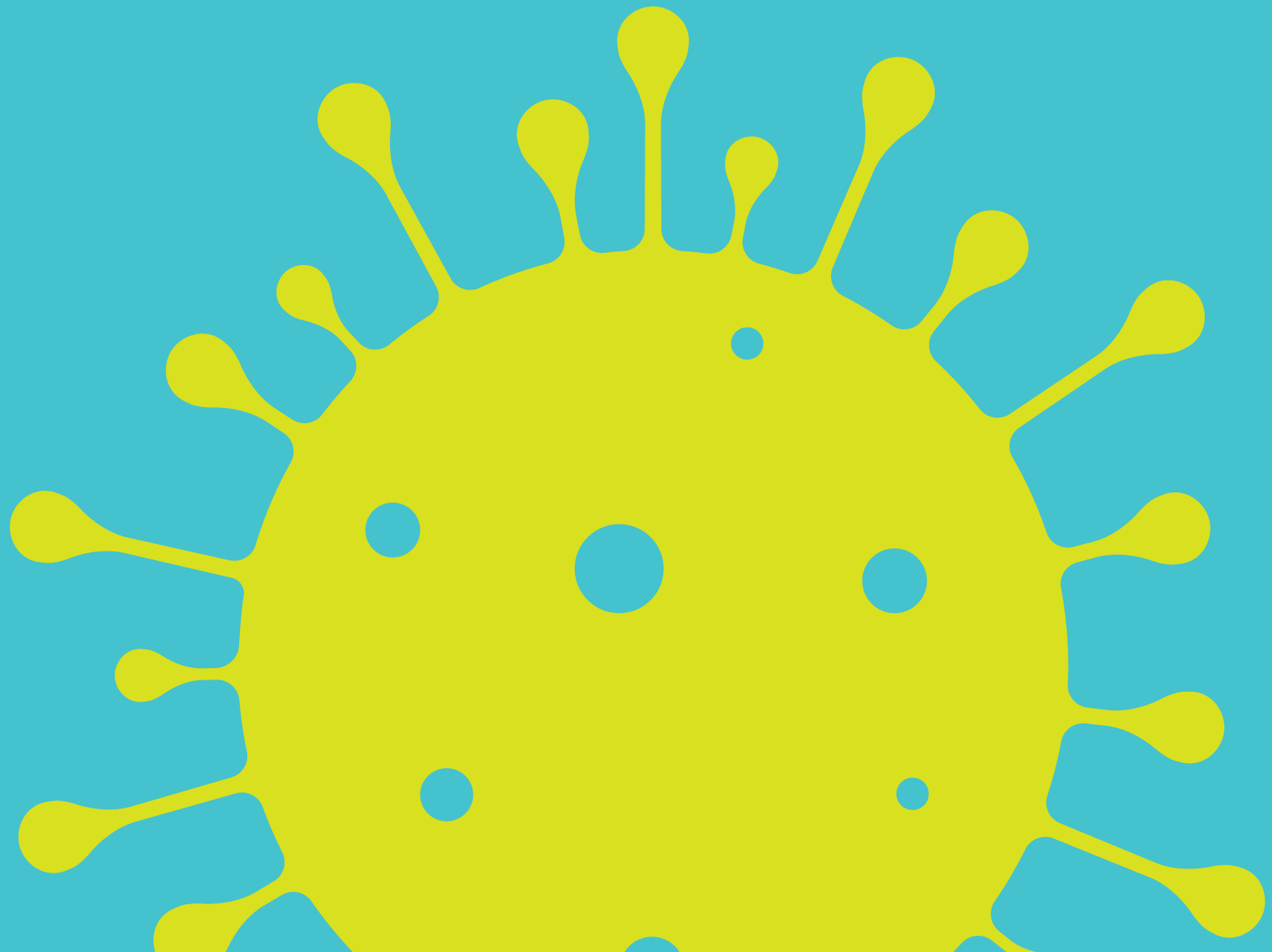




**CHILDREN & YOUNG PEOPLE'S DIRECTORATE
YOUTH SERVICE**

**A Best Practice Guide
for Staff
on a Safe Return to
Restarting Youth Service**



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Introduction

The enclosed guidance paper is to be read in conjunction with Welcoming Youth – a guide to Restarting Youth Services. The guidance is designed to provide support and information for EA Youth Service staff in preparation for return to work in what is being termed the new normal, following the Covid-19 pandemic. The health and wellbeing of our staff is the Education Authority's (EA) highest priority. The present focus is on enabling staff to return to work whilst giving paramountcy to what is best for staff health, safety and wellbeing.

