

**REPORT OF SERVICE DIRECTOR – CUSTOMERS, GOVERNANCE AND  
EMPLOYEES****WORKPLACE BUDDY SCHEME - UPDATE****Purpose of the Report**

1. To update Members on the roll out of the Workplace Buddy Scheme as part of a comprehensive package of support to employees and to seek agreement to the ongoing development and expansion of the scheme.

**Information****Background**

2. The County Council is a Platinum Wellbeing at Work award winner with a comprehensive Wellbeing Action Plan and supporting programme of work. The focus of this is to support employees to remain healthy whilst at work and to be able to return to work as soon as possible after a period of absence and to be able to perform well whilst at work.
3. Members are also aware that, in common with many other employers, stress and depression is the most prevalent reason for absence across the Council and that the Council has in place a range of initiatives to try to improve the resilience of employees but that these are continually under review.
4. Following the relaunch of the package of support measures for employees via a new page on the Council's intranet, work continues with Public Health colleagues to ensure that the intranet includes advice, signposting and access to services and activities in relation to diet, fitness, dealing with cancer and terminal illness, smoking cessation and a range of measures to support employees experiencing mental health issues. The focus is on self-service and access to activities where possible. However our Well-being Champions and developing Mental Health First Aiders programme will provide further support in sign-posting individuals to relevant information.
5. As part of this comprehensive offer, the Workplace Buddy Scheme was developed and launched in May 2018. The scheme is an entirely voluntary, informal support scheme provided for employees by other employees to provide a "listening ear" and opportunity to have a coffee and a chat with a colleague as a means of receiving support outside of the normal management arrangements.
6. The opportunity to volunteer as a buddy has been promoted via the intranet, Team Talk and through team meetings. Buddies can discuss potential issues and problems with colleagues

and listen to how they are feeling with a view to preventing issues escalating and potentially impacting on an employee's ability to attend work. It will be for individuals to decide whether such contact is undertaken face to face, by email or telephone.

7. Whilst a number of employees stated that they would find the buddy scheme helpful as part of a managed return to work, there has been limited uptake to date. For many, such informal support already exists through workplace friendships. However we continue to promote the scheme as part of the HR team's support to employees and managers as a valuable addition to the range of support for employees perhaps just having "a bad day" as a preventative measure or where their health has deteriorated to the point that they have been absent and are apprehensive about returning to work.
8. As mental health is often a significant factor for long term absence, volunteer buddies will be provided with information on the national "Time to Talk" initiative which provides some very practical assistance and guidance on how to support colleagues returning to work after a period of absence.
9. Workplace buddies have been acknowledged as innovative by external partners who have had information about the scheme shared with them by one of our employees as an example of good practice and we have been advised that parts of the NHS are hoping to trial a similar scheme.
10. The Workplace Buddy Scheme is in addition to day to day managerial support for employees and through formal supervision and the Employee Performance and Development (EPDR) process as it is recognised that employees may feel more able to share some issues and concerns with a colleague on an informal basis than with their line manager.
11. This informal buddying scheme fits into the Council's overall wellbeing support package which also includes coaching from a network of trained and qualified coaches; access to external NHS wellbeing services and the Council's formal Counselling Service provided by an external provider.
12. Good progress is being made in relation to working with the recognised trades unions to develop proposals for Mental Health First Aiders to further support employees. After several discussions we have agreed what level of support the voluntary service will take and have evaluated training for the type of scheme we are seeking to implement. We will shortly be asking for people interested in training as a Mental Health First Aider to volunteer.

## **Promotion and Next Steps**

13. It is recognised that different people respond to different types of support and there is not a universal one size fits all approach for people experiencing temporary or ongoing poor mental health. However in seeking to provide a broad range of support mechanisms, it is hoped that employees will find something suitable to assist them. To encourage take up of any of the available support provision, including the Workplace Buddy Scheme, a Team Talk article has been produced to raise awareness for publication early in February.
14. Training courses for managers and supervisors now also include a section on the Workplace Buddy Scheme and the wider wellbeing agenda, therefore ensuring that managers are aware of the wealth of support opportunities available to employees to enable them to remain in work and to enable a smooth return for any employee who has been absent for a significant time.

15. There will be ongoing briefings for the volunteer buddies to ensure that they are aware of the parameters of the role as with the Mental Health First Aiders. This is to ensure appropriate boundaries are maintained given it is not the intention to offer a therapeutic service other than that which is already provided as the counselling service from Care First.

### **Other Options Considered**

16. The Council has developed a comprehensive support package for employees over a number of years. It was felt that the more informal buddying approach would provide employees with choice and complement the existing provisions. Take up of the scheme and feedback will be monitored as far as possible, whilst maintaining confidentiality, in order to try to measure the impact of the implementation of the new scheme.

### **Reasons for Recommendations**

17. The Council facilitates and encourages employees to access a range of activities and initiatives to support them to become more resilient and to respond to and manage difficult issues and problems which may arise both inside and outside of work with the aim of preventing ill health and supporting employees to remain effective at work.
18. The Workplace Buddy Scheme complements more formal provisions with its network of volunteer buddies which it is hoped employees will find more accessible than a formal referral process to professional external providers of services such as counselling. Employees may also feel that there is less likelihood of being judged or stigmatised for speaking to a colleague rather than accessing professional or more clinical services. However, if in talking to a buddy it becomes apparent that a more in-depth intervention from a mental health professional is required, buddies will be advised to signpost colleagues to alternative provisions and employees supported to take these up.

### **Statutory and Policy Implications**

19. This report has been compiled after consideration of implications in respect of crime and disorder, data protection and information governance finance, human resources, human rights, the NHS Constitution (public health services), the public sector equality duty, safeguarding of children and adults at risk, service users, smarter working, sustainability and the environment and where such implications are material they are described below. Appropriate consultation has been undertaken and advice sought on these issues as required.

### **Data Protection and Information Governance**

20. Access to the scheme will be voluntary and issues discussed confidential between the buddy and employee. The exception would be if a significant potential risk was identified in which case, appropriate professional advice would be taken and the employee encouraged and supported to seek professional help.

### **Human Resources Implications**

21. These are set out in the body of the report. The Workplace Buddy Scheme has been discussed with the recognised trades unions and will form part of the Council's overall support package for employees. Trades union colleagues support the development and provision of this role

and are keen for staff to be encouraged and enabled to volunteer and undertake the role without it impacting negatively on their own workloads.

### **Public Sector Equality Duty implications**

22. Volunteer buddies will be from across the workforce, including employees with protected characteristics. The scheme will be available to all employees.

## **RECOMMENDATIONS**

It is recommended that Members:

- 1) Approve the continuation of the Workplace Buddy Scheme and support the ongoing communication to employees to promote the developing scheme.
- 2) Agree to receive a further progress report on the wider support provision including the Workplace Buddy Scheme in six months' time.

**Marjorie Toward**

**Service Director – Customers, Governance and Employees**

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### **Constitutional Comments (KK 14/11/19)**

23. The proposals in this report are within the remit of Personnel Committee.

### **Financial Comments (SES 11/01/19)**

24. There are no specific financial implications arising from this report.

### **Human Resources Comments (GME 07/01/19)**

25. The Council recognises that employees experience periods of both physical and mental ill health at various times of their lives. It seeks to have the most comprehensive package of support available for employees to access as evidence that they are valued and also as a means of reducing long term absence and facilitating supported return to work.

### **Background Papers and Published Documents**

Except for previously published documents, which will be available elsewhere, the documents listed here will be available for inspection in accordance with Section 100D of the Local Government Act 1972.

- None

### **Electoral Division(s) and Member(s) Affected**

- All