# People & TalentGuidance

## Managing Remote Teams – Employee Wellbeing

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# Introduction

There is an appreciation that for those working at home circumstances may have changed. Many colleagues are also still continuing to juggle work and life priorities, while others are embracing our new virtual ways of working.

It is recognised that it is not only the practical and physical elements that are impacted by working at home, but also the social interactions and the wellbeing of our remote teams.

Employees who have a better work-life balance often have a greater sense of responsibility, ownership and control of their working life. Effective service provision can be enhanced by employees being able to work in more flexible ways to better balance home and work life.

# Scope

This guidance applies to all employees of Cumbria Fire & Rescue Service for whom there is no specific procedure laid down in national or local conditions of service.

Please find below some useful information, hints and tips collated to help you support your remote teams.

You could openly discuss these tips with your team, this will help you discover what would truly support them in addition to what you already do.

# Allow distractions to happen…

Distractions may decrease productivity temporarily, but they also provide downtime to help team members recharge and remain highly motivated. At the end of the day, focus on the output, not the input; try not to concentrate on the hours worked and encourage your team to do the same. Instead think about what your expectations are and avoid worrying about elements that are out of your control, concentrate more on setting clear expectations and the goals / results that are being achieved.

# Make the effort to stay in touch with your remote workers

Regular communication is important, whether that’s organising team calls or video conferencing, or just taking the time to call each member individually. Make it habit to build in time for social conversations and small talk within the team. Reach out a few times per week. Schedule it in your calendar. A brief call can go a long way in keeping motivation up and making them feel part of the team.

# Support the health and wellbeing of your team

Major changes in work and home life (such as balancing work and parenting/carer responsibilities) can have a big impact on health & wellbeing - managers are often best placed to spot this and provide help.

Below is a link to the ‘[Employee Information – Health and Wellbeing](https://www.cumbria.gov.uk/employeeinformation/wellbeing.asp)’ pages on the intranet. These pages contain a vast amount of useful information to signpost managers and employees to any support they may need.

This includes contact details for HR and Occupational Health.

# Celebrate achievements

Highlight the little wins more often. It’s difficult to build rapport with remote team members, and, as such, praise and recognition from managers is even more important.

Seek alternative methods for recognising the work of remote workers. For example, set aside a few minutes on your next team call to talk about their success. Even a simple instant message thanking them for their great work can make a difference. Just be sure to be clear and unambiguous with your message, as you can’t rely on the subtleties that can come from communicating with someone in person.

One example of this would be to use the acronym SMART Specific Mindful Appropriate Relevant and Timely.

# Encourage Feedback

Communicating within an office setting is typically effortless. You can talk to a colleague or to your line manager sitting at your desk without lifting a finger. In contrast, remote workers have to purposefully communicate using the tools they have available. And they can’t rely on body language to determine whether it’s appropriate to provide their input.

Encouraging feedback, especially in a virtual world can be quite a challenge. Essentially the willingness to provide feedback, equates to a high level of shared trust and understanding. As a manager an effective way of shaping this is leading by example. Here are some tips:

1. Ask for feedback with specific questions

Using specific questions can be really helpful when trying to encourage feedback. It creates a safe space in which people know what you’re wanting to hear, they’re not afraid of crossing the invisible line and offending you by delivering the kitchen sink. “I’d really appreciate your feedback on my presentation. What could I do better?” Becomes a series of specific questions:

* ‘What could I do to improve my personal presentation style?’

(For example, pace of voice and questioning)

* ‘Can you help me understand how I can make the slides more accessible to others?’
* ‘I really want to make sure the key points of my presentation are clear. What 3 key points do you think other would take away? What questions do you think they would have at the end?’

Note, the second and third questions use the perspective of ‘others’ – this is a great way to create a safe space where the focus of the feedback isn’t based on the views or opinions of the person giving it.

1. Listen to the feedback with the intent to understand rather than respond

Don’t interrupt when someone gives you feedback. Just listen, focus on understanding what the person is telling you, and try to learn something from it.

When they’re finished speaking, check for understanding. You can say something like, ‘So what I hear you saying is…’ Repeat back to them the issues they have raised, as you understand them. Ask, ‘Do I have that right?’ Make sure you truly understand their point of view.

It’s imperative not to react defensively to the feedback. Keep your mindset on understanding and learning the person’s point of view, regardless of how you feel about it. Resist the urge to interrupt with your point of view.

This makes it important to over-communicate that you’re open to feedback. So that when employees are in any doubt about whether they should ask that question or give their input, the answer is always, yes.

# Be Flexible

Be flexible and compassionate; keep an open communication dialogue going so you can adapt to this rapidly changing situation together. Consider creative solutions where possible, such as supporting your staff to divide tasks up into manageable chunks according to priority and the level of concentration required and working at different times of the day, for example.

Below are some coaching questions which may help you to support creative conversations:

* How are you adding spaciousness to your days?
* What did you do last week to feel more like yourself?
* What feels important today?
* What would you like more time for?
* What digital boundaries are you creating/do you need to create for yourself?
* What has been your most meaningful experience of digital connection?
* How do you deal with digital exhaustion?
* What’s on your mind right now?
* What do you want to have happen?

# Add some light heartedness

Although this is work, to be able to build your team and motivate them, you need to add a bit of colour to an otherwise dull canvas. When remote team members know each other better, it breaks down all kinds of barriers and builds more respect and willingness to help each other.

Think about adding some ice breakers to team meetings to enable the team to get to know each other, this will work especially well with new starters and newly formed teams. Colleagues within Learning and Skills have provided the following ideas:

* Find an object that was gifted to you. Share your connection with that person and how receiving the gift made you feel.
* Share an object that is meaningful to you. What makes it special?
* Think of one of your favourite stories and share that with the group, it could be something that has happened to you personally, a traditional tale “Once upon a time…, a religious story or even a story from your favourite film.

# Hints and tips

A lot of remote workers feel like they constantly need to be ‘visible’ in their digital workspaces to ‘prove’ that they are working. They feel they need to be present for every discussion in chat or can’t let a notification go unanswered for more than a few minutes

As an employer it’s important to balance keeping productivity up alongside encouraging people to keep taking breaks. When working from home it can be very easy to feel tempted to stay at your laptop throughout your lunch or extend the end of the day by a few hours. Be sure to encourage staff to work their contracted hours and don’t stretch their working day into home life simply because they’re working from home. Lead by example, be a role model for positive work/life balance and encourage your team to do so too. As with everything, balance is key.

# Remote Meetings

* Try to ensure meeting requests are not back to back.
* Allow time in the diary for breaks, this will also help stop back to back meetings.
* Meetings should be set as a standard 45 minutes or less and no longer than 1.5 hours
* Where possible follow a set agenda and try to be more direct and specific than normal.
* Make your team aware that there is an acceptance that if volume is increasing beyond capacity, they have the autonomy to say no.
* Encourage teams to take a break for lunch and promote regular exercise.

# Wellbeing

* Lead by example and arrange regular catch up time with colleagues, promote this within the team.
* Remind the team regularly to take their annual leave
* Organise virtual coffee breaks for all of the team or small groups of the team
* Promote walks and walking meetings with colleagues. Remember that Microsoft teams can be used on council devices, suggest virtual meetings are held in the fresh air.
* Be flexible with working patterns to allow better work life balance. For example, exercising during the day in the winter months to make the most of the day light or finishing earlier in the summer to enjoy the lighter evenings.
* Use Microsoft Team for group chat/messages, look at creating a team channel.
* Consider setting up a Buddy system, pair each team member together with a colleague and request that they check in on each other’s wellbeing, chat and look out for one another.