

Keeping our staff safe during COVID-19

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She has played a lead role in the organisation's planning in relation to the COVID-19 pandemic.



People first

COVID-19 is a global health crisis which has touched the lives of every single person around the world. Our organisational response has therefore focused, with paramount importance, being placed on keeping our staff, service users and wider society safe, whilst at the same time supporting emotional and physical wellbeing.

Probation in Northern Ireland is a vital public service which works within all communities therefore we have had to adapt our working practices to ensure that we can continue to deliver services to contribute to public protection, whilst keeping our people as safe as we can in these times.

As Head of Human Resources my focus has very much been on ensuring that staff are given timely and relevant information and tools so that they can work safely at this time. I have also very much focused on making sure staff are supported through a range of wellbeing resources.

Keeping staff safe

As the pandemic took hold back in March 2020, PBNI's Senior Leadership Team has met every week, at least once per week, to ensure a collaborative, consistent and collegiate approach, and to give staff confidence that top of our agenda has been minding our people.

PBNI responded quickly and managed to successfully anticipate the restrictions that were to be implemented which allowed us to put in place systems and technology to enable the majority of our staff to work remotely from a very early stage. We also provided guidance for staff to be able to work safely and efficiently remotely. We also put in place a rota system, with the minimum level of staff in place, for the duties that were deemed to be essential workplace tasks. Offices were set up to be compliant with the necessary Covid restrictions such as one-way systems, sanitisation areas and social distancing markings.

After the initial Lockdown arrangements were in place, PBNI turned its attention to developing a four stage plan for our recovery which included varying degrees of a blended approach to staff working in offices and working remotely. To facilitate more staff in offices,

depending on the stage PBNI is in, guided by the Northern Ireland Executive guidelines, we have implemented a further range of measures to those of lockdown. These include thermometers to check staff and service user's temperature levels upon entry to offices; ensuring ventilation in offices; the mandatory use of face coverings in public spaces in offices and plastic screens between desks and in interview room. The associated guidance for these measures has been issued to all staff members to assist them to work safely when in offices.

The Health and Safety Unit within PBNI have done a sterling job, along with other colleagues in our Estates and Communications units, in ensuring the workplace has been adapted and is as safe as possible.

Throughout the recovery process we have worked closely with staff and union representatives. We have engaged and listened to feedback on every step of the journey. We communicate with staff, through a 'Monday message' and more often as we need to.

Staff wellbeing

As the pandemic has progressed, and we have continued to live and work through these difficult times, we have focused on ensuring staff are both physically and emotionally well.

In October 2020 we held a staff event focusing on building resilience and good mental health. PBNI psychologists shared information and tips on how to stay well and we heard from a psychiatric nurse on how to deal with anxiety and stress. We have provided podcasts and information sheets on meditation, mindfulness, nutrition and other practical ways to enhance wellbeing.

Our CEO does regular Podcasts in the absence of being able to interact face to face. These Podcasts have been engaging, and motivated by wishing to reach out to our staff, to make sure they know, and importantly hopefully feel, that they are supported and looked after.

We are encouraging staff in the run up to Christmas to take time and off and rest. This is a marathon, not a sprint and we will be continuing to prioritise staff wellbeing in the months ahead.

Recruitment and Training

Throughout this period we have continued to deliver training and recruit new staff. We have been creative and innovative in our approach to online training with a new online induction programme rolled out over the summer for new recruits. We have also provided a range of training videos for staff who are using a new case management system. We are embracing technology and using all means possible to continue to develop our workforce. As an organisation we can-not stand still. We need to continue to grow and develop and continuing with recruitment enables us to do that.

Opportunities and Learning

Probation in Northern Ireland is a learning organisation. We want to continue to do well and keep improving what we do. This pandemic has presented us with opportunities to develop and enhance our IT capability. It has also presented us with opportunities to enhance our staff engagement. We are embracing those opportunities and continuing to build our capacity and capability so that we can continue our work changing lives for safer communities.

We will continue to reflect on lessons learnt from these times and to go forward recognising that we have changed because of the Pandemic but that we may not lose all changes made during even after we return to more usual working ways. We will use these unprecedented times to learn and to grow.