

Audit, Risk & Assurance Committee

Date	18 January 2021
Report title	Covid 19 and support to promote Staff Wellbeing whilst Remote Working
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Report has been considered by	Julie Nugent, Director of Productivity and Skills Tim Martin, Head of Governance

Recommendation(s) for action or decision:

Audit, Risk & Assurance Committee is recommended to:

- (1) Note the contents of the paper.

1. Purpose

The purpose of this paper is to set out the support WMCA provided to staff during the Covid-19 pandemic to protect their mental health and promote their wellbeing.

2. Background

When the pandemic struck WMCA moved the majority of staff to work from home. All staff with the exception of out-based staff and a very small number of employees (less than 20) whose job necessitates them working from 16 Summer Lane, are now all home based.

The challenge for WMCA has been to switch from our traditional and largely office based employee engagement solutions, to supporting staff and managers in what has been completely uncharted territory. Moving large numbers of staff to remote working in an organised and planned way is difficult enough, but doing this in the midst of a pandemic has been testament to the quality of those enabling services involved.

3. The Support we have provided for WMCA staff

Staying Informed and Feeling Connected

From the start, our priority has been to both inform and support. We knew at the beginning of lockdown that staff needed frequent, consistent and up to date information, so we published regularly updated FAQs and management guidance in line with Government guidance.

We launched a weekly webinar, and it's continued every Wednesday since - a chance for everyone to drop in over lunchtime and hear from their leadership team, outside speakers and experts. Webinars are also recorded and posted on YouTube, so that no one need miss them.

We published a huge range of online resources both aimed at all staff and at parents and carers specifically, to help those staff who were home schooling or supporting someone who was shielding. This was especially important during "lockdown" when many staff were balancing work with caring responsibilities. Our written guidance was accessed hundreds of times by staff over the months which followed, and included 89 downloads of advice on Financial Wellbeing.

We also launched the Virtual Kitchen, in Teams. The Virtual Kitchen is somewhere for staff to "drop in to" during the day to chat to colleagues who they may not work with but might have normally chatted to in the kitchen, in the corridor or the lift. It has helped staff feel less isolated and more connected with each other.

We have done a considerable amount of work to support staff to be productive whilst working from home, and have published a toolkit which helps staff plan their day, including managing their diary, taking regular breaks, and exploiting technology to enable more collaborative working online.

Promoting Good Mental Health and Wellbeing

Our trained Mental Health First Aiders, who were available pre-pandemic have continued to support staff who feel that they need informal but immediate support. We also took the bold step to change our Employee Assistance Provider during lockdown to ensure that staff (and people in their household) can access a trained counsellor, without going through an intermediary like HR or their manager.

We ran a series of webinars on helping to promote good mental health, including mindfulness, resilience, and we promoted Loneliness Awareness Week in June to remind staff of the resources at their disposal during lockdown. 397 staff have accessed the Wellbeing and Covid 19 pages and 202 staff attended our wellbeing workshops. We were delighted to have been awarded a **Thrive at Work award** in the early autumn for the support we have provided to staff around their mental health.

At the start of the pandemic and with gyms and parks closed, conscious that we wanted to encourage staff to take regular exercise, we launched a programme of online exercise classes ranging from yoga to Zumba with a daily class for staff to enjoy during lockdown. And we supplemented this with a series of webinars on topics like diet, nutrition and sleep.

At the beginning of the pandemic we took the step to actively encourage staff to report Covid symptoms and to self-isolate by relaxing our policy around sickness absence triggers, meaning that staff who had the virus would not be penalised for reporting illness in terms of sickness reporting or sick pay.

And as we moved into the colder months, we encouraged staff to take up our offer of a free flu vaccine and 170 staff responded to our call, (up 70 on last year). This has helped staff to stay well and taken pressure off the NHS, as we started to move into a second lockdown.

Finally, as we moved through autumn into winter we published guidance on tax relief and on how to make the most of your money including running webinars where we invited in The Money Advice charity to talk to staff about how to manage their finances. We also publicised our benefits platform, Reward Gateway, with its range of discounts on everyday items including the weekly grocery shop. Registrations on the Gateway improved by over 20% from 338 staff using the programme in December 2019 to 406 in November 2020.

4. How have we measured the Impact we have had

We have measured the impact of our interventions in a number of ways and we have relied on both quantitative and qualitative metrics when evaluating the impact our support has been to staff. The hard data we have used includes staff sickness absence figures, and EAP usage, and we have used the results from staff surveys to gauge how staff are feeling.

Hard Metrics

Sickness absence rates have held, and are currently (November 2020 data) running at 4.86 days per year, which is below our own target of six days, the public sector average of 8.5 days and the private sector average of 5 days per year. In November 2020 we lost 261 days to sickness, 42% to long term sickness and 61% of all long term sickness

was lost to anxiety, stress or depression, however rates of recorded absence due to anxiety, stress or depression have not particularly increased during the pandemic.

