

HR Committee

22nd July 2021



Report of: Director: Workforce & Change

Title: COVID-19 - workforce update and return to workplaces

Ward: N/A

Officer Presenting Report: Mark Williams (Head of Human Resources)

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Recommendation

That the Committee notes the report.

Summary

COVID-19 has been the most significant incident the council has had to manage in living memory. The council responded quickly and effectively. Further national restrictions were introduced on 5th January 2021 and all the national restrictions were lifted on the 19th July 2021. This report provides an update on our recovery plans for workplaces.

The significant issues in the report are:

- We are taking a risk-based approach to opening workplaces which takes account of the current rate of COVID-19 case rates in the city; the advice of the city's Director of Public Health and our obligations to our employees under the Health and Safety at Work Act. We are taking account of the latest Government advice which states employers can start to plan for a return to workplaces
- We have introduced changes to the way we manage office spaces at the council's main offices at City Hall and Temple Street, through the introduction of zoned and socially-distanced work desks for services on a trial basis. The zoning arrangements take into account a reduced requirement for desks as many staff located in these services have been continuing to work from home effectively.
- The risk of exposure to COVID-19 remains high in workplaces and we will continue to manage the risks in accordance with the COVID secure workplace guidance even though this will no longer be a legal requirement from the 19th July 2021.
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Policy

1. The Council's HR policies have been modified where appropriate to reflect the current circumstances. For example, sickness absence related to COVID-19 is discounted under the Supporting Attendance Policy.

Consultation

2. **Internal**
Regular meetings are held with the trade unions who support the approach that is being taken regarding the management of workplaces. Managers are kept regularly apprised of the plans and have a chance to discuss at the monthly Leadership Forum.
3. **External**
None.

Context

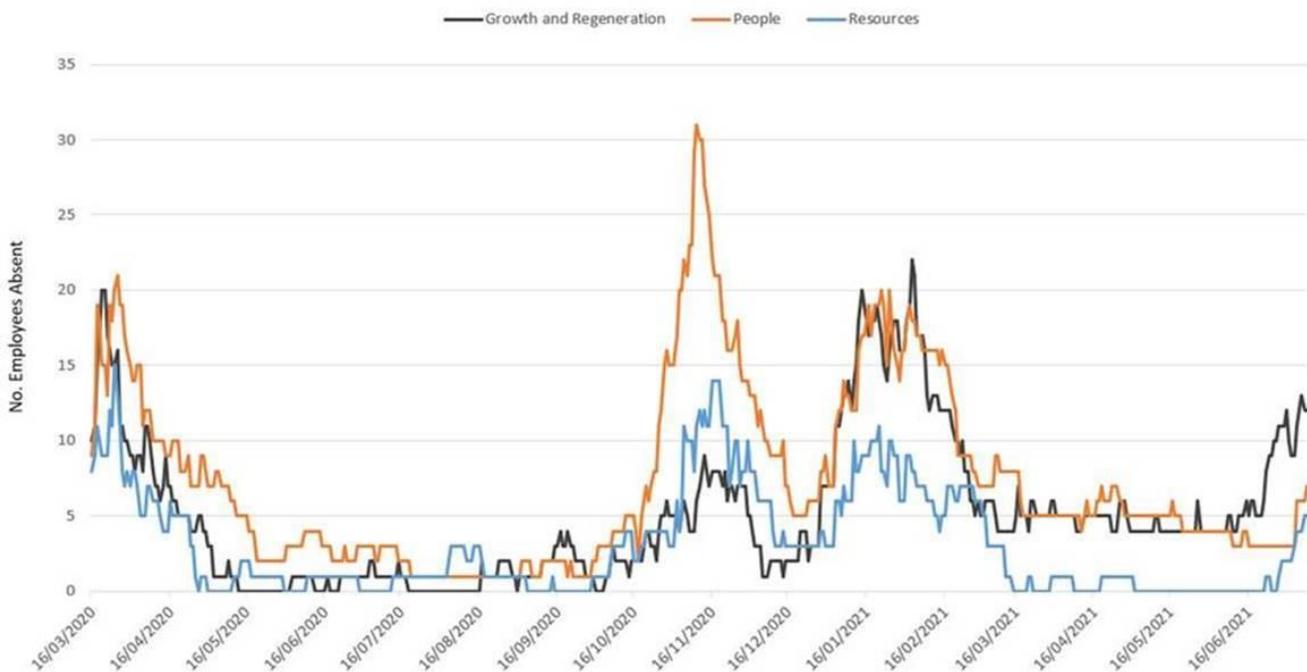
4. The organisation responded swiftly to COVID-19. Frontline services have maintained the full range of services by adapting the way they are delivered throughout the pandemic. Staff who work in city centre offices moved rapidly to working from home. We have also supported staff to continue to attend workplaces for well-being reasons.
5. Following the latest Government announcement about lifting restrictions, we are taking a measured approach to opening workplaces which takes account of the current rate of COVID-19 case rate in the city; the advice of the city's Director of Public Health and our obligations to our employees under the Health and Safety at Work Act. Government guidance is that employers can start to plan return to workplaces and this is the approach we are following, we have been working closely with managers over the last few months to prepare for a safe and controlled return to the workplace. Our frontline services are returning to normal service delivery arrangements and our risk assessments reflect the requirements of managing COVID secure workplaces as infection rates remain very high in the city. As a local measure, we will continue to require staff to wear face coverings when moving about in workplaces. We will continue to maintain social distancing measures in offices (including desk spacing) and promote good hygiene measures. We are also asking staff to continue to work from home where their job enables them to do this as infection rates remain high in the city. We are keeping the situation under regular review. As part of our work to reduce COVID cases we are also encouraging all staff to get both vaccine doses and take a lateral flow test twice a week if they are attending the workplace
6. We are supporting the health and wellbeing of staff through a number of initiatives - the work was informed by pulse surveys to ask staff what support they need. This includes regular bulletins with advice on how stay connected with colleagues whilst working remotely, resilience workshops, lunchtime-learning sessions to address concerns about returning to the workplace.

