Item 2

10th August 2023

Glasgow City Council

Wellbeing, Equalities, Communities, Culture and Engagement City Policy Committee

Report by Christine Brown, Head of Human Resources

Contact: Karen Strachan, People & Policy Development Manager
Ext: 70284

NRS Challenges

Purpose of Report:

To update committee on the outcomes of the NRS Challenges partnership project

Recommendations:

It is recommended that the committee

(1) Note the contents of this report; and

(2) Support the continuation of NRS People as a core service programme.

Ward No(s): Citywide: ✓

Local member(s) advised: Yes ☐ No ☐ consulted: Yes ☐ No ☐

***PLEASE NOTE THE FOLLOWING**:*

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1. Background

1.1 This report provides an update on the NRS Challenges partnership project, set up in November 2021 to respond to the key people and culture elements of the council's 14 point 'we will' commitment to the Trade Unions from the Leader of the Council and Workforce Convenor.

1.2 Further direct engagement between the Leader and Workforce Convenor with the operational workforce, highlighted a range of issues. These included a need for improved employee engagement, a focus on skills and career development, and a required improvement in depot working conditions.

1.3 The decision was taken to call the programme "NRS People" to give it a comprehensive identity that would encompass the entire employee experience at NRS. This brand was not intended to "leave" the service; instead, it would become "the way we do things around here" and, in the broadest sense, concentrate on addressing matters relating to people and culture.

2. Programme structure for delivery

2.1 Pillar 1 - Wellness at Work

- Effective case management to bring down absence levels, primarily tackling long-term absence through a dedicated experienced HR team.
- Focussed attention on short-term absence, identifying patterns to support employee progress.
- Focussed activity through data analysis of absence cases to deliver effective interventions.
- Delivery of the immediate objective to reduce the service's reliance on agency labour and support experienced agency staff apply for permanent jobs.

2.2 Pillar 2 - Health & Wellbeing

- To support and sustain acceptable levels of attendance whilst also improving working conditions including the further development of existing health and wellbeing activity, supported through the trade union joint working group.

2.3 Pillar 3 - Skills & Career Development

- Enhance the operational workforce's career development opportunities to improve flexibility and progress through the service's promotion structures.
- Delivery of management and skills development, in particular compassionate management as well as numeracy, literacy and digital upskilling for career development are recognised as key.

2.4 Pillar 4 - Communications & Employee Engagement

- Engage employees on the depot review plans and activities that are aimed at improving working conditions.
- Improving employee communication and engagement, to frontline colleagues in particular, not working as pc facing.

3. Structure & Partnership working

3.1 The Head of HR and Director of City Operations led the partnership project's steering group. With the Corporate HR, People and Policy Development Manager and NRS Strategic Service HR Manager providing operational leadership of the work.

3.2 The programme team was led from Corporate HR as a collaborative working group from across service and corporate staff in Communications, HR, and Operations, configured to optimise design and implementation.

3.3 A co-chaired trade union forum was re-established to collaborate on the scope of the work.

4 Budgeted Resources

4.1 The programme was assigned budgeted project delivery resource for a two-year period. With subsequent attrition and council financial challenges, for the most part, existing internal resources were pivoted to support essential programme delivery.

4.2 No other dedicated financial budget was assigned to the programme team, although escalation of appropriate business cases, provided to the Steering group, where a cost benefit analysis was determined, were approved.

5 Pillar 1 - Wellness at Work – Outcomes

5.1 When the NRS people approach began, limited resources had been focused on critical employee covid responses, creating a backlog of long-term absence cases that required immediate HR and management intervention. To date, support has been provided to over 500 employee absence cases.

5.2 All employees experiencing absence receive immediate support from the early intervention team, this triage approach helps employees return to work faster and sets up good case management foundations. Employees have access to a professional range of health and wellbeing services and guidance, all from approved local and government health and wellbeing pathways.

