



Northumberland County Council

Corporate Services and Economic Growth Overview & Scrutiny Committee

Date: June 2021

Annual Update Report for Workforce (2020/21)

**Report of the Executive Director of HR/OD and Deputy Chief Executive
Portfolio Member: Councillor Richard Wearmouth, Deputy Leader**

Purpose of the Report

The purpose of this report is to:

- Provide an annual position statement in relation to strategic workforce related areas of assurance, workstreams/associated action plans and progress to date within key areas for Northumberland County Council for the full financial year of 2020/21.
- To provide assurance to the Corporate Services and Economic Growth Overview & Scrutiny Committee that there is provision and monitoring in place to achieve necessary Key Performance Indicators relating to the workforce on an ongoing basis.
- To provide elected members with an overview of the strategic direction for the Council's workforce related matters as part of the Covid-19 recovery plans for the county as these continue to evolve.
- To provide members with an overview of the monitoring and actions taken during the period from 1st April 2020 to 31st March 2021 in accordance with the Council's Whistleblowing Policy for employees. Members are asked to note that other aspects of Whistleblowing which are not employee related are logged and maintained by the Council's Monitoring Officer.

Recommendations:

The recommendations are:

- Corporate Services and Economic Growth Overview & Scrutiny Committee note the contents of the report.
- Corporate Services and Economic Growth Overview & Scrutiny Committee continue to receive an annual update of this report for every financial year.
- Note the data that is contained in the whistleblowing report and the ongoing work to promote a safe environment for staff to raise concerns through various mechanisms across the Council.

- Support the continued use of Safecall across the Council as an additional mechanism for staff to raise concerns accordingly.

Links to the Corporate Plan

The Northumberland County Council (NCC) Corporate Plan (2018-21) has identified a number of core strategic priorities and supporting key themes of which the following are particularly relevant to the workforce:

- We want to be efficient, open and work for everyone (How)
- We want you to feel safe, healthy, and cared for (Living)
- We want you to love where you live (Enjoying)
- We want you to have access to the things you need (Connecting)
- We want you to achieve and realise your potential (Learning)
- We want to attract more and better jobs (Thriving)
- We want to make a difference (Success Measures)

HR/OD have also published a Service Statement 2021-2022 that is reviewed and updated annually as part of our ongoing governance arrangements.

Background

An integral part of the Council's success in delivering high quality services to the population of Northumberland is based on the workforce of the Council. This report gives an overview of the employment and workforce related issues which are overseen by the Council's Workforce Committee. The Workforce Committee is a sub-committee of the Executive Leadership Team and provides assurance and accountability in relation to all Workforce matters.

Current Landscape

In response to emerging priorities presented during the Coronavirus pandemic and predominantly since 20th March 2020, HR/OD have led a number of widescale initiatives alongside Council colleagues to ensure that Council employees have received strong leadership, accountability and support during the pandemic. The HR/OD Strategy 2018/21 was immediately reviewed and initiatives developed included:

- A structured and enhanced health and wellbeing suite of activities and support were introduced to further support staff affected by the pandemic, both within the workplace and those who were working remotely.
- Regular briefings and information held including drop in sessions
- Additional personal protective equipment including obtaining feedback from staff around adequacy and localised supplies
- Personalised risk assessments undertaken for all staff to ensure that managers had individual conversations with staff focused on their health and wellbeing, personal circumstances as well as work related matters
- Redeployed staff throughout the county
- Arranged through our shared Occupational Health Service to obtain early access to vaccines for frontline social care staff.
- Had regular drop in sessions and senior leadership meetings dedicating a significant amount of the agenda to supporting staff.

In the autumn on 2020, an interim HR/OD People Strategy was developed covering a six-month period up to the end of April 2021, this was in recognition of the need for a rationalised focus during this period and, in particular, on staff health and wellbeing. A further wider People Strategy for 2021-2024 is currently in development and will provide more narrative as to our ambition to continue to be an employer of choice in a post-pandemic era.

Current data

1. The Council currently employs 4,244 staff (headcount) and 3736.68 FTE (as at 31.3.21) - excluding schools.
2. The number of staff employed in schools by Northumberland County Council has decreased to 3939 staff (headcount) and 2507.90 FTE (as at 31.3.21). For the purposes of this report the HR/OD performance only relates to NCC directly employed staff as schools have their own governance structures managed through their governing bodies although the Council makes available a schools HR/OD advisory service which schools may subscribe to if they wish to.
3. Labour turnover for 20/21 is 13.17% which has very slightly increased from the previous year (13.03%) and is likely to be a result of the voluntary redundancy scheme which was ran again in 2020/21. The total figure is lower than the LGA reported average of 13.4% labour turnover rate nationally (LGA Workforce survey 2018/19¹).

¹ Note no updated LGA figures are available due to HR benchmarking being on hold.

Workforce Committee

- The Workforce Committee has established and is regularly reviewing a wide range of metrics which are used to manage and monitor compliance and best practice with workforce related issues across the whole council.
- On a monthly basis, Directors or their nominated Senior Manager through the Workforce Committee are asked to provide a full position statement relating to their area of responsibility. In advance of the meeting, Managers and Directors are provided with their position statement data which is mapped against a suite of workforce metrics for their area. Directors or their nominated Senior Manager are then responsible for providing an overview of their current performance and planned performance against the required compliance levels for each set of workforce metrics.
- Focussed attention continues to be on the key performance indicators with promoting a positive staff experience being another core area of focus. Key performance indicators focused on are e.g. health and wellbeing (including absence management), induction, statutory and mandatory training and appraisal.
- The Workforce Committee also monitors the progress of the HR/OD Strategy and more recently the Interim -Covid-19 People Strategy, this strategy is based on 6 strategic themes:
 - Engagement and Experience
 - Health and Wellbeing
 - Managing self and others
 - Developing self and others
 - Equality, Diversity and Inclusion
 - Recruitment, Reward and Recognition.

All themes impact on the workforce across all areas of the council.

Update on the Interim Covid-19 HR People Strategy

In November 2020 the HR/OD Strategy for 2018/21 was reviewed in light of the ongoing Coronavirus pandemic to ensure that the strategic focus of the Council's people management arrangements and plans were aligned to the corporate needs of the council and its employees and residents during this uncertain time.

At the start of 2020, the strategy was due to be reviewed in terms of narrative, it's cultural fit with the values of the organisation and further enhancement/development of the wider needs of the organisation in terms of developing a workforce fit for the future and also our future leaders. Given the substantial changes to the way that our staff now work, the technology that we are using and the wider impacts that Covid-19 has had on our workforce and wider communities, this short-term strategy provided focus and resilience until May 2021 when the Council further reviews and develops a longer-term Workforce Strategy aligned to a revised corporate plan for the future.

Six strategic workstreams were developed each with an associated operational action and delivery plan.

HR Plan - Strategic Themes

1. Engagement and Experience

It is vitally important that our staff remain engaged with the organisation and that their experience at work is a positive one. The environment and methods for engaging with our staff during this period have been different in approach however our core engagement is based on our values and promoting a positive experience of work at all times.

Key objectives for this workstream were:

Area	Objective(s)
Internal Communications	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> To maintain and enhance methods such as staff room, CEO Briefing, Staff Facebook groups and engagement activities.
External Communications	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> To continue to positively promote the Council staff including Excellence Awards and achievements of staff.
Taking regular checks on our engagement levels	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> To continue to work on the Staff Survey Action/Improvement Plan, Covid pulse surveys and plan for Staff Survey 2021

2. Health and Wellbeing

Focusing on our staff staying well and staying active has been a key strategic theme during the Council's Covid-19 emergency response. Recognising the importance of physical and mental health as well as wider health determinants have been important to ensure that we always maintain a strong and positive focus on the wellbeing of our staff. During 2020, we have focused on developing virtual initiatives with engagement through Facebook and virtual platforms with one of our key successes being through our virtual Staff Sports and Social Club network. We have also focused on key issues such as financial wellbeing and encouraging colleagues to prioritise their wellbeing through undertaking initiatives and support which they would not normally access. Every member of staff has now undertaken a personal risk assessment which they have set out their wellbeing support requirements and also, they have been able to discuss this with their line manager.

Area	Objective(s)
Managing risk	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Refresh of personalised risk assessments, including <u>BAME risk assessments</u>. Complete To refresh Health and Safety/Wellbeing Guidance to staff Complete

Workplace safety (including PPE)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> To provide guidance to staff working at home and within the workplace Complete and regularly refreshed
Managing short/long term absence	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> To review the impact of covid related absence to develop different strategies for short/long term absences. Ongoing
Public Health	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> To develop a health in all e-learning module Complete To provide guidance to staff on promoting wellbeing including health champions Complete To promote the Council's wellbeing programme Complete

3. Managing self and others

Changes to the working environment including social distancing, enhanced PPE and less face-to-face interaction that many staff have previously experienced has proved challenging in terms of how individuals manage themselves and others. In an incredible time of unprecedented change, we need to ensure that staff have the necessary tools and support to manage themselves and those who they have managerial responsibility for. Benevolence in managing self and others has become increasingly important as well as resilience not only for ourselves but for others.

