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Northern Ireland Civil Service

Mental Well-Being at Work Charter 2009

changing for the better

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Associated Documents

Guidance on Mental Illness

Guidance on Stress Management

Foreword

I am delighted to endorse this important Charter about mental well-being at work. This Charter coincides with the launch of the new NICS People Strategy which addresses several key issues, one of which relates to the health and well-being of staff. The Charter will therefore complement our People Strategy and will provide an important source of information and guidance for staff and managers on mental well-being, mental illness and the management of stress.

The NICS has a comprehensive range of policies and programmes in place to help staff manage their work-life balance and to raise awareness of health and well-being through health promotion activities. However, while these policies and programmes are clearly important, I recognise that within the NICS, and the public sector generally across the UK, there is an increased incidence of psychiatric and psychological illnesses, including stress-related illnesses, which reflect the trend in the population as a whole.

The Charter confirms the commitment of the NICS to supporting the promotion of mental well-being at work and providing a supportive and participative working environment for all employees.

I trust that this Charter and associated guidance will create much greater awareness about mental health and mental well-being across the NICS and that it will promote further understanding of the relationship between mental well-being and work.

Bruce Robinson
Head of the Northern Ireland Civil Service

Introduction

The purpose of this Charter is to provide advice and guidance to organisations and employees across the Northern Ireland Civil Service on the commitment to "Mental Well-being at Work in the NICS".

Work need not be inherently stressful and it is well recognised that work has a positive, not a detrimental, impact on health. Everyone at work has a responsibility through their actions, attitudes and behaviours to ensure that they are not adversely affecting their own mental well-being or that of others.

Mental health problems presenting in the workplace will not always be caused by work, in fact that category is likely to be smaller than that relating to non-work issues and pre-existing health conditions. Work-life balance is therefore of vital importance when taking a holistic look at the issues associated with stress and ill-health.

Prevention is the key and can be achieved through developing a positive work culture within the NICS, advocating appropriate management behaviours, employees being mindful of their responsibilities and employers providing a range of support and other services available to staff when needed.

Dr Ken Addley
Director
Occupational Health Service

Section 1

NICS Mental Well-Being at Work Charter

This document sets out the purpose, principles and aims of the NICS Mental Well-Being at Work Charter and how it will be implemented. It replaces CSC 2/99 and ICSC 3/99.

1. Purpose

1.1 The core values of the NICS reflect a greater emphasis on valuing, developing and involving all employees. The NICS management style seeks to be supportive and participative. Concern for employee well-being is an essential element of this NICS culture.

1.2 Mental well-being is more than simply the absence of mental illness. Mental well-being allows people to live a balanced life, pursuing their own interests while taking a constructive role at work and in society.

1.3 This Charter seeks to ensure that the mental well-being of employees is reflected in culture, organisation and management across the NICS. The NICS recognises that job satisfaction, good morale, recognition and reward, creativity, enthusiasm and the quality of life of NICS employees at work and beyond, may all be enhanced by positive attitudes towards improving mental well-being in the workplace.

1.4 The positive dimension of mental health is reinforced in the World Health Organisation's (WHO) definition of health as contained in its constitution: "Health is a state of complete physical, mental and social well-being and not merely the absence of disease or infirmity". Mental well-being is a balance of all aspects of life – social, physical, spiritual and emotional. It impacts on how we manage our surroundings and make choices in our lives – clearly it is an integral part of our overall health.

2. Principles

2.1 There are 5 overarching principles governing the NICS' commitment to mental well-being at work. Research shows that organisations where the workplace has an adverse effect on the mental well-being of employees suffer, amongst other things, from poorer quality output, lower productivity, higher levels of absence and lower morale.

The NICS duty of care under health and safety, employment and civil law extends to the mental well-being of employees

2.2 Recent litigation has emphasised that health and safety law applies to mental well-being, safety and welfare just as much as to the physical well-being of staff. Indeed, mental and physical well-being are often inextricably linked. The NICS has a common law duty of care towards employees which includes regard for mental well-being. Employment laws, including equal opportunities, fair employment, disability discrimination and race relations legislation also address the legal responsibilities of employers towards employees who may be suffering from mental illness.