5.3 A dedicated HR officer is now assigned to every long-term absence case. Experienced officers can determine the right solutions across multiple pathways, which can include redeployment, reasonable adjustments, re-designing jobs, flexible retirement or re-training as the business allows. They can also review other employment policy interventions like conflict resolution, flexible working, and cultural practices to support employee outcomes.

5.4 Management skills and confidence have grown in handling absence management through delivery of dedicated employee relations coaching from the expert team, HR masterclass webinars in maximising attendance policy delivered to all supervisors and managers and wellbeing action plan training from SAMH, bringing increased consistency and good practice to our approach.

5.5 Short term absence review activity has been implemented to better manage the highly disruptive, operational impact on service delivery. Hand in hand, a service exercise conducted a review of agency worker costs, which has resulted in the need for a resourcing exercise to improve control of short-term absence impacts.

6 Pillar 2 - Health & Wellbeing – Outcomes

6.1 Improvement in employee Health and wellbeing literacy through the launch of tailored supports including the corporate Health and wellbeing handbook, dedicated financial wellbeing guide, development of NRS mental health and wellbeing leaders trained at level 6 and HSCP suicide awareness training.

6.2 Increased in-work support for mental health through the launch of the Able Futures Access to Work Mental Health Support Service, a free service through the Department for Work and Pensions (DWP). Depot visits, virtual information sessions, and appointment days have been conducted to promote the service to all supervisors and managers with the first on-site, face-to-face sessions in the UK reaching over 250 staff.

6.3 Preventative health support was provided through occupational health checks. Almost half of staff who took part (44%) were referred to their GP due to either high blood pressure or cholesterol levels, a positive measure to improve long term health outcomes.

6.4 Health & Wellbeing information awareness raising and engagement continued through our tried and tested health roadshow model working in hand in hand with our expert partners from PAM Assist, Glasgow Alcohol and Drug Support Service, NRS Road Safety Team, Glasgow Credit Union, Hospital Saturday Fund, Step Change Debt Charity etc. Over 300 depot staff attended the roadshows and gained access to immediate face to face advice and guidance. Over 95% of attendees felt supported and learned something new.

6.5 More confident and enabled managers, supervisors, HR teams and trade union representatives able to support employees manage alcohol and drug (A&D) issues whilst using our A&D Employee Support Policy through tailored training from the Scottish Drugs Forum (SDF).

6.6 Improved employee awareness on Gambling harms through the delivery of John Hartson Foundation, gambling addiction workshops as part of a COSLA national pilot. The workshops also supported the re-launch of our refreshed Gambling Harms Support Policy for staff. Over 300 employees attended from three of our main sites, as a result, 69% of staff identified as being affected in some way by gambling.

6.7 Further local needs are being met through tailored requests for health and wellbeing learning which have included deaf awareness training and prostate cancer awareness workshops.

7 Pillar 3 - Skills & Career Development – Outcomes

7.1 The introduction of 'NRS People Manager' was designed to establish a framework and identity centred on the people management skills and behaviours required in today's workplace. Management development was identified early on as a key to good employee performance and attendance, as a result a number of workshops were delivered by City of Glasgow College and funded through the Flexible Workforce Development Fund (FWDF).

7.2 Further improvement of NRS people management skills, through the delivery of bespoke compassionate management workshops, tailored in line with the service operational needs by Organisational Development. Almost 90% of respondents said they learned something new and would be more aware of their impact as a manager as a result of the evaluation. The project

focused on role modelling and storytelling great compassionate management examples already delivering in the service.

7.3 As part of our staff listening programme, we supported employees in planning their personal development through employability support for frontline non-pc-facing employees considering supervisory roles. These workshops helped staff learn more about writing job applications, understanding person specifications, using myjobscotland and improving their overall digital skills required for making successful online applications.

7.4 Our depot Conversation cafés were pop-up engagement sessions used to gauge staff opinions on the programme and its impact. The most common theme was wanting to feel valued and thanked by senior management, which was incorporated into Service staff engagement action plans, in particular through the back to the floor approach.

