

**RAPC 512/23**

## **NEW FOREST NATIONAL PARK AUTHORITY**

### **RESOURCES, AUDIT AND PERFORMANCE COMMITTEE MEETING – 5 JUNE 2023**

#### **ANNUAL HEALTH AND SAFETY REPORT - 2022/23**

**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 of the Policy is included as a separate item on this agenda.
- 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. The Authority continued to work on responding to the pandemic during the year and ensuring our work continues safely within the Government guidelines and in terms of best practice as well the Authority's own risk assessments and guidelines to ensure the safety of our staff, members, volunteers and the public.

## **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 Head of Resources, Corporate Services Manager and Business Support Officer.
- 2.2 The table below sets out the relevant areas of responsibility within the organisation.

<b>Officer/Group</b>	<b>Responsibility</b>
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. Early in 2022 it was decided that the Forum meet quarterly - down from the frequency of meetings in 2021 due to the pandemic but more than the twice annually that existed prior to the pandemic. These meetings include the Lead Member and officers as set out above, with specialist advice being provided by the Corporate Health and Safety Manager (NFDC).
Health and Safety Quarterly meetings	Responsible for addressing 'day to day' health and safety issues and attended by the Executive Director, Head of Resources, Corporate Services Manager and the Business Support Officer.
All staff	Responsible for their own Health and Safety whilst at work or on work duties.

### **3 Coronavirus Pandemic in 2022/23**

- 3.1 As members will be aware, the pandemic which had a significant impact across the world in 2020/21 and 2021/22 continued, albeit to a much lesser extent, to have an impact in 2022/23. The measures which the Authority put in place to support staff and our customers in earlier years were relaxed in line with the relaxation and then removal of Government restrictions in favour of Government guidelines and best practice.

The Executive Leadership Team continued to discuss the implications of the virus as well as new strains which evolved, however, overall, a return to normal operations continued in 2022/23. Emphasis has still been on staff consultation and in conjunction with managers, many staff are now working a hybrid system whereby a staggered working arrangement is agreed between office and home working. The number of staff working in the office steadily increased throughout 2022/23.

- 3.2 The Health and Safety Forum meetings initially took place every six weeks early in 2022 but towards the end of the year these moved to quarterly in response to the easing of the Covid situation.
- 3.3 Important information on staff wellbeing is 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.
- 3.4 A key priority of the hybrid and other working arrangements has been to ensure that the office is adequately staffed during office hours. Staff have been made aware of our Risk Assessments and Guidance regarding the use of the Town Hall offices and additional fire wardens and first aiders have been recruited in response to the new way of working and ensuring staff safety. These volunteers are now being trained.
- 3.5 Discovery Days which were held in 2020 and 2021 to support staff during the pandemic continued in 2022. Discovery Days are an annual event, the purpose of which 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). In 2022, these events were conducted in an informal, safe 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 Members may recall that in the annual report to the Committee in June 2021, it was reported that 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 was also reported to that meeting and a relevant extract of the report is set out below for members' information:

*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 have been working through the recommendations arising from the audit and have put in place a timeline for these to be completed within available resources. Progress against these recommendations are regularly reported to the Health and Safety Forum. A key recommendation from the audit was the review and update of the

Authority's Health and Safety Policy – the draft of the proposed Policy is considered elsewhere on this agenda.

## 5. Other Health and Safety Activity undertaken during 2022/23

- In addition to meetings of the Forum, Health and Safety (H&S) meetings of officers have continued between relevant officers which allow staff to address all health and safety issues as they arise as well as those raised at the Forum meetings.
- The H&S documents previously contained on the Authority's corporate drive are now in SharePoint in accordance with the review of the Authority's records management. Relevant H&S policies and advice are also viewable on the Authority's intranet.
- Risk is now assessed using the updated risk assessment template which has been agreed and implemented. This has standardised assessments providing uniformity and continuity. The template and completed risk assessments are 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. This procedure is being finalised by officers and additional fire wardens have been recruited to improve overall cover and identification of H&S concerns as well as the safe evacuation of the building.
- The testing of the fire alarm has recommenced and fire evacuation drills will start once the fire evacuation procedure has been finalised and office based fire wardens have been trained.
- The Authority's Risk Log (including risks and mitigation relevant to staff H&S) 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 and home environment is an important aspect of the Authority's H&S work. During the last year:

- DSE (Display Screen Equipment) online assessment was carried out for those staff who have identified desk, chair or other issue as well as those working at home in line with new ways of working. 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, which was re-opened to the public in 2021/22, continues to be screened with Perspex to protect staff.
- A return to physical meetings took place in May 2021 and in 2022, NPA meetings returned to the Council Chamber. Hand gel continues to be made available as part of the precautionary measures at meetings.

## 6 Recorded Health and Safety incidents

6.1 During the last 12 months there were 8 recorded incidents logged in the Accident Book which included:

- 4 accidents/incidents that involved staff.
- 4 accidents that involved members of the public.
- There were no near misses.
- There was no other incident(s) reported.

## 7. Sickness Absence

7.1 Absence statistics for the 12 months up to the end of March 2023 are shown below with the overall short and long term sickness figure increasing from 3.3 days as at 31/3/2022 to 6.85 days per FTE (Full-time equivalent) as at 31/3/2023.

