

Agenda item:	11
Attachment:	E

Cover sheet

Meeting title:	Board
Meeting date:	24 July 2019
Title of paper:	Approvals staff support and progress in the context of an HRA-wide Staff Survey Action Plan
Purpose of paper:	Following Leadership Team discussions on action, Approvals Operations management were asked to provide Board with an update on responsive and planned actions in the Approvals Operations and Support Divisions further to Staff Survey Feedback and feedback from Staff Partnership Forum.
Reason for submission:	For information
Further information:	<p>The Approvals Service Directorate implemented a significant workforce change in April 2019 following a year of informal then formal consultation with staff, overseen by Workforce Board.</p> <p>This has led to significant challenges for staff, and interestingly staff feedback since the changes reflect general feedback in Staff Survey across the HRA which was carried out in 2018.</p> <p>This paper sets out the areas of activity in Approvals Operations since April 2019 which relate to staff feedback on the integrated process that was implemented, either in response to that feedback, or undertaken to accelerate planned developments based on early learning once the integrated process went live.</p>
Dissemination:	The information in this paper has been shared with Approvals staff at a training day in May and subsequent communications. It was also discussed with Staff Partnership Forum in June in relation to specific points raised by representatives.
Time required:	10 minutes
Submitted by:	Chris Cannaby – Head of Approvals Operations Jonathan Fennelly-Barnwell – Deputy Director, Approvals Service
Submission date:	4 July 2019

Approvals staff support and progress in the context of an HRA-wide Staff Survey Action Plan

1. Background

In April 2019 around 100 staff took up new posts in Approvals Operations with a further 10 in Approvals Support following extensive consultation on the proposed changes to structure and process, and on how it would affect staff.

Large-scale organisational change can affect staff adversely even where the need for change is understood and accepted (Johnson 1992; Strebel 1996; Herold et al 2007). This paper sets out some of the key areas of focus in relation to staff well-being during the implementation of the new structure and processes, and actions being taken to address them.

Workload has been area of concern from staff. Although the integrated process and structure did not of themselves generate a reduced staffing requirement, a reduction in headcount was required to meet organisational savings targets resulting from overall reduction in Grant in Aid funding. Although the Integrated Process for HRA Approval was designed to achieve some efficiencies and reduction in duplication, it was recognised that the reduction in establishment would mean that workload would feel high, particularly initially while new arrangements bed in and new roles and activities are learnt. Additional temporary agency staff were recruited to provide an element of buffering in this initial period. It is worth noting that the new structure created dedicated posts for certain functions, such as member support, where we had identified variability in performance and insufficient oversight previously. It is apparent that this greater emphasis on areas that were not consistently being delivered is one of the greatest contributors to perceptions of increased workload. The calculations used to generate the workload volumes of each new role were based on an assumption of full delivery of all the functions of the prior job descriptions. This has meant that planned work to create further efficiencies and streamline activity have had to be prioritised

Staff have identified that training in newer components to their roles can be challenging - for example where a former 'Assessor' is now also responsible for liaison with RECs and the regulations around the Research Ethics Service, or where a former REC manager is now undertaking review of study-wide governance and legal compliance in areas other than research ethics. Whilst this challenge is noted, it is also a central part of staff development and increases the range of skills and expertise that our staff possess.

In the Approvals Operations Division a significant number of staff have reported difficulty in adjusting the new process and structures. In addition to the need for learning and gaining experience, this has been compounded by ongoing recruitment where some posts were unfilled at the end of the job allocation process or where staff have resigned for career changes, or for promotion within the research community. There is the clear positive effect for staff that career progression opportunities with the HRA have opened – as a Band 6 is appointed to a Band 7, so there are opportunities for promotion in that wake. However, the sense of churn in teams has exacerbated issues with staff resilience and the perception of

workload and skill mix. This is in addition to factors which are reflected in Staff Survey responses across the HRA in 2018.

Feedback to Staff Partnership forum expresses concern at the team's ability to cover a perceived increase in staff sickness for the period April to Jun 2019. In fact, the level of sickness is significantly lower from the same period in the previous year. However, management note that within sickness reports, there is an increase in self-reported stress and anxiety as a reason for absence, making staff support a priority for management.

2. Management Approach

In June, Leadership Team (LT) discussed staff survey findings in detail. LT agreed to develop and implement an Action Plan on those findings. LT also discussed a noticeable overlap between those findings from Autumn 2018 pre-dating the Approval Workforce Consultation outcomes, and Approvals staff feedback since April 2019. As Approvals management has already responded both to staff feedback, and made adjustments to the integrated process based on observations on the process, the Approvals Service Directorate is already implementing a significant component of an organisational plan.

