

Improving mental health support for staff at Norfolk County Council

Norfolk County Council implemented an assessment scheme to identify adjustments for employees with mental health issues.

1. The problem

Should one of Norfolk County Council's 6,000 employees experience a physical health condition, the organisation offers comprehensive support to keep them well and in work or get them back as soon as possible if they have taken sick leave. The council provides a fast-track physiotherapy scheme, including a function capacity assessment, to quickly identify any adjustments that need to be made for them to do their job effectively.

However, as Occupational Health and Well-being Manager Paddy Lorenzen explains, there were previously no similar arrangements in place for those experiencing mental health problems:

Traditional referrals to occupational health weren't always helpful and still left both parties unsure how to manage the situation. There was definitely scope to provide an equivalent service for mental ill-health, as well as improving how we support staff experiencing mental health issues.

2. The solution

The result of this realisation was the introduction of psychological assessments in partnership

with employee well-being provider Validium. Employees are referred and assessed by clinical psychologists, who clarify the impact of the condition on an employee's job, and what might help them get back to work: 'This helps managers understand exactly what is preventing the member of staff from coming back to work, and what can be done to help them,' says Lorenzen:

One of the main difficulties around managing people with mental ill-health is simply talking about it. The assessment helps the manager be better informed about their situation, and therefore more able to have a conversation and make decisions based on objective information.

As well as psychological assessments, in recent years a suite of other tools has been introduced to help the council's managers deal effectively with mental health issues. Working with charity Rethink Mental Illness, the council uses wellness recovery action plans (WRAPs), with the aim of helping someone with a chronic mental health condition feel empowered to manage it in the long term:

Wellness recovery action plans help managers to be clear on the difference between a 'good day' and a 'bad day' for the employee, and also what they can do to support them during

a crisis. It's a plan for life. Managers are sometimes scared of doing the wrong thing when it comes to mental health but opening up the dialogue around their situation helps both parties.

The council is also encouraging managers to become mental health first-aid champions, to give them the confidence to address issues before they get worse. Alternatively, employees can also choose to circumvent their manager if they wish and instead seek help from a team of trained well-being officers.

3. The outcome

The suite of mental health tools the council has introduced over the last few years has certainly made its presence felt. Of those staff who have received support for a mental health issue since 2014, 40 per cent said it had stopped them taking

sick leave when they otherwise would have done, and 58 per cent said they had been able to return more quickly from sick leave than they would previously:

The changes themselves aren't groundbreaking, and the support is the same regardless of job function, but they make a big difference to our staff and demonstrate the importance of being able to talk openly about mental health. The well-being support we offer is going to continue growing. Our employees feel more supported if they experience psychological ill-health, and a reduction in sick leave is also hugely valuable for an organisation funded by the public purse. Supporting our workforce's mental health isn't rocket science – it's now just something we do.

SOURCE: Whitehouse (2018)