

Report to the Cabinet

Report reference: C-006-2020/21

Date of meeting: 11 June 2020



**Epping Forest
District Council**

Portfolio: Business Support

Subject: Impact of Covid19 on our Workforce

Responsible Officer: Paula Maginnis (01992 564536).

Democratic Services: Adrian Hendry (01992 564246).

Recommendations/Decisions Required:

To recognise the performance, work and effort of all our employees in supporting our residents and business community throughout the Covid19 restrictions.

Executive Summary:

The Council has continued to provide services for customers throughout the Covid19 restrictions which were put in place by the Government at the end of March. Employees have worked collaboratively supporting the multifaceted Operation Shield, supporting our business community through Business Rate Grants and being innovative in using technology to provide online resources for both customers and employees.

From 11 March a total of 98 employees have been absent from work due to Covid19, 2% were confirmed as having the infection the other 98% stayed home for a variety of self-isolating reasons (figures as at 1 June). If well, employees continued to work from home. No employees have been furloughed.

Both the People and Community Wellbeing Teams have provided a wide range of resources for mental and physical wellbeing of employees. An Employee Survey is underway, and the early messages show that employees feel valued and proud working for the Council, have enjoyed working collaboratively, working in new ways and using new technology.

The Council, working with the Trade Unions, has provided greater flexibility, where it can, on Annual Leave arrangements to enable staff and managers to plan and manage leave in a practical way over the next 2 years ensuring that service delivery can continue once restrictions are lifted.

Reasons for Proposed Decision:

No decisions are required as the report sets out the impact of Covid19 on our workforce

Other Options for Action:

No other options are required as the report is for noting

Report:

1. The report sets out the impact of Covid19 on the Council's employees.

Service Provision

2. The Council has been able to keep services running, in some cases digitally, and there has been no reason to furlough our employees. Employees have provided services using technology in a variety of ways; whether it is putting together physical activity posts on social media, exercise classes and activities for children online, group chats and online forms. They are also carrying out visits where social distancing can be achieved. Business as usual activity continues across the Council.
3. Since the 16 March there have been 11,000 additional calls handled by the Customer, Revenue and Benefits teams, illustrating the increase in customer enquiries due to Covid19. This represents a 30% increase in what is traditionally the busiest time of the year for customer contact.
4. Employees from our Revenues and Business Service Teams worked collaboratively to provide £28.7m in Business Rate grants to over 2,300 local businesses since 6 April, of which, 90% was paid within the first two weeks. This was a significant achievement supporting our business community despite the substantial increase in calls to the Revenue team at the same time. Work on a further £1.5m in Discretionary Grants will begin later in June subject to member decisions.
5. A total of 35 employees from across the authority have been redeployed to Operation Shield. The work included calls to the vulnerable list of Category A residents, welfare checks, supporting with additional calls to the Covid19 helpline, also supporting the food and distribution service. The volume of work has meant that these employees have worked on a part-time basis on Operation Shield and continued to carry out work in their Service areas. Employees have been flexible and quickly adapted to working weekends and undertaking work that they would not usually carry out.
6. Our Benefits Team are dealing with a significant rise in new claims; increasing from 150 in January to 347 in April. Significantly 80% of new claims have been made through our online forms.
7. Employees in Older Peoples Services have made nearly 4000 calls to residents including our 1350 telecare clients over the 6 weeks from 30 March. Employees are referring residents onto befriending services provided by Voluntary Action Epping Forest (VAEF) and ensuring essential provisions including medication are provided. They have also worked in collaboration with VAEF and Food4All helping to distribute free meals every Wednesday and Friday to vulnerable residents in our sheltered schemes.
8. The Communication Team have worked with external partners, members and service areas to provide a continuous flow of useful and up-to-date information and communication to our customers and employees. The team have also led the development of virtual member meetings, providing the guidance, training and supporting members at the meetings.
9. The Council's Customer Contact Team have adapted to working in a 'remote' centre and are providing a 7-day week Covid helpline. Alongside this they have supported Essex Welfare Service and Voluntary Action Epping Forest with their Covid19 response.

10. ICT have supported the organisation implementing new technology to enable our employees to work remotely, the democratic process to function in terms of virtual public meeting, at the same time as delivering business as usual.
11. The Executive Team identified the priority projects which needed to continue during this period and Project/Work Groups are working virtually together to do this. The list of projects are as follows and are not in any order of priority;
 - Accommodation
 - Flexible and remote working
 - ICT Strategy – Infrastructure Review, Application Review, HOTH
 - New Housing & Asset Management ICT solution
 - People Strategy - Health and Wellbeing workstream
 - Qualis
 - Local Plan
12. Some recruitment is still being undertaken using virtual methods to interview and test the suitability of candidates. Also, induction is carried out on-line and managers are using Teams or Zoom to carry out one-to-one induction meetings and team meetings to introduce the new employee to colleagues, set targets and manage performance.
13. Corporate communications are still taking place with the first virtual Staff Briefing taking place on 13 May. Staff were able to interact with the meeting using 'SLIDO' to ask questions of the presenters.

