

HR Committee

23rd September 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)

Contact Telephone Number: 07795 446270

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 work since the last meeting of the Committee on 22nd July 2021.

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.
- Hybrid meeting technology is now in place at City Hall and is being trialled.
- We have increased the number of desks that are available in our managed office spaces, whilst continuing to maintain social distancing requirements.
- The risk of exposure to COVID-19 remains high in workplaces and we will continue to manage the risks in accordance with current best practice guidance from the Health and Safety Executive (HSE).

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.

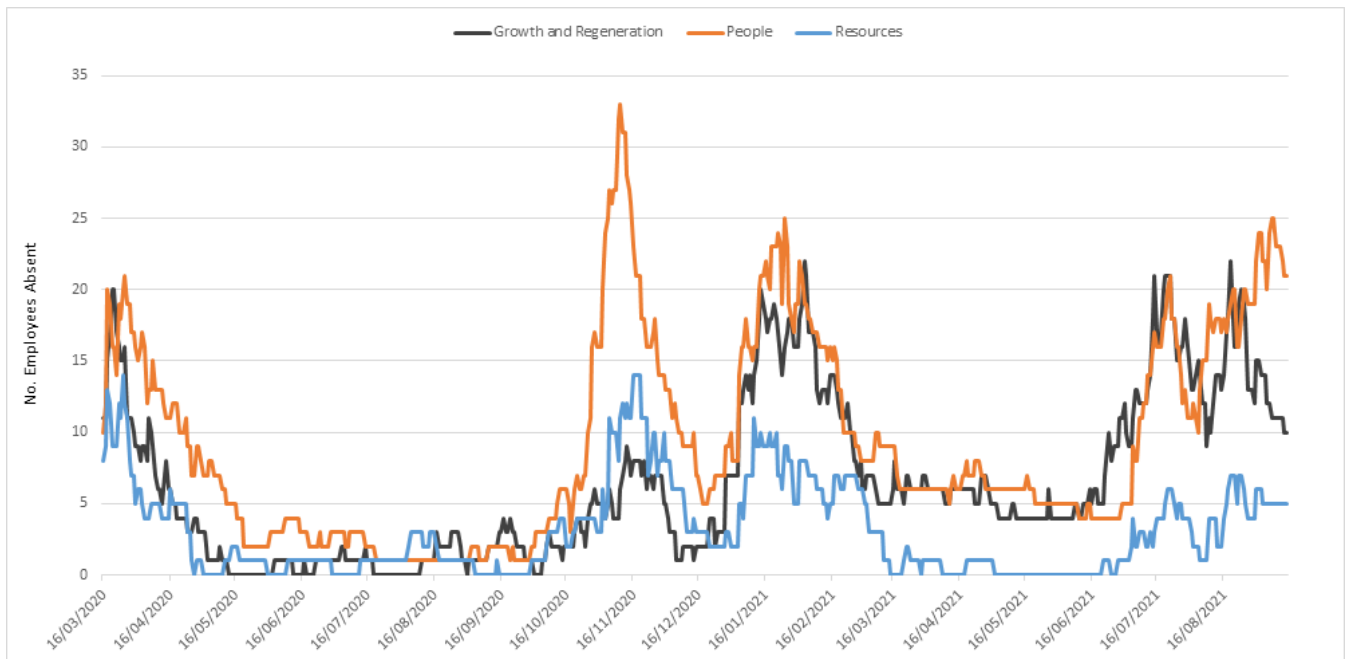
Consultation

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. From 31st August 2021, we increased the availability of desks in our core buildings whilst retaining social distancing measures. Heads of Service are now responsible for managing their allocated zones in accordance with our future workplace principles. There are also no restrictions on employees being permitted to work in offices but they are required to undertake an online induction course and book allocated desks before coming to work.
5. We are continuing to take 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. We will be reviewing our arrangements and protocols in early October. This will take into account the infection rates in the city.
6. We continue to require staff to wear face coverings when moving about in workplaces. We continue to maintain social distancing measures in offices (including desk spacing), maintaining good ventilation and promoting good hygiene measures. We have also increased the number of desks taking into account HSE best practice advice. As part of our work to reduce COVID cases we are continuing to encourage all staff to get both vaccine doses and take a lateral flow test twice a week if they are attending the workplace
7. Three hybrid meeting rooms are now in place at City Hall and we will be trialling their effectiveness. User feedback will be used to determine whether it should be extended further in our offices. Meeting rooms can also be used now at all offices.
8. We continue to have lunchtime-learning sessions to address concerns about returning to the workplace.
9. Daily monitoring of absence due to COVID-19 continues. Absence rates due to COVID have been risen in line with the rate of infection increasing. The chart below shows the sickness absence

rate by directorate since March 2020:



10. 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

11. That the Committee notes this report.

Other Options Considered

12. None as this report is for information only.

Risk Assessment

13. 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:

None

LOCAL GOVERNMENT (ACCESS TO INFORMATION) ACT 1985

Background Papers:

None.