

THE PROVISION OF OCCUPATIONAL HEALTH SERVICES IN LOCAL AUTHORITIES IN WALES

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1. INTRODUCTION

- 1.1 Occupational Health is a speciality of medicine concerned with identifying and preventing ill health in the workplace. It looks at the effects of work on health and health on work. Due to this unique, complex, and confidential speciality, Local Authority Occupational Health Services should be led by a qualified Occupational Health Advisor. Occupational Health professionals provide advice, guidance and support to both the employee and employer whilst working in partnership with colleagues such as Human Resources, Health and Safety, Trade Union representatives and Back Care Advisors.
- 1.2 It is difficult to identify organisational needs without carrying out an Occupational Health needs analysis. Local authorities are labour intensive, carrying out and providing many complex services to the public through their workforce and as such the workforce must be considered their most valuable asset. Occupational Health can address both the needs of the organisation and the needs of the workforce by providing a foundation on which to build.
- 1.3 This document seeks to identify such a foundation and policy base for the provision of Occupational Health services within Local Authorities throughout Wales.

2. CORPORATE AIMS

- 2.1 The broad aims of an Occupational Health service are to:
- maximise the health and well being of the workforce in its efforts to deliver its services to the public.
 - minimise the risks arising from working practices and the working environment.
 - the identification of issues of culture, capacity, capability, disability, current performance and risk management.

3. KEY PRINCIPLES

- 3.1 To achieve the above aims the following key principles apply:
- The implementation of appropriate provision towards best OH and employment practice.
 - Constructive approach towards compliance and responsibilities with health and safety law.
 - Allocation of resources within priority setting which best serves the public interest.
 - Confidential and accessible service.

4. THE FUNCTIONS OF AN OCCUPATIONAL HEALTH SERVICE

- 4.1 Common functions of an Occupational Health Service should include but are not restricted to:
- Pre-employment assessments to determine fitness for employment
 - The identification and assessment of health risks in the workplace

- Surveillance of the work environment factors and work practices that affect employees' health.
- Participation in the development of programmes for the improvement of working practices.
- Advice on Occupational Health, safety and hygiene, and on ergonomics and individual and collective protective equipment
- Health surveillance of employees in relation to work
- Provision of advice and guidance in the management of sickness absence and enhancing epidemiological trends.
- Collaboration in providing information, training and education in the fields of Occupational Health, hygiene and ergonomics.
- Medically supported recommendations on rehabilitation, medical redeployment and retention employees with a changing health status.
- Participation in the analysis of occupational accidents and occupational diseases.
- Communication and liaison with internal and external multidisciplinary agencies.
- Involvement in the development of health policies and procedures.
- Health promotion initiatives.
- Ill Health retirements

5. CONFIDENTIALITY

- 5.1 Local authorities need to be aware that all Occupational Health records are confidential and access can only be given with the informed written consent of the employee. The Information Commissioner, Guidance on Health Information, Part 4 provides advice on the access to information about Employees health, Part 4 also provides supplementary guidance on the provision of information about Employees health. Occupational Health records are accessed in accordance with the Access to Health Records Act 1990 and Access to Medical Reports Act 1988.
- 5.2 Clinical data and other information obtained by Occupational Health in the course of their professional activities must not be disclosed, without consent, except in the following circumstances:
- If the disclosure is clearly in the patient's interest but it is not possible to seek consent.
 - If it is required by law or by order of a court
 - If it is in the public interest "where failure to disclose information may expose the patient or others to the risk of death or serious harm"
 - In certain circumstances for the purpose of medical research.
- 5.3 All nurses are required to adhere to Professional Codes of Conduct in relation to confidentiality issues.

