

**Scrutiny Coordinating Committee  
Task and Finish Review 2023 – 2024**

**Health and Wellbeing of the Workforce**

**Draft Report**

# Scrutiny Coordinating Committee Task and Finish Working Group 2023 – 2024

## Health and Wellbeing of the Workforce

### Draft Report

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# 1 Foreword from the Chair of the Task and Finish Working Group

*Having a job is good for our health, but the quality of our jobs makes the difference. Ensuring people have a safe, encouraging and supportive working environment will help keep them well and in work for longer. This is something that all employers can and should take steps to achieve.*

Ducan Selbie  
Former Chief Executive Public Health England

We spend a lot of time at work during our lifetimes, this can be from our late teens into the early part of old age, it is a long time. Therefore, it is important that the work environment is place where staff can thrive and be confident in their roles.

For businesses that truly champion mental health and staff wellbeing, it can pay dividends not only in terms of attracting and retaining staff but getting the best out of people – benefitting both individuals and the business that supports them.

According to the National Health Service in the UK, the principal reason for work stress is a lack of support and understanding from managers/leadership. When people are stressed, exhausted and feel that they aren't listened to in the workplace it's detrimental to their health, happiness and performance.

The 2022 Deloitte UK Mental Health report estimates that for every £1 spent by employers on mental health interventions, employers could get back £5.30 in reduced absence, presenteeism, and staff turnover. This exemplifies the real importance and benefits of support and interventions not only on the health of the workforce but also the organisation itself.

The working group has looked extensively at the procedures and initiatives that the Council is employing to support and promote the health and wellbeing of the workforce. It is good to see the range and scope of activities taking place and the clear importance that the authority is placing on this aspect of work.

On behalf of the working group, we hope that this report and the recommendations that we have suggested complement the work that is already taking place and adds further support to the whole health and wellbeing agenda across the Council workplace.

Finally, I would like to thank the members of the working group for their contributions and the officers who gave their time and expertise to help us see and understand the work that is taking place in this important area.

Cllr Tracy Dodds  
Chair of the Scrutiny Coordinating Committee Task and Finish Working Group

## **2 Introduction**

- 2.1 The Annual Scrutiny Workshop provided a variety of scrutiny issues for potential review during the coming year. The Scrutiny Coordinating Committee agreed to undertake a task and finish working group to look at the health and wellbeing of the workforce.

## **3 Aim of the Review**

- 3.1 To look at how the council supports the health and wellbeing of the workforce through policy development and key initiatives as well as identifying the challenges and key achievements in employee health and wellbeing.

## **4 Terms of Reference**

- 4.1 The title of the review was agreed as 'The Health and Wellbeing of the Workforce' and its terms of reference were agreed as:
- (a) To understand the factors that contribute to the health and wellbeing of the workforce.
  - (b) To look at the policies and initiatives in the workplace that promote and support the health and wellbeing of the workforce.
  - (c) To consider the challenges and barriers to health and wellbeing in the workforce.
  - (d) To recognise the benefits of health and wellbeing to the workforce and the organisation.

## **5 Membership of the Working Group**

- 5.1 The membership of the Task and Finish Working groups was as follows:

Cllr Tracy Dodds (Chair of the working group), Cllr Michael Hartnack, Cllr Beth Jones, Cllr Mason-Gage, Cllr Antony Mullen, Cllr Pat Smith and Cllr John Usher.

## **6 Methods of Investigation**

- 6.1 The approach to this work included a range of research methods namely:
- (a) Desktop Research.
  - (b) Use of secondary research e.g. surveys, questionnaires.
  - (c) Evidence presented by key stakeholders.
- 6.2 Throughout the course of the review process the committee gathered evidence from a number of key witnesses including:
- (a) Liz St Louis – Director of Smart Cities and Enabling Services.
  - (b) Gillian Hunter – Specialist Lead – People Management.
  - (c) Karen Donaldson – Learning and Organisational Development Manager.
  - (d) Jemma Burdis – Communications Officer.

6.3 Statements in this report are based on information from a variety of published sources and from individual witnesses. No guarantees can be given as to the accuracy or completeness of such information. Views and opinions expressed by individual witnesses may or may not be representative of the views of the majority but are worthy of consideration, nevertheless.

## 7 Findings of the Review

Findings relate to the main themes raised during the committee's investigations and evidence gathering.

### 7.1 The Workforce

7.1.1 Sunderland City Council employs over 2,650 people across approximately 175 different workplaces. Approximately 33% of employees (952) are based at City Hall with the majority being desk-based, although there are a number of other key sites with concentrated numbers of staff. These include:

*South Hylton House* where approximately half of employees are in Environmental Services within 'Operational Services' roles. The remainder predominantly represent Corporate Services ('Catering', 'Cleaning' & 'Business & Property').

*Jack Crawford House* with around a quarter of employees in 'Operational Services' (Environmental Services). The rest sit mainly within 'Regulatory Services' and 'Information Planning & Transport' (City Development).

*The Port* does have some desk-based workers but there are also a good proportion of manual workers, including drivers/operators of forklift trucks & cranes.

