

Labour Relations Agency 'Together' People Programme

A response to the Coronavirus (Covid-19) Emergency

Living Our Values

To achieve our vision and purpose, our values are to be

Progressive – Ethical – Exemplary – Responsive

These values underpin all that we do

Table of Contents

1.0	Strategic Statement	4
2.0	'Together' People Programme	5
3.0	Theme I: Ensuring Staff Health and Wellbeing	5
4.0	Theme II: Stay Connected	7
5.0	Theme III: Supporting Remote Working	7
6.0	Theme IV: Keep Learning	7
7.0	Theme V: Managing the Outbreak (LRA People Management)	8
8.0	Theme VI: Managing Workload	9
9.0	Theme VII: Restoration Planning	10
10.0	Maintaining a Supportive Management Culture	10
11.0	Review	11
APPENDIX I - 'Together' People Programme Summary Diagram		12

1.0 Strategic Statement

- 1.1 The primary purpose of the 'Together' Programme (the Programme) is to ensure that staff of the Labour Relations Agency (the Agency) are adequately supported throughout the course of the Coronavirus emergency; that every possible effort is made to ensure their physical and mental health and wellbeing; and that they remain effectively engaged in meaningful work to the benefit of the Agency, our customers and stakeholders.
- 1.2 The 'Together' Programme is founded on the following principles:
- The Programme reflects the values of the Agency in being Progressive, Ethical, Exemplary and Responsive
 - The Programme is an inclusive people programme i.e. one which seeks to involve all staff within the Agency and to maintain high engagement levels
 - The Agency's duty of care to our staff is of paramount importance regardless of whether they are working-from-home or on Agency premises. Accordingly, the main focus of the Programme will be on the Health and Wellbeing of our staff
 - The Agency will observe all public health guidance and Government rules issued in respect of the Coronavirus emergency and will put measures in place to ensure that our staff, customers, their families and the wider community are not exposed to any unnecessary risks
 - The Agency will seek to maintain high quality services to our customers insofar as possible throughout the course of the Coronavirus emergency
 - The Programme will seek to strike a balance between home life and work activities; keeping people gainfully and meaningfully employed, but also acknowledging that they are at home and juggling other challenging demands at this time.
 - It will also highlight good management practice appropriate to what is a very unique set of circumstances
- 1.3 This Programme is aligned to and will support delivery of the Agency's Interim Business Plan covering the period of the Coronavirus emergency.
- 1.4 Responsibility for delivery of this Programme will rest with the Senior Management Team and individual line managers will assume ownership of different aspects of it. The SLT will assign roles and responsibilities. Whilst acknowledging that line management responsibilities generally rest at different levels within the Agency, for the purpose of this programme and the responsibilities set out in this document line managers are considered to be at ERM level and above.
- 1.5 For the purposes of planning an estimated duration of 6 months has been assumed. The Programme will however be maintained under review throughout the course of the Coronavirus emergency.

2.0 'Together' People Programme

2.1 The Programme has been developed along seven key themes:

- I. Ensuring Staff Health and Wellbeing
- II. Stay Connected
- III. Supporting Remote Working
- IV. Keep Learning
- V. Managing the Outbreak (LRA People Management)
- VI. Managing Workload
- VII. Restoration Planning

2.2 Further detail on each of the key themes is set out below.

3.0 Theme I: Ensuring Staff Health and Wellbeing

3.1 The primary focus of the 'Together' People Programme is ensuring the Health and Wellbeing of all of the staff of the Agency.

3.2 This will entail making efforts to ensure that all staff receive, read and understand all general health, safety and wellbeing guidance issued to them and have access to relevant public health and safety information in relation to working arrangements generally.

3.3 In addition to this line managers will ensure, where appropriate, that consideration is also given to more role-specific guidance and requirements in respect of the health and safety of individual members of staff for which they have responsibility. This will be maintained under regular review as part of the ongoing line manager/staff engagement mechanisms.

3.4 Managers and staff can find further information regarding the principles and practical steps to be considered in maintaining a safe working environment, within the guide:

[Covid-19: Working through this Together](#)

3.5 The Agency recognises the importance of individual staff maintaining contact and sharing experiences with a range of colleagues. Line managers should therefore establish arrangements which allow the staff, who they have responsibility for, to 'keep-in-touch' *with each other*, i.e. not through the line manager.

3.6 In support of this staff should be encouraged to spend up to **30 minutes** of their working day having a conversation with another colleague or colleagues (telephone or video call). This conversation need not be work-related and can be about sharing experiences or simply having a chat. Line managers should check through their own team and staff engagements that these daily contacts are occurring amongst their staff and may also consider implementing 'buddy' type arrangements where appropriate.

3.7 The HR team will remind staff and managers of existing initiatives such as Inspire, Mental Health First Aid and will signpost to relevant information and additional support. This will form part of the internal communications plan throughout the course of the Coronavirus emergency.

3.8 As part of this Programme online repositories will also be established to provide ease of access to any relevant resources for staff and management respectively.

3.9 A key component of the 'Together' Programme will be the development of a range of activities to assist in maintaining the physical and mental health of staff. Some initial thoughts on possible initiatives are set out at **3.10 and 3.11 below**.

