

Stress at Work Policy

Background

1. The Council values its employees and accepts that the well-being of its employees and the appropriateness of the environment in which they work are essential requirements for the efficient and effective performance of its functions.
2. To meet its legislative obligations the Council undertakes, through its Health and Safety policy, to provide systems of staff management and a working environment which seeks to avoid harming individuals and actively promotes a sound and sustainable approach to work.
3. The County Council also provides a range of support for staff to help them deal with stress.

Policy

4. The Council is committed to:
 - managing the causes of stress at work and maintaining well-being amongst its employees
 - increasing awareness and understanding of stress in the workplace
 - communicating the procedures and resources dedicated to the prevention and management of detrimental stress
 - eliminating or minimising the impact of detrimental stress on all Council employees, thereby maintaining the health and well-being of all staff and organisational efficiency and effectiveness
 - the adoption of the Health and Safety Executive Management Standards approach to managing stress.

Definitions

5. The Health & Safety Executive defines work related stress as:

'the adverse reaction people have to excessive pressures or other types of demands placed on them at work'

It is recognised that everyone needs a certain amount of pressure to remain alert, motivated and productive. Therefore appropriate pressure at work is desirable for efficiency. It is when demands and pressures are excessive or prolonged that some people find that their ability to cope is challenged. This creates a vulnerability, which can manifest itself in a range of ill health effects for the individual and can have negative consequences for the organisation in which they are employed.

6. 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 you (i.e. the job requirements) with your skills and knowledge (i.e. your capabilities).
7. Stress can also result from having too few demands, as people 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.

Risk Assessment

8. Risk assessment is a vital component of this policy. It is only when the possible causes of stress have been identified that preventative or management strategies can be effectively put in place. Managers must carry out a risk assessment for any employee who has identified symptoms due to work related stress or has been absent due to work related stress - see Appendix 2 for further guidance. Managers must complete the risk assessment form at Appendix 3 with their member of staff and then agree the action plan at Appendix 4.
9. In carrying out risk assessments, managers should be aware that:
 - stress at work can result from a single incident or an accumulation of incidents over time, and should seek to minimise both types of risks
 - stress related ill health might be caused by personal circumstances, which in turn may have a detrimental effect on an individual's ability to cope with work demands
 - employees with sensitive or confidential personal issues that could cause stress should be referred to the Occupational Health Service and/or the Staff Care Service.

Context

10. The Council recognises that some of the duties and responsibilities undertaken by its employees have the potential to put those employees under stress. For example, dealing with disturbed and aggressive clients, organisational change, facing dangerous emergency situations, excessive work-loads, staff shortages and procedural deadlines are just some.

11. External matters over which the County Council has little control can impose substantial additional pressures on the Council's workforce. These include annual budget settlements, new legislation, population changes and activities of other partners/agencies with whom the Council works.
12. Employees may have aspects of their personal lives that make them more vulnerable to stress at work or have a temporary influence on their work performance. For example: illness, family issues, financial difficulties.
13. The relevant legislative context is defined by the following:
 - Health and Safety at Work Act 1974
 - Management of Health and Safety at Work Regulations 1999
 - Working Time Regulations and the
 - Disability Discrimination Act 1995.
 - County Council policies and procedures
14. The following policies may also be relevant:
 - Career Break Scheme
 - Comprehensive Equality policy Dignity at Work Policy
 - Disciplinary and Capability Procedure Domestic violence/abuse policy Drugs and alcohol policy
 - Emergency Leave scheme
 - Flexible working policy
 - Job Sharing Scheme
 - Learning & Development policy
 - Maternity Scheme
 - No Smoking policy
 - Officer's Code of Conduct
 - Paternity Scheme
 - Procedure for Monitoring and Managing Sickness Absence
 - Raising Concerns at Work
 - Whistle-blowing policy
 - Redundancy Procedure
 - Six Steps to Managing Performance Improvement
 - Special Leave Scheme
 - Violence at Work
 - Working Time Directive

Monitoring

15. Line Managers will monitor and record stress-related sickness absences at Team, Unit and Directorate levels, and liaise with the Health, Safety and Wellbeing team, Occupational Health and Staff Care Service for proactive intervention as may be appropriate.
16. HR Business Partners will monitor stress-related sickness absences for their directorate and work with managers to ensure appropriate actions are being taken.
17. The Occupational Health Service will monitor the incidence of stress-related referrals and provide quarterly report to the Council's Health & Safety Committee, also CCMT.

Review

18. This policy has been subject to an Equalities Impact Assessment in accordance with Oxfordshire County Council's Comprehensive Equality Scheme and will be reviewed in 3 years.

