



# Carrickfergus Borough

## **Workplace Stress**

Stress has serious and profound implications for individual and organisational performance.

Stressed staff will invariably take more sickness leave and as well as this effecting services, there are often gaps that need to be filled through having to employ casual or agency staff, increased overtime working and staff having to work longer hours.

Research has shown that staff who suffer from work-related stress are unlikely to remain long with the organisation which leads to increased costs of recruitment and higher training requirements for the new replacement staff.

The Courts have also awarded significant amounts to employees who have suffered from work-related stress.

Under the Health and Safety at Work (NI) Order 1978 (as amended) employers have a duty to ensure as far as reasonably practicable, the health, safety and welfare of employees. Employers must also assess health and safety risks under the Management of Health and Safety at Work (NI) Regulations 2000 (as amended).

While in the past health and safety management focused on physical wellbeing, it is now recognized that the legislation applies equally to psychological health and wellbeing.

In October 2004, employers' obligations under the 1989 framework Health and Safety Directive (89/391/EEC) for the protection of employee occupational health and safety, was extended to include work-related stress when EU social partners formally signed a framework agreement.

### **Northern Ireland Local Government Sickness Absence:**

- The overall absence rate in 2009/10 amounted on average to 12.39 days lost per employee.
- Stress, depression, mental health and fatigue was the largest cause of days lost (22 %.)
- Stress, depression, mental health and fatigue absences average 28.0 working days
- Lost productivity due to stress, depression, mental health and fatigue calculated at 3.6m
- 81% of Northern Ireland Councils have introduced a stress management policy.
- Northern Ireland Audit Office advised 'that all Councils should be proactive in their management of stress related absenteeism.'

(NIAO: Absenteeism in Northern Ireland Council 2009 -10 – Report by the Local Government Auditor)

### **Work Related Stress Case Study**

This is a case study to demonstrate the good practices in dealing with workplace stress through a step by step risk assessment (HSE Management Standards) approach taken by Carrickfergus Borough council.

The Management Standards represent a set of conditions that, if present, reflect a high level of health, well-being and organisational performance. It allowed Carrickfergus Borough Council to assess the current situation amongst its employees using a stress survey and focus groups. The focus groups promoted active discussions with staff and enabled the council to decide on practical improvements that could be made.

## **Carrickfergus Borough Council**

Geographically positioned on the east coast of Northern Ireland, Carrickfergus Borough Council is a smaller sized local authority with a workforce of some 208 employees. It is one of twenty six local authorities across Northern Ireland and as such has a range of statutory functions to fulfil.

Carrickfergus Borough Council's area is made up of Greenisland, Carrickfergus and Whitehead. The borough is 32 square miles, with a population of over 40,000.

The Chief Executive is the most senior officer in the Council's management structure which comprises the Chief Executive's Office and four Departments, each headed by a Director. The Chief Executive has direct responsibility for Corporate Management, Finance, Audit, local elections and Emergency Planning. Directors are responsible for specific areas of business, namely Support Services (Finance & Personnel), Environmental Services (Environmental Health and Cleansing), Building Services (Building Control & Maintenance) and Development Services (Economic Development, Museum, Leisure, Tourism, Marina, Parks and Events).

The Review of Public Administration was launched by the Northern Ireland Executive in June 2002 with the remit of reviewing the arrangements for the accountability, development, administration and delivery of public services in Northern Ireland. 'Rumours' continue that the proposed Review of Public Administration (RPA) will proceed and be in place for 2015 and council employees are uncertain how this major change will impact on them. This review did impact negatively on some of the report results.

# **The Process Design and Methodology**

## **Preparatory Work**

Representatives from the Health and Safety Executive for Northern Ireland (HSENI) met with senior managers within the council to develop a process map and timescales.

At this early stage the council managers identified that it would be beneficial to engage with trade union shop stewards and get their support for the process.

## **Consultation**

The group decided that the consultation process would follow the principals contained within HSE Stress Management Standards. The HSE stress indicator questionnaire was used as the survey tool to measure Council's performance in managing work related stress.

Eight cross functional departmental focus groups with staff at all levels, including directors, were formed to substantiate and discuss further the results obtained. There were 35 participants interviewed which represented 16.8% of staff.

The main purpose of the focus group research was to draw upon respondents' attitudes, feelings, beliefs, experiences and reactions about working life within the council and to explore practical and workable improvements. Other benefits of these groups were that the council could listen to employees and learn from them, ensured active participation of council employees in the risk assessment process and demonstrates management commitment to a participative process of managing the risks of work related stress.

## **Action Plan Development**

At the end of August 2011 the Council's Corporate Health and Safety committee took receipt of the HSENI's 'Report on the Implementation of Management Standards for Work Related Stress at Carrickfergus Borough Council'. During that meeting of the Corporate Health and Safety Committee it was agreed that an action plan would be developed to address the key areas of concern highlighted in the HSENI report.

It should be pointed out that there were many areas within the report where staff said that they were happy with the systems currently in place; however, the aim of the report is to focus attention on the main areas for improvement.

## Main Concerns

The Management Standards process highlighted the following concerns:

- Depot yard security issues
- Poolside management workload during swimming programmes
- Working from home
- Inconsistencies regarding leave
- Sickness absence
- Management inconsistency interpreting policies and procedures
- Grievances
- Internal communication
- Single status review delays
- Lack of effective performance management
- Team meetings

## Improvements implemented

First and foremost Carrickfergus Borough Council has now in place a Health, Leisure and Wellbeing Working Group to specifically look at general wellbeing amongst workers as well as those who live in the borough and visitors. The Working Group is made up of representatives from various pay grades across the Council departments as well as having elected member representation.