*Houghton Depot* accounts for a small number of the overall workforce (2%), but it is important to note that nearly all employees at this location are frontline 'Operational Services' workers (Environmental Services).

7.1.2 The workforce is ageing with over 50% aged 50+ and an average age across the organisation of 48. Interestingly the workforce is generally older than the Sunderland population (22.27% residents aged 16-29 vs. 8.3% Council employees). It is also worth noting that 59% of employees are female compared with 41% of employees being male.

7.1.3 The incidence of part-time working across the organisational structure shows a predominance of part-time working in lower paid roles, and this pattern is similar across the UK. The majority of these role types are within 'Business Administration', 'Catering', and 'Cleaning' service areas, with women predominantly occupying these lower paid positions, it is also highly likely that societal factors are a contributor to gender pay gaps. (Women taking on low paid part time roles to balance family and caring responsibilities more often than men.) Further measures are being taken by the Council to combat this. Sunderland wide data (Nomis – Official Census and Labour Market Statistics ([nomisweb.co.uk](http://nomisweb.co.uk))) on earnings also suggests that earnings for women are lower overall due to part time workers.

7.1.4 It is also worth noting that the workforce has a turnover, in terms of leavers, of 13.53% of staff which is in line with median annual turnover rates expressed in the most recent LGA workforce survey. The majority of council leavers are classed as voluntary and this includes end of contract employees, those at retirement age (65+) and voluntary resignations, which can lead to beneficial opportunities arising for recruitment and promotion from within the organisation.

### 7.2 Health and Wellbeing

7.2.1 The investment and promotion in the health and wellbeing of employees is important to any organisation as it can help to improve morale, understand and reduce sickness absence, and increase productivity and performance across the

organisation. There are many issues that impact on the health and wellbeing of individuals through lifestyle choices, personal and professional circumstances to the impacts of the recent pandemic and the current cost-of-living issues. How people deal with these issues and how that affects their own health and wellbeing can vary greatly. It is however important for an organisation to understand its workforce and support groups and individuals through policies, schemes and initiatives that can promote improved health and wellbeing both in the workplace and outside of it.

7.2.2 Sunderland City Council gathers anonymous data and insights about the health and wellbeing of the workforce through the Employee Health Needs Assessment (HNA). The 2022 version was completed by 593 employees or 22% of the workforce, which was a significant increase, of 130%, compared to the previous survey. The Employee HNA can assist in tracking progress and performance against a number of measures as well as supporting strategies, policies and action plan priorities.

7.2.3 The working group enquired how the organisation would look to improve the 22% response rate in future. It was reported to the group that it was important to continue to promote the importance of responding as proactively as possible through council media, wellbeing mentors and council communications. In that promotion it was crucial to stress the anonymity aspect of any survey to ensure responses are candid and reflect a candid view. Ultimately though employees needed to see the benefits of filling in the survey and that their concerns have been recognised and responded to.

7.2.4 The Employee HNA survey covered a variety of issues including employee feelings towards their own mental health, wellbeing, physical health, alcohol consumption, smoking and vaping, lifestyle, sleep health and financial wellbeing. The survey identified that the general health and wellbeing of the workforce as being either good or very good.

7.2.5 Respondents to the survey also highlighted, when asked, key priorities around mental wellbeing including work-life balance, anxiety, stress and depression. It was positive to note a robust three-year Health and Wellbeing Strategy and emerging action plans to address priorities and needs. Members also acknowledged that there were approximately 60 wellbeing mentors across the organisation providing support and signposting for employees. The Health Survey is due to be repeated in 2024 and this will provide further information to shape future support and initiatives. Members also noted that the full staff survey 2023 did include the following wellbeing questions:

- My workplace is inclusive and celebrates diversity.
- The council truly values the diversity of its employees.
- My health, wellbeing and safety are taken seriously.
- My direct line manager/supervisor takes a genuine interest in my health and wellbeing.
- I am aware of the council's wellbeing offer to its employees.
- I know how and where to access the support for my wellbeing that is provided by the council.

### ***Mental Health***

7.2.6 From the staff survey Members of the working group could see that the general mental wellbeing of employees fell between fair and very good with the majority surveyed feeling comfortable having conversations about their own mental wellbeing.

How is your mental health?		I am confident having conversations in the workplace about my mental health	
Very Good	14.5%	Agree	74.3%
Good	41.7%	Disagree	25.7%
Fair	31.4%		
Poor	10.8%		
Very Poor	1.6%		

