ies Report

Institute for Employment Studies

Wellbeing through job design

A case study of implementation in RASI (Resettlement, Asylum Support and Integration)

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1   Context and description of the pilot

1.1   Why focus on wellbeing through job design?

Happy, engaged people are more productive.[1] Research evidence links poorly designed work with higher sickness absence and lower perceived job engagement.[2,3]

In a wide-ranging literature review Daniels et al[4] conclude that 'successful interventions that improve psychological health and levels of sickness absence use a range of strategies such as training and organisational approaches to increase participation in decision making and problem solving, increase support and feedback, and improve communication'. They recommend 'system wide' approaches that simultaneously enhance job design and a range of other employment practices.

Job design is important because the way a job is designed can influence: the efficiency levels that can be achieved; the sense it makes to the job holder; whether the job is motivating and satisfying; whether the job links well with other, related jobs in the team; and whether the job is beneficial (or harmful) to health.

Consistent with this, the 'Wellbeing through job design' pilot has not taken a siloed approach to specific areas of work; it has adopted an innovative system-wide approach, which has involved:

■ recognising everyone has a role to play in change;

■ bringing people together as a team to solve problems;

■ being honest about what has and hasn't been working for people;

■ democratising decision making and opportunities for personal development; and

■ ensuring that activities are underpinned by the message that people's wellbeing matters.

[1] MacLeod D, Clarke N (2009), Engaging for Success: Enhancing Performance through Employee Engagement, A report to Government. London: Department for Business, Innovation and Skills.

[2] Böckerman, P., Bryson, A., Kauhanen, A. & Kangasniemi, M (2020). Does Job Design Make Workers Happy? Scottish Journal of Political Economy, Vol. 67, No. 1, 31-52.

[3] Michie, S; Williams, S; (2003) Reducing work related psychological ill health and sickness absence: a systematic literature review. Occupational and Environmental Medicine, Vol. 60, No.1, 3-9.

[4] Daniels K, Gedikli C, Watson D, Semkina A & Vaughn, O (2017). Job design, employment practices and well-being: A systematic review of intervention studies. Ergonomics, Vol. 60, No. 9, 1177–1196.

1.2 What was the pilot intervention described in this case study?
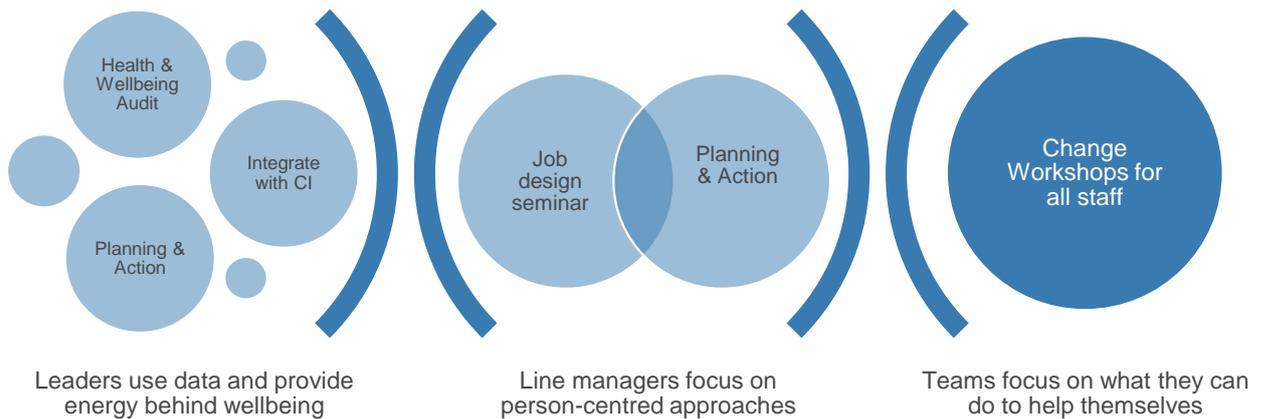
1.2.1 Participating teams

Two teams at the Home Office participated in a 'wellbeing through job design' pilot intervention during the period March 2019 to March 2020. Both were large teams (approximately 80-100 people on each) and were located together (in Croydon). The teams were selected after work was undertaken within one directorate to identify areas of the business needing support and intervention. Results of staff surveys and absence statistics sent a clear message that additional action was needed in both teams. In particular they had: the highest actual sickness days lost (ASDL) across the directorate, despite extensive efforts by local managers and HR and the People Team following best practice processes to address attendance and sickness absence issues; People Survey scores for 2018 that were slightly below the directorate average for engagement, with the bullying, harassment and discrimination (BHD) scores higher than the directorate average; and a reported 85-90 per cent of staff were in receipt of an adjustment to the physical environment and/or working hours.

