Report title: Remote Working and Wellbeing	
Report to: Corporate Policy and Scrutiny Committee	
Report author: Pam Parkes, Director ODP & Service Transformation	
Date: 27th October 2020	**For:** Information
Enquiries to: Ben Unsworth, Head of Service Transformation or Alison Woods, Head of People Business Partners, Employment Practice & Equalities	
County Divisions affected: All ECC Employees	

1. Purpose of Report

The national lockdown meant an immediate shift to remote working for the majority of Essex County Council Employees. Wellbeing support was put in place and research was commissioned to understand the impact of remote working and to explore the opportunities arising from such a significant change.

This report provides a briefing on:
- the Digital Remote Working programme and how we are supporting the council to make the most of new ways of working
- What we are doing to support the wellbeing of our workforce now and in the future

The attached presentation describes the research we carried out to understand the experience of our employees and sets out the vision and ambition for the Wellbeing Strategy..

2. Remote Working at Essex County Council

Ways of working
Changes to the way we work at Essex County Council (ECC) were brought about because of lockdown. Many have been successful and there is some desire to keep them. This is dependent on what the service is and whether or not it adversely affects services to our residents.

Understanding remote working at scale
Gavin Jones (CEO) commissioned a piece of discovery research into what model of remote working works best and why. This comprised of:

- an academic literature review
- in-depth user research with ECC employees who took part in video diary studies
- desk research
- data analysis
- an audit of staff surveys
- light touch review of services suitable for delivery by a remote workforce

The overall finding was that **a** hybrid approach is the most successful model for remote working in the long term. It reduces cost, carbon footprint and road congestion. It increases the physical and psychological wellbeing of staff, reduces social isolation and leads to greater productivity and job satisfaction. It also makes ECC a more inclusive employer which helps attract and retain talent.

3. Remote Working Staff Survey

In May 2020 a survey was issued to employees to gather information on experiences of working from home during the national lockdown. This data can help us make more informed decisions about future ways of working and understand the support people need. The detailed analysis is in the attached Remote Working and Wellbeing presentation.

We received 4,790 responses (63% of ECC employees), including more than 16,000 free text answers that were analysed. There were some differences in response rates between functions, services and teams - so we need to exercise caution when interpreting results.

Top concerns for ASC, C&F, EDU, PPH
- the inability of maintaining social distance
- working in an office environment that is not suitable, especially when compared with their environment at work (some of the elements mentioned: light, ventilation, windows, noise)
- anxiety about contracting the virus

Top concerns for CCS, F&T, ODP&ST
- having to use public transport for travelling to the office
- social distancing
- the return to work in a non-suitable office environment
- anxiety about contracting the virus

The concern that was least mentioned (although it appeared in all functions' responses) was the possibility of losing the benefits of WFH (for example work-life balance).

How we are addressing these issues
We have already put the following in place:
- Default position is still working from home when possible
- Phased, coordinated return to offices for those who can't continue working from home already in place and working well
- Process to coordinate return to other workplaces (i.e. country parks) in place and working well
- Safety measures in place, with clear on-going communication from those services with people returning

- Continuous review of measures in place to adjust or reinforce when necessary
- Safety assessments undertaken at workplace level as well as at service and individual level when required
- Wellbeing support offering

Further recommendations
- Continue to promote and strengthen the Wellbeing offer
- Reduce to the minimum the number of employees returning to the office who need to use public transport
- As soon as possible to share with all employees the plans for improving work-place environment (part of the Ways of Working recovery work)

Tasks people are unable to perform from home

While most of those people whose work can be done in an office said they were able to work from home, there are some tasks that couldn't be done from home or an ECC office. For example:

- Community based tasks like visiting homes, schools or care homes
- Tasks in statutory settings (i.e. court hearings)

People in libraries indicated they couldn't perform any of their normal library duties and had challenges keeping in touch with colleagues when they were redeployed during the Covid-19 response. They did not have ECC laptops or access to devices at home, which presents a risk of creating a digital divide that needs to be considered in any new operating models.

There were some tasks that could be carried out at home if people had access to the right systems and equipment (e.g. printers and scanners). There were also some processes that would require a more fundamental redesign to support effective remote working.

Some staff also expressed a preference for performing relationship-based tasks face-to-face (assessments, supervision, performance management). While being remote doesn't prevent this work taking place, people have some concerns about doing this effectively. People also expressed a concern for the loss of social learning and sharing experiences from spending time together.

4. Remote Working and Wellbeing

To support employees whilst working remotely a range of wellbeing focussed support was put in place.

