

BRIDGEND COUNTY BOROUGH COUNCIL

REPORT TO THE CORPORATE OVERVIEW AND SCRUTINY COMMITTEE

14 APRIL 2021

REPORT OF THE CHIEF OFFICER – LEGAL, HR AND REGULATORY SERVICES

SICKNESS ABSENCE RELATED TO STRESS, ANXIETY, DEPRESSION AND MENTAL HEALTH

1. Purpose of report

- 1.1 The purpose of this report is to provide Committee with information about employee absence levels and in particular those relating to mental health and mental illness and supportive actions that are in place.

2. Connection to corporate well-being objectives / other corporate priorities

- 2.1 This report assists in the achievement of the following corporate well-being objective under the **Well-being of Future Generations (Wales) Act 2015**:-

Smarter use of resources – ensure that all resources (financial, physical, ecological, human and technological) are used as effectively and efficiently as possible and support the creation of resources throughout the community that can help to deliver the Council's well-being objectives.

3. Background

- 3.1 At its meeting on 14 January 2021 the Committee received council wide absence reports for Quarter 2 - 2020/2021, and expressed concern about the rising levels of long-term absence in relation to stress, anxiety, depression and mental health. The Committee asked to receive additional information about these absence levels and gain an understanding of what supportive measures are in place for employees, and in particular during the pandemic.
- 3.2 All employee sickness absences are recorded via the integrated HR and payroll system. This supports the management of absence on an individual employee basis as well as overall monitoring and trend analysis. The system has 16 categories covering absence reasons against which absences are recorded. The category reported as "stress, anxiety, depression and mental health" is the subject of this report.

- 3.3 It is important to note that this is a very broad category and can be best described as covering all aspects of mental health and mental illness. Whilst these are increasingly used as if they mean the same thing mental health is about mental wellbeing, whereas mental illness typically has more of a significant detrimental impact. There are many types of mental illnesses/health disorders with different signs and symptoms.
- 3.4 Mental health refers to emotional, psychological and social well-being. People have varying thresholds for how much they can cope with before their mental health suffers. Sometimes a person's mental health comes under strain due to life events and personal experiences, which could include a relationship breakdown, difficult work situation, a family problem or health issue (on occasions a serious family health issue which could be life changing/ and or a terminal diagnosis), and also following a bereavement.
- 3.5 There are many types of mental illnesses/health disorders with different signs and symptoms and include conditions such as depression, anxiety and substance use disorders.
- 3.6 Stress and other mental health related absences are recognised as the largest contributor to sickness absence levels in organisations of all sizes. A recent article published by the Chartered Institute of Personnel and Development (CIPD) in January 2021 referred to mental health related absence as the most common cause of long-term sickness absence in UK workplaces. "Stress related absence in particular has increased, with 37% of respondents to the CIPD and Simply Health Health and Well-being survey saying that stress-related absence had increased in the last year."

4. Current situation/proposal

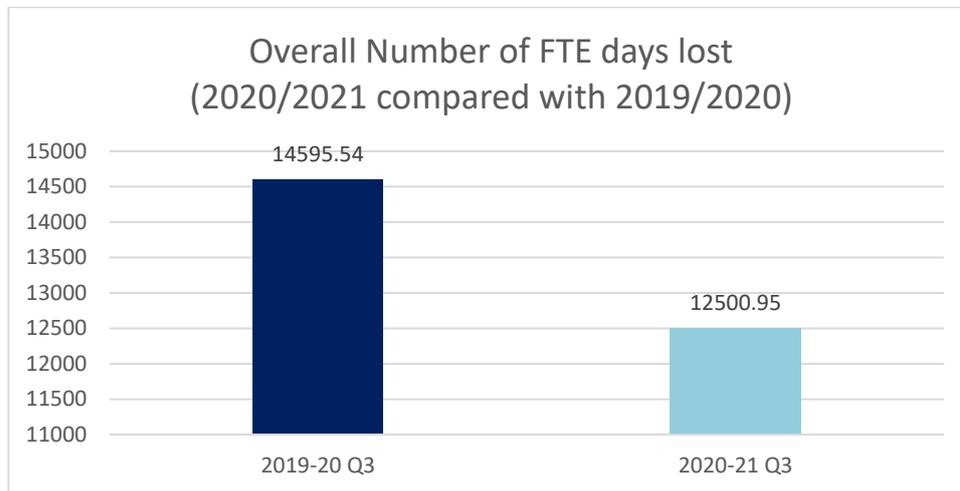
- 4.1 The following paragraphs provide details of absence levels as well as the processes in place for managing absence and supporting employees. There have also been considerable actions taken at Directorate and service level throughout the pandemic to support employees in very challenging circumstances. These vary according to work setting. Additionally regular meetings have taken place with trade unions, where national guidance has been shared and discussed as well as local matters.

