

STRATEGIC DISCUSSION PAPER June 2019

The role of Occupational Health at NHDC

What is Occupational Health?

Occupational Health (OH) is a specialist branch of healthcare concerned with the effects of work upon health and the effects of health upon work. The Council has a contract with an external Occupational Health (OH) service provider for over 15 years. In recent years our OH service provider have been Optima Health and they support our employees with a range of advice and support through appointments with an Occupational Health Advisor, who is a qualified nurse with specialist training in Occupational Health.

OH Services

1. Fitness for work assessments
2. Appointments with OH medical practitioners
3. Health promotions

1. Fitness for work

During recruitment a fitness for work questionnaire is completed (by the successful candidate following the offer of employment) and those individuals who highlight health issues are required to complete a more detailed confidential health questionnaire. This is assessed by OH in line with the job description and followed-up with a telephone assessment, and occasionally a face-to-face assessment. OH will provide HR with confirmation that the individual is fit for the role they are being employed to do, and / or recommendations of any suitable adjustments eg the provision of a specialist chair.

The OH team also provide an annual health assessment for our night workers at Careline. The Council is required to offer this health assessment (although individuals can decline the offer) which is carried out via a health questionnaire and any concerns followed up by telephone.

2. OH Appointments

The OH service offers face-to-face appointments for NHDC employees in their offices in Stevenage, as well as telephone appointments where an individual is too unwell to travel, or is unable to drive whilst recovering from an operation. Individuals are referred to OH by their manager, usually following a discussion with HR, and details of the medical or health issue are provided on a written referral form which is shared with the OHA as well as the individual.

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A referral to OH may be done for a variety of reasons, including advice on:

- long-term sickness absence
- ill-health retirement
- disability and reasonable adjustments
- frequent intermittent sickness absence
- rehabilitation or phased return to work programmes
- management of a health issue to prevent sickness absence

OH reports

Following the appointment with OH, a medical report is produced giving some background to the health issue, a summary of the current issues and how this impacts on the individual's job. The report may include details of treatment and advice provided by the individual's doctor, and / or advice and recommendations from the OH Adviser, along with answers to specific questions raised on the referral form such as:

- What is the outlook for the individual's condition in relation to future work performance and/or attendance?
- Are there other actions/adjustments that the employer could make to support the employee at work or help facilitate a return to work?

The individual's consent to release the medical report is requested at the start of the OH appointment and the report is either issued to the individual to have first sight of the content, or issued to the individual and their manager / HR simultaneously.

Acting on OH advice

In many cases the advice and recommendations are straightforward and can be implemented by the manager and / or the individual but in other cases further discussion between HR and the line manager may be required. For example the OH Advisor may make recommendations whilst unaware of specific operational requirements eg suggesting alternative duties where none are available in that service area. There could also be suggested actions for the individual which he or she does not agree with, or are impractical for their circumstances. In cases of work-related stress, OH will often recommend a stress risk assessment questionnaire to pinpoint the causes of stress, and a face-to-face meeting with the manager to discuss solutions and support available. The HR Business Partners can

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provide further support and advice to the manager and the individual, as well as arranging and facilitating a meeting if required.

Resolving concerns

Occasionally an individual is reluctant to attend an appointment with OH. Whilst this is not compulsory, they are advised that it will be in their best interests in order that appropriate support or work adjustments can be recommended. We remind individuals that attending an OH meeting can allow them the opportunity to discuss their medical history in confidence with an OH professional, and how it impacts on their work.

In cases of stress or mental health issues, an individual is sometimes unwilling to engage with recommendations from the OH Advisor. Whilst these cannot be enforced eg seeking counselling support from our confidential advice service, the individuals are encouraged to take responsibility for their health and wellbeing, and this includes taking advice from the OH team.

3. Health promotions

The OH team have a wealth of knowledge which they are able to share during periodic health promotion events. Recent events have included presentations to individuals and managers on Stress and Mental Health awareness, Cancer Awareness, a Sleep Clinic, and Improving the Management referral process. They also occasionally run a Know Your Numbers session where employees can book an appointment to have their blood pressure and BMI assessed with follow-up advice.