



HEALTH AND WELLBEING AT WORK 2021

Case studies



About the CIPD

The CIPD is the professional body for HR and people development. The registered charity champions better work and working lives and has been setting the benchmark for excellence in people and organisation development for more than 100 years. It has more than 150,000 members across the world, provides thought leadership through independent research on the world of work, and offers professional training and accreditation for those working in HR and learning and development.

About the survey

The CIPD's *Health and Wellbeing at Work* survey, in partnership with Simplyhealth, examines the practices organisations have to support people's health at work. It provides people professionals and employers with benchmarking data on important areas such as absence management, wellbeing benefits provision and mental health. The survey for this 2021 edition was conducted online and sent to people professionals and senior HR leaders in the UK. In total, 668 people responded.

About the case studies

As part of our latest Health and Wellbeing at Work Survey, we spoke to two organisations - Co-op and Essex County Council - whose response to the pandemic put employees' needs front and centre of their health and wellbeing agenda. As such, we've featured them as case studies to illustrate the positive changes organisations can make to foster a greater focus on employee health and wellbeing. The tremendous challenges of the past year also present an opportunity for organisations to share experiences and learn from each other to enhance their health and wellbeing practices for the future.

Case studies

Health and wellbeing at work survey 2021

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1 Co-op

Integrating wellbeing across the business

Owned by individual members and other co-ops, the Co-op is a 'different kind of business'. With a head office in Manchester and more than 3,500 other sites across the UK, its operations include legal, insurance and funeral services, as well as around 2,800 retail outlets and logistics networks. The organisation employs more than 63,000 people.

Growth of the wellbeing strategy

The Co-op's health and wellbeing focus has grown from a relatively low base just under three years ago to an expansive and increasingly integrated organisational programme. Initially led by a small pensions team, the advantage of almost a fresh start was that a new wellbeing offering could be based on the needs of the workforce and target support where most needed. The team analysed a range of employee data, including absence rates and patterns and benefits take-up, to identify the main wellbeing issues. This exercise identified mental health, musculoskeletal disorders and lifestyle choices as three priority areas for action.

As a first step, the team reviewed the Co-op's occupational health and employee assistance programme providers to ensure these contracts were fully meeting its needs. It has also stepped up support for financial wellbeing, offering a range of support and services for colleagues through Neyber (now part of Salary Finance).

Other early actions included enhanced communications to promote employee wellbeing; for example, by raising awareness around mental health and producing guidance booklets to ensure colleagues could access the range of support available. In the early days this was achieved 'on a shoestring'. Since then, the Co-op's wellbeing approach has evolved to include a dedicated HR Wellbeing team with a reasonable budget. As Health and Wellbeing Manager Paul Caudwell explains, *'This is because the organisation knows it's the right thing to do.'*

Improving mental health outcomes

In 2019 the Co-op joined together with Samaritans and a group of other retailers, including the [John Lewis Partnership](#), to support the mental health and wellbeing of retail workers. The initiative was inspired by research showing that over half of the 2,000 retail workers surveyed couldn't recognise the signs of someone needing emotional support, while around a quarter wouldn't feel confident approaching an upset colleague.

The collaboration resulted in a 'Wellbeing in Retail' online guide to help individuals look after their own mental health, give advice on how to support others who may be struggling, and signpost where to go for extra help. It includes practical information on mental health as well as activities and resources that retail workers can access whenever and however they need it, all accessible via desktop, phone or tablet. It also has tools such as breathing techniques, the Samaritans' 'listening wheel', a mood barometer, films from mental health experts, and case studies. *'Having a bespoke tool means we can support colleagues who are working in the retail sector, which has some specific characteristics and challenges that can potentially impact on people's mental health,'* says Caudwell.

The role of line managers in supporting health and wellbeing is a continual thread running through every aspect of the Co-op's activity. For example, it has developed a management development programme to ensure line managers are confident and competent to support colleagues' mental health. This facilitated learning intervention covers elements such as how to spot the signs of mental ill health or stress, how to have sensitive conversations, and how and where to refer people to expert sources of support.

Since the onset of COVID-19, the pressure on managers to deliver operationally has inevitably increased, and the Co-op is very aware of the potential impact on their wellbeing. Co-op has increased support for its managers, for example, by introducing access to a helpline available around the clock. *'Our line manager population have really delivered on the operational front, but we are conscious of the cost this could mean to their wellbeing,'* explains Caudwell. *'We are starting to see some early signs of this impact in terms of occupational health demand, and we are prepared for the longer-term effect of the personal and work challenges many have been facing. We will continue to develop support that is led by the data to ensure we prevent ill health as well as support people if they do experience stress or poor mental wellbeing.'*

The pandemic: stepping up wellbeing support

COVID-19 has had a far-reaching impact on the Co-op's operations and its people, including their health and wellbeing. On the positive side, the vast majority of its workforce are 'key workers', and they have developed a sense of pride in the recognition they've received for their work to support the nation's response to the pandemic.

