RETURN TO WORK SAFELY UPDATE
Human Resources Organisational Development

1. INTRODUCTION

This briefing paper provides an update on arrangements for employees working in new ways and safely following the removal of all legal restrictions concerning COVID in February 2022, and the council's move from amber to purple[1] in April 2022.

2. COVID

From 19 March 2019 the council adopted and maintained a precautionary approach to COVID, ensuring that robust risk assessments and safe systems of work were in place for all services and that Government Guidelines were followed in relation to infection control. This was primarily in relation to Adult Social Care Guidance, including guidelines on the use of personal protective equipment PPE). The council's priorities was to maintain service delivery and protect the workforce.

Over the duration of the pandemic, 11 RIDDORS (Reporting of Incidents, Deaths and Dangerous Occurrences) were reported to the HSE which related to work place transmission of COVID. These incidents occurred in high risk personal care settings, where Service Managers, Public Health and Health and Safety worked together to contain and prevent the further spread of infection. Other COVID absence was due to community transmission.

2.1 Covid Absence

Different types of Covid Absence were recorded and monitored to help us understand the impact COVID absence was having on the delivery of services, and absence levels were monitored by Gold and Silver Command on a regular basis. The categories took into account the Government Guidelines in relation to COVID Infection or self isolation legal requirements in place. Any COVID absence was not counted against sickness thresholds when managing sickness absence, to ensure there was no detriment to employees during this time. These categories have now been reduced to reflect the current position of COVID as another respiratory infection:-

1. Employee has symptoms of COVID and has tested positive: this absence is not counted against sickness absence triggers

2. Employee has symptoms of other respiratory infection, including Covid, but does not test: this absence is counted against sickness absence triggers

A traffic light system was implemented to allow a consistent assessment of the risk to workplace transmission, and the level of controls required to reduce the risk to as low as reasonably practicable (our legal duty under the Health and Safety at Work Act etc.1974). Please see Appendix A.

The Council implemented a PPE Policy consistent with Health Protection Guidance and is still utilised by social care employees where close contact with customers is required.

Since March 2020, the cumulative number of Covid cases has been:-

COVID Absence-Not Working 990

COVID Absence-Working 752

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[1] PCC operated on a traffic light system re COVID: Red – maximum controls in place; amber – reduced controls in place; Purple – return to standard infection controls and implementation of new ways of working in full.

COVID Sickness - 985

2.2 Protecting employees at higher risk

From the outset of COVID when the shielding of employees identified at higher risk was announced, we put in place individual risk assessments to ensure these colleagues were additionally protected from work place transmission. When shielding ended this included ensuring these colleagues continued to work from home if they could, were redeployed if they were not able to work from home, or reasonable adjustments made.

2.3 Safe Systems of Work (SSOW)

A safe system of working group was initiated as part of the emergency response arrangements, led by the Service Director for HROD. The group comprised Health and Safety Consultants and Facilities Managers. The overarching aim of the group was to ensure that employees were informed about COVID controls within individual buildings/workplaces and were clear about the infection control requirements as lockdown was eased. Surveys of individual buildings were undertaken initially to plan for social distancing, and subsequently for ventilation.

The group continues to run today led by the Head of Health and Safety, to pick up any residual concerns re COVID, and any other buildings related health and safety matters. This has proved an effective forum for identifying and addressing concerns early.

The Health and Safety Team were responsible for producing generic risk assessments, safe systems of work and tool box talks for Service Managers, at every new iteration of Government Guidance (See Appendix B), and ensuring that each service had a published SSOW.

From 1 April 2022 the Health and Safety Executive (HSE) advised that COVID was no longer a biological threat requiring additional controls except in specific settings e.g. NHS and Adult Social Care, and that otherwise COVID should be managed as any other respiratory infectious disease.

The Council, under the direction of the Director of Public Health, stood down our COVID risk assessments and safe systems of work on 1 May 2022 for all services except where employees are in close contact with customers where adult social care guidance continued to be followed. The Council continues to encourage vaccination and twice weekly asymptomatic lateral flow testing, along with standard infection control measures and ventilation.

2.4 Trade union engagement

As part of the emergency arrangements the Service Director for HROD held daily meetings with Lead Trade Union Reps and this served to maintain a high level of engagement in the risk assessment process for all services including PCC Controlled Schools. These meetings were decreased from February 2022 proportionate to need, In relation to COVID the current concern is the counting of any absence due to COVID towards sickness absence triggers in the council's Managing Absence Policy, and the way in which long covid is viewed.