Figure 1: Staff Health Survey Responses 2022

- 7.2.7 Members were informed that there was extensive work being undertaken around mental health in the organisation, which was being supported by Washington Mind. Members identified that there was a clear focus on general awareness raising, signposting and support for national campaigns to de-stigmatise issues around mental health. This includes access to wellbeing at work awareness sessions for staff and increased signposting to counselling support.
- 7.2.8 Members were also informed that, in conjunction with Washington Mind, a mental health awareness training programme for managers has been developed. Sitting alongside this is also a newly developed toolkit providing support and guidance in relation to key mental health issues for managers.
- 7.2.9 The group also noted that the Council had launched an Employee Mental Health and Wellbeing policy and procedure. Clearly the organisation recognises the importance of promoting good mental health and providing support for employees who are experiencing mental ill health. This policy aims to set out the workforce impact, responsibilities, risk factors and support available to all employees in relation to their mental health and wellbeing.
- 7.2.10 Members queried if there was a more proactive approach taken to the data from specific service areas e.g., Sunderland Care and Support or Social Services due to the nature of the work involved. It was acknowledged that there was considerable work undertaken with such staff around mental health including the creation of 'staff ambassadors' to highlight issues and areas of concern. The working group recognised the significance of ensuring that those service areas with highly emotive and stressful roles should be monitored more closely for signs, trends or patterns in mental wellbeing.

### ***Physical Health***

- 7.2.11 Apart from mental health another key aspect of health and wellbeing at work is around an employee's physical health. This can be defined as the condition of their body, taking into consideration everything from the absence of disease to fitness levels. Physical health is critical for overall well-being, and can be affected by lifestyle: diet, level of physical activity, and behaviour.
- 7.2.12 With this in mind the organisation has a number of promotions that support physical health including health MOT's across the organisation, wellness walks and runs, active breaks and use of the City Hall Wellness Suite as well as discounted memberships to gym facilities across the city. The Council also has a dedicated Employee Wellness Coordinator who delivers those health MOT's and supports with



promotion and use of the Wellness suite at City Hall. There is also continued promotion and support of Active Travel and Active Sunderland initiatives, support for winter vaccination programme and active participation in the BIG Workplace Games. The working group clearly acknowledged that physical wellbeing is a cornerstone of overall health and productivity. Employees tend to be more engaged and focused, while less prone to burnout, when they are physically healthy.

7.2.13 Engaging in regular physical activity helps to prevent chronic diseases, obtain good quality sleep, better manage stress and maintain a healthy weight. Promoting physical wellbeing not only benefits individuals, but also has a positive impact on an organisation, helping to reduce absenteeism, improve employee retention and enhance overall company performance.

### ***Financial Health***

7.2.14 The organisation is acutely aware of the importance of financial health for employees especially in the current cost of living crisis. Members noted that the Council introduced face to face training in 2023, Making Every Contact Count, a financial wellbeing a 2-hour session open to any member of staff. The Council has a number of initiatives which aim to provide support around financial wellbeing working in partnership with a number of groups including Moneywise and SHARP including road shows and pop up stands across the city. The Council are also improving promotion and engagement in Union Learn Initiatives via digital touchdown zones. The organisation also continues to develop and promote staff benefits and offers through the introduction of the Vipup scheme. The group acknowledged that staff also have access to financial resilience training.

7.2.15 The biggest financial concerns for the workforce, from recent staff surveys, are around not being able to pay bills, risk of future redundancy, not being able to retire and insufficient savings. Members noted that the Council had in-house workshops to support retirement planning and AVC (additional voluntary contributions) advice.

7.2.16 Financial wellbeing is often associated with mental health problems. According to the Money and Mental Health Policy Institute, people with mental health problems are three times as likely to be in problem debt. Employers are well placed to offer support. The business case for doing so is clear: financial wellbeing programmes can help employers reduce people risk, manage workplace costs and improve productivity<sup>1</sup>.

### ***Alcohol and Smoking***

7.2.17 Employers have a crucial role to play in reducing alcohol harm among their staff, through approaches such as education, confidential support and ending the stigma about seeking help for a problem with alcohol. According to Alcohol Change UK, around 17 million working days are lost to alcohol each year at a cost of £1.7 billion. With sickness levels at a 20-year high at 2.6 per cent and depression and anxiety topping the table of reasons for long-term absence, progressive employers are beginning to understand that supporting people to have a healthier relationship with alcohol could have a significant impact on their workers' health and wellbeing.

7.2.18 The Learning and Organisational Development Manager outlined a number of initiatives that the Council supported in terms of tackling alcohol consumption as part of an overall approach to health and wellbeing. This included supporting Dry January, drop-in sessions supported by Change-Grow-Live at a number of sites

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<sup>1</sup> Financial Wellbeing – Price Waterhouse Cooper. 2018

across the organisation. Change-Grow-Live also provided on-line alcohol intervention training as well as continued promotion of the Sunderland Tier 2 Alcohol service.

7.2.19 The working group highlighted the question design around alcohol consumption in the staff health survey and suggested it would be more helpful to have the days in a typical week where someone consumes alcohol defined as 0-1 days and 2-3 days rather than 0 and 1-3 days.

7.2.20 In terms of smoking the staff health survey highlights that only 5% (32) of survey respondents stated they smoked daily or occasionally. At a national level, the prevalence of e-cigarette use (vaping) has risen over recent years but appears to have settled at about 6% of the adult population. The Council also continues to promote interventions with continued support for National No Smoking Day and Sunderland Stop Smoking Services. As well as leading the way for others in the City to become smoke-free employers via Sunderland Health Alliance.