Absence reports for Quarter 3 - 2020/2021

- 4.2 The Committee have previously reviewed absence reports for Quarter 2. More up to date information on Quarter 3 is included in this report for consideration, and comparators with the same period in 2019/2020, so that seasonal variations are taken into account. At the time of writing the report figures for Quarter 4 were not available.

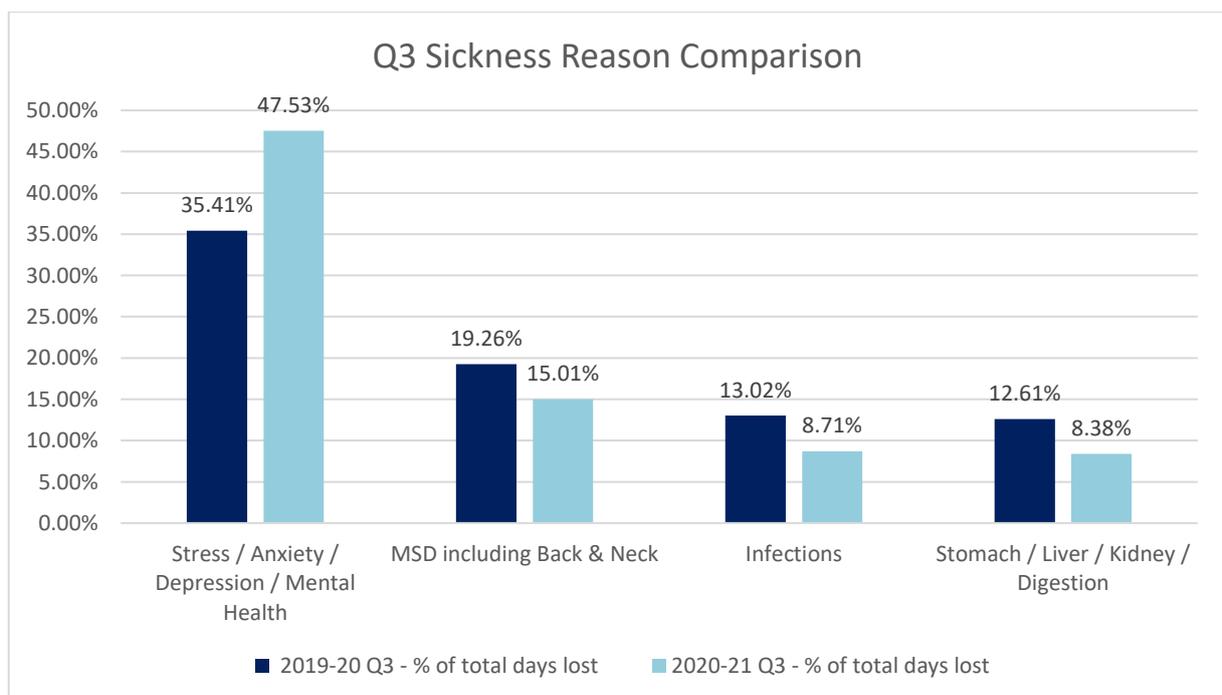
4.3 Graph 1 shows that the overall absence level for the Council during the period 1 October 2020 to 31 December 2020 dropped when compared to the previous year by 14.4%. Whilst a number of factors relating to the pandemic will have influenced this, it is also reasonable to consider the fact that staff working at home have a level of flexibility which enables them to better manage short term illnesses.

