

Meeting of the Overview and Scrutiny Committee - 27th March, 2024

Report of the Chief Executive

Employee Health and Wellbeing

Purpose of report

1. To provide the Overview and Scrutiny Committee with a report on the findings from a review of the Council's employee wellbeing offer and the proposed action plan to address the issues identified.

Recommendations

2. It is recommended that, subject to any comments, the Overview and Scrutiny Committee: -
 - Note that employee wellbeing within the Council currently reflects the national trends of an overall increase in sickness and absence due to mental health related sickness.
 - Note the work undertaken to review the Councils' employee wellbeing offer and the findings of this.
 - Note that there is a need to strengthen the Council's wellbeing offer to employees to address the issues highlighted in the report.
 - Endorse the action plan as per Appendix 1.

Background

3. Members have requested a report to come to the Scrutiny Committee on employee wellbeing. Historically the responsibility for employee wellbeing sat with the Public Health Directorate, however following a review of arrangements in place to support employee wellbeing shortly after the Covid pandemic, the decision was made that employee health and wellbeing should sit with the Council's Human Resources function as part of the People and Inclusion Division. The responsibility moved during the current municipal year and provided an opportunity to undertake a review of the Council's offer.

4. Each year a national Health and Wellbeing at work report is produced for employers by the Chartered Institute of Personnel and Development (CIPD). The latest report published in 2023 found that the UK is currently experiencing the highest rate of sickness absence in a decade (the average of 7.8 days per employee per annum). It also identifies mental ill health as the top cause of long-term absence followed by musculoskeletal issues.
5. The majority of employers surveyed reported ongoing issues with stress related absence, with heavy workloads being cited as the most common cause. The report also found that despite an increasing number of workplace health and wellbeing services being put in place by employers, mental health issues for employees are continuing to increase.
6. The issues highlighted by the report are reflected in the Dudley Council context with our latest figures (based on Q2) identifying 5.48 days lost per FTE, slightly lower than that reported in the CIPD report. This figure is lower than the average figure for local government, where the latest LGA figure was 8.8 days average sickness rate per FTE employee or 3.6%. In addition, there is a downward trend as the current Q2 figure sees a 6.5% decrease compared to the figure from Q2 last year.
7. In terms of Mental health related illness, the position at Dudley Council reflects the national trend with Mental Health/Anxiety/Depression identified as the top reason for sickness in the latest sickness figures. Whilst there has been a decrease in the number of days lost compared to the same period last year, there has been an increase in the number of days lost for illness due to non-work-related stress. The areas identified as having the highest levels of mental health related sickness being Housing, Regeneration and Enterprise, Children's Services and Adult Social Care.
8. Whilst it is important to monitor and respond to the data, focussing on sickness absence alone is unlikely to uncover the underlying factors affecting health and wellbeing, or identify areas where any significant improvements can be made. Likewise, as highlighted in the CIPD report, simply putting new provision in place does not address the problem. Hence, the importance of understanding what good employee Health and wellbeing provision is. To this end, a review was undertaken utilising a framework that is seen as best in class which has been developed by the NHS. The framework provides guidance on how organisations can understand what good health and wellbeing looks like and what can be achieved.

9. The NHS Health and Wellbeing Framework: Organisational Diagnostic Tool, helps employers to measure their health and wellbeing offer against 7 key elements that should feature in a strong employee health and wellbeing offer. These are:
 - i. Data Insights and organisational evidence covering, where we obtain our data from.
 - ii. Personal Health and wellbeing covering; mental health, physical wellbeing, and healthy lifestyles.
 - iii. Relationships covering; working together and supporting each other.
 - iv. Fulfilment at work covering; Bringing yourself to work, Life Balance and Recognition.
 - v. Environment covering; the physical working environment.
 - vi. Managers and Leaders covering; senior leadership responsibilities, healthy leadership behaviours and skilled managers.
 - vii. Professional Wellbeing support covering; support partners and organisational design and policy.