7.5 In some occupational roles, services require deeper mental resilience support, as a result our employee assistance provider held a number of workshops for specific service teams to support their mental health while working with vulnerable service users.

7.6 A programme of Succession and Career planning was implemented in the service areas of Roads and technical services. Bespoke Organisational Development workshops were delivered to improve understanding of the framework, accompanied by employee awareness workshops to promote a sense of ownership of career planning and engagement among staff.

7.7 City of Glasgow College successfully conducted a comprehensive series of workshops budgeted from the FWDF. These aligned to our own organisational framework whilst providing a particular focus for managers on how to identify skills shortages for business-critical positions, hold career conversations, create personal development plans, and how to provide performance feedback.

7.8 Over 300 employees were included in the scope of the identified business critical areas and analysis discovered that over one-third of these employees are over the age of 55, making succession planning a critical business issue. The team identified prevailing under investment in learning and development related to these posts, which had caused the emergence of significant skills gaps and shortages within the service, this is compounded by the current competitive external labour market, creating no immediate solution to meeting service delivery needs.

7.9 As a result, HR and operational managers conducted a comprehensive skill needs analysis across all their targeted service areas in order to identify the required qualifications, training needs and associated costs, with the Director of City Operations approving the identified investment to deliver on the business case.

8 Communications & Engagement Pillar – Deliverables and Outcomes

8.1 Employees have been provided with clear and up to date communications across the project and its aims. A new staff communication forum was established as part of the service's refreshed approach and multiple channels have been used to reach all employees including non pc facing staff. This includes live digital presentation sessions, personal communications for staff on leave or currently absent, the NRS E-loop, managers briefs, webinars, employee briefs for non pc facing staff, depot visits and depot screens, to name a few.

8.2 A large part of the employee engagement strategy was the delivery of the NRS People conference, with strategic service presentations to bring staff together face to face and keep them informed. Conference breakout areas also included service information and engagement sessions and featured the Health & Wellbeing Market place our largest roadshow audience to date.

8.3 The service installed depot communication screens to display corporate and service staff messages. This has resulted in direct communications available instead of posters, keeping information up to date and relevant, delivered at the same time as pc facing employees, previously out of reach.

8.4 Staff can now gain fingertip access to employee supports online from their own personal devices. Working with our trade unions, we created an easy-access QR code for discreet and private access to information and support to help overcome the barriers to seeking help caused by stigma.

Staff had trouble applying for local job openings, which were printed out for notice boards and often out of date. Directly marketing QR codes on posters and service jobs listed in digital communications allows employees to scan and apply for jobs quickly from their own devices.

8.5 Another development was creating a web platform that allowed all non pc facing employees quick and easy access to all NRS People information through a QR code including, for the first time, access to our employment policies and conditions of service. A communication campaign was launched to engage staff on its use including vehicle sticker and workplace posters.

8.6 The depot review programme has also been focused on employee engagement with a strong communications plan. As a result, employees and trade unions have been involved in the design of the new Easter Queenslie depot with staff ideas adopted including a prayer room and fitness suite. Wider works are ongoing across the estate to improve working conditions across a Five-year programme, again with trade union and employee feedback.

9 Staff Survey

9.1 The staff survey provided a formal and anonymous method for staff to have their say. Nearly 500 staff responded to both the 2022 baseline and 2023 follow up survey. Survey engagement sessions were delivered in person across 40 groups to nearly 1200 staff and were supported in person by senior management. In both surveys, the majority of respondents described themselves as working in frontline service delivery.

9.2 Overall, the results from those that responded indicate a small but valuable positive shift in perceptions of working in NRS and equivalent reduction in negative views across the same questions since the baseline survey.

9.3 On communications and engagement, an improvement in feeling valued at work (+7%) and a bigger improvement in being kept up to date with service communications (+13%).

9.4 With a definite positive shift seen in employees feeling they can better engage with their managers, for example on personal and wellness matters 63% (+9%), on employment policy and practice 42% (+7%), staff training conversations 50% (+11%) and dedicated time to talk to their manager about work performance (+14%).