Area	Objective(s)
Self-Management and supervision resources	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> To ensure that there are refreshed templates for workplans, 1:1's and team meetings available to develop a Climate Change impact statement of commitment for staff as part of the Council's Climate Change Plan Ongoing Develop training module similar to manager as coach but in virtual environment. Complete
Smarter/Flexible Working	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> To develop guidance to staff on smarter/#TeamNorthumberland model of flexible working based on trust and productivity. Ongoing
Managing resources, performance & productivity	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> To refresh the statutory and mandatory training requirements for 2021/22 onwards Complete To refresh the appraisal template to become an ongoing conversation tool. Complete

4. Developing self and others

During a time of great change, this also presents great opportunity. Many staff have adapted to new skills and roles with ease based on the needs of residents or colleagues, but others need more support in order to instil a learning culture within their day-to-day roles.

Area	Objective(s)
Developing a learning culture	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> To continue to promote and embed the values of the council through all activities. Ongoing To enhance and develop the Council's Apprenticeship programme Complete To develop a revised organisation wide Training Needs Analysis taking into account changes to the way our staff are working. Ongoing
Supportive leadership and talent management	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> To develop our virtual leadership & management training and coaching content Complete To undertake a talent management exercise for Business Leadership Team with clear pathways identified for future talent development. Ongoing
Use of virtual resources	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> To enhance the Council's virtual work experience programme Complete To review the use of e-learning and other virtual resources to meet the Council's training needs. Complete
Managing Risk	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> To share good practice in relation to workplace practices, processes and perspectives through ongoing supportive measures such as chatrooms and virtual events etc. Complete

5. Equality, Diversity and Inclusion

Ensuring that we have embedded key principles relating to equality, diversity and inclusion across our workforce is a key requisite of our ability to enable all staff to flourish within their roles. Our staff are entirely interdependent, they bring different skills, experience and talents and our role as an organisation is to bring out the best in them through a supportive, inclusive environment. Our staff should feel a sense of "belonging" to the organisation.

Area	Objective(s)
The use of our staff as experts	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> To launch a reverse mentoring scheme across several areas Ongoing To develop the skills base of our staff network Chairs/co-chairs. Complete/Ongoing To enable input to key strategies & policies by staff networks Complete/Ongoing To develop L&OD (Learning and Organisational

	Development) programmes that reflect lived experience of our staff. Ongoing
Enhancing our staff network groups	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> To increase our resources to support our staff network groups and their associated activities. Ongoing To encourage involvement across all services in network activities Ongoing
Enabling our most disadvantaged staff to lead our inclusion agenda.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> To seek ideas from staff to enhance our staff network groups. Ongoing To continue with the current Diversity Partners programme Ongoing To utilise staff as exemplars and role models. Ongoing
Supporting our leadership and talent management development	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> To ensure that we develop our leadership and talent management development programmes with a strong inclusion agenda. Complete/Ongoing Embed ED&I as a core component of our recruitment & OD programmes. Ongoing To introduce robust measurements to ensure equity of access to development opportunities. Ongoing

6. Resourcing, Reward and Recognition

Our staff have gone above and beyond during our emergency response to the global pandemic, and we will continue to develop innovative ways of supporting them.

Area	Objective(s)
Excellence Awards	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> To continue to have our excellence awards in a virtual way until we can have a face-to-face celebratory event. Complete
Additional benefits and rewards	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> To review how staff are using annual leave and enhance this where possible. Complete To review the Council's long service awards to ensure that staff are aware of presentations that will take place virtual. Complete
Recruitment and Resourcing	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> To grow our resourcing approaches to fulfil a more flexible and attractive workforce for the Council. Complete To continue to develop our virtual recruitment and induction processes. Complete To ensure the Council are prepared for the workforce implications of Brexit ie EU

	settlement scheme support for EU national employees, ensure all those that are required have an appropriate visa (tier 2 visas to be replaced by 'Skilled Worker' visas on 1 Jan 2021), review system for right to work checks (all new starters after 30 June 2021 will require alternative ID checks) Complete
Recognition of #TeamNorthumberland	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> To continue to promote #TeamNorthumberland via #CouncilsCan. Complete To continue to provide Letters for Children. Complete To utilise methods such as #ThankYouThursday Ongoing To share/promote #TeamNorthumberland through regular awards. Ongoing
Look to expand electronic access to email/e-business to all.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Greater reach for communications to staff Ongoing Greater engagement for staff Ongoing Ability to record and monitor things like annual leave/personal information. Complete

HR Function and Structure

The HR/OD team has been reconfigured and flexed to support service need and talent management development opportunities throughout the last twelve months and this has included individuals working in different roles and departments as needed.

Our continued commitment to Equality, Diversity and Inclusion continues to positively impact on the Council and we have continued to raise our profile both locally and nationally, we are known as a diverse organisation and are currently ranked 34th in the Stonewall top 100 LGBT+ Workplace Equality Index which is a fantastic achievement.

Locally, regionally and nationally, the Council's HR/OD team is known for excellent leadership, knowledge and skills and our management support to our HR Schools Team within Northumberland continues with North Tyneside Council which provides significant strength to the service. The Council's HR/OD team regularly share best practice at professional conferences and with colleagues also.

The services awards and accolades this year include:

PPMA Excellence in People Management Awards 2020

Public Sector Team of the Year – the HR/OD Team (Highly Commended)
 Best Creative Concept - Apprenticeship Campaign - (shortlisted finalist)
 Best Employer & TU partnership (Highly Commended)
 Rising Star Award – Estelle White (shortlisted finalist)

LGC Awards 2020

Diversity & Inclusion (Highly commended)

Personnel Today 2020

HR Director of the Year (national) - Kelly Angus (shortlisted finalist)

Apprentice of the Year - PPMA 2021

Finalist – Megan Mitchell (winner announced September 2021)

North East Apprentice Bake Off

Clare Sharkey – IT apprentice (winner)

CIPD North East of England Awards 2021

Excellence in Inclusivity & Diversity (shortlisted finalist)

Excellence & Positive Impact (shortlisted finalist)

Excellence in Leadership (shortlisted finalist)

PPMA Excellence in People Management Awards 2021

Public Sector Team of the Year (HR/OD Team) - (shortlisted finalist)

Best Employer & TU Partnership - (shortlisted finalist)

Best Health & Wellbeing Initiative - (shortlisted finalist)

Best Inclusion & Diversity Programme/Initiative - (shortlisted finalist)

Best Talent Programme - (shortlisted finalist)

Key Performance Metrics

Learning and Development Performance

Performance Appraisal

During 2020/2021 the final recorded % of all staff who had a performance appraisal was 81.08%. This is under the expected level of performance of at least 85% and a small increase from the previous year (80.80%). The appraisal performance indicator has been monitored closely and those managers who have not achieved 85% have remedial action plans in place to ensure that this is achieved for 2021/22. The HR/OD team are also undertaking a review of the appraisal process itself to ensure that any necessary improvements are made and that it remains useful to both employee and manager.

Need (Headcount)	Number completed. (Headcount)	%	Total remaining (Headcount)	%
4244	3533	83.25	711	16.75%

Directorate	End of year % achievement
Finance	83.42%
Fire and Rescue	93.39%
HR/OD	94.29%
Place	85.50%
Regeneration, Commercial & Economy	52.91%
Adult Services	90.25%
Children's Services	84.84%

Statutory and Mandatory Training

An annual Corporate Training Needs Analysis (TNA) has been developed for all Northumberland County Council staff which is monitored for compliance directly by the Workforce Committee to ensure that staff are offered and complete the necessary and relevant training to keep them safe in the workplace.

The 11 core subjects that all employees are required to undertake are as follows:

- Equality and Diversity – 3 yearly refresher
- Manual Handling awareness – 3 yearly refresher
- Safeguarding Adults awareness – 3 yearly refresher
- Safeguarding Children awareness – 3 yearly refresher
- General Data Protection Regulation (GDPR) – annual refresher
- Fire Safety awareness – annual refresher
- Health and Safety awareness – one off
- Stress Awareness – one off
- FOI and Subject Access refresher – one off
- PREVENT awareness or WRAP – one off
- Infection Prevention and Control - one

The Council's OD team have worked alongside HR colleagues to embed support for talent management and development at all levels across the Council. For 2020/21 we

had a highly successful set of achievements in relation to Statutory and Mandatory Training which has been well embedded across the organisation. The overall final position for the Council as at 31.3.21 is outlined below.

Appraisal	Fire Safety	GDPR	E & D	Manual Handling	Safeguarding Children	Safeguarding Adults	H & S	Stress Awareness	FOI Subject Access	Prevent	Infection Control
83.25 %	84.31 %	85.83 %	93.76 %	92.81%	91.99%	91.92%	95.88%	92.51 %	95.38 %	95.05 %	88.69%

Any compliance/performance issues are raised by the Executive Director of Human Resources & Deputy Chief Executive with the relevant Director/Head of Service and compliance will be discussed on a quarterly basis by the Executive Leadership Team in the form of a formal Workforce Assurance report.

