



**WOKINGHAM
BOROUGH COUNCIL**

Health and Safety within Wokingham Borough Council

Annual Report 2023-24

Foreword

Wokingham Borough Council as an organisation takes health and safety seriously and is committed to the continuous development and improvement of our health and safety management system.

With that aim in mind, and as part of our overall governance arrangements, at this time each year we revisit and review our internal health and safety performance across the preceding twelve months and, taking that information into account and the lessons we have learned along the way, agree our current priorities for health and safety.

As we move ahead, we will continue to take a sensible and proportionate approach to health and safety management and remain committed to learning lessons along the way to improve further.

Susan Parsonage

Chief Executive

Wokingham Borough Council

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Introduction

Wokingham Borough Council has an established health and safety management system that reflects the “Plan Do, Check, Act” approach recommended to employers by the Health and Safety Executive (HSE). Our framework arrangements for managing health and safety include:

1. defined responsibilities for health and safety by role
2. consultation with employees on health, safety, and welfare matters
3. designated health and safety leads at both Director and Executive level
4. in-house health and safety specialists providing advice and support.
5. health and safety policies and guidance
6. health and safety training programmes.
7. investigations into the causes of accidents, incidents and near miss events
8. arrangements in place centrally and locally to monitor and review health and safety.

Corporate Health and Safety Role

The Corporate Health and Safety Team’s has been moved under the directorship of the Chief Operating Officer to align with the responsibilities under the Chief Executives Office, but its role has not changed. Its function continues to be to provide support and advice to all staff and members of the council on matters of health, safety, and welfare and to provide and maintain safety policies along with a suite of corporate arrangements and guidance to improve understanding of safe practice and to provide internal assurance checks on safety related areas.

Identification and mitigation of risk at the earliest possible stage must always be the goal, it is the responsibility of the Health and Safety Team to monitor accidents and incident trends, ensuring investigations are prompt and learning applied where appropriate and should it be required at any point the team will notify the HSE, or other relevant bodies of any reportable matters and coordinate the council’s cooperation and response.

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

This report relates to the Council's internal health and safety performance during the period between April 2023 and March 2024 and covers the Council workforce, approx. 1415, and those schools where the Council is legally the employer, approx. 1921 colleagues, which is the case for maintained community schools including special schools, voluntary controlled schools, maintained nursery schools and pupil referral units.

The details in this report do not include the health and safety performance of services provided to Academy schools or Council partners as part of shared services.

Key elements of this report include the increase in accident and incident reporting including near misses in 2023/24 and a summary of the health and safety programme implemented following the audit conducted by the British Safety Council in January 2024.

Overall, the health and safety performance of the Council during 2023-24 should be viewed in a positive light due to the low number of serious employee incidents i.e. those that require notification to the Health and Safety Executive (HSE) under The Reporting of Injuries, Diseases and Dangerous Occurrences Regulations 2013 (RIDDOR).

Health and Safety 23/24 Data & Intelligence

A total of 343 incidents were reported across the organisation (schools and services). This year saw a reversal of the previous trend of low reporting with an increase of 20% more near misses, incidents and accidents being reported overall.

