

## Health & Wellbeing

West Midlands Police

February 2009



# Case Study

### **EFA overview**

West Midlands Police has been judged the leading metropolitan police authority in the UK based on a range of measures including crime rates and quality of service. To remain successful, the Force needs a fit, healthy and engaged police and civilian workforce. With this in mind, it has significantly expanded its occupational health offering to staff, taking into account the needs of both an ageing workforce and the increasing number of women on the Force. Its healthy ageing project was designed to encourage staff to pursue healthier lifestyles while helping those who are absent through illness to return to work more quickly.

### **Initiative**

West Midlands Police aimed to provide a working environment that supports the wellbeing of all staff with a particular emphasis on the health and fitness of female staff and of police officers whose careers can span 30 years.

### **Aims of initiative**

In tackling issues around health, West Midlands Police was hoping to improve its attendance management. It judged that improved occupational health provision, that took account of the changing needs of an ageing workforce, would be a key way of dealing with this issue.

Health provision was seen as key part of an attraction and retention scheme. The Force recognises that police officers need robust support if they are to stay fit for what is a demanding and physical job.

In addition West Midlands Police addressed particular female health and wellbeing needs through the healthy ageing initiatives.

### **Approach**

Before deciding what interventions to adopt, the Force conducted an in depth survey of health needs looking at the types of illness and injury that were causing people to take sick leave. This highlighted that delays in treatment were preventing people getting back to health and work as quickly as they might.

Using these findings, West Midlands Police took a two pronged approach to healthy ageing with a view to both promoting healthier lifestyles and helping people back to work.

Health promotion measures available to all staff include medical check ups, cholesterol testing, dietary and fitness advice, support to stop smoking and flu vaccinations.

To help people back to work, the Force has introduced a variety of in-house medical specialists including a physiotherapist, psychiatrist and A&E trauma consultant. They ensure speedier and often more appropriate treatment for staff.



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The nature of police work can put a serious strain on the mental as well as the physical health of staff. To tackle this, West Midlands Police is working on a mental health policy for managers and staff. In some instances treatment needs to be immediate – for example, the death of a colleague in the line of duty. In such an event, staff have access to counsellors to help them through the initial shock. They can also seek help from an in-house psychotherapist and mental health nurse.

With more than 5,000 female staff, women's health is a growing concern for West Midlands Police. Given that more than half the women on the payroll are over 40 years old, the impact of the menopause on their health and wellbeing is a particular issue. The Force has therefore set up a working group to look at what support can be put in place through, for example, different working practices or shift patterns.

## **Challenges**

Police work can be dangerous and officers can get injured on duty, often with long-term consequences. In addition, the rigours of ageing can be at odds with the expectation that officers will remain operational throughout their careers. All of this means that keeping the workforce healthy is an ongoing task and not something that a single intervention or campaign can solve.

## **Outcomes and benefits of the initiative**

The healthy ageing initiative has enabled West Midlands Police to develop its occupational health provision considerably. As a result it has increased awareness of workplace health issues among managers and more junior police and civilian staff. In particular, the Force has seen a growing understanding of health issues affecting women at work.

The Force and individual staff now benefit from speedier treatment for mental and physical ailments. For example, staff can wait six to eight weeks for physiotherapy through the NHS but as little as 72 hours when referred for in-house physiotherapy.

## **Impact on the organisation**

The Force's attendance levels are the highest since it was established in 1975 with 98% for Police Officers and 97% for other staff. These are the highest for any police force in the country. More than half of all staff achieved the Force's Always There Award in 2008 which means they had not missed a day's work through the year.

A more robust approach to staff wellbeing has also enabled West Midlands Police to apply successfully for several people management awards, which it believes has enhanced its ability to attract and retain good staff in a tight market.

Finally, West Midlands Police maintains that its approach to healthy ageing has also enabled it to become the highest performing metropolitan force in the country.