



This is an open report

Report to: Confident Council Scrutiny Committee

Date of Meeting(s): Monday, 11 November 2024

Subject: Wellbeing and Supporting Attendance

Report of: Lisa Selby, Assistant Director - HR & OD

Contact Officer: Vicki Lowe (01942) 828997

Cabinet Portfolio Holder and area: Councillor Nazia Rehman - Portfolio Holder for Finances, Resources and Transformation

Summary:

To provide an update on the impact of the Supporting Attendance approach along with details of the progress and further enhancements we have made to our staff wellbeing offer.

Link to Corporate Priorities:

‘Progress with Unity’ Missions:

As residents, businesses, public services and community organisations of this borough we have come together to deliver two key missions:

Mission 1: Create fair opportunities for all children, families, residents & businesses.

“Together, we will break down the barriers that create financial, health, education and environmental inequalities in our borough.”

Mission 2: Make all our towns and neighbourhoods flourish for those who live and work in them.

“Together, in genuine partnership with our residents and businesses, who know our community best, we will help each town and neighbourhood in the borough celebrate and maintain their identity whilst understanding and helping to achieve what is needed to thrive.”

These missions are supported by the council’s plan which has three key pillars: **community wealth and health building, a focus on inequalities and supporting communities to fulfil their potential and create opportunities for all.**

Outline how this report supports our ‘Progress with Unity’ missions and the key pillars of the council plan:



The Supporting Attendance approach provides our managers with a framework and tools to enable them to have asset-based/person-centered conversations with staff about their wellbeing and ensures that we are able to provide or signpost them to tailored support with a view to improving their health and wellbeing and attendance at work.

The Supporting Attendance thus contributes to breaking down the barriers that create health inequalities within our borough, taking into account also that 78% of the Wigan Council workforce both live and work in the borough. The approach further supports community health and wealth building by improving financial wellbeing by seeking to avoid where possible periods of reduced/no pay arising from long term sickness absence and/or dismissal from work for non-attendance.

Wards Affected:

None

Recommendation(s):

The Confident Council Scrutiny Committee are requested to question and make comment on the information outlined within the report and endorse the work being undertaken in relation to the Council's Supporting Attendance approach and wellbeing offer.

Implications:

What are the financial implications?

There are no financial costs associated within the report. The detail of the report aims to achieve cost savings by preventing and/or reducing the levels of sickness absence.

Is budget release necessary (Capital Expenditure Only)?

No budget necessary.

What are the legal implications?

The application of the Supporting Attendance approach seeks to ensure compliance with the Equality Act 2010, providing evidence of the ways in which we seek to make reasonable adjustments in cases where an employee has a medical condition/disability which has, or could have, an impact upon their attendance at work.

What are the staffing implications?

The wealth of wellbeing support available as well as the Supporting Attendance approach is intended to positively impact on staff engagement and wellbeing and further supports staff to remain happy and healthy in work.



Equality and Diversity Impact Assessment attached or not required because (please give reason). If not required, then a relevance check needs to be completed.

Equality and Diversity Impact Assessment is not applicable. The Supporting Attendance approach is supported with interventions that drive inclusion, exploring support and reasonable adjustments at the earliest opportunity based on the different needs of individuals. Relevance Check is attached.

What are the property implications in terms of reduction, addition or change to the council's asset base or its occupation?

Not applicable.

What are the Corporate Parenting Implications?

Children in Care and Care Leavers will positively benefit from the wellbeing support and Supporting Attendance approach detailed within this report as we continue to seek to reduce sickness absence thus ensuring that the right staff are in work to support our Children in Care.

In addition, as we actively support our Care Leavers into employment at the Council. The person-centred approach that underpins our Supporting Attendance approach will ensure that their specific needs will be considered therefore helping to keep them well in work.

Risks:

To mitigate risks, the Supporting Attendance approach was co-designed and co-created with staff and consulted on with recognised Trade Union partners. In addition, ongoing audit checks seek to ensure that the approach is being consistently applied across the organisation.

Sustainability/Environmental implications:

Through ongoing enhancements to our wellbeing offer and the application of the Supporting Attendance approach, we anticipate that greater numbers of staff will continue to be kept well, healthy and happy at work. This will lead to greater availability, coverage of rotas, fulfilling key roles to provide continuity of provision of vital services going forward. It also encourages greater team presence, cohesion and overall resilience for the future.

