

## Workplace Health Promotion in Donegal County Council

### About the authority

The Donegal County Council is a local authority located in the north west of Ireland. It is ultimately concerned with improving the quality of services to citizens. It employs approximately 1,000 staff. Roughly, 400 staff work in Lifford (the headquarters) and all other staff are located around the County.

### Why engage in WHP?

The beginnings of workplace health promotion (WHP) can be traced to 1994 when the County Manager began to look at the people issues of staff in general. Outdoor staff whose working conditions needed improvement were the first group to be targeted. Along with personnel the County Manager endeavoured to make senior managers aware of the working conditions of outdoor staff where the provision of basic facilities such as shelter and tea-making were lacking.

This project, which is aimed at progressing people issues, has gradually widened its scope to incorporate not just issues mandated by legislation, but to include a number of voluntary measures ahead of many other County Councils. For example, the County Council was innovative in allocating 3% of investment to staff development six years ahead of its counterparts. Initially, this investment was used to improve the working conditions of outdoor staff, whereas nowadays initiatives are broader and target the needs of all staff and citizens incorporating a cross border health promotion project.

### Main driver for WHP

Since 1994, the County Manager and the Training Manager have been the driving forces behind the County Council's desire to build a better workplace for all. The project has worked through cross-level working groups that work on specific workplace health issues and through the local partnership approach to develop interest amongst different internal players.

The management of the project rests mainly with the Training Manager and Personnel Department, however it is the philosophy of the Training Manager to empower staff to become the owners and drivers of WHP issues. To some extent, this has already started through the various working groups that exist (as part of the growing partnership approach evident in the Council) on issues such as work and family, and health and safety. The management of WHP activities co-operates with a number of expert organisations in the delivery of its programme, such as the Irish Heart Foundation (IHF) and the North Western Health Board.

### Establishment of co-operation and participation structures

Integrating WHP initiatives into the authority structure and procedures is an ongoing task and many policies already exist in draft form, such as policies on smoking cessation, anti-bullying, and harassment. The impetus for these policies stems directly from the findings of evaluation exercises on WHP. Policies are normally developed through the partnership approach at local level,



which is representative of both staff and management. The Personnel Department then brings policy documents to completion and disseminates them to Area Managers who in turn implement these policies. The working groups are helping to embed WHP issues at senior, middle, and front line levels. The approach has been to enable participation in the working groups to all staffing levels and then to offer programmes to all staff. The Lifestyle Challenge is an example of a voluntary programme, which has the full support of senior management.

### **Clear objectives**

The topics covered by the County Council's WHP programme include:

- Improving working conditions of outdoor staff
- Health Awareness Days
- Lifestyle Challenge – Fitness and Healthy Eating Programme
- Health issues for men and women
- Staff welfare issues
- Managing your stress.

### **Internal promotion and dissemination of information**

Internal promotion of WHP issues is carried out in a very systematic and comprehensive way. The working groups and the local partnership approach have been a means of getting WHP issues on the agenda of the Council and have been responsible for promoting these issues on a formal and informal basis. Indeed, many of the early sceptics of WHP are now its most ardent supporters.

The Council's information campaign used a combination of media. For example, it has an Intranet with a section on "Health Promotion" and provides information on programmes such as the Happy Heart, Lifestyle Challenge, Eating for Health, Cervical Cancer Awareness, etc. It also provides information through the staff magazine "Grapevine" and hosts periodic health awareness days on site in Lifford. It has poster and information campaigns in headquarters. As well as working with the IHF, the Council has collaborated with the local Leisure Centre in Letterkenny to provide fitness programmes for all staff who wish to improve their health. The Staff Social Club, which is actively supported by the Personnel Department, has negotiated discounts for staff in gyms and fitness centres throughout the County.

The strategy is that health promotion should be visible and accessible and by combining electronic, paper-based and on-site demonstrations, the County Council feels that it is delivering a very positive message to staff. In addition, staff feel that the general perception of the County Council has improved and investments in staff and WHP have paid off.

### **How WHP was set in motion**

In 1998, the County Council launched a Staff Health Programme during Happy Heart Week. Topics covered during a series of workshops included physical activity, diet and addiction. Instructors from the Letterkenny Leisure Centre gave individual advice on physical activity and fitness checks. The programme was well received by staff and

it is intended to continue with further health checks by IHF nurses. Staff were also encouraged to take part in the Lifestyle Challenge Programme. At the workshops, staff were asked to fill out evaluation forms. Feedback from these forms suggested that the workshops were excellent and the majority of respondents felt that it was very important to commence a staff health programme. Topics which staff saw as important and would like to see included in a staff health programme were wide-ranging and included, for example:

- Stress handling
- Women's health
- Men's health
- Mental health
- Emotional health
- Getting active/exercise
- Health issues
- Personal development/assertiveness/body image
- Bereavement
- Alcohol/drug addiction
- Effects of computers
- Bone density checks, etc.

In addition to the above, the Council organised a workshop on "Men's Health Days" in 2000, in order to raise discussion on health issues, assess staff needs, carry out basic medical tests and provide an opportunity for discussion, information, and advice on health and lifestyle. The discussions revealed that staff appreciated the efforts made to highlight WHP issues and many commented on the positive effects of their work in social and physical terms. However, stress, working conditions,

and information on pensions and entitlements, health and safety were issues needing attention.

### **Follow-up programmes**

Following the above exercise, the first Lifestyle Challenge programme commenced in 1999 followed by a second in 2001-2002. The 2001 programme was offered in seven areas throughout the county. At the end of the current programme, each participant will evaluate it and determine the benefits of it to him/herself. Participants who successfully complete the challenge will receive certificates in March 2002.

Since 1998, a stress management training programme has been in operation and favourable reports have been received from more than 100 participants. Other initiatives, which responded to staff needs, include distribution of information on women's health issues, health awareness days, access to a nutrition expert, formulation of a draft smoking cessation policy, management training in how to listen to and respond to staff needs particularly in relation to health, safety, and wellbeing, etc.

### **Evaluation process**

Evaluation routinely follows specific health promotion initiatives using a combination of methods, such as "happy sheets", survey, or focus group discussions. Results are subsequently presented to middle management. A major result from WHP initiatives is that the number of employer liability claims has

decreased by 50% in the last five years. In addition, the high take-up and completion rates of IHF programmes are a positive indication of the general health of staff.

### **Staff satisfaction**

The County Council conducts bi-annual satisfaction surveys and indications are that staff satisfaction has greatly improved. Morale is higher amongst staff and there is evidence of greater organisational commitment. Of the men who participated in the "Men's Health Days", there were reports of improved job satisfaction, fulfilment, job security, variety and enjoyment of work. In addition, there was a general feeling that the men were happy to be able to get up and go to work and work was considered important for mental health.

### **Citizen/Customer satisfaction**

Customers appear to be more satisfied and the number of complaints has decreased.

### **Has health improved?**

Since 1994, working conditions of outdoor staff have greatly improved.

There are fewer sick days overall and since 1995, there is a marked decrease in the number of smokers.

### **Making plans for the future**

Over the last number of years, WHP initiatives have been pursued on an ad hoc basis and based on attendance at recent events there is a huge appetite

for health promotion. However, the time is now ripe for the development of a more formal County Council policy on WHP in order to ensure sustained action and development. Plans for the future include the appointment of a Staff Welfare Officer and the development of a strategy with specific, medium-term targets for WHP.