

East Herts Council Report

Human Resources Committee

Date of Meeting: 5 June 2024

Report by: Head of HR and Organisational Development

Report title: Employee Health and Wellbeing report 2023/24

Ward(s) affected: N/A

Summary

RECOMMENDATIONS FOR Human Resources Committee:

- (a) To consider the annual Employee Health and Wellbeing Report 2023/24 including the actions (in section 8.0) planned for 2024/25 and provide any comments to the HR and OD Service Manager.**

1.0 Proposal(s)

- 1.1 HR Committee Members are invited to consider the Employee Health and Wellbeing Report 2023/24.

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 2023/24 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.

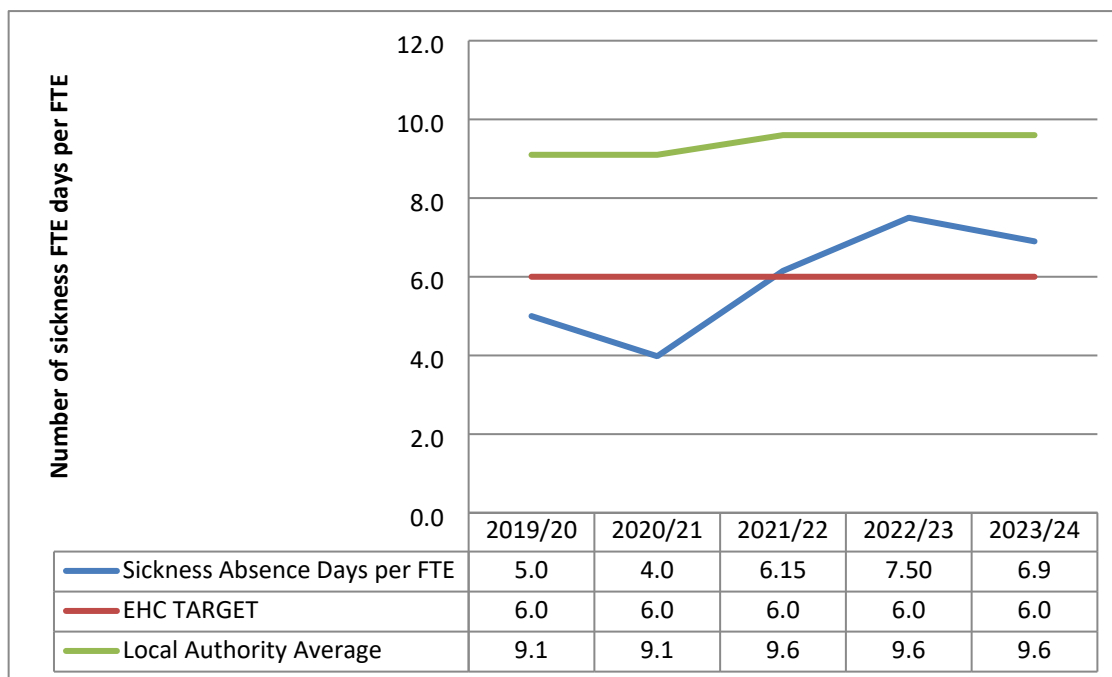
- 3.2 The council measures sickness absence in two ways: the number of full time equivalent (FTE) days absence per FTE employee and the percentage time lost due to absence.
- 3.3 The number of FTE days absence per FTE employee is calculated by dividing the number of FTE days sickness absence by the total 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 2023' has also been used to make comparisons with other organisations.

4.0 Sickness Absence Levels

4.1 ALL Absences

- 4.1.1 In 2023/24, the number of sickness absence FTE days per FTE employee was 6.9 days which is above the council's target of 6 days but lower than in 2022/23 (7.5 days). It is however lower than the local government average (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, 22/23 and 23/24. 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.

