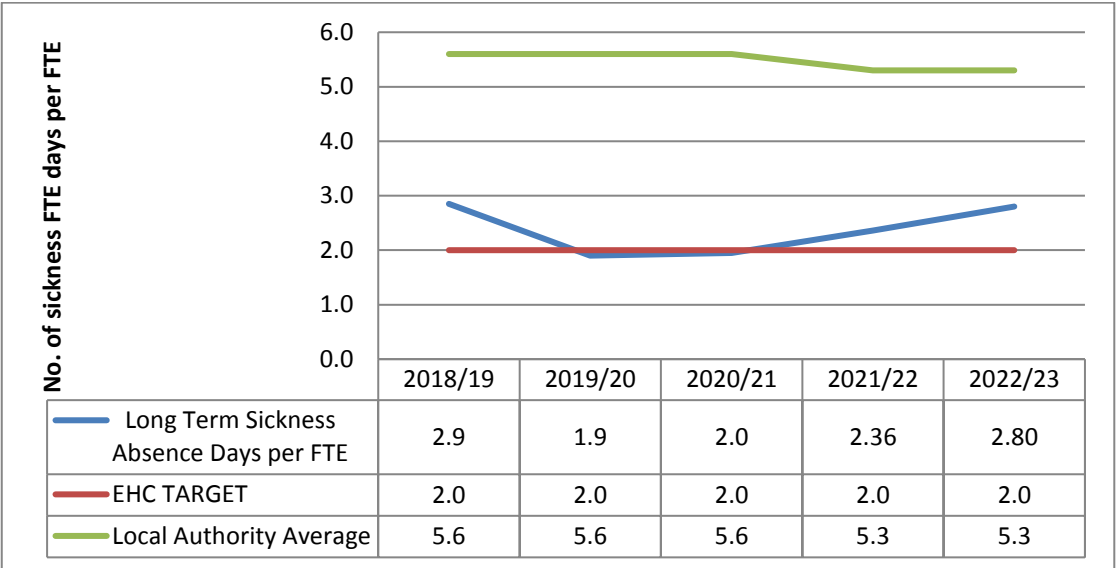
4.2.7 Stress was the third most common cause of short term absence accounting for 12.4% of all short term absences (20 employees). The CIPD Survey reported that 30% of organisations said that stress was in their top three causes of short term absence.

**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 2022/23, the number of long term sickness absence FTE days per FTE employee was 2.8 days which is slightly above the council’s target of 2 days and an increase on 2021/22. It does however remain lower than the local government average (5.3 days in 2021/22). Please see Figure 4 below.

**Figure 4 – Long Term Sickness absence FTE days per FTE**



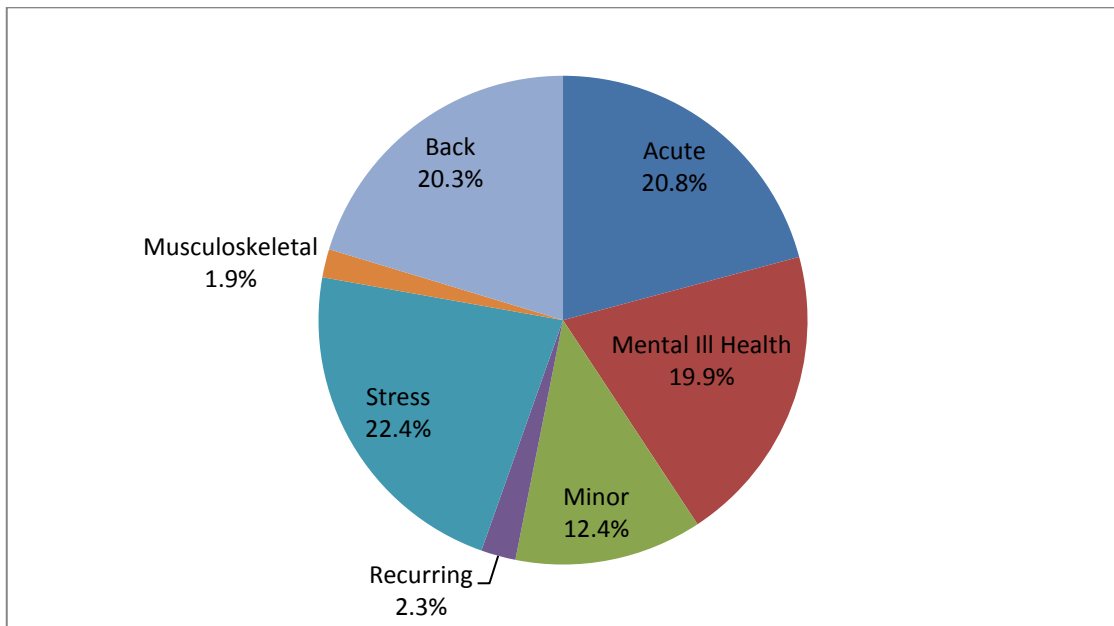
The local authority average is the mean of all English local authorities taken from the ‘LG Inform Benchmarking Metrics report’. The 2021/22 report is the latest report available at the time of writing so this data was used for 21/22 and 22/23. Due to COVID no data was recorded in 19/20 and 20/21 so we have carried over the 18/19 data for these years.

