

Employment Matters Committee

17 September 2026

Healthy Workplaces

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Summary

This information paper is to share with Employment Matters Committee that Medway Council has joined the Medway Healthy Workplaces Programme, and as part of the benchmarking assessment this has identified several actions to support a reduction in staff absences and an improvement in the overall wellbeing of staff that have been pulled together in an overall action plan.

1. Recommendations

- 1.1 The Committee is asked to note the report.

2. Background Information

- 2.1 The Medway Healthy Workplaces Programme (MHWP) is a free, local and council-run initiative, led by public health, with an accreditation and support framework designed to help organisations create healthier, more supportive workplaces. It focuses on improving employee health and wellbeing through evidence-based policies and practices, promoting a healthy work environment and creating a positive organisational culture.
- 2.2 Medway Council has recently joined the programme as part of its commitment through the People Promise to prioritise staff wellbeing.
- 2.3 There are 4 levels of accreditation, Bronze, Silver, Gold and Platinum, which organisations are benchmarked against. Medway Council was accredited Bronze in September 2025 and Silver in June 2026.

3. Implementation of the MHWP in Medway Council

- 3.1 As part of the initial assessment against the MHWP framework HR and Public Health colleagues looked at evidence sources including a deep dive into the Council's absence data, staff survey results, HR policies, current wellbeing initiatives etc. which identified several areas for focus, not only to meet the next levels of accreditation for the MHWP programme, but from which an action plan was developed to support a reduction in staff absence levels and an increase in staff wellbeing.

3.2 The table below explains the priority areas and the aims for 2026/27 Council wide action plan:

Priority Area	Aim for 2026/27	Key Themes
Long-term and repeat sickness absence	Reduce long-term sickness absence by 6% and prevent recurring absence through earlier support and workplace adjustments	Supporting Good Attendance - Improved manager training on absence management - Enhanced occupational health referral processes - Earlier intervention for employees experiencing repeat absences - Promotion of workplace adjustment and inclusion passports
Mental health and wellbeing	Reduce stress-related absence by 12% and increase EAP utilisation access to support services	Mental Health & Wellbeing - Recommissioned Employee Assistance Programme (EAP) - Roll-out of Connect 5 mental health training - Improved wellbeing resources and stress management support - Relaunch of Employee Wellbeing champions
Social connection and inclusion	Address loneliness and isolation and strengthen workplace relationships	Building Healthy & Connected Teams - Loneliness awareness training - Resources and toolkits for managers - Guidance to help maintain team connection in hybrid working environments
Data quality and management practice	Improve return-to-work compliance and absence reporting accuracy	Evidence based - Accurate and timely data - Review of absence reasons
Musculoskeletal health (MSK)	Reduce absence caused by physical health conditions and workplace ergonomics by 8%	Physical Health & Prevention - Musculoskeletal (MSK) health initiatives - Ergonomic assessments and workplace adjustments

Priority Area	Aim for 2026/27	Key Themes
Headache and fatigue prevention	Promote healthy working habits, breaks and eye care	• Eye-care promotion and display screen equipment (DSE) support • Seasonal health campaigns and vaccination programmes • Cardiovascular health checks • Physical activity challenges • Flexible RTW plans
Cold and flu prevention	Improve workplace hygiene and vaccination uptake	
Support during recovery from illness	Strengthen return-to-work support following surgery, cancer treatment and other significant health conditions	
Healthy lifestyles	Encourage physical activity and preventative health checks	
Directorate-specific wellbeing priorities	Target burnout, customer aggression and shift-working challenges where these are key risks	Additional actions will support services facing specific wellbeing challenges, including: • Burnout and retention within Children's and Adult Services • Customer aggression and workplace stress within public-facing services • Support for employees working shifts and irregular hours.

3.3 The action plan was finalised and agreed by all stakeholders at the beginning of Quarter 1 to deliver these aims with identified outcomes and measures of success. This is an ambitious plan; it will take time to see the benefits of proactive and preventative actions. However, by the end of 2026/27 we aim to have made progress and made improvements in the following:

- reducing long-term sickness absence;
- reducing stress and anxiety related absence;
- improving return to work compliance;
- increased use of the physical, mental, social and financial wellbeing initiatives;
- improving social connection and workplace inclusion;
- greater participation in preventative health and wellbeing activities.

