

Crawley Borough Council

Report to Overview and Scrutiny Commission 13 June 2022

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/184*

1. Purpose

- 1.1 The purpose of the report is to provide members of the Commission with a progress update following the information provided to the committee in June and November 2021. The updates are in relation to the Council staff sickness levels, the impact of Covid-19 pandemic, the effects of homeworking, staff welfare and how the workforce continues to transition 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 from homeworking.
- 3.2 The report presented to Commission provided an overview of the situation and measures put in place for its workforce. At the committee's request this report is by way of an update from November 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 and measures and support offered to colleagues.

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 Impact on sickness of Crawley Borough Council employees
- 5.2 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. The Council has seen two cases of long Covid.

- 5.3 The Council has seen an increase in absences due to Covid in the last quarter of 2021-2022 which it has attributed to Covid tests being more easily accessible to staff. Since the testing requirements have been relaxed, the Council has seen a decline in reported sickness relating to Covid.
- 5.4 Other reasons for sickness relate to musculoskeletal (not back related), stomach conditions and mental health.
- 5.5 The winter flu vaccination programme saw an increase in take up than its previous years. Despite a national shortage of vaccinations, the Council has been able to support staff through this programme and it will again run a programme towards the end of summer 2022.
- 5.6 Support to our workforce
- 5.7 The Council's offer of support to staff has been made through its learning and development programme. The offers set out in the earlier report continues to be offered with the re-introduction of some activities taking place 'in person' and others being delivered by Microsoft Teams and CBC Learning Channel on subjects such as:
- Overcoming Overwhelm
 - Men's Health and Wellbeing
 - Menopause demystified
 - Mental Health awareness
 - Mindfulness and Wellbeing
 - Aspiring / New People Manager Programme
- 5.8 For people managers, current and aspiring managers the Council has offered the sessions outlined in the previous report along with the following workshops for;
- Aspiring / New People Manager Programme
 - 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 The launch of a revised appraisal scheme Called 'Plan Do Review' based around conversations for employees and their line manager.
- 5.10 A wide range of offers are made through the Council's Wellbeing team for example sessions offered:
- Starting the year- be kind to yourself in 2022. A guide to taking care of your mental health
 - Motivation for the year ahead-kick start 2022 with healthy eating habits
 - NHS Heart Health Check
 - Food waste- top tips to reduce food waste and how to plan weekly meals

5.11 Other initiatives offered by officers within the Council:

- Raising the profile of 'Bike Week' which highlighted the cycle scheme and the valued discount platform
- Workplace Savings Scheme which enables staff to transfer money into a savings account directly from their salary
- Pension Benefits, with the recently introduced AVC scheme for participants off the local government pension scheme
- Energy at home – top tips on ways to make energy saving
- National Walk to Workday

5.12 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 Council has previously advised the committee, it has continued to see an increase from its workforce taking up the counselling service. The offer to staff is one round comprising of 6 sessions. The Council is seeing a number of people requiring more than the 6 sessions. In part this is attributed to the difficulty in obtaining GP referrals and NHS mental health service referrals. In general, the feedback from the counselling service following the completion of sessions is positive. The prediction being more people are likely to require this service going forward.

5.13 The Council has introduced a programme of reflective practise, the aim is to develop personal awareness, resilience, skills and competence across professional, interpersonal and relational domains that enhance the workplace.

5.14 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.

5.15 The results continue to be very positive but one area which had seen a downward trend was staff finding workload levels more challenging. It is hopeful this area will be addressed with the refresh of the appraisal scheme called 'Plan Develop Review' which will encourage employees and their line managers to reflect on what has been achieved in the past 12 months, plan ahead for the coming year whilst looking to future support and development opportunities.

5.16 The Council has and will carry on 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. Staff returning to the office environment

6.1 A small number of staff due to the nature of their work activities, continued to work in the office environment on a regular basis. Once the government had lifted the main restrictions, The Council saw a gradual return where staff were encouraged to be present in the office for a minimum of two days per week for full time employees and one day a week for part time employees.

6.2 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 that some staff might be fearful or be reluctant 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.

- 6.3 From May 2022 the Council relaxed some of the Covid 19 restrictions in our buildings, which means the wearing of face coverings is no longer mandatory, if staff wish to wear a face-covering they may choose to do so. There is no longer the requirement for the one-way systems and restrictions for accessing the stairs up and down the building, and social distancing in the meeting rooms was finally removed. The decision was made following a survey with staff. However, sanitiser will continue to be available, as will the use of hygiene screens in the public areas. Going into the warmer months staff are encouraged to ensure good ventilation is maintained in the office environment.

7. Impacts to the externally focused workforce

- 7.1 The external workforce has continued to carry out its function and has adhered to risk assessments and guidance appropriate to specific work areas. This includes 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

- Continue to provide learning and development and support workshops appropriately to meet the needs of both employees and service delivery
- Continue to provide and raise the profile of the support available to staff for their wellbeing, mental health and financial health
- 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.

[LDS/166 – Overview and Scrutiny Commission 7 June 2021](#)

[LDS/175 – Overview and Scrutiny Commission 1 November 2021](#)

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