



DUNDEE CITY COUNCIL: AN INTERGRATED STAFF SUPPORT SERVICE

1. Organisations involved

Dundee City Council, Social Services Department

2. Description of the case

2.1. Introduction

The social work environment can present employees with many challenges and demands due to working with vulnerable individuals, and at the same time, dealing with the day to day challenges in their own personal lives. Dundee City Council social work department comprises of approximately 2000 employees, 75% between the ages of 40 to 60 years old with 85% of these being female.

The Social Work Department at Dundee City Council, places a high value on all of its employees; and, moreover, in maintaining and improving their psychosocial wellbeing. It was for this reason that in May 2004 a Staff Support Service, following on from an initial successful year-long pilot, was established. The service promotes several initiatives, aimed at an individual and organisational level, to improve employees' psychological well-being and physical health. The primary aim of these initiatives is to raise morale within the department, giving employees a sense of being valued and in turn reducing absenteeism.

2.2. Aims

The main objective of the integrated Staff Support Service is to enhance employees' psychological wellbeing and physical health. This is achieved through education, training and other initiatives which promote a shared responsibility for employee's psychological and physical wellbeing between both the organisation and the individual employees.

It was intended, through the general improvements in the individual's psychological wellbeing and physical health, to reduce sickness absence and staff turnover; and therefore reduce the associated costs to the Social Work Department.

2.3. What was done, and how?

The initial stage in the development of Staff Support Service was to appoint a staff support officer. The staff support officer regularly attends the staff, management and directorate meetings. The primary purpose of this is to:

- Provide an opportunity for all differing levels of personnel within the social work department to be involved in the development of the initiative.
- To champion and promote the service.
- To allow employees to feedback and evaluate the initiative, to allow continuous improvement and adaptation to the specific needs of the employee population.

A group representing different levels of the department was established the 'Healthy Working Lives Group'. The group meets regularly to ensure effective two-way communication and promotion of the service to the employees.

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The service was designed and developed by engaging with employees at all levels in the organisation. The Staff Support Service includes individual employee and group level interventions with a focus on mental health and wellbeing.

There were issues in the early stages of the service with regard to convincing all managers that it would be in their interests to communicate the services to employees which would enable and encourage participation. Not all (but most) employees have e-mail accounts, so a variety of communication methods are required, including relying on managers to inform their teams and ensuring the effective distribution of the staff magazine. For this reason, from the beginning, a highly proactive approach was taken to meeting employees at all levels as well as providing evidence of effectiveness to managers. Additionally local "champions" sit on the Healthy Working Lives Group and promote events, activities and opportunities in person and via notice-boards in every unit.

Where possible these opportunities are accessible by taking services onsite into offices and units, precluding the need to travel and reducing costs in terms of transport and time.

Mental health and psychological wellbeing initiatives

A confidential employees counselling service

Initially the counselling service comprised of two in-house counsellors. A further eight appropriately qualified and experienced part-time counsellors were then recruited to accurately reflect the gender ratio within the employee population. The service accords with the BACP (British Association of Counselling and Psychotherapy) codes of practice and ethics and is a completely confidential service.

The referral rate from 2003-2007 was around 75 employees seeking help per year, with the average number of sessions being 5 and the mode being 9. Mostly employees self-refer and first appointments usually take place within seven working days of referral. The service does not differentiate between personal and work-related problems in terms of employees' eligibility for counselling.

Employees can go in work time if they negotiate this with their manager, or if they prefer, they can go outside of work time.

A rolling programme of stress management training and stress management workshops

Regular stress management training day courses are delivered complementing the stress risk assessment process for managers and employees. All services have completed stress audits.

This was followed by the design and implementation of a 'Mental Wellbeing Policy and Procedures' and complementary training. The policy was developed by a group of employees representing the different sections of the department. An 'all staff' consultation was undertaken before the Policy and Procedures were finalised and implemented. All the managers are currently being trained on the Policy and Procedures and there are plans for all employees to have a half day on Mental Wellbeing. Selected employees have also been trained in 'Critical Incident Debriefing' which is used to support employees individually or in groups where there has been a significant critical event for example the death of a child for those who work in Child Protection Services.

Team development days

Bespoke team development days were designed in collaboration with team managers. These days would be set up by teams as required, often at times of particular stress or a need for changes in service remit or delivery. The staff support officer's input is to support the managers and employees to examine and understand stress and help them manage change. Dependant on the employee's requirements these days can also incorporate relaxation sessions. Work is continually ongoing in the 'Staff Development Section' on how to use these days most productively.