All employees have a role in promoting mental well-being at work

2.3 All employees in the NICS share a responsibility to look after the mental health not only of themselves but of colleagues at work . This responsibility may be fulfilled formally through, for example, trade union safety representatives, safety committees and employee representative consultative machinery.

It may also be informal, through the strong camaraderie and mutual support derived from a positive, harmonious working environment which emphasises team-working and tolerance and shuns any form of discriminatory behaviour, harassment, bullying or inequality at work. The NICS Dignity at Work Policy details the standards of behaviour expected from employees.

Line managers, Departmental HR and Departments/Agencies also have specific roles to play in the promotion of mental well-being at work.

Mental well-being can be affected by many factors in the workplace and in life generally

2.4 The mental well-being of employees can be affected by factors outside work, such as, but not limited to caring responsibilities, marital or partnership difficulties, family crises, financial problems and bereavement. The effects of stressors outside work are often displayed at work. It is important to recognise that employees may have pressures outside the workplace which may render them less able to cope with their work and work environment. Individuals should be encouraged to recognise this for themselves and confide in managers or colleagues who need to be able to respond sympathetically and to ensure that they recognise this increased vulnerability when managing and carrying out work.

Factors in the workplace which can enhance or damage mental well-being include the way work is organised and managed, interpersonal relationships between employees, and ergonomic and other aspects of the physical working environment.

Stimulating work is motivational and can enhance personal well-being and performance

2.5 Mental well-being can help individuals to lead full and satisfying lives, of which work is an essential component. Mental well-being is affected, amongst other things, by the degree of control which employees have over their work and the nature and demands of the work. As long as work is managed safely and effectively, it is good for health and well-being. People in work have been found to be physically, psychologically and socially healthier than people who are unemployed.

Dealing with mental health issues presenting at work requires sensitivity, awareness and confidentiality

2.6 There is stigma attached to mental illness, mainly due to a lack of awareness and fear. Providing clear information and educating employees about mental health and mental illness can help towards minimising the existence of stigma. Mental health is intrinsic to the quality of our overall health. It is as important to protect and promote mental well-being as much as physical well-being.

3. Aims

The aims of the NICS Well-being at Work Charter are as follows:

"To promote mental well-being at work"

3.1 Education and advice are essential components in promoting a positive attitude to mental well-being in the workplace. A workplace that provides the daily essentials for mental well-being will:

- Help employees feel good about themselves and do well at work;
- Be inclusive and encourage the involvement of all employees;
- Promote flexible working arrangements for employees;
- Provide a healthy, safe and harmonious working environment; and
- Offer access to expert advice on issues including health, nutrition and fitness.

To prevent mental ill-health being caused at work

3.2 Reliable information is the key starting point in prevention. Departments and Agencies should consider what information is needed in order to plan preventative action which tackles the causes of mental ill-health in particular circumstances. The collection and analysis of data on the mental health status of employees, from, for example, existing management information systems, health surveys or attitude surveys will also help to define the scope of the problem for a particular Department or Agency.

In addition, raising awareness of mental ill-health and the promotion of positive attitudes about mental well-being can help to promote fairness and consideration in workplace behaviour.

Stress is not a clinically diagnosed mental illness; however the strategic management of stress is a vital component in preventing cases of stress at work leading to mental ill-health.

To effectively manage mental health issues presenting at work

3.3 Communication, the cultivation of an open approach to discussing mental ill-health, responsiveness and empathy in dealing with the issues in the workplace will help not only those who may experience some degree of mental illness, but also those who, quite understandably, may have difficulty in dealing with what has been a taboo subject for many years. Compliance with existing legislation covering equal opportunities, fair employment, disability, health & safety, race relations and employment law is an issue which can be regularly reinforced. Departments and Agencies also need to consider the impact which issues such as organisational values, management style, work procedures and working relationships can have on the mental health of employees.

4. Implementation

In considering implementation, Departments and Agencies should address the steps outlined below:

Increasing awareness and understanding by providing information and advice on mental health issues

4.1 The incorporation of mental health issues into training and development activities such as health and safety training, management training and education and career development should also be considered. It is important that all employees recognise that too much pressure, from whatever source, can have stressful effects and must be handled sensitively.

