

# Crawley Borough Council

## Report to Overview and Scrutiny Commission 7 June 2021

### Staff Sickness Levels with Covid 19 and the Effects of Working from Home

Report of the Head of Legal, Governance and HR, *LDS/166*

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#### 1. Purpose

- 1.1 The purpose of the report is to provide members of the Commission with information on Council staff sickness levels during the Covid-19 pandemic and the effects from homeworking. It also sets out the measures which were taken by the Council to provide direct support services and to facilitate access to external support providers.

#### 2. Recommendations

- 2.1 To the Overview and Scrutiny Commission:

That the Commission is requested to receive this report, note progress to date and acknowledge the ongoing approach.

#### 3. Reasons for the Recommendations

- 3.1 Under the Scrutiny Procedure Rules, it was requested that a report be provided to the Overview and Scrutiny Commission on Council staff sickness levels during the Covid-19 pandemic and the effects of homeworking.
- 3.2 Particularly in the early period of the pandemic (early-mid 2020), the Council was operating in a very fluid environment with an ever-changing national picture and a regular flow of government guidance around the COVID-19 safe workplace.
- 3.3 Whilst the Council kept its approach under review during the pandemic and it has sought feedback from staff through surveys and interactive Q&A sessions, it is vitally important that the Overview and Scrutiny Commission is able to consider and scrutinise the Council's approach on staff welfare. This will be of particular value because it is acknowledged that i) impacts of this pandemic on staff are likely to be long term and ii) future pandemics are possible.

#### 4. Background

- 4.1 In March 2020, the Government announced a national lockdown and advised that people should 'work from home where possible'. For a majority of the Council's staff that meant that they swiftly transitioned to working remotely from home. Some staff with underlying health conditions were required to shield. For other more operational staff, their roles could only be performed in the physical workplace e.g. depot.

- 4.2 It was clear that whilst there were some positives for staff working from home such as flexibility and less commuting, there were negative impacts from homeworking such as feeling isolated, having less social contact and potentially there being less information sharing and collaborative working. Clearly the COVID-19 virus itself and the physical and mental consequences of being infected (or a family member or friend) were and continue to be significant.
- 4.3 The Council's challenge was to ensure the wellbeing of its staff in the areas in which it does control whilst still delivering services.

## **5. Description of Issue to be resolved**

- 5.1 Establishing a clear picture of Council staff sickness levels during the Covid-19 pandemic and the effects of homeworking will help to appraise the Council's approach in supporting its staff (with suitable services) and ensuring their wellbeing. The effectiveness of these measures will affect staff productivity, absence and morale levels as well as staff retention.

## **6. Information & Analysis Supporting Recommendation**

### **6.1 Impact of Covid-19 on the Council's employees**

- The National picture
- Impact on sickness of Crawley Borough Council employees
- Support to our workforce
- Support to staff during the pandemic
- Recruitment and retention of staff

#### The national picture

- 6.2 National sickness levels have decreased in the last year, and there are some explanations as to the reasons being due to the government guidelines and national lockdowns, some people were shielding, some working from home, and many placed on furlough all resulting in reduced contact with others. These reasons together with people following the government's hygiene recommendations are factors believed to have contributed to less sickness absence.
- 6.3 The national picture suggests Covid absences accounted for 14% of all sickness.

#### Impact on sickness of Crawley Borough Council employees

- 6.4 The council's sickness records for Covid was recorded in two categories one being those who could not work due to a requirement to self-isolate as they may have been in contact with someone who tested Covid positive or someone displaying Covid symptoms. Due to the nature of their job role meant they could not work from home.
- 6.5 The second category was staff that had tested positive for Covid or were too ill to work from home due to their symptoms.

- 6.6 The Council has also seen a reduction in sickness absence which aligns with the national picture. In particular during the winter months reductions have been recorded in people taking absence for viral infections, flu and the common cold ailments. Covid isolation absence 9% and Covid sickness absence 7%. It is important to highlight that the sickness figures recorded for 2020/21 were 939 less than the recorded figures for 2019/2020.
- 6.7 A number of other local authorities in our area report similar downward trends in absence cases.

#### Support to the Council's workforce

- 6.8 Within the council, its people are its most important resource and it is recognised that it is fortunate as an organisation to have so many committed staff who care for Crawley and its residents. This has been demonstrated throughout the pandemic crisis as the workforce continually work to provide vital services to the residents of Crawley and to its business community.
- 6.9 As an organisation the council has made significant efforts to support staff during what has been a challenging time. When, in March 2020 the government placed the country into lockdown to reduce the spread of infection the council was aware of the stress which was likely to be caused and the impacts. The workforce would be concerned for their own welfare but also for their family and friends. Concerns would be expected from staff in relation to how and where they were going to carry out their work.
- 6.10 To support the workforce the council put practical steps into place from the very beginning. To assist those who could work from home the council advised on how to work safely at home and how to set up work equipment in a home environment. Staff were reminded about taking regular breaks, staying in touch with colleagues remotely and provided tips on healthy eating. Although most office based staff could work from home a small number of staff have worked in the office where Covid safe measures were put in place. For staff who work mainly externally (outdoors), the council proactively undertook risk assessments in respect to the work undertaken. Interaction with members of the public was limited and the council looked at how they could stay safe when working with colleagues in a team environment.
- 6.11 It was also acknowledged that some staff faced a challenging time when managing home schooling together with working from home. The council responded positively to this and adopted a flexible approach during this time.
- 6.12 In preparation for returning to the workplace (for when the current lockdown restrictions are lifted on 21 June), the council has ensured that work environments will remain Covid safe. Plans have been drawn up and communicated to staff about the amount of time they are expected to spend working from the physical workplace and how much time they might work remotely from home or another location.

