

Case Study: Supporting staff wellbeing during Covid-19

By NHS Business Services Authority (NHSBSA)

“Covid has changed the way we work in many ways, but throughout it all staff wellbeing has been our number one priority. The systems and wellbeing offers we brought in during lockdown have helped bring people together more, and effectively supported them, whether working remotely from home or in the office.”

Ryan Jones, FLEx Manager and MHFA Network Co-Chair, NHSBSA

What does your organisation do?

We are an arm’s length body of the Department of Health and Social Care (DHSC). We are responsible for providing platforms and delivering services, which support the priorities of the NHS, Government and local health economies, and in so doing we manage around £35bn of NHS spend annually. Our services include recruitment, employee record management, providing learning opportunities, HR advice, payroll and secure medical record scanning. We have around 3,500 staff based in 11 sites around the country.

How did lockdown affect your staff?

- Lockdown meant that many of our staff had to work from home, making coordination difficult.
- Our workloads also increased because of the pandemic and the fact that some who had Covid symptoms were required to self-isolate.
- Lockdown also affected the mental health support we provided for our colleagues. Mental health was already a business priority because of the organisation’s people focus and high levels of mental health related absence. We know that mental health has a significant impact on the workplace, with

evidence suggesting that 12.7% of all sickness absence days in the UK can be attributed to mental health conditions.

- The diversity of roles and locations of our various internal audiences meant that although many staff were isolated at home, others were still coming into the office, which could be lonely and isolating in itself.

What changes did you bring in to support colleague wellbeing?

We had run many initiatives prior to lockdown to support colleague wellbeing, though these were mainly face to face, limited to individual offices and didn’t include all our staff. When lockdown came, we decided that colleague wellbeing had to be our priority and realised that online support was the best way forward. While we were initially completely reactive to the pandemic and lockdown, we’ve gradually become more proactive, and able to adapt better to circumstances as the pandemic has developed. Changes included:

Technology:

- Building confidence with technology: although some of us had used Microsoft Teams prior to the pandemic for meetings, it hadn’t until that

point been used much for less formal, cross-organisational engagement events. We appointed Teams Champions who were trained up by a full-time Microsoft 365 employee in how to use the platform.

- For the first time, we also enabled people to access the NHSBSA's intranet from home, and on any device, so they could continue to feel connected and informed about what was happening in the organisation.

Wellbeing events:

- We introduced bi-weekly virtual "WeCare Cafés" on Teams for anyone from the organisation to join in, to talk about issues related to mental health.
- We began hosting weekly Wellbeing Awareness Sessions, promoting positive mental health and wellbeing on topics including stress, wellness action plans and NHSBSA mental health support.

Management support:

- Mental health is fully integrated into our vulnerability risk assessment process, ensuring that when readjusting to office-based work, mental health needs are taken into account – balancing health needs and protection from infection with mental wellbeing through the help of our occupational health services.
- Managers are now also having weekly wellbeing conversations with their staff, "checking in" to make sure they are okay and creating individual wellness action plans.

Training:

- Feedback from our staff has shown us that many people are struggling with the same kinds of issues, which has prompted us to run a number of sessions on how to deal with them. This has included problems with sleeping, keeping fit, and switching off from work when forced to work at home.
- Mindfulness has proved particularly successful in helping our staff deal with the stresses they've felt during lockdown, with sessions organised in and out of work time, and included as part of Corporate Service Directorate meetings.
- We are also planning to run substance misuse training, knowing that drugs and alcohol can be a coping mechanism during difficult times

for some people. This is very much focused on supporting staff, rather than judging or disciplining them.

- In the near future, managers will also be trained to carry out stress risk assessments, again to be able to properly identify and support individuals when things become difficult.

Creating and promoting safe spaces:

- We established dedicated safe conversation spaces for LGBT+ and BAME colleagues, to link up and talk through common issues with one another.

What were the benefits of the changes you introduced?

- More openness about mental health: We've noticed that colleagues have become much more open talking about their anxieties, with our Mental Health First Aid Network, in particular, being used more, with an increase in conversations around suicide and safeguarding issues.
- Connecting colleagues: since moving to using an online platform to host our various discussion groups and events, we've been able to connect with colleagues across the whole Authority, which has made us much more united as an organisation.
- Events for all staff: Prior to the pandemic, we would often invite guest speakers to present at some of our events, but time and geography meant that most of our staff would not get to benefit from their wisdom – now that's not the case, anyone can "tune" in. It has also meant that business units which may previously not have had the budget or resources to host their own wellbeing events can now be involved.

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- Increased attendance at training: Teams has proven a great platform for delivering some of our training. Previously, many members of staff would have had to travel up to our head office in Newcastle to take part in some of our courses, but putting the training online has saved them time and travelling costs, encouraging more people to sign up. Teams also affords colleagues greater anonymity than turning up to a meeting space where people are more readily identifiable.

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- Reaching more staff with wellbeing offers: We have also seen a marked increase in use of our company’s social media, Yammer, hosted through our intranet. This has helped us promote our wellbeing offers and very importantly, has given colleagues the opportunity to join up with each other through shared interests. Our “gaming” group, especially, has proven very popular and led to organisation-wide tournaments of certain computer games!

What challenges did you face?

- With increased workloads staff time was precious and anything we offered to support their wellbeing often had to be in addition to their day jobs. Wellbeing has been highlighted as a priority by the Leadership Team throughout the pandemic. To further promote our support offerings, we made the most of our dedicated Wellbeing and Inclusion Network members to champion these sessions and promote the message in a way that was tailored to departmental pressures.
- The suddenness of lockdown meant that it was initially very difficult to support our

people. We quickly had to put in place measures that were completely reactive to the unprecedented situation, and it was only through trial and error, and listening to the issues that were concerning our staff that we were able to gradually develop wellbeing initiatives to adequately support them.

Is there anything that hasn’t worked so well? What did you learn from the process?

When we first launched our virtual coffee clubs, there was no particular theme or structure to them, so conversation and interest in them soon dried up. In addition to using our Mental Health First Aiders to support conversations, we’ve also learnt to plan the discussion themes better, for instance by using World Mental Health Day as an opportunity to talk more about current anxieties and ways of dealing with them. We’ve also had a drop-in film club, which worked well, and have plans to organise a session around Stoptober, to encourage people to stop smoking, while also considering their mental health.

How will your experiences during the pandemic change what you do when it is over?

The pandemic will definitely lead to much more flexible working in the future, as we now have the technology, systems and mindset for working in different ways. We’re also much more aware of how people are feeling and the experiences they’ve had – some, for instance, have expressed anxiety over returning to the office as lockdown has eased, so home-working for most will continue into 2021, if not longer. The systems and wellbeing offers we brought in during lockdown helped bring people together more, and effectively supported them whether they are working at home or in the office, so there is no reason why these shouldn’t continue.