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Input into all employees induction processes

The Staff Support Officer has a slot in the 'Departmental Induction Programme' and ensures that all new staff members are aware of the importance of promoting their own mental wellbeing and that of their colleagues, as well as an awareness of the Mental Wellbeing Policy and Procedures.

General physical health promotion initiatives

While some of the services provided are specifically focused on mental health and wellbeing, the link between physical health and mental wellbeing is also recognised and supported by other provisions.

Promotion of health and lifestyle related activities and information

Health and lifestyle topics were introduced as regular articles in the bi-monthly employees' newsletter – "Staff Matters". This is supported by awareness-raising sessions and/or information posted on dedicated notice boards at various locations throughout the department. Health promotion leaflets are distributed to employees and an area on the Social Work Department intranet site specifically for health promotion has also been developed.

Health themes are also promoted throughout the year: for example in one year the organisation promoted men's health week (health fair), bowel cancer screening, breast cancer month (information and web links), menopause, back-care week (a sequence of classes on "better backs"), national no-smoking-day (smoking cessation classes and a pilot of the "Easyway" programme). The most recent sessions (2009) have included meningitis, bowel health and mental wellbeing.

In response to employees' requests there were weekly classes offering yoga, Tai Chi, jogging, salsa and meditation/relaxation free of charge. Teams were able to participate in taster sessions on-site and as part of development days. Many of these 'taster' sessions went on to become self financed by staff directly with the instructor. Some employees have gone on to develop their own groups including a hill walking group and a netball team.

Regular health fairs

Health fairs are held each year offering employees information on various health-related topics.

These health fairs offer a range of health promotion activity to employees including; complementary therapy treatments, health fitness and lifestyle checks, healthy snacks and the opportunity for employees to network with other colleagues. They are also used to inform employees about mental health issues including stigma, food and mood and domestic violence.

Back-care initiatives

A range of qualified and experienced complementary therapists were recruited to offer employees with physical problems that impact on their work a series of treatments of options. Employees can choose from physiotherapy, sports massage, reflexology, osteopathy, chiropractic, acupuncture, podiatry and cranio-sacral therapies. Employees are allowed to negotiate to go in work time with their manager.

Health, fitness and lifestyle assessments

A comprehensive health, fitness and lifestyle assessment was available to all employees, including assessment of blood pressure, height, weight and body/mass index, aerobic and lung capacity. This was supplemented by discussion about lifestyle, including stress. Employees were able to travel to and attend these checks in worktime.

Subsidised slimming club membership

Annually, usually in February, employees are offered subsidised membership of the "Scottish Slimmers" weight loss regime for an initial ten week programme. Many have gone on to self finance and reach their target weight.

Organisational level interventions

- Introduction of family friendly policies
- Flexible Working Hours
- Stress management and risk assessment policies and procedures
- Management development programmes - These include training programmes such as Mental Health & Wellbeing Training (for Managers), Enhancing People Skills, and Handling Stress Training for Managers which have all been developed in response to issues identified through the Staff Support Service.
- Mediation Service - In 2009 a Mediation Service was also set up within Social Work to tackle issues between employees. The aim of Mediation Service is to resolve issues at the earliest possible opportunity before the problems become entrenched.
- Mandatory Stress management training for all managers - This includes; training on recognising the signs and symptoms of work-related stress, its associated mental and physical health implications, identifying the potential causes of stress in the workplace and how to find and create effective solutions to managing workplace stress

2.4. What was achieved?

Achieving objectives

The main objectives of the integrated Staff Support Service were and are still being achieved:

- To enhance psychological wellbeing and physical health through education and the promotion of a shared responsibility between both the organisation and the individual employees.
- The Staff Support Service continues to reduce absenteeism, staff turnover and its associated costs. For example in the second year of being established, the Social Work Department of Dundee City Council saved circa £150K (165.000€) on sickness absence due to a reduction in stress, anxiety and musculoskeletal problems. Employees regularly feedback that they did not require to go off work, or returned sooner than expected, due to the supports offered by the service.

Employee Feedback and Evaluation

Feedback questionnaires and evaluations were administered to the employees throughout the process of implementation and at regular points throughout the years. This feedback allows the service to be continually adapted and developed to the individual needs of the employees.

An online health needs assessment questionnaire is administered every three years to allow the service to be monitored in terms of its effectiveness in improving the psychological and physical health of the employees, particularly those who had been absent with stress or who had recently experienced stress. This assessment includes questions about mental health and wellbeing.

The results of these questionnaires and evaluations inform and shape the department's management development/training programme. Further initiatives have been implemented as a result of this feedback including the introduction of family friendly policies and flexible working hours.

Through the employee feedback many service users express their appreciation at being able to access high quality health-promoting activities and information in the workplace. A regular comment is that this is good for their morale and demonstrates the employer's consideration for their mental and physical health and wellbeing.