1.2.2 Design

The primary driver behind the design of the pilot was the view that people and their wellbeing are at the heart of effective teamworking, and more generally, making health and wellbeing an organisational priority. Evidence-based practice from a range of disciplines was brought to bear on this pilot . There was a deliberate decision to start with actions to affect change in wellbeing at collective/team level, to pave the way for changes to the design of an individual's job.

The pilot took an iterative co-production approach with approximately quarterly meetings to review actions taken, reflect on the results and plan next actions. The co-production team included the team leaders and representatives from the Home Office Health and Wellbeing Team and the Institute from Employment Studies (IES).

An overview of the pilot design concept is provided in Figure 1 below, with further details of the timeline and content of activities provided in the next section.

Figure 1: Overview of key phases of pilot activities

Leaders use data and provide energy behind wellbeing — Line managers focus on person-centred approaches — Teams focus on what they can do to help themselves

Source: IES, 2021

1.2.3 Implementation

An initial bespoke Home Office Health and Wellbeing audit was carried out by the Health and Wellbeing Team within Home Office HR in the pre-pilot stage. Auditors produced a report in March 2019 which provided clear indicators on what was working well and what needed to improve. The report showed clear evidence of initiatives already in place although there were markedly differing views on progress, with staff responses considerably less positive than managers on some aspects.

Separate action plans were drawn up by the two teams focusing on those indicators highlighted as red or amber in the audit report. Areas to focus on included: senior management visibility in implementing the health and wellbeing strategy; staff feeling able to raise concerns about the effects of work on their health and wellbeing; addressing unfair treatment as a priority; recognition of achievements; use of reasonable adjustments; offering all staff the same opportunities; encouraging staff to contribute to decision making; and training managers to support those experiencing stress or mental ill health.

Team leaders focused attention on implementing their action plans from April to October 2019. Specific initiatives included:

- A visual plan on the wall in the office with upcoming milestones and key dates, so staff are aware and feel that they are brought into upcoming changes and events.

- A 'you said we did' board on the wall in the office to show staff what managers had done with their feedback on ATLAS (new case management system).

- Team reward and recognition budget used up collectively, rather than individually, by issuing all staff with a voucher as a reward for everyone's work on the roll out of ATLAS.

- Weekly short wellbeing sessions (15 minutes) on topics such as mindfulness, gratitude and stress relief.

- Regular 10 @ 10s sharing important messages through Senior Executive Officers (SEOs) and team leaders.

- Staff workshops set up as part of continuous improvement andlLearning and development initiatives were used as idea-generating fora and the energy and commitment put behind implementing the actions staff identified became integrated with the pilot.

- A 'development scheme' for four Executive Officers (EOs) to build capability and skill sets, and focussing onall areas of leadership, with retention of knowledge as a key success factor.

- Mapping local requirements against corporate training programmes already on offer, for example in building resilience and emotional intelligence.

A 2.5-hour 'Introduction to Job Design for Managers' event was held in November 2019, to explain the principles and the evidence base behind job design options and the potential benefits to the workplace and employee wellbeing. The first half was an expert presentation from IES, and the second half was facilitated by team leads/senior managers who each led discussions and action planning with their own managers. The event aimed to bring to the surface the ways in which job design has been used and could be used within the teams and aimed to ensure a common language would be used in future to describe changes made with consideration of the wellbeing activities taking place.

Line managers took centre stage between November 2019 and February 2020 by rethinking with their direct reports what job redesign options might better support them, and actioning any changes indicated.

The staff in one of the teams arranged workshops to take forward their own ideas and articulate their improvement suggestions; for example, to the way busy leave periods are managed (Christmas) and by seeking volunteers to be involved with projects rather than cherry picking 'favourites'.

During February 2020, over a half-day, 'Wellbeing and Change' events were held, with all staff and managers from both teams invited. Co-designed by IES and team leaders/senior managers, and facilitated by IES, these were interactive experiential-style learning workshops designed to challenge thinking. Two events were run to fit around shift

patterns. Reflection and participation were elicited through small group work. These events highlighted the role of team members in supporting wellbeing in times of change with discussion of how people can support each other and build resilience through change. Discussion included what individuals can do to help themselves and each other, emphasising that there should not be sole reliance on the line management chain to build an individual's resilience; rather, everyone should think about how they can influence change and their personal response to it.

