

Positive About Mental Health Policy

4 November 2021

Reference: SPCB (2021) Paper 65

Executive summary

1. This paper invites the Scottish Parliamentary Corporate Body (SPCB) to agree the new Positive About Mental Health Policy for MSPs and their staff.
2. The aim of the policy is to adopt a whole parliament approach to mental health and wellbeing. This inclusive approach can be achieved without undermining the employment relationship between MSPs and their staff. Leadership Group has already approved this policy for Scottish Parliamentary staff in line with its remit.

Issues and options

Background

3. Mental health conditions are widespread and most of us will either experience one or know someone who has experienced one. One in four adults in the UK experience at least one diagnosable mental health condition in any one year.

Parliamentary Context

4. The mental health and wellbeing of colleagues at the Parliament has been the focus of increasing attention and activity for a number of years. Such an approach is more important than ever to address colleagues' mental health and wellbeing during the Covid-19 pandemic and in its aftermath.
5. An analysis was carried out over Summer 2020 to inform the review of the Staff Cost Provision (SCP) of the Reimbursement of Members' Expenses Scheme. This showed that the complexity and volume of MSPs' casework had increased significantly. Many of these issues are complex and sensitive and can be distressing, highly emotive and challenging for staff to deal with. This is having an impact on staff mental health, wellbeing, and resilience.
6. Workload for MSPs and their parliament-based staff is equally substantial and challenging. Some reporting that the increase in casework has reduced the time available to devote to other activities such as research, communications, and office management.
7. Following this, the SPCB took significant steps to address the sources of pressure for MSPs and their staff and to mitigate for the risks associated with

these. In November 2020, the SPCB agreed to increase the SCP to enable MSPs to recruit an additional one full-time equivalent member of staff to provide additional support.

8. Over the last eighteen months the People and Culture function has also focused its efforts on providing the support that MSPs and their staff need, including:
 - Running a well-received series of wellbeing sessions delivered virtually by our Occupational Health service provider.
 - Offering one-to-one and group support to MSPs and their staff.
 - Sending regular reminders of the availability of the Employee Assistance Programme, including specialist counselling services.
9. More recently, there has been a substantial rise in requests for occupational health support, from both MSPs and their staff.
10. The commitment and leadership provided by the SPCB has been vital in driving the process of taking proactive steps to further address this most pressing of issues.

Promoting a whole-parliament approach

11. The policy recognises that mental health affects everyone. While its effects can be felt differently, and in different settings (i.e., at home, at work or both), a positive workplace environment that promotes good mental health, tackles stigma, and supports people when they experience mental ill health can contribute to improved wellbeing and risk mitigation.
12. The policy will enable the SPCB to make a positive and inclusive signal of intent, including supporting MSPs with their own mental health and wellbeing and assisting them to exercise their duty to their staff. In this capacity MSPs have a general legal duty of care which requires them to take reasonable steps to protect the health and safety of their staff, including identifying the early signs of mental ill health and providing proactive support.
13. In doing so, the SPCB recognises that MSPs are the legal employers of their staff. The policy does not seek to cut across this employment relationship.
14. Importantly, MSPs' staff have been integral to developing the policy. This includes MSPs' staff representation on the Parliament's Health and Safety Committee with those representatives invited to join an internal working group who led on the policy review. The working group was chaired by the Group Head of People and Culture who also chairs the Health and Safety Committee.
15. As previously agreed with the SPCB in session 5, the People and Culture function will support MSPs and parliamentary groups to adopt the policy by developing bespoke plans to meet individual needs. These will be proportionate, taking account of needs, issues, and concerns.

Governance

16. The policy is in line with equalities and health and safety legislation and has been reviewed against health and safety guidelines.

Resource implications

17. There are no additional resource implications associated with the policy itself as the support arrangements identified in the policy are already in place and available to MSPs and their staff.

Publication Scheme

18. This paper can be published under the SPCB Publication scheme.

Next steps

19. The policy will be launched at the end of November. In advance of that the People and Culture function will offer to meet with parliamentary groups to present the new policy, address any questions and concerns from MSPs, and develop bespoke plans for implementing the new policy. Guidance to support this policy will also be produced.

20. It is important that the focus is on embedding the policy and supporting MSPs, in their capacity, as employers, and their office managers to feel confident in dealing with mental health issues in the working environment. This will be supported by the rollout of training in January 2022 aimed at supporting colleagues to look after their own mental health, seek support when it is needed and provide support to others.

21. This training will take place alongside an ongoing wellbeing programme. The current programme of work that takes us to the end of the year includes:

- Wellbeing Week (delivered virtually).
- Deliver Mental Health Awareness, Managing Stress and Resilience, Mental Health Awareness for Managers and Suicide Prevention webinars. These are currently being advertised and open to all staff.
- Improving access to mental health and wellbeing information on the intranet pages.

Decision

22. SPCB is invited to agree to the policy.

People and Culture

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