Report to: **Scrutiny Committee**

Date of Meeting 4 March 2021

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Exemption applied: None

Review date for release N/A

Report re Staff Morale

Report summary:

This report has been prepared at the request of the Committee and follows on from comments made and concerns expressed at the Joint Overview & Scrutiny Committee when members were considering the draft budget proposals and the draft service plans for the 2021/2022 financial year.

In response to those concerns a Health & Safety Executive approved form of survey was undertaken of all staff over a 10 day period. In total 329 officers responded representing a 67% response rate. This report highlights areas for the Committee to assess.

Recommendation:

That the Scrutiny Committee considers this report and formulates appropriate recommendations to Cabinet and/or Council

Reason for recommendation:

This report raises relevant issues for Councillors to consider

Officer**:** Mark Williams CEO

Portfolio(s) (check which apply)**:**
☐ Climate Action and Emergencies
☐ Coast, Country and Environment
☒ Council and Corporate Co-ordination
☐ Culture, Tourism, Leisure and Sport
☐ Democracy and Transparency
☐ Economy and Assets
☐ Finance
☐ Strategic Planning
☐ Sustainable Homes and Communities

Financial implications:

None immediately arising

Legal implications:

The Council as employer will want to assure itself that it is providing an appropriate working environment which minimises the risks of employment based legal claims being made against it

Equalities impact: Low impact

The consultation was made available online to all EDDC employees, with paper copies available on request for those that preferred / needed a paper version. This consultation in itself has a low

equalities impact but any proposals / recommendations emerging as a result, or not taking action on issues, may require impact assessments and may have high equalities impact(s).

Climate change Low Impact

Risk: Low Risk

Currently low risk, any emerging proposals / recommendations / not taking action on issues could be high risk and may need risk assessments.

Links to background information 3 Appendices are attached

Link to Council Plan:

Priorities (check which apply)

☐ Outstanding Place and Environment
☐ Outstanding Homes and Communities
☐ Outstanding Economic Growth, Productivity, and Prosperity
☒ Outstanding Council and Council Services

1. Background

1.1. EDDC has traditionally been an organisation where staff morale has been high. In September 2019 EDDC was described as an organisation with a 'strong track record of successful delivery'; 'strong financial management'; 'high quality services' and a 'hardworking and committed workforce.' (source: LGA Peer Review - https://eastdevon.gov.uk/papers/cabinet/271119bpcabinetpeerreviewfinalreportsept2019.pdf)

(N.B. – At Council on the 18th December 2019, 13 Councilllors requested that their names be recorded as they 'disagreed with the report of the Peer Review': https://democracy.eastdevon.gov.uk/documents/g239/Printed%20minutes%2018th-Dec-2019%2018.00%20Council.pdf?T=1)

1.2. In January 2020 the Council achieved Platinum Investors in People status which is the highest status achievable. Previous to that the Council had been at Gold level (the previous highest status) for some 6 years. The IIP report has previously been circulated to the Committee (https://eastdevon.gov.uk/media/3720918/east-devon-district-council-review-2020-platinum-report-ac.pdf). In the context of this report the following extract is apposite: 'You…provide effective people management and development in order to achieve high levels of engagement, which has in turn delivered higher levels of performance overall and has enabled you to drive your ambition forward 'to be an outstanding and well run council which provides great services and outstanding opportunities for East Devon – now and for future generations'' This was further endorsed by people's passion around levels of service and support given to their residents, the community they serve and a genuine desire for EDDC to succeed, which I found inspirational. The encouraging high levels of involvement through working groups and team discussions during 1-2-1's and SMT/SMT+ meetings, is something which is highly appreciated by people across the business'.

2. Staff Morale/Sickness during Covid-19

2.1. Post the IIP report the country entered into a period of lockdown and the impact of the Covid pandemic was felt across the country. Devon was fortunate in that it had a lesser incidence of the disease but nonetheless fears for personal and family health, safety and welfare were a real concern. Generally speaking the organisation adapted well to the

challenges of home working and also took on board the various Government initiatives in terms of grant schemes and support for the local economy and vulnerable people.

