



HR Policy

Draft Pandemic Policy
January 2015



Human Resources

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1. INTRODUCTION

This policy sets out the council's provisions and expectations on the part of its employees and management in the event of a pandemic occurring. Every effort will be made to maintain the services we provide, especially those that are statutory and critical to the well-being of the community. Services will be tailored to the level of pandemic alert and requirements set out in business continuity plans.

This policy is primarily concerned with the maintenance of essential services, continuity of staffing and the management of staff who are affected by a pandemic. It is one of a wider suite of documents which comprise the borough's overarching response to emergency scenarios, and should be read in conjunction with your service unit or department's business continuity plan.

Our external approach to a pandemic (e.g. communicating with and safeguarding members of the public) is not covered in this policy. For those who wish to read more about the external process, further information is available in the Brent Pandemic Framework.

2. PREPARATION AND RESPONSE

2.1 Workforce infection prevention

The council ensures that staff whose day to day roles expose them to risk of infection are protected on an ongoing basis. The council's procedures for infection control are outlined in the Infection Control arrangements, which are available on the intranet. These arrangements were reviewed in 2015 and provide guidance to managers on how to prevent contamination and subsequent spread of infection, as well as on how to conduct effective risk assessments. These arrangements clarify that infection control arrangements and risk assessments may be subject to revision during a pandemic to reflect current health advice and guidance.

2.2 Response structures

In the event of a pandemic, the council will set up a 'Gold Group', comprised of CMT members. This group, advised by the Emergency Planning team, will be responsible for setting the council's strategy on service maintenance and staffing continuity. This strategy will then be implemented by the 'Departmental/Service-level recovery group' which works to develop appropriate actions based on the Gold Group's strategy across the organisation. These actions will work in conjunction with departmental or service level business continuity plans and the HR Pandemic Policy.

3. DURING A PANDEMIC

The main business continuity issues the council will need to prepare for during a pandemic are:

- Maintaining critical services
- Managing the workforce
- Communicating with employees and customers

3.1 Maintaining critical services

The council's Emergency Planning team coordinates business continuity planning across the council. Individual departments are responsible for determining how they will manage staff and services when faced with a loss of staff. Business continuity plans detail the responsibilities, staffing arrangements and priorities of each service unit/department in the event of emergency situations. In the case of a pandemic, business continuity plans are implemented following certain triggers from health bodies, and these will be communicated to staff via the corporate communication channels.

Service units are likely to be affected by an increase in sickness absence and other absences due to e.g. transport problems, caring responsibilities or family bereavement. Services should plan for the possibility that at the peak of a pandemic 50% of employees could be off work at the same time. This eventuality should be acknowledged and addressed in each department's business continuity plan(s).

As part of contingency planning on a departmental level, senior managers can, when appropriate, ask staff who retire or leave the service whether they would be potentially be available to assist during a pandemic.

Senior managers of front line services should also map the range of services commissioned by non-council providers and include these in their planning. Departments are required to review and re-submit their business continuity plans every two years. Further details and guidance is available from the council's Emergency Planning team and the intranet.

3.2 Managing staff

During a pandemic all levels of staff are likely to be equally affected. Employees will therefore need to be aware that they may be called upon to exercise authority in areas beyond their normal job roles and responsibilities. The contribution of all employees during the pandemic period will be essential to the provision of critical services.

The council will expect employees to be flexible to ensure that critical services can be maintained. This may include undertaking temporary transfers to complete work outside of an employee's normal job description. Where employees are required to undertake duties beyond their normal role, managers should ensure they give employees a clear explanation of their requirements in the new role. Temporary transfers may apply across sections/departments, particularly where employees are not able to work in their own department due to e.g. suspended service. Employees should be encouraged to see any temporary transfer as a way of developing new skills for future career enhancement.

Managers may also request volunteers from existing employees who are willing to work additional hours to cover increased absence levels in critical service areas. All additional volunteering is subject to the Working Time Regulations. Volunteers who have specialist skills and knowledge may also be requested to work outside their normal areas of work to deal with emergencies and continuing situations during the pandemic. Other volunteers may be trained to deal with general tasks such as administration, record keeping and telephone work.

