

Menopause in the workplace: A review of support available in Mid Devon District Council

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A review by a Working Group of the Mid Devon District Council Scrutiny
Committee

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Introduction

Women over the age of 50 are the fastest growing portion of the UK workforce and all of these will go through the menopause during their working lives. Despite being a natural stage of life, the menopause remains somewhat of a taboo topic in the workplace. Unlike pregnancy or maternity, it is not well understood or provided for in workplace cultures, policies and training. Managers' and colleagues' attitudes to menopausal women make a difference.

Experiencing menopause symptoms often has negative impact at work, affecting not just individuals but also their team and the organisation. As an employer, the Council has a duty to look after the health and safety of employees. This review looks at how the Council can best support staff as they go through this period of their lives. Providing support to employees and their line managers will not only have wide ranging benefit for workplace, but could also help mitigate the impact of the menopause for our staff and improve their overall wellbeing.

Rationale

Members were made aware by some staff and line managers that they were struggling to access guidance on the menopause in the Council. The Scrutiny Committee agreed that employees experiencing menopause, or symptoms associated with the menopause, should feel supported by the Council and know where to go to get advice. It was also agreed that managers need the right information and tools so that they can best support their team members through this time.

A Working Group on menopause in the workplace was set up to review the support available to employees and their line manager. The aim was to provide better support to staff on the menopause which could bring wide-ranging benefits for the workplace and the overall wellbeing of staff.

Methodology and approach

In order to ensure balanced representation on the Working Group, it was agreed that the Group would co-opt a Member outside of the Scrutiny Committee. As a result, Cllr Mrs N Woollatt, Cabinet Member for Working Environment and Support Services, volunteered to sit on the Working Group.

The first meeting of the Working Group was held on 13 July 2020, and the group agreed to meet monthly where possible. The Group held both meetings and discussions with relevant Officers to understand how the menopause is currently being addressed within the Council. Members agreed early in the process that a staff survey would be useful in order to clearly understand the range of issues within the Council and how best to support the specific challenges staff face.

Members also agreed that they would explore discussions with:

- Mid Devon District Council (MDDC) staff first hand – both employees and line managers, to hear some lived experiences of menopause in the workplace;

- A medical expert – to fully understand the symptoms, impact and treatment of the menopause;
- A Unison representative in the Council – Susan Sharland, attended a number of meetings of the Working Group.

In addition, the Group reviewed a large number of workplace guidance documents, notably: the Unison guidance and model policy; the LGA 'Managing the Menopause at Work'; and the TUC Menopause in the workplace toolkit. The Group also reviewed a number of organisational policies, and particularly valued the leaflet for staff developed by the Police Mutual.

To fully understand the issues associated with the menopause in the workplace, Members felt that it would be useful to attend relevant training. As part of the review Members of the Working Group, and Officers, attended an online learning session by Foot Anstey focusing on menopause in the workplace. The Unison representative also attended TUC training on menopause in the workplace and shared the key outcomes with the Group.

What is the menopause?

The menopause is a natural stage of life that most women experience. It is marked by changes in hormones and the ending of menstruation. Women may experience a range of physical and psychological symptoms. It can also affect transgender and non-binary people.

The menopause usually occurs between the ages of 45 and 55, and in the UK the average age is 51. It can, however, happen much earlier - many women experience the menopause before 45 (early menopause) and a significant number of women (1 in 100) experience the menopause before the age of 40 - this is known as a premature menopause or premature ovarian insufficiency.

The menopause usually happens over a number of years. During peri-menopause (the period of transition that takes place several years before the menopause) the ovaries gradually produce less oestrogen in the four to five years leading up to menopause. In the last two years of peri-menopause, oestrogen levels drop significantly. This is usually the stage where the most severe menopausal symptoms are experienced. Twelve months after the last period marks the official stage of the menopause.

In the years after the menopause, symptoms like hot flushes usually ease while health risks caused by decreased oestrogen levels typically increase. This is known as post menopause.

What are the symptoms?

There are a range of symptoms associated with the menopause and each woman feels them differently. Most women will experience some menopausal symptoms, but the duration and severity varies from woman to woman. Some symptoms can be quite severe and have a significant impact on everyday activities, including within the work place.

