

Scrutiny Report



Performance Scrutiny Committee – Place and Corporate

Part 1

Date: 6th September 2021

Subject Staff Support during Covid-19

Author Scrutiny Adviser

The following people have been invited to attend for this item:

Invitee:	Area / Role / Subject
Rhys Cornwall	Head of People and Business Change
Rachael Davies	HR and OD Manager

Section A – Committee Guidance and Recommendations

1 Recommendations to the Committee

The Committee is asked to

1. Consider the information contained within the report
2. Discuss the ways in which staff wellbeing have been considered by the Council throughout the course of the Covid 19 pandemic and whether any additional measures need to be taken

2 Context

Background

- 2.1 Prior to the emergence of the Covid 19 pandemic in March 2020 the Council had a range of tools by which it could support the wellbeing of the workforce, balanced against the need to have a fully operational staff resource in order to deliver services to residents of the city. These tools included a full doctor-led occupational health service based in the Newport locality, an Employee Assistance Programme (EAP) which provides in the moment counselling and advice over the telephone on a 24/7, 365 days a year basis, access to the Health and Safety team for stress risk assessments, and a high level of reference to wellbeing issues and subsequent signposting for more help and information in the staff newsletter throughout the year.

3 Actions since March 2020

- 3.1 As a consequence of the first lock-down in March 2020 the Council immediately took steps to consider how best to protect and support the workforce. In line with government guidance all staff who were able to work from home were issued with guidance to do so, whilst those that were unable to work from home but were at higher risk of potential harm due to an underlying health condition, or had a family member who was vulnerable, to remain at home and not attend their workplace. Communication via email, newsletter and manager cascade to teams was sent out on a regular basis offering updates and information on the situation.

The HR/Payroll system was quickly updated to include new categories for managers to record the different reasons for staff being unavailable to work; those who were self-isolating, shielding or who were absent due to contracting Covid. This information was issued daily in order to best understand the impact that the differing absences were having on the operational running of services. It has now reduced to twice weekly as whilst the number of staff absent is significantly reduced, should this situation rapidly change, there is the capability to increase the frequency of reporting if needed.

The Gold command group took a series of decisions around the way in which terms and conditions were applied in order to support the workforce. Overtime rates and the flexi time scheme were reviewed and changes applied to enable operational services to continue and increased flexibility to staff who needed support balancing their work and home lives during the demands of the pandemic.

A key action in the early part of the pandemic was to ensure that staff were working from home in a safe way. The Health and Safety team issued communication to the workforce asking them to complete a piece of e-learning on DSE issues and complete a DSE assessment. This was to enable staff to understand whether they were at any risk of poor posture or inappropriate working conditions and to take action to remedy these risks. A checklist was made available to supplement the DSE assessment which gave staff the opportunity to select which items of equipment they already had at home, perhaps which may have been provided from the office when they vacated, and which items they did not have access to but needed. Those items were then made available for home delivery or collection from the Civic Centre, and ranged from wireless keyboards to desks and chairs. Where it was simply not possible for staff to be safe at home, or where staff had an individual set of circumstances where working from home was not conducive, managers were supportive in making alternative arrangements to attend a Covid secure workplace.

Health and Safety support

- 3.2 The role of the Health and Safety team changed rapidly in March 2020 and, by necessity, a lot of proactive work ceased at that time. The volume of work that the pandemic generated was unprecedented. However, health and safety legislation was not suspended and the complications of managing this, whilst balancing covid risks were significant. Much of the day to day health and safety work or accident reporting and investigation, wellbeing assessments, support for managers and staff, and ensuring that work is carried out safely has of course continued. The role of the H&S Manager continues to be almost totally taken up with covid related issues, with the rest of the team attempting to balance the day to day of reactive health and safety under covid restrictions and with covid controls always at the forefront. We have done our utmost to assist managers in discharging both their health and safety and covid duties and support them to continue to deliver frontline services under incredibly trying circumstances. Some of the activity that has continued to be provided includes;
- Advising and supporting managers in writing and implementing Covid 19 risk assessments and activity risk assessments reflecting Covid 19 controls
 - Ongoing support around school transport operations