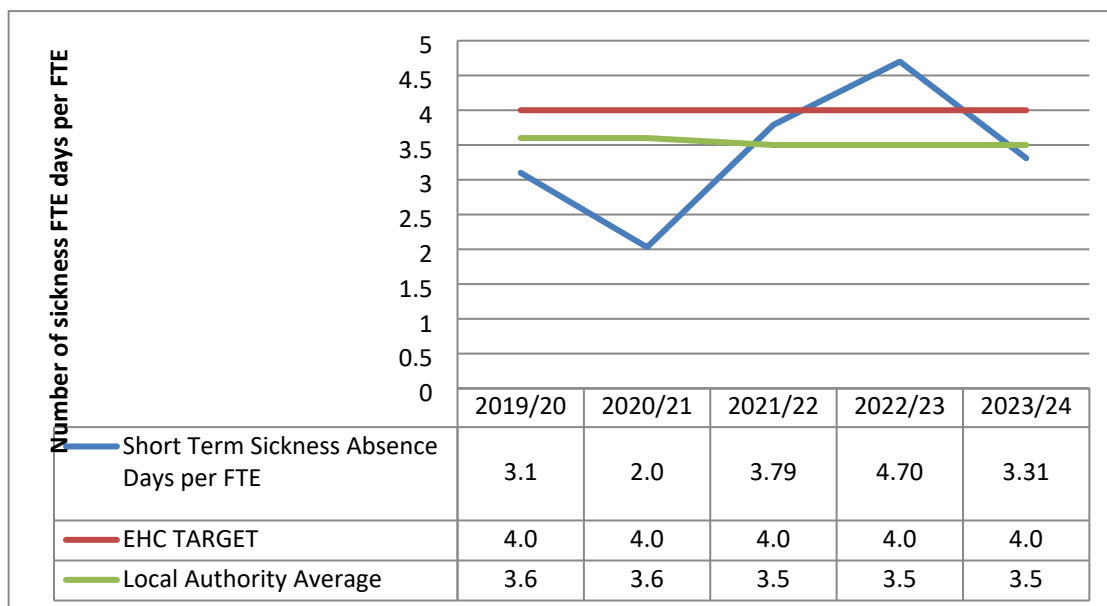
4.1.2 The total number of days taken as sickness absence in 2023/24 was 1956.71 FTE days. 48% (938.64 FTE days) of these were due to short term absence and 52% (1018.07 FTE days) were due to long term absence. The total percentage time lost in 2023/24 due to all absences was 2.861%. This is lower than 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 2023/24, the number of short term sickness absence FTE days per FTE employee was 3.5 days which is below the council's target of 4 days and is lower than in 2022/23 (4.7 days). It is the same as 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

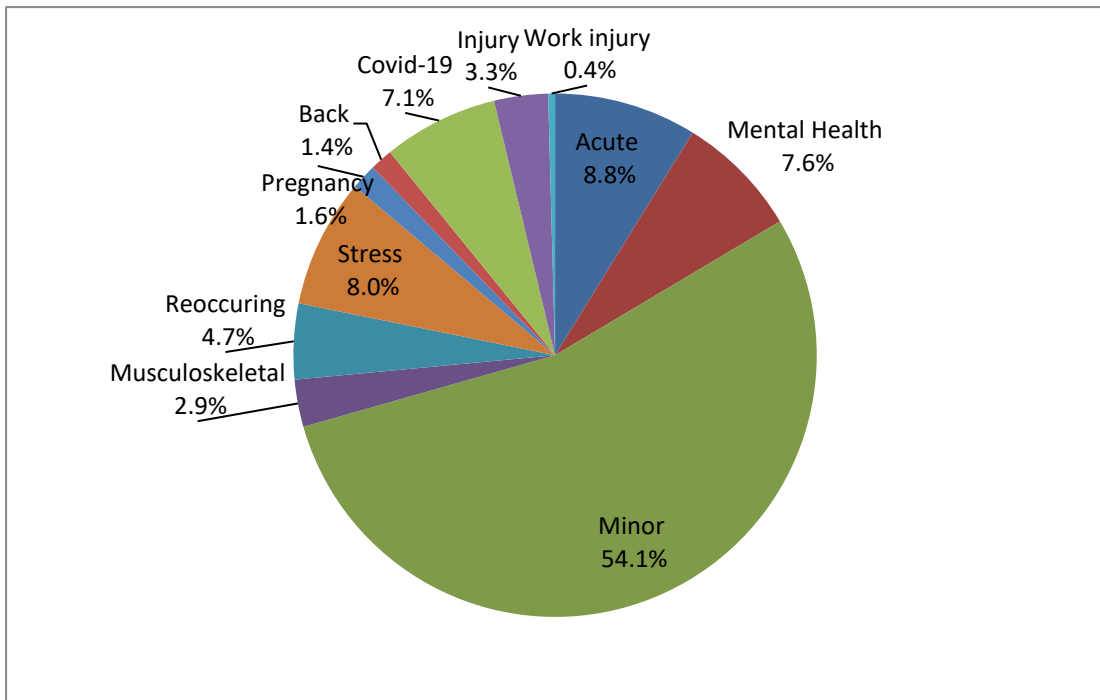


The council's short term absence target was reduced from 4.5 days to 4 days in April 2019. The local authority average is the mean of all English local authorities taken from the 'LG Inform Benchmarking Metrics report'. The 2021/22 report is the latest report available at the time of writing so this data was used for 21/22, 22/23 and 23/24. 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 2023/24 was 1.37% which is lower than the local government average (1.7% in 2021/22).

