

## ANNUAL SICKNESS & COVID ABSENCE REPORT

### 1. RECOMMENDATIONS

- 1.1 That EMT and the HR Committee notes the sickness levels for 2020/2021, and supports the action plan.

### 2. INTRODUCTION

- 2.1 This report gives an update on the Councils approach to managing sickness absence and provides trend data for the 2020/21 financial year. Sickness and absence relating to COVID are detailed in this report.

### 3. BACKGROUND

- 3.1 Sickness absence continues to be a key performance indicator for the Council.
- 3.2 Due to the COVID pandemic, for the majority of the year, all staff who have been able to do so have worked from home, enabled by enhanced technology, reducing the spread of common germs, and giving the opportunity for staff to work remotely. Additionally, in several cases, if they had been required to be office based they may not have been able to manage their absence and would have otherwise been sick (for example those unable to drive after an operation).
- 3.3 Whilst 2.2 only applies to those able to work at home; the lockdown, social distancing and other measures such as hand washing and mask wearing applied to all employees and will have reduced transmission of other infections across the whole workforce.
- 3.4 For at least seven months of the year, the majority of Leisure Centre staff were on furlough, this accounts for some 400 employees. No sickness would have been logged whilst they were on furlough.

### 4. SICKNESS ABSENCE DATA

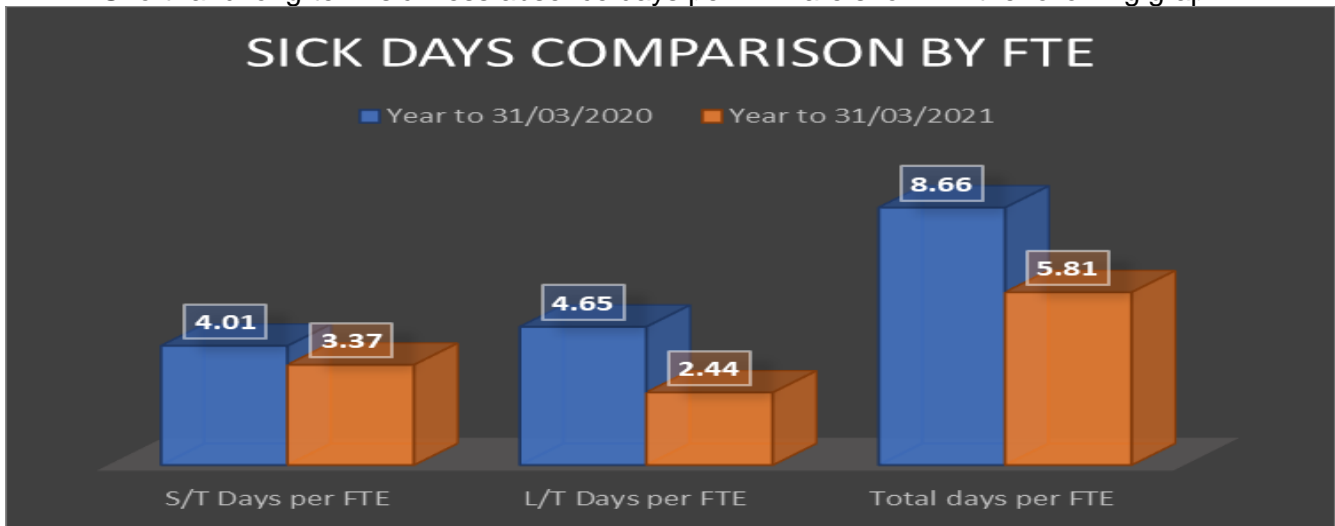
#### Typical Sickness Absence Data including positive COVID test absence

- 4.1 This year's sickness figures include confirmed positive tests for covid. Positive covid tests resulted in 250 days sick between 38 employees. One of these cases was long covid, which has now been closed.
- 4.2 The table below compares full time equivalent (FTE) working days lost due to sickness for the years to March 19, 20 and 21, as well as the % of working time lost.

Years	Year to 31/03/19	Year to 31/03/20	Year to 31/03/2021
<b>Total days lost</b>	8157	6567	4579
<b>Average days per FTE</b>	10.47	8.66	5.81
<b>% of working time lost</b>	4.02%	3.33%	2.23%

- 4.3 Despite the additional days lost due to positive tests for covid, the absence figure has reduced by 2.85 days per FTE and 1.1% less working days lost compared to last year. This is likely attributable to the reasons detailed in 2.2 - 2.4.