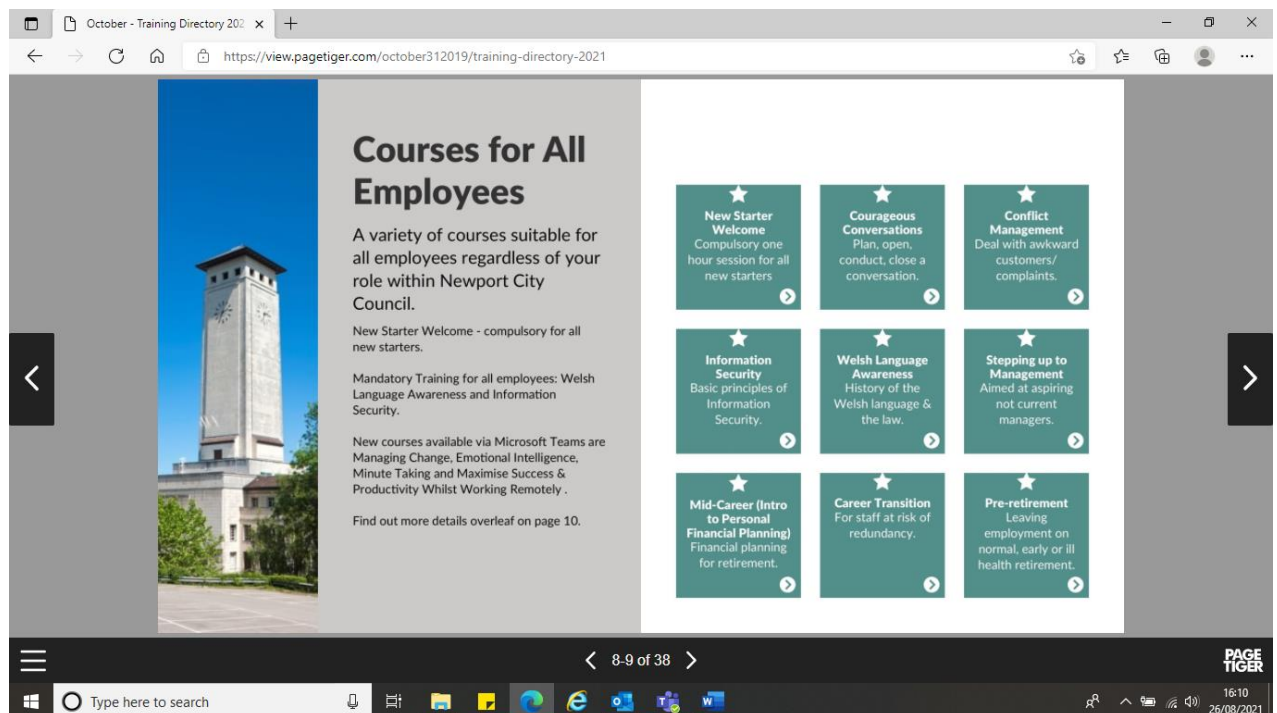
- Continuing to support schools with Covid risk assessment, operational management and case management
- Following up on an increasing number of staff Covid+ cases to establish whether they might be RIDDOR reportable.
- Supporting the Test, Trace, Protect (TTP) process in schools and with confirmed cases in NCC staff – advising on contact isolations and contact group closures, liaising with environmental health, providing extensive advice, support and guidance to schools around isolation and quarantine requirements, as individual results are coming through before they are working their way through the TTP system, so we need to take actions before the TTP process begins.
- Developing and issuing guidance on covid related issues.
- Supporting various departments that are unable to work remotely by carrying out briefing sessions on COVID-19, discussing any concerns that they have and ensuring that they feel safe at work.
- Developing a COVID-19 health and safety compliance audit template, which will enable the health and safety team to identify any areas of concern and to ensure that the necessary advice and support is provided to managers.
- Supporting educational and childcare settings to resume/continue face to face operations whilst introducing lateral flow device testing. This involved the health and safety department working closely with the Environmental Health team to amend and present the COVID-19 presentation from the asset bank to all Head Teachers. We have conducted several drop-in sessions for Head Teachers to ensure that they feel confident in implementing the necessary guidance and have provided overarching risk assessment updates, along with drafting and distributing the necessary protocols for staff.
- Conducting a Covid-19 health and safety compliance audit of the Civic Centre to identify conformances, non-conformances and opportunities for improvement.
- Developing and maintaining a Covid-19 action log to ensure that the necessary requirements are implemented. Completing desktop audits for school settings to ensure that Covid-19 control measures are robust, and that they are operating in a Covid-secure way. This includes reviewing existing 'bubbles', risk assessments and emergency procedures.
- Changing some training programmes to e-learning and training delivery via teams, including replacements for face to face skin surveillance, manual handling training and competency assessments.