### ***Healthy Eating and Sleeping***

7.2.21 A balanced and healthy diet is a cornerstone of a healthy lifestyle and supports a person's general wellbeing. Members were informed that the Council continues to support the expansion of Sunderland Weight Management Programme as well as the continued promotion and support for healthy choices sessions across the City.

7.2.22 Sleep, or lack thereof, is a big part of the equation when it comes to health, wellness, and productivity. Sleep disorders can snowball into bigger problems, with people having less energy, so they exercise less. Sleep disruptions have been shown to impact people's food preferences<sup>2</sup>. As the staff health survey now looks at sleep health Members were interested to know how this data would be taken forward. The Learning and Organisational Development Manager acknowledged that this was one of the challenges, but as highlighted poor sleep is often linked to other aspects of wellbeing and can be driven by lifestyle choices.

## **7.3 Strategy, Support and Recognition**

### ***The Vision of Wellness and Wellbeing***

7.3.1 The group were informed that the vision was very much around a happy, healthy, safe workforce and it was important that people felt valued and rewarded for their contribution within the organisation. It is also important that staff feel connected to the people they work for and are prepared for their role with the skills, tools and knowledge required. The working group members recognised that job satisfaction was a critical factor that has a bearing on an individual's health and wellbeing.

7.3.2 The Learning and Organisational Development Manager reported that, within the Council, there was a very clear vision around the wellness and wellbeing of the workforce including:

- Staying healthy at work.
- Mental wellbeing support.
- Improved healthy eating and weight management.
- Reducing smoking levels.
- Reducing alcohol consumption.
- Increasing physical activity.

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<sup>2</sup> A healthy workplace starts in bed by Chris Orchard. 2015

- Promoting sustainable living.

### ***Supporting Digital Engagement and Wellbeing***

- 7.3.3 Members were informed of the Microsoft 365 F1 licence rollout programme to those staff who are often the hardest to reach within the organisation. It was noted that an Microsoft F1 licence was a very basic council account with email address and access to the Sunderland Council Hub.
- 7.3.4 It was positive to note that there had been 539 licences ordered that would be rolled out to over 100 locations. It was acknowledged that there had been challenges to this, particularly around hardware and in many instances installation of the licence on an employee's personal device. But this has allowed the organisation to engage with cohorts of staff, that for varying factors have been harder to reach, in a way that had not been achieved before. It was noted that feedback from staff had been very positive.
- 7.3.5 Members acknowledged this as a positive step to staff feeling more connected with the organisation but queried if there had been any issues with staff using the digital technology. It was reported to the group that there was a pilot scheme commencing with Sunderland College to upskill the workforce in the use of tech and improve the digital skill set across the organisation. Microsoft 365 F1 licence usage was to be monitored to assess the effectiveness of the rollout and the organisation would respond proactively to feedback from users.

### ***Wellbeing Mentors***

- 7.3.6 The organisation has a growing community of wellbeing mentors positioned across the organisation, currently 64, who are passionate about their role supporting employee engagement. There are quarterly workshops for the wellbeing mentors to share intelligence and influence health and wellbeing activities and initiatives. They are also represented on the Health and Wellbeing project team.

## **Support your colleagues to be their happiest, healthiest selves - get involved**

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### **Putting wellbeing first - that's the way we do things**

We're looking for volunteers to spread the word about campaigns and activities, encourage people to take part, be our colleagues' voice, and even suggest what campaigns we run in the future.

This role is open to anyone in our organisation, regardless of experience, and can be a great addition to a CV.

We'll provide essential training, and there will be opportunities to continue this training to a higher, accredited level if you wish.

Figure 2: Wellbeing Mentor recruitment promotion

### ***Mental Health Support and Signposting***

- 7.3.7 It was recognised that the organisation has a number of policies and practices in relation to mental health support and signposting including an employee mental wellbeing policy and procedure and a managers guide to mental wellbeing. It was hoped that this guide can give managers the confidence and ability to discuss potential mental health issues with staff. It was also noted that these tools were available on the Council's Hub for all staff to access.
- 7.3.8 It was further noted that metal health related illness was one of the main reasons for staff sickness. Also, as the workforce operates in a more agile way post-pandemic it can often be difficult for managers and colleagues to spot the signs associated with mental health issues and far easier for them to be disguised. Therefore, it was good to note that there was also proactive and early interaction with Occupational Health Services, signposting to counselling services through Vipup and commissioned awareness raising training via Washington Mind.

### ***Health and Safety Support***

- 7.3.9 Health and safety was also highlighted as of paramount importance in keeping the workforce safe while working and carrying out their duties for the council, with a partnership approach having been adopted with services developing role specific training matrices. All health and safety policies were constantly reviewed and updated in light of new legislation and codes of practice.
- 7.3.10 Good health and safety practice and adherence in the workplace is supported by toolbox talks for specific service areas and regular workforce wide communications. There are also detailed policies and procedures around alcohol and substance misuse, health surveillance and fleet services transport to name a few. It was also pointed out to the group that there was always consultation with and support from trades union in terms of the development and implementation of strategies, policies and procedures.

