

Strategic Discussion Topic JSCC December 2020

Carers at Work

This topic is never far from the top of the workplace agenda but has been increasingly in the spotlight through 2020 as the result of the COVID-19 pandemic and its consequent restrictions.

Who is a 'carer'?

We traditionally think of carers as those who are, or expect to be, responsible for a child under 18 but an employee can also be a carer if they are caring for a partner, relative or friend. A growing number of people are defined as "sandwich" carers, combining care for an older person alongside childcare responsibilities.

The facts¹

- There are currently an estimated six and a half million carers in the UK.
- More than four million carers provide up to 19 hours of unpaid care for a family member or friend each week and of these, more than three million are still in paid work.
- Recent research from the Office for National Statistics showed that more than 1 in 4 sandwich carers are reporting symptoms of mental ill health.
- One in seven UK employees is caring for an older, sick or disabled family member or friend who cannot manage without their support.
- Currently 600 carers leave work every day, a figure which is not sustainable given the challenges to UK productivity.
- The UK is facing a significant skills gap as over the next decade the number of workers aged 16-49 is forecast to drop, while the number of people aged 50-65 will rise. As a result, an increasing number of workers will be taking on caring responsibilities; with our ageing population and rising State Pension age, more people will be combining work with care.
- Carers will include many talented and experienced employees; the peak age for caring is 45-64, an age at which many people will have gained valuable skills and knowledge in the workplace.

The consequences

Supporting carers in the workplace is an issue that cannot be ignored by employers. Organisations which fail to address these issues and do not create a workplace culture which supports carers are potentially at risk of:

- Losing top talent and skills
- Incurring additional recruitment and retraining costs
- Facing productivity losses

Many carers struggle to balance their work and caring responsibilities, others feel obliged to make a choice between the two. Caring for someone is not only physically exhausting, but emotionally stressful, with such pressures resulting in many carers feeling unsupported, isolated and alone.

What support does NHDC have in place?

Flexible working practices are the cornerstone of the support the Council gives to its employees who have caring responsibilities and help balance domestic responsibilities with work. All staff can request to work flexibly which can result in arrangements such as part-time working, job sharing, compressed hours, term-time working, staggered hours, or annualised hours. The most common form of request we get is for reducing hours from full to part time. NHDC's flexi-time policy (which has recently been improved) and homeworking arrangements also support those with caring responsibilities.

For working parents there are Maternity, Paternity, Adoption, Paternity Adoption, Parental Leave and Shared Parental Leave Policies. Those who were employed with NHDC prior to October 2018 were

¹ Carers UK

able to sign up for the Kiddivouchers salary exchange sacrifice childcare voucher scheme. This type of scheme is now closed to new applicants, but a national tax-free childcare scheme is available to new parents.

In addition, special leave and time off for dependants provisions can offer support to carers such as allowing a period of unpaid leave for nursing a dependant or relative, or giving a short period of unpaid emergency time off for an employee to make arrangements for the provision of care for a person who reasonably relies on them for assistance. This includes a wife, husband, partner, child, parent or someone who lives in the same household as the employee, (but is not a boarder, lodger or tenant), or even an elderly neighbour who lives alone.

For those who are struggling with the pressures of work and caring, the Council's health and safety arrangements give support through stress assessment arrangements and the Wellbeing Policy.

Supplementing the above policies are a range of additional support mechanisms for employees which include:

- Occupational Health referrals for staff whose caring responsibilities are affecting their own health. Line managers will be advised on any reasonable adjustments to working arrangements to support the employee.
- The GP Helpline through which all employees now have 24/7 access to a consultation service where they can speak to a GP who can provide advice, diagnosis and reassurance on a wealth of medical matters. The service also includes an online doctor service, where employees can have a face-to-face webcam consultation with a GP, a private prescription service (chargeable) and a medical information service, where health, disease, lifestyle and travel information on over 700 topics can be accessed.
- The Workplace Wellness advice service which is a free, confidential service which offers employees, Councillors and their dependants expert guidance, invaluable information, specialist counselling and support any time, day or night, either over the telephone or online. Employees and Councillors can also access up to 6 sessions of face to face counselling.
- Well@work is an intranet page which provides information on health and fitness initiatives, as well as guidance for employees and managers dealing with serious personal or family health issues e.g. cancer.

What are the benefits of this support?

Supporting staff with caring responsibilities is not only the right thing to do as a responsible employer, but by offering this it enables carers to carry on working effectively which can attract and retain staff (reducing recruitment and training costs), reduce stress, increase resilience and productivity, reduce sick leave, improve service delivery and increase staff morale, all of which are beneficial to the Council. It also has a positive impact on the provision of quality care by working carers on those they care for, with ongoing benefit to valuable NHS resources.

Latest developments

In June 2018 the Government published its Carers Action Plan covering actions to be taken to support carers. These include the development of a carer friendly employer benchmarking scheme, promotion of the Employers for Carers organisation, consideration of dedicated employment rights for carers and raising awareness of the return to work after caring talent pool. As these develop HR will consider the implications for the Council's support for carers.