We have identified a significant increase in the number of occupational health referrals during this quarter, and of the previous quarter, where clinical support is required for employees suffering from effects of the pandemic – These are either upon themselves directly, or upon their family members, which has impacted upon their physical or mental wellbeing. Where possible, health and safety support continues to be offered during the interim period until an occupational health appointment can take place. However, it is increasingly clear that clinical support is needed for these cases, where there is no work-related link and a medical pathway is required.

Learning and Development

3.3 All in-person courses ceased in March 2020 and after a period of waiting to see whether the pandemic would be short-lived it became clear that the learning and development programme needed to be reinvented in order to continue to provide key training to those in need. Our training providers adapted their courses to be delivered remotely via Teams and were up and running within 6 months. The 2021/22 learning and development programme is entirely provided via Teams (with the exception of first aid and fire training), but as in-person contact increases throughout the remainder of 2021 and into 2022 we will look to repurpose as appropriate.

Whilst the 2020/21 learning and development programme was significantly affected by Covid 19 and most courses were cancelled due to the need to reduce face to face contact, we have ensured that the 2021/22 offer is running at full capacity by moving face to face training to online, remote or e-learning wherever possible.



We therefore expect to offer a full programme of learning and development throughout this year, recognising that the workforce will require access to upskilling opportunities despite the disruption of the pandemic.

As a direct result of feedback received from those working from home, the most popular course in recent months has been a new offer – Maximising Success and Productivity – tackling the challenges of remote working. The aim of this course is to help understand and overcome the challenges of working remotely. It will cover miscommunication; motivating yourself at home; avoiding distractions; prioritising workload; staying connected with colleagues and remote team work – all areas highlighted in our employee surveys that have caused concern since March 2020.

Our commitment to equalities means that whilst we have continued to offer Autism Awareness, Deaf Awareness (introduction to Sign Language), Dementia Friends Awareness, Anti-Slavery and Human Trafficking, Preventing Violent Extremism and Violence against women and domestic abuse awareness training throughout the pandemic, we have also recently started a Council wide rollout of equality and diversity training, with managers and senior leaders being enrolled onto an Inclusive Leadership course to improve personal knowledge, leadership skills and most importantly, create a positive working environment for all of our staff.