Personal and Professional Development

The last fully completed Staff Survey undertaken in 2019 provided information that the Council is heavily committed to training and developing its staff not only with their statutory and mandatory training but also training to help employees do their job better. As an organisation we continually aim to increase the personal and professional development of staff and have revised the appraisal process and renamed to 'About You' to make development an area of discussion as well as regular conversations during supervision. During 2020/21 the Council has successfully delivered a number of initiatives to support corporate talent management and development alongside local initiatives by each department and these are:

- Over 550+ Apprenticeships courses available from levels 1 – 7, 54 different routes have been tapped into. The Council's Public Service Duty (PSD) is set to have 2.3% of workforce as apprentices and currently the Council's figure is significantly above this at 9.8*% of the workforce who are apprentices.
- HR/OD lead the NCC Apprenticeship management arrangements following some changes in consultation with the Council's Learning and Skills service and have recently had 2 additional successful external cohorts of apprentices appointed for services. Cohort 1 in September 2020 with 17 appointed into Level 2/3 roles within services. The last cohort in February 2021 we had 144 applications with 16 appointments made with a high calibre of candidates for all apprenticeships.
- Apprenticeship events are held with the aim to promote NCC as an employer of choice for the county and the surrounding area. The last event in February 2021 was virtual due to the COVID 19 pandemic and lockdown. The event had 600 registrations and 250 people attended on the day with a reach of over 1.5 million through social media and other promotions. The event included Ask an Apprentice, Chat room and videos of lived experiences of our current and past apprentices and this model

was received extremely well that we will continue to utilise this in a blended way going forward.

- In 2020/21 we have supported 2 graduates through the National Graduate Development programme offering exceptional training, mentoring, professional qualifications and initiatives that give back to communities, whilst helping to develop a rewarding career within Local Government and in professions such as Health & Social Care, Human Resources, Accountancy, Information Technology, Leadership & Management.
- We have supported 24 of our employees to undertake a Level 7, Master of Business Administration (MBA) study programme and qualification through Sunderland University as part of our arrangements to provide career development and future leaders for the Council.
- We have supported 9 employees through their degree level Chartered Management Institute (CMI) - Level 6 qualification course also and so far 32 employees have been supported through additional Level 7 qualification courses. Providing development at a range of levels and supporting Talent management and succession planning.

Case Management

The Council's HR Advisers work on a ratio of 1:511 employees currently and the case profiles for 2020/2021 are as follows:

No of cases 2020/2021	Finance	Fire and Rescue	Place	Regeneration, Commercial & Economy	Children's Services	Adult Services	HR/OD	Total
Disciplinary Cases	2	6	7	2	11	6	1	35
Grievance/ Dignity at Work cases	0	0	1	0	2	1	1	5
Health & Well being policy cases	Review 1 - 41 Review 2 - 5 Review 3 - 2 Review 4 - 3	Review 1 - 21 Review 2 - 5 Review 3 - 0 Review 4 - 2	Review 1 - 83 Review 2 - 18 Review 3 - 5 Review 4 - 10	Review 1 - 58 Review 2 - 14 Review 3 - 7 Review 4 - 3	Review 1 - 115 Review 2 - 39 Review 3 - 19 Review 4 - 0	Review 1 - 124 Review 2 - 71 Review 3 - 31 Review 4 - 4	Review 1 - 45 Review 2 - 7 Review 3 - 6 Review 4 - 1	Review 1 - 487 Review 2 - 159 Review 3 - 70 Review 4 - 23
Total	53	34	124	84	186	237	61	776

In 2019/2020 we have undertaken 5 cases of mediation using trained facilitators, 2 in Housing, 1 in Schools (invoiced through SLA agreement) and 2 in Education and Skills.

Our cohort of trained coaches have received 27 nominations for coaching from Council employees that result in an average of 3-5 sessions with a coach for career, leadership or personal/professional development coaching in 2019/2020.

Health and Wellbeing

The Occupational Health team and the team work closely with managers to ensure that they focus in on key issues, particularly providing health and wellbeing support upon referral, supporting staff to remain at work (where appropriate) and managing sickness absence. The Occupational Health team and the HR team have worked closely with the Council's Health and Safety team to assess employees through individual personal risk assessment's which have been completed for all staff during the pandemic to assess an individual's wellbeing, their current health status and vulnerability and where appropriate their suitability to work in their current role.

The Health & Wellbeing Co-ordinator has provided an inordinate amount of high level support to staff throughout the pandemic with the aim to encourage personal responsibility for wellbeing during the pandemic regardless of the work situation for the employee. Support that has been provided has included: online fitness classes, Apps to promote sleep, help with anxiety and mental health were provided. Wellbeing initiatives included beginners running (including couch to 5k virtual events), weigh and go, reading promotion, staff singalongs, mental wellbeing network and walking, running or cycling challenges for employees with small rewards/accolades for completion. Mindfulness sessions were set up using support from Occupational Health named CALMSPACE to allow regular meetings for employees to use meditation and mindfulness exercises. Regular meetings with the Chief Executive or Deputy Chief Executive for those employees that were classified as Clinically Extremely vulnerable were organised to get feedback and to ensure they still felt part of the organisation despite many being unable to attend work. Those employees classed as CEV were sent regular communications and small tokens reiterate the inclusive message. A Buddy scheme was set up to connect employees and to lessen a sense of isolation. A Chatty café looking at different skills was set up to allow experts to share their knowledge in flower arranging, wreath making etc. Daily tips and challenges were published through the weekly bulletins and the staff Facebook page to encourage employees to participate as part of #TeamNorthumberland. We have had excellent feedback from staff and such an approach has without doubt impacted on the engagement of our staff and also our sickness absence reduction.

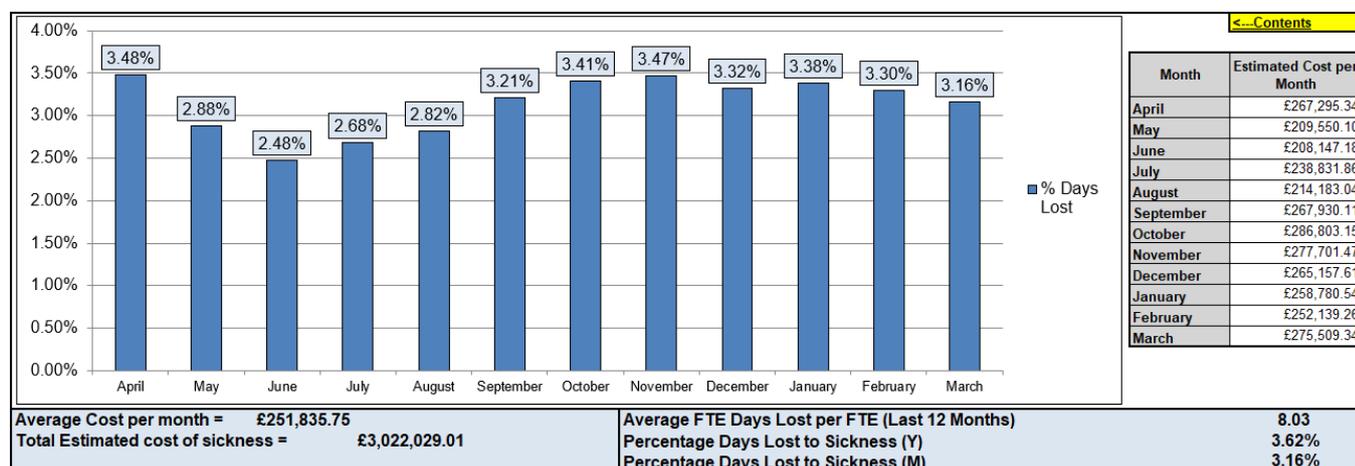
The H & W Co-ordinator has developed a cross section of 100 employees to act as Health & Wellbeing Champions to help promote good workplace health that are provided regular training and updates for their Champion role. As an organisation we have the Better Health at Work Award at Maintaining Excellence level and during 2020 were given Ambassador status from BHAWA for the work undertaken supporting employees during the pandemic which is a huge achievement. We are now looking to sustain some of the activities that we have developed and adapt our approaches considering the positive engagement on health and wellbeing activities that we have achieved across the workforce.

Sickness Absence

Sickness absence for 2020/2021 had an annual cost of £3.02m which compared to the previous year 2019/2020 (£4.02m) is a reduction of £1m. The average number of FTE lost days per FTE for 2020 is 8.03 which compared to the previous year 2019/20 (FTE lost days per FTE were 10.60) is a reduction of 2.57 days per FTE. The Council has always had an ambitious aim to achieve a sickness absence level of 7.5 days per FTE and this is likely to be achievable in 2021 if the trajectory continues..

The WFC report highlights specific trends and areas with high absence levels in each service area. Departments are supported to understand their own data and areas discussed to look at how they can best deal with reducing absence. The Health and Wellbeing Policy has now been adopted by NFRS to ensure a consistent approach throughout all of the organisation in regard to Health and Well-being of employees and the management of absence. Mental health support is now part of the health and wellbeing process through the routine use of Wellbeing Action Plans and Stress risk Assessments for employees. Questions for managers have been included in the supervision proforma to record all aspects of an individual's wellbeing by the manager on a regular basis.