After the workshop and in recognition that staff had voiced concerns around change overload/change fatigue, sub-teams continued to talk and share and identified what would make a difference in managing their expectations and how they would look to support each other through current and future change. These agreements were put to the test shortly afterwards due to Covid-19.

2   Outcomes

2.1   Metrics

Sickness absence across the two participating teams has improved substantially. As can be seen in Table 2.1, average levels of sickness absence dropped by 40 per cent in Team 1and 26 per cent in Team 2 between 1 April 2019 and 31 March 2020. A significant part of the overall improvement was due to reductions in the number of days lost and frequency of episodes due to stress/anxiety/depression/mental health (see Tables 2.2 and 2.3).

It is always tricky in workplace settings to be certain what activities (or combination of activities) caused any changes. This is in part because organisations commonly have numerous initiatives going on in parallel and the composition of teams change as staff leave and others join. In addition, pressures on staff can change over time due to changes to the external context. Therefore, these figures need to be treated with caution as there is no certainty how much of the improvement, if any, is due to the pilot intervention. However, sickness absence was a key metric of interest to the pilot and so is included here.

Table 2.1 Average sickness days lost per FTE

	12 months to 31 March 2019	12 months to 31 March 2020	Change number (& %)
Team 1	19.71	11.75	7.96 (40.4%)
Team 2	18.19	13.53	4.66 (25.6%)

Source: *HR and People Team, November 2020*

Table 2.2 Days lost due to due to stress/anxiety/depression/mental health

	12 months to 31 March 2019	12 months to 31 March 2020	Change number (& %)
Team 1	250	121	129 (51.6%)
Team 2	562	230	331.5 (59%)

Source: HR and People Team, November 2020

Table 2.3 Number of absences due to due to stress/anxiety/depression/mental health

	12 months to 31 March 2019	12 months to 31 March 2020	Change number (& %)
Team 1	8	6	2 (25%)
Team 2	13	8	5 (38.5%)

Source: HR and People Team, November 2020

The dates of the People Surveys do not precisely match the dates of the pilot. Nevertheless, People Survey overall engagement scores for 2019 remain slightly below the directorate average for both teams.[5] Digging deeper, there was a substantial increase in wellbeing theme scores in Team 1, although overall wellbeing scores were still below benchmarks of the parent organisation and the directorate and the scores for items of support from managers was slightly higher than for benchmarks. In Team 2 there was an 8 per cent rise in how well change is managed, and a 10 per cent increase in feeling involved in decisions that affected team members' work.

A follow up Health and Wellbeing Audit is planned for March 2022 which will provide extensive comparison with previous results in March 2019.

In this context it is important to note that Operational Excellence (OpEx) has been embraced by the teams. Although OpEx was being rolled out across all RASI teams independently of the 'wellbeing through job design' pilot, the two initiatives have been integrated in both pilot teams. OpEx has been used as a primary method in empowering staff/teams to rethink how things are done and to make improvements to their wellbeing as well as their productivity, and the delivery of each team's services.

For these reasons extensive qualitative interview data from managers[6] is presented in this section, as well as the quantitative data from corporate metrics and surveys. Interviews give context to the improvements seen in the hard data. Direct quotes (unattributed) are used to illustrate specific points. Due to Covid-19 and increase in workloads it was not possible to interview staff below SO level, therefore the benefits from their perspective cannot be represented here.

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[5] Source: Civil Service People Survey reports 2019, transformation.enginegroup.com.

[6] IES conducted interviews with managers with senior responsibility for or within Team 1, a leader with executive responsibility for both teams, current and previous team leaders (at Grade 7) and an individual working at SO level.

2.2   What the managers say

2.2.1   About their context

Multiple interviewers commented on the relatively long period of tenure of many employees within the team. This was not seen as a problem but possibly contributory to some negative behaviours having become embedded.

It was felt important to address these issues amid a period of significant change, mostly stemming from the transition to a new   case working system. There has also been the requirement to adapt to a new external provider. Furthermore, in Team 1 there has been a fast turnover of team leaders: three Grade 7s have occupied this position in the space of two years.

Although many problems were possibly attributable to past ways of working, the feedback from the staff survey contained was challenging for staff with management responsibility. Team leaders faced the task of dealing with understandably emotional responses.