Throughout the pandemic staff have received regular updates from EA. In addition EA has also devised a 5 Step Recovery Plan aligned to the Northern Ireland Executive to help us resume business as usual ensuring this Education Restart takes place in a safe and effective way. This phased approach will adhere to guidance from the Public Health Agency and the Northern Ireland Executive.

The Health and Wellbeing team has also provided support to staff through Health and Wellbeing webinars. The team has articulated that the current situation has affected staff in many different ways. In response they have developed pre-recorded webinars for staff and a second for people managers. Further information is available on: <https://healthwell.eani.org.uk/>

EA will adopt a range of measures to support employees experiencing mental health and wellbeing concerns as a result of COVID-19. Measures will range from supporting employees regain an effective work-life balance, addressing fears about return to work, right through to support for severe mental health conditions.

EA who have a number of staff working in front line response roles, are acting now to ensure that the necessary support is in place. This document will assist line managers to put in place effective mechanisms to support staff making the transition to more offline engagements with young people and colleagues. This document is presented in 5 sections. The first two sections explore the themes of prevention and early intervention. It provides an overview of what staff can do initially to prepare people and the environments for a restarting of Youth Service. The next two sections remind us of key messages regarding staff disclosures, mental health concerns and also how we can support people to return to the workplace. The final section provides an overview of helpful advice for those who manage people.

Within this rapidly changing context, this guidance is intended to be a living document, prepared in line with the NI Executive's Guidance, 'Coronavirus: Our Approach to Decision Making'. At this stage, the main focus is on the most salient actions that will assist staff begin the first steps towards reopening local youth work services and welcome young people back into an important service provision.

Prevention

The Education Authority Youth Service has two current areas of focus. Firstly, supporting the mental health and wellbeing of employees who are continuing to work in essential and key worker roles. It is important to highlight that working under significantly increased pressure may make staff more vulnerable to stress or other mental health conditions. Secondly, providing support to those EA staff who are currently working from home and will start to return to the workplace on a phased and adjusted basis in the weeks and months to come.

While the mental health and wellbeing implications of this will vary from employee to employee the resilience of all EA employees has been challenged by the current situation. EA Youth Service will consider the following:

- Where employees started work for EA Youth Service in the time prior to (or even during) lockdown, they may require a re-induction into the Service to help them feel connected and engaged. This will cover any health and safety changes in line with the Government's COVID-secure workplace guidelines;
- All line managers to be briefed on the potential mental health and wellbeing implications of COVID-19 and their specific roles and responsibilities in relation to supporting staff within EA and their return to work;
- All staff can access information on Inspire Workplaces - Wellbeing at Work. This is a free, confidential and anonymous service for EA staff enabling them to access additional specialist support and information;
- Communicate regularly with EA staff on wellbeing and mental health support. Where possible have conversations which reinforce activities that encourage physical, mental, financial and social wellbeing;
- Provide mental health awareness-raising activities – working towards a culture where it is acceptable to talk about and seek support for poor mental health. Facilitate a briefing session for EA Youth Service people managers on mental health and wellbeing prior to a return to work;
- Encourage staff to protect their own physical and mental health by practicing relaxation and mindfulness, getting out into the fresh air and being active when you can and respecting social distancing advice;
- For staff who continue to work some or all of the time from home, create and adhere to a routine and work plan on a daily basis. Keep home and work as separate as possible. Routines will reinforce this.

The complex nature of wellbeing and mental health means that there is no single solution for supporting return to the workplace. It is now clear that the return will be gradual and phased, with those employees who can continue to undertake a degree of homeworking will continue to do so. Employees may also be working a range of different patterns and hours to allow for effective social distancing. Some activities will remain curtailed. Of course, some employees never left work, continuing to work in essential and key roles under a range of challenging circumstances.

The continuing threat of the virus will also mean that many employees will also be working whilst retaining care or childcare responsibilities and have other pressing personal issues that may have an impact on their mental health. Even if employees are not experiencing poor mental health they may have concerns and fears about return to a physical workplace, including using public transport or staying safe in the work environment.

Early intervention

Where the signs and symptoms of poor mental health and wellbeing are well understood at all levels within an organisation, it can support early intervention and the opportunity to take early action to prevent the situation escalating. Sharing information about mental health can also enable employees to identify signs, especially early signs, in themselves and seek the necessary support.