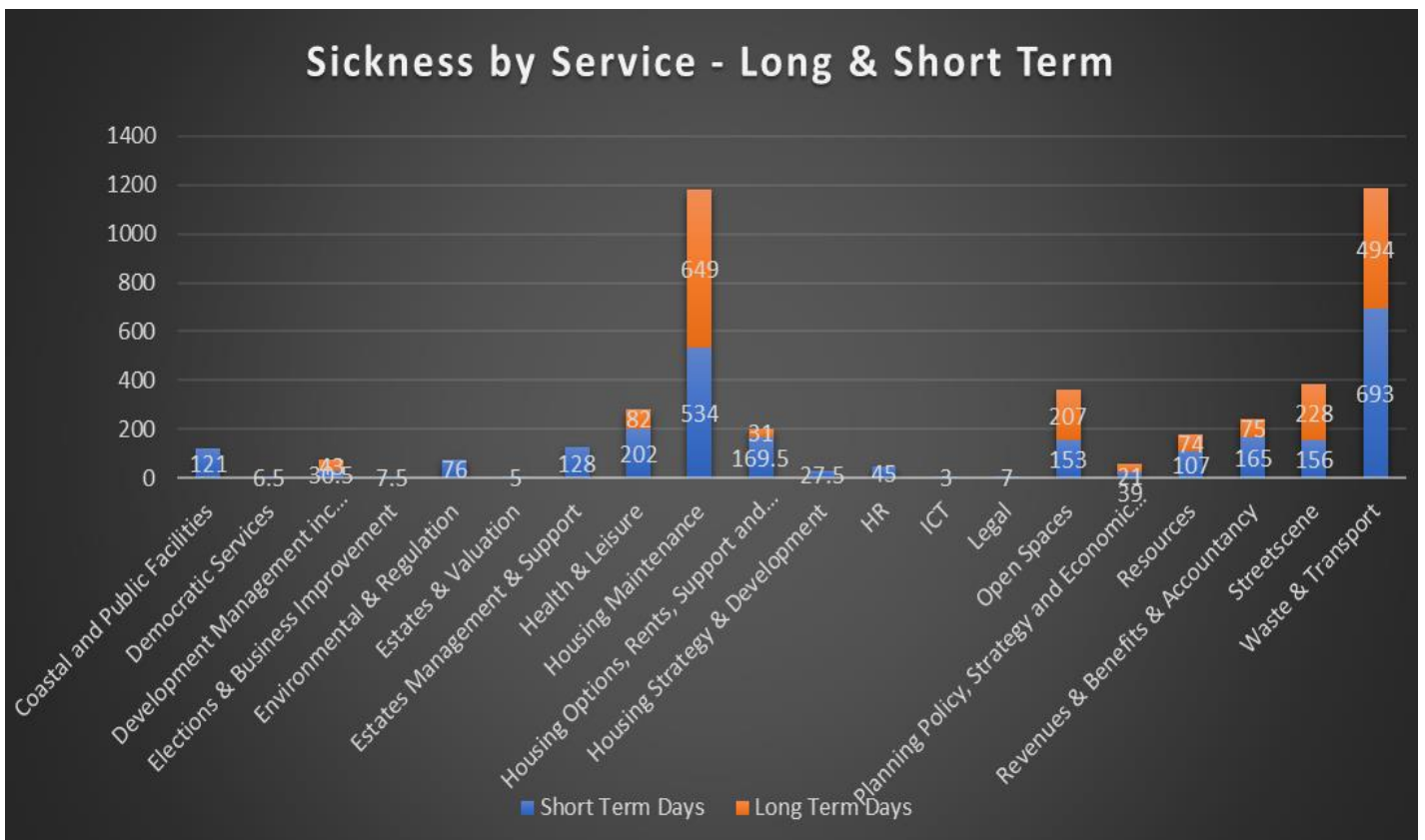
4.4 Short- and long-term sickness absence days per FTE are shown in the following graph:



4.5 Long term absence (sickness of 20 days or more) has significantly reduced. Commonly in long term sickness cases, it can take a protracted length of time to receive correct diagnosis and action, with potential for extended recuperation. This has been especially the case in the past year, with COVID putting back appointments, diagnosis and appropriate action even further. Whilst some employees working from home may have been able to work comfortably and recover sooner than they may have if based in the office in the past year, this figure also includes our operational employees who would not have been able to do so. At 31<sup>st</sup> March 2021 there were 9 employees off long term sick accounting for a total of 800 days open long term sickness (as opposed to 8 people and over 420 days last year). All of the open cases are being managed appropriately with the manager and HR.