Appendices

1. Appendix 1 - Responsibilities
2. Appendix 2 - Risk Assessment
3. Appendix 3 - Risk Assessment Form
4. Appendix 4 - Risk Assessment Action Plan
5. Appendix 5 - Potential psychological hazards
6. Appendix 6 - Strategies for preventing and minimising stress at work
7. Appendix 7 - Sources of support

Head of HR

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Alternative formats of these policies can be made available on request. These include other languages, large print, Braille, audio cassette, computer disk or e-mail. Please contact Strategic HR on 01865 815399.

Appendix 1 - Responsibilities

1. **The Cabinet** is responsible for:
 - setting the policy context

2. **Directors** are responsible for:
 - the provision of resources
 - familiarising themselves with the nature and causes of stress in the workplace
 - supporting, implementing and disseminating the principles and aims of the Stress at Work Policy among their staff
 - ensuring managers undertake stress risk assessments with their direct reports and that they take action to deal with the issues identified and minimize the risks as far as is reasonably practicable (see Appendices 2, 3 and 4)
 - ensuring that their managers demonstrate the appropriate behaviours associated with the following competences:
 - Improving Performance
 - Decision Making
 - Personal Effectiveness
 - Strategic Awareness
 - promoting and maintaining systems of stress management and behaviour at work, which adhere to the principles, aims, and strategies of the policy
 - encouraging employees to aspire to a healthy lifestyle.

3. **Heads of Service and Line Managers** are responsible for:
 - understanding the potential psychological hazards and applying the strategies for preventing and minimising stress at work as listed in Appendices 5 and 6
 - demonstrating the appropriate behaviours associated with the following competences:
 - Improving Performance
 - Decision Making
 - Personal Effectiveness
 - Strategic Awareness
 - understanding the behaviours likely to give rise to stress in the workplace
 - familiarising themselves with the nature and causes of stress in the workplace
 - being aware of risks, for example any traumatic events, health problems, disciplinary action, complaints about overwork and bullying, organisational change and ensuring that staff have access to appropriate support
 - referring employees who are absent due to stress to the Occupational Health Service

- carrying out a risk assessment for any employee who has identified symptoms due to work related stress or has been absent due to work related stress - see Appendix 2 for further guidance. Managers must complete the risk assessment form at Appendix 3 with their member of staff and then agree the action plan at Appendix 4.
- seeking advice for complex issues from the HR Management Advisory Team
- taking steps to reduce the risks once a manager has been alerted to a risk by, for example, from Occupational Health or Staff Care. This must not be left to the employee alone to solve
- undertaking risk assessments where:
 - the levels of stress related sickness absences and/or staff turnover are significantly high
 - there are significant hazards such as violence, heavy workloads or poor working conditions
 - there are high or increased levels of formal/informal employee complaints
 - a Union, Health, Safety & Wellbeing, Occupational Health or Staff Care Service representative, or staff group requests this to be done.
- monitoring and recording stress-related sickness absences at Team, Unit and Service levels, and liaising with the Health, Safety and Wellbeing team, Occupational Health and Staff Care Service for proactive intervention as may be appropriate.

4. **Individual employees** are responsible for:

- demonstrating the appropriate behaviours associated with the following competences:
 - Improving Performance
 - Decision Making
 - Personal Effectiveness
- avoiding behaviours which give rise to stress
- developing a balanced and responsible approach to work and their personal lives to ensure they are able to work
- being aware of the signs and causes of stress in the workplace (and in their personal lives)
- understanding the Stress at Work policy and co-operate with managers and colleagues in the prevention and control of stress
- recognising that dealing with stress is not a weakness, it is a natural reaction which can be both positive and negative
- reporting matters of concern relating to their or a colleague's health and safety at work to an appropriate manager
- supporting colleagues who are experiencing stress
- informing their manager when personal stress is affecting their work and refer themselves to the Staff Care Service

- in an emergency, consulting their GP.

5. **The Occupational Health Service** is responsible for the assessment of employee's health and giving advice to managers where employees have stress related problems or sickness absences. The Occupational Health Service is responsible for providing:

- professional advice on health related issues
- advice on:
 - phased return to work if appropriate
 - advice on flexible working hours / revised duties if feasible
 - medical redeployment
- monitoring the incidence of stress-related referrals and provide quarterly report to the Council's Health & Safety Committee, and County Council Management Team.