3.10 **Physical Health and Wellbeing**

The Agency recognises the importance of maintaining physical health and wellbeing amongst staff and the strong links between physical health and mental wellbeing. On that basis staff are encouraged to spend 15-20 minutes of their working time each day engaging in some form of moderate physical exercise. This might include, but not be limited to activities such as:

- Yoga/Pilates
- Stretching exercises
- Workstation exercises
- Deep breathing exercises
- [Other activities to be considered in light of staff survey results when available]

Where possible managers should consider how these might also be organised as group exercises, making best use of the technology and physical (home) environment available to staff. In any event all staff should be encouraged, where willing, to engage in some form of moderate physical exercise for 15-20 minutes of their working day.

3.11 **Mental Health and Wellbeing**

The Agency also recognises the importance of maintaining good mental health and morale amongst staff. Where possible, line managers should encourage participation in activities which promote good mental health and morale by allowing staff to 'switch-off' or take time-out from their normal working responsibilities.

There are a range of activities, games and online resources available which are designed to encourage interaction and engagement amongst remote groups (large and small), and promote good mental health amongst individuals. By way of example these include such activities as:

- Online group games e.g. Quizzes, Charades, Pictionary, Taboo, etc.
- Virtual coffee breaks
- Virtual team meetings
- [Other activities to be considered in light of staff survey results when available]

Line managers are tasked with co-ordinating these types of group activities as appropriate within their teams.

3.12 The HR team will continue to circulate information in relation to potential Health and Wellbeing activities as part of the internal communications plan applicable throughout the course of the Coronavirus emergency.

4.0 Theme II: Stay Connected

- 4.1 A key component of this Programme is the establishment of a communications plan setting out mechanisms to provide for more structured communication and engagement (horizontally and vertically) amongst all Agency staff for the duration of the Coronavirus emergency.
- 4.2 Internal engagement, dialogue and feedback mechanisms will be established to ensure multidirectional communication is maintained at all levels. To include:
- Our trade union NIPSA
 - The ER Project Group
 - Corporate-wide
 - Across teams
 - Amongst colleagues and individuals
- 4.3 This will make best use of the widest possible range of existing technology and resources, and will include the following:
- Weekly Chief Executive's communication to staff
 - Staff survey
 - Regular scheduled team discussions
 - Regular scheduled information bulletins; Staff Briefings and Health and Wellbeing email circulars
- 4.4 The ER Project Group will continue to meet in a 'virtual' format throughout the duration of this Programme and will provide an important forum for the discussion of a range of issues and initiatives of importance to staff and the Agency.

5.0 Theme III: Supporting Remote Working

- 5.1 The Agency currently has in place an Agile Working Policy which contains guidance in respect of Remote working for Agency staff.
- 5.2 However as part of this Programme guidance available to staff and managers will be reviewed and supplemented to reflect the unique nature of the current circumstances and latest best practice thinking in relation to Remote Working.

6.0 Theme IV: Keep Learning

- 6.1 The Agency remains committed to the development of all staff throughout the duration of this Programme.
- 6.2 For the duration of this Programme the identification and provision of learning opportunities will fall under four possible categories:
- I. Identification and delivery of learning and development activity which is of more immediate priority in the context of new remote working arrangements and the need to deliver flexible and resilient services to our customers, or;

- II. Delivery of previously identified training needs, where feasible, or;
 - III. Completion of any outstanding e-learning activities e.g. GDPR, or;
 - IV. Wider staff learning and development opportunities which are focussed on individual growth, team growth and knowledge development
- 6.3 The need to minimise face-to-face contact will inevitably limit the options for delivery of learning and development activities. In those circumstances activities are likely to include such things as:
- Online e-learning
 - Webinars
 - Individual/Team coaching (by video/telephone call)
 - Self-study/Reading exercises
 - Distance learning
- 6.4 The HR Team in conjunction with line managers will identify opportunities to engage staff in e-learning and other activities which meet the criteria set out at **6.2 above**. Line managers will review previous staff PDP's to identify learning needs which might be delivered in the current context.

7.0 Theme V: Managing the Outbreak (LRA People Management)

- 7.1 Whilst recognising the unique set of circumstances in which the Agency and our staff are currently operating it is important not to lose sight of the good people management practices which will continue to apply.
- 7.2 In addition to dealing with the public health measures in place which significantly limit movement and social interaction, the Agency is also aware of the likely impact of the Coronavirus either directly or indirectly on colleagues. It is highly likely that a number of Agency staff may contract the virus or be required to isolate at some points over the course of the emergency. Staff will keep line managers advised where this is the case.
- 7.3 In order to continue to properly support staff, provide services to our customers in these circumstances and facilitate the working from home of our entire workforce it has been necessary to temporarily set aside or vary some of our HR policy provisions for example in relation to flexi-time and absence management.
- 7.4 These temporary policy changes will be maintained under review throughout the current emergency. The need for other changes may emerge over the life of this Programme. In all circumstances these will be discussed as appropriate with trade union colleagues in advance of any changes being made.
- 7.5 One such temporary policy change relates to the suspension of 'trigger' or 'review points' within the Absence Management Policy. Line managers will however continue to support staff where they report as sick (Coronavirus or otherwise) and will manage any impacts across their teams.