Usage of our Employee Assistance Programme (EAP) remains around the national average, there were 11 people who have accessed counselling support between April and November 2020 on 35 different occasions. Many staff understandably use the service more than once, and we cannot differentiate between whether staff are accessing the service or people in their household, as the EAP is open to both.

Staff Feedback

Over the summer we surveyed staff to ask how they were coping working from home. 76% of those staff we surveyed (so this survey excluded out-based employees) responded and 89% of those said that they were able to work from home comfortably, 94% said they felt trusted and empowered whilst 80% reported being more productive which is a strong result as we surveyed staff during the summer break when children were at home with their parents.

57% of respondents said that they would be happy to continue to work remotely permanently whilst 39% said that they would like to work from home some days and the office on other days, just 4% said that they wanted to work from the office again full-time.

In both of the WMCA surveys (we surveyed again in November) the vast majority of staff report that they felt that they met with their line manager and with their team often enough, and that they have felt they could access whatever support they needed quickly and easily.

Ipsos Mori conducted a poll on behalf of Deloitte and surveyed 1300 employees nationwide and found that whilst 55% reported being as or more productive at home, 38% said lockdown had had a negative impact on their wellbeing and that they missed social interaction, and the opportunity to meet up and network.

Our staff also reported missing face to face contact with their team mates and informal social interactions, but they also reported the benefits including a reduction in commuting time, a better work/life balance, and more time with spent with family. These results are borne out by other surveys too.

During the second survey in late November, we surveyed all staff about their experiences of the pandemic. We received a 69% response rate, a little lower than before, but again statistically very high. 55% of respondents in this survey said they were happy or very happy, but 19% said they were sad, and 22% said they had "Covid fatigue".

It is important to remember that when we first surveyed staff it was the summer months and we had recently emerged from a four month lockdown, whilst in November the West Midlands was in Tier Three and living with the restrictions that brings. It is unsurprising then that some colleagues are finding life more challenging.

How have we compared with others?

There is considerable evidence that we have provided a lot more support than many other employers, and that as a result our staff have fared better working remotely during the past nine months. Our experiences have led us to be invited to share our best practice at a number of webinars where we have talked to other employers about the support we have put into place.

We have also had an article published in The MJ magazine in early December, <https://www.themj.co.uk/Creating-good-days-at-work/219299> which set out many of the interventions we have made to support staff, and the head of HR/OD has been interviewed by both Social Care magazine and for an article for the West Midlands Employers quarterly digest which is sent to all their members sharing our good people practice. Both of these articles will appear in the New Year.

5. Staying Covid Secure and Agile Working longer term

A survey of all local councils in England and Wales by the LGA in October revealed that 70% of local authorities are considering increasing working from home post-pandemic, whilst research by Gartner, conducted among HR professionals, suggests that 9 out of 10 HR leaders will allow staff to continue to work from home post-vaccine. 62% of those surveyed said they would still be applying Covid-secure measures in their workplaces as part of their return-to-the-workplace strategy.

At WMCA, we have already done a lot of work already internally to promote more agile working; we have run six webinars for staff to help co-create our new policy and 216 staff attended these workshops. The pandemic has undoubtedly helped us to move this agenda forward and with greater pace but that has been because we have demonstrated our ability to work productively from home, and because this option is popular with many having benefitted from working remotely during 2020.

This together with the work we are doing to review our Assets strategy means that agile working will be firmly embedded in the WMCA, and we will continue to encourage staff to take a flexible approach where they can to where they work. Our adage has been that “**work is an activity, and not somewhere you go**”, and with many staff reporting that they are enjoying the benefits of remote working, we will continue to support staff to do that where they can.

6. Financial Implications

Support in the current financial year is being met from an existing budget earmarked for Staff Wellbeing, this budget is small as many of the initiatives we have introduced have been inexpensive or free. We are committed to both reviewing our offer and how we fund the programme during the continuing pandemic, well beyond March 2021.

7. Legal Implications

There are unlikely to be any workplace grounds to insist that staff who work for WMCA must be vaccinated. The bar is likely to be set very high, with only health care and allied workers being strongly encouraged to accept the vaccine, and as such there is no real legal basis to insist that our employees are vaccinated.

8. Equalities Implications

An equality impact assessment has been conducted on out-based staff on the network, as they are working in a higher occupational risk group than office based staff. The assessment noted the particular vulnerability of staff from a Black or minority ethnic community background to catching and becoming very ill from the virus, however the assessment was satisfied that all staff were receiving good guidance, support and appropriate PPE given the perceived risk to their health and safety.

Like staff working on the network, staff working in 16 Summer Lane, all had individual risk assessments, and no one was permitted to enter the building until they had undertaken a building induction. Access to the building has been strictly controlled and staff who do not have permission to enter have had their access passes “switched off” to prevent casual entry.

Finally we review and report on all sickness data on a monthly basis, and there is no disparity between groups of staff with different protected characteristics (race, gender and disability).