INTERNAL AUDIT REPORT

FROM:	Audit and Risk Manager	**SUBJECT:**	Health and Wellbeing of Staff under COVID Working Arrangements
TO:	Head of People and Communications	**DATE:**	11 February 2021
C.C.	Chief Executive Deputy Chief Executive (AJ) Head of Finance Portfolio Holder (Cllr Day)		

1 Introduction

1.1 In accordance with the (amended) Audit Plan for 2020/21, an examination of the above subject area has recently been completed by Jemma Butler, Internal Auditor, and this report presents the findings and conclusions for information and action where appropriate.

1.2 Wherever possible, findings have been discussed with the staff involved in the procedures examined and their views are incorporated, where appropriate, into the report. My thanks are extended to all concerned for the help and cooperation received during the audit.

1.3 The audit was undertaken during the COVID-19 pandemic. This has meant a slightly different approach has been taken to complete the audit. Rather than observing staff members and meeting staff face to face, correspondence has been via email, telephone calls or virtually through MSTeams.

2 Background

2.1 Health and wellbeing was a priority area of focus in 2019, referred to as The Year of Wellbeing. Various initiatives were planned and organised to promote health and wellbeing within the district and for all employees. Initiatives carried out included Thrive, continued promotion of the health and wellbeing scheme and the support available through services from the employee support officers and Unison.

2.2 On 23rd March, the COVID-19 pandemic forced staff to adopt new ways of working, with the lockdown requiring nearly all 519 employees to temporarily relocate to their homes. Roughly a week prior to this WDC had already identified a number of 'at risk' staff and made arrangements for them to work from home. Some staff were unable to carry out their role because they were not normally office based or because they did not have the necessary equipment, where possible alternative arrangements were made, deploying some to help with the workload in other areas. A checklist

was issued to identify staff ICT needs and where health and wellbeing support may be required.

2.3   35 staff members were identified as a priority to return to Riverside House to work rather than stay home. This was made possible in September due to COVID safe conditions being met (e.g. social distancing, perspex screens, hand sanitising stations etc.). In addition to this there are a number of staff members (circa. 44) who work at Riverside House on a more flexible basis using a team rota system to enable them to fulfil their role.

2.4   Since the start of the pandemic, advice and guidance has been rolled out from various bodies including HSE, Public Health England and the Government. As well as information regarding local and national restrictions, the advice has included a focus on health and wellbeing for employees working from home.

2.5   The purpose of the audit is to ensure the health and wellbeing of staff has been promoted and has been considered throughout the pandemic so far and that appropriate support and guidance following government legislation has been and continues to be provided.

3   **Scope and Objectives of the Audit**

3.1   The audit was undertaken to test the management controls in place.

3.2   In terms of scope, the audit covered the following areas:
   • Information and communication
   • Monitoring and reviewing feedback
   • Legal and regulatory guidance
   • Insurance and risk assessments

3.3   The audit programme identified the expected controls. The control objectives examined were:
   • Staff feel included and secure in their role
   • Staff support is readily available
   • Staff are aware of how to make the most of their working environment
   • Staff are not working excessive hours
   • Staff morale is high with staff feeling valued, supported and positive about working for the Council
   • Staff are encouraged take regular screen/desk breaks
   • Staff feel valued and do not feel isolated
   • Managers are aware of productivity issues and able to provide support
   • Vacancies are recruited to quickly
   • HSE guidance is followed
   • The Council maintains its IIP award
   • The Council is sharing potential costs from claims with our insurance company
   • Risk assessments are up to date and issues are being addressed

4   **Findings**

4.1   **Recommendations from Previous Report**

4.1.1   The previous audit of Health and Wellbeing was completed in July 2019. However, whilst there were recommendations made, they are not thought to be relevant to this audit. The primary focus of this audit is the Health and Wellbeing of Staff under COVID Working Arrangements and should, therefore, be considered as a standalone audit.

4.2   **Information and Communication**

4.2.1   Since the start of lockdown, updates have been communicated to staff via a number of methods including a 'Big Button' on the intranet. Legislation is issued quickly whereas non-compliant guidance has often needed to be reviewed and deciphered by a team of staff to make sure they understand what it means and the implications for WDC employees. The team involved in relaying the communications includes Senior HR Business Partners, the Head of Health and Community Protection, the Marketing and Communications Manager, the Learning and Development Officer and the Localities and Partnerships Officer. Updates are posted to the big button as quickly as possible once the legislation has been issued or updated ensuring a consistent message is shared across all communication and ongoing initiatives.