Menopausal symptoms can begin months or years before periods stop and last for around four years after the last period, although some women experience them for much longer.

Women may find that their symptoms change and other symptoms may develop over time. The TUC lists the following as symptoms that women commonly report:

- hot flushes and palpitations
- night sweats (increased sweating may also be experienced during the day)
- insomnia and sleep disturbances
- fatigue
- poor concentration
- headaches
- joint aches
- skin irritation and dryness
- dry eyes
- urinary problems
- hair loss
- changes to periods such as irregular, heavy bleeding or painful periods
- vaginal dryness, itching and discomfort
- loss of libido

There may also be associated psychological symptoms including:

- depression
- anxiety
- panic attack
- mood swings
- irritability
- problems with memory
- loss of confidence

Because they may still be having regular periods when they first start to get symptoms, many women do not always realise that they are experiencing the perimenopause and may not understand what is causing their symptoms. This can be a barrier to accessing support.

Menopause in the workplace

Local Government is a female dominated workforce. It also has an average age of 40 and therefore a significant portion of our workers will be affected by the menopause while working. Line managers and employees, however, often find it difficult to discuss how the menopause is affecting a woman's working life and relationships. Problems associated with the menopause can be made worse by the fact that there remains considerable ignorance and misunderstanding about the menopause, with it often being treated as an embarrassing or taboo subject.

Not all women suffer the symptoms of the menopause, but some can suffer from symptoms that have a significantly negative impact on their performance and attendance at work. According to the Chartered Institute of Personnel &

Development (CIPD), three out of five working women experiencing menopause symptoms say it has a negative impact on them at work. Additionally, according to the LGA it is estimated that for around 10% of women, the symptoms are so bad that they feel unable to continue working.

Symptoms can be exacerbated by the work environment, for example if the office temperature is too high. Symptoms such as insomnia can reduce concentration and focus, and changes in mood and irritability can also impact on relationships with others. According to Unison, women find that some symptoms may mean they miss out on promotions and training, have to reduce their hours or lose confidence in the workplace. Some symptoms also impact on absence rates.

In Mid Devon District Council we currently have 51% of workers who are female, and 33% who are over the age of 40, so the menopause may affect a significant proportion of our workforce. Through this review the Group wanted to provide an opportunity for MDCC employees and line managers to give their experience of the issue so that the Council can understand how best to support them.

The expert view

The Members of the Group agreed it would be useful to fully understand the symptoms, impact and treatment of the menopause with a medical expert. Dr Megan Parkin from Castle Place GP Practice in Tiverton attended a virtual meeting of the Group to talk through her experience of treating menopausal patients.

The Group heard how symptoms can affect women, when they are experienced and for how long. There was discussion on the medical reasons for both the physical and the cognitive symptoms, and how each can have a significant impact on personal and professional lives. They heard information on the treatment for the menopause and the side effects that can occur.

Dr Parkin's key message was that every woman experiences the menopause differently, and as such, a one size fits all approach is not helpful. Dr Parkin stressed the need for employers to recognise that adaptations needed may change through the course of the menopause, over many years as symptoms change. She recommended ensuring that line managers have the tools to support their team on an individual basis, and that they truly understand the impact of symptoms on individual roles. Dr Parkin suggested that managing stress can have a big impact on helping to mitigate other symptoms (because it can help oestrogen levels to rise), and that the workplace has an important part to play in that.

Dr Parkin also provided information on ways in which GPs can help (for example providing a 'fit note' detailing the adaptations an employee needs to work) and how employers can helpfully encourage employees to discuss symptoms with a GP. In addition, she stressed that normalising the conversation will help encourage people to seek help.

The Working Group would like to extend their thanks to Dr Parkin for sharing her knowledge and experience with the Group.

Discussions with staff

The Group wanted to understand some lived experiences of the menopause in the Council and as such invited staff to discuss their experiences with them in a safe and confidential environment.

Over the course of the review, the Group heard first hand from seven members of staff who openly talked about their experiences as an employee and (where relevant) as a line manager (either in person at a remote meeting, or where this was not possible, in writing).