4.2.4 Figure 3 below shows the causes of short term absence in 2023/24.

Figure 3 – Causes of Short Term absence in 2023/24



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 2023/24 was minor illnesses, such as colds/flu, headaches/migraines, stomach upsets, and minor operations, accounting for 54.1% (140 employees) of all short term absences. According to the Chartered Institute of Personnel and Development (CIPD) 'Health and Wellbeing at Work Survey April 2023' 94% 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 acute medical conditions (e.g., stroke, heart attack and cancer) which accounted for 8.8% of all short term absences (11 employees).

4.2.7 Stress was the third most common cause of short term absence accounting for 8% of all short term absences (8

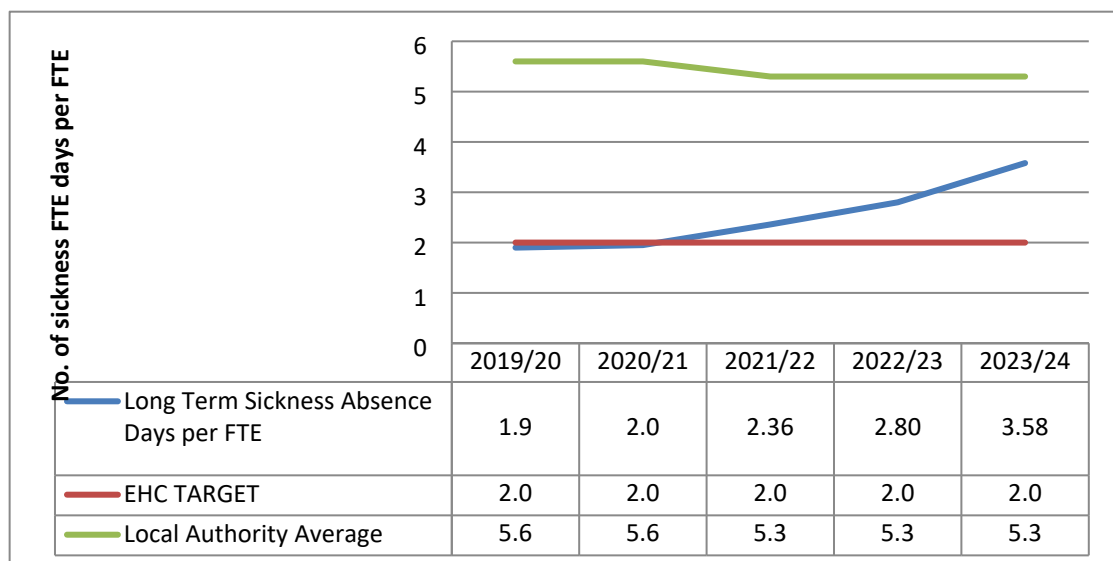
employees). The CIPD Survey reported that 26% of organisations said that stress was in their top three causes of short term absence.

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 2023/24, the number of long term sickness absence FTE days per FTE employee was 3.58 days which is above the council’s target of 2 days and an increase on 2022/23 (2.8 days). 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, 22/23 and 23/24. 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 2023/24 was 1.49% which is lower than the local government average (2.5% in 2021/22).

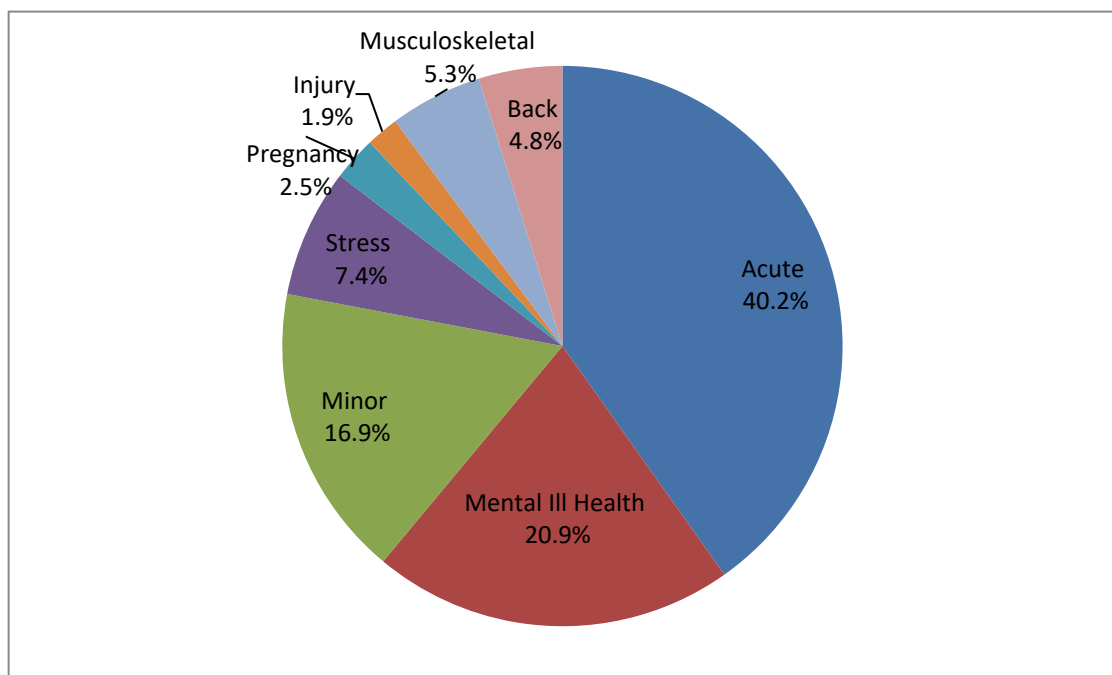
4.3.4 Although there were actually less employees off long term sick in 2023/24 (29 compared to 51 in 2022/23) there were