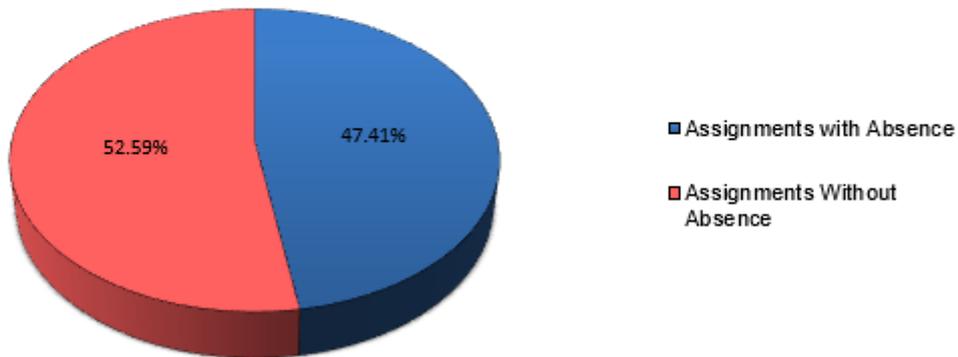
Organisational summary view of sickness absence



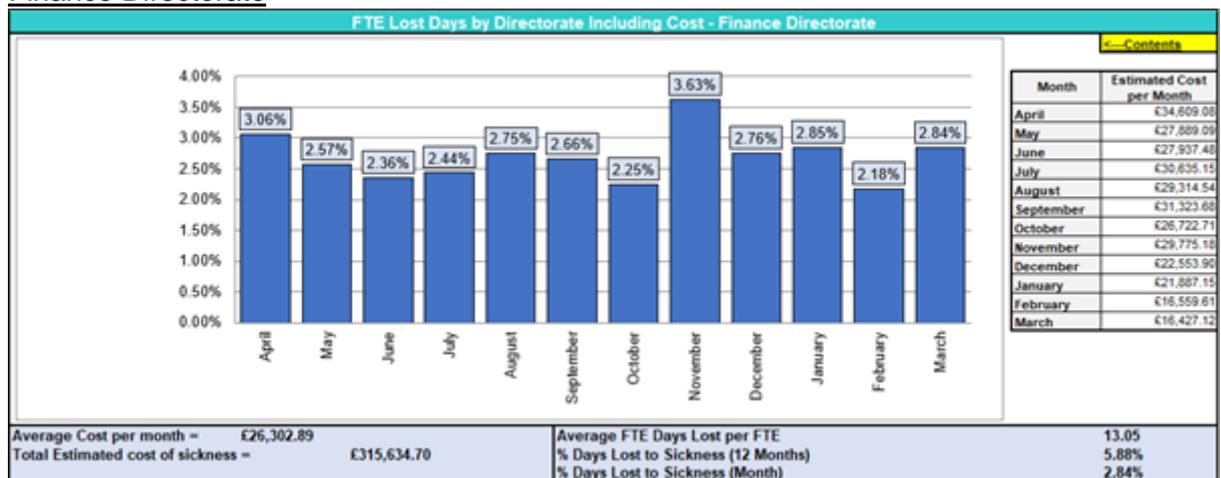
The cost of sickness absence by Directorate (see tables below) similarly shows the greatest areas being Adult Services, Place (Local Services) and Children's Social Care where the headcount is significantly higher. It is recognised that nearly 47% of all staff assignments have had some absence due to sickness during the last twelve months (as outlined below) which has decreased by 8.8% from the previous year (55.8%) .

Staff (Assignments) without Sickness (last 12 Months)

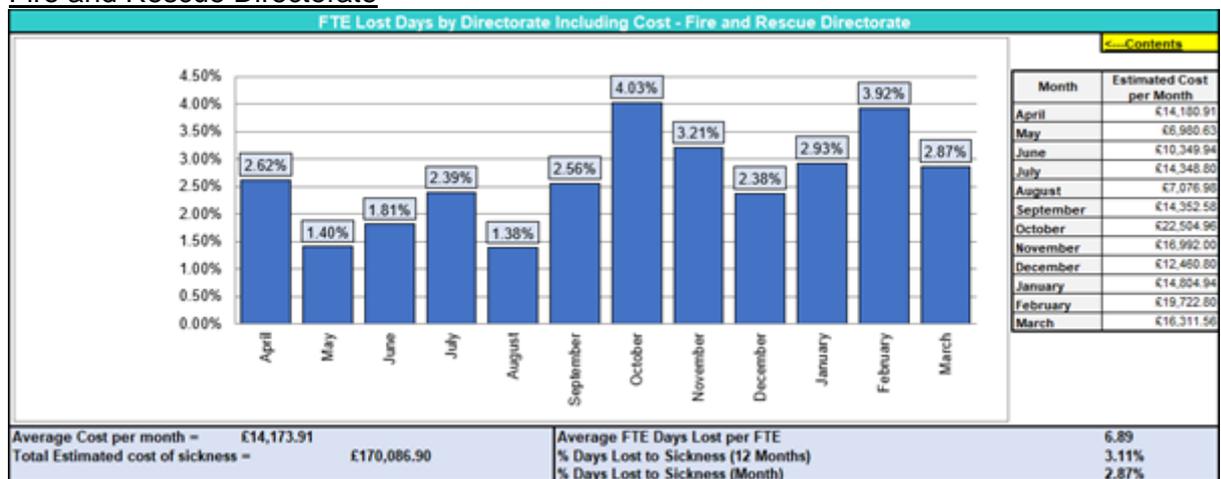
All Assignments	Assignments with Absence	Assignments Without Absence	Percentage without absence
4,244	2,012	2,232	52.59%

