

## **Camden Council**

### **The company**

The London Borough of Camden (Camden Council) is a local authority that provides services to people in an area in which dense housing and inner city deprivation exists alongside key commercial sites and some of the capital's most expensive houses.

### **The workforce**

Number of employees            6,600 (excluding teaching staff)

### **The challenge**

- Managers recognised that existing arrangements, such as a generous dependants' leave provision, were focused solely on the needs of parents.
- A need to reduce sickness absence rates
- A need continuously to improve the delivery of customer services, which includes providing excellent services to staff
- A need to make sure that Camden is recruiting from a diverse workforce

### **The response**

A work-life balance strategy was introduced in 2001 with the aim of improving on the flexible working options already open to staff.

Camden undertook a consultation process to discover what work-life policies staff would find most beneficial. The most popular options were:

- Increased opportunities to work from home
- More flexible hours
- Compressed working weeks.

These ideas were developed and taken for consultation with managers, employees and relevant trades unions

### **The policy**

Flexible working options are open to all, although individuals do not have an automatic entitlement to work flexibly.

New flexible working options include:

- Extended home working
- Job sharing (already in existence but re-launched)
- Compressed working week
- Voluntary reduced working hours
- Temporary amendments to flexitime
- Term-time working
- Annual hours scheme

New leave options include:

- An employment break scheme

### **The challenge**

Some managers expressed concerns about managing staff who might be working different hours from them or working from a different location.

Camden realised that it needed to change its culture and performance management systems to a) ensure a greater emphasis on results and b) to erode a lingering culture of presenteeism.

## **Communication and implementation**

A series of 'Talking Behaviours' workshops were organised; managers were encouraged to run these with their teams to discover ways of improving service while still offering individuals better opportunities to work flexibly.

A flexible working project group and organisational development team were charged with developing training modules for managers and their staff to help them introduce more flexible working arrangements.

The flexible working project group has developed a communications strategy around flexible working and produced a flexible working guide for managers.

## **Benefits**

The 2002 employee survey measured early reactions to the council's enhanced work-life policy, with the following positive results:

- Greater acceptance of work-life balance: 29% of staff felt that the system "was not perfect" but said it was "better than it used to be" and "a step in the right direction." Only 1 in 10 staff said they were not interested in pursuing work-life options.
- Reduced absenteeism: There was a 2.5% reduction in the cost of sickness absence and a reduction of 2% in staff turnover in the first year of the scheme's operation.
- Workspace cost savings: Hot-desking has been introduced in several departments, thus reducing pressure on accommodation. It has also enabled some departments to extend their opening hours
- Bureaucracy minimised: Camden introduced flexible working options with the aim of keeping bureaucracy to a minimum – staff only need fill in a form for monitoring purposes.

## **Resolving teething problems**

The 2002 employee survey also highlighted areas for improvement:

- Employees expressed confusion over which policies was available to whom
- Employees thought there would be a lower take-up among manual grades and customer-facing staff; in practice there has been a greater take-up by women and by lower grades
- There were some resourcing issues for lower grades, such as no 'pool' laptops
- A handful of managers remained unconvinced that work-life balance would work for their teams.

Some of these issues have already been resolved:

- More pool laptops have been made available
- A 'touch down centre', where staff can work outside of their usual office location, has been set up.
- Case studies and success stories are disseminated among staff to communicate the availability of policies and increase 'buy in'.

## **In practice**

In the small Mental Health Brokerage team, several members have taken up four of the flexible working options. They worked with the Flexible Working Project Group to develop creative ways in which the team could meet business and personal needs. As a result, the department is now open for longer hours, the team has a more

structured approach to carrying out its workload, and the team works better as a whole. An employee comments: "The flexible working options are the best thing I have ever been offered by an employer. They have rekindled my enthusiasm and commitment to fulfil my role as a mental health broker."

**Benefits to Camden:** improved morale, productivity and customer service.

**The future**

The 2001 work-life initiative has been hailed as a success. The council believes it will benefit further as take-up grows and as the e-government agenda advances.