2.5 Vaccination

We have consistently encouraged all employees to have their COVID vaccinations and our social care services engaged in the Government Scheme resulting in just under 100 per cent uptake.

We have an annual programme for flu vaccination which in 2021 saw 390 employees take up our offer. A further number would have been eligible under the free NHS offer and some employees may have paid privately.

Flu Clinics have already been secured for 2022 with our Occupational Health provider, and we are aiming to vaccinate 500 employees across four sites: Windsor, Guildhall, Prince Rock, and Chelson Meadow. Our offer is primarily available to employees who are not eligible for a free NHS vaccination and work in our front line services.

2.6 Lateral flow testing (LFT)

We have followed Government Guidelines for testing throughout the pandemic, including PCR testing and LFT testing. Since the cessation of free LFTs we have continued to encourage all employees working outside of their home to undertake twice weekly tests and have provided testing kits for this purpose.

As of 31 August the Government has ceased supplying NHS and Social Care employees with free LFTs, which we will now supply until our next review date of 30 September.

2.7 Ventilation

Having adequate ventilation emerged as the forth key infection control mechanism during the pandemic and work was done by the SSOW group to survey our estate and ensure guidelines were provided to achieve maximum fresh air flow. This was either through mechanical systems or the opening of windows.

Co2 monitors are now in place across the estate for employees to be alerted if the air quality starts to deteriorate. Instructions are in place to guide room occupants as to what to do if the monitors move from green to amber or red.

There are a small number of rooms that remain out of commission due to there being no access to fresh air; work is being undertaken on a room by room basis to assess options for recommissioning.

2.8 Wellbeing

Our wellbeing offer has been continuously reviewed and strengthened over the last two years, and action taken as a result of the three wellbeing surveys undertaken. During Covid, these included:

- Interim arrangements to remove core hours to enable employees to manage their work / life balance
- Temporary arrangements to remove set flexi periods to enable flexi hours to be carried forward
- An additional day's annual leave in 2021/2022.

Other wellbeing initiatives include:-

- We have achieved the Silver Award for Wellbeing at Work, an external accreditation scheme run by Livewell South West for our approach to mental and physical health and wellbeing

- We now have 49 trained Wellbeing Champions acting as a first point of contact for colleagues with a wellbeing need

- Several wellbeing champs were nominated Champion of the Year for Plymouth alongside our whole team of Champs who were nominated for Wellbeing Team of the Year for Plymouth.

- 24 of our Champions have attending the Suicide Awareness Training and work continues in HROD to implement best practice in domestic abuse support, drug and alcohol addiction as part of achieving the Gold Wellbeing at Work Standard

- Our Wellbeing Champ Buddy scheme is working well. Any employee can make contact with the Wellbeing and Engagement Advisor or any Manager to request a match. The Wellbeing and Engagement Advisor has a discussion with the employee and then assigns an appropriate champ who will make contact with that employee once a week for six weeks to support and signpost them appropriately. The evaluation of this has been very positive.

- The Wellbeing Room at Ballard House is being given a new look as part of new ways of working, alongside ensuring that one area of the collaborative working space on level four will have a focus on Wellbeing.

- The instant chat for our PAM Assist has been road tested successfully. This has been shared out to support all employees who feel unable to pick up the phone of find the time to seek out counselling. The instant chat is available to all staff 24/7.

- A Wellbeing Week was held in May with virtual sessions on offer including Mindfulness sessions, Reflective Thinking with a Trauma specialist, Muscular Skeletal considerations presentation, Andy Man's Club, Money and Pensions looking at the energy crisis, Menopause workshop, Alcohol and Drugs information from Harbour, Sleep Hygiene with Livewell, and Nature Leadership info with our own Wellbeing Champs.

- Engagement using Viva Insights on our MT channel is supporting wellbeing for all staff and we are looking at expanding this with our technology to support Wellbeing.

- Several Team wellbeing and resilience risk assessments have been conducted with a new short cut created making it easier for Teams to use, and for the feedback to be shared with the Manager.

3. NEW WAYS OF WORKING, INCLUDING THE ACCOMMODATION STRATEGY

The Council has an ambition set out in the Our People Strategy to ensure we attract and retain a diverse workforce, and offer an inclusive and positive working environment where people can be themselves, whilst being an employer of choice.

