

TYNE AND WEAR FIRE AND RESCUE AUTHORITY

HUMAN RESOURCES COMMITTEE: 7 JULY 2008

SUBJECT: OCCUPATIONAL HEALTH UNIT - ANNUAL REPORT

REPORT OF THE CHIEF FIRE OFFICER

1. INTRODUCTION

- 1.1 The role of Occupational Health has evolved dramatically over the past two decades, and has developed to add another dimension to health, safety and welfare by taking a holistic view of the work place. It is becoming increasingly evident that the face of Occupational Health is changing. For many years the sole focus has quite rightly been the prevention of work related ill health, e.g. the effects of noise, chemicals etc. with OH units typically being Doctor led. Many organisations did not fully practice this with only a minor injury and illness service being offered. However we have seen a steady change in the workplace in recent years and along with that the role of Occupational Health and the associated staff have had to move forward in terms of direction, practice and attitude.
- 1.2 The aim of the Unit continues to support the broad aims of the Government health initiatives whilst primarily addressing specific areas of concern within the working environment of all employees of the Authority. The ever-increasing scope of the Unit would indicate a greater acceptance and utilisation of the services provided. It is of particular note this year that the sickness absence figures for the Authority are at their lowest level ever recorded. Notably operational rider sickness is down to 6.25 shifts/days lost per employee and overall sickness absence has seen a reduction from 8.72 days/shifts lost in 2006/07 to 8.03 in 2007/08. This represents the continuation of the concerted efforts of all involved in sickness absence management and will be subject to a future report to this Committee.
- 1.3 The purpose of this report is to provide a summary of the services provided by the Occupational Health Unit and its staff over the period 1 April 2007 to 31 March 2008, the fifteenth year of operation of the Unit.

2 SERVICES AND ACTIVITIES PROVIDED BY THE UNIT

2.1 Health Surveillance

Health surveillance remains the core activity of the unit. It seeks to detect early changes in health due mainly to workplace processes and therefore protect health. It can also serve to act as health promotion in respect of providing health and safety knowledge of the process in which they are engaged. A fit healthy workforce continues to be the objective of the unit.

PREVENTING PROTECTING RESPONDING

Being proactive in health and safety terms is of prime importance and health surveillance can be the measure of our success in this practice. Early signs of occupational ill health might include symptoms of hand arm vibration or hearing loss.

Although not a new inclusion the Sit and Reach flexibility box which has been used for many years as an aspect of health screening was included in the services fitness room provision. The Unit still advocate its use as it serves as a reminder as to the requirement for flexibility not just as a fire fighter but equally in every day life.

The following Health Surveillance is undertaken:

Health Screening - Recent national statistics from the Health and Safety Executive informs that although death rates due to accidents in the workplace are falling, ill health due to occupation continues to give cause for concern. Health screening therefore continues to be a fundamental aspect of Occupational Health practice. It establishes a base line of health on which to monitor the effects of the working environment and process on individual employees. It also allows for the early detection of detrimental changes allowing for positive intervention and provides an opportunity for health promotion. A fit healthy workforce continues to be the objective of the unit.

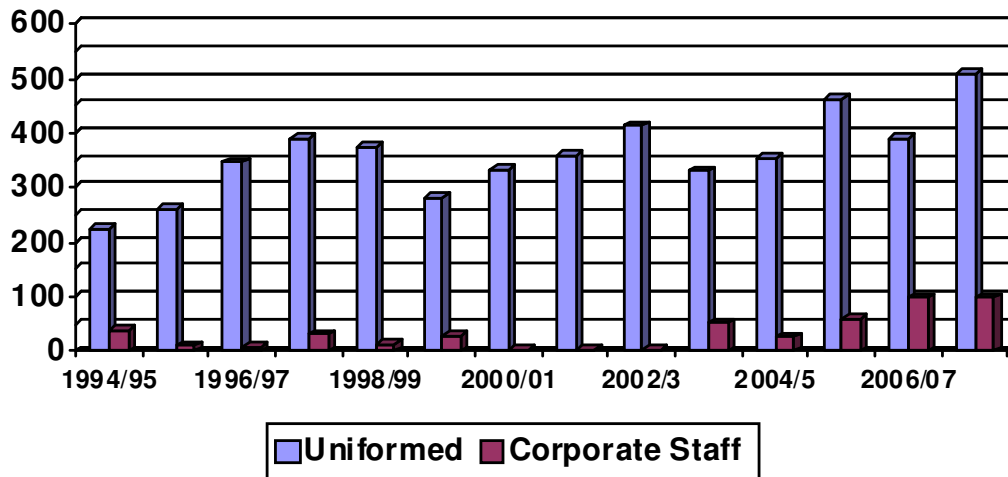
The unit has developed health-screening programmes for specific at risk categories: -

