

Business Support and Digital Overview and Scrutiny Committee 27 March 2025

Member's Item: Wellbeing and Employee Welfare

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Summary

This report sets out a response to a Member's item raised by Councillor Tejan in relation to sickness absence for Medway Council and provides an overview of sickness absence rates and the support in place to address this.

1. Recommendations

1.1. The committee is asked to note the report.

2. Budget and policy framework

2.1 Under Medway Constitution Overview and Scrutiny rules (Chapter 4, Part 5, Paragraph 9.1) Councillor Tejan has requested that an item on this matter is included on the agenda for this meeting.

2.2 The areas within HR fall to the remit of this committee.

3. The Issue

3.1 Councillor Tejan has requested that an item be placed on the agenda and the reasons are set out below:

“It is apparent from the answer I received to my Member's question at full Council on 23 January 2025. that sick pay has gone up significantly year on year. We are therefore seeking clarity on why sick pay has gone up year on year. It is also important to understand what the Council is doing to ensure and improve the welfare of employees”.

4. Current position – sickness 1 January 2024 – 31 December 2024

4.1 Overall sickness rate is 10.44 days per FTE, this equates to 22,403 sickness days lost during this period. Children's Services have the highest number of sick days at 6,680 which is over 25% of all sickness within Medway.

- 4.2 Average days lost per FTE is over 12 within Adults, Children's and Regeneration.
- 4.3 Mental Health (Stress and Anxiety) makes up nearly a quarter of sickness days within the period.
- 4.4 61.4% of sickness was long term and 38.6% was short term.
- 4.5 Full data can be found in Appendix 1.

5. Why Wellbeing Matters in Medway

5.1 In today's fast-paced work environment, where change is inevitable, employee wellbeing is more important than ever. Prioritising wellbeing not only enhances the quality of life for employees but also drives organisational success. A healthy, happy workforce is more productive, engaged, and resilient, leading to better outcomes for everyone. With significant financial pressure and Local Government Organisational Reform, supporting our workforce is a key priority. With Mental Health taking up more than a Quarter of our days lost to sickness, constant education, understanding and review of support is required.

5.2 The Benefits of Focusing on Wellbeing

5.3 Senior Leaders are very aware there are many benefits associated with wellbeing at work:

- **Increased Productivity:** Employees who feel well-supported are more motivated and efficient. By investing in wellbeing, we can boost productivity and achieve our goals more effectively.
- **Reduced Absenteeism:** Wellbeing initiatives can help reduce stress and prevent burnout, leading to fewer sick days and lower absenteeism rates.
- **Enhanced Employee Engagement:** When employees feel valued and cared for, their engagement and loyalty to the organisation increase. This leads to higher retention rates and a more committed workforce.
- **Improved Mental Health:** Providing mental health support and promoting a positive work environment can significantly improve employees' mental health, reducing the risk of anxiety, depression, and other mental health issues.
- **Attracting Top Talent:** A strong focus on wellbeing makes our organisation more attractive to potential employees, helping us to recruit and retain top talent.

6. Our Commitment to Wellbeing

6.1 We all believe our employees are our greatest asset, and their wellbeing is crucial to our success. By investing in comprehensive wellbeing programs, we aim to create a supportive and healthy work environment where colleagues feel valued and everyone can thrive.

