

Discovering the benefits of flexible working with social workers in the UK

Geof Cox

geofcox@newdirections.uk.com

Faced with a national shortage of qualified social workers, many local councils in the UK offer golden hellos and enhanced terms to encourage staff to work for them. Dundee Council has chosen a different approach. Rather than joining the bidding war it has opted for flexible working, and it has also chosen to engage its staff in developing the system – giving them the power to design the flexible working system that works for them and delivers their needs.

New Directions, engaged to carry out initial research into the wider issue of Dundee's recruitment and retention problem, quickly identified the potential of introducing flexible working practices. At first just a couple of volunteer teams were sought, but such was the strength of support amongst staff that almost every service manager put their teams forward. Nine teams were chosen: four to investigate flexible working location, four to pilot flexible working hours and one to look at organisational issues. The teams covered a range of services – including those for children, criminal justice, community care and teams working in home and residential care where it was believed flexible working would be difficult.

Developing the policy

Taking inspiration from the work done by Sandra Kolb and Naomi Johnson¹, the teams were given total freedom to tailor their flexibility to their own and their service user needs. This was a risk taken by the Director of Social Work and the Council as a whole, who were effectively suspending their HR policies relating to hours of work, core attendance and reporting. It was a risk they were prepared to take to demonstrate their trust in staff and to identify the best approach to flexible working for the Dundee staff. The only proviso laid down to the pilot teams was that the service level to their client could not be compromised in the way they worked – it had to be at least as good as before.

Through a facilitated workshop using an AI methodology, the team members identified the occasions when they were able to successfully balance work and other priorities, and shared these stories with each other. The principles underpinning these successful situations were analysed and a unique vision emerged of how they could best work together and utilise flexibility of location, working hours and/or processes.

The freedom of decision demonstrated in these pilot workshops helped staff to feel empowered and trusted, and also stemmed any fears that new working practices would be imposed from above. Allowing teams to make their own decisions made it possible to include those practices where flexible working seemed improbable as well as those where its

benefits were obvious. While managers of the pilot teams were involved in the dialogues, staff tended to take it upon themselves to design recording and planning systems which they operated with little or no managerial control. A clear message was also going out to the rest of the organisation: as the pilot teams started their six month trial other teams were demanding similar freedom and flexibility.

Measures of success

An independent evaluation carried out after 6 months of operation, showed improved operational performance:

More reports completed on time, and to a higher standard with less corrections needed, more cases closed, no backlogs. In one criminal justice team, the late delivery of Social Enquiry Reports to the courts reduced to 6% during the pilot period from 32% in the previous year, on a base of a 50% increase in total numbers.

Even teams where there was limited flexibility showed improvements far in excess of their managers' expectations. A community care team offering home support at specified times of the day had no backlog of client requests for the first time ever, and were even able to offer cover for adjacent teams, even during the peak morning and evening shifts.

Staff reported lower stress levels and said they were getting more and better work done, even in an environment of continuing high workload and under-staffing. Absence in pilot teams was reduced and there was better management of staffing crises – such as team members contributing from home when suffering with minor illness, emergency childcare or other responsibilities where previously they would have taken time off. Flexible working did not replace a lack of resource but it seemed to help to cope with pressure.

Staff said they experienced more trust and greater choice and control. They felt less guilty if they were not in the office “on-time” and did not feel they had to ask permission for protected time. Just having the choice was significant even if it was not used. One social work assistant did not take part in the pilot but liked the fact that she had the choice to opt in or out (a similar comment was also reported by Kolb and Johnson). Workers and teams made more decisions on their own, which had a beneficial impact on the work of senior practitioners and managers (after they had overcome their initial feelings of being left out!).

Fears that individuals would abuse the system proved unfounded, as did concerns over a loss of team cohesion and support. The lack of a consistent “office attendance” by the whole team led to fewer opportunities for interaction, but this was partly overcome by better quality communication when it did meet. The evaluation identified the crucial position of IT and communications technology, such as mobile phones and remote access systems, to the success of flexible working although not all work at home needs on-line system access. Poor IT and problems with remote access caused problems, and success is more likely when infrastructure and support systems are put in place at the start.

Performance management needs

The pilot programme did identify some wider OD needs – in particular managers experienced great difficulty in leading and managing performance with fewer connections

with staff, less involvement in day to day decision making and having to move from measuring input, such as time in the office, to measuring outcomes.

To help to meet these challenges, a second AI intervention took place to define a set of leadership competencies that could be used to benchmark management behaviour. A workshop involving the top two levels of the organisation (about 30 in number) used AI to identify the key behaviours of managers in engendering feelings of success and achievement in the workplace. Participants related stories of their own personal experience, and the subsequent key factors were collected and clustered. The clusters were then further refined into statements to describe key management behaviours, with detailed descriptors. The process was replicated with the first line managers (180 split over three workshops) to validate and develop commitment to the model. The model (see below) was then

The Dundee Leadership Model:

- **Put Staff at the Heart of Success**
Ensuring staff feel valued and can contribute fully to their own development and to the continuous improvement of the service.
- **Responding Flexibly**
Work flexibly to meet needs and respond to change
- **Communicate Effectively with all Stakeholders**
Achieve a shared understanding in all forms of communication
- **Promotion of Teamwork in the Organisation**
The utilisation and co-ordination of the strengths and skills of the individuals and team members
- **Take Positive Action to Meet Need**
Strive to be creative and innovative to make a positive difference for the people of Dundee

implemented through day-to-day activities, with more formal feedback through the established supervision system and evaluation using the self-assessment formats of the EFQM people standard and Investors in People award.

Trust in staff

A final word on the project comes from Alan Baird, Dundee's Director of Social Work. "In Dundee we faced the same problems in recruitment as the rest of Scotland and the UK, especially for qualified social workers, and we were being squeezed by the new Scottish Commission for the Regulation of Care and the Scottish Social Services Council offices in Dundee, both of which recruited qualified workers on enhanced conditions.

"But I was convinced that buying our way out of the crisis would add significantly to costs, whilst offering only a short term solution. When we commissioned the initial research we did not have flexible working in mind, and we were certainly not expecting the extent of the benefits that have accrued. When you demonstrate trust in staff they repay it several fold."

Footnote

¹ "Integrating Work with Life: Using AI to Successfully Implement Family-Friendly Policies" by Sandra Kolb and Naomi Johnson in *AI Practitioner* Issue 18, August 2002.