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Workplace Stress Policy

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1. INTRODUCTION

- 1.1. As an employer, the Council has a legal responsibility under the Health and Safety at Work etc. Act 1974 and the Management of Health and Safety at Work Regulations to ensure the health, safety and welfare at work of its employees. This includes minimising the risk of stress-related illness or injury.
- 1.2. Within the UK, stress in the workplace is now widely recognised as a major cause of ill health and sickness absence at work. It is therefore a key consideration for the Council in terms of employee health and safety, sickness absence management, employee morale and general employee relations.

2. POLICY STATEMENT

- 2.1 The Council recognises that it has a legal duty to its employees to take all reasonable steps to minimise the adverse effects on them from stress in the workplace. It also recognises that this duty of care extends to maintaining the mental as well as the physical wellbeing of employees.
- 2.2 The Council's statement of intent is, so far as is reasonably practicable, to:
 - maintain a safe and healthy working environment;
 - prevent stress by identifying causes of workplace stress and eliminating them or reducing their effects to a minimum.
- 2.3 The Council intends to achieve this through:
 - following the advice and implementing the principles described in the Health and Safety Executive (HSE) publication HSG218: Managing the causes of work-related stress – A step-by-step approach using the Management Standards (hereafter referred to in this document as the HSE Publication). This publication is available to download, free of charge, from the HSE website;
 - training and developing managers to be responsible for monitoring stress levels and implementing control measures to relieve stress in the workplace;
 - involving employees in identifying the causes of workplace stress through risk assessment, and taking action to eliminate or reduce the sources;

- increasing stress awareness by providing employees with the skills necessary to deal effectively with pressure and conflicting demands;
- managing the rehabilitation of employees who have suffered or are suffering serious ill health as a result of stress.

- 2.4 Specific guidance on managing workplace stress, for both management and employees, is incorporated within this policy.
- 2.5 Whilst the Council aims to ensure that workplace stress is managed effectively, it recognises that some causes of stress may not be within the Council's control.
- 2.6 The responsibility for implementing the requirements of this policy and for the preparation of an implementation strategy rests with each Director or Head of Service.

POLICY GUIDANCE

3. WHAT IS STRESS AND WHAT ARE ITS SYMPTOMS?

3.1 The HSE's formal definition of work-related stress is:

'The adverse reaction people have to excessive pressure or other types of demand placed on them at work'.

The HSE go on to elaborate that stress is not an illness, it is a state, but that if it becomes too excessive and prolonged, mental and physical illness may develop.

3.2 Work is generally good for people, if it is well designed, but it can also be a great source of pressure. There is a difference between pressure and stress. Pressure can be positive and a motivating factor, and is often essential in a job. It can help employees achieve their goals and perform better. Stress occurs when this pressure becomes excessive. Stress is a natural reaction to too much pressure.

3.3 There are some clear signs that employees may be experiencing stress at work. If they are detected early enough, action can be taken before the excessive pressure becomes a problem, and it will be easier to eliminate and/or reduce the causes.

Stress can show itself in many different ways (see below). Some of the symptoms listed may not be signs of stress if the employees concerned always behave that way, in which case managers may need to manage those employees differently. What managers need to look for are *changes* in the way employees behave that could be linked with excessive pressure.

Signs of stress in individuals

Emotional symptoms

- tearfulness
- feeling that they can't cope
- short-temperedness/irritability/anger
- more sensitive
- feeling that they've achieved nothing at the end of the day
- loss of motivation/commitment
- depressive feelings
- anxiety/worry
- frustration

- feeling drained
- guilt
- feeling neglected
- feel there's no-one to confide in
- cynicism and/or loss of sense of humour
- low self-esteem/feelings of inadequacy

Mental symptoms

- inability to plan/concentrate/control work
- indecision/muddled thinking
- mind racing/going blank
- confusion
- poor memory
- morbid thoughts

