

Wellbeing through innovation rather than expenditure:

# The case of the North Tyneside Metropolitan Borough Council

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The Metropolitan Borough of North Tyneside serves a population of 191,000 people in the area of the north east that lies between the vibrant City of Newcastle to the west, the beautiful North Sea coast to the east, the River Tyne to the south and the County of Northumberland to the north. The Borough is a blend of rural and coastal areas along with six urban centres of population, among them the well-known towns of Wallsend, Whitley Bay and North Shields. Historically, heavy industries such as coal mining and ship building have dominated the local economy, but in recent decades these industries have declined. An ambitious regeneration programme led by the Council and its partners has succeeded in diversifying the economy and attracting new investment to its expansive network of business and retail parks.

The Council provides a wide range of services for residents and businesses covering education, leisure, social care, environmental management and community safety. It is also one of the major employers in the area, employing 10,000 people, of whom around 80% are resident in the borough. Occupations in the Council are many and varied reflecting its very diverse responsibilities; planners, engineers, social workers, educationists, housing professionals and carers, to name a few.

In common with other Local Government organisations, North Tyneside is in the midst of major change as it responds to reductions in public expenditure. A target budget reduction of 30% is leading the Council to undertake a root and branch review of both its services and its role in the local community. The Council has already begun a radical change programme which includes scrutiny of all expenditure against 'life and limb' criteria and the creation of new commercial partnerships and social enterprise organisations to deliver external services and internal administrative functions at lower costs. As these new arrangements become operative, the Council's role will transcend from being a direct provider of services to being a strategic enabler and commissioner employing far fewer people.

These changes inevitably have an impact on employee wellbeing and are very much at the forefront of the Council's thinking as it continually develops its wellbeing strategy. Council employees face the challenging task of maintaining service quality with less resource whilst also managing the

transition of those services to new organisational entities. The changes represent career opportunities and fresh challenge for some and job insecurity for others. Like many organisations in both public and private sectors, the Council is addressing the very real challenge of how to maintain the resilience of its staff through prolonged uncertainty and turbulence. This is a theme which is increasingly dominating the wellbeing debate and one which is revisited later in this study and the wider report.

## The development of the Council's wellbeing strategy

The Council's strategy for employee wellbeing has evolved substantially over the years and continues to do so as the Council's role changes.

In the early days, the focus was on the 'must do' services for health and safety at work and occupational health: injury prevention, occupational health assessment and rehabilitation services. However, in line with its long standing commitment to providing the best possible employment conditions for staff, the Council saw a need to go beyond providing the 'must do' services and embarked on developing a strategy that actively promoted employee health and wellbeing. Over time it has developed a comprehensive approach to wellbeing which has become increasingly embedded in all aspects of the Council's employment policy and practice, including basic terms and conditions as described further below.

A more recent boost to the emerging focus on wellbeing came in 2010, when the Council appointed a new Occupational Health and Safety Manager from the private sector. Steve Quinlan acquired dual responsibility for the statutory and occupational health programmes and the forward development of the wellbeing agenda.

Steve Quinlan could see that the wellbeing agenda was in the ascendancy and was keen to bring it into sharper focus. One of his first initiatives was to enter the regional NHS-sponsored *Better Health at Work Awards* as a way of raising the profile of wellbeing in the Council and providing a benchmark and focus for the development of Council employee wellbeing<sup>2</sup>. Having achieved the Silver Award, North Tyneside is now working towards the Gold standard.

At the same time as raising the wellbeing bar internally, the Council has also begun to raise the profile of employee health and wellbeing in the Borough as a whole. As the organisation which is leading the regeneration and economic development of the area, the Council is uniquely

<sup>2</sup>The Better Health at Work Awards are sponsored by the NHS in the North East. Achieving the Silver Award requires the employer to submit a portfolio of evidence demonstrating:  
• The existence of appropriate health and wellbeing policies • Participation in a minimum of 4 health campaigns • Encouragement of physical activity • Consultation with employees on a healthy eating policy • Attention to diversity and equality including the needs of carers, pregnant and breastfeeding workers and workers with disabilities  
• Embedding health and wellbeing in organisational policies • Effective attendance and illness monitoring.

placed to influence both its partners and the employer community as a whole. Encouraging the whole community to invest in employee wellbeing is a key strand of the Council's overall campaign to promote excellent employment practice and to raise levels of health and wellbeing for the community as a whole.

A further important influence on the evolving employee wellbeing programme was the Council's new role in promoting public health. In 2011 the Coalition government transferred responsibility for public health from the NHS to Local Government and, along with other local authorities, North Tyneside Council now holds responsibility for goals to reduce the health burden associated with cardio vascular disease, cancer and other long term conditions. The Council sees a critical relationship between its policy and programme to promote employee wellbeing and its ability to promote the wider health and wellbeing of the community as a whole. Most employees live in the Borough and are also parents, carers and friends of other members of community. The Council knows that its employees are highly influential within their own circles and that initiatives to raise their levels of wellbeing - especially behavioural change around diet and exercise - will achieve a further impact on those around them.