In some circumstances it may be appropriate to use agency staff to cover some absences, although the availability of such staff will likely be affected in the same way as the council's own employees. A pandemic scenario would **not negate** the need for any agency staff (or existing employees covering other roles internally) to have the relevant DBS checks for roles which would ordinarily require one.

3.3 Communicating with employees

Employees are likely to be very concerned about the potential risks during a pandemic. The council's Communication team will be responsible for the dissemination of key messages before, during and in the wake of any pandemic. They will work in conjunction with the London Local Authority Coordination Centre (LLACC) and Public Health, Emergency Planning and HR to ensure all staff are receiving accurate and relevant information. They will issue up-to-date information on the intranet or other appropriate channels to employees and managers, ensuring these are consistent with national and local guidelines on:

- The key facts about the pandemic before, during and after, how it spreads, risks of infection and infection control methods, the role of anti-virals and vaccines, what additional precautions can be taken.
- Medical advice including symptoms.
- Advice on attending work, the status of services and the advice of the council's Emergency Planning team, Health and Safety team, Public Health and the LLACC at the time.
- HR advice on absence management and reporting.
- HR advice to employees where they or a dependent who needs care have been affected by a pandemic.

Departments must ensure that local arrangements are in place to facilitate good communication during a pandemic, e.g. ensuring employees who do not have access to the intranet receive corporate communication and where normal communication lines have been affected by disruption to IT, ensuring that staff receive the information by other means.

4. HR POLICIES AND PROCEDURES

During a pandemic, the priority is to avoid the spread of disease/infection. The council's flexible working arrangements will be vital in limiting the spread of infection amongst staff and members of the public. Given the extreme nature of a pandemic, normal HR policies and procedures may need to be suspended on the advice of the HR Director.

4.1 Flexible Working

During a pandemic, the normal remote working limits of two days per week as specified in the Flexible Working Policy will not apply. Employees may, if their role allows and with managerial consent, work up to five full days from home. This is subject to national and local guidance around minimising infection and spread and will be advised on by HR once a pandemic has been predicted or declared. As with all homeworking, employees must be contactable during the working day and arrangements put in place to ensure urgent issues are dealt with appropriately.

Flexible working hours may also be necessary in order to ensure that business need is met whilst minimising risk to employees. For example, if staff with caring needs require a temporary change to their working hours this should be considered by managers. Likewise employees who wish to travel outside of the rush hour or avoid public transport should be accommodated where possible if this in line with current local and national health guidelines.

Staff (including agency staff or casual workers) must be encouraged to take precautionary measures where possible. For example, in the case of pandemic flu employees must not attend work if they believe they are starting with the symptoms of flu (or if they have the

virus) as this will increase the risk of infection for other employees and service users. In this situation, employees who feel well enough to work should be asked to work from home where possible, and those who do not will take sickness absence which should be recorded in the normal way.

4.2 Sickness absence and triggers

Absences for pandemic infections/diseases will be treated as sick leave and paid in line with the council's occupational sick pay policy. Managers and employees should continue to record absence on Oracle in the normal way.

In accordance with normal absence procedures employees would be required to complete a self-certification form on return to work for the first 7 days and provide a medical certificate for all absences in excess of 7 days. In the event that medical services are stretched by a pandemic and are not able to issue medical certificates, employees may self-certify up to 14 days of sickness absence if they have been affected by the pandemic disease or virus. HR via the Communications team will advise when self-certification up to 14 days is permissible.

Standard sickness absence triggers (long- and short-term) will be observed during a pandemic, although HR will take into account the circumstances surrounding the pandemic during the monitoring process.

