

NEW FOREST NATIONAL PARK AUTHORITY

RESOURCES, AUDIT AND PERFORMANCE COMMITTEE MEETING – 7 JUNE 2021

ANNUAL HEALTH AND SAFETY 2020/21 UPDATE

Report by: Steve Avery, Executive Director

1 Introduction

- 1.1 The Authority aims to minimise the incidence of workplace risks and promote staff wellbeing by providing and maintaining a safe and healthy working environment. The Authority sees Health and Safety as being part of everyday good management and adopted a Health and Safety Policy in 2007, which was subsequently updated in August 2010 and September 2014. A further review and update of the Policy was approved by this Committee on 5 November 2018 and the latest review will take place in 2021.
- 1.2 Members have responsibility for monitoring the Health and Safety Policy and so the purpose of this report is to update Members on how the Authority has discharged its Health and Safety duties over the last year. Needless to say a huge part of this year's work has been our response to the pandemic and ensuring our work continues safely within Government guidelines.

2 Roles and Responsibilities

- 2.1 Responsibility for discharging the Authority's duty to safeguard Health and Safety rests with the Chief Executive, those responsibilities being delegated to the Executive Leadership team and Managers for the implementation of policy and practice and for ensuring that all employees are aware of their responsibilities, both for themselves and others. Operational ownership for Health and Safety has been assigned to the Executive Director, assisted by the Corporate Services Manager and Business Support Officer.
- 2.2 The table below sets out the relevant areas of responsibility within the organisation.

Officer/Group	Responsibility
CEO (Alison Barnes)	Overall responsibility for ensuring Health and Safety policy and legal requirements are adhered to at all times.
Lead Member (Patrick Heneghan)	Ensures Member input into matters of Health and Safety.
Executive Director (Steve Avery)	Operational ownership for Health and Safety across the Authority.
Health and Safety Representatives and line managers	Responsible for representing the individual teams and undertaking specific tasks, e.g. reporting areas of concern and ensuring health and safety procedures are followed.
Health and Safety Forum	Ensure Health and Safety best practice is acted upon across the organisation and issues discussed and remedied. The Forum meets twice a year (frequency increased in 2020 due to the pandemic) and includes the Lead Member and officers as set out above.
Health and Safety Quarterly meetings	Responsible for addressing 'day to day' health and safety issues and attended by the Executive Director, Manager of Corporate Services and the Business Support Officer with specialist advice being provided by the Corporate Health and Safety Manager (NFDC).
All staff	Responsible for their own Health and Safety whilst at work or on work duties.

3 Coronavirus Pandemic in 2020/21

- 3.1 As members will be aware, the pandemic had a significant impact across the world during the last year. The Authority was quick to put in place measures to support staff and our customers during this period. Shortly before the first lockdown, the Authority established a Covid-19 working group under the leadership of the Executive Director. This group was initially tasked with sending a formal update to all staff and reviewing our Pandemic Policy (from May 2009) in light of the emerging situation. Work quickly then progressed to the capability to change our ways of working with emphasis on staff being able to work remotely from home as of 17 March.
- 3.2 The number of Health and Safety Forum meetings were stepped up and take place every six weeks to monitor the health and wellbeing of staff during this difficult period, with important information on staff wellbeing being provided by the Forum representatives and information cascaded down to staff via the representatives. The Forum also provides an opportunity to capture learning and best practice from around the organisation and to share health and safety news and views.

