



Cookstown
DISTRICT COUNCIL

COMHAIRLE CHEANTAR NA COIRRE CRÍOCHAÍ
DISTRICK COONCIL O COOKESTOUN

WORK RELATED STRESS CASE STUDY

Cookstown District Council

Geographically positioned within the centre of Northern Ireland, Cookstown District Council (The Council) is a medium sized local authority with a workforce of some 280 employees. It is one of twenty six local authorities across Northern Ireland and as such has a range of statutory functions to fulfil. As well as these statutory obligations the work areas in which the Council is heavily involved in has expanded dramatically over recent years. This expansion of work has brought with it many challenges for Council employees in adapting to, meeting and managing public expectations.

Why tackle Work-Related Stress?

In August 2006 the Council identified a number of drivers to review the approach taken in managing work-related stress. These included:

- Concerns over the number of days of sickness absence lost to the Council due to work-related stress.
- Guidance issued by the Health & Safety Executive Northern Ireland (HSENI)
- Challenges and uncertainties for staff arising from the restructuring of local government as part of the Northern Ireland wide Review of Public Administration.
- A need to deliver and develop a co-ordinated approach and build upon actions already undertaken in dealing with stress.

Desired Outcomes of the Review.

The senior management team identified that they wanted the review to:

- Involve the entire workforce meaningfully.
- Identify the extent to which work related stress existed.
- Develop tangible actions to deal with and minimise the causes of stress.
- Reduce the number of sick days lost to the Council due to stress.

- Examine the effectiveness of the processes for helping staff deal with stress.
- Ensure that a healthy working environment existed for all employees
- Measure and consolidate on actions taken by Council to date.

“The review provided the opportunity to identify and address the root causes of stress in our Council and reshape if necessary our existing mechanisms for dealing with the issue.”

Ivor Paisley, Director of Corporate Services

The Review: Process Design & Methodology.

Preparatory Work.

A project delivery team who would steer the process was formed which had the support of the Council’s Health and Safety committee, senior management and employee representatives.

Consultation.

The delivery team decided that the consultation process would follow the principles contained within the stress management standards. The HSE stress indicator questionnaire was used as the survey tool to measure Council’s performance in managing work related stress. Four cross functional departmental focus groups were formed to substantiate and discuss further the results obtained.

The focus groups provided a free and open forum where staff could exchange and put forward views on how they felt the Council was performing in helping employees deal with stress. Discussion at the meetings was facilitated by trained facilitators from within the Council with some HSENI assistance. The meetings were structured to explore further why the survey results were as identified; prioritise specific areas for action; and explore potential solutions for inclusion in the final corporate stress management action plan.

Current Provision.

The delivery team undertook an in-depth review of the current level of provision and care available to staff for dealing with work related stress before embarking upon the development of an action plan.

Action Plan Development.

The final piece in the jigsaw was the development of a corporate stress management action plan. It was recognised that the plan needed to be robust and flexible and attract the support of management and employees. The plan focused on:

- Departmental team meetings
- Cross departmental team building
- Induction programmes
- Communication of current stress management provision
- Communicating organisational change
- Exploration of flexible working opportunities
- Early back to work interviews.
- Promotion of health and well being.

Challenges of the Process.

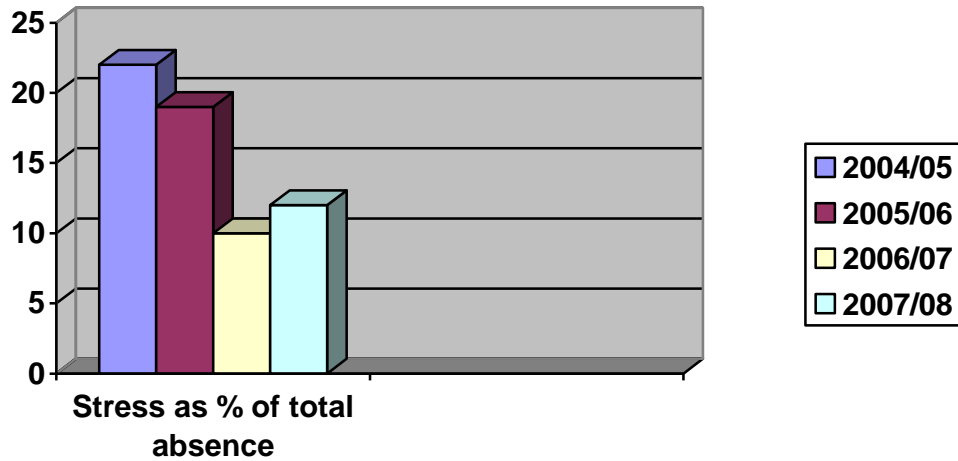
A number of challenges were encountered by the delivery team in undertaking the project. Sticking to a tight project timetable was difficult as different departments had their own priorities which they were striving to achieve. It was also not easy maintaining the consistent momentum required to deliver the programme of work.

Some employees were cynical that the project would achieve any tangible outcomes and a challenge in itself was the gaining of trust in the staff undertaking the process, however once trust was gained we obtained a high response rate to our stress survey assessment, constructive participation in the focus groups and proactive co-operation in helping to start to deliver actions that had been agreed.

Delivering - Key Outcome and Benefits?

With the key outcome from the whole process being the development of a corporate stress management action plan, a number of clear, tangible benefits have been achieved from its implementation. These include:

- Reduction in stress absence levels (see chart).
- Greater ease amongst staff around change due to enhanced communication.
- Enhanced appreciation and knowledge of staff on what other Departments do.
- An increased use of Council's Occupational Health Service, both through self and management referral, helping to promote employee wellbeing.
- Greater uptake of elements of Council's Employee Assistance Programme.
- An increased uptake of training and development opportunities offered.



“Whilst having responsibility and a duty to deliver a range of functions and services to the public Council also has an equally important duty of care for its employees. I am confident steps taken through our stress management action plan will benefit everyone”

MJ McGuckin, Chief Executive, Cookstown District Council

The Process – What worked well?

From inception to completion, the overriding element of success was in having an open and transparent process which involved all levels of the workforce and one in which there was active communication from early on. The input and support given by HSENI proved absolutely critical in providing direction and technical advice on work related stress at the outset with the senior management team and throughout the process with the project delivery team.