Belfast City Council's Workplace Health and Wellbeing Strategy
April 2024 – March 2027

Our ambition . . .
to improve the health and well-being of all our employees

Contents

1. Introduction

1.1 Belfast City Council developed its first Workplace Health and Wellbeing Strategy in 2014, understanding that investing in employees' health and wellbeing delivers outcomes that can have a positive impact on employees' mental, physical and emotional wellbeing.

1.2 The council has undertaken significant activities to deliver the objectives of the strategy by investing in health and wellbeing initiatives that support our employee's physical and mental health. As Public Sector Champions of the Mental Health Charter, it is our firm belief that the mental, physical and emotional wellbeing of our workforce is a major contributor to the successful delivery of council services and that an engaged, healthy and productive workforce is integral to that success. It is crucial in enhancing organisational performance and better service delivery, as well as meeting the objectives of the Belfast Agenda and investment within the city. We believe that to date, the strategy has delivered positive outcomes for employees across all services.   The following feedback was received from members of staff:

"I feel like everyone should attend the Mental Health First Aid course as it was so insightful and helpful. Because of the course I was able to talk to a stranger with suicidal thoughts and encouraged her to get the specialist help she needed. It also gave me a greater understanding of other mental health conditions and the confidence to address issues around them."
Roisin Bradley
Graphic Designer

Better Mental Health has always been an issue close to my heart and the MHFA training provided through Corp HR was really beneficial to me as an individual both professionally and personally. As chair of the LGBT+ Network, Proud, for the last number of years it is an issue high on the agenda for the LGBT+ community.

The pandemic was a difficult time for all communities and the uncertain times we currently live in have impacted a lot of people at different levels. The outcomes of the training for me have been a better awareness of my own mental health and how to manage stress. It has also let me help and signpost friends and colleagues who have struggled with their mental health to take simple actions and ask for help when they need it. I couldn't recommend the training highly enough to colleagues.
Darren Trowlen
Project Officer (Delivery)
Proud LGBT+ Network

I took part in the 1 Billion Steps Challenge and found the experience exhilarating and beneficial both physically and mentally – it helped me to become energized after the winter lull in outdoor activities and had the added bonus of being able to meet people and chat while out and about which would not have happened had I merely gone to the gym or swimming pool. I'm still walking and I would thoroughly recommend it to everyone!
Mary McKenna

HR Support Assistant

1.3 We recognise that health and lifestyle choices are the choice of the individual, however the council has a role in supporting a healthy environment and promoting and encouraging healthy lifestyle choices, as well as helping employees deal with specific aspects of health.

1.4 By providing a positive organisational culture, the availability of protective health and safety guidance, supportive human resource policies and health improvement practices including the provision of employee counselling and occupational health services, we believe that our Health and Wellbeing Strategy will also create a health improvement legacy of knowledge and practice which could be extended through our employees to their families and friends and through to wider society. Just over 50% our employees are Belfast ratepayers so our Health and Wellbeing Strategy has the potential to have a positive impact, across the city and contribute to the delivery of the Belfast Agenda goals for improved health throughout Belfast.

2. Foreword from the Chief Executive

Through the Belfast Agenda, we're committed to making Belfast a place where everyone experiences good health and wellbeing. This commitment is as valid for our own staff as it is for the communities we serve.

Our People Strategy sets out what we currently have in place to support your physical and mental health. This updated Health and Wellbeing Strategy is the next step we're taking to ensure that the support on offer is fit for purpose and provides the right mix of assistance that may be called upon to help you feel and give your best while at work, and outside of work too.

We are all more than Belfast City Council employees. We have friends, loved ones, hobbies, interests and passions that we want to give time to and be fit and healthy to enjoy. We hope the benefits of the approach we're taking through this strategy extend beyond the working day to support all staff to feel healthy, happy and motivated.

