

Agenda Item	7b
Report No	HC/23/19

HIGHLAND COUNCIL

Committee: Highland Council

Date: 27 June 2019

Report Title: **Assistance Programme for Employees and Members**

Report By: Head of People and ICT

1. Purpose/Executive Summary

- 1.1 In the financial year 2018/2019 referrals to two Counselling Services cost the Council just over £70,000. This is a significant increase on the spend from April 2013 - December 2014 which was £10,054. The Occupational Health contract does not include counselling sessions and there is no contract in place for counselling services.
- 1.2 The percentage of referrals seen by Occupational Health for a range of mental health issues (work and non-work related) is currently 33% of all referrals. This is consistent with previous quarters but is increasing slightly.
- 1.3 As part of the ongoing programme to support wellbeing (physical, mental, emotional and financial) this paper sets out a proposal to engage with an Employee Assistance Provider which Council staff and Elected Members would be able to access confidentially, free of charge, at any time of the day/night.

2. Recommendations

- 2.1 Council is asked to:
 - i. Approve the proposal to undertake a procurement exercise for an Employee Assistance Programme for use by staff and Members in The Highland Council. The EAP would offer telephone counselling support as well as Internet based support and information. The contract would be on a contract price base, rather than pay as you go.
 - ii. Agree that this is undertaken quickly by leveraging the procurement exercise recently undertaken by Aberdeen City and Aberdeenshire.
 - iii. Once in place, the use of other counselling services is inhibited, to offset the cost of the EAP.

3. Background

- 3.1 Staff who require counselling intervention are often referred to the Scottish Counselling Services or Caithness Counselling Services. However, there is no contract in place for these organisations and it may be that other counselling services are contacted by managers. This would make the Council spend greater than the £70,000 referred to in the summary section. There is also no subjective code for counselling so a search for spend is dependent on knowing the name(s) of providers.
- 3.2 The Occupational Health contract does not include specific counselling services, although staff are often counselled as part of their OH appointment. Occupational Health can, and do, recommend managers refer staff to counselling services. Staff can also ask managers to arrange counselling support without having to go via Occupational Health.
- 3.3 The current practice of a manager having to make the initial referral to counselling dilutes the confidentiality of the arrangement: the manager needs to know the reason the employee requires counselling and how many appointments are required.
- 3.4 There is currently no provision in place for Elected Members.
- 3.5 As there is no contract in place we do not have management information available which would identify uptake, trends or the efficacy of the services, etc. Without a contract there is also no governance on the overall spend on, or quality of, such services.

4. Employee Assistance Programmes (EAP)

- 4.1 Employee Assistance Programmes (EAPs) can assist organisations address issues by helping employees identify and resolve personal concerns that affect job performance. Through prevention, identification and resolution of these issues, EAPs enhance employee and workplace effectiveness and are an additional tool for maintaining and improving worker health and productivity, retaining valued employees and returning employees to work after illness or injuries. They provide a mechanism for offering counselling and other forms of assistance, advice and information to employees on a systematic and uniform basis and to recognised standards.
- 4.2 Such services can be provided via telephone support, face to face support and internet-based support. Increasingly, EAPs also offer a wide range of internet-based advice and information which is available to employees (and families) 24 hours a day. Critical incident support is also often part of the package, providing support and counselling for individuals who have been involved in incidents of violence, aggression or serious injury as well as support for managers who are dealing with the aftermath of an incident. Face to face counselling is not an unlimited offer – usually up to 5 or 6 appointments are offered.
- 4.3 A competent EAP would provide professionally trained counsellors who are members of, or accredited to, the British Association for Counselling and Psychotherapy; or be registered to practice with the British Psychological Service. The Service should also provide rapid response to callers, 24/7 access, clinical case management and governance and a broad range of support services.
- 4.4 The range of work and personal issues with which EAPS can assist include:

- financial and legal problems
- stress
- racial and sexual harassment
- bullying
- redundancy
- bereavement
- domestic violence
- mental health problems
- alcohol/drug abuse
- family/relationship problems
- work life balance

4.5 There are several ways in which an EAP system can benefit the Council and some of these are outlined here:

- reduce sickness absence as relationship problems, stress, depression and anxiety are increasingly seen as factors in sickness absence.
- early intervention in dealing with personal and work-related problems can help reduce sick leave and absenteeism with a proactive approach which is more cost effective than waiting until an employee becomes ill or suffers stress/illness related absence.
- promotes a culture of wellbeing .
- offers employees the opportunity to discuss problems away from the workplace.
- helps employees deal with difficulties that may be causing them trouble in the workplace. Short-term, results–orientated therapy focuses on clarifying the problem, implementing solutions and monitoring progress.
- contact with EAP is initiated by the employee as and when they think it is needed

4.6 An EAP can assist in helping to protect the Council from stress-related personal injury claims. ‘An employer who offers a confidential advice service, with referral to appropriate counselling or treatment services, is unlikely to be found in breach of duty [to safeguard their employees’ health]’ (Sutherland v Hatton, Court of Appeal judgement, 2002).

5. Proposal

5.1 It is proposed that a procurement exercise be initiated to provide an EAP for The Highland Council. This will enable costs to be managed and controlled whilst increasing the support available to employees. It will also provide management information which could show how/where money is being spent, identify trends and allow us to focus on early interventions, whilst also maintaining client confidentiality.

5.2 EAP services can be purchased on either a “pay as you go” scheme where the Council is charged on actual uptake by employees, or on a contract price base where there is unlimited access to the service. Based on a benchmarking exercise with other Scottish Local Authorities the annual contract price would appear to be the most advantageous, with face to face, telephone and internet support included as part of their EAP package.

5.3 Over £70,000 has been spent on counselling services for Highland Council staff in 2018/19. A neighbouring council with FTE of approximately 10,000, has recently

tendered for an EAP at an annual cost of £39,574.

- 5.4 It is recommended that to fund an EAP contract a new budget is set up with contributions (on a per head basis) from each Council Service, in the same way as the Occupational Health budget was created.

6 Wellbeing Support in Highland Council

- 6.1 It is envisaged that the EAP will complement other staff support services available to staff, which includes, but is not limited to:
- Guidance on managing stress
 - Mental Health Policy
 - Mentally Healthy Workplace training (for all staff)
 - Stress Awareness training
 - Resilience training
 - Stress Risk Assessments
 - Mental Health Representatives
 - Mental Health Toolkit
 - Occupational Health
 - Trade Union Support
 - Promotion of physical activities (including Step Challenge, Cycle Scheme, etc.)
- 6.2 To further support the financial wellbeing of staff, organisations such as Hi-Scot Credit Union will be promoted within the Council along with exploring services provided by others to provide education on money matters; services like borrow and debt consolidation services; and saving products for staff at no cost to the organisation.

7. Implications

- 7.1 Resource – There is currently no control of overall spend on counselling services. Having a contract in place will help the Council manage spend in this area and could provide trend analysis to help identify where/when interventions could be focused. It is anticipated this could lead to an annual reduction of £30,000 if other counselling services are suspended.
- 7.2 Legal – Having an EAP in place will reduce the risk of stress-related personal injury claims which can be costly
- 7.3 Community (Equality, Poverty and Rural) – An equalities impact screening has been undertaken which indicates that the introduction of the new service is likely to have either neutral or positive equality and poverty implications and neutral rural implications.
- 7.4 Risk – Having an EAP in place will reduce the risk of stress-related personal injury claims which can be costly.
- 7.5 Climate Change / Carbon Clever and Gaelic - No implications

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