Absence due to Covid19

14. As at 1 June a total of 98 employees have been absent from work due to Covid 19, approximately 2% of these have been confirmed as having the infection. The remaining 98% have self-isolated due to being in Category A or B (as identified by the Government) also those who have shown symptoms or a member of the household showing symptoms and are self-isolating following government guidance.

Employee Health and Wellbeing

15. The People and Community Wellbeing Teams have provided an extensive programme of Health and Wellbeing resources for our employees.

On-Line Resources – Intranet Wellbeing Hub

16. The People Team have provided a range of innovative support under the banner of 'Lets get talking' which is split into streams
 - Lets get talking
 - Resilience and Coping with Change
 - Mental Health and Wellbeing First Aid
 - Counselling Support
 - Virtual Manager – supporting managers to support their teams
 - Family and Home

The range of support and events include one-to-one virtual coaching and counselling sessions, on-line training and bite size sessions for all employees, Mental Health Training for Managers, virtual coffee breaks and a series of evening family quizzes. The Community Wellbeing Team have organised online choir sessions and exercise classes.

Wellbeing Survey

17. Employees have been asked to provide feedback to understand how they are feeling and what they need during this time. Over 200 responses have been received so far and the initial feedback includes the following key themes;
- Employees are feeling valued and proud to work for EFDC
 - Employees are working more collaboratively to support the community and each other
 - Embracing innovation and new ways of working – staff like working with MS Teams
 - Employees are appreciative of their managers running virtual team meetings and regular 1-2-1s
 - Some employees are finding challenges with having the right equipment and furniture, also sharing space with other family members working from home or that they are home schooling
 - 91% of respondents are using all the 'Lets Keep Talking' wellness resources
 - 25% of respondents stated that their mental wellbeing is a challenge at this time
 - 33% of respondents say that they find it difficult to switch off
18. The Council is considering the feedback from the survey and updating/amending support as required. A follow up set of questions regarding IT have been circulated to employees in response to the feedback.

Annual Leave Flexibility

19. The Council has issued a Joint Statement with Unison and GMB to encourage staff to continue to take leave during this time to maintain good health and wellbeing. However, it has been acknowledged there are a variety of challenges both personally and work-related for all, so employees and managers have been given the maximum flexibility to plan and manage leave during and after this period.
20. Following the Government temporary changes to the Working Time Regulations, the Council has introduced flexibility whereby there is no cut off for the number of annual leave days taken forward for the next 2 years coming to an end April and October 2022. However, the statutory 20 days should be taken in any leave year.
21. The Council has also formally launched a Buying/Selling Annual Leave Scheme. This allows staff to buy additional leave and to sell back untaken leave. The Scheme has been amended for Covid19 so that, employees can sell 15 days leave, (rather than 8 days), after the statutory 20 days leave has been taken.

Conclusion

22. The report demonstrates our employees are working collaboratively to support our customers including our business community in a responsive and effective way in a very challenging environment. The Council is facing increasing demands on services and is providing a range of support under Operational Shield, our employees have adapted to these changes, worked outside their usual remit and are achieving excellent results.
23. Our employees have met the challenge of Covid19, embraced new ways of working and new technology which will provide a strong foundation for the Council's future ambitions.

Resource Implications:

£20,500 additional expenditure has been identified for the digital training resources, counselling and mentoring sessions, quiz evenings and other online resources. Finance reports will be provided to members regarding the Council's overall Covid19 additional expenditure (which includes lost income) as our costs are likely to be higher than the £1.3m government allocation.

Legal and Governance Implications:

The Council has followed Government guidance in its response to Covid19.

Safer, Cleaner and Greener Implications:

Not applicable

Consultation Undertaken:

Together EFDC, Unison and GMB provided the Joint Statement on Annual Leave

Background Papers:

None

Risk Management:

The report is for noting and no risks have been identified.

Equalities Impact Assessment

The Council has continued to provide the range of services to our customers, some switching to digital methods. Calls have been made to those identified as most vulnerable in the district to ensure they are receiving the essentials. The Council is supporting Essex Welfare Service and Voluntary Action Epping Forest in their work across the district.

The Council has allocated government funding to our business community to support the local economy.

The Council has recognised the personal and work-related challenges employees are facing at the time and has endeavoured to be as flexible as possible for all staff.

The report does not require any decisions to be made, in any event no equality issues have been identified.