

Awash with Wellbeing

a short-form White Paper
addressing the procurement of
school staff wellbeing provision



A Personal-Professional Wellbeing Back Story

Badly done wellbeing can be worse than no wellbeing at all.

I know, I've had wellbeing done badly to me and I've seen it done badly to others. It was one of the reasons I got involved in it in the first place, over thirty years ago.

I cared about wellbeing, for myself and for the people I was working with, but I didn't really know where to go for it or from whom to obtain it - or even what I wanted from it. In the end I found my own way, bumbling around, trying this, studying a bit of that.

Working with good teachers and reading sound texts, as well as attending worthwhile events all helped. At that time these were hard to track down but maybe that was the point, the seeking after, stages in a journey etc. But it was a personal issue, nothing to do with the workplace and one in which I had no expectation of support from anywhere.

Back then, which wasn't that long ago, wellbeing as such didn't really exist. *Mind, Body, Spirit* generally covered the subject although it was considered a tad left field and practitioners of it a bit suspect. And it certainly wasn't widely acknowledged as being something employers should be involved in.

Much of the *workplace* wellbeing that occurred during this period tended to be implicit, the beneficial though incidental effect of other personnel or continuing professional development (CPD) interventions. There have always been exceptional exceptions to this however eg John Lewis, Richer Sounds, Southwest Airlines and Baxter's Foods amongst many others, where staff wellbeing by any other name, has always been central to the culture.

Thirty years ago, many felt it wasn't the place of school employers to be overtly involved in wellbeing issues (it's worth noting a lot of people still do and their view of wellbeing as a private matter needs to be respected). However, Dame Carol Black's review of the health of Britain's working age population, *Working for a Healthier Tomorrow* (Health, Work and Well-being Programme, 2008) began a shift in thinking. The Government's prompt cross party response was their document *Improving Health and Work: Changing Lives* (Health, work and Well-being Programme, 2008). Wellbeing in the workplace was beginning to gain ground and credibility.

Staff wellbeing tipped from minority alternative thinking into mainstream organisational policy in the late Nineties. It was no longer a case of wellbeing or efficiency: people were beginning to understand and accept the evidence that wellbeing and engagement *underpinned* productivity and effectiveness.

I could see this shift in my own work as CPD Coordinator with a Local Authority (LA) School Improvement Service. Where several years earlier my

suggestions for introducing more personal-professional wellbeing themes into our service provision had been dismissed outright - 'We don't do that here' - gradually, incrementally, they became acceptable and finally standard. By 2004 the LA had created one of the first Staff Wellbeing Manager appointments in the UK and I was it. My non-vocational interest and professional role had happily converged.

Today school staff wellbeing has mainstream status, which is probably a good thing. Progressing it to the point where it becomes an organisational prerequisite - institutionalised wellbeing - rather than an individual choice might not be so wise.

Neither does anyone want a situation where well-intentioned wellbeing strategy degenerates into a soulless tick box exercise, defeating the very point of the work altogether. This is why choosing the right staff wellbeing intervention for your school and rolling it out properly is so crucial.

Not a Silver Bullet

Wellbeing should of course be continually enriching the soul because at its core it's a process of personal awareness and compassionate action, not a one-off, externally applied quick fix.

You can't 'do' wellbeing to anyone in fact. It's something people have to opt for themselves; something they need to discover and work at and arrive at in their own time - and continue with, because our wellbeing needs never stop evolving.

This can be done by supporting people toward their own wellbeing with good organisational practice. They can be put in the way of quality material, established deliverers and inspiring experiences, a variety of wellbeing experiences. This is necessary because while there are human commonalities between us, we also have individual preferences and what brings enlightenment and succour to one may not be as meaningful or useful to another. Place and timing are also important.

A one size, one-off wellbeing intervention therefore will probably not fit all school staff wellbeing needs.

Good quality wellbeing deliverers are aware of this and will continually nuance and develop their work to meet the shifting needs of both the school and the individual. None of this is quick, cheap or easy, but it makes sense in the long-term.