6. LEGAL OBLIGATIONS AND NATIONAL STRATEGIES.

- 6.1 The following must be considered in order to meet legislative requirements;
- Health and Safety Legislation
 - Display Screen Equipment
 - Control of Vibration
 - Asbestos
 - Noise at Work Regulations

- COSHH
- Manual Handling
- First Aid at Work Regulations
- Working Time Regulations
- New and Expectant Mothers
- Young Persons
- RIDDOR
- Disability Discrimination Act
- Access to Medical Reports Act
- Access to Medical Records Act
- Equal Opportunities

6.2 Health and well-being are high on all authorities agendas. For example:

- **Better Health, Better Wales** provides the basis for improvement of health amongst our communities. Local authorities employ large numbers of local people who not only form part of the workforce but also form part of the community the authority seeks to serve. Better Health - Better Wales identifies the working environment as having an important influence on employees' health.
- “For many people, going to work is a positive part of their lives, and it helps them to stay healthy. But we need to make sure that work doesn't make people ill, and that they leave work at the end of the day at least as healthy as when they arrived”. This is also supported in the most recent Department of Health document “**Choosing Health**” which identified Occupational Health as having a pivotal role towards the **Public Health Agenda**.
- Occupational Health can have a positive influence to employees by providing advice and guidance on taking healthy lifestyle options; they then can influence their families and friends and provide a useful mechanism for wider health promotion. Local communities look for direction and leadership from the authority and much kudos can be gained by the provision of Occupational Health services to its employees. Local authorities can gain credibility by making a marked difference to people's health.
- Indeed government has produced a 10-year Occupational Health Strategy document entitled “**Securing Health Together**” which seeks to improve the health and extend the working lives of employees which underpins the Revitalising Health and Safety document.
- New initiatives led by the Welsh Assembly Government include **Health Challenge Wales** which aims to improve the Health and Well being of the Community and provides a national focus for better health, where as the **Corporate Health Standard** is aimed at the employees and provides a benchmark for health promotion initiatives in the workplace. **Fit 3 Strategy encourages:** fit for life, fit for work and fit for tomorrow.

All initiatives aim to achieve better health, not only of the community but also of the workforce. Occupational Health provides a pivotal role in achieving health targets and National Performance Indicators.

7. BENEFITS

7.1 There are many benefits that can be gained by a Local Authority and its employees from an effective Occupational Health Service. The workplace has and will continue to have a powerful effect on its workforce. Many people spend a large amount of

their time in the workplace and as such this is a natural setting in which to promote the physical and mental health and well being of employees. How an employee feels affects his or her job satisfaction and will over time influence or affect productivity.

- 7.2 Many local authorities recognise that healthy employees are a valuable asset and promoting positive health initiatives at work gets results. Creating a healthy working environment can:
- Increase morale throughout the authority at all levels
 - Increase productivity in order to meet Corporate aims and objectives
 - Result in fewer accidents and compensation claims
 - Create a healthier workplace culture, meeting statutory and legal requirements in respect of safety and especially, health issues.
 - Enhance recruiting potential, the ability to keep valued employees and develop a reputation as an employer of choice
 - Reduce absenteeism due to illness.
 - Markedly improve quality of service delivery.
- 7.3 The financial benefits to be gained by the authority can be substantial. The reduction of sickness absence alone can be beneficial to the authority, monies saved can be used to maintain plant and equipment, provide healthier working environment, promote a healthy workplace and meet health and safety requirements.
- 7.4 It is not the function of Occupational Health to manage attendance but to evaluate the reasons, to identify trends and consider hazards and risks that may not have been identified or adequately controlled. Evaluating the reasons for absence is an important means of contributing to the Corporate business and the bottom line. And in essence, assist with the wider aspect of health and safety management where there could be an affect of “health on work” or “work on health”.
- 7.5 There is also a need to consider and be aware of the authorities compensation claims history, both those settled and pending. Early identification and intervention can prevent further loss, physical and financial, if the work or working environment is a factor in the claim.
- 7.6 Local authorities cannot operate efficiently if the employees are absent or under performing due to ill health, be it occupationally induced, physical or mental. The Health and Safety Executive have indicated that they will be looking for evidence from employers to demonstrate their strategies for the protection of employee health at work.
- 7.7 Effective Occupational Health services can assist local authorities achieve the requirements of the governments “Securing Health Together”, 2000 which is the ten year Occupational Health strategy which underpins “Revitalising health and safety” targets as set out in its June 2000 strategy Statement. The targets are:
- 20% reduction in the incidence of work related ill health.
 - 20% reduction in ill health to members of the public caused by work activity.
 - 30% reduction in the number of working days lost due to work related ill health

- Everyone currently in employment but off work due to ill health or disability is, where necessary and appropriate, made aware of opportunities for rehabilitation back into work as early as possible.
- Everyone currently not in employment due to ill health or disability is, where necessary and appropriate, made aware of and offered opportunities to prepare for and find work.
- Achieve half the improvements under each target by 2005.