The realisation of these ambitions is entwined with the corporate priority projects and plans across the council, some of which have been delivered and some that are still in progress. This includes modernising the way we work and being flexible in how we deliver our services. This is led by the People Strategy, Accommodation strategy, Digital Strategy, New Ways of Working and the Employee Deal.

Pre-pandemic the council had initiated a 'new ways of working' programme to provide a more flexible ways of working and underpin the accommodation strategy. Lockdown provided an escalated route with employees working from home where possible, supported by assessment of Display Screen Equipment (DSE) needs and the provision of equipment

The COVID pandemic has supported the transition and realised some of our ambitions and there was no intention that the easing of restrictions would mean reverting back to the way we worked pre COVID, and our reference to 'purple' in our traffic light risk assessment signalled this change. Our employees have worked in a different way, and we have shown that employees can be supported in these new ways of working.

3.1 ACCOMODATION STRATEGY

In October 2020 Cabinet approved the accommodation framework, which included the following principles:

ACCOMODATION FRAMEWORK PRINCIPLES
1.   Individual staff needs and the requirements of each role will be used to define worker types so that we know how many desks are required in our reduced accommodation estate.   2.   Create clusters, grouping staff with functional and directorate linkages, whilst enabling new ways of working to suit service and customer needs.   3.   Use location to make services efficient and convenient for customers, clients and partners.

> 4. Creating modern customer and working environments to facilitate high productivity and wellbeing.
> 5. Retain and develop carbon efficient office locations; exit and redevelop those buildings that cannot cost effectively achieve carbon neutrality.
> 6. Use buildings as efficiently as possible whilst reducing square meters used, to underpin new flexible working arrangements. Working environments should include flexible and collaborative space.
> 7. Creating flexibility in our accommodation to support culture change, partnership working and commercial income generation.
> 8. To realise and maximise revenue benefits through releasing at least one corporate building from PCC staff use.

These principles are incorporated in the work being undertaken by the accommodation strategy as the council's assets are reviewed to ensure that they are suitable and sufficient for the future delivery model and to enable the investment needed for our vision of a flexible and agile workforce.

The programme will review the work environments to ensure that we are able to offer suitable work spaces that facilitates collaborative working, high productivity and supports the well-being of our employees. This will means we have moved away from rows of desks to more bespoke locations to suit the needs of our employees.

Ballard House is now fully equipped for collaborative working, with a new open plan space being created on floor four, and interactive screens available in some meeting rooms for hybrid[2] meetings to take place. Cloud booking is in place for employees to book a desk or meeting room digitally, which enables us to monitor the occupation of the building over time.

3.2 NEW WAYS OF WORKING

New Ways of Working was set up to review and transform the way the council delivers its services in new and innovative ways, supporting the People Strategy by ensuring that the council is a great place to work, able to offer a package of flexible working arrangements, alongside tailoring working hours to better suit the needs of the service, its employees and our customers.

It also supports the strategic aims of the council by maximising effective usage of its buildings and office space and aiming to be carbon neutral by 2030.

This work has included a review of the current job types shown on role profiles, so that posts can be allocated a new worker type that will fit with the provision of an agile workforce. Each worker type describes the way the role will operate, how the employee will be supported to undertake their role, covering location, technology and management practices.

Two workshops were held with the senior leadership team in November and December 2021 and it was agreed that there would some guiding principles to support service delivery changes going forward. These are listed below:

Principle 1

The health and **well-being** of our customers and our employees is a priority at all times

Principle 2

We will adopt a digital first approach to all aspects of our service - handling customer demand and internal business processes

Principle 3

Where it is safe and productive for staff to work from home they should - use of office space should be by exception where business needs or **well-being** requires it

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[2] Hybrid meetings: participants are able to choose whether to join a meeting in person, or to join from another location, including home.

Principle 4

We will manage our staff on outcomes and outputs, allowing them to work flexibly in terms of both location and time of day – every day of week

Detailed engagement took place with Trade Union representatives about the worker types, and this resulted in three types being identified:

- Flexible worker
- Office worker
- Front line worker

1:1 discussions with managers took place with flexible and office based workers with employees able to choose their way of working. These discussions have all been recorded digitally and enabled us to track responses and use for accommodation planning.