4.6 There has been 1 Sickness Case review dismissal and 1 ill health retirement this year. This compares to 1 Case Review dismissal and no ill health retirements the previous year.

4.7 The graph below details the sickness days per Service area as at 31/03/2021:



4.8 This shows the same data in table format:

Service	Short Term Days	Long Term Days
Coastal and Public Facilities	121	0
Democratic Services	6.5	0
Development Management inc Building Control	30.5	43
Elections & Business Improvement	7.5	0
Environmental & Regulation	76	0
Estates & Valuation	5	0
Estates Management & Support	128	0
Health & Leisure	202	82
Housing Maintenance	534	649
Housing Options, Rents, Support and Private Sector Housing	169.5	31
Housing Strategy & Development	27.5	0
HR	45	0
ICT	3	0
Legal	7	0
Open Spaces	153	207
Planning Policy, Strategy and Economic Development	21	39
Resources	107	74
Revenues & Benefits & Accountancy	165	75
Streetscene	156	228
Waste & Transport	693	494

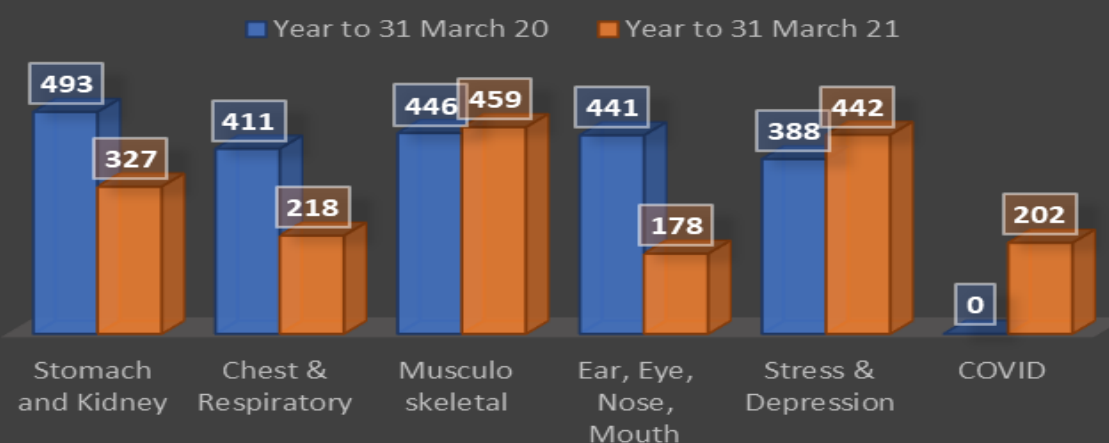
4.9 The top five reasons overall for sickness absence across the Council can be broken down as detailed below.

Reasons for sickness	Year to 31/03/2019 (days lost)	Year to 31/03/2020 (days lost)	Year to 31/03/2021 (days lost)
Musculo skeletal	1052	1238	995
Stress/Depression	812	1057	988
Stomach & Kidney	514	493	602
Chest & respiratory	321	550	340
Other	5458	3229	1665
<b>TOTAL</b>	<b>8,157</b>	<b>6,567</b>	<b>4,590</b>

4.10 Compared across the last two years, the table highlights that musculo skeletal remains the highest reason for sickness. Stress and Depression has decreased by 69 days – mental health has been and continues to be a key area of focus for the Council as we move forward. HR have tried to utilise all available resources to promote mental health assistance for all employees. This is detailed further in section 5 of this report.

4.11 Whilst return to work meetings are carried out for all periods of sickness absence, and more formal meetings are held with those that hit a trigger for short and long term sickness, it is easier to keep track of individual long term sickness matters. Short Term trends are not generally identified outside of formal meetings. To assist with this, data is provided on overall short term sickness trends. The top five reasons for short term sickness remain the same as last year, with the addition of COVID as high short term sickness. The graph below shows a breakdown of the highest reason by number of days for Short Term absence:

## SHORT TERM SICKNESS REASON COMPARISON



- 4.12 Additionally, there were 85 days sickness under the heading of 'work related', relating to 17 different entries.
- 4.13 The average cost of sickness absence is £620,644 compared to £942,760 for the previous year. This is based on an average salary, not taking account of full/half/no pay, or any other costs such as agency cover.
- 4.14 The March 2020 CIPD Health & Wellbeing at Work Survey details an average of 5.8 days sickness absence per FTE compared with 8 days average per FTE in the public sector. It states that larger organisations (with over 1000 employees) have significantly higher sickness than those with less than 500 employees. It also details mental health is the 1<sup>st</sup> highest cause of long term sickness and the 3<sup>rd</sup> highest cause for short term sickness across sectors, behind minor illnesses and musculoskeletal issues.