- 3.3 During September we held an official consultation with staff, the H&S Forum and the Union on our Risk Assessment and Guidance regarding the use of the Town Hall offices. This ensured that everyone was aware and comfortable with the covid-secure measures we had put in place. We made it clear that any use of the offices would require a strong business need - an approach which reiterated the Government announcements about 'working from home where you can' – as well as the prior agreement of the Executive Director. A small number of staff were able to work out of the offices safely during this period to carry out essential office based tasks.
- 3.4 We conducted a survey of staff in June/July to see how they were initially coping with the pandemic and the new ways of working with the results being very positive – this is shortly to be repeated to gain further insight and ideas from staff as we look to return to the offices from the end of June as well as potentially more longer-term, permanent changes to our ways of working. Prior to any significant return to the offices we will need to review our current risk assessment and rules governing the use of the offices and have regard to any updated Government guidance.
- 3.5 Before the initial lockdown in March, we arranged and successfully completed some mental health awareness sessions with all managers and with a select group of staff who volunteered to become our Mental Health First Aiders. The next stage of that programme was to arrange 3-hour sessions for all staff about looking after their own mental health and to gain awareness in regard to those around them. Unfortunately this was delayed, but the sessions took place virtually in October. In September we also ran our annual staff event known as Discovery Days, the purpose of this event is for staff to spend some time on a selected Discovery Day of their choice to discover more about the New Forest National Park and to gain a deeper understanding about a specific area of work that the Authority undertakes (as well as providing an opportunity to interact with colleagues). These events were held virtually this year but conducted in an informal and supportive format. A number of events to further support staff were arranged by the Wellbeing Group including Wonderwalks, National Perk Café and wellbeing sessions.

4. Health and Safety Audit

- 4.1 Late in 2020 officers asked the Health and Safety Advisor at New Forest District Council to carry out an informal audit of the Authority's overall Health and Safety provision and identify any gaps or areas for improvement.
- 4.2 The executive summary of the audit is attached as **Annex 1** and a relevant extract comments as follows:

The New Forest National Park have shown to be strong in a number of areas of health and safety management. It is clear from discussions with senior management, supervisors, employees and union members that the health, safety and welfare of employees is taken very seriously. Employees and union members felt very confident that senior management would take appropriate action if required to. Although the

NPA have a very good health and safety culture within the organisation a number of areas do require improvement.

- 4.3 Officers are currently working through the recommendations arising from the audit and putting in place a timeline for these to be completed within available resources. Progress against these recommendations will be regularly reported to the Health and Safety Forum.

5. Other Health and Safety Activity undertaken during 2020/2021

- In addition to meetings of the Forum, regular H&S meetings have continued between relevant officers and allow staff to address all health and safety issues as they arise as well as those raised at the Forum meetings.
 - The Health and Safety documents previously contained on the Authority's corporate drive have been moved across to SharePoint in accordance with the review of the Authority's records management. Relevant H & S policies and advice will also be viewable on the Authority's new intranet.
 - A new risk assessment template has been agreed and implemented. This has standardised assessments providing uniformity and continuity. The template and completed risk assessments are now stored centrally and are accessible to all staff.
 - Prior to the pandemic and staff working from home, officers had redrafted the emergency fire evacuation procedure to ensure that NPA staff can be safely evacuated from the building in an emergency. Once staff have returned to the offices, fire evacuation drills will commence in conjunction with NFDC the other tenants of the building.
 - The Authority's Risk Log (including risks and mitigation relevant to staff health and safety) is under regular review by the Executive Board and six monthly by this Committee.
- 5.1 Ensuring that staff are able to work in a secure and safe office environment is an important aspect of the Authority's Health and Safety work. During the last year:
- DSE (Display Screen Equipment) online assessment for staff working at home was carried out soon after staff started working from home in response to the pandemic and government lockdown. A further review was carried out at the end of 2020. This important assessment is a key tool in helping to identify and take steps to avoid neck, shoulder, back or arm pain, as well as fatigue and eyestrain relating to staff workstations at home.

- PPE (Personal Protective Equipment) has been made available to protect staff from workplace hazards and who have completed a risk assessment and particularly to those staff at possible risk during the pandemic.
- As part of the overall virus mitigation measures, the reception has been screened with Perspex to protect staff from exposure to the virus and is currently closed to the public. Opening of this area will be looked at as part of the process of opening up the offices as the restrictions are eased.

6 Recorded Health and Safety incidents

- 6.1 During the last 12 months there were 5 recorded incidents logged in the Accident Book which included:
- Three accidents/incidents that involved staff.
 - Nil accidents that involved members of the public.
 - There was one near miss. Action has been taken to prevent this causing any problems in the future.
 - There was one other incident reported.