Graph 1:



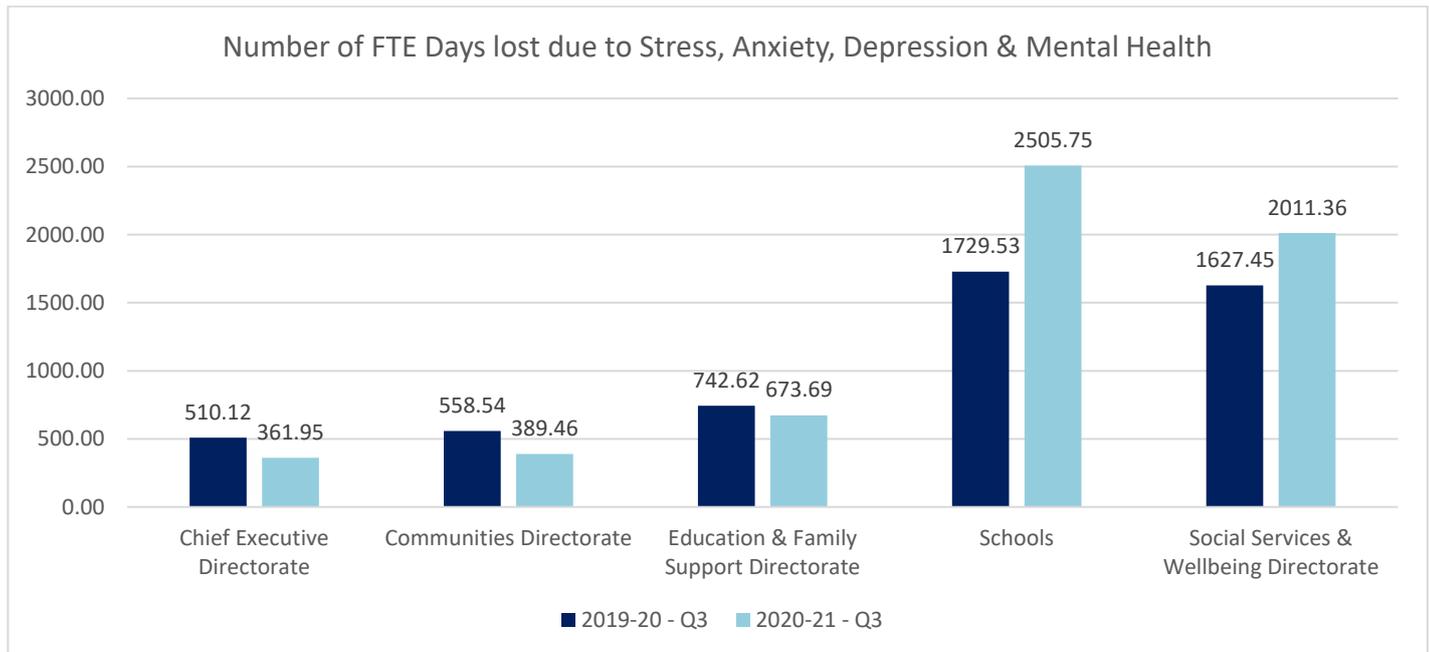
4.4 The highest 4 reasons for absence are identified in Graph 2. This shows an increase of 12.12% in total days lost for stress etc. in comparison to the previous year (even though the actual FTE days reduced), whereas the other main categories reduced.

Graph 2 :



4.5 Directorate and Schools' breakdown of FTE days lost due to stress etc. is provided in Graph 3. In comparison with the previous year this shows an improved position across 3 Directorates, with reductions of 29% in Chief Executive's, 30% in Communities and 9% in Education & Family Support Directorates. However, Schools and Social Services & Wellbeing Directorate show an increase in the number of FTE days lost, equating to 45% and 24% respectively.

Graph 3:



4.6 In summary there is a mixed picture, with an improving position on overall staff absence levels, but a concerning trend when looking at days lost due to stress related absences in Schools and the Social Services & Wellbeing Directorate. There are of course significant numbers of front line workers in these areas who will have been working in front line roles throughout the course of pandemic.