- ❑ Operational personnel. Three yearly to the age of 50, then annually thereafter, with the emphasis on fitness for fire fighting. Includes aerobic fitness assessment, blood pressure, lung function, and visual acuity.
- ❑ Health screening is offered to corporate personnel with an emphasis on health promotion. The level of fitness required by corporate staff is not as high as that for operational firefighters. However the benefits of improved health and fitness are obvious to all and therefore Unit staff continues to encourage all employees to undertake voluntary health screening.
- ❑ Hand / arm vibration screening. Work with vibrating tools / compressed air. Annual nurse based screening with referral for objective testing for positive findings.
- ❑ Compartment fire training. Six monthly health screening including the use of a monthly symptoms questionnaire.
- ❑ Merchant Navy Fire Training School. Annual screening.
- ❑ Pre employment health assessment ensures that the applicants are fit to meet the performance requirements of the job in the environment of the workplace.
- ❑ Aids to Vision. The screening takes place either at medical or on request, with a three yearly recall / retest. The scheme extends to operational personnel, vehicle and other technicians.
- ❑ After the opening of the new HQ at Barmston it was pleasing to report that for the first time corporate staff came forward for a health assessment and

Creating the Safest Community

induction to use the services gyms. A total of 44 corporate staff undertook the assessment.

Health Screening 1994 - 2007



The outcomes of the health screening process are utilised to better inform individuals about their lifestyle; to advise individuals with regard to their general fitness level; and to take any necessary preventative action with the ultimate aim of ensuring individual's remain fit for duty. It is particularly pleasing to note that there the increases in the numbers of corporate staff who are volunteering for health surveillance seen last year have been sustained this year and efforts will continue in that respect.

3.2 Clinics

The Service Medical Advisor (SMA) conducts clinics on four half-day sessions per week. The medical consists of nurse based health screening prior to personnel seeing the SMA. Appointments fall in to the following categories:

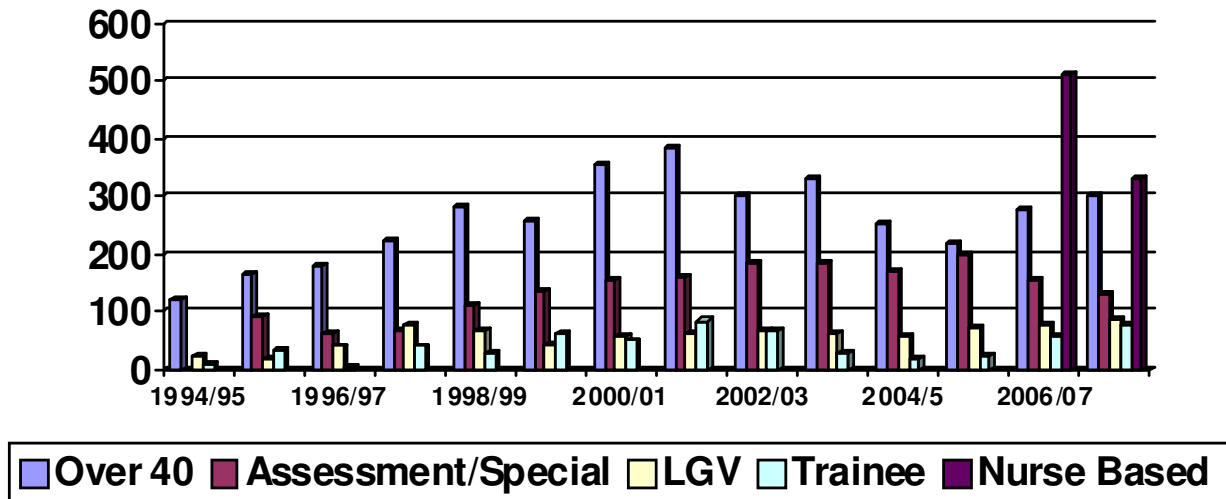
- ☐ Plus 40 years – three yearly / 50 to 55 years annually.
- ☐ LGV – on request and scheduled
- ☐ Sickness absence assessment
- ☐ Ill health assessment
- ☐ Referrals
- ☐ Staff pre-employment
- ☐ Assisted Medical Support Scheme