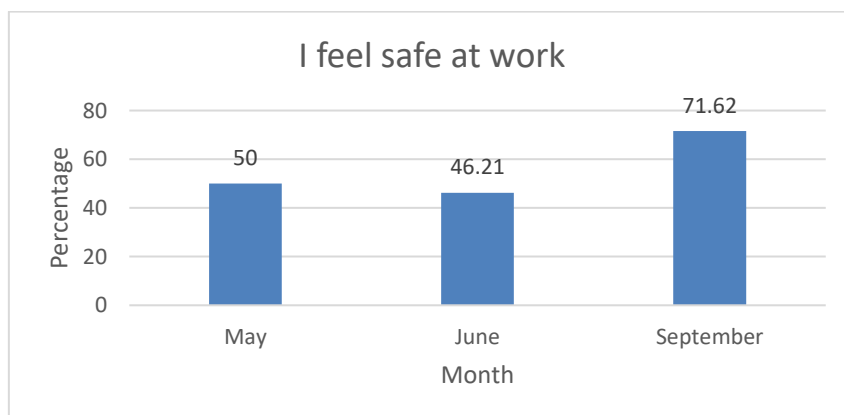
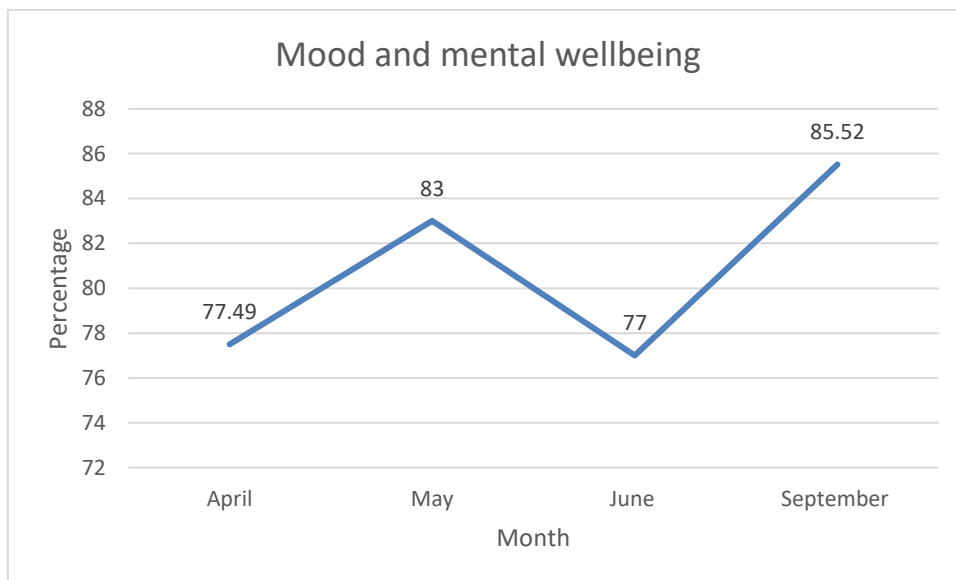
As a consequence of the Covid 19 pandemic the Corporate Management Team have identified a group learning opportunity in health and safety and to support their request for upskilling, will be receiving formal IOSH health and safety training on leadership responsibilities towards assets and resources, including the workforce, so that wellbeing is regarded as high priority by all of our senior leaders.

We expect additional learning and development need to be identified as we emerge from the demands of the pandemic that will enable the workforce to feel supported and valued, whilst enabling service areas to make improvements in the services their teams deliver to residents.

Employee Communications

3.4 Throughout the course of the pandemic surveys have been issued to the workforce to understand the impact of Covid 19 on both work and home life in order to assist with decision making on what support to put in place.

Wellbeing surveys were issued in April, May, June, September and November 2020 to see the trend in responses, as shown in the results below.



A separate survey was issued to managers to ascertain the impact of working through the pandemic on their levels of wellbeing, and feedback included a range of different responses to the challenges being faced by managers and their teams:

“My workload during the pandemic has grown every week, as well as having family commitments, homeschooling and looking after young children. Although my manager says the right things the work is still there to be done and so I end up having to work ridiculous hours and still don't feel that I am able to do everything.”