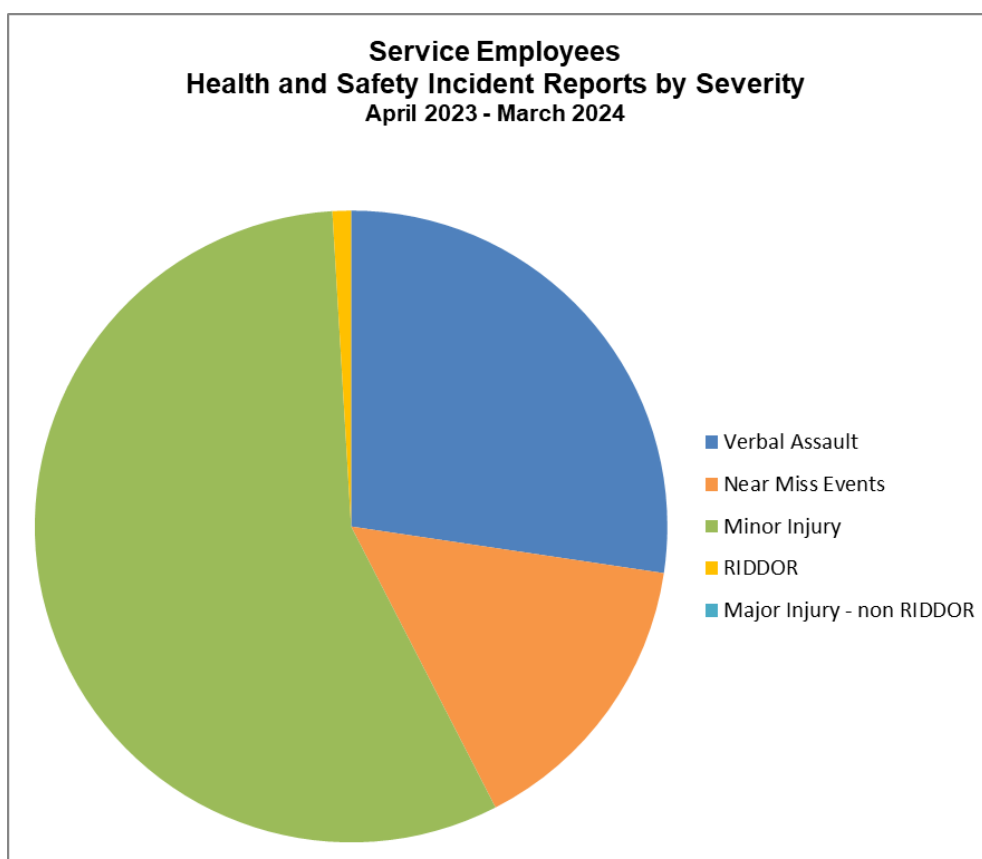
Year	2019-20	2020-21	2021-22	2022-23	2023-24
Total Incidents	703	320	489	296	343

The following graph shows the 5-year trend in employee incidents, verbal abuse and near misses.



Observations

- A total of 112 incident service-related reports were raised by service staff during 2023-24 and an additional 102 by School employees during the same period.
- The number of incidents reported in 2023/24 showed an increase of 34 reports over the previous year; the total services employee headcount however has remained fairly static across the last several years.
- The increase in incident reporting is considered to be a positive response to both corporate and local staff forum updates as well as regular safety awareness communications.
- 42% of the 2023/24 reports related to incidents where the outcome did not result in injury; including occurrences involving verbal abuse and near miss events, this figure is lower than the previous year's figure of 67%.
- 29 incidents reported now relate to verbal abuse from members of the public towards Council employees which is continuing the increase seen since 2019
- Similarly, 112 incidents involved members of the public on council owned or maintained properties and students and pupils at community schools maintained by the Council
- Analysis of the peaks in May/June 2023 and February 2024 did not reveal any significant patterns or trends.



There is evidence through direct discussions with service level forums, line manager and staff that indicate not all incidents are being recorded on the Councils main reporting system. Whilst the reasons vary the predominate trend

is awareness of what and how to report and the lack of simple and accessible reporting system to all staff to ensure barrier are not put in the way of reporting incidents as they have occurred.

This decrease in data could limit the Councils awareness of risks posed to colleagues across the organisation so the Health and Safety team will ensure that awareness of reporting and the methods of how to do so are regularly part of employee communications plan and included in both local and corporate induction practices.

Review and Improve

As part of the Councils want to focus on continuous improvement an audit was commissioned by the British Safety Council of the Councils health and safety management system in order to provide an external, independent assessment of the Councils arrangements developed and the effectiveness of their implementation.

It was worthy of note that no high priority or major improvement were noted within the audit and showed that risk areas identified within the current health and safety arrangements provided a good framework to manage health and safety both in the Council and school's environments.

