

Case study



The Management of Mental Health at Work in Mind in Harrow

This case study centres on Mind in Harrow, a voluntary organisation providing support services to people with mental health conditions. It explores how Mind in Harrow manages the mental health of its own staff. The case study conveys the importance of leadership, people management and workplace cultures in the management of mental health at work.

Organisational background

Mind in Harrow is an independent charity affiliated to National Mind and part of a network of 140 Local Mind Associations across the country. It has been providing services supporting mental health and wellbeing in the local community in Harrow for over 30 years. In the mid-1990s, the organisation had five staff and over the last thirty years it has grown to a workforce of 30 full and part-time staff and over 100 volunteers. Mind in Harrow places particular emphasis on ensuring that people with mental health problems become part of an inclusive workforce. The majority of its projects are led by people with mental health conditions, often in a voluntary capacity.

Perceptions of mental health at work and workplace effectiveness

Mind in Harrow is very different to other employers in terms of its perceptions of mental health. It is acutely aware of the stigma that continues to surround mental health and how this feeds into the labour market to the disadvantage of people with mental health conditions:

'They tend to feel disadvantaged or put-off from, or don't feel necessarily welcomed by, organisations. They have such a dilemma in the workplace, people who have used mental health services, because they have that psychiatric association and if that's disclosed during the recruitment process, how that would be responded to'.

(Chief Executive, Mind in Harrow)

People who have worked for the organisation have experienced a range of mental health conditions, for example schizophrenia, short-term depression and anxiety. Employing staff with lived experiences of mental health conditions at Mind in Harrow is seen as integral to the quality of service outcomes, including in the delivery of 'peer-led' projects. Underpinning this perception is a social model of disability:

'What matters to us is how people's mental health affects them in either their daily living or in the workplace in their capacity to do their role. That's what matters to us, not the diagnosis...how it impacts their capacity to cope and live. That's what we are about: helping with and supporting'

(Chief Executive, Mind in Harrow)



Policy, practice and initiatives in the management of mental health at work

Reflecting the workplace culture of supporting people with mental health conditions to cope and live their lives to the full, over the years Mind in Harrow has developed formal guidelines and policies on the management of mental health at work. As the organisation has grown, it has searched for guidance that complements its ethos and developed additional support to meet the full range of potential support needs. Also important is the organisation's inclusive approach to organisational leadership and access to employment and volunteer opportunities and the emphasis on employee empowerment and reasonable adjustments. Use of a peer review system helps to embed reflection on the scope for improvement in Mind in Harrow's approach to the management of mental health at work. Also noteworthy, is the organisation's peer-led work to promote mental health awareness amongst other employers.

Mind in Harrow has a Staff Wellbeing at Work policy, adopted in May 2013, following the Health & Safety Executive's (HSE) guidance in promoting the principles of maintaining and promoting individual health and wellbeing at work (see box 1). The policy states, *'Mind in Harrow's aim is to ensure staff do not experience work related stress but maintain job satisfaction, high levels of productivity and positive engagement with beneficiaries of Mind in Harrow.'*

Box 1: Key areas in HSE guidance followed by the Harrow in Mind Staff Wellbeing at Work policy

The HSE's guidance on managing stress within the work place outlines six core areas:

1. **Demands** e.g. workload, work patterns and work environment.
2. **Control** e.g. how much say staff have in their workplace.
3. **Support** e.g. the encouragement and support offered by the organisation.
4. **Relationships** e.g. promoting positive working to avoid conflict and dealing with unacceptable behaviour.
5. **Role** e.g. whether people understand their role within the organisation and whether the organisation ensures they do not have conflicting roles.
6. **Change** e.g. how organisational change is managed and communicated in the organisation.

Source: Mind in Harrow Staff Wellbeing at Work Policy

Following the HSE guidance, the Staff Wellbeing at Work policy reviews demands on staff, control, support at work, relationships at work, clarity around roles and organisational change. It also states how Mind in Harrow will achieve these goals to maintain staff wellbeing at work. A staff handbook provides additional information on a range of support available, for example on compassionate leave, bereavements, child-care arrangements, any life events that can intensify stress levels and make existing workloads more challenging to manage. While as a fairly small employer the organisation does not have an in-house Employee Assistance Programme, it signposts staff to further support, that may be needed to meet needs, for example counselling. The aim is to be as supportive and understanding as possible, making reasonable adjustments where needed, though people still

need to be able to do their jobs. As will be explored further below, managers proactively avoid creating barriers to the provision of reasonable adjustments.

