Wellness Action Plans (WAP) – Guide for Line Managers

Supporting the health and wellbeing of your team members

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1.   Introduction

This guidance is based on Mind, the mental health charity's Wellness Action Plans to support mental health within the workplace. However, the approaches within can be used to support all employees who have ongoing health and wellbeing concerns, whatever the reason, including other types of disabilities.

East Lothian Council aims to support our employees to feel well, healthy and happy at work and to that end has adapted the approach with a view to supporting all employees who are living with ill health or mental health and wellbeing challenges, short, medium or long term.

2.   Who is this guide for?

This guide is designed to be a helpful starting point as a line manager towards supporting your team members with their health and wellbeing at work. You might be:

- managing someone who is experiencing a ill-health or mental health problem and want to know more about how you can support them

- interested in using the WAP with staff who are currently well, as a proactive tool to promote and maintain their physical and mental health at work

- HR professionals looking to promote this guide to managers, to help them support the physical and mental wellbeing of their teams.

3.   What is a Wellness Action Plan (WAP) and how does it benefit line managers?

Given the high levels of stress and ill health and poor mental health we are seeing in the workplace, there is a growing demand for innovative and proactive ways of managing our health at work.

The WAP is inspired by Mary Ellen Copeland's Wellness Recovery Action Plan® (WRAP®): an evidence-based system used worldwide by people to manage their mental health.

WAP's are a personalised, practical tool we can all use – whether we have a mental health problem or not – to help us identify what keeps us well at work, what causes us to become unwell and the support we would like to receive from our manager to boost our wellbeing or support us through a recovery.

We all have mental health just as we all have physical health and this WAP has been designed to support us all to manage our mental health, wherever we are on the spectrum.

As a manager, encouraging your team to draw up a WAP gives them ownership of the practical steps needed to help them stay well at work or manage a mental health problem. It also opens up a dialogue between you and your team member, to help you better understand their needs and experiences and therefore better support their wellbeing. This in turn can lead to greater productivity, better performance and increased job satisfaction.

Employers who choose to introduce new starters to the WAP during the induction process are able to demonstrate their commitment to staff wellbeing from the very beginning, sending out a clear message that proactive management of the wellbeing of their workforce matters.

WAPs are also particularly helpful during the return to work process, when someone has been off work due to a mental health problem, as they provide a structure for conversations around what support will help and what reasonable adjustments might be useful to consider.

4.   How will the WAP benefit my team members?

By giving your team an opportunity to draw up a WAP, they will be able to plan in advance and gain an awareness of what works and what doesn't work for them. A WAP can help employees to develop approaches to support their health and wellbeing, leading to a reduced likelihood of problems such as work-related stress.

If your team member does experience a health problem, you will then both have an idea of the tailored support that could help, or at the least a tool to use in starting that conversation.

By regularly reviewing the agreed, practical steps in the WAP, you can support your team member to adapt it to reflect their experiences or new approaches they find helpful. By allowing the individual to take ownership of the process and of the WAP itself, you will be empowering them to feel more in control.

5.   What should a Wellness Action Plan (WAP) cover?

✓ approaches the individual can adopt to support their health and wellbeing

✓ early warning signs of poor health to look out for

✓ any workplace triggers for poor health or stress

✓ potential impact of poor health on performance, if any

✓ what support they need from you as their manager

✓ actions and positive steps you will both take if they are experiencing stress or poor health

✓ an agreed time to review the WAP and any support measures which are in place

> **The WAP is not legally binding, but is intended as an agreement between you and your team member in order to promote their wellbeing or address any existing wellbeing and/or mental health needs, including any adjustments they may wish to discuss.**

6.   Supporting your team members to develop a WAP

As a manager, you will be a key support in encouraging your team members to develop their WAP. You could start by:

- giving your team member a copy of our Guide for Employees: Wellness Action Plans
- asking your team member to have a go at completing the WAP
- reassuring your team member that the discussions confidential and the arrangements voluntary
- scheduling some time to discuss their WAP with you and finalise it based on these discussions
- confirming the aim of the WAP process is ensure the right support is in place for the employee

Ask the person you are supporting to think about:

- how they act when they are feeling well and flourishing at work

- what a work environment that promotes good health and wellbeing looks like for them
- what helps maintain their health and wellbeing
- what coping strategies they already use for dealing with poor health and wellbeing and why these have been effective
- how they've addressed similar challenges in the past
- what hasn't worked for them in the past and why they think this might be

Remember

- often, we are all experts on our own health and the support or adjustments we may need. The WAP provides the space and structure to consider this in a safe confidential way.
- the plan needs to include all the things that are important to the individual's health and wellbeing, from their triggers and signs of poor health, to what action to take and what support they need when or if they become unwell.