Leading on from this the council is now finalising a Health, Leisure and Wellbeing Strategy for 2012 – 2015 to clearly identify the health and wellbeing needs of staff and the community and to promote health and wellbeing through all aspects of council work.

“This strategy looks at both the health and wellbeing of those working for council as well as those who reside in and visit the borough. This is in recognition of the fact that we need a healthy workforce in order to deliver our aims and objectives to the wider community. When considering health and wellbeing needs amongst staff cognisance was given to sickness absence rates, use of Carecall, referrals to occupational health, findings from the Health and Safety Executive for Northern Ireland’s (HSENI) stress audit and responses to a staff Health and Wellbeing survey.

It is widely accepted that almost any decision undertaken within council has the potential to impact on the health and wellbeing of staff. Good **communication** is therefore essential in order to influence decisions and to manage change within an organisation. A key piece of work to follow from this strategy will be the development of a corporate communication strategy.

The Human Resource function has a huge role to play in monitoring and maintaining employee health and wellbeing. Whilst CBC has only one Human Resource Manager, responsibility for many HR functions is devolved to line managers. A range of **Human Resource policies** currently exist which are there to assist in the management of staff – sickness absence policy, alcohol at work, smoking policy, bullying/harassment policy, disciplinary policy, grievance procedure to name but a few. A major piece of work is currently underway to review these policies and procedures and a training programme will follow to ensure the consistent application of these across all council departments.

Beyond these policies, additional policies and services exist which are aimed at maintaining and improving the health and wellbeing of staff. Staff can avail of **referral services** such as the Carecall counselling service which is provided to staff free of charge. Staff may be referred to an Occupational Health consultant whose aim is to aid an employee's return to work after a period of absence.

Employees are also encouraged to participate in team building exercises and **Corporate events**. Many of these events involve volunteering, such as; beach cleans and litter picks. Other events such as the Mayor's Christmas lunch are purely social and are aimed at encouraging staff from various departments and council buildings to mix in a social setting. Employees also avail of an additional half day of annual leave in recognition of their valuable contribution to the work of Council throughout the year".

Other improvements identified during the management standards process and now being put in place include:

#### Depot Yard Security:

- Risk assessments being completed and communicated to staff.
- Training for lone workers
- Scavenging policy and site safety rules to be developed and communicated to staff and the public.
- Training to be given to staff regarding completion of incident book and investigation of accidents.
- Consideration to be given to provision of additional cover at site during weekends.
- Manned barrier now in place at site entrance.

#### Poolside Management:

- Consideration to be given to training additional leisure centre staff to STA level 2 swimming instructors.

#### Working from Home, Leave inconsistencies, managing attendance and grievances;

- All policies currently under review (most reviews completed and new/revised policies communicated to staff).
- Policy has been developed for inclement weather.
- Training to be provided to staff regarding the implementation of council staff policies to ensure consistency of approach and additional leadership training for managers

#### Grievance:

- Review of grievance policy completed and new policy in place. Staff training to follow.
- Training currently being sourced for all line managers in mediation/negotiation.
- Trawl conducted to identify council Harassment Officers (training to follow).

#### Performance Management/Appraisal System:

- System has been developed, agreed and is being piloted amongst senior managers with effect from September 2012. Intention to introduce for all staff by April 2013.
- Training to be provided to all line managers. First training day scheduled for 31<sup>st</sup> August 2012

#### Managing Attendance Programme:

- Review of current sickness absence procedures completed which has resulted in a new 'Managing Attendance Policy'.
- Training for managers in new procedures and how to conduct effective return to work interviews taking place in near future.
- Provide clarity regarding sharing forms with HR and finance.

#### Communication:

- A staff newsletter was launched in July 2012.
- Currently developing corporate communication strategy.
- Line managers to conduct regular team meetings/briefings.

#### Single Status Review:

- Efforts to be increased to draw the single status process to a conclusion.

#### **The challenges:**

The Council and its staff have faced a number of challenges since work commenced on the Council's first 'stress audit'. A new Chief Executive, Ms Sheila McClelland, took up her position within Council in January 2012. This brought about new ways of working within the senior ranks of the organisation which are gradually filtering down to employees on the ground. The Council has seen its sickness absence figures declining in the past couple of years, however, a number of senior figures within the organisation are expected to be absent from work for some time due to ill health which has placed increased pressure on remaining staff. So whilst efforts are being made to address those stressors identified in July 2011, additional stressors are impacting on staff morale all the time. That said, Carrickfergus Borough Council recognises this fact and is actively setting about drawing up its Health, Leisure and Wellbeing Action Plan for 2012-2015 to help eliminate stressors, help staff manage their stress and look after their own health and wellbeing.



## What next!

The council has also agreed the following (some initiatives are already in place):

- Lunch time fitness classes in Jubilee Hall
- Access to Smoking Cessation Services
- Health and Wellbeing info circulated by e-mail, poster and via council website
- Lunch time walking
- Cycle to work scheme
- Concessionary arrangements for use of Council facilities i.e. gym, fitness classes and golfing activities.
- The Big Bus brought to Council premises
- Employee Work/Life Balance Booklet
- Volunteering/team building exercises – e.g. beach cleaning exercises
- Currently exploring feasibility of running the Action Cancer 'Action Man' men's health programme

With its Health, Leisure and Wellbeing Strategy almost complete, the Council's Health, Leisure and Wellbeing Working Group are planning a launch event in January 2014 to bring the strategy to the attention of staff and other local organisations. The launch event is intended to double-up as a Health Fair where it is anticipated that staff will be able to avail of advice, information and free health checks on the day.