Some of the typical signs and symptoms of poor or declining mental health and wellbeing may be more difficult to identify in employees working from home or more flexibly. Typical signs include:

- Working long hours / not taking breaks
- Increased sickness absence or lateness
- Mood changes
- Distraction, indecision or confusion
- Withdrawal
- Irritability, anger or aggression
- Uncharacteristic performance issues
- Over-reaction to problems or issues

It is important to note that if one or more of these signs are observed it does not automatically mean that an individual is experiencing poor mental health but it should be a prompt for a manager to have a self-care and wellbeing conversation. Managers must not make assumptions.

Where signs are identified, managers will have a conversation with the worker. This can be as simple as a phone call or online meeting to check in with the individual. A good starting point is for the manager to simply ask someone how they are. Where appropriate share any observations in a non-judgemental manner and check if support is required.

HR can provide simple guidance to managers on structuring these conversations. The sooner such a conversation takes place, the more quickly support can be provided to the individual. Where more specialist advice is required, consider a referral to Occupational Health. In advance of any planned or phased return to work, managers can be proactive rather than wait for signs or for EA employees to express concerns. Managers will maintain contact with their team members to discuss any concerns that they may have or any specific issues pertaining to them (such as health conditions of vulnerable family members).

Effective communication plans detailing how the organisation will be approaching the return to work and prioritising the health and safety of employees will also help to allay concerns and fears, supporting mental wellbeing.

Managing mental health disclosures

Disclosures about mental health conditions may be made to managers or directly to HR. Where they are made to HR, wherever possible HR should encourage the employee to share the information with their manager. Consideration should be given to:

- Referral to Occupational Health or the employee's own GP where specialist advice is required.
- Signposting to organisational support services for mental health and general wellbeing.

Managers who receive a disclosure can follow this simple framework:

- Arrange a time to have a conversation with the employee. Where they are working from home this may need to take place via online meeting – this is preferable to a phone call where possible. Let the employee choose both the time and medium to ensure that there are no interruptions;
- Embed confidentiality in those conversations – reassure employees that their personal information will be treated sensitively. It is fine to ask what information, if any, they wish to be shared with colleagues;
- Encourage people to talk – and to take up mental health and wellbeing support;
- Discuss a plan for support – ideally this should include reasonable adjustments or practical support and a time period for review. Discuss what signs and symptoms or triggers to be aware of and the possible impacts on work. Plans will need to be flexible as mental health conditions may fluctuate;
- Reassure – be clear with employees that no assumptions will be made about their mental health and that EA will provide the necessary support.

Both EA people managers and HR should seek additional advice where required, especially where mental health conditions are particularly complex. In an emergency, if you are seriously concerned about an employee's mental health and believe they may be in immediate danger, call 999.

Supporting the return to the workplace

Return to a workplace will cause some angst for some staff so preparing key messages that will reassure staff is key. Here are some helpful tips line managers should be considering:

- Write a detailed communication plan covering practical issues such as hygiene and approach to maintaining social distancing in order to allay concerns for staff in both office and Youth Unit settings;
- Continue providing employees with ways to connect with colleagues whilst working from home or social distancing. Promoting online communities, virtual social groups and using social media can all help to connect people;
- Offer work life balance support in the form of one to one coaching, guidance or training;
- Offer positive mental health and wellbeing resources for EA employees to access in their own time through external sources;
- Profile the internal network of wellbeing or mental health champions who can support the organisation in EA.

Where employees have experienced or are experiencing poor mental health, or have taken absence from work as a result of a mental health condition, there are some other specific actions that people managers in EA may take to support an eventual return to work:

- Keep in contact with the employee on a regular basis, updating them on any key organisational communications or changes;
- Refer to Occupational Health or signpost other relevant services;
- Consider phased returns to work – even where the employee is working from home and not returning to a physical workplace;
- Conduct a formal return to work meeting, even if this is conducted via an online meeting or phone call. Review workload and adjust where necessary;
- Discuss the support the employee needs to help them to make a successful return and support their mental health – this should include the role of the manager and how they can help;
- Ensure ongoing dialogue and regular contact following the return to work;

Advice for EA People Managers

People managers play a critical role in supporting employee wellbeing and mental health: how people are treated and managed on a day to day basis is central to mental health. Management style is the second main cause of work-related stress.

EA HR professionals will be encouraging managers to undertake the following:

- **Regular check in meetings**

Managers should be checking in with their teams, individually, on a regular basis. Ideally this check in should be “face to face” via a virtual meeting. This will help managers to be alert to signals of poor mental health and wellbeing. Encourage managers to have a wellbeing conversation; provide them with a simple framework or questions that they can ask their teams. HR must ensure that managers have a clear process to follow in the event of a mental health disclosure as a result of a check-in conversation.