Managing Absence

4.7 Managing absence is a core managerial responsibility and there are a range of policies, procedures, training and resources available to assist with this. The role of the HR Business Partner is to equip managers with the tools to manage absence effectively and to provide coaching and advice on individual cases and, in particular, those that are stress related.

4.8 It is important that as soon as an employee has a stress related absence, that efforts are made to establish the cause and ensure employees are provided with support as early as possible. If it is work-related then efforts are made to resolve the issues as quickly as possible.

- 4.9 Stress related absences can be complex as there are often a range of issues involved. There are supportive measures available to employees and information on these and the resources available that are included in the council's Wellbeing Protocol are shared.
- 4.10 Stress risk assessments are in place to help identify any workplace or other stressors. The purpose is to agree actions, and/or reasonable adjustments as support mechanisms where possible to facilitate an early return to work. If the absence relates to personal stress, the MIND Wellbeing Action Plan (WAP) is used.
- 4.11 Should an Occupational Health referral be appropriate, the completed risk assessment will provide clarity on the nature and circumstances of the absence and the actions and/or reasonable adjustments that have been considered/agreed.
- 4.12 Return to work plans are established for those employees who have experienced longer term absences and these are tailored according to the employee's individual needs and circumstances, in order to achieve a successful and sustainable return to work.

Care First

- 4.13 The Council's Employee Assistance Programme (EAP) provider is Care First, whose services are widely communicated. They offer a range of information and emotional support for employees, with telephone or online counselling available, 24/7. Given the current restrictions, face to face sessions are restricted.
- 4.14 Care First Information Specialists can provide advice on practical issues and in the past year this has included specific advice and guidance on matters relating to Covid-19. Additionally they have, during the year, provided weekly publicity calendars comprising daily webinars, a total of 243 (at 8 March 2021). These appear to have been popular (although it is not possible to access Authority level information), with the following being of most interest amongst employers accessing this contract:
- Understanding anxiety and tips to cope
 - Stress, Resilience and Mental Health
 - Tips for home schooling and keeping children occupied
- 4.15 Care First has also launched a new version of its Zest platform, offering a wide range of wellbeing tools, which includes a new wellbeing assessment and improved functions to allow employees to connect with others.

- 4.16 **Appendix 1** provides a summary of Care First usage. Surprisingly there has not been a rise in the take up of these universal counselling services although the numbers of employees who access Lifestyle (the practical support and information platform) and also Zest, (the health and well-being platform) show some evidence that employees are looking after their own welfare. When compared with others, the Council has always been a good user of the Lifestyle and Zest sites, with 331 registered users which is in the top three highest registrations across the Welsh Framework contract.

Additional Support

- 4.17 The Council has continued to provide and signpost a range of resources for employees to support them to take care of their emotional health and physical wellbeing. Including Care First, these details are available on the Covid-19 wellbeing intranet page and have been included in regular Bridgend staff messages.
- 4.18 In direct response to the impact of Covid-19, temporary additional counselling support has also been made available. Priority in the first instance was given to those managing the delivery of essential/critical front line services and was then extended to Head Teachers and some front line employees.
- 4.19 This is a confidential service and referrals can be made direct but in many cases these have been made following discussions with managers or support provided by the HR Business Partners.
- 4.20 Some 17 employees have accessed this service since it was established in April 2020 and there have been some positive outcomes, where employees have either remained in work or returned to work following this support. Consideration is being given to how this or similar emotional support can be provided for employees.

Training and Awareness

- 4.21 Training workshops for managers on absence management and managing pressure have remained a high priority in the corporate training calendar. Other workshops have been made available for employees with a view to improving mental wellbeing, and in some cases especially to deal with the challenges presented by the pandemic and homeworking. All workshops are available remotely and are listed at **Appendix 2**.
- 4.22 This also includes additional workshops that are being considered for the coming year which have been identified through a corporate training needs analysis and a recent review undertaken of wellbeing support available to employees. Some of this provision has been made possible by the contribution made via the Wales Union Learning Fund and local and regional trade union representatives have been supportive. Discussions are ongoing about access to training for 2021/2022.

