

# Support During the Pandemic

## The National Church Institutions

The National Church Institutions (NCIs) exists to support the mission and ministries of the Church of England - so we instinctively acted, during the fear, confusion, and rapid Covid transition, to bring to life the best of our trusting and caring instincts, whilst continuing to give high performance as we supported the whole Church to pivot and support the wider public with sickness and bereavement.

We put trust and wellbeing front and centre as we shifted to homeworking in March 2020. Everyone got involved: Mental Health First Aiders hosted drop-ins and offered support through holiday periods; our social team organised film and gardening clubs; HR delivered resilience training and Sharing Head Space sessions for leaders; our UKME network hosted open spaces for people to reflect on Black Lives Matter; teams ran check-ins, leaders reinforced and modelled their support with high levels of flexibility and by talking about their own wellbeing; and daily newsletters and monthly town hall meetings fostered a sense of community. As a result, 90% of our people felt supported during the pandemic.

There are a number of bodies, collectively known as the National Church Institutions (NCIs), which undertake work for the Church of England.

The purpose of the NCIs is to support the mission and ministries of the Church by working with those who serve in parishes, Dioceses, schools and other ministries, and with partners at a national and international level.

Our people carry out a wide variety of roles and functions from investment management to education, to supporting Bishops in the House of Lords and planning the recent coronation. During the pandemic people shifted roles as appropriate to best support the whole Church including the nearly 20,000 active clergy who lead in local parish churches and offer chaplaincy in other settings, including hospitals. While the church buildings were closed for some of the pandemic (with services moving online), the work of the church supporting the wider public with sickness and bereavement, continued apace.

The NCIs are separate legal entities, but they are a common employer with 700 people. The seven NCIs are: The Archbishops' Council, Bishopthorpe Palace, The Church Commissioners, The Church of England Central Services, The Church of England Pensions Board, Lambeth Palace, and The National Society for Promoting Religious Education. The majority of NCIs staff were office based before the pandemic, but now have hybrid working arrangements in place. This supports our people with flexibility and enables more people based outside of London and York (where we have offices) to work with us.

### **Culture change centred on trust and wellbeing**

Prior to the pandemic, whilst there was a flexible working policy, working five days a week in the office was very much the norm. Work on wellbeing had begun in 2018 with the introduction of an employee assistance programme and training an initial cohort of mental health first aiders. This work was in the early stages when, at the start of the pandemic, we shifted overnight to homeworking. It was therefore quite a cultural shift when we adopted our two guiding principles: that we would trust our people would do the very best they could in the circumstances; and that wellbeing should be front and centre of our immediate support. Whilst you might expect wellbeing to feature as part of an organisation's offer, for us wellbeing was suddenly at the very centre of our strategy. Our approach didn't just offer support during the pandemic, it catalysed culture change and modernisation of working practices across the NCIs.

### **Leaders' role-modelling**

This was led from the top. We instituted monthly all staff webinars, led by our most senior leaders, and we made sure that wellbeing and trust were embedded in those in each time. Again, while this might be expected in terms of talking about the commitment and encouraging openness and access to support, our leaders also modelled talking about wellbeing by sharing how they were feeling themselves, including when they weren't feeling that great, or when things were difficult.

### **Spaces to talk and decompress**

We recognised the need for open spaces to decompress, so starting with the leaders, the HR team facilitated Sharing Head Space sessions. This wasn't just an HR initiative, so many people in our organisation got involved. Our mental health first aiders (MHFAs) grew their existing support role by hosting drop-in sessions as well as putting together rotas so that there was a mental health first aider available for people to contact throughout holiday periods, including Christmas day. Our social team organised a film club and gardening club. Our UKME network hosted open spaces for people to reflect on Black Lives Matter, championed by senior leaders.

Our teams and departments scheduled regular check-ins either in existing team meetings or as additional social times, all reinforcing the message “it’s ok, to not be ok”.

### **Resilience training and flexibility**

We talked about resilience offering a suite of training from short webinars to more in-depth courses. Where we went above and beyond was that our messages on resilience were backed up both by our messages on trust, and by our action, offering flexibility around hours worked (where possible for the role) with specific encouragement in winter months to take longer lunch breaks to get outside during daylight hours. Our high focus on flexibility allowed working parents to retain their roles without changing their contracts.

### **Wellbeing surveys**

We ran two wellbeing surveys in 2020 to check in on how people were feeling, where they were drawing on support and what the key issues were to inform current and future strategy. Survey feedback and our principles of trust and wellbeing informed all our policy decisions, from explicitly stating our support for those juggling caring responsibilities with their work (including that they should not miss out financially), to extending holiday carry-over so people could use their leave at a time when they were able to travel with or to family and friends. This was balanced with recognising how weary people were feeling, so an extra wellbeing day was given in Spring 2021.