In addition to their responsibilities outlined in Paragraph 3. Managers should:

- ensure that employees who are referred to the Occupational Health Service are fully aware of the reasons for their referral and of the purpose of the service
- ensure that the Occupational Health Service is properly briefed on any special physical and psychological demands of jobs, health problems and how these affect the employee's ability to perform their work.

6. **The Staff Care Service** is responsible for providing:

- counselling
- mediation
- training for employees who are likely, by the nature of their jobs to experience pressure or to witness, or to have to deal with, critical incidents or trauma
- adequate and prompt critical incident debriefing and subsequent counselling where necessary. Normally, this should be within 72 hours. Occasionally, employees may experience post-traumatic stress disorder at a later stage and should be referred to the Staff Care Service for appropriate assessment and counselling

In addition to their responsibilities outlined in Paragraph 3 Managers should:

- ensure that employees are aware of the support available to them
- be aware of their own limitations in advising employees with problems
- refer employees for counselling to the Staff Care Service.

7. **The Health Safety and Wellbeing Team** is responsible for:

- advice and help on Health Safety and Wellbeing matters
- stress audits
- action plans
- training.

8. **The HR Management Advisory Team** is responsible for:

- providing advice to managers on HR policies and procedures and management practice.

9. **HR Business Partners** are responsible for:

- monitoring stress-related sickness absences for their directorate
- working with managers to ensure appropriate actions are being taken
- contributing to the development of the organisation so that work-related stress does not impact negatively on service delivery.

Appendix 2 - Risk Assessment

Stress is the single highest reason for sickness absence from work. Risk assessment is the cornerstone of managing stress at work. It is when we look at the potential causes of stress that it can be proactively managed. Risk is defined as the chance that someone will be harmed by a hazard. A hazard is defined as anything that has the potential to cause harm. Guidance from Health & Safety Executive (HSE, 1995) encourages risk assessment for psychological risks in broadly the same way as assessments for physical risks. The HSE defines risk assessment as 'nothing more than a careful examination of what, in your work, could cause harm to people, so that you can weigh up whether you have taken enough precautions or should do more to prevent harm. The aim is to make sure that no one gets hurt or becomes ill'.

Key steps in risk assessment

1. Identify the potential hazards in the job
2. Determine the risk – are the potential hazards likely to have a harmful effect?
3. Evaluate the risk by
 - identifying what action you are already taking,
 - deciding whether it is enough, and
 - if it is not, decide what more you need to do
4. Record the significant findings of the assessment, take the actions identified, and
5. Review the assessment at appropriate intervals.

For a simple to follow risk assessment see Appendix 3 and for the follow-on action plan see Appendix 4.

In undertaking risk assessments, the 'how' and 'why' particular hazards cause particular kinds of harm in particular workplaces or work groups should be explored. Also, individual differences in the way people perceive psychological hazards at work should be borne in mind. One person's stimulating challenge could be another's high stress factor. In addition, stress induced ill-health may be caused by non-work related issues, which may in turn have a detrimental effect upon work performance. The use of a simple questionnaire provides an insight into the nature and quantity of hazards. This can be followed up by interviews and focus groups in order to get to people's local understanding of hazard-harm link and how the hazards can be controlled.

Action

Once a risk assessment has been carried out, managers and employees should take appropriate and agreed steps to eliminate, control and monitor risks.

Recognising the symptoms of stress.

Some of the recognised symptoms of stress are: tiredness, aching muscles, disturbed sleep, loss of appetite, indigestion, stomach problems, increased use of or dependence on alcohol/drugs/smoking. Also, headaches, inability to relax, poor concentration and indecisiveness, excessive worrying, increased irritability, feeling anxious, changes in attitudes to work and colleagues, and increased incidences of short term sick leave.

Recognising the signs of stress in the workplace.

Some of the possible signs of stress can include:

- increases in overall sickness, particularly frequent short-term absences
- poor work performance: low output, lower quality, poor decision-making
- relationships at work: conflict between colleagues, poor relationships with clients, conflicts with managers
- loss of motivation and commitment
- poor time keeping
- high accident rates
- low morale

Appendix 3 - Risk assessment form

Risk assessment form

This risk assessment form includes questions that relate to six potential psychological hazards that can be the causes of stress at work. These are job demands, control, support, relationships, role and change.

Employees should complete this form and discuss with their line managers. Line Managers should analyse the findings of this risk assessment with the employee concerned, identify potential risk factors, agree an action plan, take action, record, evaluate and review.

Line managers should use the 'stress action plan' form at Appendix 4 to agree, plan, implement and review the relevant actions. Managers may keep completed risk assessment forms in a confidential individual employee's performance review file or wherever it is deemed appropriate.

