

Manager's Guidance: Keeping in touch and making adjustments (boundaries and working flexibly)

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Introduction

About this document

Life for us all has altered in one way, shape or form and the outbreak will continue to shape how we work, where we work and what we do for some time to come. We want to acknowledge that this is tough for us all – make sure your teams know that you know and we want to support as much as possible.

As managers, we have specific responsibilities for people including communication, agreeing and planning work and staff wellbeing. All of this has to be done very differently whilst we continue to respond to and recover from COVID19.

Remember:

- It is okay not to be okay – everyone’s feelings are valid and that includes us as managers
- There is always support available for us all through our own manager, [People Support Plus+](#) and our Employee Assistance Programme provider – Care First - as well as other wellbeing tools

We recommend you take some time to read through this information (some of which has been published before), refresh your knowledge and awareness and give some thought as to what it means for you, your team and what responsibilities you all have right now.

Communication and keeping in touch

Communicating with your team

Keeping in touch

We are, generally, social beings. Feeling connected to others and having a sense of belonging is important to our wellbeing and in turn and how motivated we are. At the moment, many of us are working in different locations, many away from colleagues; we know from our *Tell Us How You Are Doing* survey that many of us feel disconnected. Research tells us that people want more compassionate connections with managers than formal updates.

Agree a time and day that suits as many as possible and be prepared to flex it if needed – put a reminder/invite into everyone's diaries. If anyone misses it, make sure you can catch them up in a one to one! Use language such as 'we' and 'our' – remain a unit and be inclusive.

Continue to hold your team meetings even if they are remote. Use Skype or Microsoft Teams to keep in touch and keep your team updated with what is happening in work, the latest guidance and to check in with what they are working on – acknowledge effort and what is being achieved under challenging circumstances. Where possible, can team members share objectives/activities so they are in touch? Make sure you also check in on a one to one basis.

For managers with larger teams particularly, you might want to consider encouraging your team members to pair up and check in on each other now and again (or to work together where possible) – this would be beneficial for teams who can't get together (virtually) too often or for colleagues who may feel overwhelmed with informal team get-togethers. This also could be a great idea for you – pair with another manager for peer support and idea sharing

Consider having informal group connection and check-ins; it's quick and easy and a great way of keeping in touch. You may want to have Skype or Teams check-ins that are completely informal – just say hi and see how everyone is doing. We've heard of teams running quizzes, having tours of the room and meeting partners, pets and children! Try not to put pressure on to participate (especially out of hours) but keep an eye on those who may be disengaging.

Keeping in touch - individuals

Communication and engagement

- Our recent Tell Us How You Are Doing survey suggested many colleagues want proactive communication with managers – not just in response to need or updates
- Please have regular one-to-one check ins with your team members. These are so much more than updates on work and feedback – these conversations are essential to you knowing them, knowing how they are and understanding when and if support may be required.
- Don't just talk work – many of our colleagues are carers and parents who are supporting others and for us all, life just isn't as it usually is right now. Make sure they're taking breaks, switching off and getting fresh air whilst keeping to relevant guidance on distancing.
- Make yourselves aware of the [support services and resources](#) available to staff so you can make suggestions/signpost at the right time – it also helps to regularly remind everyone in your team what is available. Here's a sample of what we can access:



Keeping in touch with individuals

Are you okay?

Being present with individuals is essential – please don't be responding to emails or picking up other work while checking in.

We've all asked 'are you okay?' or 'all good?'; closed questions will get closed (yes/no) answers and leading questions may encourage colleagues to go down a particular path. Not everyone will be an open book and share if they're not okay for a number of reasons. Whilst it's not for managers to judge alone if a colleague isn't okay, we can ask more open questions to gauge if support should be offered.

Tell me about your day

What is going well right now?

What could be improved – and let's talk about how we can try and make that happen?

Keeping in touch with individuals

Some indicators not all is okay

We get so much information about people from being with them – body language, physical appearance and other non-verbal cues. Working remotely, or not having such close contact with colleagues, makes it more challenging to notice common signs someone may need support. Where possible, use video calling at least now and again so you can spot subtle signs.

