

DEPARTMENT OF CULTURE, ARTS AND LEISURE (DCAL)

Who we are?

The Department of Culture, Arts and Leisure (DCAL) is one of 11 Northern Ireland Departments. It was created in 1999 by the Departments (Northern Ireland) Order 1999.

What do we do?

In Northern Ireland it is the Government Department responsible for arts and creativity, museums, libraries, sport, inland waterways and inland fisheries, linguistic diversity, archives, and for advising on National Lottery distribution.

No of employees

DCAL employs 288 staff in a wide range of grades and disciplines, both administrative and professional.

Why did the Department decide to introduce the Health and Safety Management Standards?

As part of the Department's commitment to health promotion, the well-being of its employees, and the management of absence due to illness, the Departmental Board agreed to introduce the Health and Safety Executive Management Standards in March 2008.

How did we do it?

In order to secure commitment from management, employees and trade union representatives, the then Permanent Secretary, Paul Sweeney, wrote out to all staff explaining the purpose of the Health and Safety Executive Management Standards and how the process would be taken forward.

Briefing sessions for staff, run by the Health and Safety Executive NI (HSENI), took place on the 29 May 2008 and explained the rationale behind the initiative and details of the process.

In June all staff were asked to complete a questionnaire anonymously, and following an analysis of the results, a series of focus groups were facilitated by the HSENI. Two reports, detailing the findings were produced. Northern Ireland Statistics and Research Agency (NISRA) produced a report on the questionnaire and HSENI produced a report on the focus groups.

A DCAL Steering Group was established with the main objective of drafting an action plan addressing the issues raised in the Survey and by the Focus Groups. The Steering Group comprised of representatives from the Departmental Board, Personnel Branch, every Division in the Department and Departmental Trade Union Side.

Once developed the plan was then endorsed by the Departmental Board and communicated to all staff. It linked the problems identified to practical solutions and seven key areas were cited as requiring action; work/life balance, training & development, business planning, performance

management, deadlines, internal communication and relationships. Actions were identified with timescales, and responsibility for following these up was allocated to individuals and/or groups.

What we achieved?

Some examples of the actions taken are:

- The introduction of a monthly Departmental Team Brief
- A talk to senior management on bullying awareness by a representative from the Labour Relations Agency. This was then cascaded down to all staff
- All staff to be involved in business planning process
- Relaunch of the Mentoring Programme
- Introduction of the Teleworking Programme
- Increased staff awareness of various working patterns available dependant on business needs

The action plan complemented a Sickness Absence Reduction Plan developed by the Department following recommendations made to the Northern Ireland Civil Service (NICS) by the Public Accounts Committee and the NI Audit Office. Examples of actions taken as a result of this plan are:

- Mental health awareness presentations to staff
- Training and promoting use of Harassment Contact Officers in the Department
- Developing and implementing an extensive workplace health improvement programme now in its second year.

Both these plans have helped to reduce sickness absence in the Department and in the last two financial years we have surpassed our Ministerial Targets.

	Ministerial Target	Actual Outcome
2008/09	10.4	7.4
2009/10	9.6	6.9

Days lost per staff year

Lessons learned.

On reflection it may have been more beneficial for the steering group to have been established at the start of the process – before we issued the questionnaires etc. This would have given them more ownership of the whole initiative and a greater understanding of the objectives from the outset.

The response rate to the questionnaire (49%) although significantly acceptable could have been better, as could the attendance at the focus groups (6%). In hindsight it may have been beneficial to reschedule the dates of the focus group meetings to increase participation. The questionnaire did identify a “hot spot” or area of higher pressure which was not anticipated prior

to the survey. Having this information provided justification for addressing pressures specific to this area.

The whole process was communicated to staff in advance but anecdotal evidence suggested that staff did not feel action would be taken following the results of the questionnaire and the focus groups being published. It is hoped that any future initiatives will attract more input from staff given that we have been very proactive in completing the actions on the Health and Safety Management Standards (HSEMS) Action Plan and have communicated this to staff via various channels, for example the Intranet, the Departmental Staff Brief and through our Induction process.

Using NISRA statisticians to compile the Report on the questionnaire results and HSENI staff to facilitate the focus groups helped to ensure staff had the confidence to respond in an open manner and to highlight issues they felt needed to be addressed.

What next?

The HSEMS Action Plan is a living document that is continually updated alongside the Department's Sickness Absence Reduction Plan. Following on from the results of an NICS wide staff attitude survey a Staff Engagement Forum has now been established in the Department. Its primary focus will be on developing actions arising from the results of the latest staff attitude survey but will also take into account other related matters, namely – a post occupancy evaluation report on our new accommodation in Causeway Exchange, and work emanating from the Health & Safety Executive Management Standards.