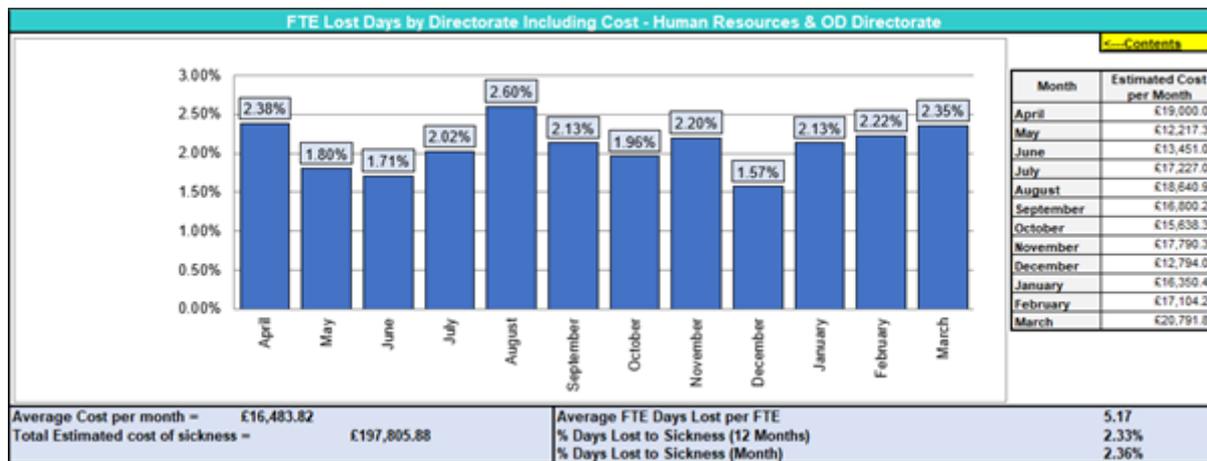


Finance Directorate



Fire and Rescue Directorate

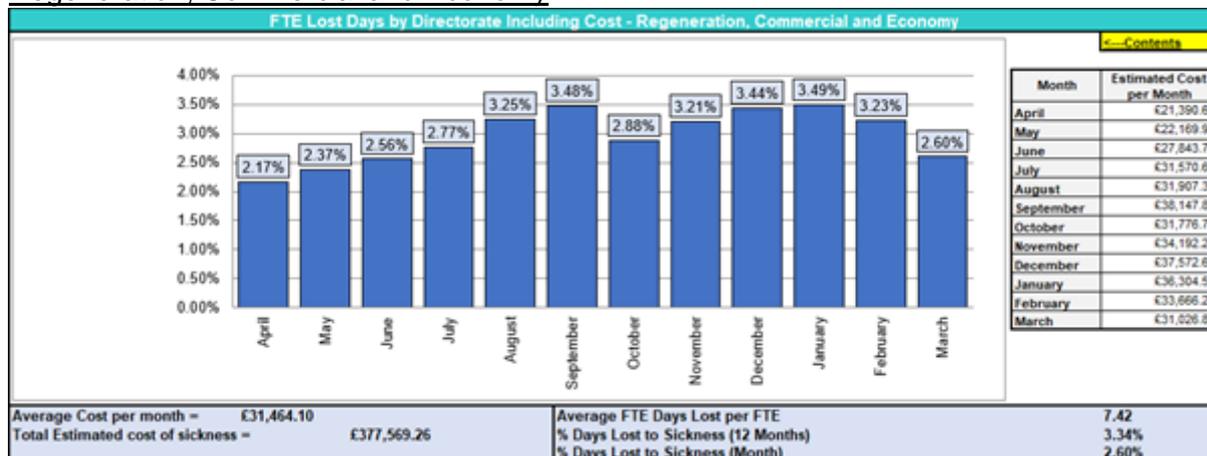




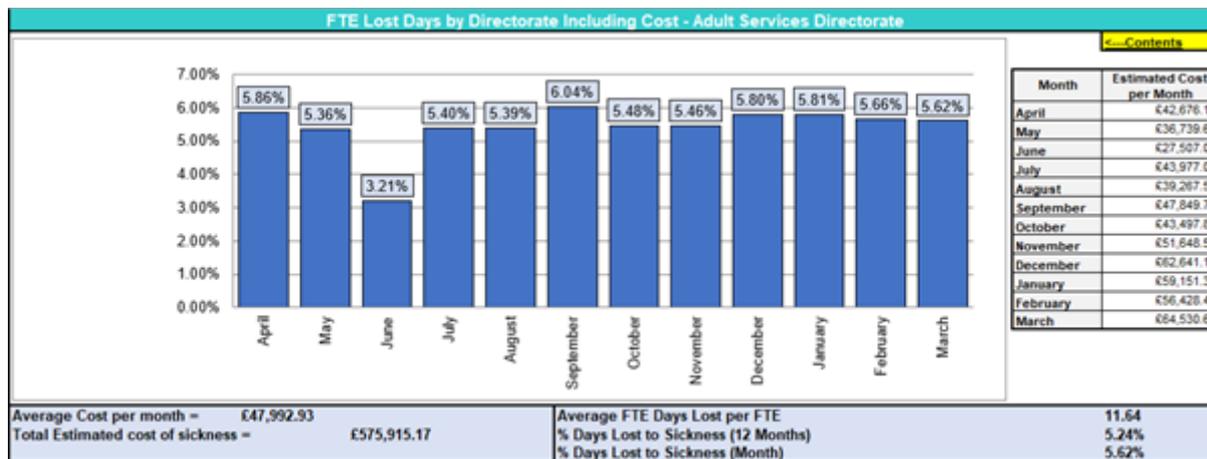
Place Directorate



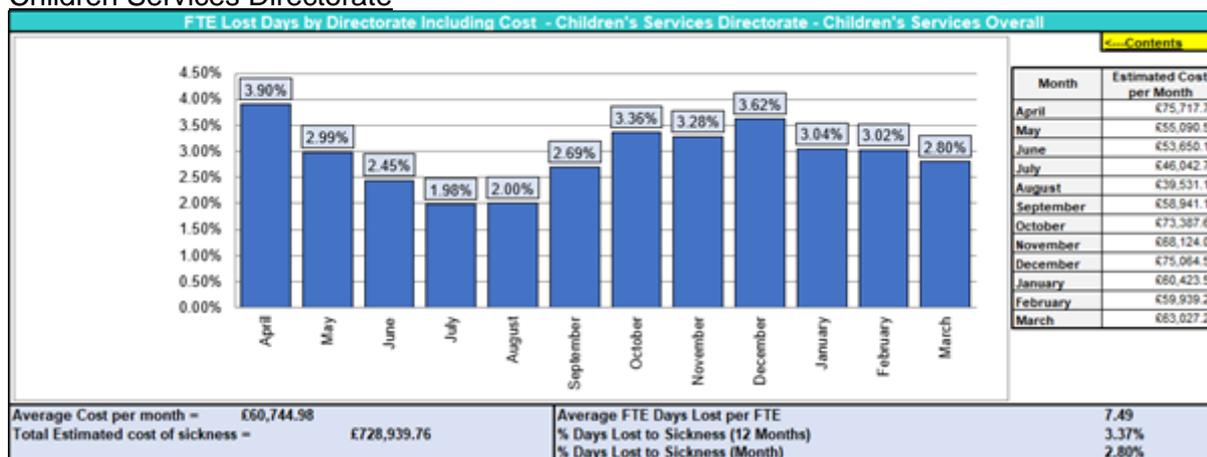
Regeneration, Commercial and Economy



Adult Services Directorate



Children Services Directorate



Work is ongoing to promote wellbeing with staff as we have progressed through the Covid 19 pandemic and relevant lockdown periods. Outside of these parameters the key health and wellbeing focus remains as:

- Mental health
- Musculoskeletal
- Healthy lifestyle

Although during the pandemic, sickness absence has reduced organisationally, we have focussed in on data from the Personal Risk Assessments in June 2020. This exercise was refreshed in February 2021 and provided managerial advice and guidance to those service areas where employees had rated themselves low (1-5) on the wellbeing scale of 1-10.

Sickness Absence costs comparative 2020/2021

	Absence costs 20/21	Absence costs 19/20	Ave days lost per FTE 20/21	Ave days lost per FTE 19/20	% days lost to sickness 20/21	% days lost to sickness 19/20

Total NCC	£3,022,029.01	£4,029,494.78	8.03	10.60	3.62%	4.77%
Chief Executive*	£18,416.28	£0.00	1.02	0.00	0.46%	0.00%
Finance	£315,634.70	£398,138.98	13.05	6.94	5.88%	3.13%
Fire & Rescue	£170,086.90	£150,188.20	6.89	5.73	3.11%	2.58%
HR & OD	£197,805.88	£351,752.29	5.17	9.68	2.33%	4.36%
Place	£591,091.79	£1,089,157.92	8.01	15.02	3.61%	6.76%
Regeneration, Commercial & Economy	£377,569.26	£200,731.45	7.42	4.08	3.34%	1.84%
Adult Services	£575,915.17	£592,788.77	11.64	16.20	5.24%	7.30%
Children's Services	£728,939.76	£1,181,811.75	7.49	12.22	3.37%	5.50%

*Includes Information Services and Shared Audit Services from March 2021

Sickness Absence Benchmarking - Average Lost FTE Days per FTE

Previous year's Cabinet Report recommendations were to include benchmarking data from other unitary authorities and Northumberland compared with all English Unitary Authorities. However, the latest benchmarking data we can access is that of 2018/19².

Year	Northumberland	Minimum for All English unitary authorities	Mean for All English unitary authorities	Maximum for All English unitary authorities
2020/21	8.03	N/A	N/A	N/A
2018/19	11.2	5.4	10.1	13.1

Northumberland compared with CIPFA 'Nearest Neighbours'

² due to COVID-19 LGA HR benchmarking has been on hold since Q3 19/20 the figures in the report are the latest available figures the LGA have published.

Year	Northumberland	Minimum for Northumberland CIPFA nearest neighbours	Mean for Northumberland CIPFA nearest neighbours	Maximum for Northumberland CIPFA nearest neighbours
2020/21	8.03	N/A	N/A	N/A
2018/19	11.2	9.3	12.2	14.3

Northumberland CIPFA nearest neighbours include the following Local Authorities: East Riding of Yorkshire, Sefton, Wirral, Durham, Isle of Wight, North Tyneside, Shropshire, Redcar and Cleveland, Cornwall, Torbay, Barnsley, Rotherham, Calderdale, St. Helens.

Northumberland compared with North East Local Authorities

Year	Northumberland	Gateshead	Cumbria	Durham	Carlisle	Newcastle upon Tyne	North Tyneside
2020/21	8.03	N/A	N/A	N/A	N/A	N/A	N/A
2018/19	11.2	-	25.3	12.6	-	12.9	11.8

When the data is able to be collected it is done through the Local Government Workforce Survey. The annual survey is conducted by LGA Research and Information. The survey is sent to all heads of human resources in England between June and September. Please note the response rate of this survey varies from year to year.

The benchmarking data provides evidence we have the lowest absence rate from those reported in 2018/19 in the region, and near the mean of all unitary authorities for the year 2018/19; rates of sickness absence have significantly reduced for 2019/20 however in the absence of up to date benchmarking data no comparisons can be drawn for 2019/20.

COVID-19 Personalised Risk Assessments

To support staff through the pandemic and to ensure they were kept safe and well throughout, each member of staff was offered the opportunity to complete a Covid-19 personalised risk assessment. This exercise has been to date been undertaken on 2 occasions with completion rates by directorate for each round within the table below.

	% of Completed Risk Assessments (Version 1)	% of Completed Risk Assessments (Refresh February 2021) (As at 30 th April 21)
Total NCC	100%	91%
Chief Executive*	100%	95%
Finance	100%	93%

Fire & Rescue	100%	94%
HR & OD	100%	94%
Place	100%	86%
Regeneration, Commercial & Economy	100%	91%
Adult Services	100%	89%
Children's Services	100%	91%

*Includes Information Services and Shared Audit Services from March 2021

All potential issues identified through this process were supported by the HR/OD team with each risk assessment being fully quality assured by a member of the team and any follow-up discussions and associated actions, for example, equipment needs or onward referrals to Occupational Health were completed in a timely manner.

The graph below illustrates the council's sickness rates since November 2018. As can be seen the rates have been significantly lower since the onset of the pandemic in March 2020 and relatively stable throughout the last year. As mentioned in previous sections this has resulted in a significant reduction in the cost of sickness absence of circa £1m+ over the period.

Impact of COVID/WFH on Sickness Rates



HR/OD Helpline

While the HR/OD function has operated a helpline for several years, during the pandemic resources were re-arranged putting in place a rota within the team to expand capacity during periods where government announcement were rapidly evolving. This enabled the team to provide calm and reassurance to staff and managers who were struggling with work-based queries. All calls and advice were initially logged in order to identify any common themes and Frequently asked questions were updated on a daily basis with organisational decisions against each individual query. In addition the phonenumber was diverted to the Executive Director of HR/OD and Deputy Chief Executive or Strategic HR Lead on evenings and weekends.

