



Hertfordshire County Council

Hertfordshire County Council (HCC) provides services for one million residents in the south of England. The workforce of 35,000 is predominantly female and over 10,800 or 31% have declared caring responsibilities.

In 2006 the Council introduced two complementary change programmes *Balance* and *The Way We Work*. These brought together and expanded on previous work-life balance initiatives.

Balance is the work-life balance strategy. This built upon the previous *Carewise* strategy. Luke Watkeys, Human Resource Officer, describes the rationale behind *Balance*: "In 2006 we centralised the Human Resource (HR) functions. Prior to this all HR activity was managed in separate departments. We had plenty of flexible work options but there was considerable variation in how these were managed. We wanted to be fair to all our staff."

Now any employee can apply to work flexibly regardless of their circumstances or background. There is an extremely high acceptance rate - 97.4% of applications to work flexibly are accepted and everyone returning from maternity leave has had their request granted. In addition there are a number of ways that staff can balance their caring and parenting responsibilities. Employees can take five days paid emergency leave and childcare vouchers are available through salary sacrifice. The Council estimates that 75% of the staff work flexibly in one way or another.

There is a strong business case behind this. "The flexible working offer reduces turnover and increases application at work. If employees think that HCC is responsive to their needs as parents or carers, they will be more committed. This will make them more motivated and fulfilled when at work."

Nevertheless, HCC also considers that there is a strong value basis in what they do. The Council recognises that they should take the lead in being positive towards people with caring responsibilities as these make up a significant proportion of the population of Hertfordshire. The benefits should apply to as many people as possible.

The second change programme is the *Way We Work* programme. This has been established to ensure that employees are able to work flexibly in delivering services. Key to this is the availability of appropriate technology to ensure that work becomes 'an activity not a place'. HCC believes that flexibility is a crucial factor in improving performance and delivery.

"There is a balance between the two programmes. If we offer flexible working and breaks for carers this helps us deliver more flexible and appropriate services to the people of Hertfordshire. This is a win-win situation."

The two programmes are publicised continually using new technology and doing 'lite bites' short presentations that raise awareness of the offer for families. Every year HCC hosts a Carers' Conference for HCC employees which receives high level support: "It is a way of finding out whether our policies directed towards carers are working. It gives us a temperature check on whether our policies are working. We can find out how people are feeling, how are our plans being implemented." The conference and the HCC carers' group also have responsibility for reviewing the *Balance* strategy and making any further recommendations for further change. Over the last few years this comprehensive support for carers has won a number of awards.

Luke Watkeys believes that the *Balance* policy has now become embedded: "There is no going back. The mind set has changed. People now understand the impact of not allowing carers to support their families."

Supporting Statement

Organisation: Hertfordshire County Council

Approximate number of employees: 35,000

Sector: Public

Brief description of nature of business: Local Authority for Hertfordshire

1. Why is your organisation a good place for parents to work today? We are looking for evidence (eg, maternity return rate, men working flexibly, extra support for carers, senior level diversity) as well as any programmes or initiatives which mark you out from your competitors.

Hertfordshire County Council (HCC) is committed to supporting employees with caring and parenting responsibilities find ways of successfully combining caring and parenting responsibilities with work and has several initiatives in place to help carers. A number of these initiatives and successes are detailed below:

- We offer flexible working to **all employees** regardless of circumstance or background. 97.4% of flexible working requests are granted:
- **100%** of requests for flexible working following maternity leave are granted
- **Childcare vouchers** are available to all employees through salary sacrifice, and at present 478 of our employees benefit from this scheme every month, gaining up to £243 tax free worth of vouchers per month, per parent
- **31%** of our workforce have declared caring responsibilities, of which 87% have caring responsibilities for children, 8.3% for adults, and 4.7% for both children and adults
- We offer **five days paid leave** per year to enable employees to deal with an unexpected or sudden emergency involving a dependant. In addition to this carers can also take an **extra 20** days unpaid leave per year
- We offer and promote **Balance**, a range of initiatives aimed at helping employees successfully balance their caring and parenting responsibilities with their work
- We estimate that approximately **75% of our employees** work flexibly and through our flexible working programme **The Way We Work**. We actively promote new working practices including home working and location flexibility. Feedback from our managers' workshops last year included the following quote, "More effective use of time helps with meeting deadlines by enabling employees to work more easily."
- Our **HCC carers' group** has 27 members at present who are entitled to time off to attend. The group meet quarterly and comments are fed directly to HR employment policy makers, ensuring their views are heard
- We run a well attended **annual conference** for carers with invitations sent out from our Chief Executive, who also attends and gives a welcoming speech. The conference involves a number of workshops, with the purpose of providing information about services that can help them as well as giving carers the opportunity to tell us how we can improve things.
- The following statement is a testimony from a carer who has benefited from flexible working with us, "I've got an extremely supportive manager who has enabled me to work flexibly and balance the conflicts of home and work. This has included working from home and working flexible hours whilst in the office. This has made me feel wonderful and enabled my work and caring balance to be achieved."

