

Newry and Mourne District Council: Work Related Stress – Case Study (March 2007)

Background

Newry and Mourne District Council is dedicated to the delivery of a comprehensive range of cost effective, efficient services which provide a clean, safe and healthy environment. The Council also promotes the social and economic well-being of its communities through a wide range of approaches from the Economic Action Plan to Community Festivals. All Northern Ireland councils were subject to a Review of Public Administration and as a result this will bring substantial changes. The Work Positive programme and introduction of the Management Standards was undertaken in view of developments in Local Government.

Getting started

Presentations were made firstly to the Management Team and then to the Trade Union/Management Joint Working Group regarding the 'Work Positive' initiative. Both groups welcomed the initiative. Management buy-in was essential to facilitate employee attendance without cost to the employee or their section. Briefing sessions were subsequently delivered to all staff groups by Health and Safety Executive for Northern Ireland.

Communications on the process were also undertaken through, direct mail, newsletters, email, posters and asking unions to raise the profile. There was a generally positive response from staff

The Health and Safety Officer within the Personnel Department was the champion for NMDC

Look at the hazards

Benchmark data was made available by the HR department who record sickness absence figures routinely. Data is analysed by numbers, duration and causes of absences. Numbers of contacts with the Employee Assistance Provider (EAP) are also monitored.

Identify who might be harmed

It was recognised by Newry and Mourne Council that stress might affect staff in any department. The Council employs approximately 450 staff and all staff were given the opportunity to participate in the initiative.

Evaluate the risk

The questionnaire was posted to all employees. Employees were asked to identify which department they worked in. This was to allow action to be more focused i.e. targeted departmentally. Additional open questions were included with the survey regarding awareness of self-referral to the EAP, main causes of stress, personal coping mechanisms and suggestions for prevention.

The questionnaires were returned anonymously to the EAP. There was a 50% response rate.

Focus groups were jointly facilitated by Health and Safety Executive for Northern Ireland and the Councils confidential employee provider. The focus groups allowed for individuals to voice concerns. Results of the focus groups were recorded anonymously and subsequently communicated collectively to Senior Management.

A voluntary steering committee was then formed in order to review the information collected from the focus groups. It considered both the questionnaire results and focus group suggestions and established a draft action plan.

The outcome of the focus groups and draft action plan was presented by the EAP, supported by HSENI to Senior Management. Without this process it would otherwise have been difficult for Senior Management to get an accurate reflection of the perceptions or cultural climate within the organisation.

Taking action and developing solutions

A Council wide 20-point action plan was drawn up and its implementation is underway. Individual members of staff will be appointed to implement, monitor and review each action point. Actions identified as being priority included:

- Wellbeing/work-life balance training and initiatives
- Training on dealing with stress related absence
- Improve communications
- Staff directory improve communications, service areas team building
- Protocol for elected Councillors for work requests
- Cross departmental team building initiatives
- Training initiatives more accessible to all staff
- Consultation and introduction of performance or appraisal system

The questionnaire to be issued again in Spring 2008 to measure the impact of the solutions and results of change.

Lessons learned

Accessibility of employees to participate was important - some briefing sessions and focus groups had to run at 7.30am to facilitate service provision. Initially there was a poor attendance at focus groups for former manual employees. Focus groups were re-ran for the former manual employees and attendance at the second focus groups were good (Better attendance was due to running smaller groups which were work service specific).

External facilitation of focus groups and audit process was very useful in gaining employee trust and confidence for obtaining a balanced outcome. Regular updates to keep employees informed was important, even if there was nothing specific to report.