Has the relevant Legal Officer confirmed that the recommendations within this report are lawful and comply with the Council's Constitution?

Yes

Has the relevant Finance Officer confirmed that any expenditure referred to within this report is consistent with the Council's budget?

Yes



Are any of the recommendations within this report contrary to the Policy Framework of the Council?

No

What are the alternative option(s) to be considered? Please give the reason(s) for recommendation(s):

There are no proposed alternative options as this report outlines the continued development of the work we need to do to support employee health and wellbeing and our approach to supporting attendance.

There are no background papers for this report.

Directorate Sign-off:	Lisa Selby
Date:	23 October 2024

Please list any appendices:

Appendix number or letter	Description
1	Supporting Attendance Meetings



1.0 Background

- 1.1 Our last staff wellbeing update for the Scrutiny Committee on 13 November 2023 provided an update on the developments to our staff wellbeing offer along with details of the implementation of our Supporting Attendance approach. The principal aim of our Supporting Attendance approach is to support Wigan Council employees “Team Wigan” to stay both happy and healthy in work.
- 1.2 The purpose of this update is to provide the committee with evidence of the impact of our Supporting Attendance approach to date along with details of the progress and further enhancements we have made to our staff wellbeing offer.

2.0 The Impact of the Supporting Attendance Approach

2.1 Alignment with Progress with Unity

When initially developed, it was imperative that the Supporting Attendance approach underpinned the previous Team Wigan Deal and our joint commitment to care for our health and wellbeing. The approach was co-designed as a result of feedback from teams across the Council and takes a holistic view to wellbeing and attendance, focusing on early intervention, prevention and what we can do together to help keep us well in work.

As we move forward now with Progress with Unity, we must deliver on a new set of key priorities and missions including but not limited to creating fair opportunities for residents within the borough and breaking down financial and health inequalities.

In particular, with regard to health inequalities, the Supporting Attendance approach provides our managers with a framework and tools to enable them to have asset-based/person-centered conversations with staff about their wellbeing and ensures that we are able to provide or signpost them to tailored support with a view to improving their health and wellbeing as well as their attendance at work. This in turn improves financial wellbeing by seeking to avoid where possible periods of reduced/no pay arising from long term sickness absence and/or dismissal from work for non-attendance.

For this reason, the Supporting Attendance approach continues to be as relevant as ever in ensuring that we are able to deliver on these missions, particularly as around 78% of our workforce are also Wigan borough residents.

In addition, much of what we have achieved so far through our Supporting Attendance approach has been supported by our culture and Team Wigan behaviours. The importance of the Team Wigan behaviours is reinforced through the ethos and vision set out within Progress with Unity. In particular, the need to see the person, listen deeply and do the right thing which is already a key requirement of our Supporting Attendance approach.



2.2 Embedding Supporting Attendance

We have been assessing how well embedded the Supporting Attendance approach is across the organisation and one of the ways we've tested this is through working closely with the Internal Audit Team to support regular audits with a view to enabling us to constantly review and monitor feedback and adapt and shape our policies, procedures and associated toolkits.

When we launched Supporting Attendance, it was never intended to be the final product, but rather the first iteration of what would be a constantly evolving approach that would be shaped by our learning and experience to ensure we could refine and adapt it to ensure that it would deliver the required outcomes.

As a consequence of feedback, and since transition to this approach, we have made a number of changes including improvements to supporting attendance toolkit templates, providing additional support in the application of the procedure, providing additional training and workshops for existing and new managers, and improving our data collection, analysis and intelligence gathering.

In total, 569 managers have now been trained in the Supporting Attendance approach either by attending a Pilot Session, Initial Session, or Supporting Attendance Workshops, with a further 49 booked onto an upcoming session.

2.3 Current Position on Sickness Absence

A standard measure of levels of sickness absence from work is to compare % absence to possible working days. The below table compares levels of sickness absence over the last 2 years:

Month/Year	% Sickness Absence (Working Days Lost as a % of Possible Working Days)
April 2023-March 2024	4.85% *
April 2022-March 2023	5.27%

*equates to 12.62 days per annum per employee

As you can see, since the introduction of the Supporting Attendance Approach in January 2023 we have seen a reduction in the overall number of days lost due to sickness in comparison to the previous year.