- In our 2008 employee satisfaction survey, **72% of employees** agreed that their line manager is sensitive to their work-life balance

2. Please describe up to three milestones, changes or initiatives which helped the organisation become the great place for working parents that it is today.

Balance was introduced in 2006 as our work-life balance strategy, bringing together our work-life balance options, benefits, and wellbeing initiatives. *Balance* is divided into three strands: care, health and life, and covers a number of initiatives such as leisure and health benefits, financial advice and flexible working advice. Our 'parents' pages' aim to support parents, carers or prospective parents by providing all relevant information that they should need.

Our **HCC carers' group** was set up in February 2004 and has currently 27 carers on the mailing list. We pay for the costs of this group and all employees who care for a friend or relative are entitled to time off to attend which gives them the opportunity to discuss issues affecting their work and caring balance. One member has been quoted as saying, 'I have now started my flexible working hours, and it's great that the group have helped me to go for it.'

The Way We Work is our comprehensive change programme, started in 2006 and set up to ensure that our employees are able to work flexibly in delivering services and achieving their own work-life balance. We have also introduced new technology to support this programme, including advanced telephony systems, wireless laptop access for home working, and 'team desks' where employees can plug in their laptops and access our network from any office.

This introduction of technology has enabled location flexibility, alongside the programmes aims of changing our culture to one of work being an 'activity not a place.' The advantages of home working were never more evident than in the recent severe weather, in which many employees were unable to get to main offices or local bases so operated from home, allowing services to continue.

3. What was the driving force behind these initiative(s)? This might have been, for example, a particular business challenge, internal or external; leadership shown by an individual; employee demand for change, etc.

Our initial plan to achieve a carer friendly organisation resulted in our **Balance** strategy. This strategy involves four key elements and was introduced to market us as an employer of choice and to promote the wellbeing of our workforce:

- A range of flexible working opportunities for all employees
- A range of initiatives to support carers in the workforce
- A range of initiatives aimed to encourage employees to adopt healthier lifestyles, and
- A voluntary benefits package

The initiatives under our **Balance** strategy are wide ranging and include discounts on day-care across Hertfordshire as well as links with carer organisations across Hertfordshire to provide support to carers.

The **HCC carers' group** aims to suggest carer-friendly actions for us to incorporate into its employment practice. To make carers and families aware of the policies on flexible working.

The driving force behind **The Way We Work** has been increasing the use of flexible working, maximising the potential of our employees, using resources effectively and challenging traditional working methods and practices. Flexible working helps us to meet our strategic objectives as well as supporting carers which in turn helps us to retain skilled employees. We recognise that by extending and improving our range of flexible working options, we can bring benefits to our employees as well as our service users.

4. How do you think that your initiative(s) or practice, past or current, have influenced other employers?

We achieved **Beacon Status** 2005-06 for supporting employees who are also carers and were one of few local authorities to have done so. As part of this award we hosted an event to share good practice with other organisations and to highlight our achievements. As part of our Beacon Status we held a **Carers in Employment Forum** which was a two year European Social Survey funded project. We organised an operational service for 273 carers to learn what they needed and to support the findings.

This year we have won the Employers' Forum on Age award for flexible working. We have also won a number of awards over the past few years including the '**Working Families Carers in Employment Award**' and the '**Most Effective Benefits Strategy for Working Parents and Carers Award**'.

After we were presented with the 'Most Effective Benefits Strategy for Working Parents and Carers Award' in 2008 we received a phone call from South Tyneside Council who were runners up, as they wanted to know more about what we did for carers and parents and to follow our example.

Our HR Director, Alan Warner, has spoken at national events for Working Families, Carers UK, and Busy Bees. Additionally, our **The Way We Work** team have been to many other organisations, public and private, to show them what we're leading on in terms of flexible and remote working.