



**Review of Council's
Staff Welfare and Wellbeing
Response
to the First Wave of the
COVID19 Pandemic**

1.0 Introduction

- 1.1 The following is a synopsis of the proceedings and recommendations made by the Covid 19 Scrutiny – Staff and Wellbeing Task and Finish Panel (“the Panel”) to consider the Council’s staff and wellbeing response to the first wave of the Covid 19 pandemic.
- 1.2 If the Council was to provide the services efficiently and effectively throughout the first wave of the pandemic it was essential that the Council should preserve and protect the health, safety and wellbeing of its staff
- 1.3 The Purpose of this review was to investigate:
 - workforce planning during the response phase
 - actions taken to promote workforce wellbeing during the response phase
 - workforce realignment and actions taken to staff those areas where staff were seconded to other posts during the 1st wave of the pandemic were able to gain the necessary knowledge and skills to confidently undertake their new areas of work
 - Strategies to thank and recognise all employees for their contribution during response and to identify key contributors at team and individual level
- 1.4 To achieve this the Panel agreed to focus on the following areas:
 - a) What health and safety support was needed for staff working at home during the response and how did we enable it?
 - b) What wellbeing initiatives did we put in place to support staff during the pandemic?
 - c) When and how did we recognise and thank staff during the response phase?
 - d) How and when did we communicate with staff about the pandemic, our response and any future changes?
 - e) What impact did this have?
 - f) What plans do we need in place to deal with a second outbreak and our ability to react and respond?
 - g) When and how can the workforce come into the office?

2.0 Conclusions

- 2.1 The Board is satisfied that every effort was made by the CEO and Senior Management to ensure the safety of staff at HBC. Setting up working from home took 5 weeks which is felt was an overly lengthy process and may have been a contributing factor in the less than successful highlighting of the problems gathering with Capita and the issuing of the Business Grants. The Board was concerned at how many desks and chairs had to be issued to staff working from home, how this was delivered and at what cost to the Council.

The issuing of IT equipment was of course endorsed.

- 2.2 The Board questioned why so few staff were working from the Plaza. It was possible for 50 members of staff to be on site, but only 20 were in place. What balance was struck with staff working together?

- 2.3 The offer of Counselling to all staff was noted and should be given when and if requested. In this very difficult situation it would not be unreasonable to expect some members of staff to have anxiety issues, and staff should be confident that help is available if needed. It would be interesting to know if staff were brought into the Plaza for meetings with managers to ensure their wellbeing or if they were just required to work from home with little contact.

- 2.4 The Board, on the whole was relatively happy with the results of the scrutiny.

3.0 Recommendations

- 3.1. The current arrangements for emergency planning, including business continuity planning, be endorsed.
- 3.2 That the arrangements put in place to monitor the efficiency and effectiveness of the Council's health and wellbeing support to staff during the pandemic be endorsed.
- 3.3 That the current arrangements, including the appointment of a Client Relationship Director and Head of Strategic Commissioning, for ensuring that our commercial partnerships and contracts deliver efficient and cost effective services to residents be endorsed
- 3.4 That a reasonable balance is struck with staff working safely in the Plaza and that management is not overly cautious by allowing too many staff to work from home.

4.0 The Panel

- 4.1 The Review was undertaken by the Panel which included the following members:

Councillor Patrick (Chairman)

Cllr John Davis

Cllr Beryl Francis

Cllr Tim Pike

Cllr Clare Satchwell

Cllr Peter Wade

Cllr Yvonne Weeks

- 4.2 The Panel would like to record its gratitude to the Members and Officers of Havant Borough Council for making themselves available to meet with the Panel. Full details of these members and officers may be found in the document entitled "Background Papers.

5.0 Methodology

- 5.1 The Panel's activity fell into 3 parts:

(a) Review of Background Information

Throughout the review the members of the Panel had access to the report on the Council's Covid 19 response submitted to Cabinet on 1 July 2020 and to the resource back established by the Local Government Association, which included examples on how other Councils had reacted to the Covid 19 pandemic

(b) Interviews with the relevant officers

(d) Arriving at recommendations

The Evidence Considered

6.0 How did the Council enable staff to work from home?

- 6.1 The Panel was pleased to note that the Council had already developed continuity plans and undertaken scenario analysis in the event of an emergency such as the pandemic. These continuity plans were reviewed prior to the official lockdown to ensure that they were fit for purpose.
- 6.2 In addition to these plans the Council had, in preparation for Brexit, already purchased equipment to enable critical staff to work from home
- 6.3 Prior to the official lockdown the Council had established a cross-functional team to develop a coordinated response effort and undertake an analysis of the current workforce:
- (i) to determine future workforce needs;

- (ii) to identify the gap between the workforce that was available and the Council's future needs; and
- (iii) to develop solutions to enable the Council to accomplish its mission, goals, and strategic plan.

