

## RETURNING TO WORK – ARE WE READY?

As restrictions start to relax everyone's thoughts are focussed on supporting the 'return to work', albeit not yet 'normal' work, for staff at all levels in organisations.

Having coached more than 40 leaders at all levels in different agencies during the pandemic, I am aware of how differently people have responded to the circumstances of home working and the juggling of responsibilities for family.

I know folks who have split parenting duties to a timetable, single parents who have had to literally manage everything themselves, others who either moved in with older relatives to provide care and support, or moved vulnerable people into their own already overcrowded home, and partners who have been physically separated in different parts of the country and even different countries since lockdown. Those in identified vulnerable groups have been in self-isolation to limit their vulnerability to Covid 19.

Adaptation to home working has varied from those who still feel they can only effectively work in the office to those who are so productive at home they are reluctant to go back to working in an office setting. Everyone has had to become more technically proficient and the pandemic has been a game changer for service delivery, with many agencies offering remote assessments, remote interviews and moving increasingly to paperless systems where everyone can access shared servers.

There are those who have loved the relative isolation and those who have struggled to motivate themselves and to maintain their mood, in the absence of being able to physically meet family friends and colleagues.

Generally though, there is a sense that the situation for most people is getting a bit frayed and there are genuine signs of fatigue.

While most of us welcome the potential for getting back to more office based or centre based work, this will not all be plain sailing. In fact, returning is likely to engender a similarly varied range of responses and we as leaders have to be sensitive and non-judgmental in our approaches.

The goal is to gradually increase service provision with more and more direct contact with vulnerable clients, while at the same time being sensitive to the needs of staff and being fair and equitable in decision making. Here are some guiding principles:-

- Decide what is needed to deliver an effective service, based on identified risks in both the short and longer term. Keep developments under review.
- Be flexible in ways of achieving service delivery – just as we have been in recent weeks
- Listen to understand anxieties and fears
- Allow people to come up with plans that suit both their work and their personal circumstances
- Balance individual needs with team needs so everyone feels they are being treated fairly

Strong focussed leadership at all levels in organisation is key to managing our continually changing circumstances. Let's review the benefits and challenges as we make the transition.

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