4.2.2   At the start of lockdown, the Communications team were aware of a number of staff who did not have access to the intranet or their emails whilst working from home. A text service was, therefore, set up to relay important messages, updates and newsletters. 200 staff members signed up for the service. The last message issued was on 24th June 2020 as, by this point, most staff had been issued with equipment to enable them to work from home.

4.2.3   Staff are also issued with an update from the Chief Executive. This is usually issued at the weekend directly to staff emails. These updates are also issued to stakeholders and key contacts as well as being published in the residents' newsletter. Early in the pandemic the updates to staff were quite formal but, as a result of comments received from staff through the staff survey, the tone has been changed slightly and the update is amended to prioritise the staff news.

4.2.4   Managers are frequently encouraged to have conversations with staff and to signpost them to the wellbeing initiatives and services available. Throughout the pandemic, questionnaires, talking points and reminders have been shared through Managers Forum. They have also been issued with guidance to encourage staff to take breaks and to use their annual leave, not necessarily to go away on holiday but to have a break from work.

4.2.5   Updates and information provided to staff through the Big Button is deleted as it is updated. Early into lockdown there was information provided regarding the ability to work flexibly whilst having children at home and advice on home office set up. It was highlighted during the audit that the

advice was no longer available and is still of benefit as staff are replacing home furniture with desks and other equipment is being replaced or where staff may have children isolating at home. The advice had not been removed on purpose and has since been reinstated.

4.2.6 In April there was a focus on health and wellbeing with a Big Button released highlighting mental health, how the Council can support staff, and tips to improve your mental health. The guidance signposted staff to support and issued tips on working remotely as well as promoting the healthcare scheme. Again this information is still relevant but the article is no longer available, although managers have continued to be encouraged to have conversations with their staff. As mentioned in 4.2.5 the information had been removed unintentionally and links will be reinstated.

Risks

1. **Staff may be following working guidance from the HR handbook, rather than the up-to-date guidance in place during the current pandemic.**
2. **Staff may be unaware of the wellbeing support available to them.**

Recommendations

1. **The current advice and information should still be easily accessible to staff so it can be reviewed if their circumstances change or when there are new starters.**
2. **Reminders or links to the support available should be an ongoing priority in the current pandemic.**

4.2.7 Where there have been changes in staff roles, either through re-organisation or new starters or leavers, the individual staff pages (located through the search function) are not being updated accordingly. For some of the senior positions the communications team have provided a Big Button update with the new starter or change of role information. This has been found to be very useful as it has not only helped staff feel 'in the loop' but it has also given some background on the staff member and the chance to get to know a little about them.

Advisory

Updates of staff or service area changes could be shared on team pages or big buttons to help ensure staff don't feel further isolated.

4.2.8 The impact of the tone and style of communication delivered plays an important role in the current situation. The guidance and updates, if not adapted accordingly, could unintentionally have a negative effect on staff that are already struggling. During the audit, a training session started to be rolled out 'making virtual working work' with part of the session highlighting the importance of a balanced approach by using paradoxes to show the negatives and positives for a selection of scenarios. By ensuring a balanced

view, and continuing the mental health theme from earlier in the year, staff that are feeling isolated may feel like they aren't alone and may be more willing to talk about their problems or access the support available.

Risk

The tone and style of updates and guidance may have a negative effect on the staff causing them to feel further isolated.

Recommendation

Messages should be continuously reviewed and adapted including those delivered by managers. Managers should make regular contact with their staff enabling them to provide guidance and signpost them to support.

4.2.9   The Council has a wide range of support available to staff. However, the information is posted on various pages throughout the intranet, so the support is not always easy to locate. The main health and safety page includes a team page for health and wellbeing, which directs users to WCC pages for wellbeing, the BUPA scheme, 2019 Year of Wellbeing page and the health officers group (HOG). There are no direct links to the employee support officers (ESO's), Unison or the emergency support line and counselling. There are dedicated pages for the ESO's and Unison but they are not easy to locate. Carrying out a search for 'staff support' does not provide any relevant links.

Risk

Staff may not be able to find information on the support available to them when they need it.

Recommendations

The Health and Wellbeing page should be kept up-to-date and include current links, promoting the services and resources the Council has available to staff.