Changes in behaviour

- comfort eating or loss of appetite
- smoking, drinking or recreational drug taking
- getting less work done
- irrational behaviour/mood swings
- poor relationships with colleagues/clients
- verbally or physically aggressive
- socially withdrawn
- inflexible
- insomnia
- fidgeting/impatience
- nervous habits (e.g. nail biting, foot tapping)
- accident prone
- disregard for personal appearance
- lack of confidence
- absenteeism/poor time keeping
- denying there's a problem
- unable to show true feelings

Signs of stress in a group

- disputes and disaffection in the group
- increase in employee turnover
- increase in complaints and grievances
- increased sickness absence
- employees reporting stress
- difficulty attracting new employees
- poor performances
- customer dissatisfaction/complaints

These effects are usually short lived and cause no lasting harm – when the excessive pressure recedes, there is usually a quick return to normal.

Stress is therefore not the same as ill health.

However in some cases, where excessive pressure is intense and continues for a long time, the effects of stress can be more sustained and far more damaging, leading to longer term psychological problems and physical ill health for employees, and significant consequences for the Council in lost time, output and contracts, and higher insurance premiums and litigation costs.

- 3.4 It is important to realise that it is not up to managers to diagnose stress. It is for them to recognise that behaviours have changed, to be aware that something is wrong and to take prompt action. If managers are worried about an employee, they should recommend that they see their GP and/or refer them to the Council's Occupational Health and Wellbeing Unit.

However, managers should take care not to over-react to small, temporary changes in behaviour. Managers only need to act when these behavioural changes continue for a while. Use the above symptoms, both the individual and group ones, as clues.

4. WHAT CAN CAUSE HARMFUL LEVELS OF STRESS AND WHAT SHOULD BE HAPPENING TO PREVENT IT

- 4.1 A person experiences stress when they perceive that the demands of their work are greater than their ability to cope. Coping means balancing the demands and pressures placed on them (i.e. the job requirements) with their skills and knowledge (i.e. their capabilities). For example, if a manager gives a member of their team a tight deadline on a project they feel they have neither the skills nor ability to do well, they may begin to feel undue pressure that could result in work-related stress.
- 4.2 Stress can also result from having too few demands, as employees will become bored, feel undervalued and lack recognition. If they feel they have little or no say over the work they do or how they do it, this may cause them stress.
- 4.3 The HSE has identified six key risk factors of work design that, if not properly managed, are associated with poor health and wellbeing, lower productivity and increased sickness absence. These six factors are known as the **Management Standards** and cover the primary sources of stress at work. They are:

Demands

This includes issues such as workload, work patterns and the work environment.

The standard is that:

- employees indicate that they are able to cope with the demands of their jobs; and
- systems are in place locally to respond to any individual concerns.

What should be happening/states to be achieved:

- employees are provided with adequate and achievable demands in relation to the agreed hours of work;
- people's skills and abilities are matched to the job demands;
- jobs are designed to be within the capabilities of employees; and
- employees' concerns about their work environment are addressed.

Control

How much say employees have in the way they do their work.

The standard is that:

- employees indicate that they are able have a say about the way they do their work; and
- systems are in place locally to respond to any individual concerns.

What should be happening/states to be achieved:

- where possible, employees have control over their pace of work;
- employees are encouraged to use their skills and initiative to do their work;
- employees are encouraged to develop their existing skills and, where possible, are also encouraged to develop new skills to help them undertake new and challenging work;
- employees are consulted over their work patterns; and
- employees have a say over when they can take breaks.

Support

This includes the encouragement and resources provided by the Council, line managers and colleagues.

The standard is that:

- employees indicate that they receive adequate information and support from their colleagues and superiors; and
- systems are in place locally to respond to any individual concerns.

What should be happening/states to be achieved:

- policies and procedures are in place to adequately support employees;
- systems are in place to enable and encourage managers to support their employees and for employees to support their colleagues;
- employees know what support is available and how and when to access it;
- employees know how to access the required resources to do their job; and
- employees receive regular and constructive feedback.

Relationships

This includes promoting positive working to avoid conflict and dealing with unacceptable behaviour.

The standard is that:

- employees indicate that they are not subjected to unacceptable behaviour, e.g. bullying or harassment at work; and
- systems are in place locally to respond to any individual concerns.