If we look at the breakdown of absence by Directorate, this demonstrates an improvement in attendance since the implementation of Supporting Attendance as compared to April 2022-March 2023:



Directorate	April 2022-March 2023	April 2023-March 2024	Increase or Decrease in Days Sick since transition to Supporting Attendance
Adults	6.11%	5.38%	Decrease
Children's	5.40%	5.12%	Decrease
Customer	4.58%	3.40%	Decrease
Environment	6.98%	6.68%	Decrease
Place	1.53%	3.35%	Increase
Resources	3.29%	1.74%	Decrease
Strategy & Innovation	2.21%	2.90%	Increase

Intelligence suggests that the increases in absence within Place and Strategy and Innovation may be associated with the transfer of services into those directorates including associated increases in headcounts.

2.4 Benchmarking Sickness Absence Levels

When compared to other benchmarks we still have work to do to further improve our attendance levels in comparison to the wider private sector and national average:

Wigan Council	Comparator Employer – NHS North West (data from NHS England – 2023/24)	Public Sector (data from CIPD September 2023)	Private Sector (data from CIPD September 2023)	National Average (data from CIPD September 2023)
4.85%	5.85%	% not reported	% not reported	3.4%
(12.62 days per employee)	(Days not reported)	(10.6 days per employee)	(5.8 days per employee)	(7.8 days per employee)

Public sector organisations always report higher levels of sickness absence than their private sector counterparts and it's worth noting that the Chartered Institute of Personnel & Development (CIPD) Health and Wellbeing at Work Survey in September 2023 reported the national average level of sickness absence as 3.4%, which is the highest figure in over a decade. It is interesting that whilst the national average is increasing, here at Wigan Council we have seen a decrease in our overall



levels of sickness absence over the last 12 months and so have not seen that upward trend.

Interestingly, the same CIPD report also indicates the size of the organisation appears to have an impact on the level of days sickness absence with the average days absence for organisations with 5000 employees or more reporting an average of 13.3 days per employee, which is higher than or current level of 12.62 days per employee.

2.5 Long & Short-Term Absence

An analysis of our absence levels in comparison to the previous year shows a slight reduction in the number of long-term sickness absences as compared to short term absences:

Year	Long Term (i.e. 20 days or more)	Short Term
April 2023-March 2024	70.31%	29.69%
April 2022- March 2023	70.92%	29.08%

2.6 Top Reasons for Sickness Absence

Below is an overview of the top 5 reasons for absence for the 12-month period ending March 2024 against those previously reported:



Ranking	Wigan Council (Top 5 Reasons as at January 2023)	Wigan Council (Top 5 Reasons overall in April 2023 to March 2024)	CIPD (Top 5 Reasons for Short Term Absence as at September 2023)	CIPD (Top 5 Reasons for Long Term Absence as at September 2023)
1 (Top)	Anxiety, Stress & Depression (Mental Health)	Anxiety, Stress & Depression (Mental Health)	Minor illness (e.g. colds/flu, stomach upsets, headaches or migraines)	Mental ill health (e.g. clinical depression or anxiety)
2	Covid-19 Diagnosed	Surgery/ Operation	MSK injuries (e.g. neck strains or repetitive strain injury, including back pain)	MSK injuries (e.g. neck strains and repetitive strain injury, including back pain)
3	Musco-Skeletal conditions	Gastro-intestinal conditions	Mental ill health (e.g. clinical depression or anxiety)	Acute medical conditions (e.g. stroke, heart attack or cancer)
4	Injury/ Fracture	Cold/Flu/Viral Infection	COVID-19 (including confirmed cases, self-isolation, quarantine, shielding)	Stress
5	Gastro-intestinal conditions	Musculoskeletal Problems (MSK)	Stress	Recurring medical conditions (e.g. asthma, angina or allergies)

Note: Care should be taken when making the comparisons to benchmarked data due to different ways in which we categorise absence e.g. we include stress, depression, anxiety all together rather than separately.