Once the WAP has been drawn up, factor in some time during your catch-ups or 1-to-1's to review the WAP and make any necessary changes. The WAP is most effective when treated as a live, flexible document, so a regular 'feedback loop' with your team member to assess what is and isn't working is an important part of the process.

The WAP should be written and owned by the individual, expressing their own personal choices, their personal experience and their needs. Your role as manager is to discuss their plan with them and provide support, including guidance on what is possible for any reasonable adjustments. Try to avoid influencing them by offering your own advice or suggestions.

Confidentiality

The WAP should be held confidentially between manager and employee, with the employee being made fully aware of how the information will be used, and therefore only providing information that they are happy to share. If the employee is filling out a WAP as a result of being unwell, you may ask whether they would consent for a copy of it to be held with HR along with any other information about their wellbeing, such as an Occupational Health report or a Return to Work plan.

It is helpful to encourage your team member to seek advice from a health professional involved in their care, such as a GP or Occupational Health expert, on what they might wish to include in their WAP.

In order to fulfil your duty of care to keep your staff members safe at work, you will be obliged to break confidentiality if they are experiencing a crisis. If you become aware that someone is at serious risk of harm, whether this is the employee or someone else, you should call the emergency services.

7.   Supporting staff wellbeing

The WAP is not only a tool to support staff when they are experiencing problems - it also helps identify how an individual's wellbeing can be proactively improved. Take a look at our tips below on how you can support staff wellbeing.

Your managerial style

- How people are treated and managed on a day-to-day basis is central to their health and wellbeing and to how motivated and engaged they feel, so it is important to reflect on your managerial style and tailor it to suit the needs of each team member and task. A good approach is to proactively ask your staff what support they need from you.
- Develop an atmosphere of trust by regularly asking for feedback about the support you provide.
- Weave wellbeing into your catch-ups with staff, ensuring that you regularly ask how they are and how well they feel their work is going.
- Encourage positive relationships with colleagues and provide mediation where necessary.
- Be supportive, approachable and responsive, ensuring that you are available for regular work-related conversations and increasing the frequency of supervision or catch-up time with the team member if required.
- Proactively support staff to monitor their workload and encourage healthy working hours and a positive work/life balance.
- Provide your team with meaningful work and opportunities for personal development and growth.
- Make sure that deadlines are reasonable, that work is clearly defined and well matched to each employee's abilities and that people understand their role in the bigger picture.

> **Your role and behaviour as a manager is key to the health and wellbeing of your team members. Being open to receiving feedback on your management and communication style and being aware of how you come across to others is a crucial part of being an effective manager, and creating healthy and productive teams.**

8.   Supporting someone with a health and wellbeing problem at work

If someone in your organisation or team discloses their health problem to you, you may wish to read up on it a little so that you have a basic understanding of what they might be experiencing.

For information on a wide range of mental health conditions, have a look at have a look at information on Mind's website about types of mental health conditions.

Do remember though that it is not the manager's role to provide medical advice, and a specific condition is often experienced very differently by different people, so try not to make assumptions.

Focus on what you as a manager can do to support the individual, rather than offering advice. We've listed some tips below:

- Encourage staff to be open about problems they are experiencing.
- Ensure confidentiality and provide an appropriate place for confidential conversations.
- When talking about health and wellbeing, listen, be respectful and do not make assumptions.
- Be positive – focus on what employees can do, rather than what they can't, providing training, mentoring or coaching if there are skills gaps.
- Work together and involve people in finding solutions as much as possible.
- Support staff to develop personal resilience and coping strategies.
- Involve staff in dialogue and decision-making and remember that people are often the expert when it comes to identifying the support or adjustment they need and how to manage their triggers for poor health and wellbeing.
- Recognise and praise good work and commitment, providing regular opportunities to discuss, review and reflect on positive achievements – this helps to build positive self-esteem and develop skills to better manage triggers for poor health and wellbeing.
- Encourage staff to seek further advice and support (for example from buddying or mentoring schemes), and seek advice and support yourself. If your organisation has a mentoring scheme, make the most of it. Or if it doesn't, consider setting one up.
- If you need help thinking about how to start a conversation about mental health with a member of staff, have a look here.

> **Would a WAP be useful for your whole team? Perhaps other managers in your organisation would benefit from your team's experience with WAPs. Spread the word!**

9. Supporting your own wellbeing

Don't forget that your wellbeing as a manager is just as important as that of your team.

