

Crawley Borough Council

Report to Overview and Scrutiny Commission 5 June 2023

Staff Health, Morale, and Sickness Updates

Report of the Head of Governance, People & Performance, *LDS/200*

1. Purpose

- 1.1 The purpose of the report is to provide members of the Overview & Scrutiny Commission (OSC) with a progress update following the information provided to the OSC in June 2022. The updates cover the Council workforce's health, wellbeing, and sickness levels. It examines out how employees have transitioned back into the workplace since the pandemic and sets out the measures the Council has put in place to support and monitor employees.

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 OSC on Council staff sickness levels during the Covid-19 pandemic and the impact and effects of homeworking. Reports were provided to the OSC in June and November 2021 and June 2022. At the Commission's request further updates have been provided to the Commission.

4. Background

- 4.1 The report presented to the OSC 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 There are no longer government restrictions or guidance that employers need to follow should they have Covid or the symptoms of Covid. However, the Council has continued to record Covid sickness. Employees are still required to report if they test positive for Covid. In cases where the employee is well enough to work and the role can be undertaken remotely, they should work from home. If they are unwell, they should not attend the physical workplace or work remotely from home. In circumstances where the employee tests positive for Covid and their role cannot be undertaken remotely from home, they should not attend the physical workplace until they achieve a negative test. The intention to provide employees with an assurance that the workplace is as safe as it can be. The reporting process is reviewed periodically. If employees wish to do so they may wear face coverings. The Council

had seen two cases of long Covid. Both employees have returned to work with support. No further long-term cases have been identified.

- 5.3 The Council monitors sickness absence and during the first three quarters of 2022-2023 Covid continued to be within the top three reason for sickness absence. However, during Quarter 4 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 was successful in uptake, and it will again run a programme towards the end of summer 2023.
- 5.6 Working in the Town Hall
- 5.7 Employees based in the town hall complex (old building) continued to return to the office. Social distancing was encouraged, and specific desks were taken out of use to ensure that social distancing was maintained. Higher levels of cleaning continued across the town hall and other council worksites. Hand sanitizer for personal use and cleaning products to wipe down desks and equipment were provided. Employees were encouraged to work a minimum of two days a week in the physical workplace if they were a full-time worker and a minimum of one day a week for part-time workers.

Support to the workforce

- 5.8 The Council's offer of support to employees has been made through its learning and development programme. The support facilities and resources listed in the earlier reports to OSC continue to be offered both 'in person' or online via Microsoft Teams and the CBC learning channel.
- 5.9 The financial cost of living crisis impacts the workforce, and the Council has issued several reminders to employees to highlight the organisations from which they can seek support, guidance and money saving tips. The Council has placed a specific focus on financial well-being and has provided workshops on this topic to help employees better understand their relationship with money. The workshops have provided strategies and tactics to improve their financial habits. Other guidance has looked at financial planning and practical knowledge on the key elements of managing everyday finances e.g., budgeting, managing debt, seeking support they are struggling.
- 5.10 For people managers and aspiring managers, the Council has developed and is currently rolling out a suite of essential training sessions for managers. These sessions cover: -
- managing sickness absence
 - discipline & grievance
 - managing performance
 - having difficult conversations
 - investigation training
 - equality, diversity & inclusion
 - safeguarding.

The Council continues to offer sessions outlined in the previous report along with the 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
- 5.11 To work alongside the essential training for managers a review of several of the people-related policies and procedures is taking place.
- 5.12 A wide range of sessions are offered through the Council's wellbeing team:
- Starting the year- be kind to yourself in 2023. A guide to taking care of your mental health
 - Motivation for the year ahead-kick start 2023 with healthy eating habits
 - NHS Heart Health Check
 - Food waste- top tips to reduce food waste and how to plan weekly meals
- 5.13 Other initiatives offered by officers within the Council include:
- 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
- 5.14 As the Council has previously advised the OSC, it has continued to see an increase from its workforce taking up the counselling service. The prediction was that more employees would be requiring this service, and this has been the case. Many employees who took up this offer have requested further sessions beyond the normal 6 sessions earmarked for an individual employee.
- 5.15 The Council has continued the 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. This initiative has supported individual teams to use a confidential reflective space in which they can reflect upon, and how they feel about what they do, the impacts the pandemic has had upon them and the service providers they work with. The sessions cover many aspects including managing work boundaries, threats to resilience, coping with change and maintaining well-being. Feedback has been positive. The programme will be continued to be offered to other teams across the Council.
- 5.16 Every 3 years, the Council circulates an employee survey looking at a range of areas that can be monitored and compared to the previous survey. This was most recently undertaken in the autumn of 2022. The results are very positive. In all nine topic areas there are improvements since the previous survey. This is really encouraging and reflects the work that has been done. Some highlights include:
- Up 3 per cent: Crawley Borough Council cares about my health and wellbeing at work
 - Up 7 per cent: I feel I am working in a safe environment
 - Up 2 per cent: I know how my day-to-day work contributes to making Crawley a better place
 - Up 3 per cent: I have received the training I need to do my job
 - Up 10 per cent since: I feel safe to express my views and opinions honestly
 - Up 8 per cent: I believe / feel my ideas will be listened to
 - Up 6 per cent: CMT generally seek suggestions and ideas from staff.

The survey indicates that there is still work to be done in some areas. CMT is working on an action plan to focus on these areas and will work with employee

groups and the People Board to develop it. Once complete this action plan will be shared.

- 5.17 The Council has and will carry on providing ongoing support to its workforce and will 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 for a long time to come.

6. Employees working in the office environment

- 6.1 Employees began to move into the New Town Hall, the Create Building, in December 2022. The design of the workspace is open plan and desks are shared. Office cover is agreed locally by service teams and divisions. The benefit of having employees working a combination of in the office environment and at home has proved popular. The benefits of having people in an office environment as opposed to offering permanent working from home arrangements are to share learning, to induct and help support new colleagues. It contributes to being able to check in with colleagues around their health and well-being. The model for hybrid working is one the Council will continue to promote. The Council is not alone in its thinking as more organisations are finding that bringing employees back into the office environment (whether on a full time or hybrid basis) can increase productivity and provide a better work life balance with more social interaction which can help reduce stress levels and improve mental health and increase creativity.

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 employees 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.

None

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