- **Looking for signs**

EA Managers have been provided with training via webinar on the potential signs of poor wellbeing and mental health, as well as how to handle a disclosure of a mental health condition. Managers do not need to become mental health experts but they do need to know how to identify and refer. Where managers are concerned about the mental health of their employees, they should signpost to relevant support services. EA HR will provide support to managers on any services that are available, such as the Occupational Health Service.

- **Burn-out**

Managers need to be alert and through regular communication and check-ins managers can identify staff who are stressed, unhappy and even those who are working while unwell. Managers need to encourage staff to take time off and use leave during this period of lockdown.

- **Role modelling**

Managers can encourage employees to take care of their wellbeing and mental health by acting as an effective role model. Managers can share how they are looking after their own wellbeing at this time, encourage their team members to undertake any organisation-provided wellbeing activity and share wellbeing and mental health messages. This will help to create permission for their team to do the same and encourage people to seek help if they need it.

- **Connecting people**

Connecting with others supports good mental health. Managers should continue to take regular opportunities to bring employees together virtually. As well as work-related meetings, encourage social connections through social media or informal online meetings.

- **Review workloads**

There are many reasons in the current situation why employees may be unable to be as productive as they would be under normal circumstances. Managers will be sensitive to this and recognise that expectations may need to be adjusted in the short term. Existing objectives, workloads and deadlines will be adjusted where possible to take into account the changing context.

- **Promote learning**

Learning can boost wellbeing and can provide purpose and structure to the day. Managers will encourage learning opportunities whilst working from home. This is an ideal opportunity to develop new skills to enhance your practice and reinforces our organisations commitment to lifelong learning.

- **EA workforce health and wellbeing**

In the event that a staff member/young person becomes unwell in the workplace with a new, continuous cough, high temperature, loss or a change in their sense of smell or taste they should be sent home and advised to remain at home for 14 days. Workers are only allowed to return to the workplace if it is not reasonably practicable for them to work from home.

- **Risk assessment**

All risks must be assessed by EA staff following meaningful discussion with their line manager. This includes:

- Face to Face and virtual meetings with you
- Indoor work with young people
- Outdoor work with young people
- Travel with young people.

Significant findings must be recorded on the risk assessment and control measures put into place before any contact with young people takes place. Again EA staff will take all reasonable measures to maintain the two metre physical distance protocol in all indoor or outdoor work settings.

- **Safe hygiene practices**

All EA staff will wash their hands more often for a period of 20 seconds on arrival in work, after all breaks, when you eat or handle food and when you blow your nose, sneeze or cough. Hand sanitiser will be made available in all work places to include office areas, kitchen spaces, restrooms and main entrances of all EA buildings. Signs will be on display as a reminder to adhere to the good hygiene practices. EA staff will maintain a clear desk policy and will sanitise desks and all shared equipment before and after break periods.

Final Remarks

In conclusion, a safe return to work for staff is paramount for the Education Authority Youth Service. The guidance paper enclosed covers a range of areas to include:

Communication

EA will continue to offer communication aligned to the NI Executive 5 Step Plan with a phased return to a safe and effective Education Restart.

Staff Wellbeing

Supporting the return to the workplace will be a gradual process taking into account both where employees have or are experiencing poor mental health. The EA have specific actions which people managers may take to support a return to work.

Advice for People Managers

People managers play a critical role in employee wellbeing and mental health support. EA managers will focus upon hosting regular check-in meetings, looking out for the signs of poor mental health and wellbeing, recognising staff burn-out, acting as positive role models within EA teams and striving to continue to connect our people whilst at the same time promoting ongoing staff learning and development.

Workforce Health and Wellbeing

Workforce health and wellbeing is underpinned by the organisations understanding of and commitment to improving the wellbeing of its people. Whilst there is no single solution in what is most certainly a complex area, staff can be reassured that EA will provide support and give paramourncy to the wellbeing of EA staff throughout these unprecedented and challenging times.

Risk Management and Safe Hygiene Practices

This document will provide staff with guidance and support towards the enhancement of a protected environment which will ensure that staff are not in danger and that all risks are minimised. All risks will be assessed and sufficient control measures put into place before contact with colleagues or young people takes place.

This resource is not definitive and any additional concerns must be explored with the line manager to ensure that EA staff remain safe. Find below some additional reading resources which may be helpful as we continue to ensure that the health and wellbeing of staff remains a priority.

Additional Resources for Staff

www.hope-uk.org provides advice on supporting staff wellbeing through Covid 19

www.mentalhealthatwork.org.uk explores mental health at work

diversityq.com outlines how to boost employee wellness

