

University of Leicester - staff mental health and wellbeing case study

Building a Staff Health and Wellbeing Strategy

In 2016 the University of Leicester recognised that it needed a dedicated Staff Health and Wellbeing strategy. The University already had an Occupational Health Nurse in post, but the role was primarily clinical, with no provision for wider staff support.

A Staff Health and Wellbeing Lead was appointed and a staff health and wellbeing strategy developed that identified the need for a more holistic approach, based initially on the five ways of wellbeing and then incorporating the six core standards published in the Stevenson and Farmer 'Thriving at Work' Report in October 2017.

It was recognised that the skills and specialist workplace knowledge of the Occupational Health team could provide a valuable contribution to fully operationalise the strategy, so the remit of the Occupational Health team was expanded to incorporate proactive health promotion and prevention.

Analysing and responding to health needs

A health needs analysis was carried out using data from wellbeing events, staff questionnaires, sickness absence figures and occupational health statistics. It was identified that mental health was the single most common health problem experienced by staff across the University; so supporting the emotional wellbeing of the staff at the University of Leicester was a key priority.

Existing provision was reviewed and additional interventions identified that would cover both reactive and proactive, preventative aspects of wellbeing. This included but was not limited to:

- Reviewing existing staff counselling provision and implementation of a full independent and impartial EAP and counselling service.
- Reviewing and increasing the resources of the Staff Wellbeing and Occupational Health teams
- Developing closer working relationships with Safety colleagues to utilise their skills and expertise.
- Achieving buy in from Senior Leadership team and ensuring that health and wellbeing was on the agenda at Board level, alongside safety.
- Identification of roles within the university that have a higher psychological demand, resulting in review of the pre-employment process and implementation of ongoing psychological health surveillance.
- Provision of Mental Health First Aid (HE-Specific) training for staff and managers to raise awareness and increase confidence in supporting colleagues with mental ill health.
- Development and delivery of bespoke training to all levels of the organisation to better understand the causes of stress and how to manage distress.
- Implementing a programme of group activities.
- Provision of expert advice to the senior leadership team, both on policy design and implementation, maintaining awareness of mental wellbeing and how it is affected by Board decisions and actions.

Managing staff anxiety relating to the Covid-19 pandemic

The onset of the pandemic necessitated a review of what was provided and how it was provided. Initial efforts were focused on managing anxiety related to the pandemic but as lockdowns progressed, it was recognised that staff were struggling with isolation and that motivation towards self-help is more difficult in isolation. Since the pandemic began, strategies have included:

- Involvement with Covid incident planning from the very beginning to ensure that mental wellbeing remains a key agenda item.
- Involvement with the WorkSmart project to ensure that mental wellbeing is kept on the agenda during major changes to staff working processes and working locations.
- Recognition of isolation due to prolonged period of homeworking, with subsequent development of online, Teams activities such as stretch classes and meditation sessions, as well as introduction of a Wellbeing Café online, encouraging staff to join for a lunchtime chat and catch up to reduce isolation.
- In recognition that staff may be experiencing high levels of anxiety when returning to work on campus, a questionnaire was circulated to identify specific causes of anxiety, and a personal risk Action Plan and support toolkit developed to help staff to implement strategies to assuage their concerns and signposting to additional sources of support.
- For those who remain clinically vulnerable and anxious our Occupational Health and Safety Services Team have developed a risk assessment based on ALAMA covid-age calculator to ensure an appropriate assessment is undertaken before staff return to work.

Continuing to provide support

We recognise that there is still more work to do, particularly in the area of prevention of post traumatic stress in certain staff groups in more psychologically demanding roles. To this end we are engaging a Graduate Trainee to undertake a project to develop the risk assessment tool and associated interventions required to provide enhanced support to the identified staff groups.

Continuous feedback is sought from staff and Unions and is triangulated against occupational health referral and sickness absence numbers, to ensure that activities and strategies are evidenced-based and focussed on the real time needs of staff.

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