### ***Learning Opportunities***

- 7.3.11 The Council also operates a combined face-to-face and e-learning offer that is open to all employees and covers a wide range of issues focused on health and wellbeing including domestic abuse, mental health awareness, menopause and stress and wellbeing to name a few. All training packages are open access, including mandatory training, and there is the opportunity to undertake these during work time.
- 7.3.12 All new staff are required to complete an induction with additional mandatory modules for managers including stress and wellbeing, health and safety management and risk assessments and safe working practices. Importantly induction ensures effective communication of expectations with signposting to wellbeing support services at the commencement of employment.

### ***Employee Engagement***

- 7.3.13 Employee engagement is also a major contributing factor to the success of any strategies, policies and procedures. In providing engagement through a number of means including 1-to-1's, annual appraisals, live events and staff awards provides a greater sense of purpose for employees and in understanding their contribution to the organisation and its success.
- 7.3.14 Further to this is there are two sets of awards within the local authority, the Stars Awards which supports employee recognition and highlights many of the Council's

values through the good practice exhibited by the workforce. There are also the VIP awards which focus specifically on the Council's values, which occur three times per year. Members enquired how Councillors can propose staff for awards and they are able to nominate staff for the Stars Awards, with a couple Members having done so for the last event. It may be useful to promote this further to ensure all members are aware and have the opportunity to nominate if they so wish.

7.3.15 Members were also informed that compliments and complaints were always relayed to the relevant service areas. Currently a piece of work was underway with Power BI (Microsoft package) to bring these varying sources of information together and provide useful data for the organisation around its performance and operation.

## **7.4 Challenges, Barriers and Communication**

7.4.1 A key challenge is around health and wellbeing often being treated as a separate issue but to be effective it requires embedding into the organisation. The Council is a Better Health at Work employer and strives to ensure that health and wellbeing is considered and addressed at every level within the organisation.

7.4.2 This remains a challenge and there is work to be done. One aspect of this is in how the Council has changed its approach to appraisals, and the use of wellbeing conversations with those employees on long-term absence. Members enquired how the organisation supported managers in developing these skills in engaging in difficult conversations with staff. It was noted that face to face attendance management training had been introduced in 2023 to ensure managers have the knowledge and confidence to manage the absence of staff effectively. This includes regular check-in during absence and timely referral to occupational health services.

7.4.3 The importance of an inclusive work environment where employees have a sense of belonging is crucial to providing a workplace that is productive and fulfilling to employees. It was noted that a dedicated space on the Hub has been developed for inclusion and belonging as well as the reintroduction of the Supporting Employee Equality Network (SEEN). With this in mind Members suggested that it was important to give some priority and further support to the Equality Network within the organisation to build capacity within the group.

7.4.4 The group also highlighted the importance of integrating wellbeing into procedures, policies, appraisals and one-to-ones. It was also acknowledged that it was about recognition and opening conversations about real problems. Again, it was reiterated that there was training for managers, and it was not to be seen as just another question to be asked. It is important that managers get to know their staff.

7.4.5 The working group did note that agile working, including working from home, had made this more challenging with reduced face-to-face contact. As the organisation has adopted a more agile working pattern in the aftermath of the Covid-19 pandemic and to create a better work-life balance for employees, it can also mean that spotting the signs of potential health and/or wellbeing issues becomes more difficult. This highlighted the real importance of team meetings, team development and team building opportunities. Members queried if working from home was an issue for the organisation and it was noted that, where roles permit, staff are encouraged to work in an agile manner, however, there is an expectation that time should be spent in the workplace to enable collaborative working with peers and colleagues. This was very much down to personal circumstances and choice along with the requirements of the role of each employee. It was also worth noting that

flexible working and working from home is more attractive to younger people and can help in recruitment and retention of staff.

- 7.4.6 Challenges also existed in sharing key information in working depots, it was noted as not always easy to engage with the workforce in these settings through usual social and digital channels. Therefore, it was important to take key messages directly to depot employees.
- 7.4.7 Another key challenge was around the cost implications associated with health and wellbeing in the workplace and how much the organisation wants and more realistically can invest into this agenda. It was noted that currently there was no dedicated health and wellbeing budget although associated budgets provide a valuable source of investment such as training and Public Health budgets.
- 7.4.8 Delivering those key messages to employees on a variety of issues, including around health and wellness, is extremely important. The group invited one of the council's senior internal communications officers to provide an overview of how these key messages are relayed to staff. It was reported that the internal communications team functioned under five key pillars which contributed to the positive working environment and culture of the organisation. These five pillars were identified as:
- i. Leadership Visibility
  - ii. Reward and Recognition
  - iii. Wellbeing
  - iv. Engaging with the Frontline
  - v. Employee Voice.
- 7.4.9 The council has approximately 2,650 employees and communications currently reach around 90% of staff. It was noted that analytics were employed to modify and provide focus around the various channels used to relay messages and interact with the workforce. The use of analytics also enables the direct targeting of specific groups of employees through appropriate channels to deliver key and role specific messages.
- 7.4.10 The recent employee survey has also seen an increased completion rate up from 1034 responses to 1507 responses. The survey will provide for a comprehensive action plan and feedback to all staff, as well as service level results. It was noted that results would be reported back into individual teams and services. The senior Communications officer stated it was important to be seen to be listening to staff and taking action which will lead to increased participation and engagement in future surveys. It is very much a case of 'you said, we listened.'