Ultimately however, whether people take advantage of these opportunities to become more well is up to them; it's their choice.

Nevertheless, it's understandable that some people are wary of wellbeing and feel they would rather not be made well no matter how worthy the

intentions of the employer school or established the reputation of the deliverer. They may have had a poor experience of wellbeing interventions in the past and don't want to risk repeating it. Individual preferences in regard to wellbeing need to be taken into account as in any other area of school policy.

Despite this many schools will pursue wellbeing as a kind of cure-all for employee ills although a knee-jerk reaction is unlikely to be terribly effective and could actually cause more issues than it solves.

The heart of most schools seems to be in the right place, however. But while they recognise the importance and potential of wellbeing for their staff and organisation, they are often flummoxed as to where to start with it.

Wellbeing providers (suppliers) abound offering what appear to be ready-made wellbeing solutions to suit every need and budget. Therefore, it's simply a matter of making a choice, right? Possibly, though the choice-making isn't a clear-cut process.

School Wellbeing is a Serious Business

Any kind of school staff wellbeing work needs to be carried out respectfully, tactfully and obviously with some kind of integrity. The intervention itself needs careful procurement; wellbeing isn't snake oil to be peddled or a bandwagon to jump on as it's passing.

Wellbeing is a state of existence humankind has always aspired to. It's not a new drive; what's new is employers' keenness to be involved in it. Managing this properly in the school setting is a big ask of anyone. An empty worded staff wellbeing policy alone won't hack it. Nor will a hastily sourced and implemented quick-win initiative (although as part of a wider wellbeing approach these can be remarkably effective).

Managing wellbeing, be it of an individual or organisation, is a nuanced mix of skill, science and art. It's too important and far reaching to be toyed with or dabbled in, especially when you're rolling it out across a school and liable to be influencing untold numbers of people. **It's an eternal process, one which needs strategic integration and ideally, the involvement of all.**

Wellbeing is right on trend at the moment for lots of obvious reasons, not least the seemingly never-ending effect and repercussions of Coronavirus. And the intention to do well by wellbeing is real, on the whole. People have realised it's not just a nice-to-have anymore, it's fundamental to the healthy function of every school.

But while good intentions are laudable, they need to be backed up with the appropriate expertise. There's more to staff wellbeing than on-line surveys,

counselling lines (how qualified and *experienced* are the people at the end of these lines?), mindfulness and nutrition and exercise and so on.

In truth all of the above or none of them might be what your school needs right now. Or perhaps something completely different again. Whatever you chose though, it needs to have merit and create the right impact.

No one wants a situation where someone else has to come in after the event and mop up the wellbeing damage caused by an ineffective or inappropriate wellbeing intervention.

Know What You Want

Having presumably carried a school staff wellbeing needs analysis of some kind, you'll have an indication as to where support and development for your people is commonly needed. This will be your school staff wellbeing *imperative* providing the information you need to investigate how this work should be carried out and who should be involved in it.

Encouraging the creation of a *Staff Wellbeing Team at the outset of this work and collaborating with them to investigate your school's current staff wellbeing position can be a useful start. Questions they might ask both themselves and colleagues could include:

- How would a wellbeing intervention help us?
- How would it differ from what the school might normally offer in this situation?
- How do we want to feel (in place of what we feel at the moment)?
- What would help us to achieve that improved state?
- How could that happen? What needs to take place?
- What can the school do? What can we as staff do?
- If it's successful, what impact would it have on us personally?
- If it's successful, what impact would it have on our work?
- If it's successful, what impact would it have on the school?

This initial work is *intrinsic* rather than imposed, immediately involving staff and enabling them to begin assuming shared ownership of their workplace wellbeing.

It also brings clarity: now you'll have some insight into what wellbeing success for the staff and the school might look like, invaluable for briefing your chosen wellbeing provider in a situation where there isn't in-house wellbeing expertise or capacity to deliver staff wellbeing yourself.