John Walsh
Chief Executive

3. What is health and wellbeing?

3.1 Health relates to a person's physical and mental condition. Wellbeing is the subjective state of being healthy, happy, contented, comfortable and satisfied with one's quality of life. Mental wellbeing relates to a person's emotional and psychological wellbeing. This includes self-esteem and the ability to socialise and cope in the face of adversity. It also includes being able to develop potential, work productively and creatively, build strong and positive relationships with others and contribute to the community.

(*Source: National Institute for Health and Care Excellence (NICE)*

A healthy workforce can lead to:
- Healthy, happy employees
- Motivated employees with improved morale
- High employee retention and low employee turnover
- Reduced sickness absence
- Good employee/management relations

A healthy workplace can be defined as:
- A place where health risks are recognised and managed
- A place where work design is compatible with people's health needs and limitations
- An environment that supports the promotion of healthy lifestyles
- A place where employees and employers recognise their responsibility for their own health and the health of their colleagues

3.2 Implementing this strategy will help support the development of a healthier, robust, resilient and engaged workforce, who will be tasked with achieving the council's main priorities set out in:
- The Belfast Agenda;
- Corporate Plan, incorporating the Improvement Plan;
- Continual delivery of quality, value for money services

3.3 A cross-council team facilitated by Corporate HR has led the review of the strategy. The team included representatives from all departments as well as representatives from the Trade Union Group, Corporate Health and Safety Unit and Marketing and Communications. A number of external partners including the Public Health Agency, Business in the Community

and the councils Occupational Health and Employee Counselling providers also input into the development of the strategy.

3.4 In order to realise our ambition of improving the health and wellbeing of all our employees, we firmly believe that everyone has a part to play:

Chief Executive

The Chief Executive is responsible for the effective implementation of the strategy and its action plan through delegation to Directors.

Directors

Each Director is responsible for:

- Ensuring employees within their department are aware of the Health and Wellbeing Strategy;
- Ensuring that managers are trained and understand their responsibilities with regard to their people management role;
- Ensuring that support is provided to managers in carrying out their people management roles
- Role modelling effective leadership and people management behaviours
- Supporting managers on the implementation of the strategy;
- Supporting employees in availing of the opportunities which the strategy presents.

Director of Human Resources

The Director of Human Resources is responsible for:

- Leading on the development, implementation and review of the strategy and action plan;
- Providing advice and support to managers and employees in implementing the strategy;
- Ensuring appropriate training is provided for managers where necessary on relevant human resource policies together with a programme of management development training;
- Monitoring the progress and outcomes of the strategy.

Managers

Managers are responsible for:

- Ensuring all employees are aware of the strategy and – subject to operational requirements - facilitate employees who wish to avail of the opportunities the strategy presents;
- Ensuring that they comply with all human resource policies and procedures, codes of practice and guidance notes;

- Participating in appropriate training in order to fulfil their roles as line managers.
- Role modelling effective leadership and people management behaviours

Health and Wellbeing Strategy Working Group
- Review of Health and Wellbeing Strategy and actions plans
- Monitoring progress
- Evaluation and reporting

Employees

Employees have responsibility for:
- Taking due care of their own health, safety and wellbeing and that of others who could be affected by their activities at work;
- Adhering to all relevant council policy and procedures.
- To avail, participate in relevant/appropriate training

Trade Union Representatives

TU representatives have responsibility for:
- Advising, supporting and representing their members;
- Working with managers to progress the implementation of the strategy and supporting further initiatives to help improve employee health and wellbeing.

4. Things that impact on the health and wellbeing of our employees

4.1 Our working environment is key

This will include:
- Work and how it is organised including fair allocation of work
- Job meaning and contribution to success
- Job security
- Supportive management and leadership style
- Work / Life balance
- Perceived fairness and justice in the workplace

4.2 Having effective job and organisation design, fit for purpose people practices, policies and procedures and effective management and leadership are crucial to ensure all our employees are provided with an optimal working environment.