At the other end of the wellbeing spectrum, around 4,000 colleagues work in the Co-op's FuneralCare services; although these colleagues are used to dealing with loss and bereavement, many could be at risk of 'enduring harm' if they feel they can't provide the funeral service families want due to national restrictions. Colleagues working in this very caring profession have gone to great lengths to try and make the funeral service as meaningful as possible, and the organisation is planning a remote remembrance day as a mark of respect for all those who have been lost.

To support colleagues facing new working demands and routines following COVID-19, the organisation initiated an intensive communications campaign. This features many wellbeing strands, such as support for working parents and people working from home, with safety as a core focus. A new newsletter, *Co-op Care*, was launched and is regularly circulated to all 63,000 colleagues; it aims to give simple, practical advice, including self-care top tips, to help individuals meet the wellbeing challenges they are facing, such as bereavement, increased caring demands, and ongoing fear and uncertainty. The newsletter has continued to enjoy high open and read rates, which gives the Co-op confidence it's hitting the right mark with its tone and content.

The Co-op has also launched new products to meet the evolving health and wellbeing needs of people following the pandemic, including 'Smart Health': this offers virtual access to a GP and other services such as nutrition and mental health support, as well as an online health and safety risk assessment tool. This wellbeing support goes beyond the services offered via the employee assistance programme and also gives access to colleagues' families.

Going forward, the Co-op is also planning a virtual 'festival of wellness' in the spring to recognise colleagues' commitment and hard work during COVID-19, with activities planned to boost people's emotional and mental resilience.

Leading on wellbeing

Ensuring that the Co-op's leaders are committed and visibly driving the wellbeing agenda is a core priority for the year ahead. This was reinforced at a recent internal leaders' conference, involving 600 of the organisation's top managers. The Co-op's leadership programme will also embed wellbeing as a strategic and operational priority.

2 Essex County Council

Embedding employee wellbeing as a strategic priority

Essex County Council (ECC) is a large county council, employing more than 7,200 employees who serve a community of 1.4 million residents.

Nurturing a 'healthy, content and resilient workforce' is considered pivotal to achieving ECC's ambition of 'being the best local authority in the country'. The focus is to create a wellbeing culture that is championed across the organisation, with the effect of improving the employment experience of everyone.

In September 2020 the council launched its five-year, prevention-focused Wellbeing Strategy. During its development the council carried out a wellbeing audit and ran focus groups to ensure the strategy reflected the needs and views of its workforce.

Essex County Council defines wellbeing as:

'A sense of organisation, team and individual health, contentment and resilience. In which employees are supported to make informed choices and engage in positive wellbeing behaviours in order to thrive at ECC and beyond.'

A holistic approach

The Wellbeing Strategy focuses on four key pillars of 'integrated wellbeing':

- **Mental wellbeing** – for example, creating a culture of open discussion around stress and mental health and providing better access to support, advice and signposting
- **Physical wellbeing** – for example, creating an environment where people feel empowered and are educated about their physical wellbeing, and establishing programmes for specific conditions
- **Social wellbeing** – for example, building healthy, collaborative, nurturing and supportive relationships, which includes good leadership, to foster a genuine community within ECC
- **Financial wellbeing** – for example, reducing financial stress by helping people to better manage their finances and become more financially secure in areas such as managing debt, budgeting, saving, pensions, investments and living within their means.

To achieve its aims across the four pillars, the council believes it needs to have the right foundations in place. As well as a strong focus on helping to prevent people becoming unwell in the first place, the culture needs to be supportive of wellbeing, and there has to be alignment and fit with wider organisation and HR policies and standards. The council's 'My Wellbeing' brand encourages employees to take personal responsibility for their own wellbeing. Effective leadership and management is another prerequisite.

Committed leaders and competent managers

Ensuring leaders 'walk the talk' around wellbeing is a core part of ECC's approach. Leadership commitment is visible in a number of ways, such as through virtual roadshows and consistent messaging to employees via a regular CEO blog and other director communications. It's also reinforced through leadership training so that leaders understand the links between wellbeing and other core areas such as performance and development:

'There's strong and consistent commitment from our leaders for employee wellbeing, and their support is integral to achieving the aims of our Wellbeing Strategy. This has been even more crucial since the onset of the pandemic and their core messaging to

employees always has a focus on the importance of employee wellbeing. Leaders play a key role in ensuring that wellbeing is integrated into our culture and taken seriously.'

Dr Sabrina Robinson, Wellbeing Lead, Organisation Development and People and Service Transformation Function

Having managers who are confident and capable to support employee wellbeing is integral to the achievement of ECC's strategy. There's a clear expectation on managers to demonstrate the behaviours to act as a 'motivator' for wellbeing in their teams. They are also expected to 'bring to life' the many policies and standards that underpin employee wellbeing. Dr Sabrina Robinson explains: *'Ultimately, we want managers to act as role models and nurture relationships with people so that they understand their wellbeing needs and can support them in the right way. Our aim is compassionate leadership and management, which is embedded in our training and culture.'*

Responding to the pandemic

The onset of COVID-19 has understandably created a range of challenges for employee health and wellbeing at the council. ECC employs a diverse range of people, many in key worker roles, but also a significant number in office-based jobs who have been working full-time from home for many months.

