Social services (Flexible working hours)

In a local authority social services department, a range of policies was put in place to help employees tackle their sources of pressure outside work.

Problem

In organisations that provide a service outside normal working hours upon which members of the public depend, it can be difficult to meet the demands of the service without compromising the work-life balance of individual members of staff.

Assessing the risks and finding solutions

- *Working non-standard hours* - This flexible solution was applied to a member of staff who wanted to take a non-work related college course, which involved attending lectures during the normal working week.
  The employee felt that the only way to complete the course would be to leave work or reduce their hours to part time. However, due to the nature of this person's job (overseeing the organisation of providing meals to people's homes), it was possible to accommodate the demands of the college course. A flexible working solution was adopted where the employee now works one day at the weekend and attends college on a weekday.
- *Temporary reduced hours* - An employee experienced a period of intense pressure in her home life due to a very sick relative and felt that the easiest way to handle the pressure was to leave employment. Instead, an individual flexible solution was worked out allowing the employee to reduce her hours and have a working pattern of three full weeks in work with one week off. When the pressure subsided at home, the employee returned to full time hours.
- The assistant director of social services championed the flexible working approach adopted by the department.

Results

This policy has allowed a number of individual customised solutions to be created that have helped employees deal with their personal sources of pressure, while continuing to meet the demands of the service. Staff were willing to endorse this as well. These are instances where flexibility has demonstrably helped members of staff to cope better. The organisation was able to retain these two experienced members of staff.

It is important to encourage staff to adopt a sensible 'work-life balance' and share their concerns about stress at an early stage. Listening to your staff and agreeing a course of action to tackle any problems can go a long way to ensuring that staff know that the contribution they make at work is valued.