more off for acute reasons such as cancer which understandably led to lengthy sickness absences.

4.3.5 It is also worth noting that 51.5% of employees at the council are in the 50-64 and serious illnesses tend to become more frequent in later life.

4.3.4 Figure 5 below shows the causes of long term absence in 2023/24.

Figure 5 – Causes of Long Term absence in 2023/24



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 most common cause of long term absence was for acute reasons (e.g. stroke, heart attack and cancer), which accounted for 40.2% of all long term absence (5 employees). All employees have been supported by Line Management, HR and Occupational Health. According to the CIPD Survey, 46% of

organisations reported that acute reasons were in their top three causes of long term absence.

4.3.6 The second most common cause of long term absence was for mental ill health, which accounted for 20.9% of all long term absence (7 employees). All employees have been supported by Line Management, HR and Occupational Health. According to the CIPD Survey, 63% of organisations reported that mental ill health was in their top three causes of long term absence.

4.3.7 The third most common cause of long term absence was minor illnesses (e.g., colds/flu, stomach upsets, headaches and migraines, minor operations), which accounted for 16.9% of all long term absence (9 employees).

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 are 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 increased from 1.9% of all short term absences in 2022/23 to 7.6% in 2023/24. Long term absences due to mental health have also increased from 19.9% of all long term absences in 2022/23 to 20.9% in 2023/24.
- 5.6 Short term absences due to stress have decreased from 12.4% of all short term absences in 2022/23 to 8% in 2023/24. Long term absences have also decreased from 22.4% of all long term absences in 2022/23 to 7.4% in 2023/24.
- 5.7 The council has continued to take action to support employee mental health in 2023/24, 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 Employee Assistance Programme (EAP)

6.3.1 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.

6.4 Mental Health Support from Able Futures

6.4.1 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.

6.4.2 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.

6.4.3 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.

6.4.4 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

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

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

7.0 Actions taken in 2023/24 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 2023/24 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 such as International Women's Day (staff event in council chamber), free flu jabs, 'how to adjust your chair' sessions, and Menopause awareness month.

7.4 Blended Working

7.4.1 Following a review, it was agreed by Leadership to make the blended working arrangements permanent and a policy was developed. This is with Unison for their feedback and it has been decided it will now be grouped with a review of the flexi time scheme, overtime and TOIL and combined into one policy.

7.5 Menopause awareness

7.5.1 Menopause awareness training was run in October 2023 by Talking Menopause. Separate sessions were run for Leadership Team, managers and employees and toolkits were provided. The aim of the sessions was to raise awareness and create an environment where everyone in the council feels comfortable talking about menopause. Staff feedback was extremely positive following the training.

8.0 Actions planned in 2024/25 to improve employee health and wellbeing, to:

- Develop a combined blended working, flexi time, overtime and TOIL policy. Ensure expectations of blended working are clear and that flexibility works effectively for both employees and services and communication is well maintained. Ensure the flexi-time scheme 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.
- Seek volunteers to be 'Equalities Champions' and set up an Equalities Group. Volunteers would represent different areas of equality and diversity as the council is too small to have individual staff groups for all of the different diversity strands.
- Review the intranet Wellbeing content and update and develop accordingly.
- Roll out Flu Jabs to staff from September as with previous years.
- 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.
- Research whether there are any links between employees with protected characteristics and higher sickness absence rates.

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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