Wellbeing Communications: During lockdown and beyond to support people working remotely we had regular wellbeing focussed communications via the Intranet and One News including sharing resources and information, campaigns and virtual activities.

My Wellbeing: During lockdown we developed the 'My Wellbeing' information and resource page which is available via the My Learning platform. The My Wellbeing Portal gives access to wellbeing focused learning including a range of guidance, advice and support. Including

- 4 Pillars of Wellbeing: Mental, Physical, Social & Financial
- Covid-19 & Wellbeing
- Bereavement Support & Information
- Line Manager Information
- Signposting

Bereavement Support: Early during lockdown it was recognised that there may be an increased requirement for bereavement support among employees and so a range of additional support via our Occupational Health and Counselling team was put in place. This included:

- **My Wellbeing – Bereavement Support and Information:** a dedicated Bereavement Support and Information section on the My Wellbeing portal to help and support those affected by bereavement. This includes employees who have lost someone, a manager who is helping to support an employee or a manager who is supporting their team as they go through a bereavement or managing the essentials arising from the death of an employee.
- **ECC Counselling Single Point of Access:** Our Counselling Single Point of Access provides employees the opportunity to talk to a trained specialist about bereavement counselling options. Following the assessment further counselling sessions may be arranged either via ECC, counselling

provision available through our EAP or support through other local provision.

- **Virtual Bereavement Safe Spaces:** These virtual safe spaces with a bereavement focus are facilitated by internal counsellors. This is to offer people drop-in support when you want to join others who are experiencing loss too. These sessions will run on Thursdays 10:00am-12:00pm.
- **Line Manager Bereavement Awareness Training:** Designed to prepare managers for the impact of bereavement so that they feel they have the confidence and the tools available to be able to support their teams. This session is delivered in the form of a facilitated webinar. Available for senior leaders and line managers.
- **Trauma Support:** In circumstances where groups of employees are affected by the coronavirus such as a death of a team member or where the work they are doing has been impacted by the coronavirus then we are able to arrange online group trauma support up. This will be provided by either our in-house specialists or via our EAPs critical incident management team.
- **Death in Service Checklist:** We have updated our death in service checklist to provide more in-depth guidance and support for managers, this can be accessed on the My Wellbeing Portal in the 'Senior Leadership and Line Manager Information Playlist'.

5. Wellbeing Strategy

Our Wellbeing Strategy 2020 – 2025 has been in development over the last year and was formally launched on Tuesday 29th September 2020. The development of the strategy was informed by the Digital Remote Working project (including the remote working survey conducted above) and wider employee engagement conducted during the national lockdown. This wider engagement included 1-2-1 interviews, employee networks and panels, and focus groups.

At Essex County Council we define wellbeing as: "A sense of organisation, team and individual health, contentment and resilience. In which employees are supported to make informed choices and engage in positive wellbeing behaviours in order to thrive at ECC and beyond." Our workplace wellbeing strategy sets out our vision and aims for employee wellbeing, our key areas of focus including our approach and how Essex County Council will seek to measure success.

Our wellbeing vision is to work with and for all within Essex County Council to enable the right environment and behaviours so that individual and organisational wellbeing is embedded in everything we do. Ultimately, creating a healthy, content, resilient and productive workforce who are able to work to the best of their ability and collectively maximise the impact for the residents of Essex.

Our Aims are to:

- Create a safe and healthy work environment which fosters a culture of positive wellbeing, whereby the wellbeing of our people is seen as integral to everything we do.

- Improve general wellbeing for our diverse workforce and ensure that wellbeing is seen as everyone's responsibility across ECC.
- Embed wellbeing as a central part of our strategic priorities for our leaders and councillors across all functions within ECC and ensure that all are aware of our statutory obligations.
- To be identified as an employer of choice who cares about wellbeing and recognises the role wellbeing can play in the bigger picture including improving productivity and ways of working.
- Provide impactful wellbeing support based on the needs of our people, using a collaborative approach.

We have 4 pillars of wellbeing which are: Mental Wellbeing, Physical Wellbeing, Social Wellbeing and Financial Wellbeing.

