

## University of Leicester

### Leicester City Council Health and Wellbeing Board

#### Briefing paper: Mental health and emotional resilience.

September 2020

There is a range of information about the University of Leicester response to COVID-19 that can be viewed on our webpages: <https://le.ac.uk/research/coronavirus>

The University has also created a case study document capturing learnings from our actions and response to the local lockdown. This was created to share with other universities the ways in which they can prepare should a local lockdown occur in their own communities.

This paper will outline examples of how the University of Leicester has supported **mental health, wellbeing and resilience** over the course of the COVID-19 outbreak for:

- Our staff
- Our students
- Our local community, and
- Through our research

#### 1. Our students

All frontline services have transferred to remote delivery including accessibility support, counselling and welfare services since lockdown in March. Hence, there was no gap in these services being provided at this crucial time.

An initiative between LPT, UHL, CCGs, UoL, DMU and Loughborough universities to pull together mental health services for the student population in Leicester and Leicestershire had started before lockdown in response to identifying 18-24 year olds as the biggest group accessing services. Further development of this work has progressed during lockdown and focus groups are underway to tailor to student's needs.

Over 400 students in university and private accommodation were contacted during lockdown and engaged with to ensure they were aware of the guidelines and could raise any issues they were experiencing. Emergency packages containing items such as pyjamas, money, food and other living essentials were sent out to those in need. Students who required more specialised support could access Advisory services to be provided with help during self-isolation, deep cleaning services and study support.

The University has a student Hardship Fund as part of our normal support services. This year due to COVID the budget for this fund was increased thanks to philanthropic donations and a new Digital Hardship Fund was created to specifically support students who did not have access to a device for remote learning from home. For students still on or close to campus, our Library also increased both the number of laptops that can be loaned and the duration of time it can be loaned for.

Students were also able to join free activities such as yoga, knitting, pizza making and self-care. This helped students feel connected and take time out to focus on their wellbeing.

## **2. Our staff**

Staff health has remained a key priority for the University in the Major Incident Meetings that took place over lockdown and has been a core part the Lockdown Exit Group in planning the safe return of staff to campus or continued home-working.

The Wellbeing team immediately responded to the national lockdown and closure of campus with the development of an online Wellbeing Support Toolkit that is continuously refreshed and updated. This toolkit has been viewed by 3045 different staff, which is 77% of our workforce. Within the toolkit, working with the University's Race Equality Staff Forum and EDI Team, there is a dedicated area of the toolkit to highlight to all staff the resources available to support BAME colleagues.

A Wellbeing at Work Questionnaire was conducted to understand how staff were coping to continue to work during the national lockdown. Staff feedback indicated that their Digital Wellbeing was being negatively affected and that digital detox measures would positively support their health and wellbeing. The VC has recognised the importance of the Stress at Work Policy and presented an introduction to this revised policy with an introductory video. Managers Briefing Sessions to implement this policy have been well attended and evaluated.

Over August, staff have been encouraged to reduce screen time wherever possible as part of virtual meetings, reduce email traffic, and have been given an additional day of leave (28 August).

In addition to the Wellbeing Support Toolkit, the Staff Health and Wellbeing Team provided online campaigns and facilitated virtual physiotherapy sessions; a virtual stretch class targeted at home-working environments and promoted SMART Working resources designed for reducing sedentary behaviours.

## **3. Our local community**

As part of our local efforts to minimise the strain on the NHS, we provided clinical psychologist support to frontline staff working in hospitals and signed up more than 400 staff and student volunteers to support the NHS in a range of administrative and support roles.

The University's Vice Chancellor and a coalition of leaders and personalities invited anyone with connections to the city and county to tell the world what we celebrate about Leicester and Leicestershire and how we'll come through this current challenge and move forward together in hope using the hashtags **#TogetherInHope** and **#WeAreLeicester**. To see the engagement achieved through this campaign, search for the hashtags on Twitter.

Attenborough Arts Centre have reached out to communities in various ways to support people as they transitioned into lockdown and self-isolation. At the beginning of lockdown, the education team created and delivered hundreds of child activity packs to SEND schools across Leicester. The same team have also produced four digital activity packs to aid learning from home in a fun and exciting way for primary school children. For our creatives, we created 'Attenborough At A Distance', a group where people could share work they have produced and we also set challenges for them, to make a night time scene, a piece on the theme of space, etc. Finally, our 'Next Gen. Creatives' have been engaging local artists with opportunities to create collaboratively, for example creating personalised flags, culminating in a semaphore performance through Teams – with the video they produce being shared online.

Through the U.matter community engagement project, various free online wellbeing activities were offered through our community partners, such as Mind Apples (a social group for mental health), Writing and Drawing for Wellbeing, and the Local History Café which engages older people in conversations about our social history. We have also created resources and shared these with our partners to help them transfer to online platforms and offered free access to a paid zoom account whilst the George Davies Centre and campus remains closed for external room bookings. To find out more visit [www.umatterleicester.ac.uk](http://www.umatterleicester.ac.uk).

#### **4. Through our research**

Our researchers are involved in a wide variety of research projects related to COVID-19. Indeed, the University of Leicester has received the second largest amount of COVID-19 related research funding in the UK. For more information on our health and wellbeing related research, please visit <https://le.ac.uk/research/coronavirus/health-and-wellbeing>

We also have academic expertise influencing how mental health services and support can be improved during COVID-19. Dr Michelle O'Reilly is leading a project on suicide response and prevention with Leicestershire Police and Leicestershire Partnership NHS Trust to utilise data collected by the police on completed suicides over the last five years, and they are comparing March-August 2020 with the previous years in terms of numbers and demographics to see the influence of COVID-19 on suicide. Also, the team are interviewing Police Officers about suicide and the impact of COVID-19 on them. Drs Michelle O'Reilly and Diane Levine have joined an international partnership led by Professor Carmit Katz (University of Cambridge) who are discussing issues related to domestic violence and child abuse in the context of COVID-19. They have published a framework in the journal Child Abuse and Neglect based on those collaborative discussions and continue this research.

Research is underway to better understand the impact of adapting to a more digitally reliant world for work and social interactions. For example, understanding the impact of homeworking on work-related stress during and after lockdown led by Professor Stephen Wood.

The Centre for BME Health has included the provision of COVID-19 information and resources in predominantly south Asian languages and in formats accessible to the community. We have been working nationally with the NIHR to ensure that ethnic minority voices are heard and that the impact of COVID-19 on minority groups is addressed in future research.