The previous five years has seen a year on year increase in the total number of clinic appointments, mainly due to the increase in the age profile (age 40 and age 50-year medical), the impact of sickness absence procedures and latterly the Accelerated Medical Support Scheme. This is the second year that nurse-based clinics have been in place primarily due to the initiatives undertaken by Unit staff to raise the profile of the Unit in providing 'well person' clinics and targeting specific issues such as the effects of exposure to the sun at various times of the year. In addition, the relocation to Barmston Mere has had a

marked effect in so much that the Unit and its staff are more outwardly visible.

The graph below represents the number of specific medicals undertaken in the unit since its opening in 1994.

SMA Clinics



3.3 Pre Employment Health Screening

The Unit continues to screen all new employees, prior to appointment. As well as confirming suitability for employment and establishing a base line for health, this provides an opportunity for employees to meet the Unit staff and promote the facilities available to individuals. A total of 57 corporate and 77 operational pre-employment medical assessments have been undertaken during this period.

3.4 Health and Fitness Promotion

Health and Safety presentations are a joint Health & Safety / Occupational Health project. The current programme, now in its fourth year, targets slips, trips and falls and includes information on hydration and vaccinations.

The Health and Safety presentations also provided an opportunity to make operational and technical personnel aware of proposed changes in The Physical Agents Directive (Noise and Vibration). The changes, in particular to noise, resulted in new hearing protection being trailed in view of the directive now impacting on fire fighters to wear hearing protection.

Health Promotion also includes:

- Occupational Health Welcome packs.

All new employees are issued with a package, which gives details of unit staff and facilities available, as well as a broad range of relevant health promotion information leaflets.

- **Service Gazette Health Advice**

The Unit aim to include a health information article in the Service Gazette twice per month. Topics such as sun care, skin cancer, manual handling, cholesterol, skin care when working with substances and smoking prevention in association with the introduction of the Authority 'No Smoking' policy have been explored.

- **Research Topics**

Back pain accounts for the largest single musculo skeletal cause of sickness absence in the Authority. A pilot study undertaken some two years ago developed a measuring tool to assess the spinal health (stability) of operational personnel, and a comprehensive preventative exercise programme was tested during the pilot. This provides a further method which unit staff can employ to identify and mitigate the effects of deteriorating spinal health.

- **Health Promotion Leaflets**

The Unit has also produced specific health promotion leaflets covering areas such as noise, Leptospirosis and Hepatitis A.

- **Smoking Cessation Advisors**

Following a partnership with the Roy Castle Lung Cancer Foundation events were arranged to revisit the topic of Stopping Smoking. Various attempts had been made over the years to provide health promotion information regarding the ill effects of smoking and advising people to stop. Despite this there remain a significant number of personnel who smoke. All the OH Advisors therefore trained as Smoking Cessation Advisors with the various Primary Health Care trusts to offer the service "in-house". A comprehensive advertising campaign accompanied by help and advice to further encourage existing smokers to quit was undertaken with the pleasing result that a further 16 members of staff went on to quit smoking or are working towards it. This initiative has, over the three years of being, resulted in 51 members achieving or working towards quitting smoking and further will continue especially with the changes to legislation that came about with effect from 1st July 2007.

- **Health Promotion: workshops**

Health Promotion Workshops, although not a new concept, present a means of raising the profile of good health and the importance of lifestyle information to the workforce. It further demonstrates the commitment to a fit and healthy workforce by the Authority. This year the unit establishes a permanent health promotion display in Service Headquarters. The displays were changed frequently and featured information on breast and prostate cancers, No Smoking Day and other pertinent health related subjects. In addition, all of the material

featured on the display was duplicated and distributed to Community Fire Stations, thereby raising awareness throughout the organisation.