Potential hazards

4 = Strongly agree

3= Agree

2= Disagree

1= Strongly disagree

- | | |
|--|---------|
| 1. The amount of work I have to do is realistic/achievable in my normal hours of work. | 4 3 2 1 |
| 2. I can do my work at a reasonable speed . | 4 3 2 1 |
| 3. I am able to cope with the demands of my job. | 4 3 2 1 |
| 4. I feel that I have a good deal of say over how I do my work. | 4 3 2 1 |
| 5. My work provides me with a variety of tasks. | 4 3 2 1 |
| 6. I have a good deal of say over decisions about my work. | 4 3 2 1 |
| 7. I feel that I am adequately supported in order to carry out my work | 4 3 2 1 |
| 8. I get support from my immediate superior when I am having problems at work. | 4 3 2 1 |

9. I feel that I get help and support from my manager and colleagues when needed. 4 3 2 1
10. I feel part of a team in which I am respected and valued. 4 3 2 1
11. I feel that my colleagues relate to each other in a productive and co-operative way. 4 3 2 1
12. I am not subjected to unacceptable behaviour at work such as bullying and harassment. 4 3 2 1
13. I have a clear plan of work which is agreed by me and my line manager. 4 3 2 1
14. I understand how my work fits into the overall aims of the team. 4 3 2 1
15. I understand how my work fits into the overall aim of the Council. 4 3 2 1
16. I feel encouraged to talk to my manager at an early stage if I am not clear about my priorities or the nature of the task to be undertaken. 4 3 2 1
17. I receive information about planned organisational changes. 4 3 2 1
18. I am given information to enable me to understand why organisational change needs to happen. 4 3 2 1
19. I have the opportunity to comment or ask questions about organisational change. 4 3 2 1
20. I do not have a personal health, family, relationship or financial problem. 4 3 2 1

Employee:.....Signed.....Date.....

Line Manager:Signed..... Date.....

(The purpose of the line manager's signature is to confirm that he/she has seen and discussed the responses on this form with the aim of agreeing problem areas and deciding, as far as is reasonably practicable, an action plan)

Appendix 4 - Risk assessment action plan

Name:

Job title:

Agreed action plan/control measures

Review date

Action plan/control measures effective?

If not, consider alternative measure

Further review date

Employee's signature:.....Date.....

Line Manager's signature:.....Date.....

Appendix 5 - Potential psychological hazards

The following six potential psychological hazards are as detailed in the Health and Safety Executive Management Standards;

1. Demands

Includes issues like work overload/underload, work patterns and the work environment.

The standard is that:

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

What should be happening/states to be achieved:

- the organisation provides employees 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.

2. Control

This is how say the person has in the way they do their work.

The standard is that:

- employees indicate that they are able to 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
- where possible, employees are encouraged to develop new skills to help them undertake new and challenging pieces of work
- the organisation encourages employees to develop their skills
- employees have a say over when breaks can be taken; and

employees are consulted over their work patterns.

3. Support

Includes the encouragement, sponsorship and resources provided by the organisation, line management and colleagues.

The standard is that:

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

What should be happening/states to be achieved:

- the organisation has policies and procedures to adequately support employees
- systems are in place to enable and encourage managers to support their staff
- systems are in place to enable and encourage 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

4. Relationships

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 behaviours e.g. bullying at work; and
- systems are in place locally to respond to any individual concerns.

What should be happening/states to be achieved:

- the organisation promotes positive behaviours at work to avoid conflict and ensure fairness
- employees share information relevant to their work
- the organisation has agreed policies and procedures 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.

5. Role

Whether people understand their role within the organisation and whether the organisation ensures that the person does 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:

- the organisation ensures that, as far as possible, the different requirements it places upon employees are compatible
- the organisation provides information to enable employees to understand their role and responsibilities
- the organisation ensures that, as far as possible, the requirements it places upon 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.

6. Change

This is how organisational change (large or small) is managed and communicated in the organisation.

The standard is that:

- employees indicate that the organisation engages them frequently when undergoing organisational change: and
- systems are in place locally to respond to any individual concerns.

What should be happening/states to be achieved:

- the organisation provides employees with timely information to enable them to understand the reason for proposed changes

- the organisation ensures adequate employee consultation on changes and provides opportunities for employees to influence proposals
- employees are aware of the probable impact of any changes to their jobs. If necessary, employees are given training to support any changes in their jobs.
- employees are aware of timetables for changes
- employees have access to relevant support during changes.

