



## Submission Details

Organisation or individual to which this submission relates (if different from above):	Bradford Metropolitan District Council
Approximate size of organisation (number of employees) if applicable:	8,400
Number of employees covered by the initiative if applicable:	900

1,200-word entry

## The need

### Business case

"A colleague in one of my teams had poor attendance over two years... she was constantly finding reasons for absence. I thought of her as 'a problem employee'... as such, she was in and out of formal processes..." Service Manager, Bradford Metropolitan District Council (BMDC).

With performance issues like this widespread throughout the council, the obvious approach for increasingly pressurised managers is to come down hard on colleagues, using formal processes.

In July 2017, BMDC initiated 'The Big Project', a council-wide workforce transformation project seeking to ensure 'everyone has the capacity, capability and commitment to do more than just their role'.

### Board-level commitment

As part of this project, BMDC's HR team undertook a thorough workforce review and set council objectives relating to employee engagement, wellbeing, performance and productivity.

The strategy focused on two objectives:

- Reduce sickness absence
- Reduce time wasted handling disciplinary and grievance matters

Research (see later) highlighted that success was particularly dependent on one segment of the workforce: managers. With 8,400 employees, including 900 managers, the thought of investing in management development would have stopped the conversation there for most cash-strapped councils. Instead, BMDC bravely decided to invest.

While most councils responded to continued austerity by making deep budget cuts in areas like training, BMDC was brave enough to ask: "Is cutting training spend the right decision?"

This board-level commitment was demonstrated to managers when the strategy was launched by senior leaders (see later and appendix-1).

### Defining good management

To understand the scale of the challenge, two years' of management information was analysed. This gave BMDC's HR and senior leadership team a compelling case for investment, and a blueprint for the programme strategy:

- 37% of absence cases related to mental health, with advisers reporting managers lack confidence with sensitive conversations.
- Managers' propensity to deal with 'black and white' issues, but avoiding issues needing greater judgement.
- Protracted case durations negatively impacting all involved.
- A disconnect between the number of short-term absences requiring proactive management and number of absence cases opened.

## The solution

### Strategy

The chosen strategy, developed and implemented with employee relations specialist AdviserPlus, was to:

- Invest in a management development programme, with greater emphasis on employee relations.
- Equip managers with the skills to 'get the basics right' and help them concentrate on more complex tasks and strategic goals.
- Include managers at every level across the business.
- Tailor interventions to suit those attending (i.e. adapt sessions to suit experience, seniority, responsibility, capability).
- Take a three-pronged approach, comprising:
  1. Pre-course e-learning.
  2. Face-to-face workshops.
  3. Proactive follow-up calls.
- Partner where appropriate, but ensure each element of the solution worked as an extension on the HR function.

The impact must be sustained, so a framework of quarterly service reviews and recommendations were put in place.

This meant the strategy continuously evolved, informed by insights – a focus that remains high on the agenda.

### Engaging stakeholders

With buy-in so crucial to success, the programme was pitched as a pivotal part of the 'Big Project'. Manager conferences launched the programme, with key messages from senior leaders aiming to challenge the status quo and introduce best-practice people management (Figure.1, supporting document).

## Implementation

### Stage one: Pre-course e-Learning

To maximise face-to-face learning an e-learning module was created, tailored to council policies. Equipping managers with a clear understanding of people management procedures through real-life case studies and Q&As, it aimed to increase confidence, engagement and buy-in, in preparation for stage two.

### Stage two: Face-to-face workshops

Spread over four days, interactive workshops were run by external trainers:

- A wide range of topics, including leadership skills and – perhaps most important – a more sensitive and intelligent approach to performance management.

- Opportunities to roleplay learning, raising confidence when dealing with difficult conversations.
- Real-life (anonymised) case studies, keeping learning as realistic as possible.
- The final day focused entirely on mental health.

Key aims of the workshops:

- Ensuring managers came away with new confidence to tackle performance management and difficult conversations.
- Empowering them to intervene early to help employees who needed it, before issues had a chance to escalate.

## **Stage three: Proactive follow-up calls**

A vital step in the process to ensure the learning is embedded, the final stage involved expert Employee Relations Advisers calling every manager to follow up - giving managers the opportunity to ask questions, give feedback and open cases.

## **Additional support**

Alongside this bespoke learning programme, the following supporting elements were developed:

- Online mental health toolkit, signposting resources to enable early intervention/prevention.
- Series of workshops on 'Managing Mental Health in the Workplace' for 100 staff across the council.

## **Results**

### **Changing behaviour**

By changing how managers handled performance issues, many indicators began to improve, including:

- Fewer instances of employees taking short-term absence being escalated to formal procedures (Figure.4).
- The total number of performance cases being opened plummeting while the programme was rolled out (Figure.5).

### **Impact on employees**

Real-life examples show managers apply their new skills in the workplace and achieve better outcomes for everyone:

#### *Example 1*

So, what happened with the example we referenced in the introduction? Instead of continuing with formal processes, the Service Manager at Bradford Council applied the mental health awareness training. He took time to understand the full picture, encouraging the employee to talk through the issues she faced. They worked together to devise a new flexible working arrangement which would improve her ability to manage the stress and anxiety external pressures had previously caused.

Following a three-month trial, it was apparent that the changes made were a vast improvement, with the employee reporting they felt happier, as well as falling below the corporate sickness trigger point for the first time in years.

### *Example 2*

When a manager noticed an issue with the performance of a team member, she put her management training into practice.

She didn't automatically act on the assumption that his below-par work was simply due to a lack of training, unwillingness or laziness. Sitting down with the employee and taking the time to ask him about the work and why he was falling behind, he revealed that he was in fact going through an extremely stressful period in his life – a relationship breakdown – and hadn't realised that such issues were impacting his day-to-day role.

By empathising with his situation and patiently listening to his thoughts and feelings, the manager was able to offer emotional support in the form of an occupational health referral, followed by weekly counselling. While his personal situation hasn't changed substantially, his manager is already seeing a marked improvement in attitude and responsiveness at work.

## **Strengthening the council**

Since implementation:

- Disciplinary cases take 66% less time to process (Figure.2).
- Grievance case duration has reduced by 60% (Figure.3).

## **Why it's different**

The project has been pivotal in improving manager capability to provide better employee experiences and untie the hands of BMDC's HR professionals.

Alongside benefits like process time reductions and cost savings, this programme has enabled a full-scale employee relations boost at a time when BMDC needed it most.

An easier and cheaper approach to managing performance could have been taken, but BMDC proved that well-placed workforce development, when aligned to employee AND business needs, can deliver benefits far broader and more substantial than the obvious response to austerity – an important finding for the wider local government HR community.