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Mike Hedges
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Via email - Mike.Hedges@senedd.wales

23 July 2020

Dear Mike,

Re: NRW Staff Health and Wellbeing during Covid19

At our recent meeting with the Committee, Joyce requested a note on our response to Covid in terms of staff wellbeing.

As we discussed in our session, as the Covid-19 crisis started to impact more significantly, our immediate concern was to consider our staff and the effects on their health and wellbeing, as well as ensuring effective business continuity of our prioritised business activities. From the outset we ran our response to Covid-19 along established incident management lines. We set up a Strategic Incident Response and Recovery Group (S-IRRG) reporting into Executive Team, and a Tactical IRRG (T-IRRG) to oversee the different phases. We are now largely through the Response phase, and well into Recovery, with the initial part looking at our medium-term Recovery and also the longer-term Renewal work.

The wellbeing of our staff is at the heart of what we do and will continue to be so. I am immensely proud of the way that NRW staff have responded to the crisis, and how hard they have worked during the lockdown period. We held a staff engagement survey in May, asking how they were coping with the impact of the pandemic, and if the organisation was providing the support that they needed to help us inform our future planning. The report is attached as an Annex for your information.

I pleased to say that around 1350 colleagues responded, and we really appreciated their engagement and honesty in saying how they felt and what we could learn for the future.

This survey will be regularly repeated, and alongside our Staff Engagement Group, provides the opportunity to listen, engage and act on staff views. There were many positives raised within the survey, with people considering that the organisation as a whole, and their colleagues and managers, had been very supportive. Flexible working, lack of commuting, increased time with family and impact on wellbeing were also mentioned as positives.

Exceptions that are still important to consider were childcare, caring roles, and health impacts where they exist, and as you would expect, there was some uncertainty about the continued Covid-19 situation and its impact on working arrangements. In this regard, workload, work-life balance, ergonomics and site working were highlighted. Most staff reported that they would like to continue to work from home or at least more flexibly going forward, so we will consider building that into future ways of working. This continuing feedback will help inform our medium-term stability and renewal work, ensuring that we take these comments on board when planning how we emerge from the pandemic.

From a health and safety perspective, we have been very active in our response to ensure the continued wellbeing of our staff and used both our S-IRRG and T-IRRG, with key leads in place to ensure appropriate procedures and arrangements were developed and followed.

A functional risk assessment for operational works was rapidly prepared, and we published a specific Covid page on our intranet site which includes links to a series of specifically prepared webinars and guidance for management and staff, including advice on hygiene, social distancing, remote working and mental health. An all-staff Covid update is issued weekly with the latest updates on government guidance and any changes to service provisions for the coronavirus period.

We have a free employee assistance programme where staff have access to NRW's employee assistance programme which can provide professional, confidential voluntary counselling and other assistance, and we have trained Mental Health First Aiders to provide support when needed. We also introduced a [#WellbeingHour – one hour of protected work time a week](#) for staff to use to do something which supported their health and wellbeing. I was delighted to see staff using this opportunity to explore their local environment, and we have had many lovely photographs published by staff on our intranet pages.

During the very early stages of the pandemic, our field and operations work was assessed to ensure that necessary activities could do so within government guidelines on social distancing, with health and safety our top priority. Some limited fieldwork has continued throughout Lockdown, mainly on our own Estate or in response to incidents. We are now

working with Welsh Government and others to establish clear principles for extending this to enable us to carry out a wider range of duties. The health and safety of our staff, and those whose land we are working on, is clearly of paramount importance and we have issued guidance on [Safe Working Procedures for operational sites](#), a pre-site checklist, toolbox talk and our fleet contains toolkits to ensure that contact points are kept clean.

As the pandemic has advanced, we have been looking at our estate, especially carparks, trails and visitor centres, and reviewing the WG guidance on access to the outdoors. Working closely with partners with similar sites, local authorities and communities we have now re-opened most of our carparks, walking and bike trails, but will continue to keep our Visitor Centres closed until we have a safe and workable model for their re-opening.

We remain clear that, in line with Welsh Government guidelines, those who can work from home should continue to do so for the foreseeable future, and only those who *must* work from an office or depot will be enabled to do so. Work continues to make our offices and depots safe and accessible to those staff that can't work from home, on a phased basis. Each of our sites has a Senior Responsible Officer to oversee this work, which includes reconfiguring desks and common areas, hand sanitiser station points, and demarcation of floors to ensure social distancing. We have also made physical alterations to our buildings such as installing screens at our reception areas, and installing fire door guards to minimise unnecessary contact whilst still complying with fire regulations, and ensuring adequate signage throughout all areas, covering social distancing guidelines, handwashing and reminding staff of Covid 19 symptoms. Cleaners are on site during the day to make sure that high contact areas are kept clean, each office has a nightly deep clean, and going forward, those essential workers allowed into offices will use a booking system to ensure numbers are kept to an appropriate level to maintain social distancing requirements.

A functional office safety risk assessment has been produced along with safe working guidance for returning to offices. All documentation produced is updated according to any changes in Welsh Government or Public Health Wales guidance. If anyone does show any Covid symptoms, the SRO will shut the office or site down and it will be deep cleaned before any staff can resume working there.

I hope that this provides some assurance that we are doing all that we can to protect the wellbeing of our staff during this difficult time. As we are now largely through Response phase, we have started to undertake the Review of the Response stage. This incident has been like no other, and it is important we reflect and review what went well, and where improvements can be made. This will help inform not only the Recovery stages of our work, but also any future incidents. We may of course have to go back to a Response phase, depending on the continued spread of the virus and WG advice, so we remain focused on the emerging situation, with our Response teams ready and able to respond as necessary.

As I discussed, part of our Recovery work is to develop our longer-term approach to what we are calling 'Renewal' – in other words, how we want the organisation to work in the future. This is looking at what we want to retain from our current ways of working, how these can be embedded, and how we, as an organisation, can lead the Green Recovery with more efficient and low impact operations so that there is a positive legacy from this time of great adversity. I understand that David has written to you about the work he is leading on the Green Recovery, and we will continue to keep you informed as this progresses.

Best wishes,

Clare

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'Clare Pillman', with a horizontal line underneath.

Clare Pillman
Prif Weithredwr, Cyfoeth Naturiol Cymru
Chief Executive, Natural Resources Wales

[NRW : Pulse Survey Wellbeing, Work and Covid-19 final report](#)