What Criteria Can I Apply When Choosing Between Wellbeing Providers?

There is no official international wellbeing standards commission or auditing body. However, the BSI has created a code of practice, PAS 3002, which 'aims to be a supplement to provide a benchmark for organisations around the world regardless of jurisdiction, size and sector in relation to the health and wellbeing of its workers and so help to improve the health of the working population'. What Works Wellbeing offer robust direction in terms of evaluative tools, with their Wellbeing Measures Bank covering almost every angle you might want to address to monitor and measure wellbeing in the workplace.

Whether wellbeing is benchmarkable or not is still a moot point. But in this world of target-setting, attempts to standardise and systematise it seem inevitable. Others may decide that trying to rationalise subjective happiness (wellbeing) in the school workplace is simply mudding the waters, possibly unworkable, and not something they want to buy into.

Yet, wellbeing interventions can impact staff engagement and happiness for the better. While convincingly hard evidence as to these improvements (usually derived through data pertaining to decreased absenteeism and increased retention and production etc) is often difficult to obtain, qualitative evidence is much easier to collect and possibly more useful in the long run. And if there's one thing wellbeing should be, it's a long-term strategy.

In the meantime, staff wellbeing provision continues to be something of a Wild West free-for-all. Everyone has an opinion about it and their own unique interpretation of it. Differentiating between providers and products, and their appropriateness to your school's needs is fraught with problems even for someone with an understanding of the sector.

So how do you objectively differentiate between the innumerable staff wellbeing offers out there? What useful criteria can help you make a more informed procurement choice for your school?

The following considerations may be helpful in developing a properly structured and effective wellbeing procurement process. They can be applied to any wellbeing provider no matter their size or specialism. While not infallible, they can narrow the field.

In-depth investigation of these criteria rightly demands time and patience. Staff wellbeing implementation is a serious business and an important purchase for your school, one which needs to be absolutely fit for purpose – more actually - *it should do no harm.*

Wellbeing Procurement Checklist

1. **Compliance:** does the staff wellbeing product meet the Standard for Schools Professional Development (Department for Education, 2016)?
2. **Service or product:** is this a uniquely developed and genuine staff wellbeing offer or another product the provider has simply repurposed as wellbeing?
3. **Experience:** how long has the provider/deliverer been working/practising/researching in the specific wellbeing field they are advertising; just how specialist are they in what they are delivering? In which is their sector wellbeing delivery experience: public, private or third sector?
4. **Impact data:** while it's nigh on impossible to measure all round wellbeing growth, specific areas can be more easily ascertained. How do they evaluate impact? Who has conducted their evaluation in the past; where and when; how many took part over how long etc; what specific wellbeing intervention was investigated; has the evidence been published and if so where; where has the intervention subsequently been implemented (NDA allowing)?
5. **Testimonial/peer review:** what do others say about this provider, their product and its impact? What recent feedback have they had? Is this provider credible? Can they cite where they've made a difference? Would other reputable customers be comfortable testifying for them?
6. **Follow-up:** guarantee provisions and customer service, what are they offering?
7. **Pricing structure:** this will be based on a combination of variables including expertise, experience and industry reputation.
8. **Scalable:** what kind of numbers can they deliver to whilst still maintaining quality? Would their product work in a small to medium sized business? Or is it more suited to a corporate setting?
9. **Embeddable:** how quickly and easily would you/they expect this work to be rolled out and fully integrated into your organisational structure?
10. **Sustainable:** for how long do you/they expect this wellbeing product to be impactful? How will you continue to monitor and measure impact? Will this affect your organisational capacity?
11. **Tailorable:** is this wellbeing product a one-size fits all or can it be flexed to meet your unique school profile?
12. **Badging:** has the provider achieved any institutional awards? Has their work been recognised in or outside the profession? Do they work with an awarding body? How else is their work recognised?