We have also developed a strategic approach based on 6 key areas of focus. The purpose of our strategic approach is to ensure that wellbeing is seen as essential to 'creating the right conditions' for our people. Wellbeing therefore needs to sit across all areas within ECC. With a focus on creating a wellbeing culture which is championed at all levels, prevention focussed and improves our standards and practices. With the purpose of having a positive impact on the diverse individual needs of all. These key areas of focus are:
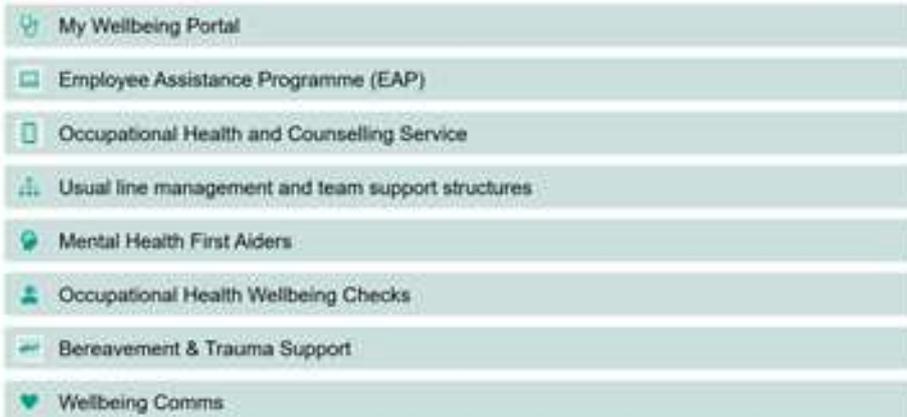- Our Culture
- Prevention
- Our Standards
- My Wellbeing
- Collaboration & Impact
- Leadership & Management

A long-term action plan containing detail of the specific actions we will take over each phase to progress the delivery of our aims and approach will be developed. This strategic plan will be underpinned by business and service plans through which our functions plan their activity. An annual report will be produced at the end of each year to review progress, impact and alignment with wider organisation strategic aims. Ultimately every individual in the organisation should feel a connection to our Wellbeing Strategy's aims, approach and our wellbeing vision.

6. Our Wellbeing Offer

ECC offers a range of wellbeing focussed support to employees including:

ECC WELLBEING SUPPORT

- My Wellbeing Portal
- Employee Assistance Programme (EAP)
- Occupational Health and Counselling Service
- Usual line management and team support structures
- Mental Health First Aiders
- Occupational Health Wellbeing Checks
- Bereavement & Trauma Support
- Wellbeing Comms

7. Wellbeing Support Usage

Employee Assistance Programme (EAP): Q1 usage data shows that usage went up during the last two weeks of the quarter (start of lockdown). Significant increase in counselling requests and mental health support. Other areas include family support, money and older people and so will focus on these in wellbeing activities. Q2 usage data shows usage of the service has not increased from the same quarter in 2019 despite the Covid-19 pandemic. Main areas where people have sort support include; personal support, mental health support and stress support. COVID 19 has not been added as a separate issue by the provider because it is an exacerbating factor across all types of concerns, cited as a worry in over 80% of calls received by the Helpline (all queries not just ECC). Highest usage in ASC.

Occupational Health and Counselling: On average there are 140 OH referrals per month, 15 pre-employment assessments per month and 18 counselling referrals.

My Wellbeing: Average of 350 logins per day to the my learning portal; number of courses being accesses has doubled and wellbeing courses feature in the Top 10 being accessed. Seeing on average 150 completions a week.

8. Next Steps

Remote Working Survey - Version 2
The second remote working survey is live at the time of writing this report.

Financial Wellbeing Education and Support: To support with the financial wellbeing pillar we shortly be launching financial education and products through Salary Finance.

Winter Wellbeing Support and New Ways of Working Standards: We are developing new Ways of Working Standards as part of our Employment Standards suite. Our Employment Standards are the way we articulate the intentions we have for supporting and managing our people. They also clearly set out what you should

expect from the organisation and your line manager, alongside what's expected of our employees in return.

Our new Ways of Working Standards will reflect our desire to support employees to safely work remotely and protect their wellbeing. Recognising the ongoing impact on mental health that the pandemic is having on all of us, as winter approaches. We need to consider the evidence base so we can define and implement the right practice for ECC. The aim is to define minimum standards for ECC which can be augmented and translated within functions to best fit with their business requirements. Our suggested areas of focus are:

1. How We Use Technology: Behaviour and Etiquette
2. Flexible Working and Time Management
3. Leadership and Management
4. Social Interaction and Building Relationships
5. Supporting Employees Working in Offices or in a Hybrid Way
6. Wellbeing for All and Health & Safety

Our next steps for developing the standards are:
- CLT discussion and review
- Business Partner, FRG & FLT and employee network engagement
- Review of Remote Working Survey v2 results
- Testing with employees and line managers
- Develop intranet page with the standards and all resources in one place (also to refer to guidance already on My Wellbeing)
- Focussed communication and engagement plan
- Proposed launch 1st November 2020

For additional information on the Digital Remote Working project, remote working survey and wellbeing please view the PowerPoint presentation provided with this report.