The organisation's supervision policy was introduced in 2005, in part to support the development of a workplace culture where staff feel empowered. There is an emphasis on ensuring that staff do not have an *'unnecessary interfering kind of line management experience'*. Rather the focus is on staff being able to make their own decisions and be able to have as much control and say as possible in their role, and how the service they deliver works. The supervision policy is quite explicit about the kind of support the organisation expects line managers to give to people if they're going through or have additional emotional needs. The policy includes a statement of management and supervisee expectations (see box 2) reinforcing messages around the importance of supportive practice and reasonable adjustments.

Box 2: Management and supervisee expectations as outlined in the Mind in Harrow Supervision Policy

Mind in Harrow's expectations:

- To ensure the provision of the best service possible.
- To ensure that the supervisee works to their job description and that any changes to this are monitored and agreed.
- To line manage the work and to provide a means of accountability to the organisation and external stakeholders, including funders and service users. This includes cover during leave and illness.
- To provide an opportunity for reflection, joint problem solving, clarifying of professional issues and general professional development and learning.
- To offer professional support during stressful periods and to consider ways of managing these in the workplace.
- To ensure that the supervisee understands and abides by Mind in Harrow's core values.
- To consider development of the service.
- To evaluate the supervisee's performance and conduct.

Supervisee Expectations:

- To have a means, through line management, of being accountable to the line manager, the Chief Executive and to the funders for the work.
- To be able to reflect on their work, engage in joint problem-solving, have an opportunity to clarify issues and to continue one's professional development and learning.
- To receive professional support and to be offered help in managing professionally stressful situations.
- To be supported to develop the service
- To receive feedback during supervision on performance, and to have regular annual reviews of this and the service in general.

Source: Mind in Harrow Supervision Policy



The style of leadership at Mind in Harrow has been significant in putting these policies into practice. It is influenced by the background of the Chief Executive. He first entered Mind via a volunteer route and draws on his lived experience of mental health in his day-to-day management of Mind in Harrow. He emphasises: *'I've come from that background, so it's very important to me'*. This means that there is leadership in fostering and supporting an open and inclusive workplace culture that supports people in talking about their mental health and emotional wellbeing in the workplace.

'We're an organisation that encourages people, welcomes people, supports people well with their mental health and wellbeing and that's the case generally for how local Minds operate. You know, there is that kind of culture where it's possibly more open than some organisations, being able to talk about your emotional wellbeing in the workplace'.

(Chief Executive, Mind in Harrow)

All job advertisements include a statement about encouraging people who have used mental health services to apply. This is perceived to be important because of the labour market disadvantage that they experience. Moreover the organisation has certain jobs that are structured around staff who have lived experience of mental health conditions, drawing on that experience in their role as a form of expertise:

'It gives you sort of an empathy, perspective and awareness that maybe you wouldn't have if you hadn't had that experience'.

(Chief Executive, Mind in Harrow)

Policy and practices are regularly reviewed. As well as internal reviews conducted in consultation with staff, Mind in Harrow also has a peer review system, working within Mind National's quality standards, called the Mind Quality Mark. Every three to four years a review panel visits for the day and conducts a quality review. The panel consists of someone from Mind, a Chief Executive from another local Mind and one or two service users. The panel's activities include talking to service users, staff, volunteers and trustees, to get a rounded picture of how Mind in Harrow is operating, including its support for people's mental health in the workplace.

Mind in Harrow works to promote wider societal change and a current project, 'Head for Work', aims to raise awareness of mental health amongst employers. This innovative project involves thirty volunteer trainers who have lived experiences of mental illness and who are long-term unemployed, living in the London Borough of Harrow and who are also in secondary healthcare, in the mental health service. 'Train the Trainer' courses have allowed the volunteers to gain a qualification from Middlesex University as accredited Mental Health Awareness Trainers, qualifying them to become paid training ambassadors for Mind in Harrow. The project manager has supported them in delivering mental health awareness training to employers in the clinical sector, educational sector and the corporate world, both in and outside of Harrow.



Successes and challenges in the management of mental health at work

The personal testimonies of staff reinforce that Mind in Harrow has managed to foster a supportive and inclusive workplace culture where reasonable adjustments are made and staff can be open about their mental health support needs. However, the external funding structure and associated pressures experienced by the organisation pose a particular challenge in minimising workplace stress and this can compromise mental wellbeing.

While Mind in Harrow has operational priorities in delivering its services, there is typically scope to make reasonable adjustments according to staff needs, for example in relation to working hours.

'If you've got a service to run, that's running between 9 to 5, not everyone can do them 8 to 4 ... it kind of equals itself out. So I think if people don't make lots of pressure points and don't make it overly bureaucratic and actually just work with the team ...I've got a team of 10 that I manage and I've got some who say 'yes I love working evenings', some say they love doing mornings, and there's some who say 'I'm quite happy to do the bog standard 9 to 5'. So without me having to dictate and say no you're going to do this, you're going to do that, it manages itself'.