The information relating to the support available to staff should have the relevant intranet tags so it appears in the search function.

4.2.10   There are currently 55% of staff registered in the healthcare scheme. Last year's claims totalled £26,223.60, with the highest percentage of claims going towards dental (circa. 30%) or therapy costs (circa. 26%). The current year's claims figures are not yet available, although it would be expected that claims would be lower with many services being closed for most of the year, other than for emergency treatment. The uptake of staff registering on the scheme does not appear to have been impacted by the pandemic.

4.2.11   Before the pandemic the 'people and change' training sessions had been completed, with the session being designed to help staff adapt and embrace change. Training sessions have continued in the virtual environment with

only a few of the regular courses unable to be carried out. The courses that can be offered online have been better attended than previous years with staff logging in on time and there being fewer 'no shows'. Provision of the training courses through virtual methods appears to have been successful with only a few minor technical issues where the attendee's internet has dropped out or has been inconsistent. However, there are some staff who have been unable to attend training this way as they do not yet have the equipment needed. This will be resolved once the laptops have been rolled out to staff, with priorities decided by management.

4.3   **Monitoring and Reviewing Feedback**

4.3.1   One-to-ones are still continuing where staff have the equipment to take part and almost 77% of appraisals were able to be carried out. The guidance has continued to advise staff to work from home since March 23rd 2020. A roll out of laptops has begun to ensure that the staff who don't currently have suitable equipment will be able to work from home and access the virtual meeting platforms. In June, the guidance was updated to allow workplaces to reopen as long as they could do so in a Covid-compliant manner.

4.3.2   Feedback from staff has been obtained through a staff survey carried out in June. The feedback showed that staff were enjoying the nicer weather and the ability to go outside and walk on their lunchbreaks or in the evenings. Some staff were even able to take their equipment into their gardens to work. There were a number of positives identified for staff working from home but the survey also had responses from staff who felt isolated, were struggling to have a definition between work and home life, wanting to reclaim their dining/kitchen tables, had issues with ICT or equipment and some who simply missed the general office interactions. Some of these points are explored further in the below paragraphs.

4.3.3   The survey was carried out at a time when staff believed we would begin to return to the office to work due to the government briefings advising the nation that we were moving into recovery. However, the legislative guidance remained the same, advising staff to work from home apart from where work places could be Covid secure. A follow-up short survey is due to be completed in January as part of the Chief Executive talk. At this point, most of the workforce will have been temporary home workers for around ten months.

4.3.4   The results of the survey were circulated towards the end of June. Since this point, there have been various intranet posts produced to help with the issues raised within the survey.

4.3.5   To help with the isolation and general interactions, some managers are encouraging non-work meetings and 'tea break sessions'. Staff Voice also recently ran two sessions for staff to join and just have a catch up and chat. The sessions were not accessible to all staff, due to the link being embedded in the message or staff not having the necessary equipment. Further sessions are planned to be organised. There also needs an across-the-board clear and consistent approach, ensuring all managers are offering the opportunity to their staff.

Risk

Staff may not be able to access the casual meetings from a link on the intranet.

Recommendation

As most staff cannot access virtual meetings through VMware, there should be alternative joining instructions issued to allow staff to access the sessions from the device used for virtual meetings.

4.3.6   The Media team has also recently produced a Big Button for staff, providing ideas on how to keep warm before turning the heating up. This responds to the concerns raised both in the survey and through Rumour Mill (the staff discussion board) regarding the increase in utility bills due to working from home. As well as ideas to keep warm, the information also reminds staff about the ESO's, Unison and the health and wellbeing membership scheme, although no direct links are provided. There was also a reminder and link included for the tax rebate available for staff who are temporarily working from home.

4.3.7   ICT are working to ensure all staff have suitable equipment to work at home and be able to attend virtual meetings by providing laptops. This is not a small task and the roll out could take a number of months to complete. All laptops need to be set up correctly with the appropriate programs and systems and staff will then need to be trained on how to use the equipment. This training is undertaken face-to-face so must be COVID secure and relies on staff arriving on time and engaging in the process. Unfortunately, it has been reported that staff have repeatedly arrived late, delaying the process, and affecting not only their session but following sessions. A reminder email and clear instructions have been circulated to help reduce this issue.