- 6.2 Since the last employee engagement survey we have been focusing on improving the wellbeing of our colleagues. Key strategies we already have in place are:
- 6.3 Flexible working – is one of the key benefits employees seek as the ability to have flexi-time and balance home and life is important to many of our colleagues. In addition to flexible working times, we also offer hybrid working (in roles that allow), 9-day fortnights, condensed work patterns, part time hours and job shares. Options like this can often help colleagues balance working life and home life, reducing stress and increasing job satisfaction.
- 6.4 Mental Health Support – Is available for both managers and employees. Managers are able to seek support and guidance on dealing with both their own, and their team members mental health issues through the Managers wellbeing resource hub. Support for managers is also available from HR. All employees can access the 24/7, 365 days a year confidential employee assistance programme. Managing sickness absence well, with use of Occupational Health can help colleagues manage stress and mental health issues.
- 6.5 Reward and Recognition – we have implemented the Total Reward and Recognition Strategy 2024-28. We understand that recognising colleagues for their achievements and investing in them through an array of benefits can help make them feel valued and boost morale, motivation and wellbeing as a result.
- 6.6 Health promotion activities - The Healthy Mind and Wellbeing Working Group, (created following the 2022 employee engagement survey) seeks to implement, support and raise awareness of the help and advice available to employees in relation to employee wellbeing. The group has introduced initiatives such as the Press Pause campaign, the Managers wellbeing resource hub and virtual hobby groups.
- 6.7 An inclusive workplace – is one where employees feel valued, involved, and respected for their viewpoints, ideas, perspectives, and experiences they bring. We want all our employees to feel supported, included and valued for their contribution. and where they can be themselves at work without fear of discrimination. Our Workforce Strategy 2028 commits to a framework and action plan to promote and support equality, diversity, and inclusion in the workplace, which includes the revamp of the Equality Board and staff equality networks.
- 6.8 Mental Health First Aid (MHFA) - Our MHFAs are equipped with the skills to recognise signs of mental health issues in colleagues and provide initial support. It helps create a supportive work environment where mental health is openly discussed and addressed.
- 6.9 Mindfulness and Stress Management Workshops - During Mental Health month we offered workshops on mindfulness, meditation, and stress management techniques to help colleagues develop coping strategies and improve their overall mental wellbeing.

6.10 Medspace Financial Wellbeing Resource Hub – poor financial wellbeing can have a knock-on effect for both an individuals' mental and physical wellbeing. Colleagues can access the Financial Wellbeing Resource Hub on Medspace signposting them to helpful advice and guidance and money-saving benefits.

7. What more can we do right now?

7.1 Corporate Management Team spent time together in December reviewing our support to wellbeing and considering what more we could do. Discussion included:

- Additional time off: is the thing our colleagues would value the most as a form of recognition according to the employee survey 2024 results. As part of the pay award CMT and members agreed to offer a small respite of a full day off to allow colleagues some additional time on or around their birthday.
- Adequate time between meetings: Teams meetings and face-to-face meetings to start on the hour or half hour but operate for 25 minutes or 50 minutes as the norm.
- Walking Meetings: Encourage employees to hold meetings while walking, either outdoors or indoors. This promotes physical activity and can help reduce stress.
- Mental Health Awareness Training: Review and enhance our basic mental health awareness training for all employees to include elements of physical health. This can be done through online courses or workshops and helps create a supporting environment and builds on own awareness and accountability.
- Line Managers mental health awareness training: enhance our provision to include this as a mandatory module for all people who manage employees.
- Mandatory 1-2-1 sessions: ensure all managers check-in with individuals in their teams at least on a monthly basis. This will enable an early detection of any mental or physical wellbeing issues to enable support to be provided reducing the need for longer term interventions.
- Peer Support Groups: Not characteristic driven but more focussed to needs, i.e. working parents, bereavement, etc. Establish peer support groups where employees can share experiences and offer mutual support. This can be particularly helpful for managing stress and promoting mental wellbeing. There is a survey currently out asking for employee's views on what type of groups would be beneficial.
- Flexible Working Hours: Allow flexible working hours or remote work options to help employees balance their work and personal lives more effectively in all areas of the business. This is largely in place throughout, but some areas are new to reviewing this. Offer flexible working to Service Managers: Whilst there is flexibility many are working too many hours, this should not be encouraged, and whilst there is a possibility of productivity loss, this should not be used as a reason not to explore.
- Wellbeing Challenges: Organise simple wellbeing challenges, such as step-count competitions or hydration challenges, to encourage healthy habits and foster a sense of community.

- Mindfulness Sessions: Offer short, regular mindfulness or meditation sessions regularly rather than just in mental health month. These can be led by volunteers or accessed through free online resources.
- Healthy Eating Initiatives: Promote healthy eating by providing information on nutrition, organising healthy lunches/snacks on site, or offering free fruit and healthy snacks in the workplace. This can link to the design and interim arrangements in Gun Wharf as well as extended to offer sites.
- Press Pause Campaign: Relaunch and embed the press pause campaign. Bigger communication campaign, with all leadership teams actively focusing on the press pause campaign and making a conscious effort to ensure teams are aware and can think about how this best works for them.
- Leadership awareness: Offering specialist training for our leaders to ensure wellbeing is on everyone's radar and colleagues feel it is more than just a tick box exercise. Wider acknowledgement and engagement with the 'wellbeing hub' for leaders.
- Friday Meetings by exception: Where possible encourage no meetings on a Friday so people have the chance to catch up before the weekend and therefore don't feel the need to work over the weekend or carry the burden to Monday.

