WEST DUNBARTONSHIRE COUNCIL

Report by Strategic Lead – People & Technology

Corporate Services Committee: 13 November 2019

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Subject: Supporting Employee Wellbeing Policy

1.   Purpose

1.1   The purpose of this report is to update the committee on the review of the former Attendance Management policy and the subsequently agreed Supporting Employee Wellbeing Policy.

2.   Recommendations

2.1   The Committee is asked to approve the Supporting Employee Wellbeing Policy (Appendix 2).

3.   Background

3.1   West Dunbartonshire Council is committed to supporting employees' health and well-being thereby improving attendance. The Council's Well-being Charter sets out the expectations and responsibilities of managers and employees in relation to attendance and well-being at work and the Attendance Management Policy, implemented in October 2015, supported this aim.

3.2   Since the introduction of the 2015 Policy, various practices have been used to support employees to stay in work, or assist a sustained return to the workplace. The policy provides a framework to pro-actively monitor absence and develop support mechanisms for employees, in line with the Employee Wellbeing Strategy.

3.3   While a number of technical changes have been made since its introduction, a fuller review was deemed timely to better align this policy with the Employee Wellbeing Strategy. The aim being to promote a healthier and more inclusive culture in addition to reducing sickness absence.

4.   Main Issues

4.1   Since the introduction of the policy there has been heightened attention on removing the stigma from those experiencing challenges with their mental health and wellbeing. In order to support and progress this, it is important to incorporate pro-active measures to support employee health and wellbeing where possible. Employees who feel supported by their employer in any

aspect of their mental or physical health are likely to be more engaged, experience an increase in productivity and minimise the time spent away from the workplace due to sickness.

4.2 Key change drivers

- Language used in the policy did not accurately reflect the spirit of the policy i.e. to provide a mechanism that enables managers to support employee health and wellbeing in the workplace. HR, Trade Unions, management representatives and representatives from the Employee Wellbeing agreed that the tone could be softened in a manner that would better reflect the supportive approach intended and change both perception and the manner in which it is applied.

- The focus groups considered reasonable attendance levels and the points at which specific line management involvement may be required. A need and duty to inform and manage expectations of the workforce was acknowledged. The view remained that removing these could increase the likelihood of inconsistent practice and bias. Consequently there are no changes to the expectations of attendance.

- In consideration of the feedback, the policy aims to ensure that the process is viewed as a positive, caring and supportive interaction between line manager and employee.

- HR undertook a benchmarking exercise with other local government authorities in relation to attendance management policies and found that standards and monitoring are comparable i.e. 8+ days or 4 occasions in rolling 12 months or thereabouts. However, the language of these policies is evolving. For example, East Dunbartonshire refer to their meetings as 'Wellbeing Support Meetings' and South Lanarkshire refer to their meetings as 'Attendance Support Meetings'. South Lanarkshire have also attached an appendix purely dedicated to internal and external supports available. Feedback from North Ayrshire council was that they too are embarking on a review with the aim of reflecting a supportive ethos their policy.

- The CIPD's 'Moving employee wellbeing agenda report' discusses the context of mental illness, mental health, and wellbeing. Crucially finding that negative words can be experienced as condescending, isolating, and stigmatising, whereas positive words can convey understanding, dignity, empathy, and hope. Using the wrong language and words can create barriers, misconceptions, stereotypes and labels that are difficult to overcome. It is therefore critical to have all parties involved in employee wellbeing use positive language and role model the positive and supportive tone in order to drive full understanding and change the approach. In order to ensure we can achieve this change in tone, HR will link this to the communication plan which will include training/masterclasses of the revised policy to managers and trades union groups across all services.

4.3   Key change themes

- The name of the policy has been changed to 'Supporting Employee Wellbeing Policy' to reinforce the commitment to employee health and wellbeing as well as the policy title reflecting the supportive nature of the changes within. Other local authorities, for example, East Dunbartonshire adopted a 'Wellbeing at Work' policy in 2016, with the same focus in mind.

- Significant amendments to language to reflect the supportive ethos, which is to adopt a culture that promotes and ensures positive physical and mental health and wellbeing is at the core.

- Technical amendments to reflect changes in policies and supports i.e. updating the employee counselling service from Time for Talking to PAM Assist.

- Additions to clearly manage the expectations of the manager and employee obligations throughout the process i.e. when reporting, contact, updating HR21, locations of meetings, when OH appointments may be necessary.

- Detail of each change is outlined in Appendix 1 'Table of Policy Changes'.

4.4   Next Steps – Communication Plan

- Supporting documents i.e. manager guidance, template letters etc. are in the process of being updated to reflect the agreed changes and ensure that the tone of any correspondence sent to employees is appropriate. Additionally, the employee supports in place will also be highlighted within these template documents to ensure awareness of supports. This also helps to ensure that those who do not regularly access the intranet know where they can find the information. The manager guidance will also be amended to highlight that the practicalities of wellbeing support meetings should also be considered. For example, depending on the nature of the illness, the timing of the meeting may be planned to coincide with the time of day the employee feels at their best and most able to attend/contribute.

