

SHORT REPORT	
<b>Subject Matter</b>	Support to employees
<b>Lead Director</b>	Sue Stanhope – Interim Director of Human Resources
<b>Date</b>	22 April 2020



### 1. EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

- 1.1 Our staff are vital in helping Sandwell to combat the many issues that our communities are currently facing. It's essential therefore, that we do all we can to support and protect our staff. This report provides an overview of the support, communication and advice that is being provided to council employees and the work being undertaken with the Trade Unions.
- 1.2 In addition, it describes the approach that the council is taking to meeting the staffing resource challenges faced as a consequence of the impact of COVID 19 in particular how we are redeploying employee volunteers around the organisation.
- 1.3 The outbreak of COVID 19 has presented us with a number of challenges in respect of the occupational health and safety in respect of employees and this report details our advice and support on issues such as Personal Protective Equipment (PPE), self-isolation and shielding.

### 2. KEY ISSUES

- 2.1 **Employee communications** - ensuring that employees have access to the answers to a range of questions that they have both in respect of their personal situation as well as they role at the council. It was really clear from the beginning that being able to respond quickly to questions that were being asked was really important if we were to try and ensure that employees felt that we were listening and responding to their concerns. To respond to this

need we have created a set of frequently asked questions (FAQs) which sit on the HR pages on the intranet. They provide answers to a variety of questions covering topics including self-isolating/shielding, home working, key workers, caring responsibilities, pay and questions on a range of terms and condition issues. Whilst the FAQ section of the intranet is the repository for questions and answers to the questions we are also provide direct advice and guidance over the phone or via email through the HR advisers, Occupational Health and Health and Safety.

- 2.2 **Trade Unions** - We meet virtually with all the Trade Unions on a daily basis to address any areas of concern that have arisen and to ensure that the feedback they get from employees is heard and responded to. Working jointly with the Unions has enabled us to share knowledge and build a collective understanding of emerging issues and challenges and work jointly to an agreed response that balances the needs of the employee and the council. A specific request was received which asked for consideration to be given to the payment of an additional amount to front line workers. The email referenced that Lancaster Council had agreed to pay an additional £100 per month for at least a two-month period. Whilst recognising that the organisation was very grateful to all staff, wherever they work in the council, for all the efforts that are being made to maintain services during these unprecedented times, it was considered that this was not something that it felt was appropriate to do at the present time. The commitment was given to consider how the extraordinary contribution of staff should be recognised when the outbreak was over. It did not commit to what form that might take.
- 2.3 **Deploying our human resource** - At the beginning of the outbreak we asked all employees to complete a survey for us identifying any underlying health conditions that they may have. We also asked them to let us know if they had any previous experience of working in a social care setting. The vast majority of employees returned this survey, and this has given us a much clearer picture of our human resource. From all the information we have collected to date, we have pulled together a spreadsheet that enables us to search through the data and identify potential employees to volunteer for redeployment into business-critical services. Working with service managers we have used this information to ask employees in non-critical areas to volunteer to be redeployed to work in another area of council activity to help us ensure that we can continue to deliver those critical services. Any employee who volunteers to be deployed into another service or role will be provided with the basic training necessary to safely carry out tasks and any PPE required. Enhanced rates of pay will also be paid for any volunteers who help on a weekend who currently work Monday – Friday. Specialist training programmes have been created in an e-learning

format to ensure that training can be provided to employees prior to their deployment into a different area or role.

- 2.4 Monitoring absence levels** – to ensure that we understand the pressures on our staffing resource we are monitoring and reporting on absence levels on a daily basis. This reporting identifies any employees self-isolating, shielding or absent for other reasons. On a weekly basis this is shared with West Midlands Employers so that we can benchmark against others in the region. It also enables us to give immediate advice to employees as well as target any wellbeing or health support and be able to identify any employees who it may be appropriate to offer testing to.
- 2.5 Health and Safety advice to employees** - An important area of focus has been on the provision of advice and clear guidance on the use of Personal Protective Equipment (PPE) together with the revision of risk assessments to reflect the challenges of delivering service at the present time. In line with information received from Public Health England we have issued guidance on when PPE should be used and what levels of PPE are appropriate. In addition, health and safety guidance has been updated on working from home, use of display screen equipment, reporting to the HSE together with the provision of specialist manual handling training to support the deployment of employees into areas such as adult social care. The issuing of guidance in this area is of significant importance to the organisation in managing the risks associated with the potential for a likely increase in both public and employer liability claims in the future. As an employer, we must ensure that we approach the risk associated with COVID 19 in the same way that we would any other risk to the health and wellbeing of employees, taking sensible steps to discharge our duty of care and to document our assessment and adopted policies. Being able to demonstrate that we have considered the risks carefully and took sensible steps to mitigate those risks will be crucial evidence in defence of any subsequent claim. If someone becomes infected at work in the absence of evidence of such steps having been taken, we are vulnerable to being found in breach of duty and liable for losses arising. There is also the potential for us to be considered vicariously liable for the negligence of our employees for an example in a situation where an employee has been redeployed to another role and not provided with sufficient training/supervision. There is also the issue of a potential increase in public liability claims that arise from changes to working practices. The guidance, advice, support and risk assessments that we put in place all seek to mitigate this risk.
- 2.5 Well-being information** – The Council also has a wide range of resources available to support positive mental wellbeing. These include an Employee Assistance & Counselling Service which offers free, confidential advice and counselling on a wide range of issues. This programme is available 24/7 and

aims to support employees with both personal and work-related issues. We also have Mental Health toolkits for employees and managers which are full of advice, tips and resources to help support positive mental health and wellbeing at work. Working with the Trade Unions we have also recently introduced a Parental Leave Scheme which together with our revised our Bereavement Policy offering practical support and time off for bereaved employees.

**2.6 Working from home** - Where employees can work from home they are being asked to do so as a matter of course. If an employee is self-isolating whether they employee can work from home will very much depend on the employee's role, the terms of their contract and the circumstances of their self-isolation or quarantine. If it is possible and they are not actually unwell, then they can work from home. We have a SMART working toolkit and guidance booklet. This contains all the information needed when working from home. We have relaxed the flexible working policy to enable employees to care for a child whilst home working. We are continuing to provide information on a regular basis to those working from home.

### **3. NEXT STEPS**

3.1 We will continue to update the Frequently Asked Questions part of the intranet and work with managers and supervisors to ensure that employees without easy access to the intranet on a day to day basis have easy access to the information that answers a number of their questions.

3.2 Working alongside the Trade Unions enables us to get direct feedback on the concerns of employees. We meet via Skype on a daily basis so that we can ensure that we respond in a timely manner to any concerns. This has proved to be positive and will continue for the period of the outbreak.

3.3 Ensuring that we are able to deploy our employees into business-critical areas and ensure that they are trained and feel safe and supported.