> *The summer survey had some people hurt by it, in tears… it was tough on managers. They felt criticised for not being flexible: they said 'I'm always flexible'… but this is how people perceived it. It could be based on very personal grievances like 'they haven't sorted out my Christmas leave'.*

Interviews showed that many aspects of the survey and audit findings aligned with senior manager perceptions, especially regarding sickness management.

It was apparent that line managers reported feeling guilty about issuing warnings or, more generally, taking legitimate action with respect to poor attendance.

> *We weren't managing absence; it was happening to us.*

The 'excessive' demand for reasonable adjustments described by line mangers interviewed was felt to be motivated by general discontent and, possibly unconsciously, a sense of entitlement to concessions arising from longstanding malaise within the team.

Working culture was regarded as negative and there was a lack of a sense of operating as a team. There was a view that in the past staff had not been treated as adults and this was seen as engendering a lack of personal responsibility. Associated with this, there were major issues around communication and flow of ideas.

> *It was hard to get people engaging upwards, no chances to come up with ideas, it was felt they [the managers] were not open to suggestion.*

> *We had to make things more open and transparent.*

Collectively the main actors have brought an important combination of skills, including HR and change experience as well as hands-on knowledge of initiatives that have worked in other parts of the Civil Service.

Communicating better and dealing with change more effectively

There was consensus in the interviews that some issues had arisen from poor communication of policies and processes. For example, the excessive use of reasonable adjustments was felt to stem from a lack of understanding around their purpose. Therefore, communications were issued across the directorate in August 2019 via the Wellbeing Newsletter, explaining the duties of the Home Office as an employer and providing further guidance to those who required support. The directorate's Development, Partnerships and People Team updated the reward and recognition guidance to resolve apparent misunderstandings in that area.

There were other efforts to improve the flow of information which were easy to implement and have been received positively through staff feedback. Successes highlighted were:

■ the visual plan on the wall in the office with upcoming milestones and key dates;

■ the 'you said we did' board to show staff what we had done with their feedback; and

■ the 'Daily Tips' memo which has helped staff adapt to change and learn from others.

There were some more easy wins where it was clear old ways of working (legacies of previous team leaders) were not fit for purpose, created unnecessary tensions and got in the way of staff supporting each other.

> *They weren't allowed to talk to each other. They couldn't ask other colleagues what to do. Their mobile phones were face down…So I got rid of that. I got rid of the rules.*

To address negative behaviours a staff suggestion to draw up a Team Charter was actioned. It set out a standard of behaviour or 'code of conduct' dealing directly with 'showing how we respect one another'.

Dealing with change was identified as an issue particularly the inevitable disruption of the introduction of the case management system.. It was felt by staff there was both a resistance to change and a sense of passivity.

> *There's a feeling that change is happening TO them – [the attitude is] 'it's being done to us; we have no say'.*

A team leader organised a change workshop for staff, held outside the office environment, directly drawing from material introduced during one of IES's sessions. This described the change curve and organisational readiness for change.

> *I talked about the change curve – I kept that term and the original language… I talked about change and its impact on 'organisation' vs 'team' vs 'me'.*

An important message to convey was that everyone has a role to play in change and the need to support each other.

Giving people a voice

Managers reported that the sessions led by IES consultants triggered the formation of the 'Leadership People's Group' and the 'People's Group' for managers and staff respectively. These groups were seen as the most important outputs of the whole programme of work. Their activities were perceived as being key to finding new ways of working.

> *We introduced The People's Group to give a voice to the team …there were questions around the job, what did and didn't work, what could be done around improvement, it allowed people to raise concerns.*

> *Things needed to be more open, junior people were afraid to speak up… there were things they felt they couldn't say to their own manager.*

For staff this formed the important function of being not just a place to vent but also an opportunity to involve staff in generating ideas, agreeing priority areas for action and translating ideas into action.

> *We listened to 'weekly moans' - what was bugging people: we looked at alternatives if people were not happy with the job they were doing.*

There is consensus that this has proved successful. The approach has allowed active problem solving, and brought about improvements; for example:

- improving the way busy leave periods are managed such as Christmas;
- staff taking ownership of reward and recognition: since July, anyone can be nominated for a voucher of recognition for up to £50; and
- providing a means of capturing success and sharing how it was achieved with others.

A staff suggestion scheme has provided another vehicle for individuals to put their ideas into practice.