## **7.5 Health and Wellbeing Priorities**

### ***Better Health at Work Award***

- 7.5.1 The working group were pleased to be informed that the Council had retained its 'Maintaining Excellence' standard as part of the Better Health at Work Awards. Importantly areas that were recognised included:
- Mental Health awareness/support.
  - Financial wellbeing support/advice – commitment to real living wage 2023.
  - Menopause awareness – inclusion in attendance management toolkit to aid understanding.

- Re-introduction of Domestic Abuse Champions (60) plus introduction of Domestic Abuse Policy.

7.5.2 There were also some recommendations from the assessor which highlighted some potential priority areas for improvement and development including:

- Less one-off events - repetition ensures events/activities become embedded and sustainable.
- Wider engagement - frontline services risk exclusion, maximise reach of comms, consider themed toolbox talks.
- Digital enablement to facilitate equitable access to information on the Hub and citywide services.
- Utilise QR codes more effectively as a cost-effective means of disseminating information.

### ***Mental Health 2024-25***

7.5.3 Mental wellbeing remains a key priority for the organisation in going forward with a number of commissioned services via Washington Mind including a number of training offers including mental health awareness for managers and employees as well as sessions on emotional resilience which aim to promote self-care.

7.5.4 As well as these sessions there will also be attendance management training offers which will help to support managers in holding effective wellbeing conversations, developing and implementing wellness action plans and completing stress risk assessments with their staff.

7.5.5 The Council are also committed to promoting a number of national campaigns on mental wellbeing including mental health awareness month, stress awareness week and world mental health day.

7.5.6 The development and implementation of policies and procedures will continue to help drive the organisation forward in terms of the health and wellbeing of its workforce. Key documents like the Dignity at Work Policy, Mental Health Toolkit for Managers and Employee Mental Wellbeing Guide will offer key support.

### ***Appraisals***

7.5.7 Appraisals are a vital way to create a two-way dialogue between the employer and employee and can provide that opportunity to discuss issues relating to an individual health and wellness in the workplace. Appraisals were relaunched across the organisation in April 2023 with revised documentation including guidance notes for both appraiser and appraisee. The organisation has also introduced group appraisals to support managers with larger teams and multiple employees in a similar role. Importantly appraisals have also been embedded into the new manager induction programme, manager development and leadership competency framework.

7.5.8 The Chief Executive's live events, manager briefings and Yammer have also been utilised to promote and encourage engagement with employees throughout the year. There is also continued targeted support for some of the organisations harder to reach teams which is resulting in a significant rise in appraisal completions. This has included the introduction of group appraisals which have been effective in certain service areas where employees have been reluctant, for a number of reasons, to come in alone.

7.5.9 It was also important to recognise that managers were expected to conduct appraisals, ensure return to work interviews were taking place, as well as formal attendance review meetings and referrals to occupational health where required. It was clear from discussions that managers would be held to account, with data being analysed to identify trends or patterns of behaviour. Data would also be also assessed to ensure that appropriate action is taken, in line with absence management policies, for employees who hit attendance trigger levels. It was expected that the organisation would expect to see changes and improvements as a result of these measures in the next couple of years.

### ***Digital Engagement***

7.5.10 As detailed throughout the report digital enablement and engagement remains a key priority with 11 digital touchdown zones across the city including City Hall, the Port and Barley Mow. Microsoft 365 F1 licences continue to be rolled out across the across the organisation which gives employees access to the Hub and the learning platform, policies, benefits portal and staff discounts. It is also good to note that services are leading the way and managing their own licences with support from the project team where required.

7.5.11 There continues to be a drive to identify skills gaps and develop service centric solutions working closely with managers e.g., recently developed and implemented a bespoke, digital upskilling programme for the bereavement team. The organisation also continues to improve and increase its digital skills programme with external support from Sunderland College.

7.5.12 Members noted as digital engagement increases across the local authority the development and greater use of QR codes, as highlighted by the Beter Health at Work assessment, has the potential to enhance referral routes and health promotions across the organisation.

### ***Inclusive Workplaces***

7.5.13 There is a clear commitment to relaunch and grow the membership of the Supporting Equality Network through engagement and consultation with existing members. The aim is to widen participation beyond LGBTQIA+ to include carers, veterans and domestic abuse victims.