What should be happening/states to be achieved:

- positive behaviour is promoted to avoid conflict and ensure fairness;
- employees share information relevant to their work;
- policies and procedures have been agreed to prevent or resolve unacceptable behaviour;
- systems are in place to enable and encourage managers to deal with unacceptable behaviour; and
- systems are in place to enable and encourage employees to report unacceptable behaviour.

Role

Whether people understand their role within the Council and whether the Council ensures that they do not have conflicting roles.

The standard is that:

- employees indicate that they understand their role and responsibilities; and
- systems are in place locally to respond to any individual concerns.

What should be happening/states to be achieved:

- it is ensured that, as far as possible, the different requirements placed on employees are compatible;
- information is provided to enable employees to understand their role and responsibilities;
- it is ensured that, as far as possible, the requirements placed on employees are clear; and

- systems are in place to enable employees to raise concerns about any uncertainties or conflicts they have in their role and responsibilities.

Change

How organisational change (large or small) is managed and communicated within the Council.

The standard is that:

- employees indicate that the Council engages them frequently when undergoing an organisational change; and
- systems are in place locally to respond to individual concerns.

What should be happening/states to be achieved:

- employees are provided with timely information to enable them to understand the reasons for proposed change;
- adequate employee consultation on change is ensured and opportunities are provided for employees to influence proposals;
- employees are aware of the probable impact of any change to their jobs. If necessary, employees are given training to support any change in their jobs;
- employees are aware of timetables for change; and
- employees have access to relevant support during change.

Understanding that these six factors can cause stress for employees can help both managers and employees determine whether or not a problem exists with stress, what to do to reduce it if there is or, if not, what to do to help prevent stress from becoming a problem in the future.

- 4.4 The HSE's Guidance on the Health and Safety (Display Screen Equipment) Regulations links stress to musculoskeletal disorders associated with DSE work (as well as identifying stress as one of the main hazards in its own right).

This Guidance explains that employees' psychological response to work and workplace conditions may have as important an influence as physical risk factors on their health in general, and musculoskeletal health in particular, and may be linked to musculoskeletal disorders via stress-related processes that include direct biochemical and physiological changes in the body.

The Council, too, recognises the link between musculoskeletal disorders associated with DSE work, and stress.

As such, for the management of musculoskeletal disorders associated with DSE work, both the physical and stress risk factors need to be identified and controlled. The best approach to use is an ergonomic one, which looks at achieving the best 'fit' between the work, the working environment and the needs and capabilities of individuals. Therefore, reference should not only be made to the Council's Policy HS11 – Display Screen Equipment, but also to the Management Standards approach described in Section 4.3 above of this policy.

- 4.5 The HSE's Guidance on the Manual Handling Operations Regulations links stress to musculoskeletal disorders associated with manual handling operations (as well as identifying stress as a hazard in its own right).

This Guidance explains that stress-related changes in the body, such as increased muscle tension, can make people more susceptible to musculoskeletal problems.

The Council, too, recognises the link between musculoskeletal disorders associated with manual handling operations, and stress.

As such, for the management of musculoskeletal disorders associated with manual handling operations, both the physical and stress risk factors need to be identified and controlled. Again, similar to 4.4 above, the best approach to use is an ergonomic one. Therefore, reference should not only be made to the Council's Policy HS4 – Manual Handling, but also to the Management Standards approach described in Section 4.3 above of this policy.

5. CARRYING OUT A RISK ASSESSMENT FOR WORK-RELATED STRESS

- 5.1 Regulation 3 of the Management of Health and Safety at Work Regulations requires employers to assess risks to health and safety from the hazards of work. This includes the risk of employees developing a stress-related illness because of their work. Managers should therefore carry out a risk assessment to identify stress risk factors, decide who might be harmed and how, and evaluate the risks and decide what control measures are required.
- 5.2 The Management Standards described in the HSE Publication give a step-by-step approach to carrying out a risk assessment for work-related stress, i.e.:

Step 1 of the risk assessment – identify the stress risk factors (understand the Management Standards):

- understand the six broad risk factors for work-related stress on which the Management Standards are based;
- understand how the Management Standards translate to your service area;
- understand how to compare your service area's performance with the 'good management practice' of the Management Standards;
- identify risk factors specific to your service area;
- focus on prevention and managing the root causes of work-related stress;
- focus on organisational level issues.