- Working long or late hours – but bear in mind this may be part of flexible arrangements to balance other responsibilities
- Tiredness – appreciating that this may impact people in different ways, does a colleague sound more tired or are they open about struggling to sleep?
- Are they becoming more or less involved, even in team meetings – this could indicate disengagement or the need for more contact (could be feeling isolated)
- Barriers slipping – if not physically in a work environment, are you noticing ‘filters’ dropping/thinning – this could be in the language used, shows of frustration etc

This is by no means exhaustive and we emphasise again that to identify changes in your colleagues, you need to know them – keep in touch!

Communicating with your team

Tips for managers

- We remain responsible for communicating to and with teams, even though we may be working in different places and on different things
- We know many colleagues are feeling isolated and disconnected – even if there doesn't seem to be a reason to check in or a 'list' to go through, call and say hi
- Make sure you send on daily briefs to staff without easy access to emails, or highlight articles they may want to read
- Use the new, weekly manager's briefing to cascade information to teams, summarise important updates and to draw attention to key dates
- Remember – there was a before time and there will be an after: we'll come back together as teams so relationship maintenance and staying connected will help that happen

Working differently to support personal circumstances

Our reality

Competing commitments

Most of us will be managing disruption to our home or personal lives as well as work lives – perhaps there seems to be little boundary between the two right now. As much as being able to work flexibly might have been important to us (and essential to the organisation to delivery our strategic aims), we probably didn't expect it to land this quickly and in this way.

Colleagues may be managing direct care for the following and/or be navigating changes to normal care provision (e.g. childcare)



Care for
children



Care for
vulnerable
adults at
home



Care for
family/
neighbours
isolating

Working differently

Being flexible and output-focussed

Acknowledging many colleagues are working at home but with additional responsibilities for childcare/schooling and/or care for vulnerable adults, we need all managers to offer as much flexibility as possible. The most important thing we can all do is be open and have dialogue about what life is like right now and how we think we can balance all responsibilities, but here are some tips:

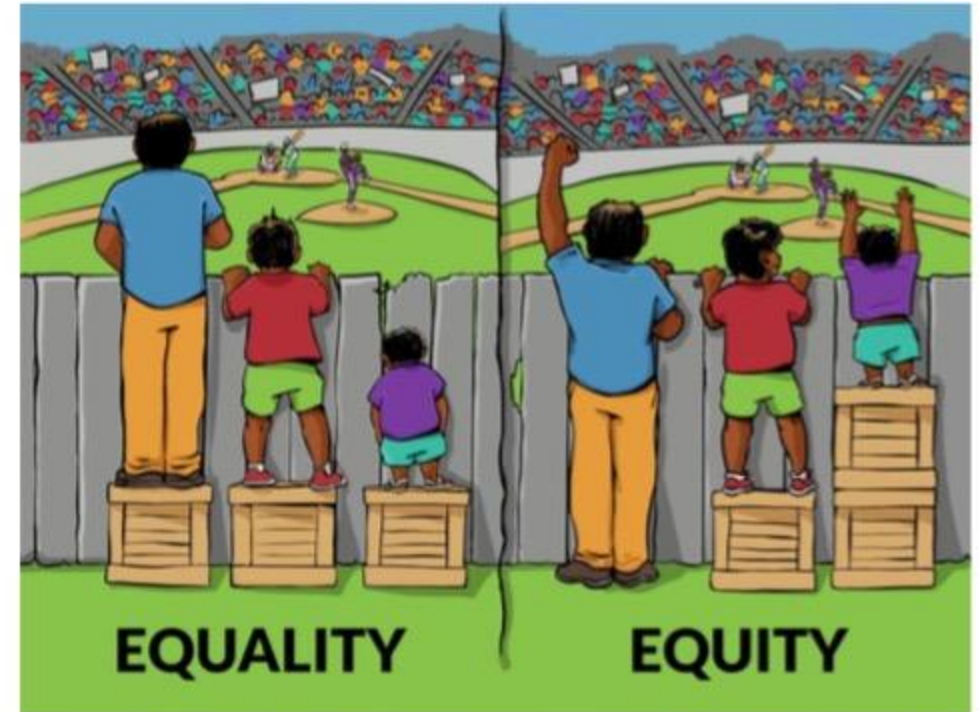
- Focus on **output rather than hours worked**; it should be more important that we can do what is agreed and less about exact hours put in
- Have real dialogue – no pre-conceived ideas of what can or can't be done and why
- Be solutions-focussed – try to focus less on what can't be done, but consider what can be done and what might need to change to support colleagues
- Be open to ideas or really different ways and times of working – would starting earlier and finishing earlier work? Would starting later and working later work? Could we swap out a weekday for a day on the weekend if care is easier to manage then? Would split 'shifts' work? Do we need to alter responsibilities to facilitate this? Check out the stories some colleagues have shared about how they're balancing responsibilities – no one is alone in this.

