

**The employer's role in keeping staff healthy** requesting a focus on mental health with the backdrop of the pandemic being considered.

## **Introduction**

NHC have always been conscious of its responsibility to support the wellbeing of its employees. This is set out in Health and Safety Law as:

*It is an employer's duty to protect the health, safety and welfare of their employees and other people who may be affected by their business. Employers must do whatever is practical to achieve this.*

NHC has gone beyond this general requirement, and since the pandemic the Council has responded to the emerging wellbeing and mental health challenges with a wide range of additional direct support and helpful resources. We recognise that it is not just about our duty of care and the legal and moral obligations to our employees, it also reflects that the right support contributes to creating an effective and efficient organisation. Placing importance on employee wellbeing helps us to create greater loyalty with our staff, contributes to better recruitment and retention and better staff engagement and productivity. This focus on wellbeing is in keeping with our values, in particular "we work together and support each other to deliver the best we can".

## **Prior to the pandemic**

For many years NHC has taken a pro-active approach to supporting the wellbeing of staff. This has included:

- Annual flu vaccination vouchers
- Confidential employee advice service (EAP)
- Discounted leisure services
- In-house coaching
- Training to support wellbeing
- Training to prepare for retirement
- Home working and flexibility with working hours
- An occupational health service

## **During and Post Pandemic**

At the start of the pandemic and the first lockdown, it was recognised that there was a potential for the new ways of working, in addition to the global health crisis, to create anxiety and mental health issues. The organisation has played an important role in supporting our people through this difficult period and beyond. The initial response was to ensure that within the first couple of months of lockdown everybody received a welfare call from HR to check in with them and ask about their wellbeing.

For many employees this check-in call provided reassurance and some contact from outside of their own team. These calls also helped to identify specific issues as well as offering or directing individuals to more support that may have been required. HR also created a 'lockdown tool kit' of resources and guidance that staff could tap in to and support their own health and wellbeing and that of their family.

Following on from the HR check-in calls, there have been several further check-in emails sent individually to all employees, signposting to new resources, reminders for existing resources and encouraging staff to get in touch if they need further support. These have been well received.

Other health and well-being resources and support that have been introduced include:

- **The GP Helpline** provides access to GP appointments 24/7 by phone or video call. This has been of particular benefit since the NHS surgeries have come under extreme pressure.
- Our **Mental Health First Aiders** held a 3-month trial of monthly staff drop-ins via Zoom, these have now been reduced to quarterly due to low attendance
- A dedicated **coronavirus support page** on the intranet for staff and managers with links to a wide range of internal and external resources to support health and wellbeing
- **Consultation with staff** regarding returning to the office or moving to a hybrid approach which has included staff surveys and discussion at the regular staff briefings
- **Workshops** held virtually covering wellbeing and productivity
- Our **Virtual Kitchen** get-togethers have given staff working remotely the opportunity to catch-up informally with colleagues from across the council
- We have been able to offer all staff unlimited access to a range of online **health and wellbeing classes** (available online) from our employee assistance provider.
- In mid-January we launched the **Headspace** wellbeing app, supported by Public Health England funding for staff resilience. This has been welcomed by many staff with 78 signing up for the app in the first month.

### **Finding the balance**

Whilst the rationale for 'keeping staff healthy' is clear, there is also a balance to be struck. NHC remains the employer and as such the relationship with staff is contractual, based on consideration by both parties, i.e. work to an acceptable performance and payment for that work.

Ultimately NHC are not the primary health care provider, social care or responsible for issues in an employee's life. The responsibility to fulfil the contract and to look after their health lies with the individual. However, for the reasons set out above we can, and should, provide support, flexibility, practical tools, signposts to the appropriate support and agencies and if nothing else a listening ear.

There is a need to ensure we do not give employees the impression that we are there to 'solve' their problems or to pile pressure on managers to resolve every wellbeing issue.

The organisation can provide some direct support, but it ultimately acts as a conduit to the support available.