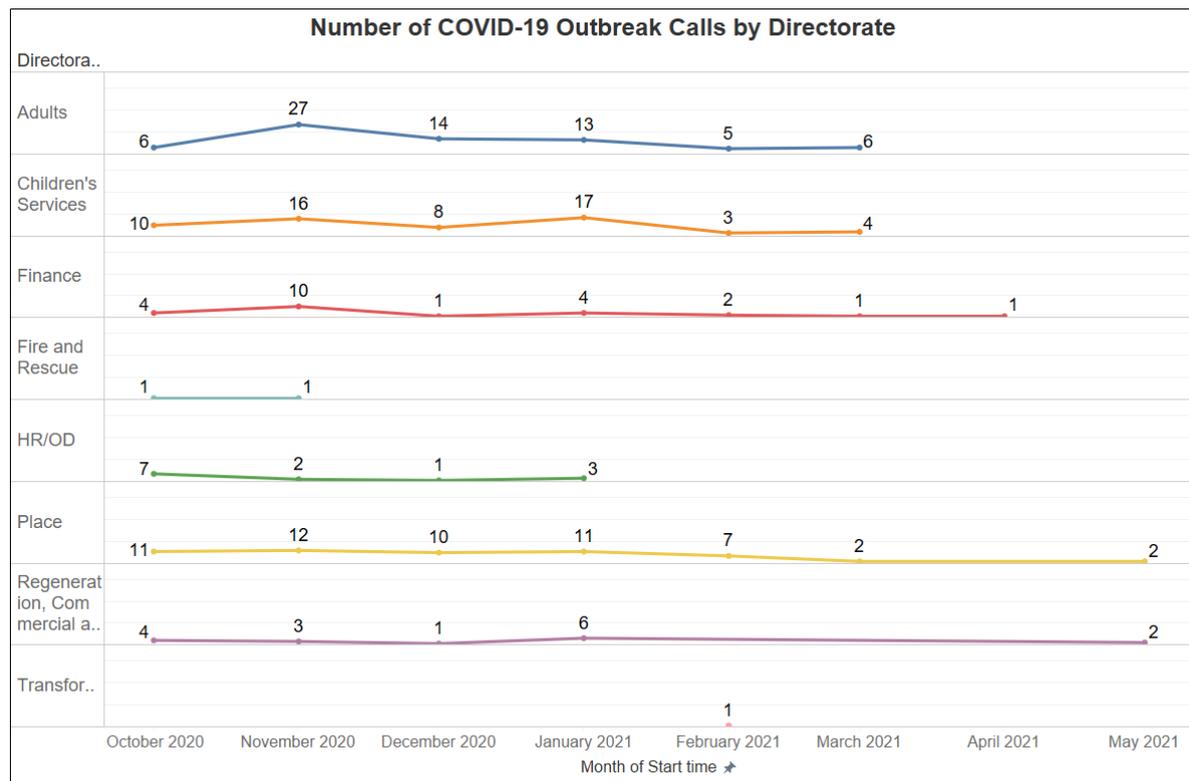
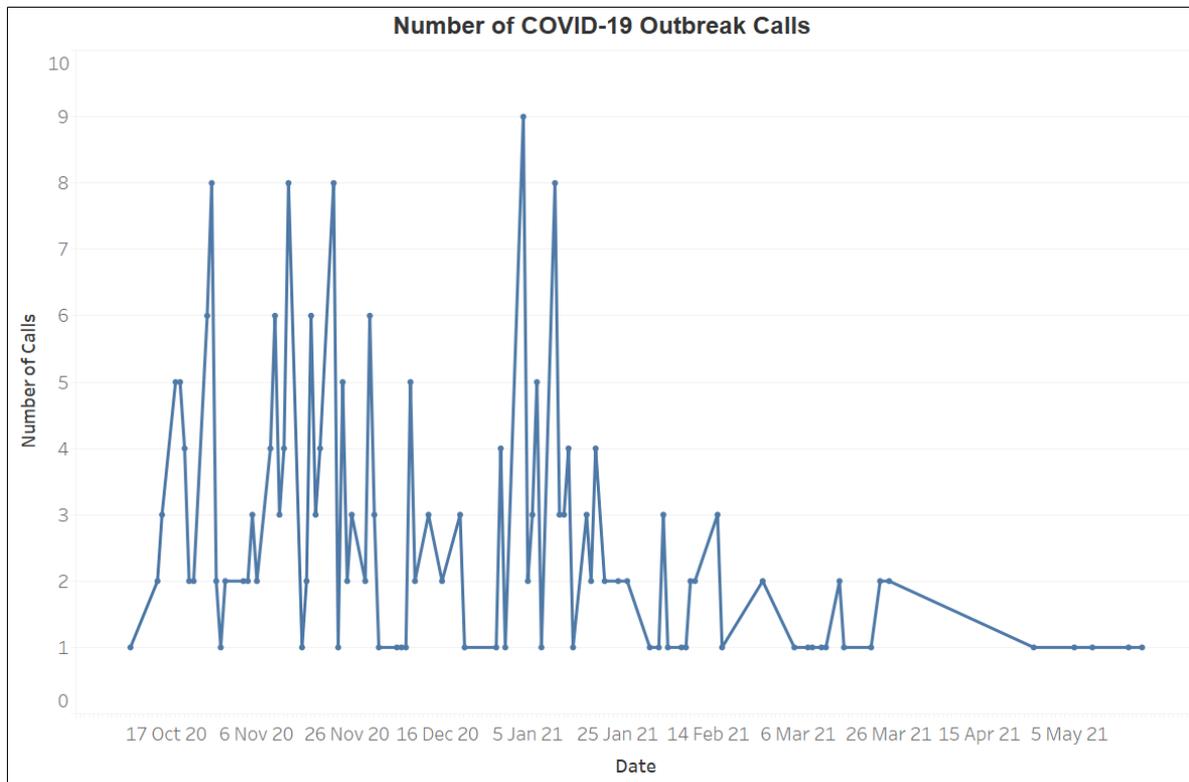
COVID-19 Hotline

During the second wave of the pandemic the HR/OD team worked with colleagues from Public Health in setting up a COVID-19 Hotline. Members of the HR/OD team were trained in how to deal with possible workplace outbreaks and took responsibility for manning the hotline at all times.

To ensure that all actions were appropriately taken when the possibility of a workplace outbreak occurred the following measures were put into place:

- Ascertained if the case was symptomatic or confirmed positive, if so, appropriate advice was given regarding the individual and their family about testing and isolation periods.
- Discussed with manager when they had last been at work, who they had been working with and where, then determining if 'contact' under the PHE definitions had occurred.
- If yes, any other employees that had been in contact were sent home and told to isolate for the relevant time-period.
- If no, but other employees had been in the same workplace at the same time, those employees were written to and told they did not need to isolate to try and ease any concerns.
- Occasionally, there were causes for concern in terms of employees not adhering to social distancing and/or wearing suitable PPE and those issues were addressed via management intervention.
- The location of cases was monitored and if there were more than 2 cases in the same workplace in quick succession, a review was undertaken between HR, Public Health, Health and Safety and Public Protection to determine if any further action was needed.

From its inception in on 9 October 2020 to the time of writing, the hotline has fielded 243 phone calls. Graphs below demonstrate the breakdown of when the peak times of daily rates of calls were, and from which directorates per month.



Agency Staffing

Numbers of agency staffing are regularly reviewed by the Workforce Committee. We continue to work with local authority colleagues across the region to ensure we set standardised frameworks and agreed rates, particularly for challenging areas such as

social workers etc which has proved very positive for the Northeast in managing the challenges that agency staffing costs and quality pose.

Further monitoring of agency staffing, and overtime has commenced across directorates with an Internal Staffing Bank now set up to reduce the requirement for agency workers, offer staff the opportunity to register for work at any department/area within the Council (dependent upon their skills and experience) and this will ensure build a more flexible workforce and reduce existing costs over time. The Staff Bank is still in its infancy and progression of this work has been hindered by the restrictions of the pandemic. Work over the next 12 months will take place to ensure the use of the staff bank has been explored before authorisation to use agency is approved.

Fixed Term Contracts

Fixed term contracts are now monitored monthly by the Workforce Committee using a RAG rating so there is notice for those that are due to come to an end immediately and those that are longer term. All fixed term contracts and honoraria have an end date so that they are regularly reviewed.

Equality and Diversity

The Council has seven very well established staff networks LGBT, Enable Disability, Autism Spectrum Disorder, Black Asian and Minority Ethnic, Menopause, Mental Health and Carers Network groups which are now separate from NHCT and continue to be well attended. The network groups contribute actively to the development of a more inclusive culture by commenting on policy, leading on a broad range of ED&I campaigns working closely with Communications staff and contributing to positive staff engagement.

A number of the network groups have been trained to be mentors for lived experience and will be integrated into the councils' mentoring and coaching offer to give staff access to the lived experience of staff with one or more protected characteristic.

The Council has maintained its Stonewall Workplace Equality Index position in 2020/21 as the WEI was suspended during Covid-19 having been successful in attaining 34th place overall as one of the highest local authorities in the country within the rankings which is an excellent achievement. Our Children Services were also very highly ranked within the Stonewall Education Index.