Step 2 of the risk assessment – decide who might be harmed and how (gather data):

- acknowledge that work-related stress has the potential to affect any employee;
- consider sources of information available to indicate any potential problem areas (e.g. sickness absence data, productivity data, employee turnover data, performance indicators, team meetings, one-to-ones, toolbox talks, focus groups and employee surveys);
- undertake a preliminary analysis and compare performance against the Management Standards 'states to be achieved';
- identify areas of current good practice and areas where your service area is performing less well;
- record what you have done.

Step 3 of the risk assessment – evaluate the risks (explore problems and develop solutions):

- consult employees to discuss problem areas in more detail;
- work in partnership with employees and their representatives to develop actions to take;
- ensure that issues affecting individuals are addressed;
- communicate results to managers, employees and employee representatives, with a commitment to follow-up;
- record what you have done.

Step 4 of the risk assessment – record your findings (develop and implement action plans):

- create and agree with senior management, employees and employee representatives an overall action plan for the implementation of solutions (an action plan template and worked example is given in Appendix 3 of the HSE Publication);
- share the overall action plan with all employees, including dates for monitoring and review;
- begin the process of implementing the overall action plan and any lower level plans;
- record actions taken.

Step 5 of the risk assessment – monitor and review (monitor and review action plans and assess effectiveness):

- monitor against the action plans to ensure that agreed actions are taking place;
- assess the effectiveness of the solutions implemented;
- decide what further action or data gathering, if any, is needed.

6. DEALING WITH INDIVIDUAL CONCERNS

6.1 The main focus of the Management Standards risk assessment approach is on issues that are likely to be potential sources of stress for groups of employees, but it may also identify that some individuals are experiencing problems that the majority are not. The solutions that are developed for the majority of employees may not address these problems. However, the Council still has a duty of care to protect the health and wellbeing of those individuals too.

It is essential therefore to remind individual employees that there are ways to raise any concerns they may have, such as:

- speaking either formally or informally to their line manager or another person in their management chain;
- speaking to their trade union representative, trade union health and safety representative or Human Resource advisers;
- speaking to one of the Occupational Health and Wellbeing Unit's in-house counsellors;
- if they prefer, speaking to their GP.

- 6.2 Recent results of claims for compensation for work-related stress have made it clear that where stress is 'foreseeable', action must be taken to limit the problem.

Therefore, although line managers are not expected to be experts on stress, they are expected to take action to try and limit the harm if a problem with stress is brought to their attention. Suggested actions that line managers can take are:

- speak to the person involved about the complaint, take the complaint seriously and do not belittle the person, and try to determine what can be done;
- if the distress is serious and fault is cited, ask for expert assistance;
- if the complaint involves issues with the line manager or other team members, Human Resources should be involved, as should an employee representative, and possibly also the Occupational Health and Wellbeing Unit;
- if a work-related problem can be easily identified, try to resolve the situation as quickly as possible whilst the employee is still at work, rather than after the employee has gone off sick, but then follow up with a wider, documented appraisal including other employees and, where appropriate, their representatives. An action plan to control stress risk factors should be agreed and implemented;
- even if it is known that it is 'home' influences that are a major contribution in a complaint about stress, still try and support the employee otherwise their performance may still suffer and it could also affect their colleagues. This support could come in the form of referral to the Occupational Health and Wellbeing Unit's in-house counselling service or adaptations to working conditions or hours.