Developing a WAP of your own with your manager can be a helpful way of keeping track of what keeps you well and ensuring you're looking after your own needs too. For tips on how to promote your own wellbeing and proactively support your health and wellbeing at work have a look at 5 ways to wellbeing and How to be mentally health at work.

10.   WAPs in action

Often the necessary change is one of attitude, expectations or communication rather than a major or costly change.

As a manager, be as creative as possible when thinking about how to address the specific needs of your staff. The agreed steps in these case studies were effective because they explored their individual needs and put in place practical, easy to implement approaches or adjustments based on these needs.

Pete:

I don't have a mental health problem but I think wellbeing and mental health shouldn't be something we only talk about when we get ill so, when my manager in my new job told me about the WAP and suggested I fill one in, I thought it would be a good opportunity to think about what makes me stressed at work and what helps me to perform well and be productive.

As part of my WAP, I identified that a few things cause me stress – for example, not being kept informed of developments in the organisation that could affect me, a chaotic office environment, and people not being supportive or approachable. Having set these out, I then considered ways they could be alleviated, such as scheduling regular catch ups with my manager to get updates on organisational developments, making sure I factored in time to get away from my desk and out of the office and ensuring that my manager and I had time to reflect on what was working and what wasn't working.

My team seemed to be quite open about wellbeing so I chose to share my WAP not only with my manager but with the team too, so that colleagues were aware of any triggers or preferences I have in terms of how I work and the type of environment that keeps me well.

Being given the opportunity to fill out a WAP when I was a new starter made me realise how valued my health and wellbeing were by my manager and organisation as a whole and gave me confidence, especially in dealing with potentially difficult situations.

Rehana

I have a diagnosis of bipolar disorder and post-traumatic stress disorder, which has led to a period of sickness absence from my job as teacher, while I was in hospital. I felt work were being pretty good with me. They didn't always fully understand but they did try.

Under the 'reasonable adjustments' clause in the Equality Act, my previous employer put in place several things to help me to return to and stay in work. This included changes to my working hours so I could start and finish early, and work additional days in the school holidays.

We also made changes to my role so I could teach fewer regular lessons, which was supplemented with more in-depth work and computer development at my desk, with small groups of pupils.

My manager also arranged a personal mentor that I met with every couple of weeks to check informally on my health and monitor my workload and support needs, and gave me the option to take 'time out' in the staff room or sick room if I needed to rest between lessons. I found that these adjustments all helped me to manage my condition, stay well and continue to perform well in my job.

Syed

I manage a team of five in a fast-paced organisation and use WAPs with my whole team. One of them has a diagnosed mental health problem so the WAP was particularly helpful in the initial stages of our working relationship as a way of structuring our conversation about mental health and making me feel more confident in broaching the topic with her.

For the rest of my team, we use WAPs to identify early warning signs that they might be struggling with stress or other incidences of poor mental health. Using a WAP with the whole team has emphasised to me how different people's needs are. For example, when it comes to what action to take when I spot the signs that someone might be struggling, one team member asks that I arrange for us to pop out for a coffee to discuss, whilst another asks that I email her rather than approach her directly so that she has the opportunity to decide what she wants to share with me on her own terms.

All in all, I've found WAPs to be a simple and easy way of keeping track of what keeps my staff well and ensuring I'm doing what I can as a manager to support their mental health and in turn their productivity.

11.   Reasonable adjustments and the Equality Act 2010

As a result of completing a WAP, you might decide along with your team member that some reasonable adjustments are needed.

A reasonable adjustment is an alteration that an employer makes which enables an employee to continue with their duties without being at a disadvantage compared to others.

Under the Equality Act 2010, there is a legal duty on employers to make these reasonable adjustments for employees with a disability. Whether a health problem is defined as a disability or not, employers are encouraged to make adjustments for staff who are experiencing health and health problems.

The types of reasonable adjustments commonly made for people experiencing a health problem depends on the symptoms being experienced by the individual, and should be tailored to suit them. It also depends on the organisation's resources, so it's important that managers are aware of what their organisation is able to provide and what is defined as 'reasonable' when entering into a conversation. Being clear on this will help manage expectations and guide decision-making.

For more information have a look at the government's Reasonable adjustments for disabled workers guidance, Rethink Mental Illness's 'What's reasonable at work?' guide and the Acas website, where you can find details of their equality and diversity advisory service.