The council acted swiftly to support people's wellbeing and help them adjust to new ways of working; for example, by setting up a wellbeing portal with accessible and practical information and advice. A new taskforce was set up to capture the experience of remote working and digital technology, which helps to steer wellbeing support. It also aims to identify new opportunities to enhance the future experience of those working and living in the county. Encouragingly, ECC's Digital Remote Working Survey showed mainly positive levels of wellbeing due to working from home during lockdown, although it did reveal longer-term limitations around 'social interaction'.

The organisation hosts a monthly wellbeing hour for all staff – a live event showcasing what's been happening on wellbeing and introducing new initiatives with sessions ranging from mindfulness, resilience and 'food to boost your mood'. It has also introduced compassionate bereavement support in response to the grief and loss experienced by some staff, with access to specialist counselling services. There's also a bereavement support group and line managers have access to training and support.

ECC has also introduced a new employee assistance programme that includes an online portal, as well as new occupational health provision to meet evolving wellbeing needs.

Supporting mental health

The council is well aware of the increased risks to people's mental health caused by COVID-19. As well as the immediate effects of factors such as uncertainty, fear and isolation on people, Dr Robinson foresees that many of the mental health impacts of the pandemic will take many months to emerge. This makes it crucial for the council to plan longer term for the mental health support it provides.

Improving the culture to support people's mental health was already firmly on its radar pre-pandemic. Mental health is one of the four key pillars of its Wellbeing Strategy, with a key emphasis on fostering regular and supportive 'check-in' conversations between managers and employees. The focus of performance and coaching conversations has shifted to ensure that wellbeing is the first concern for any discussion.

In an employee survey, around half of respondents said they can talk to colleagues/HR/ their line manager about mental health issues. Therefore, a central aim of the council's approach is to create a culture of open discussion around mental health, so that individuals can have the confidence to speak up and seek support if needed.

The council is targeting renewed rigor on its programme to train and support a network of trained mental health first aiders going forward.

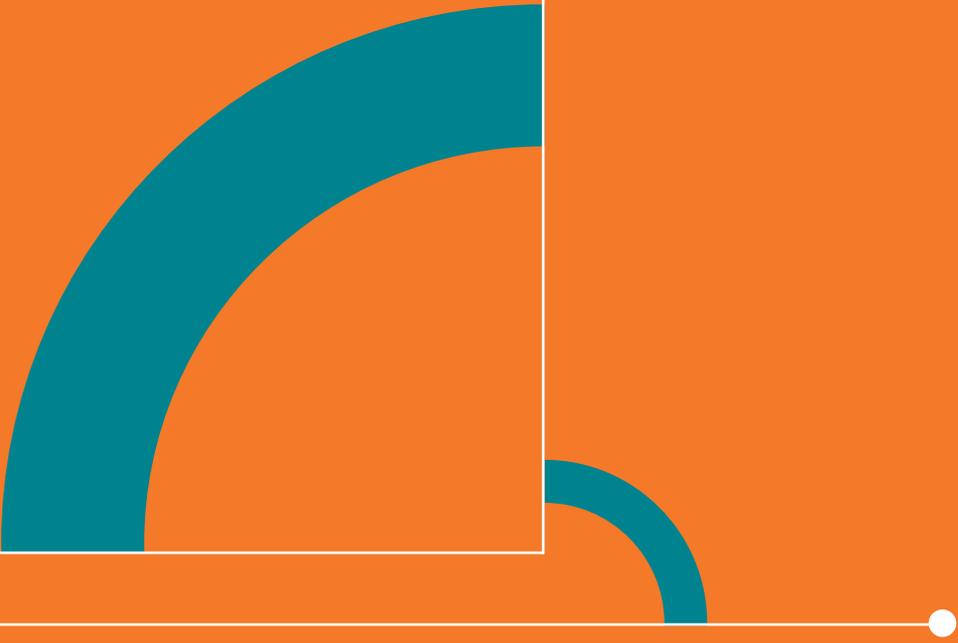
Measuring success

Too few organisations evaluate the impact of their wellbeing programmes, but measuring success is a core element of ECC's strategic approach. Its Wellbeing Strategy describes this as a '*cyclical process of collaboration, reflection, review and improvement*'.

The council uses a range of 'hard' and 'soft' metrics to measure the impact of its actions. 'Soft' outcomes include improved relationships and change management processes as well as enhanced customer satisfaction levels. Hard measures, where it's easier to collect quantitative data, include:

- uptake of wellbeing-related activities
- reduced sickness absence
- employee engagement scores
- recruitment and retention rates
- regular employee surveys and ongoing feedback
- self-reported wellbeing scores and 'mood tests'
- the development of wellbeing impact assessments.

To download the full *Health and Wellbeing at Work* survey, including a range of resources produced in partnership with Simplyhealth, visit the [CIPD website](#).



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