Appendix 6 - Strategies for preventing and minimising stress at work

Management of organisational change/restructuring (see also the HR Toolkit 10)

1. The Council will consider and seek to manage the impact of proposed change on employees and involve or inform employees and trade unions appropriately and promptly with a view to gaining their understanding and co-operation.

Communication

2. Poor communication (or a complete absence of it) can cause stress at work. Managers and employees are encouraged to adopt and adhere to effective two-way communication for the prevention and control of stress.
3. Employees should report to their line manager any issues of concern relating to excessive pressure or stress. Managers should listen to, and give appropriate consideration to, comments and representations from employees, trade unions, the Health, Safety and Wellbeing Team, Occupational Health or the Staff Care Service.

Job Design/Workload Management

4. Managers should;
 - analyse jobs to ensure a reasonable degree of variety and control for the post holder
 - avoid placing unreasonable demands on employees, by prioritising workload and delegating appropriately
 - respect others' time and seek to negotiate an efficient and effective solution to workload problems
 - ensure that employees take annual leave and work breaks in line with the Working Time Directive in order to avoid fatigue.

Recruitment

5. Line Managers should:
 - provide adequate information for candidates as part of the selection process regarding working conditions, including special features of the job such as tight deadlines, shift working patterns and dealing with disturbed or aggressive clients

- appoint to all posts by reference to the job description and person specification, which should take into consideration the ability to meet any special requirements of the job
- provide adequate information to new recruits, through the induction process, including details of emergency procedures and staff facilities, and nominate a colleague as a reference point for further support
- make time available to meet new recruits promptly when they start and at regular intervals during their probationary period.

Learning and development.

6. Line Managers will ensure that employees;
- are adequately trained to fulfil their duties and responsibilities
 - are trained, as appropriate, in dealing with potential health & safety hazards that may be associated with the job that they do
 - are encouraged to develop stress and time management techniques.

Supervision

7. Line Managers will:
- agree clear objectives with a reasonable timescale, taking care to explain how duties and responsibilities fit into the wider work context
 - ensure regular supervision (through 1 to 1 meetings) of employees in order to respond promptly to problems
 - provide positive feedback and recognition of good performance promptly and when appropriate
 - discuss poor performance promptly, honestly and constructively and to agree appropriate action using the 6 steps to managing performance improvement
 - undertake regular staff development & performance review meetings in partnership with directorate HR teams where appropriate, and in accordance with the County Council's policies on Appraisals and Learning & Development.

Appendix 7 – Sources of support

For further details on the internal support available please also see Appendix 1 which sets out the responsibilities of each group below in greater detail.

Line Management

Effective communication between line managers and employees to assess issues and agree action towards a resolution.

Strategic HR

Policy development and advice.

Directorate Human Resources Business Partners

Monitoring of stress related absences and contribute to the development of the organisation so that work-related stress does not impact negatively on service delivery.

HR Management Advice Team

Advice and help regarding appropriate employment policies and employee support services. Telephone: 01865 797300

Occupational Health Service

Advice on medical suitability for particular duties and phased returns/rehabilitation programmes. Telephone: 01865 815421.

Staff Care Service

Counselling support for individuals, teams, mediation, advice and support for managers and post incident support. Telephone 01865 854416.

Health, Safety and Wellbeing Team

Advice and help on Health Safety and wellbeing matters Telephone: 01865 797222

Worklife Enhancement

Stress audits, action plans and training Telephone 01865 797178

Trade Unions

Colleague support, representation, advice and information.

External sources of help and counselling

In addition to support available from GPs the following is a selection of external sources of help and counselling.

- Alcoholics Anonymous 01865 242373 www.aa.org
- Al Anon 020 740 30888
- Drinkline 0800 9178282
- National Drugs Helpline 0800 776600
- FRANK 0800 776600 www.talktofrank.com
- NHS Smoking Helpline 0800 0224332 www.smokefree.nhs.uk
- Cruse Bereavement Counselling 0844 4779400
www.crusebereavementcare.org.uk
- Isis Centre 01865 556648
- Samaritans 08457 909090 www.samaritans.org.uk Oxford 01865 722122
- Relate Helpline 0300 1001234 www.relate.org.uk Oxford 01865 242960
- Teacher Support Network 0800 562 561 www.teachersupport.info
- National Debtline 0808 808 4000 www.nationaldebtline.co.uk
- Rape Crisis 24 hours helpline 0808 802 9999
- Health & Safety Executive Website: <http://www.hse.gov.uk/stress>
- HSE (2001) Tackling Work-related Stress: A Guide for employees
- HSE (2001) A managers' guide to improving and maintaining employee health and wellbeing. HSE Books, Sudbury www.acas.org.uk - Stress at Work