It is difficult to determine if local authorities achieved the targets, as many did not measure these particular areas. However, with Occupational Health provision, clear policy and procedures can assist the authority in meeting the targets as determined by the year 2010.

7.8 Whilst it is difficult to calculate precisely the savings that can be attributed to an efficient Occupational Health service it is clear it has a positive contribution to make to the local authority seeking to save costs and reduce losses in the following areas:

- Absenteeism
- Accidental injuries, incidences and work related ill health
- Payment of compensation to injured workers
- Loss of service provision as a consequence of the above
- Replacement costs of workers
- The re-training and supervision of inexperienced replacement employees
- Management time in dealing with absenteeism, accidents and claims issues
- Relationships with trade unions
- Legal costs
- Additional administration costs and increased insurance premiums
- Cost of fines or other penalties actioned through the courts.

7.9 General Occupational Health policies are directed to provide the authorities with management guidance and a framework for controlling and informing employees of the risks and issues involved in these areas. Policies need to be monitored and reviewed.

7.10 Occupational Health services have a unique opportunity to design health promotion programmes that are focused on the needs of the Local Authority and its employees' risks. The needs and topics can be identified from risk assessments and or sickness absence causes and trends with considerations given to the social economic demographics of the local community.

7.11 Occupational Health staff, through education and training, are able to promote the philosophy that an informed and competent employee is a safer employee. Those programmes linked with results of risk assessment support the employer's duties to ensure a competent and safe workforce.

7.12 Workplace risks need to be identified if there is to be an informed workforce capable of co-operating through understanding the risks to their health. General lifestyle risks impact on health, attendance and performance at work.

7.13 An employee health strategy identifies the health needs of the authority and can contribute to meet the Corporate Health Standard. This can have direct benefits in promoting the health of the employees.

8.0 CLINICAL SUPERVISION

8.1 It is important to remember that the employer also has a duty of care to the Occupational Health staff. In order to provide a comprehensive Occupational Health Service the Occupational Health Advisor takes on board wide and varied information from employees including information surrounding traumatic events, ill health or bereavement. It must be recognised that Occupational Health Advisors require a conduit to discuss areas of concern and this can be provided as part of clinical supervisory sessions. Provision of this clinical supervision is undertaken by other Occupational Health professionals or outside counselling provision that meet the specific needs of the Occupational Health staff.

CONCLUSION

Local Authorities continually undergo change. The Wales Programme for improvement along with strategies such as Securing Health Together and Revitalising Health and Safety provide a number of challenges for local authorities in Wales. At the heart of that change are the employees both in terms of the managers and line managers who have to implement change and the wider workforce who is charged with delivering quality services to the community.

Any improvement that is achieved requires proper leadership and direction coupled with an infrastructure to support all areas of the local authority workforce. The appropriate introduction of Occupational Health services or improvements in existing Occupational Health services, into an already established local authority infrastructure is an essential ingredient in ensuring improvements in the health of the workforce. A by-product of providing an Occupational Health service is improved production and effectiveness from its employees with increased confidence in the employees' ability to provide services.

Occupational Health is now taking a lead in Health and Safety and Government initiatives, recognising that most work related injuries are indeed health issues, for example stress and mental illness, musculo-skeletal problems, vibration etc. Accordingly employers must robustly address these health problems.

There can be benefits of an in-house comprehensive Occupational Health Service, which plays a pivotal role in improving the health and well-being and the reduction of risks to the employees.