



West Midlands  
Combined Authority

## Audit, Risk & Assurance Committee

<b>Date</b>	29 September 2021
<b>Report title</b>	COVID-19 Update – Employee Health & Well-Being and new ways of working
<b>Accountable Chief Executive</b>	Laura Shoaf, Interim Chief Executive
<b>Accountable Employee</b>	Mel Ganderton, Interim Head of HR
<b>Report has been considered by</b>	Linda Horne, Finance Director

**Recommendation(s) for action or decision:**

**Audit, Risk & Assurance Committee is recommended to:**

- (1) Note the COVID-19 Update

## 1. Purpose

The purpose of the report is to provide an update on COVID-19 in relation to supporting employee health and well-being and outlining the future approach with regard to flexible working.

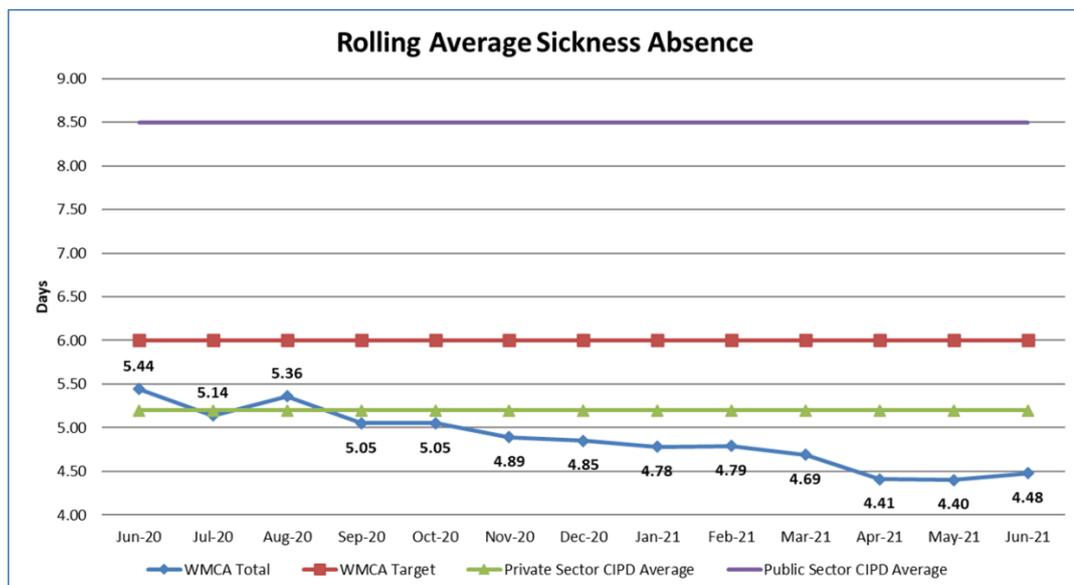
## 2. Background

COVID-19 has undoubtedly presented significant challenge to all industries and organisations across the UK. With the impact on the pandemic, we have taken swift action to protect the health and well-being of our all employees. Through collaboration and focus we continue to respond to the Governments road map, protecting and promoting health & well-being of all employees whilst continuing to deliver services for our communities.

We have learnt a significant amount and we continue to use that learning as we prepare for organisation life, post Covid. We are now preparing for a return to our offices, but in a different way, where a hybrid style of working will be adopted. This will mean that employees will work some of their time at home and some in the office. Our aim through this transitional period is to support employees as we change our approach as an organisation. The adoption of home working was a forced and necessary action to respond to Covid and control infection rates. However, like many organisations we have adapted to change and have observed the benefits of a more flexible way of working. We are committed to supporting our people as we move through this period of change in particular supporting employee health & well-being.

## 3. Update on impact of COVID-19 at WMCA

The current 12-month rolling sickness absence rate for the Authority is 4.48 days lost per FTE, which equates to 1.78%. This is lower than the national average of 5 days lost per FTE and 2.2% national average of working time lost per FTE for 2020. Sickness absence is showing a declining trend which is attributable to a number of factors; 1) employees working from home; 2) shielding employees returning to work; 3) reduction in Covid related absence. This trend is comparable to the trend nationally, the average sickness rate of 2.2% working time lost per FTE, is the lowest rate in 15 years (Source: XpertHR annual survey).



The impact of COVID-19 on sickness absence has been relatively low throughout the duration of the pandemic. The number working days lost due to Covid related absence is 843.5 days (March 20 to 6<sup>th</sup> July 2021). This equates to 0.42% loss of working time for the whole period. The number of days lost due to employees having to self-isolate is 396.5 days, which equates to a 0.2% loss in working time. This is attributable to those employees within Transport for West Midlands who were required to self-isolate but who could not perform their work from home. Employees who were required to self-isolate but who could work from home, continued to work and therefore there was no impact on productivity.