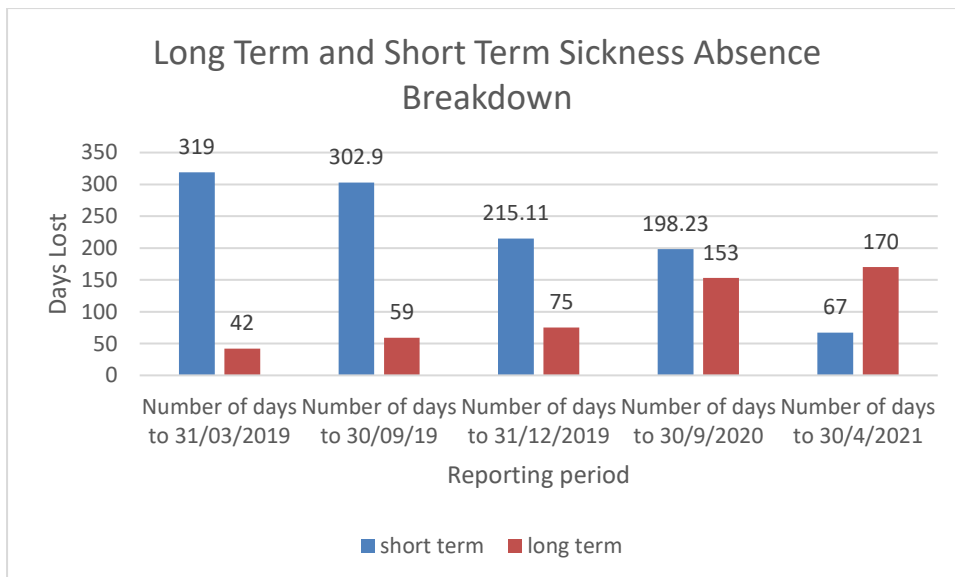
7. Sickness Absence

- 7.1 Absence statistics for the 12 months up to the end of April 2021 are shown below with the overall short and long term sickness figure down to 3.3 days per FTE (Full-time equivalent). The most recent survey conducted by the Chartered Institute of Personnel and Development (CIPD) showed that the UK average level of employee absence in days per FTE in the public sector was 8 days.

The table below shows the comparison with previous years based on sickness days per FTE.

Rolling year to 30/07/2018	Rolling year to 31/12/2018	Rolling year to 31/3/2019	Rolling year to 30/9/2019	Rolling year to 31/12/2019	Rolling year to 30/9/2020	Rolling year to 30/4/2021
6.17	6.13	4.93	5.08	3.96	4.93	3.3

The table below shows the sickness figures quoted since March 2019. Each period looks back over a full 12 months.