3.4 Activity that has already been completed includes, supporting and promoting Loneliness Awareness week in June, ongoing delivery of manager bitesize

absence management training, promotion of the Press Pause campaign, the wellness bot, and the 'My Possible Self' (mental health and wellbeing app through Optima Health), and the launch of the new return to work form within the My View portal with additional support and guidance and management absence reports now available to all managers.

- 3.5 In Quarter 3 there will be a programme of Health MOTs for staff, flu vaccination programme for frontline staff and a physical activity challenge, alongside a review of our stress risk assessment tools and process.
- 3.6 We are working with internal communications to develop the Health and Wellbeing MedSpace content and want to utilise this as a tool to keep staff updated and engaged in the Healthy Workplaces programme, the action plan and the ways in which they can get involved. We already have regular wellbeing communications in the whole staff weekly email and the HR newsletter, and the support of the Healthy Mind and Wellbeing Group and Employee Wellbeing Champions (including Mental Health First Aiders).
- 3.7 Progress will be monitored through quarterly review, sickness absence data, participation in wellbeing initiatives, Occupational Health and Optima Health (employee assistance programme) usage.

4. Risk management

Risk	Description	Action to avoid or mitigate risk	Risk rating
Failure to reduce sickness absence levels	Planned interventions do not deliver the anticipated reduction in long-term, stress-related and repeat sickness absence, resulting in continued pressure on service delivery, increased costs, reduced productivity and reduced levels of employee engagement.	Quarterly monitoring of absence data, training, targeted interventions for high-risk areas, improved OH support.	B2
Lack of management engagement	Managers do not consistently complete RTW interviews, stress risk assessments, implement reasonable adjustments limiting the effectiveness of the action plan.	Ongoing training and support for managers, support from HRBPs, compliance checking.	B2
Low employee engagement with wellbeing initiatives	Employees don't know about and/or engage with the suite of wellbeing support, Optima Health (Employee Assistance	Work with internal communications team to promote wellbeing initiatives, explain the	B3

Risk	Description	Action to avoid or mitigate risk	Risk rating
	Programme), health campaigns or training which reduces the impact of preventative measures.	Healthy Workplaces programme and update on progress against the absence action plan. Engage employee groups such as Employee Wellbeing Champions, Healthy Mind and Wellbeing Group and Medway Makers.	
Data quality and reporting limitations	Inaccurate absence recording and poor return to work compliance will limit the ability to understand the true picture, identify trends, monitor progress and target interventions effectively.	Reviewed and updated standardised absence reasons, communicated and provided guidance on My View linked to absence recording and RTW, management Oversight.	B2
Resource and capacity constraints	Limited capacity across the organisation, financial resources and current partner support e.g. OH, may lead to delays in delivery of the absence action plan.	Regular review of progress against the action plan. Identify resource requirements early to and look to mitigate.	B2
Mental health and wellbeing risks continue to increase	Stress, anxiety, burnout and workload pressures continue to rise, particularly in higher-risk services, resulting in increased absences and turnover.	Train more staff in Connect 5, ensure service level stress risk assessments are undertaken annually, promote and ensure full utilisation of Optima Health, wellness bot and health app, target high risk teams with relevant interventions.	B2
Local Government Reorganisation (LGR)	Organisation change associated with LGR creates uncertainty which could affect employee wellbeing and	Regular communication with staff, inclusion of wellbeing considerations within	C2

Risk	Description	Action to avoid or mitigate risk	Risk rating
	diverts attention from this action plan.	change programmes.	

For risk rating, please refer to the following table:

Likelihood	Impact:
A Very likely	1 Critical
B Likely	2 Major
C Unlikely	3 Moderate
D Rare	4 Minor

5. Local Government Reorganisation (LGR) implications

- 5.1 There are no direct Local Government Reorganisation implications arising from this report currently. The Healthy Workplaces Programme is an existing workforce wellbeing initiative and does not require any contract variations, policy changes or decisions by the Shadow Council. Any future opportunities for alignment of wellbeing approaches across any North Kent council will be considered if LGR arrangements develop.

6. Financial implications

- 6.1 There are no direct financial implications arising from this report.

7. Legal implications

- 7.1 There are no direct legal implications arising from this report.

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Appendices

None

Background Documents

None