6.4 As a result of this planning, the Council enabled staff to work from home from the first date of the national lockdown. Those staff that had been identified as critical during the Brexit preparations were provided with the necessary IT equipment.

6.5 To ensure the health and wellbeing of staff working from home, all staff, from the date of the first lockdown, were required to complete and return a DSE form. These forms were used to enable the Council to identify and supply additional support or equipment to those staff working from home. To save unnecessary costs, if a DSE indicated that a member of staff working from home required any additional furniture, the Council loaned the unused furniture stored at the Plaza.

6.6 Health wellbeing advice and support for staff working from home was provided from the first date of the national lockdown.

6.7 The workforce arrangements were continually reviewed by the multi-functional group to identify hotspots and to ensure resources were allocated efficiently and effectively. Senior management team also held meetings (daily at the height of Covid-19) to monitor the performance of the Council.

7.0 How did we provide health and safety support for staff?

7.1 Health wellbeing advice and support for staff was provided from the first date of the national lockdown.

7.2 Health and Wellbeing support was also continually reviewed and updated to tailor for the needs of the Council and staff e.g. as soon as the Public Service Plaza become Covid 19 secure, a handbook was issued to all staff giving guidance on visiting the Plaza.

8.0 What Wellbeing initiatives did we put in place to support staff during the pandemic?

8.1 A wide range of wellbeing initiatives were used to support staff through the pandemic including:

- HR information leaflets/FAQ's
- HR advice and guidance (employee and manager level)
- webinars
- E-learning

- Occupational Health and EAP provision
- **Wellbeing Wins** -weekly bulletins with advice and links to help you cope during coronavirus lockdown.
- HR advice and guidance through HR team for staff and managers
- Occupational health/ EAP provision
- Mental health first aiders
- Interactive wellbeing sessions (SUMO)
- Staff welfare covid sub group
- Staff wellbeing survey

9.0 When and how did we recognise and thank staff during the response phase?

The Council recognised and thanked staff through the following methods:

- You're a Star Scheme
- Kneller's News
- Team Talk
- Individual & team recognition via 1-1's and team meetings

10.0 How and when did we communicate with staff about the pandemic, our response and any future changes?

The Council used a wide range of media to communicate with staff during the pandemic including:

- leaflets/FAQ's
- dedicated pages on SKOOP
- webinars
- E-learning

- Team Talk
- Team Meetings
- 1 to 1 with line Managers
- Handbooks
- Emails
- Kneller's News

11.0 What impact did this have?

11.1 Every member of staff was sent the survey, including those not based at a desk. 61% of the workforce responded to the survey. The key results showed that:

- 93% of respondents feel they are kept informed of the councils' response to the pandemic through channels such as Kneller's News, Team Talk and the Weekly Email
- 86% of respondents are confident that the senior leadership team will take the right steps through the pandemic
- 78% of respondents feel that the senior leadership team are visibly role modelling behaviours asked of staff members through the pandemic
- 70%+ of respondents feel they receive support from their line manager
- 48% of respondents have concerns about infection in the workplace
- 13% of respondents are experiencing negative side effects as a result of DSE set up
- 73% of staff who responded like their new way of working

11.2 There had been a reduction in sickness levels with no work related stress absences.

11.3 A critical element in wellbeing was taking proper breaks away from work. For this reason, every member of staff was encouraged to continue to plan breaks as normal for the summer and the rest of the 2020/21 annual leave year.

11.4 The Council had a responsibility to make sure every member of staff took at least the minimum statutory annual leave amount in each leave year and therefore all staff had been encouraged to take their leave. However, in recognition of the disruption to normal working patterns and annual leave plans the following arrangements for carrying over leave had been put in place:

- Carry over of annual leave from 2019/20 of one working week as normal, plus any additional accrued annual leave, in agreement with the line manager, where, for operational reasons, more than one working week was outstanding by 31 March 2020
- Up to two working weeks of annual leave can be carried over to the next leave year (2021/22) and if necessary, a further two weeks can be carried forward to the following leave year (2022/23)

12.0 What plans do we need in place to deal with a second outbreak and our ability to react and respond?

- 12.1 The Panel was satisfied that the current continuity plans and monitoring processes were sufficient to enable the Council to respond in the event of another outbreak.

