

# TIME ON OURSIDE

Dundee Council has pioneered flexible working in an effort to improve staff retention.

Geof Cox looks at the results



**GEOF COX** is an independent consultant working in organisation and management development. He has recently been working on the National Training Framework for Supporting People and on projects in the public and private sectors, including leading this work for Dundee Council.

Many councils now 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.

Independent research into Dundee's recruitment and retention problems identified the potential of flexible working practices. Initially, just a couple of volunteer teams were sought, but almost every service manager came forward. Nine teams were chosen: four to investigate where flexible working could take place, four to pilot flexible working hours, and one to look at organisational issues, such as ways to better time and staff. 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.

The teams were given total freedom to tailor their flexibility to their own and service user needs. The only proviso was that the service to the client had to be at least as good as it was before. This freedom 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 where flexible working seemed improbable as well as those where its benefits were obvious. The pilot teams operated with little or no managerial control, which was essential to the success.

An independent evaluation at the end of 2003 showed improved performance after six months of flexible working.

More reports were completed on time and they were a higher standard with fewer corrections needed, more cases were closed and there were no backlogs. In one criminal justice team, the late delivery of social inquiry reports to the courts reduced from 32 per cent in 2002 to 6 per



cent for the pilot period. Even teams where there was limited flexibility showed improvements far in excess of their managers' expectations.

Staff reported less stress and said they were doing more and better quality work, even in environments where there were high workloads and understaffing. Absenteeism in pilot teams was reduced and management of staffing problems improved – such as team members contributing from home when suffering minor illness or dealing with emergency child care or other responsibilities. Flexible working did not replace the lack of resources but it did seem to help people to cope with the pressure.

Staff said they had more trust and greater choice and control. They felt less guilty if they were not in the office "on time" and did not feel like they had to ask permission if they wanted some protected time. Just having the choice was significant even if

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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.

There was also evidence of workers and teams making more decisions, which eased the workload of more senior managers.

Fears that individuals would abuse the system proved unfounded, as did concerns over a loss of team cohesion and support. But managers did have problems leading and managing performance – particularly with the change from measuring input, such as time at the office, to measuring outcomes. The lack of a consistent "office attendance" by the whole team led to fewer communications, but this was partly overcome by better quality communication when it did meet.

The evaluation of the pilot also identified the crucial role of IT and communications technology, such as mobile phones and remote access

## TRUST IN STAFF

Alan Baird, Dundee's director of social work, gives his verdict. "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, while 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."

systems. Poor IT skills and problems with remote access caused problems, but not all work at home needs this sort of system access. But, if the scheme is to be extended any further, better infrastructure and support systems are needed.

As to the future, while the recruitment issues have not been resolved, the working environment has improved, which can surely only help the situation. As Angus Skinner, Scotland's chief social work inspector, says in a report: "A culture of professional development and leadership will encourage more people to consider a career in social services."

Staff are keen on flexible working, but need to be given choice and allowed to contribute to the way it is designed. The evaluation suggests that the improved working environment and work-life balance will help retention by increasing job satisfaction and reducing stress. CC

## ABSTRACT

This article looks at the steps that one council has taken to address the growing recruitment and retention problems in social services. By giving staff and teams the choice and control to decide the best working practices for them and their service users, Dundee Council is benefiting from increased staff performance, less stress and lower absence rates. The recruitment and retention crisis remains, but the council is a more attractive place to work.

## REFERENCES

Progress with Complexity: the 2002 national overview report, the Scottish executive

## FURTHER INFORMATION

- The 2001 Cabinet Office paper *More than Money* addresses non-pay rewards in the light of work-life balance. Available from [www.cabinet-office.gov.uk](http://www.cabinet-office.gov.uk)
- Information on work-life balance, including details of grants to set up schemes, is available from the Department of Trade and Industry website: [www.dti.gov.uk/work-life/balance/](http://www.dti.gov.uk/work-life/balance/)
- The Department for Education and Science has a website devoted to the issue: [www.flexibility.co.uk/issues/WLB/](http://www.flexibility.co.uk/issues/WLB/)
- For further details of the inquiry methodology used to set up the pilots go to [www.newdirections.org.uk/al.htm](http://www.newdirections.org.uk/al.htm)

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