4.3.8   Unison have been meeting frequently with both HR and the Joint Communication Forum to discuss any concerns and how to support staff returning to work. They have been providing health and wellbeing support to their members throughout the pandemic and have been encouraging communication with managers. Membership does not appear to have been affected by the pandemic; there are currently 211 members, equating to circa. 41% of staff. Unison are working with HR to produce the next staff survey which will have a focus on health and wellbeing.

4.3.9   35 staff were identified (through the staff survey, an ICT and health and wellbeing checklist and manager discussions) as needing to return to the office. They returned in September after the workplace had been made Covid secure, by installing screens in between work stations, providing hand sanitation stations, one way systems, new working guidance, and more ensuring that the staff who needed to return to work could do so safely.

4.4   **Legal and Regulatory Guidance**

4.4.1   As an employer, WDC has the same health and safety responsibilities for home workers as for any other workers and this includes those who are temporary home workers. Insurance companies, the Health and Safety executive (HSE), Mind and various other external companies realised at the start of the first lockdown that there was a high potential for insurance claims against businesses from staff due to the working arrangements as well as in increase in the potential for mental health issues. To help with this, the HSE, Safety and Health Practitioners (SHP), the insurers and many other companies provided guidance for employers to share with their staff. The guidance included advice on various home working aspects.

4.4.2   The Health and Safety Co-ordinator shared the guidance and advice from SHP with the Media team who posted it to the lockdown Big Button earlier in the year, as well as incorporating it into the induction training for new starters. As mentioned above (see 4.2.5), the guidance is no longer accessible, despite it still being relevant, as the button has since been updated. The guidance is also not available on the health and safety team page. Links to AssessNet (a system used that holds risk assessments and DSE assessments along with other workplace risk advice) can be found on the quick links on the main intranet page and on the health and safety team page, however only the quick link works.

        Risk

        Staff may be setting their equipment up incorrectly, causing musculoskeletal injuries.

        Recommendation

        The health and safety page should be reviewed to ensure it is relevant and has current information and guidance available, including advice on how to set up their workstation.

4.4.3   The Investors in People (IIP) silver award was issued to WDC in 2018 and has recently been reviewed. The Council has maintained the silver status and the feedback was presented at Managers Forum in November. The IIP highlighted some of the Council's strengths, including the commitment to developing and supporting staff, a well-designed learning and development programme and a shared ethos based on values. The IIP feedback also provided areas to work on and focus on over the next twelve months, many of which aim to improve the health and wellbeing of the staff.

4.4.4   One of the focus areas identified was to speed up the response to change and performance which is very relevant to the current situation. WDC could use the frequent changes over the last year to show their reactions to change when the next review is carried out. Another focus area included in the feedback is to review the health and wellbeing action plan in line with the new ways of working. Again the current situation will provide a solid base of evidence to show how this has been incorporated. The next IIP review has been deferred for a year due to the amount of change the Council is

currently going through. The focus areas will remain under review until the deferred IIP review takes place.

4.5   **Insurance and Risk Assessments**

4.5.1   There is appropriate insurance in place in the event of staff claiming against the Council due to working conditions. Due to the potential of liability claims, the insurers have provided guidance to help reduce the risk by advising staff on how to set up their workstations and on the importance of taking regular breaks as well as offering mental health and wellbeing advice. The guidance had been circulated to HR and it was included on one of the earlier lockdown Big Buttons. As before, this guidance is no longer available as the button has been updated.

4.5.2   At the start of lockdown, HR issued a checklist to staff to assess the equipment needs and home set up. Managers were required to review the information and provide support to their staff where possible. The checklist was also used to help compile an equipment list for ICT, enabling them to prioritise staff equipment needs as well as a list of staff who needed to return to the office as soon as the restrictions and legislation allowed.

4.5.3   The Corporate Health & Safety Co-ordinator (CHSC) has been providing support to staff on an individual basis where staff have made contact and asked for office equipment such as chairs. An assessment has been carried out to ensure the staff member's needs are met and, where possible, a solution has been arranged.

4.5.4   As highlighted above, the Council uses a system called AssessNet to collect and compile display screen equipment (DSE) assessments. Since an update to the system in April it has not worked to its potential and has not been sending feedback to the CHSC when assessments have been completed. The CHSC is working with AssessNet to resolve the issue and, once resolved, a new DSE assessment for homeworkers will be issued to all relevant staff.