3.5 Vaccination

Certain vaccinations are recommended for fire fighters and these have been administered by the individuals GP over the years. However guidance for GPs from the General Practitioner Committee now makes it clear that the responsibility lies with the employer. At the time of this report the unit are formulating plans to take full responsibility for provision of occupational vaccination. The Unit has already undertaken vaccinations for swift water rescue and high volume pump personnel, and this initiative will further enhance the medical support offered.

3.6 Physiotherapy

The unit continues to refer personnel with musculo skeletal problems for either assessment or assessment and treatment. Such assessments and treatment generally ensure individuals can continue to work with physiotherapy support, and prevent conditions worsening. A total Number of 139 assessments were made this year, the majority of which were musculo skeletal in nature. These interventions have resulted in an earlier return to work than would have normally been anticipated.

3.7 Accelerated Medical Scheme

The Authority has in place a scheme to provide early access for staff to medical specialists in order to gain an immediate assessment of a medical problem. The scheme also enables an early diagnosis and plan for appropriate treatment(s) with a view to reducing sickness absence and providing robust evidence regarding the application of ill health retirement.

During the course of 2007/08, 40 individuals progressed through the AMS scheme including operational and corporate staff. The results to date indicate that employees assessed leads directly to recommending a level of treatment and thereby a speedier return to work.

3.8 Counselling and Welfare Support

Counselling services are provided to Authority staff through an internal specialist Welfare Officer, who is specifically trained in the psychological problems associated with the workplace. Welfare support and pastoral care is also an area of continuing growth and is provided jointly by the Unit and the Welfare Officer.

Of the cases dealt with easily the majority were non-work related difficulties with the most common being due to relationship problems leading to stress/anxiety/depression symptoms. By far the smallest number of referrals were work-related with the most common being stress/anxiety/depression symptoms and work based relationship difficulties.

The Trauma Support Team continues to be an important cornerstone in the aftermath of incidents. There were a number of critical incidents involving one or more fatalities in 2007, where supervisory personnel were contacted and the services of the TST were offered. There are now quarterly meetings for all members to discuss training needs and any recent Trauma Support Sessions conducted.

An internal Work Related Stress Survey was conducted for the second time and a comprehensive report on the outcomes will be tabled at a future meeting. It is envisaged that this survey will become an annual event and it is hoped that over time the data will be able to give an accurate reflection of stress levels throughout the organisation.

The continuing engagement by personnel with the educative/awareness raising programme of stress management sessions is heartening and the encouragement for employees to access services earlier and more appropriately has also been reassuring.

3.9 Reasonable Adjustment

The Disability Discrimination Act places a responsibility on employers to make reasonable adjustments in the workplace in respect of an individual's disability. A number of issues have been managed over the year including the provision of hearing aids, specific chairs, adjustments to work stations, non standard footwear and reports commissioned. Not all changes have involved expenditure. Some adjustments have involved small changes in office layout or the organising of a "buddy system" to provide assistance to staff and visitors alike that may require help with wheel chairs in cars for example when arriving at SHQ. Its simple changes like these that demonstrate the commitment to disability and our work place.

3.10 Recruitment

The unit continues to play an extensive role in recruitment by providing fitness testing of all potential trainees, input at induction and provision of health supervision through out the trainee course. This initial targeting implants the culture of the organisation into such persons from the beginning of their service.

3.11 Audiometry

The Audiometry Programme, in keeping with the aim of retaining people in the workplace, individuals are investigated to explore the possibility of providing artificial aids to make this particular disability compatible with fire fighting. Digital technology is now applied to artificial aids providing a significant improvement in hearing when compared to the analogue type.

3.11 Aids to Vision

Aids to vision on the fireground was introduced in 1997 following research by the City University, London, and made provision for serving firefighters, whose vision

had declined below the required standard, to wear optical correction in both safety spectacles and breathing apparatus lens inserts. The scheme is now well established with a constant 12% of operational personnel using the safety spectacles with optical correction. The scheme also available to other identified service staff on a risk approach basis.