“My manager is great the support I receive is very good from her, I am able to phone after work and discuss any concerns I may have. My Manager was very supportive, I am a diabetic and she ensured I completed the covid risk assessment and put in place a system where I could still do my job but from home.”

“I feel there are tools in place from the organisation such as iTrent check ins, how to record sickness etc. However, some basic tips on best ways to keep in touch with a team, monitoring productivity and motivating a team virtually would be beneficial.”

Receiving and listening to this feedback has enabled the Council to direct resources to the most appropriate areas, whether that be providing messages to reassure staff with home-schooling demands that they were supported to balance their work and home lives, or identifying new learning and development opportunities to address the new way of working remotely and how to stay motivated.

The frequency of surveying has reduced to quarterly due to feedback that the same questions were being asked of the workforce too often. The latest survey was issued in August 2021 and a further one will be issued in the Autumn.

In addition to regular touch points with the workforce the Council's intranet page has a dedicated Covid-19 messages page where all of the communication from March 2020 can be found, including previous versions of the staff newsletter.

The screenshot shows a web browser window displaying a SharePoint intranet page. The browser's address bar shows the URL: <https://intranet.corporate.newport/sites/live/my-employment/staff-conference>. The SharePoint page has a green header with navigation links: COUNCIL, MY DEVELOPMENT, MY EMPLOYMENT, MY FINANCE, MY INFORMATION, MY WELLBEING, and MY WORKSPACE. The main content area is titled "COVID19 Messages & Important Information" and features a large yellow box with the following text:

Keeping up to date on the latest coronavirus (Covid 19) pandemic advice we appreciate can be difficult. In light of this we have provided information on a regular basis via staff news. Information will continue to be circulated by staff news, and published to this page.

Latest Updates:

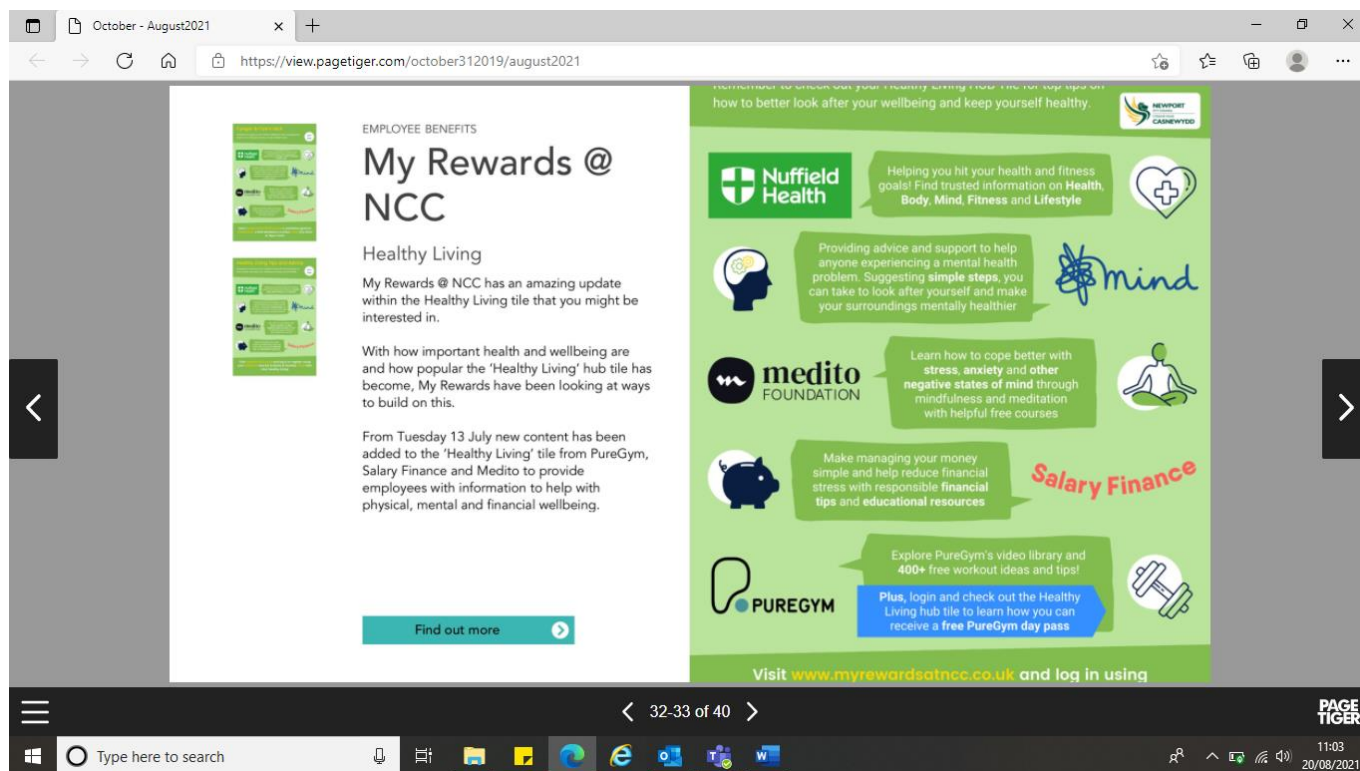
Update 30 July 2022 - All adults who have been fully-vaccinated will no longer have to self-isolate if they are identified as close contacts of someone with coronavirus from 7 August. The most recent Welsh Government guidance can be found here: <https://media.service.gov.wales/news/changes-to-self-isolation-for-fully-vaccinated-adults>

