

Mental health matters at Consensus



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Supporting opportunity, choice and success

Erica Dowdell

Workplace Wellbeing Lead
Consensus

Erica has worked in the care industry for almost 27 years and joined Consensus in 2008 as service manager of Moor Lane, near Bristol. Bringing with her a background in nursing, Erica went on to manage several Consensus services including residential services Ellsworth House, near Bath, and Ty Machen, near Caerphilly, before deciding a new challenge was in order. The role of workplace wellbeing lead seemed to be the perfect opportunity for that.

“Those who spend most of our working lives taking care of others often have to be reminded to take care of our own mental health and wellbeing. If we can help our colleagues to feel more content, healthy and happy, that not only improves their morale but can have a direct improvement on the levels of care they give to the supported individuals with learning disabilities, autism and other complex needs in our services,” said Erica. *“Coping with the stresses of the Covid-19 pandemic meant that, for many of us, our working environments and relationships with work changed and we are now, quite rightly, expecting more from our employers in promoting and embedding a culture of care where people feel valued and heard.”*

Erica heads a workplace wellbeing team which includes three wellbeing coaches from three different services and regions across Consensus. They work alongside the HR Team to clearly identify ways to provide proactive and preventative support for all colleagues, and how much of a crucial role this plays in staff retention.

Erica added, *“The wellbeing coaches are already playing a great part in working with me and championing the overall wellbeing initiatives. Their role is not intended to be a counselling service for colleagues. Rather, they offer peer-to-peer support and confidential advice – which could be face-to-face, by phone or a Teams meeting – and signposting to local and national mental health and wellbeing support organisations.”*

“Embracing mental health and reducing the stigma is at the core of what we do.”

The next vision for the team was to create a network of mental health first aiders (MHFAs) throughout Consensus. Early in February the first cohort of 15 successfully completed their training with Mental Health First Aid England and became certified MHFAs; the second cohort of 15 qualified in mid-May. These individuals will help to make up a wider team to support those colleagues that need it, and will come together for regular networking and reflective practice sessions. Erica has also completed her own MHFA course as well as ASIST (applied suicidal intervention skills training).

“The wellbeing coaches play a great part in championing the overall wellbeing initiatives

Over past months, the team has promoted national awareness days, weeks and months such as International Men's Day in November, National Grief Awareness Week in December and The Samaritans' Brew Monday initiative in January. Because financial concerns can affect many people in work, financial wellness was also included as part of the overall health and wellbeing strategy. A six-week Budgeting Bootcamp began in April, to provide financial education, resources and tools for colleagues via weekly emails, videos and more. In May, Women's Health Month 2022 was marked by a first-ever Menopause Café online event, led by two of the wellness coaches and open to everyone who has experienced or is experiencing the menopause, regardless of age or gender.

Erica said, *“Embracing mental health and reducing the stigma surrounding it is at the core of what we aim to do, whilst also looking at a variety of initiatives to help improve the wellbeing of our staff even more. For instance, the impact of workplace-related stress is a major issue, it contributes to poor mental health and is the number one reason cited for sick days in Great Britain. We can all suffer with stress at times and in different ways. However, 90% of people will give a different reason for absence rather than disclosing an impact on their mental health due to work.”*

“I'm a big believer in talking through our problems whatever they may be and sometimes it's the small things that can make a massive difference! Our message to colleagues is: ‘Don't be hard on yourself, if you are struggling at the moment – please reach out, there will be someone that can help.’”