It is therefore not surprising that Steve Quinlan reports that the Council's programmes for employee wellbeing and community programmes have begun to be increasingly intertwined. This is undoubtedly driven by the fact that the Council has to achieve huge change with very limited resource and hence is looking for every opportunity to 'kill more than one bird with a stone' by doubling up activities. However, Steve also sees the beginnings of a much more significant trend whereby employers are being encouraged to become significant players in health promotion. As the resources of the NHS become more and more stretched, we need to look to new ways of influencing the health behaviours of large numbers of the population. Employers are probably uniquely placed to reach large numbers of people and their family and social circles.

### The decision making process

Historically, there has been strong political and executive leadership that has ensured that employee wellbeing remains consistently high on the Council's agenda. The Council has unusual political leadership arrangements with a directly elected Mayor (one of only two in the country) and a Cabinet structure. Council policies and performance are also reviewed by overview and scrutiny committees. At the political level, there has been strong cross-party support for the development of excellent employment policies and wellbeing practices. In addition, the current Elected Mayor, a former health professional, has shown a personal interest in employee and community health and wellbeing and is an active and visible champion of the wellbeing agenda.

Executive leadership of all aspects of the employee wellbeing agenda sits with the current Acting Strategic Director. This ensures that all issues relating to employee wellbeing - strategy, services and evaluation - are represented in the leadership team and connections made to other areas of the Council's agenda where there are opportunities for synergy. Day-to-day development and

implementation of the wellbeing programme sits with Steve Quinlan as Occupational Health and Safety Manager.

The Council sets out its employee wellbeing policy in its Workforce Strategy which is regularly reviewed and updated. The biannual all-staff survey enables the Council to get direct feedback on employment policies as well as the general employee experience and temperature. Where appropriate, it adjusts its wellbeing programme in the light of that feedback.

We have noted earlier some of the key influences on the development of the employee wellbeing strategy and the increasing synergies between the Council's role in promoting employee health and wellbeing and its wider community responsibilities. It is important to add that resource constraints are a critical factor influencing which wellbeing services are invested in. The Council has no separate budget for employee wellbeing, hence all of the services it provides must operate at zero cost to the Council. This means that the Council has to achieve its wellbeing strategy through innovation rather than expenditure; by flexing its employment contract, through partnership agreements and utilising resources such as its leisure facilities to benefit employee wellbeing. It also rules out benefits that other employers might provide such as health assessment, screening services and private medical insurance that incur high cost.

### The current programme of wellbeing activity

A distinctive feature of North Tyneside's approach to both employee and community health and wellbeing is the extent to which it has become embedded in core employment; in effect, a red thread running through much of the Council's employment policies and processes. The most notable example is the Council's contract of employment which provides generous flexible working conditions to enable staff to accommodate the wider responsibilities they may have as parents and carers. The Council is very clear that helping staff - especially women - to balance multiple responsibilities builds staff loyalty and commitment as well as reaping benefits for families and children. Currently, the key features of the employee wellbeing programme are:

#### Flexible working hours

This enables staff to choose a pattern of working hours that best suits their lifestyle and responsibilities outside work. It also offsets the demands made on many staff to work outside normal business hours for things such as Council meetings and community events which are often in the evening. Under the flexible working-hours policy:

- Staff are required to work a minimum of 3.5 core hours per day (between the hours of 9 and 5) but have total flexibility in how they manage the remaining hours
- They can opt for consolidated working hours that allow them to work more intensively for some of the time in order to have free time to suit their needs. For example, staff can work only in term time, taking school holidays off; work nine-day fortnights, taking extended holidays etc.

- They have the option to work from home with their manager's agreement. This practice is increasing and enables the Council to reduce office accommodation, as well as reducing travel-to-work time for the employee
- The Council also helps staff to accommodate personal difficulties such as child illness and carer emergencies through discretionary leave of absence for personal reasons.

The option of flexible working is readily taken up by the majority of staff (with the exception of staff who are required to work specific shifts because of the nature of their job) and reported as one of the most important benefits of working for the Council. Senior leaders in the Council acknowledge that these are very generous terms, which, on occasion, present managers with the challenge of balancing flexibility for employees with the business needs of the organisation. However, they also report that most issues are resolved through mutual trust and a willingness to accommodate both needs and that the benefits of flexible working far outweigh the negatives.

### Salary sacrifice

Council employees benefit from a salary sacrifice scheme through which they can take a reduction in gross pay to fund purchases of additional benefits, such as a lease car, child care vouchers, additional leave or a bike through the Cycle to Work Scheme. The scheme is tax efficient in that gross pay is reduced so the employee pays less tax and the purchases under the scheme are not treated as taxable benefits. Though not strictly 'wellbeing' benefits they enhance employee quality of life.

### Healthy eating

The Council promotes healthy eating within its offices and throughout the community as part of its campaign to enhance public health and wellbeing. This is an example of using the synergies between its employee and community responsibilities to achieve maximum impact. Within the Council's main a restaurant offers healthy options which can also be used by any member of the public. There are email campaigns promoting healthy eating as well as regular events promoting healthy diet and exercise.