5. Where are we now?

5.1 We have a number of key policies, procedures and strategies in place, which directly or indirectly support employee health and wellbeing. We also have an effective track record of promoting and supporting a range of health and wellbeing initiatives and activities. This has been strengthened further with the council becoming the Public Sector Champion of the Mental Health Charter.

Please see Appendix 1 for a summary of current policies, procedures and strategies and ongoing initiatives and activities as of April 2024.

5.2 Our ageing workforce

44% of our employees are over 50 and while an aging workforce can be a good thing in terms of the wealth of experience and knowledge it can also mean that a greater percentage of employees can face more health issues, which can impact on performance and attendance levels. Our aging workforce means that it is more important than ever to support our employees' mental and physical wellness through planned activity.

5.3 Observations from our employee counselling and occupational health providers

Statistics reported in May 23 highlighted a steady increase in demand for support from the Council's employee counselling service, rising most notably during the pandemic. Increases in the cost of living has also had a major impact on employees in terms of anxiety and stress levels and issues like addiction and homelessness are becoming more prevalent. Current pressures in the health service including long waiting lists, inaccessibility of mental health services in the community and even simply accessing primary care services in GP practices has also caused anxiety and stress due to delays in getting other health issues addressed and treated. Connections and relationships with other people, both in and outside work continues to be a major contributor to high levels of stress and anxiety.

Employees who are involved in disciplinary or grievance investigations can be put under additional pressures where investigations are not being completed in a timely manner, or when a manager is required to address under performance, so there is a continued need to support staff and ensure that managers and officers involved in the implementation of HR policies and procedures are adequately trained and knowledgeable.

The effective management of absence in line with the Council's Attendance Policy is of particular importance not only for those staff absent from work but in addition, for staff impacted by colleagues' absence who are required to take on additional work.

Where knowledge and support does not exist within the Council or where expert or long term support is required, effective signposting to and partnerships with other agencies and organisations can also help ensure that staff get the support they need.

5.4 Increasing levels of absence

Absence levels have been increasing steadily over the last 5 years. The top five reasons for absence in 2022/2023 are as follows:

Reason for absence:	% of total absence
Stress. depression, anxiety	35.88%
Musculo-skeletal	23.57%
Infections, Covid19	10.93%
Stomach, digestive, etc	7.19%
Infections, inc colds & flu	6.06%

The council recognises that it is inevitable that employees will experience periods of ill health which prevent them from attending work. It is important that sickness absences are treated fairly and sympathetically, and we are committed to providing appropriate support and encouragement to employees who are absent.

5.5 Our Attendance Policy and Booklet are designed to balance the requirements of the service with the interests of individual employees and encourage all employees to meet the high standards of attendance normally achieved by the vast majority of Belfast City Council staff. Particular communication and awareness raising around the Health and Wellbeing Strategy, activity and initiatives will be targeted to any areas where absence levels are high or where there is an identified need to address particular causes of absence.

5.6 The Attendance Policy sets out the council's commitment to "explore with the employee what reasonable adjustments, if any, can be made to enable the employee to meet the attendance standards."

6. Where would we like to be? - our strategy goals

6.1 We want to be an organisation:

- Where individuals feel valued and recognised for their contribution
- With increased employee engagement/motivation
- Where employees feel that they have the opportunity to develop
- Reduced absenteeism
- With good employee retention
- Where employees are clear about their role
- Where employees feel supported by their line manager
- Where employees improve their physical and mental health

6.2 Developing our strategy

The strategy builds on our existing policies and initiatives to provide an evolving series of actions aimed at producing a more cohesive, structured and corporate approach to health and wellbeing across the council.

It is based on the four strands of Business in the Community's Workwell Model (see figure 1) and the proposed actions have been developed accordingly:

- **Better Work** – Create good work and working conditions that enhance employee wellbeing.
- **Better Health & Wellbeing** – Take a whole-person approach to wellbeing. The four pillars of wellbeing are physical, mental, financial and social health and wellbeing. All of which are inextricably linked.
- **Better Management** – Make employee mental health 'business as usual' for all leaders and people managers.
- **Better Specialist Support** – Take an inclusive and employee-led approach to providing support.