There are no real surprises in our data and as would be anticipate the reduction in absences linked to Covid 19. Interestingly we have a high occurrence of absences due to surgery and operations within our top 5 (which in comparison to benchmark



data could simply be down to categorisation) but organisationally we appear to have less injuries or fractures factoring as a reason for absence compared to early 2023.

Our top reason for absence continues to be associated with Anxiety, Stress and Depression and this remains unchanged and is comparable to the top reasons for absence associated with longer term absences when compared to benchmark data.

The CIPD report referred to above gives insight into the fact that public sector and non-profit organisations are more likely than private sector organisations to include mental ill health among their top causes of long-term absence and more public sector respondents also report that stress is among their top causes of short- and long-term absence so it is certainly not surprising that our data aligns with this.

2.7 Alternative Options to Sickness Absence/Other Leave

Below is a summary of alternative options to sickness absence/other leave over the past 2 years:

Other Leave Type	2023-2024 Hours taken (unless otherwise specified)	2022-2023 Hours taken (unless otherwise specified)
Carers Leave	3695.62	1086.07
Disability Leave	238.35	619.85
Special Leave (including Bereavement)	12,563.39	8,058.66
Unpaid Leave (Days)	0	6.5
Unpaid Leave (Hours)	5	5.08
Surgery/Operation	0	7.5
Witness Summoned or Subpoenaed	37	0

What is immediately apparent from the data outlined above is the significant increase in staff taking 'Carers Leave' which we could broadly assume is associated with a greater awareness of this support option as a result of the Supporting Attendance approach and the asset-based conversations managers are now having with their staff.

The increase in the number of hours 'Special Leave' can likely be attributed to the increase in special leave from 6 days to 10 days and management in accordance with the Supporting Attendance approach i.e. to support staff with personal life circumstances that impact on their wellbeing.



The reduction in 'Disability Leave' in comparison to the year 2022-23 may be associated with greater support being available in the workplace as a consequence of wellbeing check-ins with managers and more personalised support being put into place.

2.8 Supporting Attendance Meetings

One of the key elements of our new approach to Supporting Attendance, are the meetings that managers have with their staff, whether it be a Wellbeing Check-in, a Supporting Attendance Plan Meeting/Review, or Hearing. The table in **Appendix 1** shows the total number of meetings that have been recorded as taking place since the introduction of Supporting Attendance.

Since the Supporting Attendance approach has been introduced 18 staff have left due to ill health retirement, 14 have been dismissed on the grounds of ill health/sickness capability and a further 17 have mutually agreed an exit. To date, no employment tribunal claims have been made in connection with any Supporting Attendance cases or dismissals.

3.0 Update on our Staff Wellbeing Offer

Since we last attended Scrutiny Committee in 2023, we have made further progress in improving our Staff Wellbeing Offer.

Members of the Committee are reminded that many elements of the Staff Wellbeing Offer are also available to Councillors. We will shortly be forwarding an updated copy of the "Keeping Team Wigan Well" booklet to Democratic Services for circulation to all Councillors to ensure that you know how to access this offer.

3.1 Mental Health

As mental health conditions are the primary cause of sickness absence across the Council workforce, a key focus of developments to our wellbeing offer has been to enhance the wealth of mental health support available.

Since the transition to our Supporting Attendance approach in January 2023, this has included:

Mental Health First Aider Training - Training a further 140 employees to become Mental Health First Aiders. Mental Health First Aider training provides staff with an in-depth knowledge and understanding of mental health factors that can affect wellbeing, provides practical skills in spotting triggers and signs of mental health issues, and provides confidence to get involved, reassure and support a person who is in distress.

Mental Health Awareness Training – Training a further 165 employees in Mental Health Awareness. This training provides more information on what mental health is,



how to challenge stigma, how to look after their own mental wellbeing as well as providing the confidence to offer support to someone with poor mental health.

Mental Health Champions – Training a further 6 Mental Health Champions. Our Mental Health Champions are trained to have supporting and confidential conversations with colleagues and to take an active role in promoting positive wellbeing initiatives to support and signpost for further help with their mental health or to support others to make lifestyle changes.

Enhanced Mental Health Support & Trauma Risk Assessment – Developing and expanding our enhanced mental health support offer which has seen increased utilisation through co-ordination and deployment of our Mental Health First Aiders and Trauma Risk Assessment (TRiM) Assessors.