- Delivery of training and masterclasses will be rolled out across the services by HR to achieve consistency and good practice approach to the revised policy.

- Highlighting the changes to and introducing the revised policy will be achieved through workforce updates, newsfeed articles, the use of the big screens, text messages to mobile/hard to reach workers, and briefing notes provided for managers to share at team meetings. The Wellbeing Advocates and Managers' group will be asked to share messages with colleagues. Finally, the HR team will trial email signature messaging to promote the policy in all of their correspondence. This will mean that any time a member of the HR sends an email, the recipient will see a message at the bottom of the email

promoting the policy.

- I-learn modules updated to align with the revised policy and a supporting re-launch. The current module is already a mandatory part of the skills passport that all new employees are required to complete and the updated version will replace that module.

4.5 It is anticipated that these changes and additions to the policy, including the communication plan, will further support the management of the process and help to improve the understanding of the impact that physical/mental health can have on employees ability to attend work. Furthermore, it will more effectively highlight the responsibilities of both employees and managers and raise awareness of the supports available..

5.   People Implications

5.1 The changes/additions outlined in the report will better reflect the supportive approach intended and change the perception and the style in which the policy is applied. In order to further embed a supportive and inclusive culture for the workforce, it is critical that all parties involved in well-being demonstrate positive behaviours. Negative language will simply erode these positive developments and damage both the employee/employer relationship and have a detrimental impact on well-being.

5.2 The policy for employees is accessible on the WDC intranet and the supporting e-learning module is a mandatory part of the induction process for all employees.. Training regarding legislation associated with the policy i.e. GDPR and Equalities are annually refreshed through e-learn courses, email reminders for these courses are issued to employees when required.   using

6.   Financial and Procurement Implications

6.1 There are no financial implications associated with revision of this policy and procedure.

7.   Risk Analysis

7.1 Application of the revised policy and practice will mitigate against any potential risks by ensuring fair and effective management and support of employees and limiting inconsistencies in practice across departments.

8.   Equalities Impact Assessment (EIA)

8.1 The original equalities impact assessment conducted in 2015 has been reviewed and updated..

9.   Consultation

9.1 The changes to the Attendance Management Policy were informed by feedback from Service Managers, HR and Trade Unions. The changes were discussed at organised Focus Groups on 28th February 2019 and 26th March 2019.

9.2 The importance of all parties involved in employee wellbeing actively and positively supporting these changes was discussed and reinforced at the Convenor Meetings on Tuesday 23rd April 2019, 21st May, 18th June, 20th August and 19th September.. The policy changes are the best achievable through negotiation recognising that the application of some aspects require further monitoring to ensure the supportive nature intended is achieved.

9.3 The period for formal review with the Joint Trade Union to be set at between 9 and 12 months. The implementation of the revised policy will be monitored through the Joint Union Convener Meetings.

10.   Strategic Assessment

10.1 This report directly supports the Council's Employee Wellbeing Strategy ensuring this policy is aligned to the ethos in providing meaningful and tangible support to employees.

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Date: 21/10/2019

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Appendices:	Appendix 1 – Table of changes Appendix 2 – SUPPORTING EMPLOYEE WELLBEING POLICY Appendix 3 – Employee Wellbeing One Page Support Guide
Background Papers:	EIA
Wards Affected:	None

Appendix 1 – Table of Changes

Section	Changes/Additions	Rationale
Policy Name	'Attendance Management' Policy to 'Supporting Employee Wellbeing Policy.	This is now aligned with our Employee Wellbeing Strategy.
Meetings	'Long Term Attendance Review Meetings have been changed to 'Wellbeing Support Meetings' 'Attendance Trigger Meetings' have been removed and addition has been added which gives guidance to importance of 'Back to Work Wellbeing Support Meetings' with manager and discretion on whether it's appropriate to issue employees with 'Attendance Advisory Note' (see below).	This amendment supports our ethos which is to adopt a culture that promotes positive physical and mental health and wellbeing at the core of everything we do and support our Employee Wellbeing Strategy. From the benchmarking exercise found that most authorities refer to these meetings as 'support meetings'. This was felt to be most appropriate as at this point in the policy, as this is the line managers prompt to have a conversation with the individuals regarding supports and any concerns i.e. patterns of absence. It was felt that in order to change the focus, removing language that isn't felt to be helpful or supportive would help. This may help employee's who feel particularly anxious in attending these meetings, which in turn will allow them to be viewed as positive, supportive and pro-active.
Improvement Notes	Improvement notes have been changed to 'Attendance Advisory Notes'	At each meeting where they are issued with this note, it ensures clarity of where they are in the process and next steps.
S3.1 'Key Principles'	Points have been included around employee and employer responsibilities for H&S (this is also included in S7.1) and embedding a culture of health and wellbeing.	Appropriate to be included as already in WDC's T&Cs and fits well with the context of this policy.
S3.1	The word 'implementing' has been replaced with 'applying' 'Robust' has been removed and replaced with 'Supportive'	Technical change
S5.2	Under 'Application' and 'Policy Procedure' – 'Unsatisfactory standards' have been replaced with 'Not meeting expected levels'. An addition has been made to read 'This is to ensure regular support is in place guided by our Employee Wellbeing Strategy to keep employees at work where possible.'	In line with our ethos.