Figure 1

A FRAMEWORK FOR EMBEDDING HEALTH AND WELLBEING INTO ORGANISATIONAL CULTURE - **The Five Enablers**

- Open Dialogue and Feedback
- Collaborative Individual Focused Approach
- Focus on relationships
- Positive Physical Environment
- Measuring & Monitoring

The Four Actions

- Empathy and Compassion
- Inclusivity and Equity
- Trust and Appreciation
- Authenticity

6.3 The 2024 – 2027 action plan (see section 8) has been developed as a result of internal feedback provided via the departmental Health and Wellbeing Strategy Working Group, organisational data, trade unions and external partners including, our Occupational Health and Employee Counselling providers. Aspects of the wider Health and Social Care Agenda have also influenced the action plan.

6.4 The action plan is not exhaustive and should the Health & Wellbeing Strategy Working Group be made aware of concerns, trends or new initiatives, from internal sources, including Elected

members and external sources such as Public Health Agency, Business in the Community or other external partners to support our employees, these can be incorporated at any stage.

6.5 The council is going through a period of change and it is important that the strategy and action plans aim to meet the needs of our employees during this challenging time.

7. Implementation, review and governance

7.1 Responsibility to deliver the actions is set out in the action plan. Departments will be required to ensure that the strategy is communicated to all staff and that as far as possible attendance and participation at events / training etc is facilitated. It is recognised that facilitating attendance can be challenging, particularly for employees in frontline operational roles. Corporate HR will work closely with frontline services to address any barriers that might prevent frontline staff from participating; in particular, where and when health and wellbeing activities and initiatives are being delivered.

7.2 Progress on delivery of the actions contained in the strategy will be reported to Corporate Management Team on a six-monthly basis. These reports will measure progress on actual delivery against proposed timeframes.
In order to be able to measure the impact of the Health and Wellbeing Strategy, the following qualitative and quantitative people performance indicators are proposed:

- Staff Turnover
- % staff agree that that they have opportunities to discuss their personal development?
- % staff agree that there are opportunities for career growth
- % staff agree that they receive feedback and that their contribution is valued and recognised
- Continued retention of and improvement in external diversity accreditations and benchmarks
- Attendance at and evaluation of events and training; both office based and frontline staff
- Number of health checks carried out;
- Attendance management statistics and reasons for absence
- Demand for counselling service
- Active travel surveys

Measurement of these performance indictors will take place at the end of year 1, 2 and 3.

Belfast City Council – Health & Wellbeing (H&WB) Action Plan 2024-2027

Activity Lead key
CHR   Corporate Human Resources
CH&S   Corporate Health & Safety
IC   Internal Communications

Theme	Actions	2024/2025	2025/2026	2026/2027	Activity Lead	Indicative cost
Better Health & Wellbeing	• Deliver a programme of health checks – including a focus on Men's health	☑	☑	☑	CHR	£1,000
	• Develop an annual H&WB training plan to deliver a programme of wellbeing support and awareness raising to all employees. (See Appendix 2)	☑	☑	☑	CHR	£3,000
	• Establish a team of health and wellbeing champions across all departments	☑	☑	☑	CHR	£2,000pa
	• Continue to deliver stress management training.	☑	☑	☑	CHR	Nil
	• Provide support for staff to practice mindfulness and lunch time activities such as yoga, Pilates etc	☑	☑	☑	CHR	Nil
	• Signpost healthy eating advice programmes on Staywell and Interlink	☑			CHR/IC	Nil
	• Assess our position against mental health charter	☑	☑	☑	CHR	Nil