Update 8 June 2021 - Wales moves from Alert Level 2 to Alert Level 1. The most recent Welsh Government guidance regarding the restrictions from June 7th can be found here: <https://gov.wales/restrictions-7-june-2021>
Newport City Council is required to operate in the safest possible way.

Update 12 March 2021 - Information for protecting people defined on medical grounds as extremely vulnerable from COVID-19 (known as 'shielding')

The bottom of the screenshot shows the Windows taskbar with the search bar, taskbar icons, and system tray showing the time as 11:02 on 20/08/2021.

Our fortnightly staff newsletter continues to be issued via Page Tiger, an external web hosted platform which enables us to send communications to employees personal email accounts where they do not hold a Newport.gov.uk email account, which includes our schools based workforce. There is always an emphasis on wellbeing in each newsletter and different resources or signposting is made available.



Absence

- 3.5 The Council set a target of 9.98 days of absence per FTE in 2020/21 and this was achieved with an outturn of 7.12 days per FTE. This is the first time in many years that sickness absence levels were under target. There were some slight misses against target in Adults, Childrens and City Services which is to be expected given the high level of front-line work that has continued throughout the pandemic and the increased demand on the workforce in those areas. The first quarter of 2021/22 is showing a similar projection with Adults and City Services already slightly over target.

The total number of days lost to sickness absence in 2019/20 was 43,565, with 12,190 of those days due to short term absence such as viral infection, sickness/diarrhoea and ear/nose/throat. Comparing these figures to 2020/21, the total number of days lost was 31,736, with 5,837 of them due to short term absence. This is a 52% decrease in the number of days lost due to short term absence and a 47% drop in the number of occurrences. However, the number of days lost due to stress and anxiety remains the most common reason for absence with 12,407 days lost in 2019/20 and 11,184 in 2020/21, a drop of 11%.

Whilst it is highly possible that absence levels are lower due to social mixing being restricted throughout much of 2020/21 and less transmission of colds, influenza and other viruses, it is perhaps possible that some illness is being masked by homeworking. It is less challenging to work from home whilst feeling unwell compared to commuting to a workplace and working with

colleagues. It is also possible that some reasons for absence are mitigated by working from home such as less opportunity for poor working relationships which can lead to absence.