Taking account of the mental well-being of employees in the organisation and management of work

4.2 Examples of how this can be achieved include demonstrating a commitment to promoting mental well-being at work in, for example, human resource strategies and personnel policies and procedures, taking management action to identify and address mental health issues in the workplace and being aware of the impact which management changes and activity may have on individual well-being and, ultimately, organisational performance.

Supporting the responsibilities which all employees have to realistically and positively appraise personal mental well-being and to respect the mental well-being of colleagues

4.3 In recognition of the responsibility which individuals can take to promote mental well-being, Departments and Agencies should encourage employees to:

- help themselves through realistic and positive appraisal of their situation
- be alive to the causes and effects of stress at work
- recognise, and seek professional help for, the symptoms of mental illness
- look out for each other and consider the impact that the absence of colleagues may have on those at work
- comply with the employee obligations of health and safety legislation
- be open and honest in communicating concerns
- respect diversity at work and set realistic expectations of themselves and others
- appreciate and reconcile the competing demands of work and other duties or interests.

Complying with relevant legislation

4.4 The regulations about health and safety management offer a sound framework for undertaking hazard identification and risk assessment of mental well-being in the workplace. As part of an overall strategy to reduce work-related ill-health, the Health and Safety Executive has developed some clear guidance on stress management. The Management Standards for work related stress encourage organisations to take preventative measures through a health and safety risk assessment approach.

Offering caring and supportive treatment for all employees, particularly those whose mental health is, or has, the potential to become threatened

4.5 Arrangements for managing absence and facilitating return to work after illness should take account of the special circumstances of employees who are or have been mentally ill. Some people continue to attend work though emotionally upset; indeed where the source of the upset is outside work, the working environment can have a salutary effect on such individuals. While respecting privacy and confidentiality, managers and colleagues can be encouraged to learn to cope in the working relationship with an employee who may be in this situation and to be aware of the early signs that all may not be well.

Ensuring employees make use of appropriate professional and specialist services and advice

4.6 The NICS has a well developed infrastructure for the provision of occupational health, welfare, and health and safety services and offers an Employee Assistance Programme. Employees across Departments and Agencies are encouraged to continue to draw on these resources.

Section 2

Promoting Mental Well-Being at Work

The first NICS Healthy Workplace Policy Statement in 1996 was innovative and far sighted in recognising that physical and mental health are complementary and that employers and employees have a shared responsibility to promote, maintain and improve physical and mental well-being.

Mental well–being is more than simply the absence of mental illness. At work, mental well–being encompasses the positive measures that can be implemented to prevent stress and promote a healthier working environment.

Health Promotion

The NICS has a range of programmes available aimed at promoting health and well-being, including the Civil Service Sports Association's Health Works Programme, which focuses on a number of aspects of individual health and wellbeing. The NICS Occupational Health Service (OHS) continues to run the 'Lifestyle and Physical Activity Assessment Programme' where employees can have a personal lifestyle assessment. The programme includes a lifestyle evaluation and assessment of activity levels and a physiological assessment, including measurement of blood pressure, cholesterol, strength, flexibility, lung function and stamina.

The OHS also provides a wide range of services and information on various health topics including stress and health promotion activities, including talks and seminars to groups.

Welfare Support Service

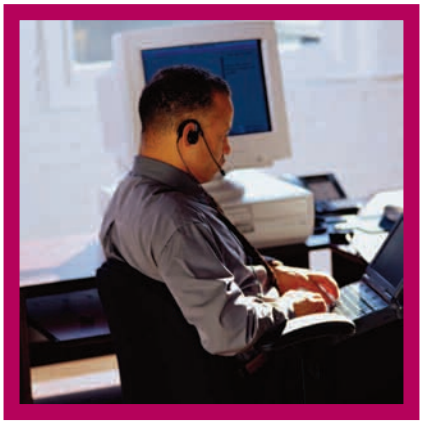
The recently centralised NICS Welfare Support Service offers specialist services to individuals through a cadre of Welfare Officers. The services available include liaising with Departmental HR and management, and help with many of the external stressors such as life crises, life events and financial difficulties. Welfare Officers may also alert establishment or personnel officers to high levels of stress related cases within specific areas of Departments or Agencies and ensure that these cases are followed up through liaison with local management in order to determine any common cause and to provide supportive remedial help.