- 4.23 Other relevant resources which have been put in place which may have had a positive impact for some employees' wellbeing include the introduction of:
- A Wellbeing Checklist for homeworking
 - Tips on working from home for new starters
 - Managing Remotely training for managers

Next Steps

- 4.24 The Council has, in recent years introduced a range of interventions to support the wellbeing of its employees. There is, however, a need to do more to strengthen and enhance the arrangements currently in place to ensure that all employees can receive the right level of support especially at times of need.
- 4.25 Future priority actions will focus on taking forward the Wellbeing Action Plan, and in particular exploring the therapeutic provision to meet the demand of more complex cases, and interventions that target particular groups of employees.

5. Effect upon policy framework and procedure rules

- 5.1 As this is an information report, there is no effect upon the policy framework and procedure rules.

6. Equality Impact Assessment

- 6.1 The report provides the Committee with information about the Council's approach in supporting employees and managing attendance which takes full regard of its equality duties.

7. Well-being of Future Generations (Wales) Act 2015 implications

- 7.1 It is considered that there will be no significant or unacceptable impacts upon the achievement of the well-being goals/objectives under the Act as a result of this report.

8. Financial implications

- 8.1 There are no financial implications arising from this report as it is an information/update report. However, an earmarked reserve for £115,000 is being established as part of the year end accounts process to progress a number of projects and resources in the 2021/2022 financial year to further support employee wellbeing in light of the ongoing impact of the pandemic.

9. Recommendation

- 9.1 That the Committee notes the level of stress related absences across the Council and the actions being taken to support employees and manage attendance.

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31 March 2021

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Background documents:

[Health and Wellbeing Protocol](#)

[Stress Risk Assessment Form](#)

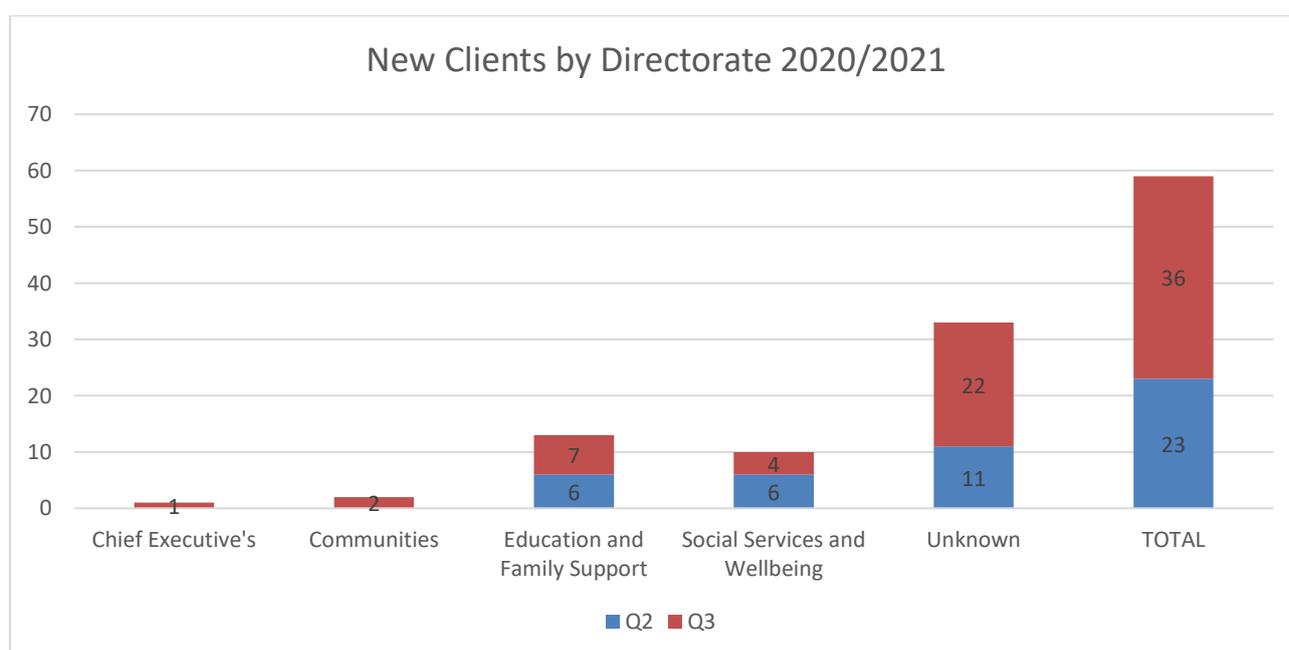
[Wellness Action Plan \(WAP\)](#)