7.5.14 There has also been a revision to the learning offer for employees with 5 bitesize e-learning modules developed around equality, diversity and inclusion, discrimination and you and your workplace. The Council has also embedded equality, diversity and inclusion into new starter and new manager induction programmes. As well as adopting and benchmarking Sunderland City Council against the Equality Framework for Local Government which has seen the development of a robust action plan. It was also suggested by Members that as well as a robust induction checklist the organisation could also introduce a simplified handover document for staff moving internally within the organisation, providing a clarity of expectation and a seamless transition.

### ***Leadership Competencies***

7.5.15 In September 2023 the council launched its first Leadership & Management Competency Framework, Leading with Purpose. The organisation has also worked with our partner, Sunderland College, to identify professional qualifications to support the leadership journey in 2024, this will include:

- Level 2 - Aspiring Managers
- Level 3 - Team Leaders



- Level 5 - Operational Managers.

7.5.15 The Council continues to grow its corporate learning offer and in 2024/25 will be adding coaching skills for managers, performance management and managing agile teams.

## **8 Conclusions**

The Committee made the following overall conclusions: -

- 8.1 Workplace health and wellbeing can no longer be merely taken for granted or seen as an afterthought; it is critical to the overall health of an organisation. The evolving demographic of today's workforce means it is more important than ever for employers to create effective health and wellbeing initiatives. Within the Council there is an ageing workforce, an increase in women working and a variety of roles, from manual to desk-based, meaning workplace health and wellbeing is now an essential part of business.
- 8.2 Healthy workplaces help people to flourish and reach their potential. Investing in employee wellbeing can lead to increased resilience, better employee engagement, reduced sickness absence and higher performance and productivity. However, wellbeing initiatives often fall short of their potential because they stand alone, isolated from the everyday business. To gain real benefit, employee wellbeing priorities must be integrated throughout an organisation, embedded in its culture, leadership and people management. At present health and wellbeing is resourced from several budget headings such as training, Public Health and Communications, perhaps some consideration could be given to ascertaining if the level of resource is sufficient and how this is sustained moving forward.
- 8.3 The working group has clearly seen that there is a real drive within the Council to ensure that such initiatives are embedded into and considered at every level of the organisation. The working group noted examples of this through the addition of equality, diversity and inclusion training into new starter and new manager induction programmes and the considerable emphasis on appraisals within the new manager induction programme.
- 8.4 There is strong evidence to suggest that workplaces with high levels of mental wellbeing are more productive and that by addressing wellbeing in the workplace can lead to an increase in productivity. Importantly good mental health at work and good management go hand in hand in developing strategies and approaches for an organisation. From the evidence gathered the working group acknowledged the emphasis and importance the Council has in promoting good mental health and providing support for employees through policy and in collaboration with Washington Mind. It was also good to note that this remains a key priority for the coming years.
- 8.5 The working group did recognise the importance of ensuring that those service areas with highly emotive and stressful roles (e.g., social services, care and support) should be monitored more closely for signs, trends or patterns in mental wellbeing to ensure advice and support was available for employees as and when required.

- 8.6 There are many other factors that contribute to health and wellbeing in the workplace and the working group has explored a number of these with officers. Clearly physical wellbeing is equally as important as mental wellbeing, and the organisation continues to promote wellbeing initiatives that support this cultural drive to ensure employees are engaged and want to be at work. There are numerous other factors that contribute to this agenda including lifestyle choices around eating, sleeping, smoking and drinking. Again, the Council is acutely aware of the impact of these factors on employee wellbeing and continue to support and extend a number of initiatives in these areas.
- 8.7 Staff surveys have the potential to create a lasting positive impact on the organisation's health, wellbeing and overall culture. The working group noted that it was important to understand how employee feedback is measured, how surveys are acted upon and how progress is tracked and relayed back to employees. Engagement continues to improve on staff surveys and to maintain this upward curve it is clearly important that employees see action taken from the results of surveys. They remain an important resource to track the wellbeing of the workforce across a number of metrics and provide important data to target future support and interventions. Members would welcome feedback on future surveys to the committee to be able to monitor progress against identifiable actions. The group also suggested modifications to the question design around alcohol consumption to provide a more definitive profile.
- 8.8 Clearly a lot of work has been undertaken around staff appraisals to support both appraisers and appraisees to provide a worthwhile and meaningful process. Appraisals are an excellent tool to engage with staff and commence an ongoing conversation around a number of work-related themes including performance, job role and health and wellbeing. The work group were pleased to see levels of accountability being incorporated into the process and that training was available for managers. It was also positive to note the use of group appraisals to engage with those staff who may not be so confident or able to engage on a one-to-one basis. By creating these inclusive approaches, it can make the process more positive and generate further engagement with staff who may have been reluctant to engage previously.
- 8.9 A lot of the work that is ongoing around the health and wellbeing agenda will have an impact on sickness and absence rates across the Council. It is recognised that levels of sickness absence across the organisation are above expected levels but as identified throughout this report a number of these initiatives are aimed at improving and supporting the health and wellbeing of the workforce. As a result, it is anticipated that progress and improvement against sickness absence targets will be realised in the next couple of years.
- 8.10 The rollout of Microsoft 365 F1 licences throughout the organisation is helping to drive digital engagement across the workforce and this can only have benefits for delivering key messages and providing access to health and wellbeing support. It also helps to foster an environment of inclusivity where all staff are notified of and have access to the same resources. This has also helped the drive to improve the digital skills gap across the Council. Echoing the recommendation from the Better Health at Work Award it is also an opportune time to develop and implement a greater use of QR codes across the organisation as a way to promote and signpost staff to key information relating to the Council and more specifically health and wellbeing initiatives.