7. WHAT MANAGERS CAN DO TO HELP PREVENT STRESS

- 7.1 For each of the six Management Standards and the corresponding desirable set of conditions that the Council should be working towards, the HSE Publication gives examples of positive manager behaviour in achieving those ends, as follows:

Demands

- being aware of team members' abilities
- monitoring team workload/bringing in additional resources to handle workload/refusing to take on additional work when team is under pressure
- following through problems on behalf of employees

- developing action plans
- breaking down problems into parts/dealing rationally with problems
- reviewing processes to see if work can be improved/done in a better way
- prioritising future workloads/working proactively

Control

- giving employees responsibility and trusting them to do their work
- steering employees in a direction rather than imposing direction
- providing regular team meetings/opportunities for employees to air their views/listening to employees
- knowing when to consult employees and when to make decisions
- providing mentoring/coaching/helping employees to develop in role
- encouraging employees to go on training courses (which can be provided internally, and not necessarily externally)
- regularly reviewing development

Support

- having an open-door policy/letting employees know that they can talk to them at any time/taking time to talk to employees at their workstations
- making sure everyone is safe/undertaking structured risk assessments/ensuring all health and safety requirements are met
- acknowledging employees' efforts/praising good work/operating a no-blame culture/passing positive feedback about the team to senior management
- providing regular one-to-ones
- being flexible when employees need time off
- providing information on additional sources of support

Relationships

- dealing with conflict head on/listening objectively to both sides of a conflict/following up on conflicts after resolution
- supporting and investigating incidents of abuse
- having a positive approach/acting calmly when under pressure
- walking away when feeling unable to control emotion/apologising for poor behaviour

- admits mistakes
- keeps employee issues private and confidential/treats all employees with same importance
- regularly has informal chats with employees/willing to have a laugh and a joke/socialises with team
- brings in food and drinks (non alcoholic) for the team

Role

- communicates clear goals and objectives
- explains exactly what is required

Change

- keeps team informed of exactly what is happening in the Council

7.2 The HSE Publication also gives examples of positive manager behaviour in respect of other management competencies, as follows:

Taking responsibility

- leading from the front
- steps in to help out when needed
- communicating 'the buck stops with me'
- deals with difficult customers on behalf of employees

Knowledge of job

- able to put themselves in employees' shoes
- has enough expertise to give good advice
- knows what employees are doing

Empathy

- takes an interest in employees' personal lives
- aware of different personalities and styles of working within the team
- notices when a team member is behaving out of character

Seeking advice

- seeks help from the Occupational Health and Wellbeing Unit when necessary
- seeks advice from other managers with more experience
- uses Human Resources when dealing with a problem

7.3 Managers can also take advantage of the following specific training provided by the Human Resources Division:

- stress awareness training by the People Development Team;
- risk assessment training by the Health and Safety Team.

8. WHAT EMPLOYEES CAN DO TO HELP PREVENT STRESS

8.1 Employees can help prevent stress by becoming fitter and developing better personal habits, such as:

Maintain Good Health Habits

- **Stay active:** Choose an activity you enjoy and do 30 minutes of moderate physical exercise on at least 5 days a week (check with your doctor first if you have any health problems or are aged over 40)
- **Eat well:** Have a well balanced diet that includes fresh fruit and vegetables (five portions a day are recommended), bread and cereals, as well as milk and dairy products and meat or fish, or alternatives if you are a vegetarian (anyone with an intolerance to a particular food type should obviously avoid eating such food)
- **Get enough sleep:** A lack of sleep can leave you fatigued and your nerves on edge, and you in poor shape to meet the challenges of your job
- **Don't misuse alcohol or other substances:** Alcohol and other drugs, for example sleeping pills, only cover up stress-related issues and make everyday problems worse

Use Your Time Wisely

- **Don't overdo it:** Don't try to do everything at once. Set goals that are challenging but achievable

- **Don't put things off:** Once you know what you need to do, then do it! The immediate feeling of accomplishment on completing a task is satisfying and will make everything else seem easier
- **Be aware:** Take a moment now and then to step back and look at yourself and what you're doing. Assess if you are feeling stressed and, if so, take steps to reduce it
- **Make a list:** Write down everything you must do. Decide which tasks are the more important and which ones can be done later
- **Take a break:** Don't be afraid to relax for a moment and regain your energy. At lunchtime, try to leave your workstation, take a walk outside, etc.
- **Pace yourself:** Work at a steady pace. Try to complete some jobs rather than having 'many balls in the air'
- **Manage your time:** Take a course or read books on time management. Knowing how to use your time effectively can be a good way to prevent stress