[Wellbeing Guidance](#)

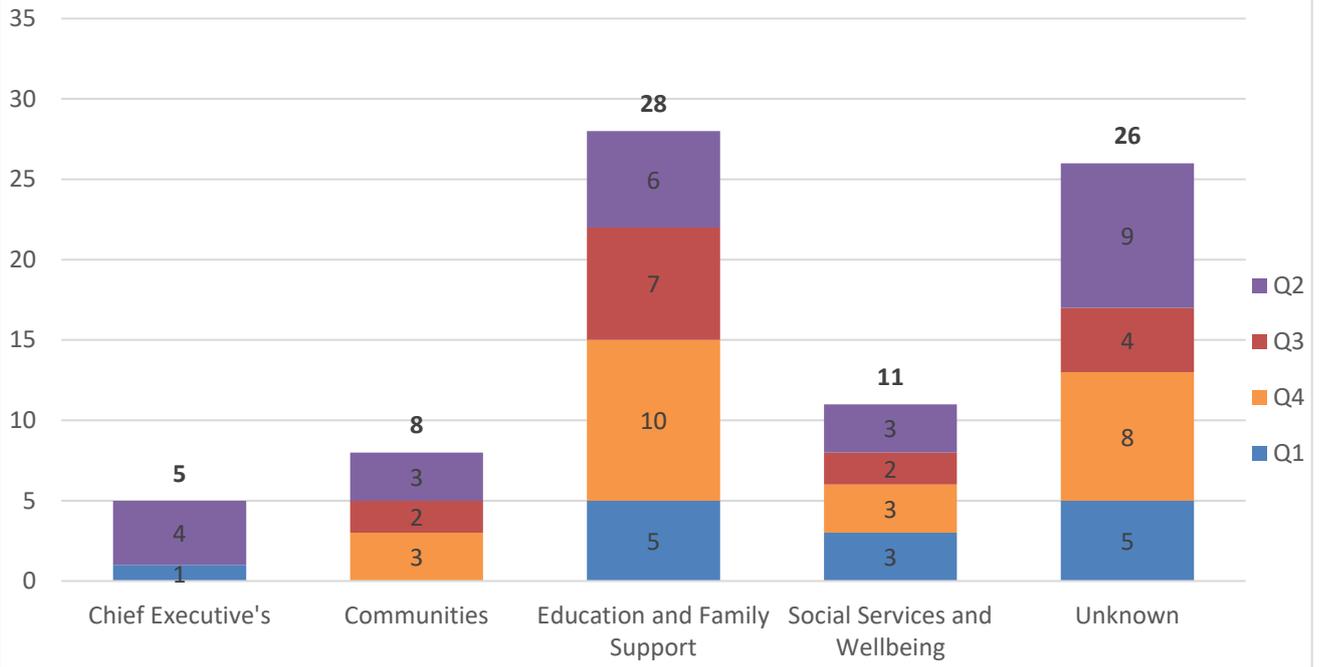
Summary of Usage of the Care First Service:

The Care First reporting periods relate to the contract start date so runs from July to June, so the table below runs from July 2019 to December 2020.