Our approach

10. Through mapping, and holding 1-1 interviews with key stakeholders, we were able to identify and capture the current range of initiatives and support in place across the council. Support is currently offered to employees from different teams including, Health and Safety, Public Health, Childrens Services, Housing and Communities, People, and Inclusion. We placed a particular focus on mental health to look at everything we have in place to support this.
11. A range of evidence was also reviewed.
 - Information from the employee assistance programme since launch in November 2023 (Viv-up).
 - Staff counselling data e.g., reasons for contact.
 - Workforce analytics including sickness data.
 - Information from employee surveys, including key wellbeing trends and,
 - Exit monitoring, and directorate employee surveys e.g., Childrens Services survey November 2023.
12. Benchmarking our current wellbeing offer against other local authorities and large public sector organisations, in order to identify good, and best practice as well as identify the range of provision that is on offer. Included in this was other local authorities within the West Midlands.

13. The NHS diagnostic toolkit was utilised to understand our status against the best practice elements within the NHS model for employee wellbeing, and to help us to prioritise areas to focus on for further investment.

Findings

14. Based on the research, the best employee wellbeing provisions are those which are wide ranging and able to be tailored to an individual. For example, it needs to be capable of factoring type of work, protected characteristics, and/or care giving status. The best offers consider the whole employee life cycle.
15. Best offers all recognise that effective employee wellbeing encompasses mental, physical, emotional, and economic health, and is influenced by workplace relationships, resources, and decisions. It's enhanced by a positive culture prioritising wellbeing, clear tasks, motivation, and benefits like financial support, reasonable adjustments, and work-life balance measures.
16. Other local authorities identified in benchmarking, such as Runnymede Council, are leading the way on specific evidence and initiatives to better manage sickness absence. These focus on improved effective people management, of which we already have some of the right foundations in place via the People Strategy.
17. To maximise the effectiveness of an employee health and wellbeing provision and address workplace wellbeing, we need to develop a system wide employee health and wellbeing strategy, which has a strong focus on prevention.
18. A strategy needs to be supported by the most senior levels of leadership, because leaders play a crucial role in creating and maintaining a culture where positive mental health thrives for employees. The national report identified that the key link in the employee wellbeing chain is the supportive role that line managers play, the way they lead their teams and manage the work environment, they should be supportive, and empathetic, creating a climate open to conversation about an employee's wellbeing.
19. It has been identified that Dudley Councils' current wellbeing offer is disaggregated, with the current provision reflecting the environment prior to Covid. As identified nationally we have needed to provide more support for issues such as mental health. The mental health offer for employees needs to be improved in order to effectively respond to the increase in this area.

20. In Dudley we found:
- Pockets of good practice, but they are not joined up with a need for stronger governance and evaluation of the wellbeing offer.
 - A wealth of information on wellbeing is available on our intranet, but it is not organised in a form that is easy for employees, and managers to locate/use.
 - Some of the information available is out of date and ownership of the information and responsibility for updating this is split between different teams, meaning there is no real ownership.
 - Consistent duplication, and a lack of one council approach, with the latter resulting in not best use of resources.
 - The employee assistance programme recently introduced has the potential to significantly improve our offer of support for employee mental health, but employees are not aware of it in its entirety, meaning we are not fully utilising this.
 - Employees have reported via survey feedback that they were reluctant to use the mental health first aiders, and there has been an acknowledgement that the current scheme isn't applied appropriately.

Recommended Next steps

21. The nature and scale of the current challenges faced by the Council will inevitably have an impact on employees and their wellbeing, particularly where they are continuing to deliver with less resource. Thus, there is a need to focus on building employee resilience as well as mitigation of risk and a focus on prevention. This together with the findings from this diagnostic exercise (using the NHS toolkit), forms the basis of the proposed actions below.
22. Senior leader engagement is required to ensure that we improve our wellbeing offer, and to demonstrate that we are aware of the importance of workplace health and wellbeing. Senior leaders must embed actions to ensure that it is taken seriously across the organisation. It is currently a standing item on Strategic Executive Board (SEB) but needs engagement with senior leaders at heads of service level too.
23. We need to progress the work already underway via the Dudley manager training and development programme, to improve skills of line managers and supervisors to manage people well. They need to be able to have sensitive conversations with people, to be able to offer support and flexibility. Line managers are key to employee wellbeing and should ensure people's workloads and deadlines are manageable. They should provide clear objectives and give constructive feedback, as part of a trust-based relationship with people.