During discussions, the Group particularly heard how staff found it difficult to talk to line managers about issues related to the menopause, particularly if line managers were younger or male. There were discussions on organisational culture and how awareness could be raised so that staff are made more aware of the symptoms and issues that might be faced within the Council. Members heard about issues faced not just by those working in an office, but also those who work off site. Staff stressed how a supportive and understanding line manager could make a big difference in helping to deal with symptoms or problems associated with those symptoms. Staff also raised that unisex toilets in some areas of the building make it difficult to deal with certain symptoms.

The Members of the Working Group would like to particularly extend their thanks to these members of staff for talking so honestly about the impact of the menopause on their working lives and what the Council could do better to support them. These conversations enabled Members to fully understand the impact of the menopause and the specific problems and issues faced by staff in the Council.

Results of staff surveys

In order to get the full picture of how the menopause is affecting staff, line managers and the organisation as a whole, and the solutions that might make a difference, the Group agreed to undertake two staff surveys. Anonymous surveys were sent, one for all staff (regardless of age or sex); and one for all line managers. The all staff survey was based on the Unison model workplace survey found in their guidance and model policy on the menopause.

It was agreed that the survey would be sent to all staff, partly as an awareness raising exercise, but also because the group were aware that there would be employees for which if the menopause was not affecting them directly, they likely knew someone that it did. The survey asked about personal experiences of the menopause in the workplace, and for those that had not experienced it, asked what support might help colleagues with symptoms. Consideration of all experiences was important for the Members of the Group and the survey greatly assisted in understanding how the menopause impacts on health and wellbeing in the Council.

The line manager survey aimed to understand how line managers would currently deal with an issue if it was raised with them, and what tools they would like to see introduced in order to better support staff.

Key findings – All staff survey

There were 119 responses to the all staff survey (out of 498 staff). Of those that responded to the questions 67 (56%) have experienced, or are experiencing symptoms associated to the menopause or perimenopause. Of those:

- 48% report experiencing hot flushes.
- 79% report suffering from interrupted sleep patterns.
- 81% experience mood swings, irritability, tearfulness, lowered confidence, feelings of not being able to cope, anxiety and depression.
- 78% suffer from physical symptoms like headaches and/or migraines, aches and joint pains, dry or sore eyes and menstrual problems such as flooding.
- 53% have not/would not discuss their symptoms with a line manager.
- The most common reason for not discussing symptoms with a line manager is embarrassment (58%) followed by having an opposite sex line manager (45%) (please note – you could choose more than one option).
- 29% have taken time off work due to the menopause.
- Of all that responded, 81% believe it would be useful to have a designated person to talk to about experiencing the menopause in the workplace.

Comments in the survey raised some specific environmental issues that the Council should consider reviewing. For example, staff commented that desk fans provided are too large (and that papers are blown around) and that meeting rooms are often very warm or it is not clear how to adjust the temperature.

Flexible working was also raised regularly, with staff recognising that when they were offered flexible working, it had improved their ability to cope and mental health considerably – particularly if they were experiencing sleeplessness. A number of staff admitted that they had used annual leave or flexi leave when symptoms of sleeplessness were particularly bad. Staff also highlighted that it is helpful, for a range of symptoms, if they are able to work from home on occasion.

Comments also raised issues about culture, and why staff do not feel comfortable raising symptoms with their line manager. A number of staff said they felt that the menopause is something that they 'just had to get on with' or was just not well understood within the Council. Staff were very supportive of having a designated person to speak to within the workplace, and there was similar support for forums where they could talk to other staff going through similar issues.

A number of staff expressed just how severely their symptoms were affecting their working life, some said they had considerably lost confidence in their abilities and one even said she was considering leaving her job. Many staff also made the link between their symptoms and their mental health, and the importance of recognising that the two are connected, as well as noting that stress can exacerbate symptoms.

Line manager Survey

55 line managers responded to the survey, which is just over two thirds of all line managers in the organisation. The key findings from the survey were:

- Just 16% have had an employee come to them to discuss issues associated with the menopause in the workplace.

- 62% felt they would benefit from further training or guidance on how to deal with employees enquiring about support for menopausal symptoms.
- Line managers commented that they would welcome training to understand how to support staff both practically and emotionally.
- Additionally, a large number commented that they would welcome formal guidance that sets out options available and where to signpost staff.

There was recognition, however, that some staff may find this a difficult topic to discuss with their line manager, and that normalising the issue would help more women speak up.