2.2. In June of last year a staff survey was carried out to ascertain how the organisation had fared during the first part of the pandemic. A copy of the results are appended as Appendix 1. The results were considered by managers and a range of responses introduced to ensure that as best we could, the concerns that were being raised were addressed. Noticeable in terms of the comments were an increase in workloads and the practical impact of working from home. Overall the feeling of staff was that we had adapted well to the pandemic but there were matters that required ongoing monitoring and careful consideration.

2.3. As 2020 progressed into Summer/Autumn it was noticeable that staff absence rates were increasing. Relevant tables are set out below. An increasing reason given for absence was 'depression, stress and anxiety'. The impact of Covid infection was also measured and this has seen an increase post-Christmas 2020.

The end of year absence target is 8.5 days and the current projection for end of year is now 9.4 days per person.   This has declined from a peak reported in November last year. It is noticeable that Covid absence increased by 50% in this January.

Month	Target	Outcome	Monthly Difference	Projected Outcome
April	0.71	0.46	0.25	5.52
May	1.42	0.89	0.53	5.34
June	2.13	1.64	0.49	6.55
July	2.83	2.55	0.28	7.65
August	3.54	3.26	0.28	7.81
September	4.25	4.09	0.83	8.17
October	4.96	5.78	0.82	9.9
November	5.67	6.83	1.16	10.24
December	6.38	7.17	0.34	9.55
January	7.08	7.84	0.67	9.4
February	7.79			
March	8.50			

Covid-19 absence tracking 2020/2021

Number of Total FTE days lost all absence for month of January	253.00
Number of reported days lost for Covid19 for January	37.33
Number of Total FTE days lost Covid 19 for April to date (January)	76 days
Number of people reporting Covid-19 Absence in to date (January)	4

3. **Our Latest Survey**

3.1. An analysis of the latest survey has been prepared and the results are set out in Appendices 2 & 3. Appendix 2 contains an analysis of the quantitative data whereas Appendix 3 contains an analysis of the qualitative data.

3.2. Appendix 2 confirms that in terms of the H&SE stress factors the highest scoring returns were in respect of role, peer support and relationships. This confirms some of the factors noted in the IIP report and is a positive result reflecting the inherent strength within our teams. In terms of inappropriate behaviour however, it is noticeable that although 83% stated they were never bullied at work, 6% of respondents stated they were sometimes bullied at work and 11% stated they were seldom bullied. The fact that 17% have given a qualified answer is considered to be significant due to the nature of the question. Also, in terms of not being subject to personal harassment in the form of unkind words or behaviour, although 62% of respondents stated they were never subject to personal harassment at work, 38% stated they were seldom, sometimes, often or always subject to personal harassment in the form of unkind words or behaviour. This is also significant due to the nature of the question.

The two lowest scoring (and therefore most negative) of the workplace stressors recognised by the H&SE were in regard to demand and change. In particular, officers have reported that they are having to work intensively; having to work very fast; having to neglect some tasks because of having too much to do; different groups demanding things that are hard to combine; not having a choice in deciding what to do at work; and not always being consulted about change at work; and when changes are made at work, not being clear about how they will work in practice.

When the results are split by teams and all the stressors are taken into account the teams that are a priority for further assessment are Housing, Streetscene and Planning. The teams that had the highest average scores overall were HR/OD, Countryside and Economy. That being said all teams within the Council will need to feel engaged in our follow up work.

3.3. Appendix 3 comprises a summary analysis of comments that officers chose to make when completing the survey. A total of 164 respondents gave free text comments, representing 33% of all staff.