Therefore, the impact of Covid related absence and self-isolation is low. This is positive as it means that the organisation has continued to operate and has been productive during the pandemic because services have been maintained through the majority of employees being in the position to work from home.

#### **4. Employee Engagement During the Pandemic**

Following the January report, we have continued the focus on employee engagement to ensure that employees feel connected. Driven primarily through the Summer Lane recovery group, the focus has been to develop regular communications, FAQs and resources in line with the latest advice from Government. Regular staff webinars have provided regular updates in relation to Covid for the organisation and the plans to return in line with the lifting of restrictions. We have also provided specific resources and toolkits for managers around remote working and ensuring that regular conversations are maintained to ensure employees feel supported and connected. We continue to provide advice and regular FAQ updates, although it should be noted that questions more recently have focused on new ways of working post Covid as opposed to issues in relation to the pandemic itself.

#### **5. Employee Health and Well-Being**

We have been cognisant of the impact of Covid on our employees from a health and well-being perspective. Through the Health & Safety Committee and Summer Lane Recovery Group we have ensured that we have maintained a focus on safety and well-being. We have ensured that all our buildings are Covid secure and have ensured that we have developed appropriate risk assessments that Covid measures are in place and adhered to. More recently with the phasing of a return to office based working we have introduced Covid testing, as part of the national scheme on a voluntary basis. We have had very few instances of positive cases but where we have had a positive case appropriate and swift action has been undertaken to protect others from exposure.

We have provided a range of support to employees on health & well-being particularly in relation to mental health and working remotely. We have delivered a range of webinars on how to support a healthy lifestyle, including themes such as importance of physical exercise, taking breaks, mindfulness, resilience. The most recent webinar in July focused on adapting to change and managing wellbeing.

We have also provided a range of support to managers to equip them with the skills to manage teams remotely and dealing with issues particularly in relation to managing mental health. We delivered four mental health sessions for managers with Birmingham Mind.

Through the delivery of the well-being strategy, we will be implementing a new stress and resilience toolkit and raising awareness of hidden disabilities, which will incorporate different conditions including mental health and musculo-skeletal conditions.

In line with our Thrive Silver accreditation we issued a health and well-being survey to conduct an organisational health check and identify key areas of focus in relation to health and well-being. 222 employees responded to the survey. The results were positive with 87% of employees describing their health as excellent, good or very good, 3% described their health as fair. Only one individual described their health as poor.

The survey highlighted that overall employees feel positive about their health and well-being and feel that the organisation is taking action to support positive well-being outcomes. However, the survey highlighted that further support is needed in relation to supporting employee resilience; work life balance; musculo-skeletal issues. It also identified the need to provide additional training and support to managers in order to improve management competence to confidently have conversations about a range of well-being issues.

Organisational capacity and resilience is an area that we continue to review, particularly as we are about to enter the summer holiday period and in the event of a 3<sup>rd</sup> and 4<sup>th</sup> wave when restrictions relax. Our recruitment to vacancies is a key priority in order to ensure that teams are operating at full capacity. We have taken action to bring in short-term additional capacity where this is needed in order to support critical work and programmes.

## **6. New Ways of Working - #WOW21**

We, like many other organisations, have taken the opportunity within the context of Covid to review how we work. We have embarked on a New ways of working- #WOW21 programme where the aim is for the organisation to adopt a more hybrid way of working post Covid. A hybrid way of working is a combination of office-based working, partially remote working and fully remote working. This allows us to capitalise on the positives of working flexibly, promoting the health and well-being of our workforce and changing our culture to one that is focused on output and performance rather than where work is performed. We recognise that a flexible approach encourages greater flexibility and autonomy. Other notable benefits of this approach are reducing cost of maintaining building assets, reducing travel costs through promotion of virtual meetings, the ability to attract talent from a wider pool and the ability to think about the utilisation of space differently i.e. bringing people together to collaborate and generate ideas.

Our agile task and finish group, established earlier this year, has been developing the organisations approach to hybrid working, including policy developing, manager and employee toolkits and have conducted a number of focus groups to obtain feedback on options. We are phasing the opening of offices, in line with Government advice. Throughout the remainder of July and August, Summer Lane will be accessible for collaboration and meetings and from September onwards the aim is for the #WOW21 hybrid approach to working to be implemented September 2021.

## **7. Financial Implications**

Employee health & Well-Being initiatives are continuing to be funded from the existing budget. We will be reviewing our health & well-being offer but at this stage we do not anticipate any additional financial cost. We do however expect additional costs to be incurred through the new ways of working programme, particularly around additional IT

and digital costs. We are continuing to evaluate the financial implications as the details evolve.

**8. Legal Implications**

No issues.

**9. Equalities Implications**

Further to the equality impact assessment undertaken on out-based employees on the network, we have ensured that risk assessments have been updated in line with latest Government advice. Risks assessments have considered the impact on high risk groups i.e. disability, age, ethnicity and appropriate measures have been implemented.