

15 The local authority as employer

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Local government employs over two million people and is one of the largest employers in the UK. Individual local authorities are major employers – often the second largest employer in an area after the NHS. As such they have responsibilities and opportunities to look after and improve the health of their workforce. Because they employ a huge range of staff doing many kinds of work, their role as employer could help them make real inroads into reducing health inequalities in their area.

An obvious example of where they can make a difference is in the pay structures, levels and conditions of service for their employees and pensioners since income is one of the biggest social determinants of health. Local authorities have also been pioneers in some forms of ‘family-friendly’ employment policies, such as flexible and term-time working. As Dorling points out in chapter two, something as simple as enabling working parents employed by the council to have time to breakfast with their children can make a difference to the children’s education and, therefore, their life chances and their overall health. But there are also more specific interventions, directly targeted at the health of employees.

The Government has calculated that the public sector in England, which includes local authorities, spends £1.8 billion on food and catering services each year. It wants the sector to use this buying power to help deliver various objectives, including increasing consumption of healthy and nutritious food, and increasing the contribution of local suppliers. The Government launched its Sustainable Food Procurement Initiative and has provided guidelines to assist the public sector, including local authorities, in procurement of food using sustainable development objectives. Many local authorities provide places where staff can purchase food, which therefore offer direct opportunities to provide safe, sustainable and healthy food. All local authorities also provide food at events hosted by the authority and attended by staff and councillors. Councils are gradually beginning to realise that it is not a good idea to promote healthy eating and access to nutritious food in their communities while continuing to offer a diet of fish and chips and tired municipal sandwiches to their staff and elected members. In both provision and procurement, local authorities are increasingly considering how they have regard to emerging expert advice on healthy eating.

Many employers, including local authorities, are offering incentives and opportunities to staff to take more exercise. For example, there’s really no excuse for any local authority not to join the national Cycle to Work scheme. This is a tax incentive aimed at encouraging employees to cycle, thereby both reducing air pollution and improving fitness. The scheme allows employees to benefit from a long term loan of bikes and commuting equipment such as lights, locks and panniers, completely tax free. Employers can lend bicycles to their staff as a tax-free benefit on the condition that the bicycles are mainly used to get to and from work or for work-related purposes. The employee ‘buys’ the bike at the end of the loan period for a nominal sum.

For those who don’t want to or can’t cycle, councils are big enough employers to run aerobics classes, facilitate and promote regular ‘health walks’ at lunchtime for groups of staff, and provide pedometers and health checks.

Offering health checks to staff – such as blood pressure and cholesterol tests –with the help of the local public health directorate provides opportunities to give or direct employees to further support, such as smoking cessation services.

Perhaps some imaginative councils having watched television documentaries which showing the enormous impact singing and dancing have on people’s well-being, both mental and physical, will be inspired to start choirs and dance classes for their own staff.

Barnsley MBC

Barnsley Metropolitan Borough Council participated in a workforce development pilot scheme run by the IDeA’s Healthy Communities team. The pilot was to see whether health improvement interventions could be introduced to manual workforces at the same time as raising knowledge of health issues in the community.

The Smithies Depot in Barnsley is the notional base of approximately 350 staff – mostly men in manual roles. It was decided to offer comprehensive health checks for up to 150 men and women. To encourage the men to come, a healthy breakfast was provided free of charge. In addition to the food offered as incentives, 150

pedometers were given out for a pedometer challenge where the highest amount of steps won a signed Barnsley Football Club football in a display case. Once the staff were 'enticed' to the canteen area they could participate in a health check or visit one of the stalls that were present to get health advice. Stalls included information on:

- smoking cessation
- The DAAT (Drug and alcohol team)
- benefits information
- emotional well-being
- Healthy Communities Collaborative
- Barnsley Premier Leisure.

Other prizes were given out for attendance. Stalls gave out a loyalty card and each time someone visited a stall the card was stamped. Six stamps got them a raffle ticket for a signed Barnsley FC football shirt.

Demand was so high for the health checks that an additional 100 were performed.

A 'grab and go' scheme has now been introduced where a local caterer comes to the canteen every morning to sell healthy lunches for the men to take out on the road. The prices are subsidised and the initiative is a joint intervention between the PCT and the council. The council can already point to a small but significant improvement in the health of the Smithies workforce.

References and further reading

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