

Crawley Borough Council

Report to Overview and Scrutiny Commission 1 November 2021

Staff sickness levels with Covid 19 and the effects of working from home update report.

Report of the Head of Legal, Governance and HR, *LDS/175*

1. Purpose

- 1.1 The purpose of the report is to provide members of the Commission with a progress update following the information provided at the meeting in June this year. The updates are in relation to the Council staff sickness levels, the impact of Covid-19 pandemic and the effects of homeworking and how the workforce is transitioning back into the workplace.

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, in March 2021 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 from homeworking.
- 3.2 The report presented to the Commission provided an overview of the situation and measures put in place for its workforce. At the Commission's request this report is by way of an update from June to early October and covers, staff sickness levels, the impact of Covid-19 pandemic, the effects of homeworking and how the workforce is transitioning back into the workplace.

4. Background

- 4.1 The report presented to the Commission provided an overview of the situation and measures put in place for its workforce.

5. Current situation

- 5.1 The national picture

National sickness levels have remained lower in general terms, some explanations are due to factors such as; the continued influence of government guidelines to carry on wearing face coverings and exercise social distancing where possible; although the government lockdown was lifted in July 2021 many organisations have continued to see large proportions of their workforce work from home therefore minimising possible spread; use of public transport has remained lower than pre pandemic again possibly attributing to less transmission; when working from home a view that

less sickness is reported as people feel able to work through. These reasons together with people following the government's hygiene recommendations are factors believed to have contributed to less sickness absence than in previous years.

5.2 Impact on sickness of Crawley Borough Council employees

The Council has continued to record sickness for Covid 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. The second category was staff that had tested positive for Covid or were too ill to work from home due to their symptoms. We have seen two cases of long Covid.

5.3 Other reasons for sickness relate to mental health and musculoskeletal (not back related) issues. These figures are lower than previous years.

5.4 The Council has also seen a continued reduction in sickness absence which aligns with the national picture. A number of other local authorities in our area report similar downward trends in absence cases.

5.5 The Council has put in place a winter flu vaccination programme and take up has increased on previous years. The programme is underway with a number of staff reporting they have successfully had their vaccination.

5.6 Support to our workforce

Interaction with members of the public has remained to be managed through an appointment basis, increased Microsoft Team meetings and where visitors are seen face to face they are asked to wear face coverings and comply with social distancing and hand hygiene guidelines.

5.7 The Council's offer of support to staff has been made through the learning and development programme. The support outlined in the report in [June](#) remains. Part of the offer with further workshops for all colleagues have been delivered by Microsoft Teams and CBC Learning Channel on subjects such as:

- Getting through anxiety
- Compassionate conversations
- Personal safety when lone working
- Aspiring / New People Manager Programme

5.8 For people managers, current and aspiring managers the Council has on offer the sessions outlined in the June report along with the following workshops for;

- The essential skills of conducting an effective interview
- How to support the team through anxiety
- Coaching conversations for managers
- Challenging conversations for managers

5.9 A wide range of offers are made through the Council's Wellbeing Team and they have delivered:

- Friday aerobics sessions carried out via Microsoft teams, 45 in total
- Weekly videos, via Microsoft teams and available on the wellbeing channel

- 5.10 Going forward the wellbeing offer will include:
- Lunchtime 'Relaxation/Mindfulness Session' on a regular basis for staff to drop in as they wish
 - Over 40 NHS Heart Health Check' provision in be reintroduced.
- 5.11 As is widely known more people through the pandemic and coming out of the pandemic have suffered from the impacts around mental health. As the Commission has previously been advised the Council had seen an increase from its workforce taking up the counselling service and this remains the case. Some attributed to family stress, caring responsibilities, loss of person close to them and relationship breakdowns. To support staff manage external pressures they may encounter a project has begun to determine whether or not our clients and residents approach to our workforce has been affected by their own mental health and perhaps showing in an increase of greater degrees of unpleasantness or mistreatment of our workforce. Although the Council is not seeing an increase in verbal or physical abuse, which is reportable, initial feedback suggests client's tolerance levels have been impacted and they are displaying varying behaviours of impatience, intolerance and some are challenging. This is a piece of work in progress and when complete the Council will be in a better position to consider what interventions it might be able to offer.
- 5.12 A project is currently being undertaken to review employment policies and procedures, we are currently looking at is introducing a policy to support those with caring responsibility.
- 5.13 Employee surveys have been carried out and CMT has found these surveys a really useful way of tracking and monitoring how staff are feeling over an extended period of time.
- 5.14 The results continue to be very positive but one area which has seen a downward trend is that staff are finding workload levels more challenging.
- 5.15 The Council will be looking at ways that it can resolve this to help staff manage their workloads and time better. An action plan is being developed and ask that managers discuss workload issues with their teams.
- 5.16 The Council continues to carry providing ongoing support to its 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.

6. Implications of the return to the office environment

- 6.1 At the time of the OSC in June the government had not confirmed the 19 July 2021 would be the date to return to the workplace, stage 4 of the government's roadmap and the Delta variant was upon us. The Chief Executive in consultation with other members of CMT and Unison, agreed to ask staff to return to the office from 6 September 2021 and to use the period between July and September as a transitional time. In making this decision consideration was given to the impact upon reduced child care as the council knew that during the school summer holiday period (July - September) a number of non-term time providers were not planning on re-opening. Additionally travel by public transport was to remain operating on a restricted service which may have endured stresses on staff trying to get to and from work.

- 6.2 For the duration of the transitional period the time was used to encourage staff who had primarily been working from home to begin to return to the office environment and see the safe working practices for themselves and experience the Covid safe environment that had been created. The council recognised some staff may be fearful and have a reluctance to return to the workplace so it was important to ease staff back.
- 6.3 For those who may have been apprehensive about returning the transitional period gave them the opportunity to return and for staff to experience for themselves the Covid safe measures in place including an enhanced cleaning regime, directional signposting to ensure no pinch points in passing in corridors and staircases. The council recognised some staff may be fearful and have a reluctance to return to the workplace so it was important to ease staff back. It also gave sufficient time for managers to work with their teams to arrange office presence on a rota basis to manage numbers to ensure social distancing could be maintained. Staff were encouraged to pop into the office for a day, or half day, or a few hours to familiarise themselves with the work set up in advance of the return.
- 6.4 From September staff were asked to have a presence in the office two days per week if full time and one day a week for part time staff.

7. Impacts to the externally focused workforce

- 7.1 The external workforce have continued to carry out their roles. Adhering to specific risk assessments and guidance appropriate to their own work areas which included outside in public areas, in depots and in work vehicles. This extended to working in bubbles, having separate rest rooms and working in vehicles with people they knew.

8. Next steps for the Council

- Complete the Action Plan to support the staff survey results. And continue with employee engagement through established channels
- Continue to provide learning and development and support workshops appropriately to meet the needs of both employees and service delivery
- Actively encourage and support those who are, or who may face challenges with their mental health by suggesting the various offers in place or highlighting external agencies for them to draw upon
- Carry on providing a range of wellbeing initiatives to suit the requirements of the workforce

9. Background Papers.

[Report LDS/166 - Staff Sickness Levels with Covid 19 and the Effects of Working From Home – OSC 7 June 2021.](#)

Report author and contact officer: Carron Burton, HR & OD Manager 01293 438095
carron.burton@crawley.gov.uk