There are four areas of activity that are being taken forward in the Approvals Operations Division to address feedback from staff that they are not yet delivering an optimal service:

- Recruitment
- Training
- Team support
- Process review and refinement

a) Recruitment

The number of staff leaving the organisation after the implementation of the workforce change has not changed significantly from the normal range, but as a greater proportion of all staff are in the Operations Division, since April 2019 it has been in a state of ongoing recruitment. As one member of staff is promoted, so we seek to promote from within to backfill these vacancies if possible. Even like for like, internal recruitment is subject to HRA Vacancy Control Policy and Procedure, and while the financial scrutiny of recruitment panel is needed, it builds in another step at each stage of the process from the point at which a colleague resigns, down to the filling of the 2nd or 3rd post down the 'chain'.

Approvals Operations management is currently focussed on two principles relating to the issues raised by ongoing recruitment:

- Better choices
- Quicker recruitment

The management team has made careful choices on several scores

- Where we can deploy staff to cover workload resulting from vacancies

- Decisions on which vacancies to prioritise and the sequencing of vacancies to maximise opportunities for staff progression,
- To minimise the impact of perceived recruitment lag.
- We have recruited 7.4 wte fixed term staff/agency workers since April additional to the establishment through repurposing of money within overall budget.

The management team provided to Chief Executive and Staff Partnership forum an analysis of vacancy rate and duration (average vacancy 4.7 weeks). Although empty posts add to overall burden, we recruit as expeditiously as the rigorous financial control of HRA Vacancy Control policy allows.

A proposed revision to the Vacancy Control procedure aims to improve quality of applications considered to avoid unnecessary delay in approval. By ensuring applications are well prepared with financial review in advance of the meeting it is anticipated that more requests are approved first time without the need for further questions / review. This focuses Operations management attention about the impact on staff of recruitment. We have deprioritised some activities and KPIs accordingly, and we have deployed staff from all areas of the Division on a short-term basis to work on processing of amendments, and to clear backlogs.

A further challenge in recruitment remains: it is generally expected that teams cover maternity leave from within budget resources, which in a team incorporating half the HRA's staff presents a significant financial pressure. Despite numerous challenges of ongoing recruitment, we have communicated to staff the positive aspect of progression opportunities. Importantly staff who were demoted in the workforce changes have now attained positions at their original Band following targeted support which has enhanced skills and knowledge in the broader context of an integrated process.

b) Training

Staff training and learning remain central to the Approvals workforce, with many roles increasing the breadth of knowledge required of our staff. Bringing together staff from different backgrounds and roles to deliver an integrated process requires the identification of the base of knowledge needed for each role. We can then ascertain the baseline in current staff and arrange for targeted support.

Access to the right type of learning is a significant area that has been identified since the integration of the teams and is reflective of feedback from the Staff Survey 2018. Learning and development is therefore central to LT action planning. The Operations management team has developed several initiatives, some of which are supported by the Learning and Development team to upskill all members of the team. Further learning opportunities across the organisation, responding to Staff Survey feedback have been agreed by LT. There is an agreed framework for leadership development at all bands and in all teams.

Within the Approvals Service specifically, we have developed process-specific learning which complements the general learning and development available across the HRA. It is enhanced with initiative such as the Leadership Framework and learning support loans. The learning matrix created for Operations and Support staff sets out a systematic way of tracking knowledge and progress. Importantly, a feature of the restructuring was to ensure reduced spans of management. This means that leaders of micro teams, and line managers

within them have fewer staff each to support. 1-1 meetings and the scope for discussion of applications enhance the options for staff to apply and test their developing knowledge in an environment of personalised leadership. Nevertheless there are challenges in delivering sufficient learning and support, given the proportion of staff who have been promoted over recent months.

A critical area identified in this new system of micro team structure has been in line management skills. As well as reduced management span allowing for more dedicated supervision in the experiential component of a '70:20:10' approach to learning, a series of taught sessions on management skills, and the nuts and bolts of HRA policies have been developed.