S1.1 of 'Procedures'	An addition has been added which outlines the aim of the revised policy and mentions that it prioritises employee wellbeing and support.	In line with our ethos.
S1.3	Update has been made to 'PDPs' and replaced with 'Be the Best Conversations'	Technical update
S2.1.1 'Reporting'	An addition of manager responsibility to update HR21 with all absence information has been included.	Technical update
S2.1.3	'GDPR Legislation and Framework' has been included alongside DPA legislation	Technical update
S2.2 'Contact during absence'	An addition has been included around the manager's obligation when the employee has failed to make contact and there are concerns for their welfare.	This is a regular HR query around what managers should do in cases of concerns regarding employee welfare.
S2.4.1	The option to refer employees to OH before they reach long term has been included as something that can be explored on a case by case basis.	Pro-active and may be helpful and supportive depending on the case.
S2.4.2	An addition of manager responsibility to update HR21 with all absence information has been included.	Technical update
S2.4.3	'Case Review Meeting' changed to 'Wellbeing Review'	Keeps it in line with language changes and is more supportive. Feedback from TUs.
S2.4.3	Additional paragraph added to make clear that it might not always be appropriate to have a 'Wellbeing Review' at 13 weeks and this is dependant on the circumstances of each case with advice from HR.	TUs & HR agreed that the 13 week review is not helpful for everyone, can cause more stress and further set back at an early stage, overwhelming with Senior manager present as well as manager. Dependent on the circumstances.
S2.4.3 'Wellbeing Review'	The 'action plan' has been replaced with 'agreed plan'.	Feedback from TUs that some employees come out of a meeting and are unable to remember what actions were agreed at the meeting. This allows these agreed actions to form the plan providing further clarity for the

		employee & manager.
	Under 'exceptional circumstances' when an employee is unable to attend a meeting due to medical reasons the addition 'alternative formats and venues can be agreed' for example, telephone calls, off site meetings or home visits' is included. The manager responsibility of updating HR21 has also been included in this section.	Added through on-going feedback, determined on case by case basis.
S2.5.1	An addition of 'Exceptional Circumstances' has been included in regards to extending phased returns.	As a result of the trade union's feedback, it was agreed and updated to reflect that in exceptional cases this can be considered. The group discussed the offer to employees i.e. 4 week phased return and it was deemed to be reasonable for the majority of cases. If employees were using annual leave at a concerning rate a further conversation with that employee would be required to understand what further supports may be needed, was agreed this needs to be reviewed on a case to case basis.
S3.1.2	The order of the paragraph has been switched around to read better.	Technical change
S3.2.2 'Wellbeing Support Meetings'	An addition to this section has been added which highlights the context of 'FINAL Wellbeing Support' meetings.	Manages expectations, provides clarity around what is to be expected at this important stage in the process.
S3.2.5	Includes an addition which places responsibility on managers to ensure that employees who are absent are receiving correspondence on all supports available within the organisation.	Duty of care
New appendix	'Employee Wellbeing Support Guide'	To support the addition in S3.2.5 a new appendix will form part of the policy. This will be a working document and will be updated regularly to stay relevant. (Appendix 2 of this report).
S3.3 'Discretion'	This section has been updated to reflect that discretion will be in consultation with HR and the Strategic Lead.	This is to clarify that the Strategic Lead will only be involved in making sure a consistent approach in the service but the decision to give discretion will be made by the manager and with support and guidance from

	Removal of 'Discretion in Exceptional Circumstances' and replaced with 'Discretion Guidance'. Additional paragraph added to guide manager's on pro-actively thinking around discretion before facilitating wellbeing support meeting.	HR. The intention is to make clear that managers should work alongside the SL to ensure discretion is being applied fairly and consistently without bias. The wording has also been updated in appendix 2 of the policy. It has been outlined that this would be determined on the individual's circumstances and on a case by case basis.
S4.1 'Disability'	'Tailored adjustment agreements' have been updated to 'Disability Passport' and also reference to the 'Disability Leave Scheme' has been added as an addition to this section.	Technical change
S4.2 'Stress'	This section has been changed from 'Stress' to 'Work-related Stress' and a link to the 'Individual Stress Risk Assessment' has been provided.	Technical change.
S4.3 'Reactive Stress'	There has been a paragraph added which originates from the council's terms and conditions in relation to those who are absent through their own misconduct/neglect.	As this is relevant to attendance, this would help highlight what's already included in the T&Cs and manage expectations.
S4.6 'Accidents at Work'	A sentence around informing H&S TU Representatives on any workplace accidents has been included.	Feedback from H&S TU representatives, to be involved from early stages of each accident.
S6 'Policies'	All policies have been hyperlinked to the relevant documents. The forms/letter templates are in as an addition.	This makes it more accessible from the one document.
Appendix 1 'Support Resources'	Information on Access to Work has been included	Relevant employee support