Working together, with trust and respect

Being fair and equitable

We know managing people is sometimes challenges – particularly when some team members perceive they're being treated less favourably than others. This can put a real strain on the team itself, relationships, productivity and you as a manager, and there may be the temptation to just have one 'rule' for all.

That can't happen; we are different with different needs at the best of times. We ask all managers make decisions that balance the needs of individuals with the needs of teams and the work itself; and we ask team members be understanding to the circumstances everyone is working in.



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Agreeing expectations

Temporary changes to ways of working

- The advice and guidance we're providing is based on what we know at the time, but the situation is fluid and matters are changing all of the time. At time of press, there are no confirmed plans for schools returning in September and the availability of childcare through the summer holidays differs by provider, by local authority and by personal circumstances (bubbles, other working parents, shielding grandparents etc).
- Any changes to working patterns do not have to be requested using the usual forms but managers and staff are encouraged to keep a short note of what was agreed, when it'll be reviewed etc. Changes are considered temporary and do not constitute a change to contract.
- If you as managers are concerned about being able to deliver the work with colleagues needing to work differently, speak to your own manager/business lead. In order to manage work and make the changes needed to support colleagues, we need to engage them where needed.

Creating a positive, balanced environment

Creating the right conditions

Working together, with trust and respect, to make a difference

We cannot emphasise enough that the most important way to support staff is to know staff; keep in touch, understand their pressures and circumstances and work together to find solutions and ways forward. We can do the following for all staff:

Keep meetings to a minimum and as focussed/short as possible

Commit to not having meetings over a lunch period if feasible and agreeable – we need proper breaks away from screens

Where possible, pair colleagues up on work so they can support each other

Please make sure you check in one to one – asking if everyone is okay in a team setting will not get you the information you need or provide staff with the support they need

Be present in your catch ups and listen/act with compassion

Be consistent: if we're adjusting work patterns, consider moving deadlines or adjusting expectations in line with what colleagues can do

Creating the right conditions

Working together, with trust and respect, to make a difference

Whilst there is a lot we can and should do as managers/leaders to support staff, everyone does have a responsibility to take good care of themselves and those around them. All colleagues should:

- Engage openly with managers about their reality and what support would help
- Come with solutions as well as issues – no one knows your circumstances as much as you
- Take annual leave – we need time out
- Focus on what can be done – is there a different type of work that could be undertaken that would support flexible working?
- Remember flexibility should be mutual – where we are supported to balance other responsibilities during the normal working day, we may need to look at a piece of work later in the day if urgent (this does not mean working hours 'back' over evenings and weekends)



And finally...

Remember what makes us us

When we are at our best, we work together. We talk, we explore options, we resolve.

We do it with trust and respect for people and circumstances and we understand not everyone's experience is the same.

And we make a difference to the public in Wales and our people: how we support colleagues by listening, trusting, being flexible will impact how engaged and connected to us they are and, importantly, their own wellbeing.

Use [People Support Plus](#) for additional advice and guidance