Improve Work Habits

- **Identify sources of stress:** Write them down. Which ones do you make yourself? Which ones are part of the job? Which ones are created by other people?
- **Follow health and safety procedures:** Wear proper clothing and equipment and follow recommended procedures to reduce the risk of injury or ill health
- **Discuss problems:** Talk with your manager or colleagues – they may have ideas on ways to help address any issues
- **Be positive:** If you think something good will happen, the chances are it will. Positive thoughts are more likely to bring positive results
- **Be realistic:** Choose realistic job or career goals. This is particularly important for people new to the workplace who want to set the world on fire – and risk exhaustion instead

Change Personal Habits

- **Be kind to yourself:** Acknowledge your successes
- **Talk about problems:** Share your thoughts and feelings with someone who knows and understands you and who will listen to you
- **Do things you enjoy:** It sounds simple, but it's not easy for many people. Soak in a hot bath, attend a sports event, visit a friend – enjoy yourself!

- **Know what's important:** Take time to find out what is and what is not important in your life
- **Plan leisure time:** Set aside time during the day for your personal recreation
- **Stop smoking and reduce caffeine intake:** Nicotine and caffeine can actually increase the effects of stress, making a tense situation even more stressful
- **Seek new interests:** Meeting new people and developing new interests are great ways to introduce some positive challenges in your life
- **Seek professional help:** If you have been feeling stressed or depressed for any length of time, counselling can help put you back on the right track

Learn to Relax

- **Breathing exercises:** Find a safe, quiet, comfortable place to lie down. Close your eyes and begin to take slow, deep, regular breaths. Concentrate on your breathing, then slowly open your eyes and stay still for a moment. Learn this and other breathing exercises to help prevent stress
- **Use your imagination:** Relieve stressful situations by closing your eyes for a few moments and imagining yourself in a calm, peaceful place
- **Quick relaxation:** A quick way to relieve stressful situations whilst at work is to take a short break and do some light stretching, or take a few deep breaths.

9. RECORDS

9.1 It is essential that appropriate records are kept, and that they are periodically reviewed and updated. The following records should be kept, together with any others deemed appropriate:

- risk assessments, with particular reference to those measures taken to identify and prevent or reduce stress;
- training records (any undertaken by managers and/or employees);
- attendance records, and any analyses of the reasons for absences.

10. ADVICE

- 10.1 Advice on the implementation of this policy can be obtained from the Health and Safety Team, Human Resources, Ty Elai, Williamstown, CF40 1NY, telephone 01443 425531.

MANAGERS CHECKLIST

	✓ As Appropriate		
	N/A	Yes	No
• Have work activities that are likely to cause stress been identified?			
• Has a risk assessment been carried out to determine if there is a workplace stress problem?			
• Has action been taken as a result of the assessment?			
• Have employees been given advice on: the causes of stress; the physical and behavioural effects of stress; the ways in which they can help themselves prevent stress?			
• Are you aware of the signs to look for that may point to an employee having a stress problem?			
• Are there procedures in place to help prevent stress from becoming a problem in the workplace?			
• When monitoring sickness absence levels, are measures being taken to determine: the reason for and the length of the period of absence; whether any particular type of work or working practice, or other work event, is the likely cause; whether any particular problem can be established amongst any particular group or category of employee?			
• When an employee claims to be stressed, has that employee been consulted to determine the likely cause of the stress and whether or not it is work-related and, where appropriate, has medical advice been obtained on the state of the individual's mental health and the likely risk posed to the employee by continued employment?			
• Where appropriate, is stress management training provided?			
• Are there procedures in place on how to deal with an employee on return to work from sickness absence where the cause was identified as workplace stress?			
• Are appropriate records being kept?			
• Are there monitoring procedures in place to ensure that the requirements of the policy are being met?			

Completed by: _____
(Signature)

Confirmed by: _____
(Signature)

Name: _____
(Print)

Name: _____
(Print)

Designation: _____

Designation: _____

Date: _____

Date: _____