Breakout session: Staff Wellbeing

Facilitators: Raj Kapoor & Sofia Shakir
Attendance: 37 participants
Purpose: To create an open and honest space for discussing staff wellbeing in the advice sector, acknowledging both the rewards and the challenges of the work, especially when support systems are lacking or pressures feel unrelenting.

What Does "Staff Wellbeing" Look Like in Practice in Your Organisation? What Are the Biggest Barriers?

Participants shared a range of practices and reflections on what wellbeing looks like in their organisations. A key theme was the importance of **listening,** ensuring staff feel heard and valued. Creating **safe spaces** for open sharing, such as through supervisor support or informal conversations in the office, was seen as essential. Team days and social outings helped combat loneliness and foster connection, especially in hybrid environments. Supervisors who show emotional availability, not just operational oversight, were praised for their impact.

Several organisations offer **quarterly counselling sessions**, reflective practice groups, and "wash-up" meetings to help staff process difficult experiences and avoid carrying stress home. Flexibility, psychological safety, and adaptability to individual and family needs were highlighted as critical. One organisation holds an **annual away day** combining strategic exercises with motivational speakers. The strongest correlate for wellbeing, as noted by Jo Hickman, is a sense of **belonging,** something that must be nurtured daily, not just in response to crises.

What Low-Cost or Creative Initiatives Have Made, or Could Make, a Real Difference?

Many teams have implemented **low-cost, high-impact initiatives** to support wellbeing. These include reflective practice spaces, employee assistance plans, and small health-related reimbursements (e.g., for optician or dental visits). Some organisations have partnered with mental health teams to provide mutual support, even co-applying for funding. Others have embedded wellbeing into their **business plans**, ensuring it's a shared responsibility across the organisation.

Creative ideas included **vouchers for volunteers**, free period products in bathrooms, and **staff-led social committees**. Celebrating achievements was also key, through peer-nominated awards, financial recognition, or simply acknowledging successes in team meetings. Social activities like **book clubs**, "lunch and learn" sessions, and shared meals helped build camaraderie. These initiatives, while modest, contributed significantly to a culture of appreciation and inclusion.

How Can We Build a Culture Where People Feel Safe to Speak About Stress, Burnout, or Mental Health?

The conversation turned to **structural changes** that could support a more open and supportive culture. The idea of a **four-day work week** was widely supported, though

concerns were raised about meeting funder expectations and maintaining service availability. Some organisations explored **compressed work weeks** or generous time-off policies, such as allowing three days off every four weeks. Studies show that 91% of organisations that trial a four-day week continue with it, citing increased productivity and wellbeing.

Jo Hickman suggested dedicating one day a week to **learning, development, and creative thinking**, drawing on research to support this approach. Participants also discussed the need for **sector-wide conversations** about wellbeing, not just organisation-specific ones. The session concluded with the idea of a **shared Miro board** to continue the dialogue and build on the momentum.

Breakout Group Reflections

In one breakout group, participants discussed the value of **social connection,** such as a good night out to debrief and bond. Remote work has made it harder to maintain a sense of community, and bringing people together physically can be costly. Some organisations host **volunteer-only gatherings** to foster inclusion, while others seek to create shared experiences across staff, students, and volunteers.

There was also a note of caution: some wellbeing initiatives can feel **superficial,** like being told to "take a walk", and may not address deeper issues. Participants emphasized the importance of **authentic, meaningful support**, and suggested tools like **annual wellbeing surveys** to track progress and identify needs.