The Employee Assistance Programme

The NICS offers a service wide Employee Assistance Programme (EAP). The programme provides all staff and their immediate family members with an independent, confidential and professional counselling service on a wide range of issues. This is complementary to the Welfare Support Service and existing policies and procedures and is an important additional resource to support staff.

Health Surveys

The NICS Workplace Health Surveys carried out in 2000 and 2005 by OHS and NISRA on behalf of the NICS Workplace Health Committee are amongst the most comprehensive of their kind and placed the NICS at the forefront of developing and supporting the concept of improving health and well-being in the workplace. The surveys included a substantial section on stress, with the questions in the 2005 survey based on the HSE Stress Management Standards. The HSE Stress Management Standards have also formed the basis of the 2009 NICS Stress Management Survey. Such surveys are important and will be used to provide useful baseline information to assist Departments and Agencies target specific actions within a Workplace Health Improvement Programme model.



Work-Life Balance

The NICS has a range of innovative work life balance initiatives —including policies on term-time working, alternative working patterns and other dependant care provisions such as guidance on eldercare and special leave (paid and unpaid) arrangements.

Health Promotion Events

Many Departments/Agencies offer Health Promotion Events with a view to helping employees promote a healthy lifestyle, including smoking cessation advice and information, alcohol and drug awareness and stress / relaxation techniques.

Physical Fitness

Exercise is seen to be as important for mental well-being as it is for physical well-being. Some office buildings have access to gym facilities.

The NICS Sports Association (NICSSA) aims to improve the health and well being of its members and their families by developing and promoting a wide range of high quality and affordable sporting, leisure and lifestyle opportunities.

Section 3

Recognising and Managing Mental Illness in the Workplace

According to the 2008/2009 NICS sickness absence report, published by the Northern Ireland Statistics and Research Agency (NISRA), Anxiety/Stress/Depression/Other Psychiatric Illnesses accounted for 26.7% of working days lost. Absences in this category tended to be long-term lasting an average of 41.6 days. Significantly, information collected by OHS suggests that most mental illness is caused by factors outside of work.

Mental illnesses are clinically diagnosed medical conditions which can affect people of all ages. It is estimated that 1 in 4 people will suffer from a mental illness at some stage during their life.

Mental illness is not rare and needs to be considered equally as important as an employee presenting with a physical illness.

A supportive working environment is an essential element in helping employees suffering from a mental illness.

Line managers, colleagues and Departmental HR need to have an understanding of mental illness and how this can affect an employee's thoughts, feelings and behaviours.

Further information can be found in 'Guidance on mental illness'. This includes the most common types of mental illness and symptoms, as well as how to provide support to an employee with a mental illness presenting at work and sources of support for employees suffering from stress.

Section 4

Stress Management in the Workplace

What is stress?

Stress has been defined by the Health and Safety Executive as "the adverse reaction people have to excessive pressures or other types of demand placed on them. Pressure is part and parcel of all work and helps to keep us motivated. But excessive pressure can lead to stress which undermines performance, is costly to employers and can make people ill." (HSE (2005) Great Britain).

Stress can have a negative impact on mental well-being and can have negative consequences for the effective running of the organisation. The most common forms of mental health problems are linked to prolonged excessive stress, including depression and anxiety.

How can stress be managed?

It is important that we can all recognise stress in ourselves. Some people may reveal obvious signs that they cannot cope, whilst others may tend to bottle things up.

The line manager plays an important role in identifying the causes of stress at work, recognising the symptoms and ensuring that appropriate action is taken. Line managers are not expected to act as counsellors or provide medical advice to their staff.

Further Information

Further information and advice on issues including the potential sources of stress in the workplace, how to recognise stress in ourselves and mechanisms for coping with stress is contained in 'Guidance on Stress Management'.

Health & Safety Executive Management Standards

The HSE in Great Britain has developed national standards aimed at improving stress management in the workplace. Further information and advice on stress for line managers, HR and health and safety advisers is included in the 'Guidance on Stress Management'