- 7.6 The twin challenges of maintaining services to our customers whilst ensuring that all staff remain actively engaged will require ongoing flexibility on the part of staff and managers.
- 7.7 The Senior Leadership Team will monitor and address any impacts on services across the Agency. This will require the adoption of 'flexible resourcing plans' and identification of staffing contingencies designed to sustain services and ensure cover for key posts insofar as possible. To better inform resource planning and decision-making the Senior Leadership Team will be provided with regular updates on the staffing position.

8.0 Theme VI: Managing Workload

- 8.1 Given the unprecedented uncertainty and volatility of the operating environment it is particularly challenging to plan workloads in the normal way.
- 8.2 Wholesale macro-level changes to the rules governing the economy, business and employment have seen unparalleled increases in the demands on our Workplace Information Service.
- 8.3 The ceasing of face-to-face contact has resulted in the suspension of a range of advisory services including all public seminars and training. Similarly our ability to effectively deliver collective conciliation and arbitration services is severely limited in the current environment.
- 8.4 Our interdependency with the Office of Tribunals (OITFET) means that significant decisions regarding the operation of the tribunals service will greatly affect our conciliation workload. It is likely that we may see a downturn in conciliation work whilst the tribunal service is not operating.
- 8.5 The Agency will therefore plan for a range of scenarios which allows for flexible resourcing of any emerging pressures and also for the potential of downtime emerging in a number of areas.
- 8.6 A key component of this will be the identification of opportunities to ensure staff remain actively engaged in meaningful work which is of benefit to them, to the Agency and ultimately to our service users over the longer-term.
- 8.7 The Senior Leadership Team will therefore co-ordinate the identification of a range of opportunities for staff to undertake alternative meaningful work in the event of downtime becoming an issue. This may include, but not be limited to, the following:
- I. Internal policy/procedure reviews
 - II. Desktop research exercises
 - III. Operational Guidelines reviews
 - IV. Document reviews
 - V. Record retention and disposal reviews
 - VI. Learning time (*Take 5 - Keep Learning*)
 - VII. Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR) community volunteering (*Take 5 - Give*)

8.8 In progressing reviews of internal policies and working procedures managers will also be mindful not to overload trade union colleagues at this time. In some cases this work may be progressed to being 'off-the-shelf' ready, to be finalised at a later stage. Prioritisation of this work will be determined by the Senior Leadership Team.

9.0 Theme VII: Restoration Planning

9.1 In adhering to all public health guidance and Government rules issued in respect of the Coronavirus emergency the Agency will also maintain a watching brief on the relaxation of the current measures and eventual moves towards normal working and home life.

9.2 In advance of that the Agency will begin the necessary planning required for the scaling-back of remote working arrangements, the return to business-as-usual operations and the reinstatement of normal service delivery. This will require a co-ordinated approach to the people management and stakeholder communication aspects in particular.

9.3 It is also likely to be the case that the full reinstatement of Agency services alongside an increase in activity within the wider economy and across a range of employment sectors will lead to some immediate additional draws on our services.

9.4 Whilst timescales and other factors determining the nature of this restoration remain unknown it will still be important, as part of this Programme, to give some consideration to advance planning to address potential backlogs and immediate workload pressures.

9.5 The Agency will therefore develop, and maintain under a review, a service 'Restoration Plan'.

10.0 Maintaining a Supportive Management Culture

10.1 The Agency recognises the extraordinary set of circumstances that staff and managers are working under and will continue to work under throughout the life of this Programme.

10.2 The Agency further recognises that our staff are working in their homes, not out of choice, but out of necessity and are also juggling other challenging issues regarding their own health and welfare, that of their families and friends, and the wider community as a whole. It is also acknowledged that the role of a working parent can be particularly challenging at this time in balancing work with childcare and home-schooling responsibilities. The Agency is extremely grateful for the good will demonstrated by all of our staff and the positive nature in which they have embraced the emergency arrangements in an effort to maintain services to the public.

10.3 In that spirit, our line managers will seek to be as understanding and flexible as possible in supporting and accommodating staff to deal with the pressures they currently face and achieve a reasonable balance and distinction between work and home life, including where childcare and home-schooling responsibilities are prevalent.

10.4 Remote working arrangements are founded on trust. It is incumbent on line managers to strike a balance between adequately supporting staff and ensuring that they are

engaged in meaningful work. In the event of a downturn or diminishing workloads emerging in some areas, line managers will determine the level of management activity required as appropriate to the circumstances.

- 10.5 It is important to maintain a balance between normal day-to-day line management activity and what may have the potential to be perceived by some individuals as being unnecessarily intrusive. Line managers will therefore determine the level of contact appropriate to individual dealings with staff.

11.0 Review

- 10.1 The 'Together' People Programme will be maintained under review by the Agency's Senior Leadership Team throughout the course of the Coronavirus emergency.

[A summary diagram of the 'Together' People Programme is included at [APPENDIX I](#) below]

