

United Kingdom

The Northern Ireland Court Service

About the authority

The Northern Ireland Court Service (NICtS) is a distinct civil service department. The role of NICtS is to facilitate the business of the courts of Northern Ireland, which falls under the authority of the Lord Chancellor's Department in the United Kingdom. NICtS employs approximately 680 staff, 70% of whom are based in Belfast, with the remainder dispersed throughout other court offices in Northern Ireland.

Significance of WHP

The significance of workplace health promotion (WHP) is enshrined in one of the Court Service's corporate objectives, i.e. "to create an environment in which our staff and their contribution to our business are valued". Before the establishment of a dedicated Workplace Health Unit (WHU) in early 2000, health and safety, and staff support services existed separately. However, it was decided that a major contribution could be made to the development of staff health and well being by joining the two services together under one discrete unit within Human Resources (HR) and look at health, safety, and welfare holistically. Although each function would retain its specific responsibilities, it was felt that a combined approach would reflect positively on the Court Service as an employer. Special aspects of this case study include Management Board support from the outset, a dedicated WHU, and the development of a Programme Action Plan and Corporate Health Plan based on a comprehensive, organisation wide assessment of health needs.

Project infrastructure

Led by the WHU, a Workplace Health Committee (WHC) was established to co-ordinate and lead a sustained, planned programme aimed at improving the health of NICtS' staff. The Committee is made up of senior representatives from each operational division, management including HR, WHU, and the trade union.

The project is managed by the WHU, which has overall responsibility for WHP within NICtS and it operates within an agreed programme of action approved by the Management Board (MB).

This project goes beyond statutory measures of WHP and incorporates health and safety, and staff welfare under one unit. In financial terms, initial interventions required staff time (approximately 50%) rather than direct financial aid, however a budget figure of £27,000 was suggested for the implementation of programmes and publicity materials for year one of the project.

Establishment of co-operation and communication structures

MB approval was granted for a WHU and its phased programme of work in January 2000. The WHU has to regularly update and inform the MB of its progress through a series of interim reports. Following approval from MB and consultation with trade unions, a new Workplace Health Committee was established. The new WHC is an extension of the former Health and Safety Committee. In addition to its existing



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mandate, the new WHC incorporates the promotion of employment wellbeing and co-ordinates this through the Department's Health and Wellbeing Strategy and Health Promotion initiatives. All staff were subsequently informed of its creation and functions. The WHC, which meets quarterly, is a forum to discuss and exchange information, and to promote, monitor and evaluate progress on the three strands of NICtS' Health and wellbeing strategy. The minutes of these meetings are for general circulation.

At an operational level, WHP forms part of the employee induction programme and health and safety.

Meeting objectives and topics

The overall aim of the WHU is to promote, maintain and improve the physical and mental well being of all staff in the NICtS and the aim of the WHC is to promote, influence, implement and evaluate the effectiveness of policy initiatives and to facilitate communication between WHU, the Committee and staff.

The topics covered by NICtS' WHP programme range from health and fitness to relaxation and stress management programmes, in-house confidential Staff Support Services and Employee Care-First Assist Service. Since the establishment of the WHU, the following activities have taken place:

- Cancer awareness seminars
- Health checks by the Chest, Heart & Stroke Association

- Health promotion campaigns
- Development of an anti-bullying policy named "Dignity and Harmony at Work"
- Stress in the workplace initiative

A three-phased approach

NICtS adopted a three-phased approach to the implementation of WHP.

- Phase 1 dealt with the establishment and internal promotion of the newly established unit through Open Court magazine and HR for U newsletter.
- Phase 2, dealt with setting up the structures through which actions could be progressed, assessing employee needs and developing a profile of workplace health.
- The last phase dealt with devising a Corporate Health Plan, developing an Action Plan, establishing reporting schedules with the MB, and reviewing and evaluating the overall process.

Bringing in WHP

After the formation of the WHU, the aims and objectives of the new Unit were publicised using internal PR links - magazine, newsletter and Intranet. The "Discovering the Needs" survey was the first major promotional activity for the WHU. In addition to a letter explaining the survey signed by the Director General, pre and post publicity campaigns in the form of an email and poster campaign were organised around the survey. Managers were also encouraged to promote the survey and allow employees time to complete the questionnaire. Routinely, WHU contin-

ues to promote its work through the "Open Court" magazine.

The WHU also hosted a health promotion road show for all staff in the Service and as well as highlighting the aims and services of the WHU it introduced the Service's policy on attendance.