- 13. Professional membership:** this should be approached with care. Under GDPR it is no longer possible to confirm with all professional bodies whether an individual is actually a member of a particular body. Theoretically, therefore, people can claim to be a member of a professional or trade body when they may not be. This aside, where are the provider's affiliations; with which organisations and institutions do they align themselves?
- 14. CPD:** how are the provider's own staff developed, especially in the area of wellbeing; what do they invest in and how often?
- 15. Contingency:** have they the capacity and resources to implement their product in your organisation in an emergency? What are their contingency plans?
- 16. Values:** these give significant insight into an organisation. How authentic do they sound? Are they off the shelf or hacked from elsewhere? Or do they sound as if they were something their staff were genuinely involved in creating? **Importantly, do their core values align with your school's values?**
- 17. Legal standards, compliances, insurances:** are they up to date and up to standard for delivering organisational wellbeing ie H&S, Risk Assessment, GDPR, DBS (where necessary), Confidentially/NDA, PL and indemnity insurance etc.

Onus

Finally and importantly, onus: where is the onus in your school's wellbeing drive? Is it upon the staff to keep themselves well, or you as the organisation to look after them? Or will you have a blended approach, sharing responsibility between the school and the individual? Once decided, complete transparency will help everyone - staff, school employer and wellbeing provider - to understand the common goal.

Identifying wellbeing onus is often avoided, unintentionally overlooked or fudged in organisations. However, being clear and above board about where and with whom responsibility for wellbeing resides can be the first step towards enhanced relationships and increased engagement in the workplace. Once determined, onus can even be embedded within the school's values.

It can also support ongoing review of the impact and currency of the wellbeing intervention in your school.

To Sum Up

Staff wellbeing procurement is a responsible task and not one to be rushed into.

Staff wellbeing 'solutions' proliferate. The sector is crowded, complex and confusing.

Staff wellbeing *providers* vary in every way including reputation, cost and impact.

Schools need a deep understanding of what they want to achieve from their staff wellbeing intervention in order to be able to brief their wellbeing provider properly and achieve a successful outcome.

Schools need to be transparent as to where and with whom staff wellbeing resides within the organisation, so everyone understands their part in the wellbeing process.

Schools should be clear that it is unlikely that no one wellbeing intervention will bring about total and forever staff wellbeing. The on-going solution is likely to be a blended one, imbedded into the organisational culture and subject to regular review.

While schools might want to aim for institutionalised staff wellbeing, individual preferences within this ideal should also be respected.

The Author

My name is Jane Anderson PhD. I've been working in wellbeing, training and development for 30 years. I'm published, experienced and have a PhD in **Place Affected Organisational Change (and complex approach linking environment, engagement and human wellbeing)**.

I was School Improvement Wellbeing Manager with one of the first Local Authorities in the UK to create such a role and have lectured and presented, researched and trained in the subject since.

This white paper is for everyone involved in school staff wellbeing. It's not proffered as best practise or the only route to successful staff wellbeing procurement, simply as a helpful tool in the process.

My own wellbeing work starts with Place. The quality and aptness of where you are and how you interact with your spaces and places is fundamental to a quality state of mind. It's impossible not to be somewhere, not to be in a place, and that place is always affecting and directing you in a multiplicity of ways, as you are it. Sometimes for the better, sometimes not.

I use Place understanding as route to creating trust amongst people. Everyone has an opinion about Place, and they are usually happy to share it and look in some depth at their workplace and how they might improve it. This kind of design participation builds peer respect, improves engagement and begins the process of change.

The Staff Wellbeing Framework model, built on my research into authentic staff wellbeing, places *Staff Wellbeing Teams at the centre of organisational staff wellbeing. Staff usually know what they need to be well (pay and conditions and curriculum notwithstanding); they just need to be released and enabled to actualise it. I help schools reach this point so they can begin helping themselves.

To find out more about:

School Staff Wellbeing Framework model [click here](#)

School Staff Wellbeing Teams [click here](#)

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Qualifying Statement

The views expressed in this white paper are my own. None of it should be interpreted as recommendation or advice. I am simply sharing my experience of school staff wellbeing intervention with the intention of it being useful to others.