4.5.5   A number of workplace risk assessments and procedure documents have been updated or created to ensure staff, Councillors and members of the public are kept safe and healthy whilst working through the pandemic. These include, but are not limited to, procedures for sickness reporting, procedures for exposure, PPE provision, hand sanitiser and cleaning regimes, Covid secure risk assessments, generic, activity specific and individual and occupational health assessments.

5   **Summary & Conclusion**

5.1   The pandemic has left all staff in a situation where they have had to learn new ways of working and adapt to different environments both in and out of their working life. The staff involved in promoting staff health and wellbeing have faced the same issues and challenges as the rest of the staff at WDC, whilst continuing to provide advice, signpost support and deliver the relevant COVID updates.

5.2 Following our review, we are able to give a SUBSTANTIAL degree of assurance that the systems and controls that are currently in place in respect of Health and Wellbeing of Staff under COVID working arrangements are appropriate and are working effectively.

5.3 The assurance bands are shown below:

Level of Assurance	Definition
Substantial Assurance	There is a sound system of control in place and compliance with the key controls.
Moderate Assurance	Whilst the system of control is broadly satisfactory, some controls are weak or non-existent and there is non-compliance with several controls.
Limited Assurance	The system of control is generally weak and there is non-compliance with controls that do exist.

5.4 There were minor issues, however, identified during the course of the audit relating to:

- The availability of up-to-date working guidance.
- The guidance to the support available.
- The need for balanced messages.
- The ease of accessing the information and guidance through the intranet.
- The ability to access meetings.
- The potential increase in musculoskeletal injury.

An advisory was identified regarding staff updates and changes in roles.

6 **Management Action**

6.1 The recommendations above are reproduced in the attached Action Plan (Appendix A) for management attention.

Richard Barr
Audit and Risk Manager

Action Plan

Internal Audit of Health and Wellbeing of Staff under COVID working arrangements – December 2020

Report Ref.	Recommendation	Risk	Risk Rating*	Responsible Officer(s)	Management Response	Target Date
4.2.6	1. The current advice and information should still be easily accessible to staff so it can be reviewed if their circumstances change or when there are new starters.	1. Staff may be following working guidance from the HR handbook, rather than the up-to-date guidance in place during the current pandemic.	Low	Head of People and Communications	The up-to-date guidance has been reinstated on to the big button information. Guidance will be consolidated to ensure the up-to-date information is easy to find.	Completed
	2. Reminders or links to the support available should be an ongoing priority in the current pandemic.	2. Staff may be unaware of the wellbeing support available to them.	Low	Head of People and Communications	Appropriate links and signposting is in place and managers will continue to be provided with information to share with their teams.	Completed
4.2.8	Messages should be continuously reviewed and adapted, including those delivered by managers. Managers should make regular contact with their staff enabling them to provide guidance and signpost them to support.	The tone and style of updates and guidance may have a negative effect on the staff causing them to feel further isolated.	Low	Head of People and Communications	Managers have now all received the virtual working training. Appropriate links and guidance will continue to be shared with staff and managers.	Completed

Report Ref.	Recommendation	Risk	Risk Rating*	Responsible Officer(s)	Management Response	Target Date
4.2.9	1. The Health and Wellbeing page should be kept up-to-date and include current links, promoting the services and resources the Council has available to staff.	Staff may not be able to find information on the support available to them when they need it.	Medium	Head of People and Communications	The Health and Wellbeing page has now been updated.	Completed
	2. The information relating to the support available to staff should have the relevant intranet tags so it appears in the search function.		Low	Marketing & Communications	This is something we are aware of and it is being addressed.	ongoing
4.3.5	As most staff cannot access virtual meetings through VMware, there should be alternative joining instructions issued to allow staff to access the sessions from the device used for virtual meetings.	Staff may not be able to access the casual meetings from a link on the intranet.	Low	Marketing & Communications	We have been made aware of this and adapted the message to ensure links are accessible.	Completed
4.4.2	The health and safety page should be reviewed to ensure it is relevant and has current information and guidance available, including advice on how to set up their workstation.	Staff may be setting their equipment up incorrectly, causing musculoskeletal injuries.	Medium	Health & Safety Officer	We will review this to ensure this is regularly updates.	Ongoing

* Risk Ratings are defined as follows:
High Risk: Issue of significant importance requiring urgent attention.
Medium Risk   Issue of moderate importance requiring prompt attention.
Low Risk   Issue of minor importance requiring attention.