3.12 Aerobic Capacity Testing

Monitoring of Aerobic fitness on station six monthly has now been in place for two years. Aerobic fitness underpins a fire fighters efficiency and safety on the fire ground. It is a quality that requires development and maintenance. Previously testing was undertaken three yearly at health screening. The move to six monthly provides an earlier warning of declining fitness whilst also serving as a prompt to maintain exercise as part of your lifestyle.

The average Aerobic capacity at the time of report was 50.8 mls.02/kg/min. This compares favourably with a recommended and now approved figure of 42mls.02/kg/min.

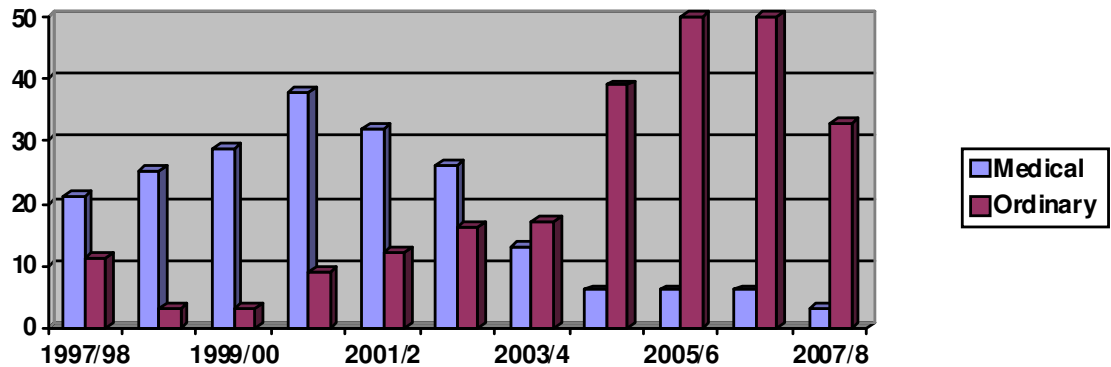
3.13 Training

Occupational Health staff undertook a variety of training and updating during the year, this included;

- Equality and Diversity
- Leadership Development
- SAP Updates
- ADOS Scanning
- Site visit to GP Health Centre re electronic medical records system.
- Health and Fitness presentation.
- Energy Efficiency presentation
- Diploma in Professional Studies
- Alcohol awareness
- Diversity and Equality
- Common Purpose Wear Matrix
- Smoking Cessation Advisors update.

3.14 Retirements

The chart below shows the retirement profile of this Service from 1997. This quite clearly shows a substantial increase in medical retirements up to 2000/01, with medical retirements accounting for over 70% of all retirements from the wholetime service. Due to the pro-active approach taken by senior management assisted by the dedicated efforts of the Occupational Health Team, since 2000/1 the number of medical retirements continues to fall. Indeed this year showed the lowest ever recorded of 3 which equates to approximately 0.3% of the workforce. Current thinking would suggest that organisations that successfully manage ill health retirements should look to having no more retirements than 3 for every 1000 employees and, as can be seen, we would have met this figure should that target be set in future years.



4 CONCLUSIONS

- 4.1 Although now in its fifteenth year the unit is still evolving. The potential for future growth and development is vast and the commitment to a proactive dynamic approach remains a core objective. The mission statement "Your Health Matters" reaffirms the Authority's commitment to investing in the organisation's most valuable asset, the health and well being of the individual.
- 4.2 All the indications are that the combined initiatives in place under the Occupational Health Unit are reducing sickness absence rates. Our current wholetime number of shifts lost per employee at 8.03 is the lowest for ten years and has bettered the target set for the upper quartile (for the Fire Service) of shifts lost for all staff of 8.7. The Chief Fire Officer is actively pursuing further reductions in staff sickness levels to achieve lasting benefits for all.

5 RECOMMENDATIONS

- 5.1 Members are recommended to:
- endorse the actions taken by the Chief Fire Officer;
 - receive further reports as appropriate.

BACKGROUND PAPERS

The undermentioned Background Papers refer to the subject matter of the above report:

- Fire and Rescue Authority Health and Safety Manual
- Occupational Health Unit Service Level Agreement