

Hertfordshire County Council – CareWISE case study

Summary

CareWISE is an important strand of Hertfordshire County Council's work life balance strategy. The aim of CareWISE is to provide a range of initiatives to help employees successfully combine their caring responsibilities with working.

CareWISE offers all carers working for Hertfordshire the right to request to work flexibly. It also offers paid time off to attend carers' support groups as well as access to an independently facilitated **HCC Carers Only** group. In addition, carers can take up to five days paid leave to deal with emergencies involving dependents.

This case study highlights the initiatives and methods used by Hertfordshire County Council to support its carer employees.

Background

There is a strong business case to support the carers that work for Hertfordshire. Survey work has indicated that 18.4 per cent of the workforce have caring responsibilities. Despite the likelihood of under reporting, this figure is higher than the national average, probably in large part because of the high numbers of part-time workers and women in the workforce. Predicted demographic changes suggest that a significantly growing number of the workforce will have such responsibilities

We simply could not afford to ignore the needs of such a valuable and significant proportion of our workforce. In Hertfordshire we operate in a volatile recruitment market. Unemployment is as low as 1.2 per cent, 25 per cent of workers commute outside of the county. Turnover was running at 18 per cent, with some teams experiencing up to 50 per cent vacancy levels. We needed to be as attractive as possible to as diverse a pool of workers as possible, and we saw flexibility as a key element in achieving this. We also recognised that we would need to create a culture where employees felt valued for their skills and not the amount of time they were in the office.

Aims

The aims of CareWISE therefore were to provide the simple flexibility and practical support that our carers needed to manage their professional and caring responsibilities in harmony. This in turn would enable us to:

- **Be more effective in the recruitment market** Flexible working and a supportive culture are two of the most important things that carers look for when choosing an employer. In order to be competitive in the recruitment market we needed to differentiate ourselves and be better than our competitors in terms of how we supported our employees
- **Reduce turnover** A lack of flexible working options may force carers to leave work. Surveys have demonstrated that flexible working would have enabled carers to stay in employment. The costs of replacing any employee who leaves work are considerable (recruitment, training, loss of productivity are often underestimated.)
- **Enhance our reputation as an employer of choice** Hertfordshire aims to be an employer that people aspire to work for. Our employees are key ambassadors for the organisation. As such they play a significant role in enhancing the external image of the County Council
- **Reduce costs and improve efficiency** National Surveys have shown that organisations that are prepared to be more flexible and supportive towards their employees are

rewarded with greater commitment and increased productivity. Organisations with higher levels of motivation and commitment often experience lower levels of sickness absence

Strategy

Our initial plan to achieve a carer friendly organisation resulted in our LifeWISE strategy. The strategy had four key elements:

- **LifeWISE** a range of flexible working opportunities for all employees
- **CareWISE** a range of initiatives to support carers in the workforce
- **HealthWISE** a range of initiatives aimed to encourage employees to adopt healthier lifestyles
- **Options** a flexible benefits package

Through our CareWISE strategy we aimed to embed the following principles and values across the organisation:

- acknowledging family and personal commitments, and appreciating how they are affected by work
- incorporating support for parenting and caring into county council policy
- incorporating balanced living issues in all personal development interviews
- promoting balanced living regularly in all departmental meetings, discussions and development activities
- incorporating a range of benefits to support parents and carers in our optional benefits package

These principles were built into everyday operations and systems including induction, performance management and contracts of employment. They were also issued to all employees, printed in booklets and were posted on our intranet site.

Flexible working has been the foundation of our approach at Hertfordshire. Anyone can apply for flexible working and once a request is received it is approved **unless** a manager can demonstrate that it would have a significant negative impact on the business.

In addition to flexible working CareWISE offers a variety of other options to help carers combine their work and care commitments:

- we offer time off to Carers to attend external support groups.
- we also pay the costs of the **HCC Carers Only** Group which is independently facilitated by Carers in Hertfordshire. As part of this Carers meet on a regular basis to discuss issues relating to their caring role and look at how the County Council can help them better combine their caring and working responsibilities. At the moment the group is working on producing some case studies to support line manager training around CareWISE. These will be available on this IDeA website later in the year
- our employees have access to CareWell an independent advice, information and support service that is entirely confidential. This service can offer carers general advice as well as telephone counselling and face to face sessions. This service is open to other household members as well as our employees
- we offer paid emergency leave to carers of up to five days per year. This enables carers time off to deal with sudden or unexpected emergencies involving dependents and to make long term plans if necessary. In addition to this carers can take an extra 20 days per year unpaid leave
- we provide an intranet site with a dedicated CareWISE section which provides information on all of the above benefits as well as case studies, and areas of further support and information
- our public facing web pages set out in general terms how we support carers who work for us to encourage carers to see us as employer of choice
<http://www.hertsdirect.org/jobsection/diversity/support/>
- we run an annual conference for carers who work for HCC. The invitation to this conference is sent out by our chief executive and last year over 70 carers attended

Costs

The CareWISE initiative has been introduced at no overall cost to the organisation. Where funding has been needed for one off events we have been able to use savings achieved through salary sacrifice based employee benefits (for example, childcare vouchers which are taken out of salary before tax and national insurance so that both employee and employer save money.)

Business Impact and what we have Learnt

The County Council's approach to carers is now paying dividends in terms of recruitment, retention, sickness absence and employee morale. It has contributed to turnover reducing to 13.3 per cent across all grades and sickness absence stands at 8.4 days per employee, which is well below the national average for local government, which stands at 10.3 days.

Take up of flexible working has been excellent. Last year 92 per cent of flexible working requests were granted compared to around 77 per cent nationally and we now have around 75 per cent of our employees working a number of different flexible working options. Staff survey results are also positive with 71 per cent of employees saying that their manager is sensitive to work life balance issues.

There are ongoing issues around making sure the whole organisation is aware of the flexibilities and the culture that supports them, and that managers understand the business case.

But we have clearly shown that supporting carers who work for us is not difficult, disruptive or expensive, it's just plain business sense – a small change in working hours or flexible arrangements can make all the difference to a carer and to the business. As an example, here is an extract from a letter from a carer, who was able to stay in work, merely through the possibility of flexibility being made available.

"It was suggested, just before I was about to give in notice, that I could apply for unpaid leave instead. As I knew (my cared for person) was terminally ill, this gave me a 'lifeline' to hold on to and helped no end emotionally.

The thought of losing (my cared for person) was bad enough, but the thought that I would also lose my job and be unable to return to it when (they were) gone was a double blow. I have been in Social Services for many years and have a very supportive network here. As an assistant I have few formal qualifications, which might have made finding work later, difficult. In the end I did not have to make use of the offer.

I hope this information will be of use in the event of other staff finding themselves in similar situations"

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