"Discovering the Needs"

The primary analysis tool was the "Discovering the Needs" or Health Needs Assessment survey based on a Canadian Workplace Health System model. The results of the survey were used to determine the nature of future health and well being initiatives as set out in the 1999-2002 Corporate Plan, and to assist in the development of a Corporate Health Plan before March 2002. The higher than average response rate i.e. 73% reflected staff interest in the topic of health and wellbeing. The WHU administered the paper-based survey to all staff including staff on sick leave and the findings of the report were quality assured via focus groups and through the WHC. The findings revealed that staff would like to see the following included in an action plan on health:

- Training for managers/supervisors in how to deal with staff concerns
- Health and safety training
- Fitness (73.5% felt that they could exercise more; 58.1% felt that they could lose weight)
- Communication – desire for more open communication with employees
- Stress (For example, 42.7% of respondents felt that they could learn to cope better with worry, nerves or

stress and 25.3% of respondents felt that they would like to remove a major source of worry, nerves or stress from their lives)

- Childcare provision
- Healthcare (39.7% of respondents felt that they could eat better)

Following the survey and the road shows, the first health and well being initiative, i.e. cancer awareness was launched in June 2000. It involved a series of health education talks and presentations by health experts. Feedback following the talks indicated that employees found them very useful and beneficial in raising awareness of cancer.

Translating WHP-needs into action

Response rates from the organisation wide survey were excellent, i.e. greater than 70% and the findings, which were distributed to all staff, formed the basis for a corporate action plan. This action plan focused on the following areas: improving health, the social environment, i.e. stress, health and safety management, nutrition, smoking, medication use, drinking and health practices.

Workplace health assessments

WHU in conjunction with the NI Chest Heart and Stroke Association (NICHSA) ran a series of Workplace Health Assessments for all staff. Qualified nurses undertook a detailed confidential assessment and provided a computer-generated profile directly to the staff member summarising test results and giving a lifestyle evaluation. The assessment looked at cholesterol and glucose mea-

surement, blood pressure, carbon monoxide measurement, height and weight, body fat, grip strength, flexibility and suppleness and stamina. Staff responded in numbers to this WHP initiative, with a 71% uptake reported in Belfast and 81% in court offices around the Province. A number of mobile units served peripheral locations. WHU will receive an overview of the results from NICHSA so they can continue to identify trends and specific workplace health issues.

Relax and de-stress workshops

In response to stress, the WHU arranged for an expert to run a series of "Relax and De-stress" workshops aimed at examining the effect of stress in the working environment and learning how to cope better with everyday stresses. Workshops were organised through the Learning Advisors in each area and 28 group sessions catered for staff in and around Belfast.

Other action areas

A number of other action areas, such as nutrition, Employee Assistance Programmes, smoking, health and safety monitoring are receiving ongoing attention through the provision of information via newsletters, posters, and the Intranet.

Some of the findings from the Health Needs Assessment, such as the childcare provision and stress overlap with other areas of HR strategy. The former is being addressed as part of a strategy on reward and recognition, and the latter is receiving attention through an

upcoming organisational stress analysis exercise using sick leave records.

In response to staff concerns relating to communication issues and industrial relations the MB has recently endorsed the development of an in-house mediation service incorporating middle managers who will be trained as mediators.

Evaluation tools

Monitoring and evaluating progress in health, safety and well being is the responsibility of the WHC and evaluation has been done following the completion of WHP activities, such as the Health & Fitness Assessments.

Improvement in health and well-being

Health and Fitness Assessments conducted during 2001 were evaluated using a sample of questionnaires returned by 50 respondents and results show that staff had made significant changes to their diet and increased the duration and frequency of physical exercise.

There are reports of increasing numbers of staff participating in health and fitness activities (i.e. 35% - 40%) and improved diet, i.e. a 40% increase in fruit and vegetable intake, and greater awareness of health in general. The uptake of the health and fitness subsidy provided by NICtS has increased by 25% and represents a positive contributor to improvements in general health and fitness.

Increase in staff satisfaction

From the staff satisfaction survey, staff reported a high awareness of health and wellbeing and appreciated the efforts made by the WHU.

A promising future

Future plans include a planned programme of activities for year 2, incorporating a stress management programme for senior and middle managers, vaccinations, diet/nutrition seminars and continuation of staff support services and health and fitness programmes. In addition, policy development is underway in the following areas: mental wellbeing, and a revised policy on the management of short and long term absenteeism.