## Key features of the Council's approach

- Strong political and executive leadership
- Employee health and wellbeing is embedded in core employment policies and practice
- Using external awards to provide a benchmark of its performance
- Combining its role as service provider and employer to promote the health and wellbeing of the community as a whole
- Comprehensive provision on a zero budget

### Physical health and fitness

All staff and their families are able to use any Council leisure and fitness facility at a discounted monthly fee of £22 pcm. This includes five gyms across the Borough, all of whom employ qualified fitness instructors who can provide exercise plans and advice on fitness, and swimming pools. The Council also offers other health benefits such as:

- Free eye tests through a local optician with whom the Council has negotiated a partnership for the provision of tests and discounted glasses and lenses, plus a profit share which returns a small amount of money to the Council
- Flu vaccination for specific groups (paid for by the employee at a discounted rate negotiated by the Council)
- Wellbeing experiences such as shiatsu or head massage, provided free of charge as tasters or paid for by the employee.

### Creating a high quality working environment

The Council offices have been designed to provide a high quality working environment for staff and the public users of the building. The Council has recently relocated its staff from a variety of older buildings spread across the Borough to a newly built office on one of the local business parks. The offices provide light, galleried space in both public areas and private offices. Great attention has been paid to the quality of the working environment and public space, with local artists donating or loaning art works.

### Looking forward: issues for the continuing development of the employee wellbeing strategy

Looking ahead, the Council sees the future of its wellbeing investment being driven by continuing resource constraints (now even more of an issue with cuts in public expenditure) and the major change programme which will fundamentally redefine the Council's role and the services it provides. It will take at least the next three years for those changes to be complete and it is possible that the Council and its staff may face an even longer period of uncertainty. The scale and pace of change taking place is making enormous demands on managers and staff alike; like many other areas of public service the challenge for many managers is how to ask for the extra mile while being able to offer much less by way of career or job security. However the experience of change is by no means universal. For some, the changes represent excitement and the opportunity to innovate; for others huge personal uncertainty; for others a loss of professional identity and purpose ("I didn't come into this work to be doing this"); for others concern for the impact of cuts on vulnerable groups.

Against this backdrop, Steve Quinlan reports that the Council sees a need to take a more targeted approach to employee wellbeing. Whilst the Council will continue to maintain and develop its generic programme of wellbeing support, it will increasingly adopt a proactive and interventionist approach in areas where there are early warnings of a decline in wellbeing. The Council is already using sickness and absence data to help it to identify areas where there appear to be emerging wellbeing challenges and is then developing a specific response to arrest the trend. An example of this

approach is in the Children's Services area where data shows that 50% of absence is caused by stress related illness. The Council has been able to identify particular service pressures in this area and has initiated a programme of counselling support for staff to try to prevent stress from reaching levels where the employee has to take extended periods of sick leave to recover. These are examples of an early trend, but for Steve Quinlan they raise what may become a much bigger issue in the wellbeing debate around how far an employer's responsibility and entitlement to proactively intervene in health and wellbeing concerns extends and where does it meet the responsibilities and rights of the individual employee? Should employers proactively target people who are clearly overweight, or is this an intrusion into the freedoms of the individual employee? How do employers create a balanced partnership with their employees to promote employee health and wellbeing?

Another important development at an early stage in the Council involves enhancing the role of line managers in promoting employee wellbeing. North Tyneside is keen for its managers to take on more of the responsibility for the wellbeing of their reports rather than relying on designated officers or HR to take the lead. As the Council's radical change programme progresses it is likely that line managers will play a critical role in maintaining employee resilience and wellbeing as well as service quality and performance.

The Council has already made a start by putting in place early warning mechanisms that alert the manager to a health and wellbeing problem; an email alert notifies managers when staff have been ill for, say, eight or 20 days, to initiate conversations with the employee to ensure that they are receiving appropriate support to recover and return to work. HR can be called on to help in delicate cases but increasingly the prime responsibility will sit with the manager.

However, the Council knows that there is much more work still to do to ensure that its managers are equipped to manage health and wellbeing issues skilfully. Many line managers are under-confident in dealing with health and wellbeing issues, especially where mental health issues or leave of absence for personal reasons are involved. In order to help managers to develop the skills they need the Council is providing development on a range of issues such as working with change, coaching and handling difficult conversations.

Finally, the Council anticipates that employers will be called on more and more to become principal players in the public health and wellbeing arena. The Council is already a key player in this health and wellbeing field but is witnessing encouragement to all employers to a much greater role in promoting not just the wellbeing of their employees but their families as well. At a recent meeting of the NHS in the North East and local employers the NHS representative spoke of employers as the new 'hub' for health promotion and their potential to replace the role of general practitioners as the primary influencers of health related behaviours among the local population.

### Emerging trends and challenges

- The growing role of employers in health promotion
- The shift towards a focus on the wellbeing of employees and their families
- Using an evidence based approach to target the most pressing health and wellbeing issues
- Moving the responsibility for employee wellbeing onto line managers
- The contribution of employee health and wellbeing to building organisational resilience in tough economic times.