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

2022/23 was 1.62% which is lower than the local government average (2.5% in 2022/23).

4.3.4 Figure 5 below shows the causes of long term absence in 2022/23.

**Figure 5 - Causes of Long Term absence in 2022/23**



**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 stress, which accounted for 22.4% of all long term absence (13 employees). All employees have been supported by Line Management, HR and Occupational Health. According to the CIPD Survey, 38% of organisations reported that stress was in their top three causes of long term absence.

4.3.6 The second most common cause of long term absence was

for acute reasons (e.g. stroke, heart attack and cancer), which accounted for 20.8% of all long term absence (10 employees). All employees have been supported by Line Management, HR and Occupational Health. According to the CIPD Survey, 37% of organisations reported that acute reasons were in their top three causes of long term absence.

4.3.7 The third most common cause of long term absence was back problems, which accounted for 20.3% of all long term absence (9 employees). According to the CIPD Survey, 46% of organisations reported that musculoskeletal injuries (e.g. neck strains and repetitive strain injury, including back pain) 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). The Leadership Team has requested HR to analyse further the absences related to stress and mental health due to high volumes in both long term and short term cases to see if there are any patterns/trends we can learn from, e.g. key causes of stress, (work or personal), actions to support return to work that are being used most effectively, or groups (e.g. equality characteristics) that need particular focus (this will be followed up and reported to LT).

- 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. We continue to advise employees to work from home if they get a positive Covid test (and are well enough to work) to avoid the potential spread of the virus to other employees.
- 5.5 Short term absences due to mental health have decreased from 9.4% of all short term absences in 2021/22 to 1.9% in 2022/23. However long term absences due to mental health have increased from 12.4% of all long term absences in 2021/22 to 19.9% in 2022/23.
- 5.6 Short term absences due to stress have increased from 11.8% of all short term absences in 2021/22 to 12.4% in 2022/23. However long term absences have decreased from 24.1% of all long term absences in 2021/22 to 22.4% in 2022/23.
- 5.7 The council has continued to take action to support employee mental health in 2022/23, please see sections 6

and 7 for details.

- 5.8 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, including:

### **6.1 Employee wellbeing activities and campaigns**

- 6.1.1 The council offers a variety of activities and training to support employees' physical and mental health and wellbeing. The HR team also promotes various national campaigns such as Mental Health awareness Day/week with support from the Communications team.

### **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.

### **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 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 2022/23 to improve employee health and wellbeing**

In addition to the ongoing support already mentioned in Sections 5 and 6 above, the council has achieved the following in 2022/23 to improve the health and wellbeing of its employees:

### **7.1 Wellbeing activities and campaigns**

7.1.1 A variety of campaigns were supported and events

held each month to support employee mental, physical and social wellbeing which included:

- Diabetes Week (June) – lunchtime drop in sessions
- Biketober (October) – green travel promoted to staff including raising awareness of shower facilities at Wallfields
- World Mental Health Day (October) – support organisations and wellbeing intranet hub promoted to staff
- Dementia Friends (October) – promoted Dementia Friends training sessions for staff
- Cost of living (November) – online support webinars
- Christmas (December) – staff Christmas gathering in the council chamber
- International Women’s Day (March) - staff event in council chamber
- Great British Spring Clean (April) – staff litter pick

## **7.2 Reviewed the impact of returning to work after the pandemic and the introduction of blended working on employee wellbeing via a Wellbeing survey and put actions in place to support employees;**

7.2.1 A Wellbeing Survey was developed by HR and sent to all employees in June 2022 to check on employee wellbeing following the return to work post-pandemic and the move to blended working. Blended working had been in place for approximately 6 months when the survey was run.

7.2.2 The response rate was 51%. This is a significant drop from the 2020 survey response rate which was 89%. This is perhaps unsurprising as the first survey was sent out when the UK was still in a COVID lockdown

and the council was only a few months into home working so employees were more likely to want to give their opinions than now when blended working is established and all COVID restrictions have been lifted.

7.2.3 Overall, responses from employees regarding their wellbeing were positive. Some of the key headlines are listed below:

- 85% of employees gave a rating of Agree or Strongly Agree to the statement 'I feel the council supports my well-being'.
- 86% of employees gave a rating of 6 or higher out of 10 for their current working arrangements (50 indicating that their working arrangement is extremely positive and 1 indicating that it is extremely negative).
- The top three most significant challenges reported were: demanding workload (41%), limited IT (19%) and anxiety about their health and well-being and/or that of their loved ones (12%).
- 94% of employees reported positively regarding the suitability of their workstation to perform their role effectively- i.e. gave a rating of at 3 or above out of 5 (5 = very suitable, 0 = not very suitable).
- Technology (email, hosted desktop, the intranet, MyView, Zoom/Teams, Micollab) was generally working well for the majority of employees. Teams and the hosted desktop were rated the lowest with 30% and 20% respectively of responses being scored less than 2 out of 5. (Please note this was before the full roll out of laptops).