24. Early access to occupational health support and other specialist sources of help, such as counselling and/or physiotherapy needs to be consistently provided. Improvements are already underway via the new OH provider, our internal staff counselling offer and the existing health and wellbeing provisions within the Viv-up Employee assistance programme.
25. Build a robust organisational framework as part of a new strategy to promote good mental wellbeing and foster a culture where people can talk about mental health and seek help where needed.
26. Ensure completion of a comprehensive risk assessment in conjunction with Health and Safety or audit on work-related stress across the workforce, as part of a preventive approach to identify its main causes as per the action plan attached at Appendix 1.
27. Identify and include an increased provision on mental ill health and adopt an alternative preventative and mitigative provision.
28. Continual assessment using diagnostic toolkit alongside findings from various surveys, exit monitoring etc. to shape and deliver an Employee Wellbeing Strategy.
29. **Action Plan**

It is proposed to:

- Conduct an organisation wide Employee health and wellbeing survey, with engagement of key stakeholders to ensure everyone understands wellbeing is important to us as an organisation.
- Undertake additional engagement of network support groups specifically, and our menopause champions to ensure support and initiatives provided are appropriate.
- Develop guidelines and toolkits to support implementation of an improved health and wellbeing offer to our employees.
- Develop metrics and performance indicators to measure success/effectiveness, and an annual action plan that is measurable.

A summary action plan is provided in Appendix 1 with timelines for delivery.

Finance

30. A reduction in employee absence, employee relations cases linked to health and wellbeing, and improved attendance in areas around presenteeism and stress, are all likely to have a positive financial impact e.g., reflected in reduction of working days lost to employee sickness.

Law

31. No legal implications have been identified. Arrangements are in place with Corporate Health & Safety to ensure that all statutory/regulatory requirements will continue to be met and undertaken.

Risk Management

32. There are no material risks identified.

Equality Impact

33. As an employer with an improved equality provision, this will have a positive impact of the proposals on people with different protected characteristics (age, disability, gender reassignment, marriage and civil partnership, pregnancy and maternity, race, religion or belief, sex and sexual orientation).
34. An Equality Impact Assessment will be undertaken as part of the work to produce a new employee health and wellbeing strategy.

Human Resources/Organisational Development

35. The work to progress the proposals and action plan will be facilitated by the teams within the people and inclusion division.

Commercial/Procurement

36. There are no commercial/procurement implications.

Environment/Climate Change

37. There are environment or climate change implications.

Council Priorities and Projects

38. The work on employee Health and Wellbeing contributes to the Council Plan 2024-2025 and specifically the key priority “Improving our organisation.



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Appendices

Appendix 1 Action Plan

Appendix 1

Recommended Employee Health and Wellbeing Actions 2024-2025

Action

Timeline

Review online pages on employee intranet site.

Review all of the pages that are currently online.

Add a holding message to communicate to the workforce the plans for the new wellbeing provision.

Plan what is to be contained in the new pages.

Create clear signposting for employees, linking to existing provision.

*Commence April
2024*

Wellbeing Needs assessment survey.

Creation of short survey.

The survey will be anonymous but ask for additional information in terms of EDI datasets, i.e., Female, Male, age range, disability status.

Questions to be created based on what the datasets are telling us so far.

Findings to be shared at senior level of the organisation.

Data to be used to inform the Health and Wellbeing Strategy and action plan

*Commence April
2024*

*Survey to be sent
end of April.*

*Feedback delivered
to organisation May.*

Creation of Wellbeing Governance board

Finalise and complete the diagnostic toolkit.

Link into Corporate Equalities group chaired by Chief Executive

*On going after report
approval.*

Key stakeholders

Re-engagement of those involved in strategic review and workforce who will enable and implement.

*Commence April
2024*

Employee communication

Action to reach front line employees.

*On going after report
approval.*

Creation of strategy and action plan

Inclusive of KPI's and metrics for measures of success.

June – July 2024.