> *If people have an idea for improvement…if they have a 'vision', if they [think] things can be done differently and better, they are now listened to.*

There was a view that listening to staff was now 'business as usual'; ie, it had become embedded good practice.

Leadership development

There was concern about leadership qualities, particularly at more junior levels of management. The system was reportedly creating 'supervisors rather than leaders':

> *The team leader asked us what we felt we needed. A lot of Civil Service learning is there already but she converted materials.*

Within the broader agenda of continuous improvement, a development scheme for EOs was being set up to build capability and skill sets, covering a range of areas of leadership, many with relevance to wellbeing. Goals for all staff were set in consultation with them

with job enrichment as a stated aim. Civil Service learning materials were adapted to fit the team context.

Sessions were delivered at team leader level and examples of topics included:

■ how to have conversations with staff about sickness absence;

■ workplace mediation;

■ bereavement and other types of leave;

■ psychological wellbeing ('how to engage in discussions to maximise wellbeing'); and

■ personal resilience training and introduction to the 'PERMA' model[7].

Wider development opportunities have been made available through action learning sets and increased access to mentoring.

We make sure people have time for learning and development… I have made time for it myself. You're encouraged to identify your own holes, gaps in your knowledge.

Mentoring makes you think what you can do when facing adversity… for example juggling work with care responsibilities.

To move away from old ways of working there was an identified need to empower teams to take more responsibility.

This is about making EOs responsible for their own role and caseload. Before it was given or assigned, now it is more autonomous – we (the managers) have conflicting demands, now they can be more strategic.

This was felt to be a key component of reshaping this role and meeting the overall remit of improving job design.

Opening development opportunities

An acknowledged issue that needed to be rectified was that staff perceived that the development opportunities were unfairly allocated and that 'high flyers' were always picked for more enriching tasks.

They were cherry picking their favourites for projects… the people who were routinely [marked] 'outstanding'.

There was a perception that crossing perceived 'thresholds' was virtually impossible unless you were marked out as a favourite. This was addressed by actively designing development opportunities into the job; in other words, ensuring that staff were routinely exposed to tasks that provided valuable experience for future career development.

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[7] This represents 'five core elements of happiness and well-being'.(PERMA stands for Positive Emotion, Engagement, Relationships, Meaning, and Accomplishments) https://ppc.sas.upenn.edu/learn-more/perma-theory-well-being-and-perma-workshops.

A minority [progress from junior to management positions], for example progressing from AA up to Grade 7. What you need to do is target people's activities at the next level up.

An important change has been to ask for volunteers to be involved in projects that will offer new experiences rather than cherry pick favourites. They are now pitched as expressions of interest invitations This has reportedly proved to be a useful tool, and has improved uptake of opportunities.

There has also been more concerted effort to give people experience in other areas of the Civil Service. This is especially important in an environment where long tenure is the norm and exposure to other working environments is limited.

Taking people away for six days, so they can learn about specific topics and interact with specific jobs, i.e., interaction between people who have different roles. The Civil Service is becoming more joined up about this type of redeployment.

2.2.2   About what worked

This section describes key observed outputs and impacts as identified by interview participants.

Working as a collective

There is reportedly a greater sense of connectedness or 'the sense of being a team'. Progress has not just been about giving people a voice: listening to them properly has been key. Overall, there is a more democratic way of operating and staff are being heard. Early quick wins such as a better flow of information are felt to have contributed to this. Improved reward and recognition processes allow successes to be celebrated in the context of what is felt to be a fairer system.

Another important development has been regarding more open communication. Previously there was felt to be an engrained culture of being afraid to speak out and this led to a tendency to avoid problem-solving. Now uncertainties are more likely to be shared.

People can say 'I don't know how to deal with this'…before, people would silently do a bad job.

Improved manager agency and autonomy

There is general agreement that 'the big changes' have been mostly at EO level. It is felt that EOs have been inspired to become more self-sufficient, take greater responsibility for their own working lives and become more confident decision makers.

Since [implementation of the initiative] it has been about getting more empowerment and control…people are owning the work that they are doing.

Another shift has been the way staff at the top are seen; making an explicit distinction between leading and managing has been important.

> *It's all about a way of managing - leading not just managing. We used to have SMT and now they're rebranded as leaders… that is the biggest change of mindset to give to people.*

With that, there is also recognition that manager behaviours set the tone for those who work for them and among them.

> *People need to feel a senior person is role modelling.*

Along with an improved line manager skill set there has been an increased sense of control.