The Council has continued to work closely with Northumberland Pride Committee to support Northumberland Pride celebrations. Plans to host the 2020 event at County Hall were suspended due to Covid-19 restrictions but as an alternative the council supported a range of virtual events to celebrate Pride month including hosting Meet the Author events, Trans inclusion Learning session, a multi-team Pride themed Quiz night and celebrating our LGBT+ inspirations and the history of LGBT+ people in Northumberland.

In addition, a programme of work is being undertaken by the Equality & Diversity Lead with partners in staff engagement, HR and Communications to support a broader inclusion agenda across the council including revising our ED&I Internet pages, developing a clear ED&I Strategy and consulting on our ED&I Objectives for the coming year. Our strategy documents and objectives will be published on our revised ED&I internet page.

The council has participated in the NHSE Diversity Partnership programme and will use this as a springboard to examine our recruitment processes to ensure they are truly inclusive. The council will be participating in a series of recruitment events targeting BAME and Disabled communities as a proactive step to ensure our job opportunities are open to all. The Council equality lead continues to work with equality allies to make the organisation more inclusive.

The Council has produced its Gender Pay Gap Report and during 2019/20 and continues to have one of the lowest Gender Pay Gaps within public sector organisations across the region. The Council's Gender Pay Gap report is now published on the Council's website alongside other documents that demonstrate the council's position in relation to ED&I.

Staff Survey Data

The Staff Survey produced a record 80.5 % return for a full census survey in 2019, which was an excellent result, and an increase of 9.5% from 2018 and 19.5% increase since 2016. Picker Institute were the provider of the survey in 2019 and given some challenges with the quality of the data analysis, the Council decided to introduce quarterly COVID-19 surveys to replace the annual staff survey for this year. While the department action plan working groups continue to meet monthly to continue with the longer-range actions of the 2019 survey results, it was felt more frequent checks on our staff engagement were needed through these uncertain times and formed part of the interim covid-19 people strategy.

Staff have been kept fully informed on the key themes that have emerged from the surveys with the key highlights from across the surveys set out below.

Results First Covid-Experience Survey March 2020

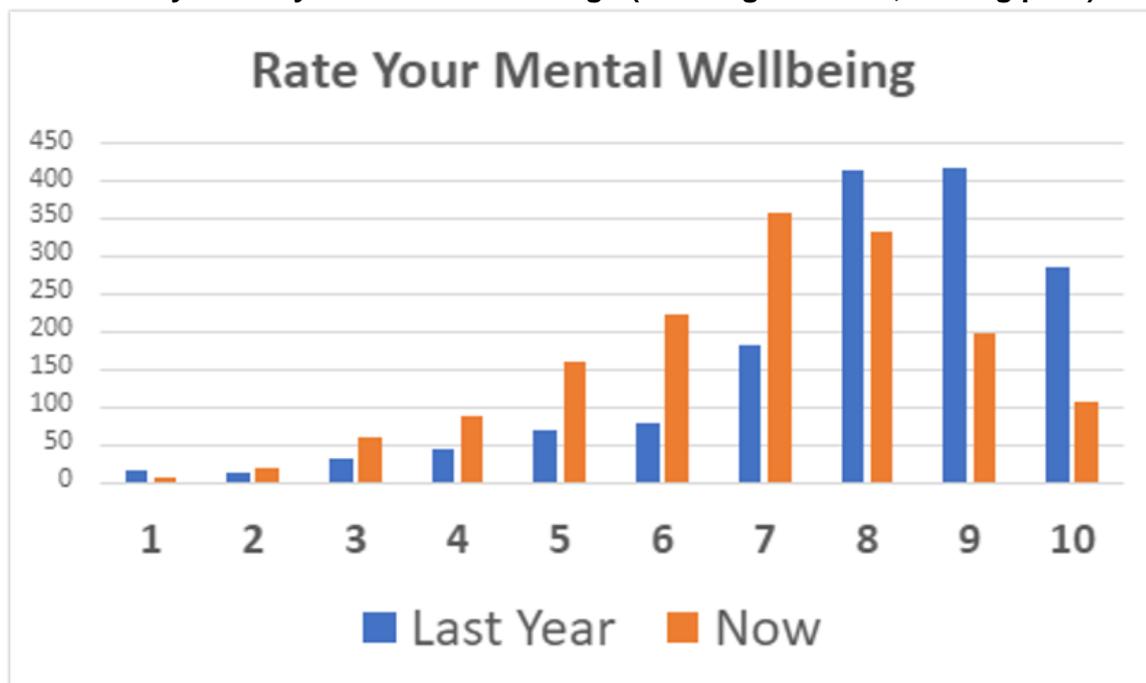
Over 1500 members of staff responded to the first covid-experience survey in March 2020 and results of key questions were as follows: -

- Have you been able to work at home since the 24th of March 2020? 77% said yes.
- If you have been able to work from home, have you had regular communication from your line manager? 86% said yes.
- Would you like to work from home on a more permanent basis if the Council were able to facilitate this? 42% said yes, but a further 28% answered 'maybe' and only 25% said no.
- Overall, how satisfied are you with life in general? (On a scale of 0-10, where 0 is not at all satisfied and 10 is completely satisfied). 79% rated themselves at 7 or over with only 3% scoring 3 or below.
- Overall, how anxious did you feel yesterday? (On a scale of 0-10, where 0 is not at all anxious and 10 is completely anxious). Over half (52%) rated themselves at 3 or below with 22% 4-6 and 26% scoring 7-10.

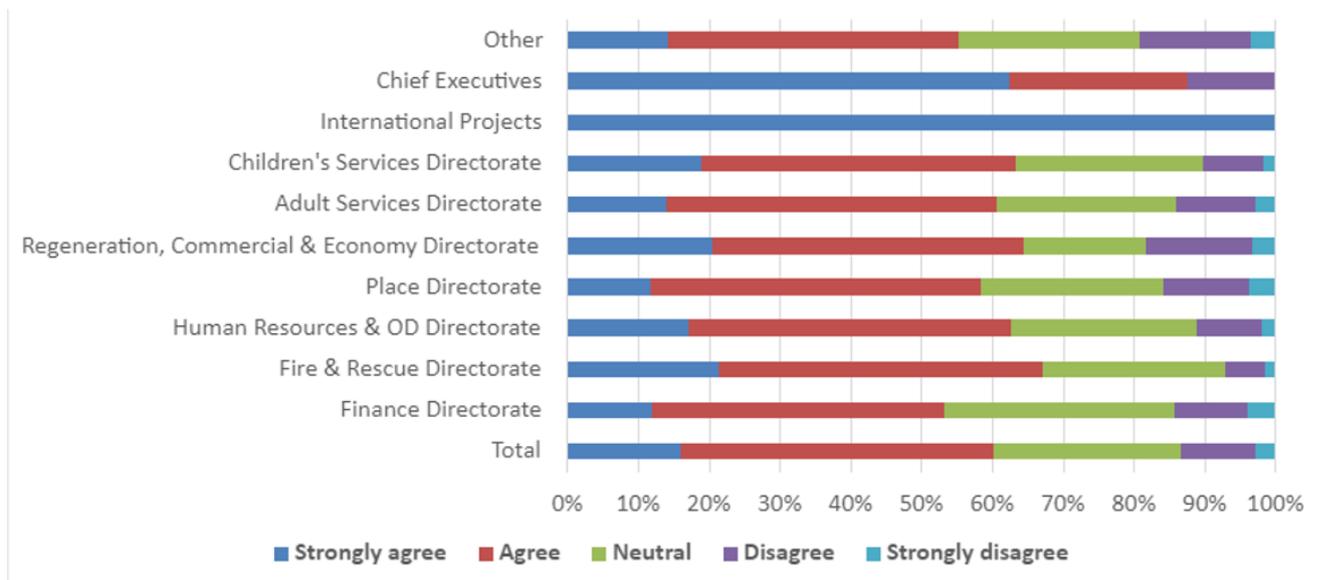
Results Second Covid-Experience Survey December 2020

With once again just over 1500 responses the continuing covid-experience survey in December 2020 provided key results as follows: -

