

Report to Budget and Corporate Scrutiny Management Board

1 December 2021

Subject:	Impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on employee's productivity and well-being
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1 Recommendations

- 1.1 That the Board considers and comments upon the information and evidence provided in relation to the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on employee's productivity and well-being.

2 Reasons for Recommendations

- 2.1 On 23rd March 2020, the Government announced the first lockdown in the UK ordering people to stay at home, for a significant part of our workforce this meant that people had to work from home. We also had a number of employees providing essential services who continued to fulfil those roles. This meant that there was a significant change in the way that work was undertaken by all of our employees and the organisation had to adapt to that change.
- 2.2 The Committee is now requested to consider note the current position.

3 Background

- 3.1 It was clear from the start of the pandemic that our staff were vital in helping Sandwell to combat the many issues that our communities faced and continue to face. It was therefore critical that we did all we could to support



and protect our staff, our interventions are described in paragraphs 3.2 to 3.8 below and are the context in respect of the current position regarding our employees' health, wellbeing and productivity:-

3.2 Employee communications - 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 vaccinations, home working, key workers, caring responsibilities, pay and questions on a range of terms and conditions 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.

3.3 Trade Unions - We set up a series of virtual meetings with all the Trade Unions 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.

3.4 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 gave us a much clearer picture of our human resource. This has enabled us to identify potential employees to volunteer for redeployment into business-critical services to help us ensure that we can continue to deliver those critical services.



- 3.5 Monitoring absence levels** – to ensure that we understood the pressures on our staffing resource at the height of the pandemic we monitored and reported on absence levels on a daily basis. This reporting identifies any employees self-isolating, shielding or absent for other reasons. It also enabled 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.
- 3.6 Health and Safety advice to employees** - 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. The guidance, advice, support and risk assessments that we put in place all seek to mitigate this risk.
- 3.7 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.
- 3.8 Working from home** - Where employees can work from home they were asked to do so as a matter of course and we supported this with a SMART working toolkit and guidance booklet. This contains all the information needed when working from home. We are continuing to provide information on a regular basis to those working from home.



4 Context and Key Issues

- 4.1 To better understand the impact of the pandemic on our employees we have conducted two surveys one in September 2020 and a pulse survey in May 2021. The response from staff was that they considered isolation from their work colleagues and mental health as the biggest barrier to working from home.
- 4.2 In respect of the September survey, attached are two reports giving the detail from that survey. Attached at Appendix 1 is a presentation which focusses on employee's mental health and wellbeing, for those employees working from home this was identified as the biggest issue. The presentation shows the data along with the interventions we had in play at the time. The data during this period shows that stress, mental health has increased by 8.6% compared to the previous year. The second report attached as Appendix 2 provides the results for the whole survey giving a full picture of how employees were feeling at that time.
- 4.3 The results of the Pulse Survey which was carried out in April of this year are attached as Appendix 3. The aim of the survey was to collect information on how employees felt about working from home. Overall the results show that employees felt positive about working from home and would like to continue to work in this fashion for the foreseeable future. There are no significant differences between responses made by part time and full-time staff, although employees would like to be engaged more about the councils future working arrangements/plans. This is especially true for those employees who do not manage staff and those employees who are aged between 16-34. The survey also told us that the vast majority of employees would like to come occasionally into the office.
- 4.4 The next attachment at Appendix 4 shows the cumulative sickness figures for Q2 (2021) and compares it to the previous financial years data to see the impact of Covid-19 on overall absence levels. In summary sickness absence levels currently are very similar to pre-pandemic levels. This is an important fact to acknowledge and it could be considered that this is a result of the positive impact that working from home has had on absenteeism against the increase of Covid-19 cases and mental and stress levels amongst employees.