Conclusions

It is clear from the staff surveys and discussions with staff that many women in the Council are impacted by symptoms associated with the menopause. The wellbeing of employees is integral to how staff feel about their jobs, how they perform and can also impact on retention and sickness rates. There are clear benefits to providing better support for women experiencing the menopause, or symptoms associated with the menopause, and in doing so creating a positive working environment where individuals and the organisation can thrive.

Workplace culture

A massive step towards ensuring the wellbeing of staff is to normalise the issue of the menopause. The Council should create a workplace where employees can talk about the menopause openly and without embarrassment. This could include:

- Work place support - in order to promote wellbeing in the organisation, the Council should consider introducing 'Wellbeing Ambassadors'. These would be members of staff who will be supported by relevant training to be able to provide advice to employees on a range of issues, including menopause, mental health and other relevant workplace issues. Ambassadors should have clear knowledge about where to signpost staff for further support if necessary. The Council should also set up an online forum, for staff and/or line managers, as a safe space to discuss with other employees problems and issues they are having. This would help empower staff and enable them to self-manage, share knowledge and get informal support from other colleagues in the same position.
- Providing information – in order to communicate a positive attitude towards the menopause, the Council should initiate an awareness raising campaign. It was clear from our survey that staff find it difficult to talk about the issue of menopause because it is still seen as private and embarrassing. Aimed at both men and women, awareness could be raised through posters, internal communications and utilisation of the Wellbeing Ambassadors.
- Workplace training – training would help demystify the symptoms and challenges of the menopause and can equip managers to be able to normalise the menopause at work. It would help provide the tools needed by line managers (as shown in the line manager survey) on how to respond to

staff that come to them with issues associated with the menopause. It would also give managers the confidence to start the conversation with staff and know how to signpost staff to the appropriate support available in the organisation.

Workplace policy

A work place policy on the menopause should be drawn up, agreed and promoted to all staff. A workplace policy on the menopause can provide valuable advice and information to support women experiencing the menopause so that any barriers to discussion may be removed. A policy will clearly set the options available to staff experiencing symptoms, and how line managers can best support them. Guidance will help to foster an environment in which employees can openly and comfortably hold conversations about the menopause, and promote greater understanding of the symptoms and support available. It will also help employees to feel confident in discussing it with their line manager so they can work together to ensure the necessary support they need.

Work place environment

The all staff survey raised some specific issues that staff are facing with regards to the working environment. In order to ensure an inclusive environment for women experiencing symptoms of the menopause, the workplace environment and the support available should be reviewed by the Council. This could include whether desk fans are too large and how to ensure all staff know how to regulate the temperature in meeting rooms. Consideration should also be given to ensuring understanding needs of staff not working in an office space, and whether the current unisex toilets could be changed. There should also be a discussion regarding whether the First Aid room on the first floor of Phoenix House could be promoted as a quiet space that staff could use to rest if needed.

Recommendations

1. That MDDC introduces 'Wellbeing Ambassadors'. These will be members of staff who will be supported by relevant training to be able to provide advice to employees on a range of issues, including menopause, mental health and other workplace issues. Ambassadors should have clear knowledge about where to signpost staff for further support if necessary.
2. That a review of support available to staff with menopause symptoms takes place. This could include whether desk fans are too large and how to ensure all staff know how to regulate the temperature in meeting rooms. Consideration should also be given to ensuring understanding needs of staff not working in an office space, and whether the current unisex toilets could be changed.
3. That MDDC has an awareness raising campaign on the menopause to normalise the issue and make staff aware of the support available. This could be through posters, internal communications and utilisation of the Wellbeing Ambassadors.

4. That a MDDC work place policy on the menopause is drawn up, agreed and promoted to all staff. The policy should help signpost support and links to other relevant policies as well as include clarity around: options available for staff experiencing symptoms; how to log time taken off; options for flexible working including the ability to work out of hours if needed.
5. That all line managers receive menopause in the workplace training. This will help ensure line managers are clear about the symptoms and impact of the menopause, as well as the support available to staff. A booklet for staff and line managers should also be produced as guidance on options available.
6. That an online forum is set up, for staff and/or line managers as a safe space to discuss with other employees problems and issues they are having.