- 98% (144 employees) of blended workers that completed the survey reported positively on the suitability of their work environment (e.g. distractions/noise from other people in their household) whilst working from home - i.e. gave a rating of 3 or above (5 = very suitable, 0 = not very suitable at all)
- 93% (150 employees) felt that their team were continuing to communicate well.
- 92% (149 employees) felt that the council was keeping them informed about the current overall position.
- 95% (154 employees) felt that they were able to maintain their usual working patterns and hours
- 36% (59 employees) had participated in wellbeing offers organised by the council such as flu jabs, yoga, lunchtime walks, taster sessions such as pilates and reflexology and NHS health checks.

7.2.4 The results of the staff survey highlighted some key themes to be addressed which include:

- Demanding workload
- Flexibility of the blended working scheme
- IT/Technology issues
- Lack of take-up for wellbeing offers
- Communication within teams and more generally under the blended working scheme

7.2.5 The findings report was taken to Leadership Team for their consideration and actions were taken forward accordingly.

## **7.3 Delivered the Employee Resilience Programme**

7.3.1 The employee resilience programme was delivered over 8 months (8 modules) and recordings were made available for staff who could not attend. In addition to the 8 modules for staff there were also two face to face workshops held for Managers:

### **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 - pronoia - when people are saying wonderful things about you behind your back? Customer pronoia 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.

### **7.4 Review of Blended Working Arrangements**

7.4.1 A Survey was developed by the HR and OD Manager and sent to all employees in December 2022 to review the move to blended working since November 2021. Blended working had been in place for approximately 12 months when the survey was run. A report with the findings was presented to LT in late March 2023.

7.4.2 The response rate was 52%. Meaning that 164 employees out of 315 responded. A 40% response rate or above is seen a statistically reliable.

7.4.3 The key findings from wellbeing point of view were as follows:

- 125 employees (76%) provided feedback on the positives of blended working, highlighting improved work life balance, reduced travel costs, improved

productivity when working at home and reduced travel time as some of the key benefits

- 65% of staff do not find anything challenging about the current 50/50 working arrangements?
- 126 staff responded to the question regarding how best to maintain a 50/50 working arrangements. 31% of respondents like and want to keep the current arrangements. However, 33% of respondents stated that they want more flexibility around the days/hours that they are in the office or home, whilst others stated that working arrangements should be tailored to team requirements.
- **Wellbeing** – 150 staff responded, with 199 positive comments (compared to 41 negative comments) about the benefits of working at home. Staff stated that a key positive impact to their well-being was reduced travel time, allowing them better work life balance and time for activities. Many staff also said that working from home helped them to concentrate better and that they were more productive. Feeling isolated and difficulties with communication were the negatives for some staff. Staff, in general, did not feel that the organisation could do anything to improve wellbeing at home.
- **Communication** – Employees were asked to rate how well they felt they were communicating, with each other, with customers and Councillors, and with their manager when working from home. The responses show that communication is not a key issue or concern and most staff believe it is excellent or at least adequate when working from home although an improved telephone system is required.

7.4.4 The report was considered by LT and covered more detail than the key findings highlighted. The report made three core recommendations which were accepted and set out below and will be progressed by Leadership Team through the Head of HR of OD re policy and IT re the telephone system:

- Consider a more flexible approach to blended working to meet service and team requirements i.e. do not have set days in the office and allow Managers to arrange office/home working as required.
- Develop Blended Working Policy, to include review of flexi time scheme, etc.
- Improved telephone system built into laptops and with headsets.

## **8.0 Actions planned in 2023/24 to improve employee health and wellbeing, to:**

- Develop Blended Work Policy to ensure expectations are clear and that flexibility works effectively for both employees and services and communication is well maintained. Develop the Flexi-time scheme to ensure it works effectively with blended working and gives consideration to core contact hours.
- Continue to support national wellbeing campaigns with the support of the Communications team to promote and offer wellbeing activities to employees.
- Refresh Mental Health First Aiders programme by seeking new volunteers and arranging training for new volunteers/refresher training for existing volunteers.
- Review the intranet Wellbeing content and update and

develop accordingly.

- Promote again the 8-module resilience programme for Art of the Possible (see 7.3.1) available on video to all staff as support for their wellbeing/mental health.
- Roll out Flu Jabs to staff from September as with previous years.
- Roll out management training including on the 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.
- Arrange 'Managing Change' training for managers as part of the Blueprint programme to support the delivery of the transformation programme.

## **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**

Wellbeing support is aimed at supporting employee's health both physical and mental health. Mental health is potentially a disability depending on its impact and therefore it is important to make reasonable adjustments and provide support.

### **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

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