This has included for example co-ordinated responses across our Environment and Children’s Directorates following traumatic events e.g. bereavement of a colleague and/or service user. We have seen an increase from 1 TRiM assessment completed in 2022/23 to 37 completed in 2023/24 of which 43% were then referred for Trauma therapy. Of 18 individuals supported in this way, 16 stayed in work following the traumatic events they experienced.

Schwartz Rounds –increased promotion of Schwartz Rounds which support wellbeing by enabling staff to talk about and share experiences and providing the opportunity for reflection. We’ve seen an increase of 1 session in 2022/23 for a total of 11 participants to 6 sessions in 2023/24 for a total of 219 participants. Feedback from some sessions we ran on 1 August 2024 include: *“Great to have the space for reflection & open, safe conversation”* and *“Feedback from everyone was that it was really useful and opened up really good conversations”*.

Counselling – we continue to support staff with access to counselling services. The table below provides an overview of the increased utilisation of counselling services over the last 2 years:

Year	Number of Counselling Referrals through Counselling Provider	Number of Counselling Referrals through EAP Provider
April 2023-March 2024	122	*98
April 2022-March 2023	119	52

*only 3 quarters reported for 2023/4

The guidance for managers within the Supporting Attendance Toolkit as well as the conversation prompts within the relevant wellbeing check-in/plan templates, prompt managers to have conversations about support available for staff, including the availability of counselling. This may account for an increase in the number of referrals to our Counselling Provider overall or could be as a result of the promotion of the service as a consequence of us securing a new provider, or simply because more staff feel they would benefit from this service.



Employee Assistance Programme – we continue to promote the availability of our Employee Assistance Programme, which includes Wellbeing Hub and 24/7 Helpline, and provides instant access to many self-help Cognitive Behavioural Therapy (CBT) resources, in addition to fast access to counselling services (mentioned above).

3.2 Flu

As Colds, Flu and Viral infections are in our top 5 reasons for absence, we are again running our annual flu vaccination programme which is part of our commitment to keep our workforce safe and well during the winter months when rates of flu are higher.

During our 2023 campaign a total of 993 staff took up the offer of the flu vaccine and 86% rated their experience as excellent. It is too early to report on take up for our 2024 campaign.

3.3 Musculoskeletal Problems

Another of our top 5 reasons for absence are Musculoskeletal problems. We have secured the services of one of the country's leading occupational health physiotherapy service providers. They offer a service to all staff regardless of whether the injury is work related or not.

As we have a higher prevalence of Musculoskeletal problems in Waste services for example, we provide an on-site clinic at the Depot, as well as a new clinic at Wigan Life Centre South due to the high numbers of staff that are based on the Wigan campus.

The below table shows the number of fast-track physiotherapy referrals over the last 2 years:

Year	Number of Fast Track Physiotherapy Referrals
April 2023-March 2024	111
April 2022-March 2023	129

Other support mechanisms for Musko-skeletal problems include the requirement for relevant staff to complete Display Screen Equipment (DSE) assessments and for relevant staff complete manual handling (and refresher) training and then refresher training, as well as guidance for managers on how to make reasonable adjustments in the workplace and to provide referrals to the Department for Work and Pensions (DWP) Access to Work service.

3.4 Menopause

As mentioned in the last report, since we signed the Workplace Menopause Pledge and made our menopause commitment, we have achieved all commitments outlined



and continue to promote, raise awareness and signpost to many women's and men's health conditions.

We now have a well-established Menopause Peer Network Group who meet on a regular basis to discuss different topics share their menopause journey to help and provide support to others, and we ran a Women's Health Event in October 2023.

Our Supporting Attendance approach also helps to normalise conversations around menopause, by supporting conversations around reasonable adjustments in the workplace.