4.5 In recognition of the feedback received from employees from the above surveys we have continued to develop the support mechanism outlined in paragraph 3 above. We have created the 'My Wellbeing Hub' since which signposts employees to a range of mental health and wellbeing support interventions. Advice and guidance is shared weekly via staff communications, this includes advice on physical wellbeing with our physiotherapist through virtual sessions, Talking Life (talking therapy sessions), EAP promotion and team Wellbeing presentations.

4.6 In addition to the employee surveys we have also conducted surveys of our managers about the way in which services are organised. The purpose of these surveys is to understand how our buildings will be utilised going forward. It also recognises the feedback from employee who are currently working from home reading attendance in buildings. The occupancy survey completed in April-June 2021 by service managers reported that across all the employees working from home that 102 colleagues total had wellbeing needs which could benefit from either a hybrid or fuller return to working from an office rather than continued working from home. To support this, the collaboration zone was opened earlier in October 2021, to offer an alternative to remote working and conduct face to face meetings. Agile fixed drop-down desks were also bookable with prioritisation offered to colleagues with Wellbeing requirements, to date the take up of these has been low but it is still relatively new. Bookings for the collaboration zone have steadily increased. As the refurbishment of Oldbury Council House nears completion from March 2022, focal fixed home zones will be available to each Directorate further supporting hybrid ways of working by offering more choice for colleague's work-styles and therefore wellbeing

4.7 As was identified in paragraph 3.6 above the health and safety of our employees has remained a key focus. We have continued to monitor accidents at work and aggressive incidents. In respect of accidents at work in the year 2020/21 there were 174 total incidents reported. 167 related to employees (of which 33 were RIDDOR reportable to the HSE) and 7 non-employees. Of these;

- 83 were employee accidents (including 33 RIDDOR)
- 22 near-miss/damage reports



- 62 were aggressive incidents to employees³ and;
- 7 non-employee incidents

This is a 44% decrease compared to the number of incident forms received in 2019/2020. Furthermore, in respect of violence and aggression there were 62 incidents reported towards our employees in the period. This is a fall of 52% compared to the previous year. This data would seem to indicate that employee safety & wellbeing has fared very well from an incident's reported point of view.

- 4.8 Productivity can be thought of as how effectively organisations, and the people working in them, produce value from individual and collective contributions. Productivity can be thought of as how effectively value (output) is produced from inputs (people, capital equipment, land, energy, and so on). In principle, there are many ways to measure productivity, but the most common measure is labour productivity and the two statistics usually quoted are output per hour worked and output per worker. However, whilst this is easily translated in a manufacturing or industrial setting it is much more difficult to quantify in an organisation such as a council. It is therefore important that we look to identify further appropriate measures of productivity.
- 4.9 Research shows that engaged employees are 17% more productive than their peers. Engaged employees are more likely to work diligently and expend discretionary effort in their jobs, increasing productivity and innovation. Employees who are engaged with their job and employer are more productive because they are motivated beyond personal factors. The feedback from the surveys we have conducted suggest people are more engaged and prefer working from home especially as they can manage their work life balance needs better (so they are using their time more effectively) and this has made them more productive (our outputs have either increased or remained the same) while current sickness levels have remained the same as pre-pandemic levels.



5 Implications

Resources:	These recommendations have positive implications for staffing, providing a hybrid way of working offer. These recommendations have ongoing financial implications, to complete refurbishment of the Council House, including council chambers, the WPV refurbishment programme must continue
Legal and Governance:	The Council is required to follow relevant Council policies and procedures and comply with applicable employment legislation and case law concerning staff related matters
Risk:	There are no specific risk implications of this report
Equality:	The recommendations contained within this report have not identified any issues which would discriminate against any disadvantaged or vulnerable persons
Health and Wellbeing:	There are no specific health and wellbeing implications arising from the contents of this report, however it is important to note that the report does outline the current support available to employees

6 Appendices

Appendix 1- Survey Results on Mental Health and Wellbeing

Appendix 2 - Overall Survey Results

Appendix 3 – Pulse Survey

Appendix 4 – Absence Levels

7. Background Papers

None