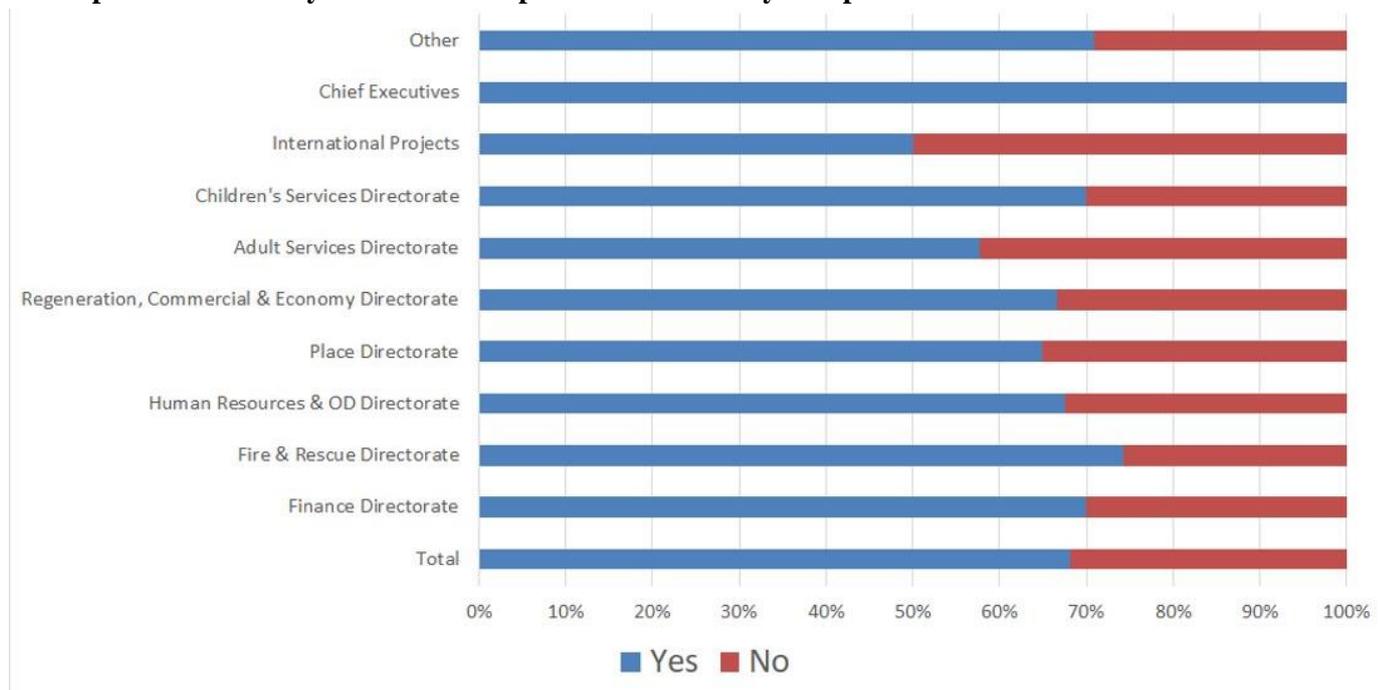
How would you rate your mental wellbeing? (10 being excellent, 1 being poor)



In the last month I have felt enthusiastic about my work



In the past month have you been able to provide the service you aspire to?



Results were analysed at directorate and service level and fed back to services via the Staff Survey Representative Meetings.

Whistleblowing Report 2019/20

The Council has for a number of years had a Whistleblowing Policy however this was reviewed formally in 2018 and relaunched across the organisation. The Council introduced Safecall in August 2017. Safecall remains one of the main methods used for the reporting of whistleblowing complaints.

Safecall is an external company which provides a helpline and promotional materials to support staff to raise concerns either anonymously or directly and staff or members of the public can contact Safecall via email or by telephone directly. The use of Safecall is advertised every week with the council's weekly communication bulletin. Safecall's advisors are trained individuals with many of them being ex-police officers. This process has been made more robust by ensuring that monthly meetings are held with the Strategic HR Lead and the Monitoring Officer. The total costs payable to Safecall during 2020-21 were £4,130.60, based on £0.95 per head.

Whistleblowing Data during 2020/2021

During 2020/2021 there were 26 (up from 22 in the previous year) issues/allegations reported in line with the Council's Whistleblowing Policy.

Service	Raised through which process	Allegation / Issue	Open/Closed	Outcome

Regeneration, Commercial & Economy	Other	Employment Practices/Behaviours	Closed	No action required
Local Services/Place	Other	Employment Practices/Behaviours	Closed	No action required
Adults, Children's, Education	Exit Questionnaire	Bullying	Closed	Training and Management Action
Adults, Children's, Education	Safecall	COVID-19	Closed	Informal Resolution
Adults, Children's, Education	Other	Employment Practices/Behaviours	Closed	Informal Resolution
Regeneration, Commercial & Economy	Other	Employment Practices/Behaviours	Closed	Informal Resolution
Adults, Children's, Education	Exit Questionnaire	Employment Practices/Behaviours	Closed	No action required
External	Other	Employment Practices/Behaviours	Closed	Recommendation Made
Adults, Children's, Education	Safecall	Bullying	Closed	Recommendation made
Adults, Children's, Education	Other	Bullying	Closed	No action required
Adults, Children's, Education	Other	Employment Practices/Behaviours	Closed	Recommendations Made
Local Services/Place	Other	COVID-19	Closed	Training and Management Action
Adults, Children's, Education	Other	Discrimination	Closed	Monitoring
Elected Members	Safecall	General allegation	Closed	Referred to Monitoring Officer
Elected Members	Safecall	General allegation	Closed	Referred to Monitoring Officer
Executives	Other	Breach of Policies	Closed	Referred to Monitoring Officer
Elected Members	Safecall	General allegation	Closed	Referred to Monitoring Officer
Elected Members	Safecall	General allegation	Closed	Referred to Monitoring Officer
Local Services/Place	Other	Breach of Policies	Closed	Informal Resolution
HR/OD	Safecall	General allegation	Closed	Recommendation made
Local Services/Place	Other	Breach of Policies	Closed	No action required
Finance	Safecall	Employment Practices/Behaviours	Closed	Recommendation made
External	Other	Employment Practices/Behaviours	Closed	Recommendation made
Local Services/Place	Exit Questionnaire	General whistleblowing allegation	Closed	Incorporated into other complaints
Elected Members	Other	General whistleblowing allegations	Closed	Referred to the Monitoring Officer
Regeneration, Commercial & Economy	Other	Employment Practices/Behaviours	Closed	Recommendation made

The source of referrals were as follows:

Directorate	Number of referrals
-------------	---------------------

Adults, Children's, Education	8
Elected Members	5
Executive	1
External	2
Finance	1
HR/OD	1
Place	5
Regeneration, Commercial & Economy	3
Total:	26

Format of referral:

Format	Number
Exit Questionnaire	3
Other	15
Safecall	8
Total:	26

Nature of referral:

Nature of referral:	Number
Breach of Policy	3
Bullying	3
COVID-19 Related	2
Employment Practices/Behaviours	10
General Whistleblowing Allegation	7
Discrimination	1
Total:	26

Outcomes from referral:

Outcome	Number
Informal Resolution	3
No action required	5
Monitoring of Service Restructure	1
Recommendation made	6
Training and Management Action	2
Ongoing – Outcome TBC	3
Total:	26

Whistleblowing Correlation with the Staff Survey Data

Work has continued in the areas where further work was identified from the 2019 annual Staff Survey around reporting bullying and harassment, both from service users and staff on staff and confidence in raising concerns where there has been a near miss or error. This was mostly due to categorisation of concerns and being clear what bullying and harassment is, what action that employees can take and where they can seek support.

Ongoing weekly communication containing the Safecall contact details, encouraging staff to raise concerns remains a high priority.

Whistleblowing Policy

The Whistleblowing Policy has not been used correctly during 2020/21 however the Council has always had a policy of investigating any concerns that are raised by staff. This policy has been utilised by Elected Members and it is an employee policy and should remain so and therefore Elected Members will be in future redirected to the Council's Monitoring Officer with any concerns that they wish to raise and the policy is currently being reviewed accordingly.

Conclusions of report

There has been significant work progressed and achieved despite and because of the Coronavirus pandemic during 2020/21 within the HR/OD team during what has been a very difficult year for staff. The notable achievements of personalised risk assessments, the changes to the way that staff work and are being managed is a testament to the excellent workforce and quality HR/OD service that the Council provides.

Recommendations

The recommendations are:

- Corporate Services and Economic Growth Overview & Scrutiny Committee note the contents of the report.

- Corporate Services and Economic Growth Overview & Scrutiny Committee continue to receive an annual update of this report for every financial year.
- Note the data that is contained in the whistleblowing report and the ongoing work to promote a safe environment for staff to raise concerns through various mechanisms across the Council.
- Support the continued use of Safecall across the Council as an additional mechanism for staff to raise concerns accordingly.

Implications arising from this report

Policy	All workforce actions need to be inline with government covid-19 regulations and guidelines.
Finance and value for money	The workforce is of significant cost to the Council and therefore it is essential that the workforce performs well to ensure that the Council achieves value for money in relation to service provision.
Legal	There are legal implications for the Council if employment practices are not in line with the law and best practice.
Procurement	None.
Human Resources	As included within the report.
Property	The <i>WorkSmart</i> project has implications for the use and functionality of the buildings estate going forward.
Equalities (Impact Assessment attached) Yes <input type="checkbox"/> No <input checked="" type="checkbox"/> N/A <input type="checkbox"/>	All HR policies and procedures are subject to an equality impact assessment.
Risk Assessment	Risks relating to the ongoing health and wellbeing of staff are managed locally and both Strategic and Operational Risk registers are in operation
Crime & Disorder	None.
Customer Consideration	Improved staff performance will impact on the quality of customer experiences.
Carbon reduction	WorkSmart and home working during the pandemic has positive environmental impacts
Wards	All.

Report sign off.

Authors must ensure that officers and members have agreed the content of the report:

	initials
Finance Officer	JW
Monitoring Officer/Legal	NM
Human Resources	KA
Executive Director	KA
Portfolio Holder(s)	RW

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