13.0 When and how can the workforce come into the office?

- 13.1 Before the Council could allow working from the Plaza, it had to undertake an appropriate COVID-19 risk assessment in consultation with Safety Champions and the Health and Safety Committee. This assessment was completed, and the Plaza adjusted to comply with government guidance within two weeks.
- 13.2 The Panel was advised that there were 54 available desks at the Covid Secure Plaza. However, the average attendance was between 25 and 32 people.
- 13.3 Some members of the Panel raised concerns that not all staff would be comfortable working from home. The Officers advised those members of staff whose mental wellbeing was at risk, if required to work from home, were allowed to work from the Plaza.
- 13.4 Some Councillors also raised concerns that a number of available desks were left vacant at the Covid Secure Plaza. These members argued that if the Council could encourage more staff to work from the Plaza, this might encourage other businesses to follow suit and as result boost the local economy. The Panel was advised that the officers were looking at ways of increasing the number of staff who worked from the Plaza in a safe way.

14.0 How were Staff Redeployed and Trained?

- 14.1 The analysis of the current workforce, to determine future workforce needs referred to 4.3 above identified where there was a potential to move staff from one service to another service with a shortfall in staff. All those staff redeployed were volunteers and were trained in their new roles. The number of staff redeployed was monitored throughout the first wave of the pandemic.

15.0 Unison Response

- 15.1 The Panel received the following response from Unison

“What health and safety support was needed for staff working at home during the response and how did we enable it?”

IT equipment, chairs, desks even, insistence on staff completing workplace H&S

What wellbeing initiatives did we put in place to support staff during the pandemic?

Advice was given around MHFAiders (their phone no's etc.), EAP and team/service management support. I'm guessing that some team leaders/managers were better than others but that's 121/appraisal territory.

Skype and Teams meetings to stay in contact with colleagues, new for many of us but useful and I think we all kind of got used to it very quickly.

Encouragement to exercise, healthy lifestyle etc.

When and how did we recognise and thank staff during the response phase?

I know my colleague and I had a very nice emailed letter from Simon thanking us for our work in the town centres when the shops first opened. Some colleagues have mentioned their weekly skype meetings with their Manager where they were always thanked for the work they were doing BUT absolutely NO communication from HOS/Executive Head.

Not sure for majority; HBC has a varied history of saying 'thank you' over and above the pay packet.

How and when did we communicate with staff about the pandemic, our response and any future changes?

Regular emails, Kneller's News, Team Talk's, service and departmental Skype and Teams Meetings. It was mentioned that there was a need for information regarding future changes and that there still is, but in the greater scheme of things the average email connected staff member was reasonably well-informed.

What impact did this have?

Would want to straw poll some members around that. Many colleagues I am in contact with seem generally OK but since Kneller's News discussed the changes there is a definite apprehension and some dissatisfaction/demoralisation with an idea of the target, but no clear direction about what the future might hold for many of us.

What plans do we need in place to deal with a second outbreak and our ability to react and respond?

I think that's what we are all keen to know - this is new challenge for us all, and often based on information issued by central government days or hours before.

There needs to be a recognition that being a local government officer doesn't mean we are just subject specialists in our own fields. Dealing with the general public means we all have a set of core skills that has seen colleagues stepping out of their comfort zones and either driving out to or phoning those at risk and carrying out welfare checks and all kinds of things during lockdown.

I believe that we tend to have a certain 'robustness of character and ability to think on our feet' and despite changes they'll just get on with things the best way they can.

When and how can the workforce come into the office?

*Again, might want to ask the members about their feelings on that, many of the colleagues asked are getting quite used to the concept of home working – 'new normal' and that kind of thing, some are still keen to maintain the break between the office and home and would prefer returning to the plaza. There is still that very real 'having my work in my house where I can't escape it' issue. Some of us are lucky and have a spare room with a door that can be closed but if you're a single or a couple and rent a one bed flat your office is **always** going to be there, reminding you of what you've got to deal with tomorrow.*

At its most brutal - if there's going to be a permanent change then some financial recognition for the fact that staff now have to buy or rent, then heat, light and maintain their own office space. We appreciate that it's 'working from home' BUT when boiled down it's what it actually comes down to, then add the electricity bills to run their office machinery and supply a broadband signal worth having".