

Acas training at Swale PCT: managing absence, bullying and harassment, and equality and diversity

This case study demonstrates how Acas training in managing staff absence, bullying and harassment, and equality and diversity practices led to reductions in absence levels and bullying and harassment incidents, and greater management confidence in dealing with these issues.¹

The challenge

Swale NHS Primary Care Trust (PCT) was established in 2002 as a result of the reconfiguration of Thames Gateway and Invicta Trusts. The PCT serves the Isle of Sheppey, Sittingbourne and the surrounding rural areas, caring for the health of around 98,000 people.

The Trust established a new Human Resources (HR) function in 2004. With Agenda for Change and Improving Working Lives (IWL) on the near horizon², HR staff embarked on an audit of all HR policies, many of which had been transferred over from the original Thames Gateway Trust. This review resulted in the development of many new policies and the harmonisation of others.

A key priority was to review sickness and absence policies. In recent years the Trust had had relatively high levels of sickness absence compared with other Trusts, (averaging 6 per cent of time lost through absences as a proportion of total staff time available). Both long and short-term sickness absence was a problem. Traditionally, sickness absence had not been proactively managed by Trust managers. Improvements were needed in recording absence, to enable effective monitoring of absence levels, and standard elements of absence management procedures – such as return to work interviews – were not always followed by managers.

The bullying and harassment policy was also revised to incorporate new legislation as well as guidelines recommended in the 2004 Ayling Inquiry and Report into GP practices. Although historically few bullying and harassment incidents had occurred at the Trust, a 2003 staff attitude survey highlighted staff concerns about bullying and harassment in the Trust. As a result, the Trust promoted a “zero tolerance” approach to bullying and harassment.

¹ This case study is based on interviews conducted in August 2005 by Alexandra Dawe and Sarah Oxenbridge (Acas Research and Evaluation Section) with an Acas trainer and two senior managers at Swale PCT, as part of Acas’ evaluation programme. We are grateful for interviewees’ assistance and reflections on the Acas training.

² The Improving Working Lives Standard is a blueprint by which NHS employers and staff can measure the management of human resources. Organisations are kite-marked against their ability to demonstrate a commitment to improving the working lives and work-life balance of their employees.

The Trust's diversity policy was also reviewed and revised. In conducting management training on a new staff recruitment policy, it became clear to HR that managers were not always aware of their responsibilities in terms of complying with employment law relating to equality and diversity issues. New legislation around discrimination had been recently enacted, or was soon to be enacted, and the Trust's managers needed to be brought up to speed with these changes. In addition to this, the IWL Practice accreditation report recommended that the Trust should provide diversity training. But more generally, HR staff felt that the general behaviour of staff pointed to a need for awareness raising and education around the issue.

These issues, and others, prompted the Trust to commission Acas to provide training. The reconfiguration to form Swale PCT highlighted a need to train managers in a consistent set of policies and procedures. The review of policies also highlighted an absence of staff knowledge relating to managing absence, bullying and harassment, and equality and diversity. A further impetus for training in these areas was the IWL process, which required the Trust to provide evidence of steps taken to enhance workforce diversity, to train and develop staff, and to ensure that staff are treated with dignity and respect.

How Acas helped.

Acas trainers worked with the Trust's HR staff to develop and refine the content of the training sessions. The aim of the training was to build awareness of the new policies amongst Trust staff, and to encourage staff to use them. A general message in the training was the importance of managing problem issues at an early stage, in a procedurally fair and correct way, in order to prevent problems from ballooning and leading to disciplinary action or Employment Tribunal cases.

One-day training sessions were delivered by three different Acas trainers on each of the three topics, throughout 2004. Multiple training sessions were held on each topic – for example, six sessions were held on absence, over several months and at different geographical locations within the Trust area, each attended by groups of around 15 managers. The sickness and absence management training was attended by 71 managers; harassment and bullying training by 64 managers and employees; and around 50 managers attended diversity awareness training. Bullying and harassment training was open to all staff, although it was mandatory for all managers to attend training on these topics.

Acas trainers and HR staff decided that it would be productive for all levels of management to attend the sessions – including directors and other senior managers – to signal that the Trust took these issues seriously, and to demonstrate senior management commitment to the new policies. Places in sessions were allocated to



include a mix of managers from different levels. The Trust's HR staff attended all of the training sessions and they presented material outlining Trust policy and provided detail of policies when required.

The Acas trainers used a variety of techniques within the sessions, including short case studies, quizzes (which included questions on Trust procedures), and 'action maze' exercises based on hypothetical case study scenarios. The action maze involved participants being split into two groups and given real-life scenarios, albeit with incomplete information. From that, participants had to make choices, and dependent upon the choices they made, they were then given incremental pieces of information. This led to a series of consequences. Each group recorded why they chose the particular action, and this was used as a catalyst for discussion. The process of recording each action reflected 'real-life' management processes, where absence, bullying, or discrimination cases might reach Employment Tribunals, requiring managers to justify and record evidence as to why they took certain decisions. The exercise reinforced to participants the value of both keeping records up-to-date, following procedures, and using the reporting mechanisms in place.

A Trust manager described the Acas trainers as "superb", and felt the combination of techniques used worked well. This manager praised trainers' ability to draw out views from all participants and described the training as "very good ... very well delivered ... they (Acas trainers) made it interesting ... and I learnt a huge amount ... it was very valuable".

The benefits: improved management practice and greater staff satisfaction

The impacts of the Acas training were many and varied. Managers were now aware of their responsibilities and more confident in dealing with absence – bullying and harassment, and equality and diversity issues, and they dealt with problems actively and "early", before they became larger-scale problems. Human Resources staff had experienced a decrease in the number of queries and requests for assistance from managers with regard to all three issues. In terms of absence management, managers were now conducting return to work interviews, which enabled them to work with staff to develop solutions to problems causing absence. These positive impacts were reflected in an initial fall in absence figures to 5.5 per cent by late August 2005, and a decrease in the percentage of staff reporting bullying and harassment incidents in a staff satisfaction survey, conducted in late 2004.³

While relations between managers and staff at Swale PCT had traditionally been good, the Acas training signalled the Trust's intent to support employees in dealing with absence issues and to bring issues relating to diversity, and bullying and harassment,



out in the open. This reaped positive dividends in terms of managers becoming more active in supporting employees around work-life balance issues, and an improved workplace climate. Staff felt more able to raise bullying and harassment issues (and *did* now raise these issues with HR staff), they were more aware of their rights, and were happier with the way absence was handled by managers. Additionally, the training resulted in a greater understanding of what diversity means and a recognition among staff that “diversity is absolutely key, and accepting people for what they are and for their differences”.

In summary, Swale PCT, like many NHS Trusts, faces challenges in the form of financial pressures and ongoing organisational restructuring, as well as the damaging impact of these pressures on workforce morale. However, the decision to commission Acas to help embed new policies was successful in terms of building improved management capacity to deal with critical issues, including absence, bullying and harassment, and diversity practices. Broader positive impacts included greater staff satisfaction with management handling of these issues, and a greater sense among staff that these issues were dealt with fairly, and more openly.

³ Since August 2005 the Trust has gone through further restructuring processes, including a ward closure and workforce reductions through redundancies. This, together with the proposed reconfiguration of PCTs, has in some instances resulted in low morale and the Trust has seen an increase in absence figures. As a result of the increase, HR staff began working again directly with managers to help them prioritise dealing with sickness incidents.

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