It should be noted that the Council's approach towards absence management has been a traditional method commonly used by employers, focused on calculating the numbers of days and occurrences of absence each year and applying a blanket policy to issue formal warnings to individuals hitting these 'triggers.'

The Covid-19 pandemic has highlighted the importance of living and working as part of a community that protects those who are vulnerable, cares for those who are in need, and supports those around us. As a responsible employer we should be role modelling these values to our workforce and a fundamental shift in the way we manage absence is both timely and necessary to show that Newport City Council is an employer of choice, recognising that illness is something to be supported through and not sanctioned by.

We are now developing a new approach to managing absence that will modernise the way in which we treat illness at work and transform our methodology towards maintaining wellness whilst in work as opposed to managing absence from work.

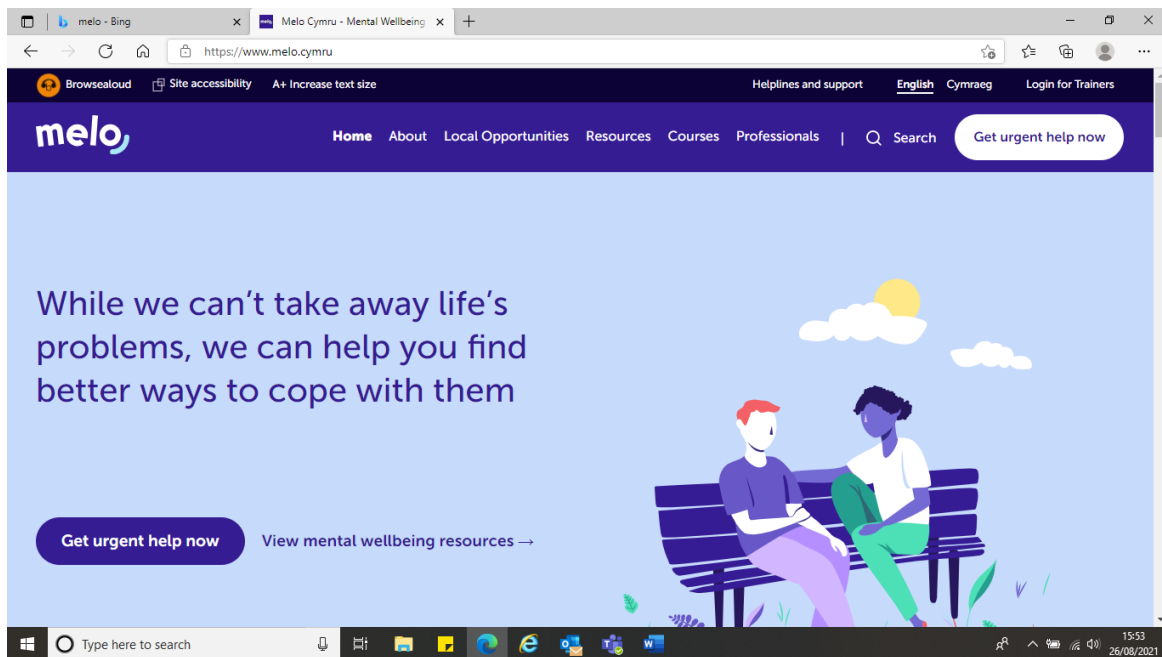
4 Future Developments

We will be reviewing our wellbeing offer this year and assessing the effectiveness of the tools currently available. This includes a new occupational health contract, a review of the EAP and the way in which we promote wellbeing to the workforce. We will be putting a wellbeing programme together where all aspects can gather in one clear document. Feedback from our surveys has suggested that information can be challenging to locate and is not always clearly linked to other areas of support, so we intend to rebrand the wellbeing offer in one location on the intranet and make it available via Page Tiger for all employees to access from any device at work or at home.