10. Evaluation of absence against national trends

10.1 Labour market survey data provided by the Office for National Statistics (ONS) shows that absence due to sickness or injury continues to follow an upward trajectory - reaching a record high of the equivalent of six days per worker in 2022 - which is the highest number since 2004, and the largest since records began.

10.2 The rise in sickness absence is reflected in Scottish Local Authority benchmarking data which shows that staff sickness absence is continuing to increase across all Councils. However, Glasgow City Council shows the smallest increase out of all other Councils between 2021/22 having compared less favourably in previous years.

10.3 According to the ONS data from the latest available labour market survey, in the first quarter of 2023, there is also a record high number of adults of working age in the UK who are opting out of work on the grounds of ill health.

10.4 Internal sickness absence data shows that between 2022/23, apart from Chief Executive's Department, NRS is the only other service to have seen a drop in employee sickness absence of 0.25 days, whilst other services reported a continued increase. This appears to suggest that there is a 'slowing down' of the upward trend in NRS, whilst it continues to rise nationally across the UK, in other Scottish Councils, and in other services within the council.

10.5 The first quarter of this financial year (Apr-Jun 2023) continues to show the slowing down and perhaps re-direction of the upward trend happening elsewhere as NRS record 3.4 days lost per employee – which has dropped slightly by 0.3 days from the previous quarter.

11. Conclusions

11.1 Overall, absence management practice and approach has been strengthened, although rates haven't lowered by as much as hoped. Nonetheless, the programme has gone beyond this in terms of results by supporting employees return to work and slowing down and indeed in evidence, reversing absence rate increases against the national upward trend, this alone is a tremendous achievement. Retaining staff through improved wellness, additionally helps us address labour market shortages by maintaining workforce critical skills and knowledge.

11.2 The timing and investment of the programme came at a significant time against a backdrop of national challenges including the "Cost of Living" crisis, post pandemic psychological health challenges and the impact of NHS waiting lists on employee health. Had we not taken this approach at this time, our attendance, staff welfare and engagement story could have been a far more negative picture.

11.3 From the evidence in the staff survey the preventative approach of the increased employee communications and employee development approach have been well received and will go a long way to future proof employee skills in the service.

11.4 The good practice, including how we've delivered, especially where particular interventions have proved most impactful, will be reviewed for wider application across the whole council.

11.5 Although we have no truly objective way to measure the effect on employee wellness and culture outcomes of all our activities, we are, however, supported anecdotally through trade union, elected member, employee and manager feedback, that all strands of the work are indeed starting to make a positive difference to 'NRS People'.

12. Policy and Resource Implications

Resource Implications:

Financial:	Financial resources required are covered by agreed budgets.
Legal:	No legal implications
Personnel:	No direct personnel implications or significant changes to processes/procedures.
Procurement:	No procurement issues.

Council Strategic Plan:	Grand Challenge 4 – Enable staff to deliver essential services in a sustainable, innovative and efficient way for our communities. Mission 3 – Enable staff to deliver a sustainable and innovative council structure that delivers value for money.

Equality and Socio-Economic Impacts:

Does the proposal support the Council's Equality Outcomes 2021-25? Please specify.	The proposal supports outcome number 10. As an employer, Glasgow City Council employees are supported to have improved mental and physical health and wellbeing.
What are the potential equality impacts as a result of this report?	Positive through improved learning outcomes and increased inclusion.
Please highlight if the policy/proposal will help address socio-economic disadvantage.	The policy and supports are aimed at employees but it's objective is to help employees to avoid the socio-economic negatives associated with poor health outcomes.

Climate Impacts:

Does the proposal support any Climate Plan actions? Please specify:	N/A

What are the potential climate impacts as a result of this proposal?	N/A
Will the proposal contribute to Glasgow's net zero carbon target?	N/A
Privacy and Data Protection Impacts:	N/A

13 Recommendations

It is recommended that the committee:

(1) Note the contents of this report; and

(2) Support the continuation of NRS People as a core service programme.