However, staff feedback does suggest a pre-occupation with formalised learning opportunities, and Directorate management have reflected that greater focus should be promoted on experiential and self-directed learning to balance these prevalent perceptions. This can also be extended to LT's action plan.

c) Team Support

Supporting the teams in Approvals Operations prioritises support to the Band 7 Approvals Managers (AMs) who lead the micro teams. A central key part of this is a clear understanding of each other's roles within teams. Extensive ongoing support has been given to AMs so full and formal line management can be cascaded through the teams as usual within the fully integrated structure. Features of the support to AMs which can then be replicated as line management is devolved are:

- Leadership advice to assist in developing strategic oversight of teams
- Mentoring with an experienced manager at a higher Band Approvals Operations Manager to model effective practice
- Creating opportunities to share good practice within peer group
- Buddying system implemented to new starters and those identified as needing additional support

Sickness absence, its impact and its perceptions have been common in feedback from Approvals Operations staff since April 2019, though it has decreased significantly. Even so, aside from our duty of care to staff and the importance of staff wellbeing, we are sensitive to the impact of absence on staff morale generally. The management team remains mindful that the numbers of reported Anxiety/Stress episodes have gone up and all except 2 cases were in Approvals Operations. However, considering that the number of uncategorised absences has gone down by more than that number, if the two are linked, paradoxically it is possibly a positive that staff are better able to recognise it (and are not somatising), and if they feel more able to report it.

Approvals Operations have implemented a supportive system for those returning from sickness absence so as not to overwhelm them and possibly lead to more sickness. In June 11 staff had been off for more than a week, and all but 2 had returned under this supportive approach. We recognise that these arrangements mean that other staff need to continue providing levels of cover for colleagues, which adds to the concerns about workload.

Generally, we remain confident the principle of smaller management teams will make it easier to support individual staff in managing their work and their professional development though we have deliberately not fully rolled out further line management down through lower bands, whilst staff are adopting the integrated process and adapting to ongoing refinements.

d) Process review and refinement.

The components of HRA Approval were known at the time of implementing the Integrated Process to benefit from reflection on and learning from their implementation (the 'unknown' changes needed), and on further activities that had already been planned (the 'known' changes needed). The last domain on management activity relating to staff feedback is dependent on two areas of activity:

- Operational review and planning to enable leaner process
- Energising and acceleration of planned projects that will support the process and workforce.

Some projects in the HRA Approval SIP have not yet made significant impact in the level or quality of applications. Further work is ongoing in relation to amendments, guidance and Research Systems (RS) solutions that could not be implemented to coincide with workforce changes. We expect to see wider roll-out of the Combined Ways of Working (CWOW) project over the coming year.

However, some work is being accelerated by diverting resource. Another significant area of staff feedback is that REC members requesting hard copies of papers outside of agreements is adding greatly to the administrator workload, not to mention cost and environmental impact. A business case has been agreed for a Fixed Term Appointment to engage directly with RECs and deliver training and support, and to redevelop learning resources to support use of the Member Portal.

3 Conclusions

The four themes of response detailed here address the majority of concerns the Operations team are experiencing. When the other projects the HRA are working on come to fruition as the integration of both Assessment and REC process and teams has done, then the management team is confident of delivering a high-quality system for HRA Approval. Some areas of our focus align with new and planned activity relating to the staff survey, particularly around learning and development, and staff wellbeing.

Approvals Operations, and therefore the HRA, maintaining the performance of previous operational teams depends to a significant degree on to the quality of the ongoing learning available to the team both specific to the process, and more general skills development. It also depends on the leadership that supports the team, and the support given to the Operations team to further refine the process.

The HRA has been in a state of near-permanent change since its inception, and recent Approvals Service developments have been the most widespread change affecting staff. Our staff continue to show resilience and a high level of professionalism, and dedication to providing a quality service. The tensions between this and large-scale change are inherent

and exacerbated by the challenging financial context. Early discussions have started on how the HRA might significantly alter the profile of our HRA Approval workload and the associated organisational burden. We are considering further significant changes to how we go about our work, some of which are in train already within the RS programme. In the meantime, however, building on approaches implemented in Approvals, reprioritising, accelerating change, and responding to staff feedback promptly before an organisation-wide plan can be implemented can also be seen as a testbed for approaches to continuous improvement in supporting the staff who are our most important asset.

References

- Herold, D.M., Fedor, D.B., Caldwell, S.D. (2007) 'Beyond Change Management; A multilevel investigation of contextual and personal influences on employees' commitment to change', *Journal of Applied Psychology*, 92 (4), 942-951
- Johnson, G. (1992) 'Managing strategic change – strategy, culture and action', *Long Range Planning*, 25 (1), 28-36
- Strebel, P. (1996) 'Why Do Employees Resist Change?', *Harvard Business Review*, 74, 86-92