Newport's PSB has welcomed an offer from ABUHB to roll out Connect 5, a mental wellbeing workforce training programme which is being jointly funded by the health board and Welsh Government. Connect 5 is the first, and only, evidence-based training programme available in the UK which aims to promote mental health and wellbeing. It has been developed using and incorporating evidence-based theory and tools, and is guided by the principles of 'Making Every Contact Count' (MECC).

As a key partner we welcome the work that colleague in health have developed to support this area and will engage in the programme for the benefit of our workforce. We will commit to identifying colleagues to be trained in being able to deliver training themselves across the Council. The programme aims to improve mental wellbeing within a work environment, have quality conversations about mental health and wellbeing and share information on where to find free resources, local opportunities to help and additional support for mental health where it is needed.

In addition to this new area of learning and development, we will commit to signposting www.melo.cymru across our staff communications as the primary source for help and guidance with mental health support.



4. Suggested Areas of Focus

Role of the Committee

The role of the Committee in considering the report is to:

The Committee is asked to:

- Consider the evidence presented
- Assess whether staff welfare issues have been sufficiently highlighted and mitigated
- Assess whether there are further opportunities to support the workforce during the ongoing pandemic.
- Conclusions:
 - What was the overall conclusion of the Committee?
 - Is the Committee satisfied that it has had all of the relevant information to base a conclusion?
 - Do any areas require a more in-depth review by the Committee?
 - Do the Committee wish to make any Comments / Recommendations to the Cabinet Member/ Head of People and Business Change?

Suggested Lines of Enquiry

4.1 The Committee may wish to consider the following:

- Has sufficient emphasis been made on the wellbeing offer to the workforce since March 2020?
- How confident are we that support has been available to all who need it?
- What concerns are there over staff welfare?
- What are the considerations for the future?

Section B – Supporting Information

5 Supporting Information

5.1 Included within the attached paper

6 Links to Council Policies and Priorities

- People and Culture Strategy 2018-2022
- Wellness at Work Policy/Management of Attendance Policy
- Learning and Development Directory 2021/22

7 Wellbeing of Future Generation (Wales) Act

7.1 General questions

The Well-being of Future Generations (Wales) Act 2015 came into force in April 2016 and is about improving the social, economic, environmental and cultural well-being of Wales. The Act is designed to support and deliver a public service that meets the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs. As one of the 44 bodies named in the Act, we must consider the Act in everything we do.

Seven well-being goals give clarity of the shared purpose of the public bodies listed in the Act for the long-term well-being of Wales. The council's approach to supporting members and staff to work remotely must support the well-being goals.

The Act also puts in place a sustainable development principle, which sets out the way we must go about meeting our duty under the Act.

7.2 The Well-being Goals and the Sustainable Development Principle

An increased focus on workforce wellbeing will have **long-term** and **preventative** benefits to the health and well-being of staff, will primarily support the well-being goal: *A Healthier Wales* and does not adversely affect any of the others. The focus also supports the Council's Corporate Plan well-being objective

To enable people to be healthy, independent & resilient;

In addition, the council is working with partners in a **collaborative** way through the One Newport Public Services Board (PSB) and the implementation of the Local Well-being Plan Well-being Objectives.

Our wellbeing work supports that of the Local Wellbeing Plan objectives:

- 1) Everyone feels good about living, working, visiting and investing in our unique city.

- 2) Everyone has the skills and opportunities to develop, prosper and contribute to a sustainable, thriving city.
- 3) Everyone belongs to friendly, connected resilient communities and feels confident and empowered to improve their well-being.
- 4) Newport has healthy, safe and resilient environments with an integrated sustainable travel network.

8. Background Papers

Include all additional documents that are referenced in the report, and those that you have used as background reading. Hyperlink to online versions of them if available.

- [The Essentials - Wellbeing of Future Generation Act \(Wales\)](#)
- [Corporate Plan](#)
- Management of Attendance Policy
- Council's intranet Covid-19 page
- Learning and Development Directory 2021/22
- People and Culture Strategy 2018-22

Report Completed: September 2021