#### Support to staff during the pandemic

- 6.13 The Council introduced a wide range of measures to support employee's welfare.

The offer of support to staff has been made through the council's learning and development programme. By way of example the council has in place:

- ✓ Trained 13 Mental Health First Aiders.
- ✓ Arranged virtual workshops covering Resilience Boosters, workshops to Help Managers Support their Teams through anxiety. How to have compassionate conversations

- ✓ Provided access to counselling service and bespoke Reflective Practice sessions introduced.
  - ✓ Mindfulness online course.
- 6.14 A wide range of offers are made through the councils wellbeing team by way of example
- ✓ Talks and presentations on Sleep, Stress Management, Happy living, Positive Psychology
  - ✓ 1:1 appointments on Weight Management, Healthy Nutrition, Wellbeing Checks.
- 6.15 Staff have been signposted to external services and the government's support programme 'Able futures'. Please see Appendix A which provides more detail around the support which has been offered to staff.
- 6.16 Employees were asked to contribute through three staff surveys about how they were feeling and whether they felt supported by the organisation. Two carried out in July and October 2020 and the most recent in February 2021. On evaluating the results of the survey last year the council was able to adapt its offer of support.
- 6.17 The results continue to be very positive but the most recent survey results have shown a small downward trend as follows:-
- Getting work done and motivation scored lower than before
  - Open and honest communication and guidance has dropped slightly
  - Putting your health and safety first when making decisions has also reduced
- 6.18 One challenge for the Council has been that, despite the continued promotion of access to a wide range of health and wellbeing services, take up remains low amongst staff. This has been raised with staff through the weekly/fortnightly Chief Executive's Questions & Answers sessions, through Team Brief and Outline.
- 6.19 Another concern raised was about the amount of time spent attending virtual meetings. The council has encouraged staff to consider meeting times, lengths and breaks when they are arranging meetings. They should avoid booking meetings over lunchtime and consider shorter meetings. The council wishes staff to make these changes for themselves and to take ownership of their own diaries and workloads. The February survey results were communicated to staff in April's Team brief.
- 6.20 The next steps for the Council will be to provide ongoing support to our workforce and to continue to encourage colleagues to take up the opportunities presented to them. Whilst there is responsibility on the Council (as employer) to ensure it exercises its duty of care to staff it is also for staff to take responsibility for themselves, take advantage of the support and reach out when they are struggling. The legacy of the Covid pandemic will remain with us for a long time to come.

#### Recruitment and retention of staff

- 6.21 Through the Council's Transformation Plan one objective is the creation of the People Strategy overseen by the People Board where a comprehensive work programme is being developed. Further work on the staff survey feedback is being considered as part of that work programme. The People Board has commenced a wider strategy looking at some key areas:-

1. Succession planning, this will help us identify our future needs and how we can develop staff.
2. The reasons why people leave, what this is telling us.
3. What is our unique selling point and what and how do we attract potential candidates.

6.22 A piece of work currently underway is to look at salary grades of profession roles this will involve a benchmarking exercise against the same and similar posts within other local authorities which will look at grades and any additional pay or benefits they attract. This is work in progress and an update can be provided to Commission members if they so wish.

## **7. Implications**

- 7.1 In order to continue to provide appropriate support to staff during and after the pandemic, there will be a sustained pull on the capacity of the Human Resources Team. There will also be a draw on officer time for example those who serve as Mental Health First Aiders. Where support services are taken up by staff (particularly the external ones), there will be an ongoing cost.
- 7.2 From 21 June 2021, the nationwide lockdown will hopefully be lifted in line with the Government roadmap towards the end of the pandemic. This could have consequences for the Council which may include a return to (or at least an increase) in staff absence. It has been established that the reduced physical contact with others, as imposed by the lockdown, has contributed to a reduction in COVID-19 infections but also regular illness e.g. influenza etc. It follows that sickness levels may rise following 21 June 2021 but that will depend on other factors such as weather and the roll-out and availability of winter flu jabs later in the year.
- 7.3 Any reduction in staff due to sickness is highly likely to adversely affect service delivery to residents and local businesses.

## **8. Background Papers**

None

Report author and contact officer: Carron Burton, HR & OD Manager 01293 438095  
[carron.burton@ Crawley.gov.uk](mailto:carron.burton@ Crawley.gov.uk)