Following the move to 'purple' status in relation to the Covid-19 response on 1 May 2022 and the completion of team moves into and within Ballard House, this following summarises how the changes have impacted on staff over the first three month period as follows:

1. Outcome of staff – manager 1:1 discussions regarding preferred working patterns
2. Usage of Ballard House and how this relates to the findings of the 1:1 discussions
3. Impact of 'Go Green Travel' policy and proposed parking changes
4. A pilot using alternative remote working facilities at Devonport Marketplace and Ocean Studios (RWY)

4. PEOPLE STRATEGY

Our People Strategy was launched in April 2020 and sets out the plan over four years to allow us to be an employer where people will feel welcome, aspire to be the best, we will attract and keep the right people and we will be well led.

Delivery of the People Strategy underpins the council being 'an employer of choice' and a great place to work. Since its launch two years ago, a number of the deliverables have progressed. The strategy is in digital form to support its dynamic nature, and this will be updated and refreshed in response to the intelligence gained through The Big Listen employee engagement survey.

Future delivery of the People Strategy will fully encompass continuous improvement with full consideration to digitalisation and Artificial Intelligence (AI). Employees will need to be supported to have the right skills to work differently and improve service delivery with a positive impact on our customers.

The significant achievements to date include:

Equality and diversity

Equality and diversity (E&D) training for managers was rolled out across the organisation, undertaken via eLearning and a foundation lecture. In 2022/23, a number of follow on sessions have been arranged in Q1 and Q2; these will be undertaken in smaller sessions, and focus on critical actions for embedding equality and diversity throughout the organisation.

Staff networks

We have created seven new staff networks which will provide employees with a forum for mutual support and peer-to-peer learning:

- Carer's Network

- Faith and Belief Network
- LGBT Q+ network
- Men's network
- Reach
- Women's Network

These new networks provide a space to discuss relevant topics, a place to come together to learn and develop and promote career development and informal learning amongst employees, whilst supporting PCC in marking key dates within our equality and diversity calendar.
An equality hub has been set up on staff room pages

Pocket guides for front line workers

Printed pocket guides were designed and distributed to front line workers (c500) in 2021/22. This included a simplified induction/employee handbook and updates associated with Covid.

Health and safety

A revised health and safety policy was signed off by the Chief Executive in March 2022

The health and safety annual report for 2021-22 was signed off by CMT and Audit and Governance Committee, including the business plan for 2022-23 agreed by Lead Trade Union Representatives

Digital health and safety management (She Assure)

A new digital management system has been rolled out across all services, providing real time management information and the ability to monitor progress of investigations. New key performance indicators are now in place including:

- Reporting of all incidents within four working days
- 20 per cent target for reporting of near misses
- Insignificant and minor incidents to be closed within two weeks
- Moderate incidents to be closed within four weeks
- Major incidents to be closed within six week
- New closure process to ensure investigations are suitable and sufficient, all actions identified and learning can be shared with other services

5. EMPLOYEE ENGAGEMENT

During the course of the pandemic we have conducted three wellbeing pulse surveys, which have assisted in the development of our support offer and provided more flexibility for employees to manage their work life balance; this was particularly pertinent when employees were needing to provide home schooling during lock downs.

5.1 THE BIG LISTEN – EMPLOYEE ENGAGEMENT SURVEY

The Big Listen, our annual employee engagement survey ran between 6 June and 22 July 2022 with a 50.9% response rate. It is being managed by an external market research company, aiming to get a higher response rate.

The survey has asked employees a range of questions concerning their perception of the council as an employer, their leadership and management, their role and their health and wellbeing.

6. COMMUNICATIONS AND ENGAGEMENT

Various channels of communication and engagement have been utilised in this delivery. This has included:-

- Dedicated staff room pages

- Engagement sessions (Questions and Answers) led by the Chief Executive on the budget, new ways of working, wellbeing
- Tool Box Talks
- Regular written updates for SLT and Team Plymouth
- Pocket Guides for Front line workers