Robust plans have been put in place to articulate the Councils health and safety journey for the next several years as part of a back to basics programme to engender a safety culture of personal acceptance and help achieve the aims of health and safety policy set out by the Council.

Underpinning this will be an ongoing communication programme to raise safety awareness and the ongoing annual self-evaluation process, led by services and supported by the Health & Safety service to ensure that areas identified for improvement are followed up with actions implemented and their effectiveness monitored.

School Based Health and Safety 2023/24

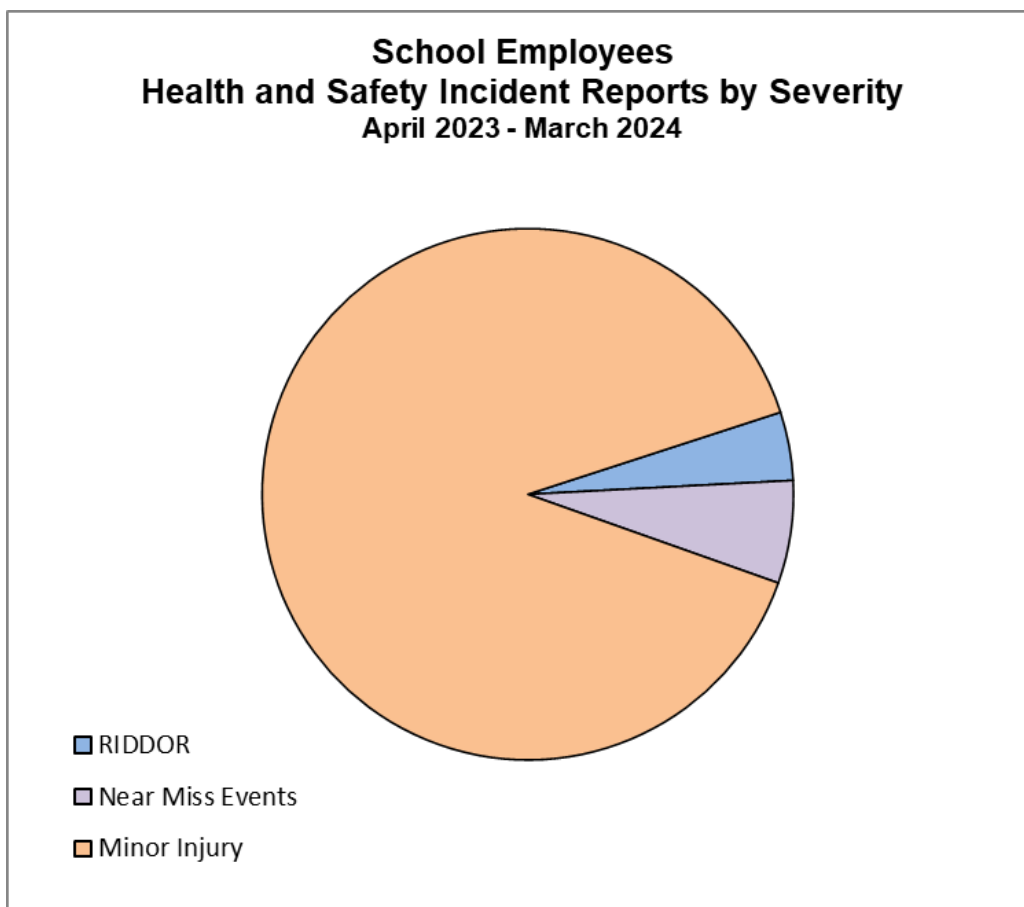
Incidents reported by schools decreased overall by 13% marking two years where there is a reduction in known incidents within schools and continuing a trend seen from 2020/21.

Part of the risk-based health and safety assurance programme for 2023/24 focussed on trying to identify why there was an overall reduction in reporting. The report found that the majority of school incidents were of a minor nature and relating to non-employees incidents that were not work-related, for example a pupil injured in a playground accident which, while important, is not within the scope of this report. However, it was noted that a few employee incidents had

not been reported to the Council, due to previous advice issued or confusion as to what represented a work-related injury whilst undertaking school activities.