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

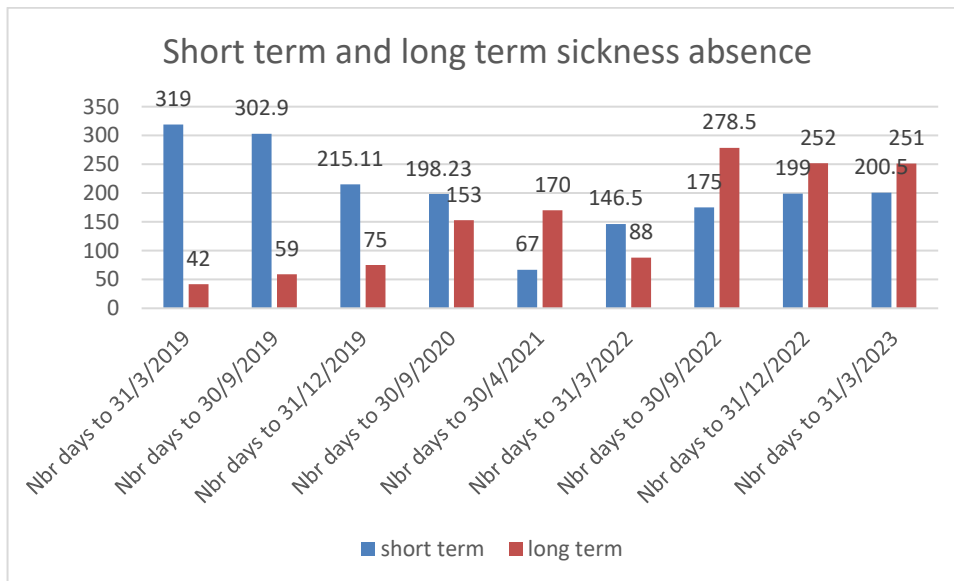
Rolling year to 31/12/2018	Rolling year to 31/3/2019	Rolling year to 30/9/2019	Rolling year to 31/12/2019	Rolling year to 30/9/2020	Rolling year to 30/4/2021	Rolling year to 31/3/2022	Rolling year to 31/3/23
6.13	4.93	5.08	3.96	4.93	3.3	3.3	6.85

7.2 Figures from some of the other NPAs are as follows.

Sickness days per FTE including long-term:

South Downs	4.6
Cairngorms	5.2
North York Moors	4.0
Yorkshire Dales	4.9
Lake District	5.0
Exmoor	4.8

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

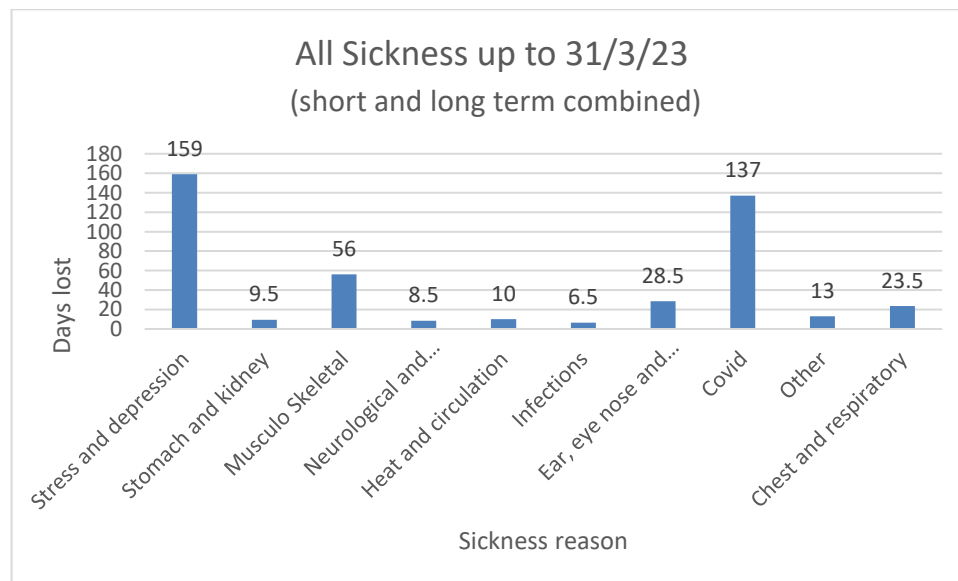


- Long term sickness absence, (absences of 20 days or more) has increased since last reported. The figure was gradually increasing as shown in September and December reporting for 2022. This figure is dependent upon ill health cases being concluded/staff returning to work following a period of long-term absence.
- Stress and depression is the highest long term sickness absence reason. The Authority continues to support the mental wellbeing of its staff by the provision of a free confidential employee support line to all staff and access to a team of Mental Health First Aiders.
- The sickness figures include Covid19 related absence as recorded on the HR Hub. The CIPD (Chartered Institute of Personnel and Development) have reported that Covid 19 continues to have a huge impact on employee health with Long Covid now a major cause of long-term absence.
- The 2022 CIPD Health and Wellbeing at Work Survey stated 67% of organisations include COVID amongst their top three causes of short-term absence.
- Managing wellbeing should remain amongst strong importance for employers and all sickness absence must be accurately recorded on the HR Hub and return to work meetings carried out for each period of sickness absence, regardless of the duration.

7.4 The figures quoted at the end of March 2022 would have included sickness absence for the year (1 April 2021 – 31 March 2022). It is worth noting that the country was still working within the Covid Pandemic and staff were working from home. Sickness absence during this period across all organisations has tended to be lower as staff. It is thought that staff who may have not been well enough to attend their workplace in person, may have been able to work from home and therefore not having to report as sick.

7.5 Top reasons for sickness absence were as follows:

- Stress and depression
- Covid 19
- Musculo skeletal



## 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 Our Employee Assistance Programme has launched an online learning platform with a programme of digital wellbeing courses. These aim to provide skills and tools to help staff feel better and stay better, helping to improve and maintain wellbeing by addressing underlying issues that may be negatively impacting on staff. Examples include mindfulness, money worries and sleep issues. Access is via the EAP website.
- 8.3 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 are asked note the report.**

**Papers:**

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