

Manchester University NHS Foundation Trust achieves a Recognition Award with its Transforming Musculoskeletal Services to drive culture change initiative

As the Northwest trailblazer for the National NHS Growing Occupational Health and Wellbeing Together Strategy (2023), Manchester University NHS Foundation Trust (MFT) committed to enhancing musculoskeletal (MSK) services for its workforce. Recognising that good MSK health is essential for the Trust's 29,000 employees – many of whom work in physically demanding roles – the initiative aimed to reduce MSK-related sickness absences, enhance staff wellbeing, and ultimately improve patient care.

Programme Overview

MFT's Transforming Musculoskeletal Services initiative was rolled out in three phases, each with specific goals and deliverables. These phases were designed to standardise and enhance MSK service delivery across the Trust, promoting a culture change in how MSK conditions are managed and supported within the workplace.

Phase 1: Digital self-referral pathway and onsite physiotherapy clinics

The first phase focused on creating a standardised, digital self-referral pathway that provided rapid access to physiotherapy treatment and work fitness advice. Key actions included implementing a digital self-referral system that allowed staff to quickly and easily access physiotherapy services without needing a managerial referral and expanding service delivery to include onsite physiotherapy clinics across various Trust locations, making it more convenient for staff to attend treatment sessions near their work sites.

Phase 2: Absence Support Service

In the second phase, MFT developed an Absence Support Service to offer timely MSK sickness absence triage advice, treatment, or self-management guidance focused on work fitness. This phase included enhancing the existing digital absence management system to link all MSK absences directly to the Trust's occupational health system and allowing OH physiotherapists to receive daily reports of new MSK absences and conduct initial triage via phone within four days of the reported absence. This facilitated fast-tracked referrals for face-to-face treatment or immediate self-management advice, depending on clinical needs.

Phase 3: MSK health education and promotion

The final phase aimed to educate and empower staff and managers with a focus on MSK health to promote a 'work-fit' culture. This phase included delivering bespoke MSK-related educational training and interventions, such as back care workshops and long-term condition management courses, including sessions on working with chronic pain conditions like fibromyalgia and extensive engagement with stakeholders across the Trust, including HR, clinical, and operational teams, to ensure the initiative was perceived as a comprehensive organisational effort rather than a standalone occupational health initiative.

Outcomes and Impact

The Transforming Musculoskeletal Services initiative has delivered significant improvements in staff wellbeing, service efficiency, and reduction in MSK sickness absence costs including:

- **Reduction in MSK absences:** Since the programme's implementation, MFT has observed a sustained decrease in MSK-related sickness absences. There was a reduction of 2,900 full-time equivalent (FTE) sickness absence days, from 8,000 FTE days in January 2021 to 5,100 FTE days in January 2024, even as the Trust's total available FTE days increased from 600,000 to 850,000.
- **Financial impact:** The Trust estimates a reduction of approximately £1 million per year in MSK sickness absence-related costs, demonstrating a positive financial impact of early intervention and effective MSK management.
- **Improved staff experience:** Feedback from the 2023 Staff Survey showed a 5.5% increase in positive responses regarding the Trust's action on health and wellbeing, and a 2.2% decrease in staff reporting MSK problems due to work activities. Additionally, 80% of staff indicated that access to MSK services helped them avoid taking time off to seek treatment elsewhere.

Nick Bailey, Director of Corporate Workforce, highlighted the programme's success, stating: *"Our excellent MSK service has proven successful in reducing MSK-related absences, as well as reducing the length of absences due to MSK conditions. The combination of specialist advice, treatment services, and work fitness guidance prevents recurrence, improves, and demonstrates our support to occupational health and wellbeing, ensuring that our staff continue to deliver excellent patient care."*

MFT's initiative to transform MSK services exemplifies a proactive and integrated approach to OH and wellbeing. By providing rapid access to physiotherapy, enhancing absence support, and educating staff and managers, MFT has driven a significant culture change towards valuing and maintaining MSK health. The success of the programme is evident in the reduction of MSK-related absences, substantial cost savings, and positive staff feedback, demonstrating that targeted interventions can lead to healthier, more engaged, and more productive employees.