(Line Manager, Harrow in Mind)

'I think when people talk about reasonable adjustment they think it's going to be something massive, and actually sometimes it's the really, really little things and it is just about asking'.

(Line manager, Mind in Harrow)

Members of staff at Mind in Harrow know that reasonable adjustments will be made to meet their needs, as illustrated by a quotation from the following employee:

'I can openly talk about things that affect me without the fear of being judged. I get a lot of support with the work that I do. I've also mentioned the support I get with being a primary carer for my mother...not a lot of services or even businesses will be open to giving me that much leeway and I get that. If I did feel that the work was overwhelming, it's something else they will support me with'

(Employee, Mind in Harrow).

Some people who work for Mind in Harrow have previously been clients. As a result they come with a starting point that they are already open about their mental health and support needs, when their health might be fluctuating and when they might need more understanding or adjustments to working patterns such as breaks or reduced hours. The staff value that openness. Other people find it harder to talk about their mental and emotional wellbeing on a personal basis particularly when their previous workplaces have stigmatised mental health as a weakness and a problem. For these staff the organisation respects the individual's right to disclose and hope that trust will develop with time.



'We wouldn't be forcing people to be saying something quite personal. ... My experience is that some staff come here from other sectors, like the public sector or other kinds of charities where this culture is not the norm. ... And so, it can take quite a long time for those staff to feel that it is safe enough to say something about it and that they'll be responded to positively in a way that is hopefully helpful to them'

(Chief Executive, Mind in Harrow).

However, a difficult funding climate provides an on-going challenge. In the voluntary sector projects are often of one to three years in duration and there is a constant process of trying to generate new income to sustain services as well as the employment of staff. For example funding for the Head to Work project runs out in April 2017. Austerity has amplified the financial insecurity. This in turn generates job insecurity and its associated stresses:

'Staff are in a constant state of anxiety or uncertainty about their role. There's very little funding that we have that is on-going and regular. ... Our core funding, our regular grant from the council, was cut by 50 per cent last year. ... As an organisation, you can imagine the effect on people's health and wellbeing, of that kind of pressure all the time. ... It's a very stressful environment.'

(Chief Executive, Mind in Harrow)

Performance targets are often linked to project targets and the project success. This contributes to the stress:

'Targets can be a stressful factor in itself, but I think if it's linked to funding... There's the feeling that if people haven't met their targets or haven't evidence for the success of their project, then possibly funding won't be renewed. And then that would have an impact on their client base, and also on themselves and their colleagues who work on the project'

(Line manager, Mind in Harrow)

There have been instances of individuals walking out of the job without giving notice linked possibly to a sense of pressure to perform. For example, one individual in a new role and on probation felt a sense of pressure to prove themselves. With hindsight the individual did not seem sure enough of their workplace relationships and seemed concerned that it would be seen as an individual weakness to ask for help. They did not feel established enough to say that they needed support or that the job was very difficult and anyone would need support in that position:

'So we have had people leaving, suddenly just finding the work too much, and maybe not giving more. It's just kind of walking out... We've had a couple of people who did that last year and that had a negative impact on all of our mental health, I think. You just feel worried for the person that they got to that level... That they couldn't tell anybody or couldn't work the period of notice... Then you feel worried for everyone left behind, because of course, if one or two people go, then we kind of all need to try and chip in and cover their projects'

(Line manager, Mind in Harrow).



Mind in Harrow tries to minimise this kind of experience by line managers looking out for current members of their team, to spot emerging signs that they are struggling, and communicating with them:

'I always say to staff, let me know, because if I don't know then I'm going to be expecting a certain level coming from you, whereas if you're open then at least we can have that conversation, I can make some adjustments'. (Line manager, Mind in Harrow)

Box 3: Key learning points

- The management of mental health at work can be supported by:
 - **Leadership** that draws on a strong understanding of mental health to foster openness and support for people to talk about their mental health and emotional wellbeing in the workplace.
 - Working within a **social model of disability** that recognises that reasonable adjustments to mental health conditions are a part of everyday working life and embeds them in **workplace cultures**. Making reasonable adjustments, for example to working hours, can often be easier than employers think.
 - Managing people in a way that allows them to make their own **decisions** and have as much **control** and say in their role as possible.
 - Regularly reviewing your policy and practice in consultation with staff.
- The management of mental health at work can be challenged by:
 - Perceived pressure to perform and meet targets. This can be generated by external funding pressures that feed into individual targets, as well as the pressure that individuals can put themselves under in trying to prove themselves in a new role and/or on probation. Line managers need to be mindful that it takes confidence for members of their team to negotiate these pressures, particularly if they have previously worked in an environment where voicing concerns about workloads has been discouraged. Line managers need to be observant around staff who may be struggling and communicate with them.

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ⁱ This case study is based on interviews with staff at Mind in Harrow and was conducted by a researcher at the University of Essex.