Further communication will be issued to schools to be clear on the requirements for incident reporting along with other core safety matters following the school's assurance programme coming in 2023/24.

Positively over 70% of school incidents were recorded as minor injury or no injury at all and only 4 instances were noted as causing an employee to become absent from work. Each of these instances were reported under the requirements for RIDDOR to the HSE employee's absence following the incident exceeded the seven consecutive days threshold and so became notifiable to the HSE.



HSE Enforcement

Two Notices of contravention have been issued to Wokingham Borough Council during 2023-24 following a spot inspection of one site by the HSE in 2023 and a review of an notifiable incident in 2022.

Serious Incident Investigations and Inspections

Two serious incidents were raised to the health and safety team during 2023-24 by services, these incidents related to physical assault by members of the public on employees whilst undertaking their work, both of which were referred to Thames Vally Police to investigate further and undertake criminal prosecutions.

The nature of incidents and potential seriousness of each incident has prompted both additional training, public communication, and other measures to be provided as part of an ongoing programme to look to reduce these types of incidents across all services.

In addition, 5 employee incidents were reported to the HSE as they met the requirements under The Reporting of Injuries, Diseases and Dangerous Occurrences Regulations 2013 (RIDDOR), 4 of these were listed as minor injuries but due to the length of absence following injury, they became reportable to the HSE under the 7-Day threshold.

Key Outcomes for 23/24

- A greater focus on ensuring the robustness of WBCs health and safety management systems was delivered with a strategic audit being undertaken by the British Safety Council which highlighted no areas of non-compliance but supported a health and safety programme to deliver a back to basics approach to produce more user-friendly and pragmatic guidance for both schools and the service areas.
- A risk based health and safety assurance programme was carried out in schools to support the development of greater health and safety competency at local level through self-evaluation whilst also providing the Council with assurance that key health and safety risks are being adequately controlled. The findings of the programme form the basis of the Council's strategy for the continual improvement of health and safety management in its schools.
- Increased engagement of health and safety through onboarding process, corporate staff inductions, Service Level Forums for consultation and awareness, Staff network meetings and customer excellence training driven the awareness of reporting incidents and especially near misses. This increased awareness has led to improvements to the safety culture with near misses being more regularly reported and services being encouraged to solve issues proactively before they become incidents.
- Staff awareness of psychological safety and wellbeing has led to both greater leadership support and an increase in the reports of verbal abuse. Where teams have been identified as underreporting after disclosures the H&S team have been proactive in supporting during team meetings to understand the underlying issues and supporting wellbeing and safe working practices. .

- A lone working review was incorporated into the Annual Health and Safety review for 2024_25 to identify service members lone working and supporting services in implementing local procedures.
- Regular communications linked to promoting the importance of Display Screen Equipment and Lone working have supported teams with key outcomes in capturing potential muscular skeletal issues and lone working during winter and darker nights

Looking forward – our health and safety priorities for 2024-25

The priority for 2024/25 is to support the delivery of a back-to-basics programme, with the aim of empowering our employees. The health and safety management systems will be reviewed in whole to simplify processes, promote a clear safety culture and in turn support service delivery to the community in the safest ways possible through a clear understanding of the Plan, Do, Check, Act approach wherever possible. This will ensure our employees are equipped with the necessary skills, tools and knowledge they need to deliver safe services from the moment of induction into the Council.

Our aim is to achieve this by continuing to take a sensible, proportionate approach to managing the hazards associated with our work activities forward action plan which is shown in Appendix C. The health and safety board will be responsible for monitoring and ensuring delivery of actions related to the forward plan.

The increase in reports of verbal assaults on employees has been noted and, while much of this can be apportioned to increased awareness and reporting, further work is being done to support staff. A communications campaign for staff in October will focus on this issue, including how to report verbal abuse, training on handling conflict and managing aggression, and the support available through the council's Employee Assistance Programme.

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