### **Proactive and responsive support**

Support was both proactive (derived from our guiding principles) and responsive (listening to our people’s feedback), so as well as a suite of generalised support including MHFAs, Employee Assistance Programme, trade unions and open space sessions, we tailored the support to our people’s circumstances.

### **Summary**

The impact to our people was that life was made that much easier during a difficult period by a solid foundation of support for what we were facing: those with caring responsibilities were supported in juggling work and home commitments, those struggling with their mental health had individual and group spaces to draw on support, we all learnt more about helpful coping strategies to increase our resilience, and we learnt to care more deeply for one another.

## **Wellbeing and flexibility supporting retention**

We supported our staff with business continuity - delivering the core services and being able to be flexible as needed. Our focus on wellbeing and flexibility ensured that we retained 91% of staff in 2020 and over 85% in 2021.

## **Engagement**

A test of impact for us is, 'how did our people feel about working at the NCIs' during the pandemic, and they clearly felt highly engaged with work – with an engagement score of 81% in 2021.

Other results in our February-March 2021 staff survey further demonstrate the impact of our support during the pandemic:

- 90% of respondents felt the support provided during the pandemic was good or very good
- 91% felt the NCIs were proactive in supporting them to work safely and effectively throughout the pandemic
- 87% felt they trusted their colleagues
- 82% felt the NCIs cared about its people which was an increase of 22 percentage points on our survey in 2019 and 17 percentage points higher than the benchmark for the not-for-profit sector.

## **The best thing about working for the NCIs**

When asked, "What is the best thing about working for the NCIs?", the top theme was 'the people', strongly linked to the supportive culture. Our people's comments included:

- The work that the NCIs do is humbling and extensive and helps people overcome the difficulties that life has thrown at them, it covers a wide spectrum of issues faced by people and churches and finds a way to resolve them.

- All staff webinars and recent NCIs days during the pandemic really make staff feel valued and supported.
- They care about staff and listen to feedback.

### **New values for how we want to work together**

The impact of the work could also be seen when we consulted with staff in 2021 on our organisation's values, asking what we were like at our best and how we wanted to work together. The outcome of those sessions is that we now have two additional values of we collaborate, and we show compassion. The support during the pandemic has changed the very core of who we are and how we want to work together.

### **Hybrid working offer**

We have continued to develop our approach in the last three years. The work that began in March 2020, continued into Summer 2021 when we launched our hybrid working offer (Working without walls), as returning to the office became more feasible. This was based on the same guiding principles of trust and wellbeing, so we allowed teams to decide what working arrangements would work best for them individually and collectively, to ensure work delivery, inclusion and wellbeing; and gave them an extended trial period to work this out.

### **New values**

This year we are launching the new values of we collaborate and we show compassion alongside generous behaviours showing how we expect to live these out.

### **New wellbeing strategy**

We have a new wellbeing strategy in the pipeline, building on the existing proactive work and support, and including a new emphasis on people's strengths, drawing on positive psychology as a driver for wellbeing. The strategy also seeks to holistically address workload and wellbeing issues, having listened to our people's feedback, starting with workshops in Learning at Work Week (15-21 May).

Sustaining wellbeing means it needs to be embedded at every level and our listening needs to go deeper, so our upcoming training on workload management will include different workshops for staff, managers and leaders. We are also working with our unions and Chief Officers to host sessions to listen, and then create

solutions, on how to address challenges around workload and difficult conversations.

## **Engagement**

We have maintained our high engagement score, with a score of 80% in 2022, and seen our work on Belonging and Inclusion begin to impact with a dramatic rise in engagement for our UKME colleagues from 77% in 2021 to 84% in 2022.

When asked in November 2022, “What is the best thing about working for the NCIs?”, our people’s comments clearly showed the sustained impact of our approach over the previous 2.5 years. Again the ‘people’, linked to supportive culture, was the top theme. Our people said:

- They are the most conscientious employer I have ever worked for. On the whole, they are very supportive of staff.
- NCI's really care about the wellbeing of its employees and management are great.
- The level of care for workers and feeling of community in our team - I know that (whatever is going on outside of work) I will be supported by my colleagues and friends to cope and recover.
- Friendly, supportive colleagues, employer that cares about its employees, I strongly believe in the work, good work/life balance. It's by far the best place I've ever worked.