7. RECOMMENDATIONS

The report be noted

Appendix A

TRAFFIC LIGHT ALERTING SYSTEM

A new traffic light alerting system was instigated in order to respond to fluctuating COVID conditions in Plymouth at short notice. The traffic light sequence has changed to RED, AMBER, PURPLE to mark the fact that we are not returning to GREEN, or pre-covid working conditions. SLT worked closely with Team Plymouth to ensure the workforce was engaged with, and understood we were not returning to pre-covid working environments, culture or practice and start to manage expectations effectively in line with this paper.
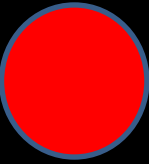
The owner of the system was CEMT (CMT as CEMT was decommissioned), and any changes will be informed by Public Health based on local intelligence and notified to employees at the command of The Chief Executive or Strategic Commander. The key indicators were:
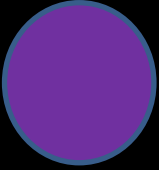
- The presence of any variants of concern in Plymouth and associated level of risk to containment resulting in increased transmission

- Hospital admission rates

- Vaccination rate

- Any new Government / PHE directives

Enactment

1. Any changes requiring escalation of our infection control measures will be made effective on the next working day, and suitable signage and staff comms will be put in place to manage this.

2. Any changes where we can stand down some of our controls will be made effective five working days later to allow time for any logistical changes to take place and employees to understand the new interim working arrangements

The following table describes the alerting system, giving examples of what would trigger the different levels, and the SSOW that need to be in place for each level.

RISK EXPOSURE	TRIGGERED BY (one components can trigger, it does not have to be some or all)	POTENTIOL IMPACTS ON WORKING ARRANGEMENTS	USE OF PCC BUILDINGS
	COVID ▪ A workplace outbreak in one or more of our sites ▪ High rates of transmission in the general population in Plymouth ▪ Evidence of a new variant in Plymouth which could cause either spread more easily, cause more severe illness or does not respond to the vaccine ▪ Government Guidance includes 'Work from home if you can' or similar **NWW** ▪ If you can work from home, continue to do so	▪ Non-essential services cease ▪ RA, SSOW and TBT's reviewed for essential services, taking account of any changes to Government Guidelines ▪ Guidelines re CEV and CV put in place	▪ Government Guidelines followed ▪ Employees working flexibly, in touchdown roles, or office based roles work from home* ▪ Social distancing remains at 2 meters
	COVID ▪ Sustained community transmission ▪ New variants locally requiring additional control measures ▪ The final stage of the Government's roadmap has not yet been implemented **NWW** ▪ Employees working flexibly, in touchdown roles, or office based roles work from home* except if there is a clear business or wellbeing need	▪ RA, SSOW and TBT as of 17 May 2021 ▪ Self isolation as per test and trace advice and any surge testing outcomes	▪ Wearing of face coverings whilst moving about buildings in place ▪ Additional fresh air ventilation implemented ▪ 2 meter social distancing ▪ Cloud booking

	▪ Cloud booking		
	COVID ▪ Minor incidence of COVID infections in the City ▪ Incidence origin known and containable ▪ Standing down our COVID response and managing as BAU **NWW** ▪ New worker types have been assigned and buildings configured to accommodate accordingly ▪ Workers utilise building space according to their worker type	▪ RA, SSOW and TBT reviewed in accordance with Government Guidelines and local conditions	▪ Continued use of face coverings in communal spaces ▪ Occupation of buildings still needs to be managed ▪ Social distancing 2 meters ▪ Cloud booking ▪ Collaborative working spaces available ▪ New storage with minimal locker arrangements in place

APPENDIX B

RISK ASSESSMENTS (RA), SAFE SYSTEMS OF WORK (SSOW) AND TOOLBOX TALKS (TBT)

Risk assessments were based on a precautionary approach, where the standard infection control measures against COVID-19 remain in place until further notice. These include:

- PPE Policy (reviewed in the light of any new Government / PHE guidelines)
- Hands, face, space, fresh air
- 2 meter social distancing
- The wearing of face coverings when moving about our buildings
- One way systems
- Desk booking system

SSOW remained in place until COVID is managed locally as BAU, and even then in our buildings 2 meter social distancing in relation to desk bookings and meeting room use remained in place until new ways of working was implemented. This supported the logistics around building redesign and office moves (space to clear storage cabinets / lockers /) and enable a prompt reversal should this be required.

Signage and staff room announcements indicated the traffic light level we are working under at any one time.

The SSOW group continue to meet weekly to manage any risks arising from the current COVID arrangements in real time and to discuss any future requirements.

Generic templates for RA, SSOW and TBT continued to be produced until 1 April when the HSE stood down COVID as a biological hazard.

Managers reviewed and amended the RA, SSOW and TBT for their service areas and forwarded to healthandsafety@plymouth.gov.uk for publication on staff room.