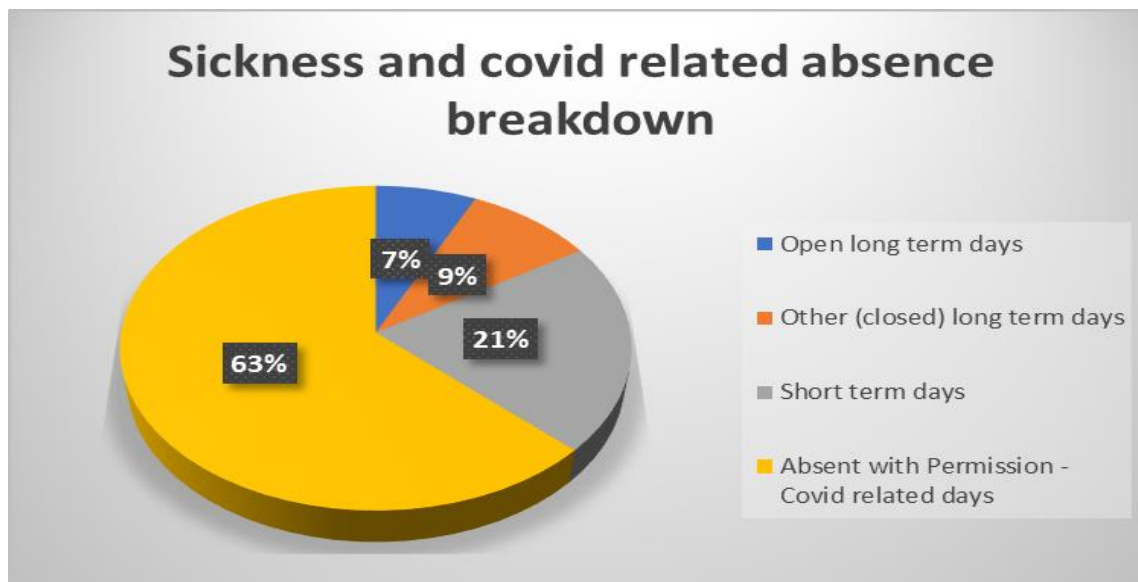
### **Sickness Absence Data including 'Absent with Permission – COVID' absence**

- 4.15 In addition to the positive covid cases classed as sickness and detailed in 3.3, there has also been 7783 days lost as a result of covid, which we have classed as 'Absent with Permission – COVID'. This is not because employees were sick with covid, it was because they were unable to work from home and were either self-isolating, off due to school closures, or shielding due to underlying health conditions (such as over 70's/clinically extremely vulnerable). Many employees fell into these categories but were able to work effectively from home, and so were not absent and are not included in the figures. The table below breaks this down.

AWP Covid Reason	Number of days	Number of people
School closure	102	33
Self-isolating	2803	165
Underlying health	4878	85
TOTAL	7783	283

- 4.16 These days were in frontline operational services such as Waste, Streetscene, Open Spaces, Housing Maintenance and Leisure. These staff were unable to work from home and so were required to isolate. During these periods, in some cases work was allocated differently across teams, this included not carrying out some duties or doing them to different timescales.
- 4.17 It is important to note the impact of this additional absence. The table and pie chart below show a breakdown of sickness and covid related days over the year to 31<sup>st</sup> March 21:

Type	%	Number of days
Open long term days	7%	800
Other (closed) long term days	9%	1122
Short term days	21%	2657
Absent with Permission - Covid related days	63%	7783
<b>Total days</b>		<b>12362</b>