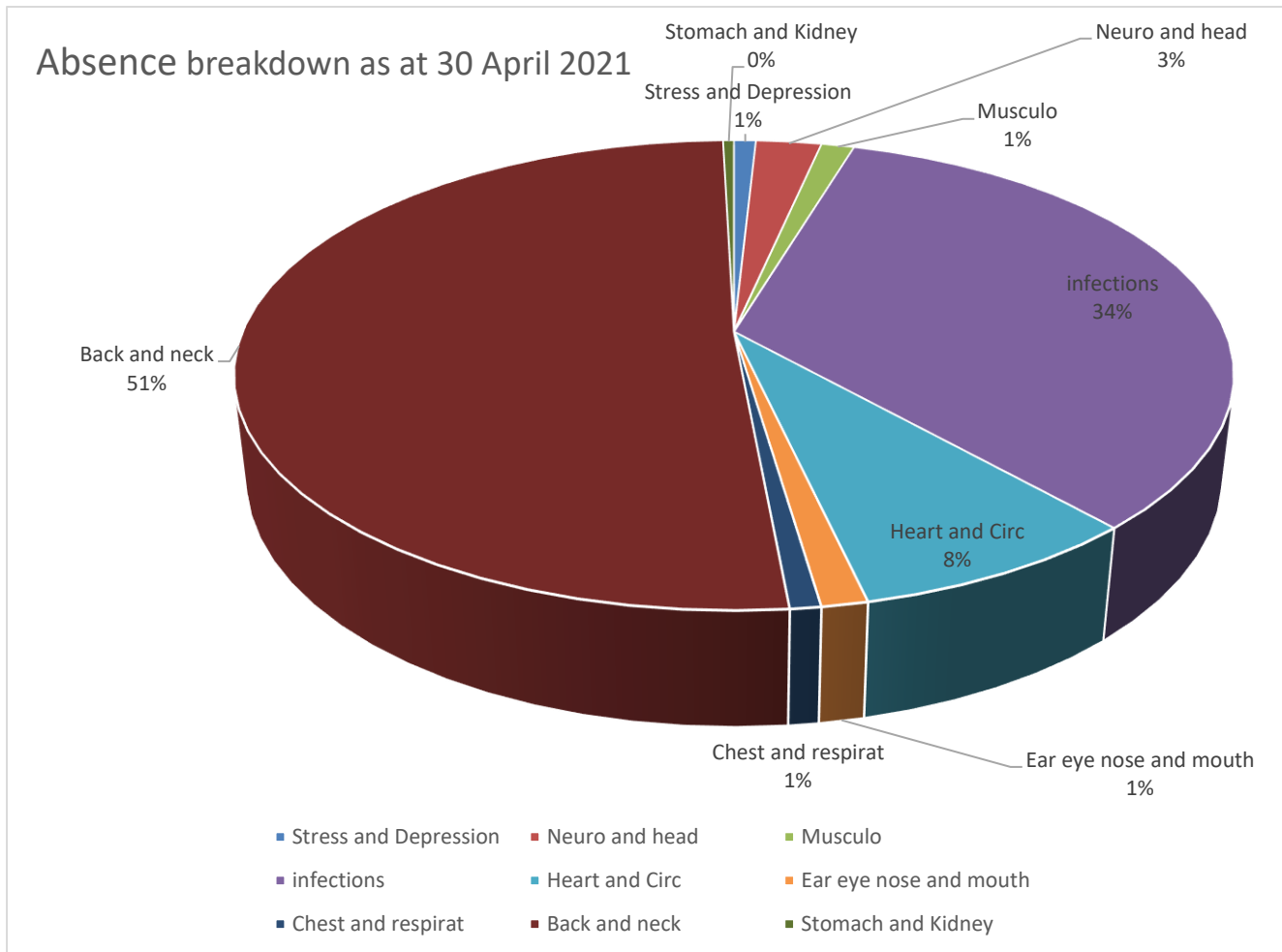


- Long term sickness absence, (absences of 20 days or more), have increased however such cases are known by management and support being given/concluded.
- As a result of the Covid pandemic, hospital appointments and treatment have also been affected therefore contributing to delays and extending recuperation time.
- Short term sickness absence has decreased since reported in September 2020.
- The majority of this reporting period has been during the Covid 19 pandemic, with most authority staff working remotely.
- With remote working coming into force from March 2020, this, together with the government asking people to social distance/ self-isolate may have led to less exposure to germs and minimise some of the usual sickness absences.
- It could be argued that homeworking has also allowed staff to work when they were a little unwell, they might not have travelled to the office / site to work but feel well enough to work from home.
- Remote working has meant that staff are not working in an open office environment where germs may spread.

- It has been a trend seen amongst other organisations that sickness absence has been lower since the Covid period (March 2020 to present) and continues to decrease.
- Reporting against stress and depression is minimal. Work has been undertaken within the authority to support wellbeing and Mental Health First Aiders introduced and supported.

Top reason for sickness absence

- Back and Neck
- Infections
- Heart and Circulation
- Neurological and headache



8. General staff well being

8.1 The Authority continues to offer an Employee Assistance Programme which is a free service for all staff and includes the following:

- 24 hours, 7 days a week confidential Freephone helpline.
- Telephone and face-to-face counselling support.
- Advice and support on matters including work, emotional, personal, relationship, family, legal, financial and health related issues.
- A monthly well-being topic that is promoted to staff via the intranet.

8.2 A series of staff activities, quizzes and events have featured regularly on the Wellbeing page of The Warbler (intranet) as well as articles such as how to look after your mental health during the pandemic.

9. Recommendation:

Members note the report.

Papers:

Cover report - RAPC 458/21

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