Over the past 15 months, teams and the majority of services have continued to operate effectively and staff surveys have confirmed that employees are keen to retain the benefits of flexible working. This has provided an opportunity to re-evaluate the use of workplaces, whilst supporting the desire for

continued flexible working from many employees. A return to workplace project was established in March 2021. Through the project we have:-

- i) Put in place zoned areas for services at City Hall and Temple Street which are locally managed. A desk booking system is used for test and trace purposes and colleagues who use the offices have to undergo an induction to re-orientate them into the workplace. The effectiveness of zoning will be reviewed on an ongoing basis.
- ii) Introduced new Future Workplace principles. These are provided at Appendix A and were the subject of consultation with trade unions and staff led groups.
- iii) Commissioned a supplier to install hybrid meeting technology in three meeting rooms at City Hall. This is scheduled to be installed by September. We are also trialing meeting pods to provide additional confidential meeting spaces at City Hall.
- iv) Undertaken regular surveys and discussion groups to understand the needs of staff.

7. Daily monitoring of absence due to COVID-19 continues. The chart below shows the sickness absence rate by directorate since March 2020:



8. Employees at all levels in the organisation – including those within the HR, Internal Communications and OD teams - have responded and adapted to COVID-19 very positively through their work in supporting the Council’s response to the pandemic.

Proposal

9. That the Committee notes this report.

Other Options Considered

10. None as this report is for information only.

Risk Assessment

11. Not required because this report is for information only. However, the return to workplace project has a detailed project plan and risks are managed appropriately as part of the project.

Public Sector Equality Duties

- 15a) Before making a decision, section 149 Equality Act 2010 requires that each decision-maker considers the need to promote equality for persons with the following “protected characteristics”: age, disability, gender reassignment, pregnancy and maternity, race, religion or belief, sex, sexual orientation. Each decision-maker must, therefore, have due regard to the need to:
- i) Eliminate discrimination, harassment, victimisation and any other conduct prohibited under the Equality Act 2010.
 - ii) Advance equality of opportunity between persons who share a relevant protected characteristic and those who do not share it. This involves having due regard, in particular, to the need to --
 - remove or minimise disadvantage suffered by persons who share a relevant protected characteristic;
 - take steps to meet the needs of persons who share a relevant protected characteristic that are different from the needs of people who do not share it (in relation to disabled people, this includes, in particular, steps to take account of disabled persons' disabilities);
 - encourage persons who share a protected characteristic to participate in public life or in any other activity in which participation by such persons is disproportionately low.
 - iii) Foster good relations between persons who share a relevant protected characteristic and those who do not share it. This involves having due regard, in particular, to the need to –
 - tackle prejudice; and
 - promote understanding.
- 15b) Not required because this report is for information only. However, the return to the workplace project has a comprehensive Equalities Impact Assessment in place.

Legal and Resource Implications

Legal

Not required because this report is for information only.

Financial

(a) Revenue

(b) Capital

Not required because this report is for information only.

Land

Not applicable.

Personnel

Not required because this report is for information only.

Appendices:

Appendix A – Future Workplace Principles

LOCAL GOVERNMENT (ACCESS TO INFORMATION) ACT 1985

Background Papers:

None.