7.2 These initiatives are under way and being promoted. They will be reviewed throughout the year.

8. Engagement

8.1 The HR team co-ordinates and supports the Medway Maker engagement champions and the Healthy Mind and Wellbeing Group. They are a selection of motivated individuals who care about people matter across Medway Council. They are a proactive 'sounding board' for prospective change and new initiatives. The group have been active in areas such as the development of our Press Pause Campaign, and other wellbeing initiatives.

8.2 A key factor for staffing is our redesign of Gun Wharf. With the closure of our Headquarters a short survey was sent to all staff to gain insight into current working arrangements and the aspirations for future working arrangements. In addition, our annual staff survey was undertaken in May and results shared with employment Matters Committee and this committee. The survey along with a Service manager survey on our ways of working has provided valuable insight of staff opinion across a wide range of areas, which include wellbeing in the workplace. We have a HR professional in place to lead on the work alongside the Facilities Management team to ensure the employee is at the heart of our thinking and engagement and feedback will remain a priority.

9. Employee Value Proposition (EVP) – Our People Promise

9.1 The Council constantly reviews its Employee Value Proposition (EVP) or 'People Promise'. This sets out information about what individuals can expect in terms of the 'deal' or psychological contract between employer and

employee when they come to work for the Council. In other words, it answers two fundamental questions for individuals: i.e.

- ‘why should I work for this organisation – what makes it stand out against the rest’? and (ii) ‘why should I stay’?

9.2 The EVP is a comprehensive collection of benefits an organisation uses to attract and retain talent. It captures the essence of an organisation by focusing on the compensation, benefits, career development, work environment, and culture the company offers its employees. As part of this year pay proposal and staff feedback we sort to enhance our wellness support and reviewing a number of new benefits, not least a salary sacrifice scheme for bicycles to support our climate challenge, and discounted leisure centre memberships.

10. Policy

10.1 Proactive intervention continues to be a priority with our recent deep dive into sickness absence, which means a policy review, procedures made simple, contractual review and training as well as regular Management information being available the new approach is due at Employment Matters Committee in May.

11. Equalities

11.1 We have redesigned and relaunched the Equality Board which is a decision-making board to help drive forward the Equality, Diversity & Inclusion Strategy and Action Plan. The action plan focuses on four key areas - Leadership, Data led, Empowering and enabling colleagues to thrive and prosper, and ensuring all colleagues are valued and can contribute to our success. We are working with the board to define next year’s activity through a workshop held on 19 March. Work is underway to support existing and help formulate staff reference groups. A mini survey was held to find out who might be interested and what types of groups our colleagues would like to join, this work continues in quarter four.

11.2 We monitor and report on our Gender, disability and ethnicity Pay Gap which has been presented to Employment Matters committee this month.

12. Contracts

12.1 We are reviewing our contracts for support which includes occupational health and ongoing individual support. We are also considering additional healthcare provision. More of this will be available in later in the year.

13. Conclusion

13.1 As we reflect on the insights presented in this brief, Medway Council knows that prioritising employee wellbeing is not just a moral imperative but a

strategic necessity. The benefits of a robust wellbeing program extend far beyond individual health, impacting overall organisational performance, engagement, productivity, and talent identification.

- 13.2 Leadership's Role in Wellbeing - Leaders play a pivotal role in fostering a culture of wellbeing. Our commitment and actions set the tone for the entire organisation. By championing wellbeing initiatives, we can inspire and empower our teams to thrive both personally and professionally. Corporate management team spent time at the aware day in December and acknowledge it is essential to lead by example, demonstrating that wellbeing is a priority and encouraging open dialogue about mental and physical health.
- 13.3 We are producing a Wellbeing strategy to capture all the areas associated with this priority, this will be presented to Employment Matters Committee in due course.

14. Financial Implications

- 14.1 There are no direct financial implications arising directly from the recommendations in this report. However, it is recognised that there is a financial cost to the organisation through the loss of working hours, especially where there is an operational requirement to cover the provision of essential services with the use of agency staff.

15. Legal Implications

- 15.1 There are no legal obligations arising directly from this report.

Lead officer contact

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Appendices

Appendix 1 - Sickness figures