Adjustments could include:

Support from a manager
- providing written instructions for someone whose anxiety affects their memory providing workload support and help with prioritising work
- agreeing the type of work they can handle whilst they are on a phased return to work increasing frequency of catch-ups or 1-to-1's

Flexibility with working patterns
- flexible working hours, for example, allowing a person who has difficulty travelling in crowded trains to start early and finish early in order to avoid the rush hour
- allowing someone who is starting or reducing medication to have a day off if they are experiencing side effects, such as drowsiness
- enabling a person to arrange their hours to permit them to attend a weekly therapy session
- allowing someone to take time out of the office when they became particularly anxious
- enabling part-time working or job-share arrangements for someone who was unable to work full-time
- enabling someone to arrange their annual leave so that they have regularly spaced breaks throughout the year
- allowing that someone who finds the pressure of large meetings very difficult can arrange to have at least 15 minutes between meetings
- a gradual return to work after periods of sickness absence the possibility of working from home,
- reduction in hours or relief from some responsibilities to prevent the person having to take time off sick during fluctuations in their condition

Changes to the physical environment
- arranging for someone who found the distractions of an open-plan office detracted from their work performance to have a desk in a quieter area
- moving a person's workstation so that they are not placed in very busy areas or with their back to the door
- provide a quiet space for breaks away from the main workspace allow for increased personal space

Other types of support
- arranging mediation if there are difficulties between colleagues
- appointing a 'buddy' or 'mentor' outside the usual management structure who can show the new employee the ropes and help them settle in.

We have put together the examples on the right following conversations with a variety of people about their experiences of reasonable adjustments.

Simon
Simon worked in a busy library and had a history of panic attacks. He was accessing support for this and making good progress but often found that without regular breaks during the day he would become agitated and sometimes start to experience physical symptoms.

When his manager suggested taking a flexible approach to breaks (dividing his lunch break into three twenty minute slots rather than a one hour block), Simon was able to spread the time he took out from work more evenly across the day and felt better able to cope.

Chloe
When Chloe's doctor recommended she change the medication she was taking for depression, she became very nervous about the prospect of telling her manager. She knew that switching to the new medication would likely result in side effects which would impact her ability to perform her role, but was afraid that if she spoke openly about this with her manager she would be judged and might even lose her job.

When her manager became aware of the support she needed, he arranged for Chloe to work flexibly whilst transitioning onto the new medication, with weekly catch ups to support her with managing her workload and the opportunity for afternoon naps when she was experiencing side effects from the medication.

All this was captured in her WAP which helped to frame the discussion and provided a written copy of what was agreed and what support Chloe needed. These adjustments were easy to implement and helped enormously in supporting her during this time.
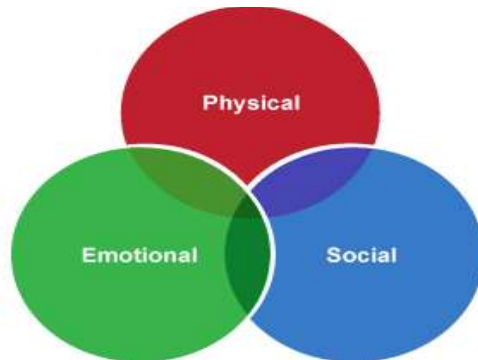
12. The WAP Form

The WAP form and information for employees can be found here.

Helpful definitions

Health; Physical, Emotional and Social Wellbeing
The World Health Organisation (WHO) defines health as 'a state of complete physical, mental and social wellbeing and not merely the absence of disease or infirmity'.

Wellbeing
Well-being integrates mental health (mind) and physical health (body), a more holistic approach to disease prevention and health promotion.

Mental health
We all have mental health, just as we all have physical health. Sometimes this is positive and sometimes not. We may experience poor mental health, e.g. due to bereavement, a difficult time at work or challenging home life.

Mental health conditions
These are diagnosed conditions e.g. depression, anxiety disorders, schizophrenia or bipolar disorder. One in four people experience will a mental health condition in any given year. Some people will have a one off incidence of a condition, others will have this for the rest of their lives.

Symptoms can vary from one person to another and what will help their recovery will also vary. People are able to live with and recover with the presence or absence of symptoms. A person with a mental health condition can have positive mental health and lead a satisfying and productive life. However, just like anyone else, they can also have periods where their mental health is not so good.

Work-related stress
Work-related stress is defined by the Health and Safety Executive as the adverse reaction people have to excessive pressure or other types of demand placed on them at work. Stress, including work-related stress, can be a significant cause of illness and is known to be linked with high levels of sickness absence, staff turnover and other issues such as increased capacity for error. Stress is not a medical diagnosis, but severe stress that continues for a long time may lead to a diagnosis of depression or anxiety, or more severe mental health problems.