- 8.11 Inclusion is an essential and imperative component of organisational culture. Helping cultivate a sense of belonging is crucial for employee well-being, productivity, and retention in the modern workplace. The Council again recognises the importance of this and are supporting and investing in programmes that will help to foster this inclusive approach. This includes relaunching and growing the membership of the Supporting Equality Network, which the working group fully endorses.
- 8.12 Recognising the staff within the organisation is also a good way of promoting wellbeing by acknowledging excellence in work across the council in a number of categories. This again can help to foster a positive and appreciative culture within the organisation and help towards an inclusive environment. The STARS Awards are one way to raise the profile of staff recognition and provide an opportunity to highlight good working practices across the organisation. The Members of the working group recognised this, and it is important that all Members of the Council are aware of the opportunity that exists for them to nominate staff for the Stars Awards to recognise the achievements and show appreciation to employees in the Council.
- 8.13 The Council is committed to improving the health and wellbeing of its workforce through support, upskilling, engagement and compassion across the workplace. Promoting employee wellbeing is good for people and the organisation. It can help prevent stress and create positive working environments where individuals and organisations can thrive. Good health and wellbeing can be a foundation to employee engagement and organisational performance. The workplace is changing, perhaps as consequence of the pandemic, traditional concepts are being replaced by working from home and more agile forms of working patterns that provide a more attractive offer for prospective employees. The Council continues to strive and innovate to provide an inclusive, supportive and attractive place to work where people feel confident in themselves and where employee health and wellbeing is at the forefront of the Council's culture.

## **9 Recommendations**

- 9.1 The Health and Wellbeing Scrutiny Committee has taken evidence from a variety of sources to assist in the formulation of a balanced range of recommendations. The Committee's recommendations to Cabinet are: -
- a) To support the development of the role and build capacity within the Council's Equality Network to promote and drive inclusion across the organisation.
  - b) To ensure feedback is provided to all employees across the organisation on the results and outcomes of staff surveys including the reporting of progress and achievements to the Scrutiny Coordinating Committee as and when applicable.
  - c) That the further utilisation of QR codes is considered in future health and wellbeing promotions and communications with staff.
  - d) That consideration is given to establishing mandatory mental health training for managers.

- e) That robust monitoring mechanisms are in place for those employees who are working in highly emotive and stressful environments to identify signs, trends or patterns in mental wellbeing to provide support in a timely and appropriate way.
- f) That in future staff health surveys the question around alcohol consumption is further refined to provide a more definitive profile of consumption across the authority.
- g) That consideration is given to ascertaining if the provision of resources for the health and wellbeing agenda is sufficient and how this can be sustained to meet current and future demands.
- h) That further work is done to publicise and promote the ability of Members to nominate for the Stars Awards as an opportunity for Members to acknowledge and recognise performance in the workplace.
- i) To consider the introduction of a simplified handover document for staff moving internally within the organisation, to help provide a seamless transition from one role into another.

## 10. Acknowledgements

10.1 The Committee is grateful to all those who have presented evidence during the course of our review. We would like to place on record our appreciation, in particular of the willingness and co-operation we have received from the below named individuals and organisations:

- (a) Liz St Louis – Director of Smart Cities and Enabling Services.
- (b) Gillian Hunter – Specialist Lead – People Management.
- (c) Karen Donaldson – Learning and Organisational Development Manager.
- (d) Jemma Burdis – Communications Officer.

## 11. Glossary of Terms

AVC –	Additional Voluntary Contributions.
Microsoft 365 F1 Licence -	A software platform designed, by Microsoft, specifically for employees who don't have a desk or office and don't need the full suite of Office applications.
HNA –	Health Needs Assessment.
LGBTQIA+ -	Lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer, questioning, intersex, or asexual.
Moneywise -	Credit Union who have been providing financial services to the people of the North East for over 30 years.
Power BI -	An interactive data visualisation software product developed by Microsoft with a primary focus on business intelligence.
SEEN -	Supporting Employee Equality Network.
SHARP -	Shiney Row Advice and Resource Project.
VIPUP -	Employee benefits scheme.

## **12. Background Papers**

12.1 The following background papers were consulted or referred to in the preparation of this report:

Financial Wellbeing – Price Waterhouse Cooper. 2018

A Health Workplace Starts in Bed. Chris Orchard. 2015

Ten workplace mental health statistics you should know in 2022 – MHFA England. 2022

Reasons your company should be investing in employee health and wellbeing – Perkbox. 2023

The importance of workplace wellbeing. Joe Wedgewood. The Happiness Index. 2023

The importance of Employee Appraisals. XCD. 2023