3.5 Workforce Wellbeing Charter

We were re-accredited with the Workforce Wellbeing Charter in 2024 and the summary below demonstrates progress in a number of areas:

Workplace Wellbeing Charter Accreditation 2022		Workplace Wellbeing Charter Reaccreditation 2024	
Criteria	Level	Criteria	Level
Leadership	Excellence	Leadership	Excellence
Attendance Management	Excellence	Attendance Management	Achievement
Health & Safety	Excellence	Health & Safety	Excellence
Mental Health	Excellence	Mental Health	Excellence
Healthy Eating	Achievement	Physical Health	Excellence
Physical Activity	Achievement	Inclusion & Culture	Excellence
Smoking	Achievement	Intoxicants	Commitment
Alcohol	Achievement	Environment & Sustainability	Achievement

Some of the criteria has changed since our accreditation in 2022, and the areas we now need to focus on to demonstrate excellence in the remaining criteria include:

- **Attendance Management** - how we put in place effective controls to limit the risk of presenteeism linked to the criteria of attendance management
- **Intoxicants** – how we actively promote stop-smoking services and allow staff time to attend and provide access to intoxicants awareness training.
- **Environment and Sustainability** - how we regularly communicate to employees promoting how they can support carbon offsetting practices, support eco-friendly conscious decision-making when outsourcing services and integrate environmental sustainability practices into our employee compensation and benefits

3.6 Occupational Health Provider

Since our last report, we have secured the services of a new Occupational Health provider (Innovate) from 1st April 2024, whose offer includes comprehensive and asset-based management referrals.



Since the transition to our Supporting Attendance approach, we have seen a reduction in Occupational Health referrals in comparison to the previous year.

Year	Number of Occupational Health Referrals
April 2023-March 2024	1517
April 2022-March 2023	1579

This reduction is likely a result of the fact that our Supporting Attendance approach encourages managers to have asset-based conversations with staff regarding what they can/can't do, thus seeking to reduce the need to make more frequent referrals to Occupational Health.

3.7 Team Wigan Experience

To support and embed our Team Wigan culture and approach, we have designed an interactive, engaging and inclusive learning experience, the Team Wigan Experience, which celebrates how we do things in Wigan Council and our borough. The experience showcases our culture, personality, spirit, and core values and provides an opportunity for us to listen to everyone's views whilst building relationships across services and focusing on our future delivery. Over 4000 staff have been through the experience, and it will continue to evolve and refresh.

Within the Team Wigan Experience we actively promote and raise awareness of our Staff Wellbeing offer which includes the full range of support available covering 'mind, body and money' (some of which has been referenced within this report) as well as to further embed asset based/person centred conversations which ultimately underpins our Support Attendance approach.

4.0 Conclusions

As has been highlighted by this report, overall the Supporting Attendance approach appears to be having a positive impact on attendance levels across the Council, especially when taking into account the wider context where organisations are generally seeing an increase in sickness absence not only as an ongoing consequence of Covid-19, but also due to the wider economic situation and cost of living crisis which also can be contributory factors to people's health and wellbeing.

Whilst recognising the positive impact of our approach, we must continue to use the data available to us to monitor and take targeted action to ensure that we are addressing the root causes of sickness absence across the organisation, ensuring that managers are applying the approach fairly and consistently, and that they have both the capability and confidence to do so.

The other area we need to focus on is evaluating the impact of the various health and wellbeing initiatives as well as ensuring that we continue to raise awareness of



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the range of wellbeing support available through our various internal communication and engagement channels.

What is clear is that Supporting Attendance remains as important as ever in ensuring that we are able to meet our strategic priorities linked to Progress with Unity, keep our workforce well, and hopefully reduce the financial and non-financial impacts of high levels of sickness absence across the organisation.

On a final note, we are currently analysing the outcome of our recent staff survey and early indications show that the majority of our staff have provided really positive feedback that they have access to the resources and benefits they need to support their wellbeing, feel that they are well supported by their manager and report that they are treated fairly and with respect and kindness whilst at work. All of this feedback further evidences the impact of the hard work that has been done so far to improve our wellbeing offer and the management of sickness absence and attendance at work.



Relevance Check

Budget Reduction/Service Area: HR&OD
Service Lead: Lisa Selby
Date: 28th October 2024

In what ways does this Budget reduction have an impact on an outward facing service? How will the service feel different to your customers or potential customers?

n/a

If not, how does it impact on staff e.g. redundancies, pay grades, working conditions? Why are you confident that these staff changes will not affect the service you provide?

n/a

Is a Customer Impact Assessment needed?

No