## 5. SICKNESS ABSENCE ACTION PLAN

- 5.1 Management information is key to effective and proactive sickness absence management. It is a key objective of all Service Managers to ensure sickness is managed effectively. Services have dealt with the unprecedented level of additional staff absence during 2020/21 principally through the re-prioritisation of work, providing a revised service, redeployment of employees across the Council and through overtime and agency cover. Online sickness absence reports and trend data are available for all managers through the Hub Management Information.
- 5.2 A robust Sickness Absence procedure is in place, which includes return to work meetings and short- & long-term triggers.
- 5.3 The HR Advisory Team advise and assist managers through the Sickness Absence procedure, and attendance at sickness meetings where appropriate. The Team have run the Absence Management 'Brief Bite' training sessions virtually for supervisors and managers at least twice a year to ensure that those new to managing at the Council or those requiring a refresher are fully trained in the Council's formal process.
- 5.4 The Council is also continuing to take a number of preventative steps in relation to sickness absence:
- 5.5.1 We offer the Employee Assistance Programme 'Workplace Wellness' through Right Management. It offers a free 24-hour telephone helpline, 365 days a year and covers issues as diverse as emotional/personal, legal, financial, marital/family, work/career and drugs/alcohol. If recommended, there may be a further opportunity to discuss problems face-to-face with a trained counsellor. This service is regularly promoted and fully funded by the Council.
- 5.5.2 Flu jabs – As with previous years, Operational and other staff where appropriate were offered flu jabs and vouchers were issued. Unfortunately, with the overwhelming impact of COVID, flu jabs were not readily available, meaning that not all vouchers were able to be utilised.

## **6. MENTAL HEALTH & WELLBEING**

6.1 Mental Health and Employee wellbeing continues to be a high priority area for assisting employees. Over the past year more than ever, we have promoted a wide range of support, including:

- The 'Every Mind Matters' NHS campaign, which included a mental health 'mind plan' quiz which, dependant on the answers given, gives tailored suggestions on how to improve your mental health
- Promoting the iTalk guide on managing work stress
- Promoting World Mental Health day
- Training another group of mental health first aiders, doubling our number to 24 across the Council,
- HR running 'Managing our Mental Health' and 'Tips for Homeworking Well' sessions throughout the year
- Additionally, we have used Yellowday to run a series of external 2-hour manager awareness sessions on mental health.
- Introducing Wellbeing Action Plans - so that managers can develop an awareness of your working style, stress triggers and responses. The aim is to ensure your wellbeing at all times
- Promoting the 'Time to Talk' campaign which included activities such as fun team meetings, creative cooking together, laughing yoga and bollywood dance sessions
- Delivering a Mental Health newsletter – we've had 2 editions so far, one just into the new year focussing on caring for emotional and mental wellbeing, and the second one launched in March focussed on developing better sleep, breathing and talking
- Arranging Mindfulness techniques training sessions which could be attended by all employees virtually
- Promoting the Employee Support Line, especially through mental health first aider conversations.

It doesn't stop there – in the last month, we've added some more really useful updates to our Mental Health pages:

- Shout text messaging mental health support service
- Support for the LGBTQIA+ community during lockdown through Shout
- Tips for Leaders on managing mental health for themselves and their teams
- Personal resilience tips useful to us all
- Between 10<sup>th</sup> – 16<sup>th</sup> May we celebrated Mental Health Awareness Week. The theme was Nature and the Environment. Our campaign included the benefits of nature for good mental health including a video from David Attenborough, hints and tips for how use nature well, and a dedicated Forestnet page with stories and pictures from our employees of how they've been celebrating nature and how this has benefited them.

## **7. FINANCIAL IMPLICATIONS**

7.1 Whilst it is notable that the 'typical' absence days are far reduced in 2020/21 in comparison to the previous financial year, it is clear that the additional days lost due to COVID will have had a financial impact on Service budgets. The Council received support funding to take account of any additional costs and revised it's budgets accordingly.

## **8. ENVIRONMENTAL IMPLICATIONS**

8.1 There are no environmental implications arising from this report.

## **9. CRIME AND DISORDER IMPLICATIONS**

9.1 There are no crime and disorder implications arising from this report.

## **10. EQUALITY AND DIVERSITY IMPLICATIONS**

10.1 There are no equality and diversity implications arising from this report. We have one sickness policy which covers all staff, and ensures a consistent and fair approach to sickness absence management.

## **11. EMT COMMENTS**

11.1 EMT are supportive of the facts in this report, and the Mental Health initiatives so far. EMT have asked for a further update report on COVID sickness cases and related absence early in October 2021 to see a half year update on the ongoing impact.

## **12. EMPLOYEE SIDE COMMENTS**

12.1 None received

### **For Further Information:**

Heleana Aylett  
Human Resources Service Manager  
[Heleana.aylett@nfdc.gov.uk](mailto:Heleana.aylett@nfdc.gov.uk)  
023 8028 5588

Or

Zoe Ormerod  
HR Advisor  
[Zoe.ormerod@nfdc.gov.uk](mailto:Zoe.ormerod@nfdc.gov.uk)  
023 8028 5588