The most common positive comments were (in order with the most common at the top):

1. Colleagues / my team are supportive.
2. My Manager is supportive.

The most common negative comments were (in order with the most common at the top):

1. Our already large workload has increased significantly recently / my / my team's workload is overwhelming / too large.
2. We need more staff / previous staff or managers have left and not been replaced.
3. New Councillors / the new political leadership are seriously mistreating officers, which is very stressful.
4. My Manager isn't supporting me / listening / sorting issues.
5. Home schooling children and working is hugely stressful.
6. Council teams need to communicate better / work together better.
7. I feel too isolated working from home (from my team / other people).
8. New Councillors / the new political leadership are unnecessarily micro-managing / causing extra workload.

4. **Concluding Considerations**

4.1. We have regularly carried out staff surveys and always treated the results with respect. They have helped build up a picture of a hard working organisation and a well-earned reputation for the Council as a good employer. The latest survey is highlighting a number of issues that the Committee will want to consider but it does confirm the key concern, that there is a growing problem with staff morale. This can be seen from the reasons being given for absence, the increased incidence of ill health and the various comments that have been made. Overall I think there are 3 factors that need to be considered.

4.2. The first is the ongoing pandemic and where we now sit in the cycle of the pandemic. The June 2020 survey suggests that there was an optimistic feeling within the organisation at the end of the first period of lockdown. The February 2021 survey suggests that that optimism is not so apparent and it raises a number of issues that will require ongoing monitoring and evaluation. It is clear that depression, stress and anxiety amongst staff is a cause for concern and I have no doubt that many officers are continuing to work despite being depressed or otherwise impacted.

4.3. The second is the issue of workload/staff absence/staffing levels generally. The pandemic has led to an increase in workload for several of the teams. In the main we have adapted well to these challenges and the public have been very appreciative of what the staff have been doing. However, I think there are enough references in the survey to additional pressures resulting from changing political behaviours, uncertain organisational direction and a more hands-on/challenging approach to operational matters that have not been so noticeable in the past. This goes to the issue of control over workload and ability to manage its volume. The Council is due to start work soon on its new Council Plan and a refresh of the Medium Term Financial Plan and I would hope that this work might help with addressing some of these concerns. On the positive side my sense is that many officers (but not all) are also benefitting in working from home and I think it will be a real challenge for the organisation to revert to a pre-Covid expectation of regular daily attendance at the office. I will look to give reassurance on this aspect as soon as I reasonably can.

4.4. The third is the impact on certain staff (mainly managers) of a change in the political culture and the working environment that is experienced by them and the consequential impact this has within the organisation. I have previously written to all councillors highlighting my concern about an oppressive and menacing online work environment that some officers have experienced/are experiencing from certain councillors. Whilst, generally speaking, standards of discourse and communication have declined in society at large this should not detract from the requirement that it is very important that the standards officers and members display are consistently demonstrated to a high standard because this behaviour directly impacts on the internal working environment.

4.5. If I were to compare and contrast where we are with where we were I would summarise that this time last year the following factors were noticeable and important in terms of facilitating high morale and the ability of the organisation to cope with change/additional work:
   1. Mutual respect between members and officers
   2. A recognition by members that officers would always do their best and work hard with the resources that they were allocated to achieve the best possible results.
   3. A sense of pride in the organisation and what it was seeking to achieve for the district.

4.6. The latest survey results suggest that these 3 factors are now less noticeable and that they have been replaced by a growing recognition of an inappropriate work environment; a sense of a 'blame culture' with officers increasingly fearful of doing their jobs and much less likely to 'go the extra mile' for the organisation; and a related perception that some

members consider that the expectations of the Member Code of Conduct and the Member/Officer protocol are there to be ignored either because there is a lack of appreciation of the corrosive impact of that behaviour or that there is no effective enforcement. It is important to balance out the positive and the negative comments but it is clear that the survey results have raised serious issues for the Committee to consider. Of particular concern in terms of the Council's future reputation as a good employer and possible legal liabilities in terms of employment based claims is the question whether these changes are to be experienced by officers as temporary or permanent.