	Care First Report Period 2019/20 (July 2019 to June 2020)					Care First Report Period 2020/2021 (July 2020 to December 2020)		
	Q2	Q3	Q4	Q1	Annual	Q2	Q3	
Face to Face Sessions	26	34	33	25	118	9	9	
Telephone Counselling	26	25	26	20	97	30	28	
Telephone Information Service	4	3	5	0	12	3	1	
Online Counselling	2	0	1	1	4	0	3	
New Clients	25	15	24	14	78	23	24	
Registered Care First ZEST site users						319	335	331
Unique Page Views on Care First Lifestyle Website	18	12	19	36	85	40	59	



New Clients by Directorate 2019/20



Mental Wellbeing

Workshops currently available:

Workshop	Aims / Objectives
Managing Pressure for Managers	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • To understand the importance of managing pressure and preventing stress, for the individual, for the team and for the organisation. • To raise awareness of some of the difficult situations that managers handle in relation to stress and to consider the most appropriate ways of dealing with them. • To consider the manager's role in promoting mental wellbeing in the team and to understand how managers might influence and develop the resilience of their teams. • To introduce the law in relation to stress and a brief exploration of managers' roles and responsibilities.
Mindfulness - All employees	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • To identify what is stress. • To examine stress and how it affects the mind and body. • Explore Mindfulness to reduce stress, anxiety and depression.
Resilience – All employees	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Identify the potential causes of the stress we may be experiencing. • Understand the different ways that people react to stressful situations. • Identify personal triggers for our stress. • Develop techniques to improve the way we deal with difficult situations. • Understand resilience and how we can learn to become more resilient.
Communication in the online workplace – All employees	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The aim of the course is to provide an overview of the ways to survive and thrive in the 'new normal', the online world of work.
Confidence in the Workplace – All employees	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The aim of the course is to provide a range of practical methods to increase participants' feelings of self-worth and encourage ways to take forward goals for the individual and the organisation.
Bereavement and Loss – All employees	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • To reflect on the grieving process and gain an understanding of current models that help understand grief and bereavement • Become aware of the impact of loss and bereavement on families • Consider, through our own understanding of the impact of loss, the ways we may assist individuals following bereavement • Consider skills relevant to their role and organisation which will improve how they communicate with bereaved people • Develop awareness of support organisations, and how and when to refer individuals for further support, including an understanding of the boundaries of our roles •

E-Learning currently available:

Workshop	Aims / Objectives
Mental Health Awareness	This module is about raising awareness of Mental Health issues, and to help identify the many forms, causes and types of mental illness. Also, the module will help delegates understand the different methods for treating mental illness.
Managing Pressure	<p>This module is part of a blended approach to the Managing Pressure Workshop and is used as pre-course work. It can also be accessed as a stand-alone module.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none">• Explain what stress is and how it is expressed physically and psychologically• Identify potential causes of stress to yourself and to colleagues• Explain how to minimise feelings of stress before it becomes a serious problem• Describe how not to deal with stress• List some short term coping strategies for dealing with stress as well as longer term solutions

Workshops under consideration for 2021/2022

Workshop	Aims and Objective
Mental Health Awareness for Managers	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Developing an awareness of the signs of poor mental health, and some of the different mental health conditions. • Better understand aspects of work that can lead to poor mental health • Understand what managers can do to promote good mental health in the work-place. • Knowing what resources are available and where to get support for team members who may be struggling with their mental health. • How to approach a conversation with a team member you have concerns around.
Mental Health Awareness – All employees	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Understanding the issues relating to mental health and wellbeing. • Developing an awareness of the signs of poor mental health, and some of the different mental health conditions. • Better understand how well-being and a culture of good mental health can be promoted in the workplace. • Knowing what resources are available to increase knowledge and where to get support for team members who may be struggling with their mental health.
Managing Stress – All employees	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Understanding what stress is and recognising the signs of stress. • Awareness of personal stress management strategies and techniques. • Reviewed the main work areas that can lead to stress and identified ways to address work-related stress.
Depression Awareness and How to take care of yourself and others – All employees	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Understand what depression is, the symptoms of depression are and how depression may be triggered. • The risk factors associated with depression. • Techniques, tools and strategies that can help. • Where and how to get help and support.
An Introduction to Anxiety Disorders – All employees	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Understand what anxiety disorders are and what to look out for. • What might trigger an anxiety disorder? • The risk factors associated with anxiety disorders. • Techniques, tools and strategies that can help. • Where and how to get help and support.