All the services are continuously evaluated and these evaluations show the positive regard for them, especially the counselling service which provides a fast response to employees' psychological needs and mental health issues. All information given during the counselling sessions is confidential and therefore creates difficulty in evaluating the service with regard to its effectiveness in addressing

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specific mental health issues directly. However the employees' feedback on the service rated it very highly, would recommend it to friends/colleagues and the perception was it was instrumental in reducing or eliminating the amount of taken due to stress, anxiety and other mental health issues. Feedback from managers also reflected that of the individual employees, which was the counselling service had been fundamental in reducing absenteeism due to psychological related illness and additionally had enhanced employees' motivation and performance.

Training programmes and events are well supported, with employees making time in their busy schedules to attend. Feedback regarding the back care project is that participants and their managers believe it reduces and/or prevents sickness absence due to musculoskeletal problems.

The information provided by the service on psychological and physiological health informs employees' working practices and therefore provides a benefit to their families and the social work department clients in addition to creating a healthier, happier and better motivated workforce. The Staff Support Service contributes to a positive health and wellbeing culture in Dundee City Council.

2.5. Success factors

One of the major success factors of the Staff Support Service is employee involvement. Employees were involved throughout the development and are involved in the continual evaluation and adaptation of the service. The employee feedback is communicated either directly by individual employees or via their Healthy Working Lives group representative. This process ensures that the Staff Support Service meets the needs of individual employees and/or the requirements of groups of employees with specific need or interests.

The initiative takes a holistic view of health and works on the premise that there can be no health without good mental health.

The role of the staff support officer is vital. Their regular attendance at staff, directorate and management meetings makes it possible to always have in mind employee's psychological and physical health issues irrespective of what is being discussed. This also makes it possible to involve management as well as individual employees into the planning and implementation of interventions. This way commitment from all sides is guaranteed, which generally forms another important success factor for interventions targeting mental and physical health at work.

Another success factor is the ability of employees to access the counselling and back care services very quickly - far quicker than if they go via their doctor. This often reduces the time employees need to take off work, or the length of time they may be absent for.

2.6. Further information

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Scotland's Health at Work Silver Award

Through the provision of the services noted above Staff Support Service achieved the Scotland's Health at Work (SHAW) Silver award in 2006. This was a national award programme, which is now the Healthy Working Lives initiative; this rewards employers who demonstrate commitment to improving the health, well being and ultimately the performance of their workforce. The Bronze and Silver Healthy Working Lives Awards were consolidated in the first 6 months of 2009 and the department has applied for the Gold award which it hopes to achieve by the end of the year. These awards are only given where health promotion is provided then embedded within the organisation.

<http://www.healthyworkinglives.com/>

<http://www.healthyworkinglives.com/award/index.aspx>

Finalist for the Care Accolade Awards

Dundee City Council Social Work Department's Staff Support Service reached the finals the Care Accolade national award scheme in 2007.

<http://www.sssc.uk.com/News+and+Events/Care+Accolades/Care+Accolades+2009.htm>

2.7. Transferability

The Staff Support Service has been used as a model, elements of which have been implemented in other councils in Scotland. The success centres on there being an individual within the organisation who has the responsibility for championing the psychological and physical health of the employees. This individual should be willing and able to work with differing levels of personnel, groups and individual employees.

It is important that employees are involved in the design and implementation of the service and the service is designed around their needs, and not dictated to by other, often competing, agendas.

It is also important to continually evaluate the service in regard to the agreed objectives i.e. reduced absenteeism, staff satisfaction and overall feedback, so that it can continually evolve and be adapted to carry on meeting the needs of the employee population.

3. References, resources:

- Towards a Mentally Flourishing Scotland - This policy and action plan outlines the Government's plans for mental health improvement for the period 2009-2011. <http://www.scotland.gov.uk/Publications/2007/10/26112853/0>
- Scottish Slimmers - Was founded in Scotland in 1980 it offers a network of slimming classes over Scotland which through nutritional advice, support and encouragement to make small positive changes in lifestyle and behaviour, help its members to loose weight and maintain this loss long term. <http://www.scottishslimmers.com/>
- Healthy Working Lives – A service which is in place to support employers in creating a much healthier and more motivated workforce. <http://www.healthyworkinglives.com/>
- Care Accolade Award - The Care Accolades celebrate and promote good practice and workforce development in social services. Care Accolades awards employers who have policies in place that retain and support employees. It also awards employers who provide examples of excellence in partnership working and innovative training programmes. <http://www.sssc.uk.com/News+and+Events/Care+Accolades/Care+Accolades+2009.htm>