> *Before, [staff] were in crisis mode, firefighting mode all the time, that leads to micromanagement…Now the attitude is 'if you make a mistake, don't hide it, learn…' we want people to get better, we're trying to encourage openness, we have an open-door policy. Not ticking people off, [but] how can we respond to this between us.*

A feeling that management care

As a result of recent activities people understand the contributions of various parts of the organisation better and feel they have senior level support. As a result, they also have more confidence in the leadership to fight their corner.

> *There is more of a sense of control and we [as managers] generally consult more.*

This contributes to a sense that wellbeing is being taken seriously.

> *There has been a change in attitude; people used to see commitment to wellbeing as just lip service… People feel more supported, we support them through hard times.*

This has been underpinned by efforts to shake up processes and systems that were not conducive to good working relationships, and building a shared sense of purpose.

There is also a feeling that the organisation is now better placed to go into uncertain times than it would have been a few years ago. Improved resilience was felt to have played a role in the success of the case management system going live.

Impact on staff wellbeing

There is recognition that improved wellbeing has been the ultimate priority and managers have aimed to demonstrate this to staff.

> *Get wellbeing right, the rest will come easy… we are working with people … it will come through that you genuinely care. It shouldn't be a tick-box process.*

Better communication and more fora for sharing concerns across the team have been instrumental to an improved sense of wellbeing. Importantly, empowering managers has been seen as a key determinant of better wellbeing.

Ultimately there is less firefighting for managers. We can be more strategic and that has led to a wellbeing shift.

In hard terms, sickness absence has reduced substantially; within Team 1's levels of absence dropped by 40 per cent between February 2019 and February 2020.

About success factors

Improvements have been achieved via multiple mechanisms, such as 1-2-1s and team catch ups. But as previously described, **the People's Group is seen as key to success**.

It's been everything together, but leadership training (Operational Excellence) and the People's Group, had the most impact...No point in managers thinking 'I am doing a good job' if others think not.

An important aspect is that **change has not been imposed from above; there has been a collaborative approach.** A strength of many improvements is that they have been built around staff concerns and suggestions.

An increased sense of taking responsibility and being part of something bigger has been attributed to **showing people respect**.

They now feel they are treated with respect, like adults, and feel they are part of a team. They've been encouraged to think 'what if this was your own business' (i.e., taking responsibility) and they understand why their manager sometimes refuses leave.

In a departure from the past, people now feel they can raise issues without negative effects; **there is a constructive approach to problem-solving**.

At any point there is a box of cases piling up [staff feel they can say], 'we need extra people'… and they will feel they will hear a positive response like, 'thanks for letting us know'.

An apparent fear of change has been tackled head-on with **an emphasis on listening and supporting**.

It's about messaging. People inherently do not like change. People thought [moving to ATLAS] was going to be awful but it's alright and gets better over time. They adapt and change in the process. A lot is about listening and giving an answer. You need a stepped approach, effective communication, people need to be supported and reassured.

Progress must be viewed in the context of an ongoing process of continuous improvement. Change has not been easy and there have been pockets of resistance; it was noted that **people must be allowed to talk about their difficulties in dealing with change**.

A visible, sustained focus on wellbeing has underpinned other activities. For example, a regular wellbeing survey and regular short wellbeing sessions (for example, chair yoga, resilience, mindfulness) have helped staff feel their wellbeing matters.

3   Final comments

This initiative set out with ambitious goals. There was a clear need to make people feel better at work and enrich the experience of being at work: ways of operating and communicating had become embedded and were hazardous to morale and productivity.

The 'Wellbeing through Job Design' initiative has been more than just rolling out a programme of disparate interventions, it has been about achieving a change of mindset. There has been a willingness to scrutinise old ways of working and replace these with innovative solutions.

The pilot is considered to have been a success by the teams involved, which is why they are willing for their efforts to be shared in the form of a case study. They hope it will help others wishing to introduce wellbeing through better job design. One of the reasons for the pilot's initial success may be, in part, the way that all the various initiatives were integrated by the senior managers and team leaders. It makes the joins and outcomes difficult to unpick for our purposes but perhaps that's a key learning point. Wellbeing through job design isn't a stand-alone process: it needs be integrated with wider culture and ways of working.

Over coming months, a key challenge will be in prioritising staff wellbeing in a post-Covid-19 environment and continuing to learn about what helps to make staff feel supported and valued. Building on existing resilience will be important, as will a willingness to see improvement as a continuous process, with new situations requiring new solutions.