Theme	Actions	2024/2025	2025/2026	2026/2027	Activity Lead	Indicative cost
	• Deliver a workforce Active Travel Plan including continuing to encourage employees to participate in the Sustrans Active travel programme.					£2,770 for Year 1
Better Specialist Support	• Continue to provide health and safety advice to managers and employees - including workplace/ergonomic assessments/DSE audits and reasonable adjustments	☑	☑	☑	CH&S	Nil
	• Provide a programme of planned awareness raising activities/articles/campaigns. Engage with staff to assess H&WB priority needs and provide a programme.	☑	☑	☑	CHR	Nil
	Develop training or a programme to support managers to recognise addiction and how they can support their staff		☑		CHR	£1,000
Better Work	• Stress Audit (using the HSE management standards). • Planning and small pilot • Trial in Departments • Roll out across all departments	☑	☑	☑	CH&S	Nil (Yr 1) Future years TBD
	• Continue to conduct Personal Development Plans for all employees.	☑	☑	☑	CHR	Nil
	• Provide a programme of training for managers to ensure they are equipped with effective people management skills to		☑		CHR	Corporate Training programme

Theme	Actions	2024/2025	2025/2026	2026/2027	Activity Lead	Indicative cost
	include staff engagement, support and inclusion.					
	• Continue to provide a programme of Mental Health First Aid training.	☑	☑	☑	CHR	£1,000
	• Ensure provision of a quiet room and develop guidance on usage	☑			CHR	Nil
	• Ensure continual signposting/communication of support available via Staywell Hub.	☑	☑	☑	CHR/IC	Nil
Better Management	• Ensure effective H&WB engagement processes are in place for staff via Induction, App, PDP's, surveys etc	☑	☑	☑	CHR	TBA Nil
	• Continue to develop employee networks providing support through the strategy objectives.	☑	☑	☑	CHR	
	• Develop a Dignity at Work/Bullying and Harassment Policy	☑			CHR	Nil

Appendix 1

Integrated procedures, policies and strategies in place	Ongoing Initiatives & Activities
- Attendance (to reduce the impact of sickness absence on the individual and the organisation) - Capability - Code of Conduct - Disciplinary and Grievance - Domestic violence and abuse - Drugs and Alcohol in the Workplace - Equal Opportunities - Enhanced Bereavement Leave - Gender Identity & Expression Guidelines - Health and Safety - Learning and Development (includes personal development plans for all employees) - Menopause Policy - Protection of staff from workplace violence and abuse from the public - Raising a concern - Redundancy - Risk Management Strategy - Social Media - Safeguarding Policy - Adults - Safeguarding Policy - Children and Young People - Smoking at Work - Work life Balance - Workstyles Policy	**Better Work** - Childcare voucher scheme - Diversity Action Plan (Gender, Disability, LGBT+, Race Action Plan) - General/specific health, safety and wellbeing courses e.g. manual handling, stress management, positive mental health and emotional wellbeing. **Better Health & Wellbeing** - Active Travel Plan - Cycle to work scheme - Discounted leisure centre membership **Better Management** - Ongoing internal communications supporting all related initiatives - Staff Support Networks (Women, Disability, LGBT+, Menopause) **Better Specialist Support** - A counselling service for employees who want to access confidential help and support - An occupational health service that provides advice on health and work issues - Free supply of period products for staff and reusable period product initiative (H&S – Health Surveillance checks) - Pre-retirement support through flexible retirement guidelines; the availability of seminars on finance and the Talking Retirement course

	• Signposting of a wide range of H&WB support not necessarily delivered by council • Smoking cessation programmes • StayWell online health hub • Trade Union Learning Representatives promoting learning in the workplace

Appendix 2

Subject Areas for H&WB training and support
Age at work
Bereavement and Loss
Cancer Awareness
Dementia Awareness
Disability Awareness
Domestic Violence
Financial Hardship
LGBT+ Awareness
Loneliness
Menopause Awareness and Support
Men's Health including mental health
Mental Health First Aid
Neurodiversity
Positive Mental Health & Emotional Wellbeing
Race Awareness
Resilience
Safeguarding
Sexual Harassment/Consent
Stress Awareness for Managers
Suicide Awareness
Women's Health

The above list is not exhaustive and topics will be prioritised according to need and issues as they emerge.