4.3 Other absence

Employees may be absent from work in a pandemic situation for reasons other than their own illness. For example, absences may occur where an employee is the primary carer of children and/or adults who have contracted a pandemic illness. Employees may also be absent from work owing to school closures and the breakdown of care arrangements for adults due to the pandemic. In these or similar circumstances, employees should take annual leave or flexi time as available to them. In exceptional circumstances, unpaid leave can be taken as determined on a case by case basis. Employees are expected to provide as much notice as possible of the need to take leave.

Employees will need to seek their manager's permission to take annual leave, flexi time or unpaid leave for these occasions. These requests should be prioritised over requests for leave for leisure purposes.

Other planned absences such as annual leave for leisure purposes, special leave, flexi time or leave for public duties may need to be cancelled or re-arranged during a pandemic to ensure sufficient cover to maintain critical services. However, this should only occur where other alternatives have been explored, e.g. temporary transfer of other employees, agency staff and volunteers.

Special leave requests for bereavement situations and public duties which must be provided by law will take priority over non-critical flexi time or annual leave. Where leave is cancelled for service reasons and employees have incurred unavoidable costs, the council may, in exceptional circumstances, reimburse any expenditure (depending on the circumstances) if they are not otherwise recoverable through insurance.

In a prolonged pandemic period leave should not be automatically cancelled and new requests may need to be considered to balance the need for work and rest. Depending on the circumstances of a given pandemic, the council may consider allowing more leave than normal to be carried forward into the next leave year subject to all employees being required

to take the statutory annual leave of 20 days (and leave on bank holidays). Any leave requests during the pandemic must have advance approval of the manager.

4.4 Reporting absence

During a pandemic, all employees are required to notify their place of work if they are absent for any reason. This includes (but is not limited to) absence caused by their own illness or potential infection, that of dependents, or caring duties arising as a result of e.g. school closures. Employees will need to advise their place of work every 7 days on the progress of their health/care arrangements etc. and the employee's likely date of return to work.

At the time of any pandemic it is likely that the council may have a central reporting system in place for all council employees. Further details will be given in its communication to employees.

4.5 Refusal to attend work or perform duties

It is expected that employees will continue to attend, perform their duties and be flexible to ensure that services continue to be provided. If difficulties arise with refusal to attend for work or refusal to carry out certain duties, managers should find out what the concerns are, consider what, if anything, can be reasonably addressed and encourage the employee to work.

If despite addressing the issues, the employee still refuses to attend or perform their full duties then this may be considered unauthorised absence or refusal to perform the full duties of their job which may be a disciplinary issue. In this scenario, advice should be sought from HR immediately to ensure an appropriate and consistent approach is taken.

4.6 Other HR functions

Other non-statutory HR functions may be affected during a pandemic. Information will be disseminated as appropriate via the council's corporate communication channels. Examples of potentially affected areas include, but are not limited to, the following:

Appraisals: It may be impractical to undertake appraisals during a pandemic and the dates for appraisal interviews and mid year reviews may therefore be postponed until after the pandemic has passed.

Grievances, Capability and Disciplinary: The operation of key HR policies and associated procedures may be impractical at the height of a pandemic. In the case of discipline, suspension may be used as a precautionary measure pending return to normal conditions. Any investigations and hearings may need to be postponed until the pandemic has passed.

5. SUPPORTING EMPLOYEES

It is anticipated that it will take considerable time for services to return to normal after a pandemic. Once the pandemic is officially over, those employees who have been working beyond contracted hours should be given compensatory leave at the earliest possible opportunity. Any annual leave requests will also need to be reviewed.

Any disciplinary, capability and grievance issues will be followed up taking account of the circumstances that prevailed during the pandemic and learning from any adverse events.

During and after a pandemic, employees may experience higher levels of stress or emotional anxiety. Throughout a pandemic, managers should encourage staff to contact the council's Employee Assistance Programme (EAP) which offers telephone-based counselling and other health related services. Managers should also refer to the council's Stress Policy to ensure they are adequately equipped to deal with potentially increased incidences of stress amongst their staff.

6. FURTHER INFORMATION

Further information in respect of this policy should be sought from Human Resources.

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