STRESS MANAGEMENT POLICY

Epping Forest
District Council

CONTENTS

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1.   WHAT IS STRESS?

Definition of stress

When the demands and pressures placed on individual workers do not match the resources available or do not meet the individual's needs and motivations, stress can occur and endanger that person's health and well-being. In the short term, stress can be debilitating, in the long term stress can kill.

All work has its pressures. We all vary in our capacity to cope with different types of pressure. Some degree of stress is a normal part of life and provides a stimulus to grow without having an adverse effect on health. When stress is intense, continuous or repeated, as is often the case with occupational stress, ill health can result.

The experience of stress can affect the way people think, feel and behave, and can also cause physiological changes. Many of the illnesses caused by stress can be accounted for by the physiological changes that take place when the body is placed under stress.

Stress can cause a range of **short-term** physical or mental health symptoms and changed behaviour.

- Physical symptoms include headaches; respiratory infections; raised heart rate; menstrual problems; back pain; gastro-intestinal problems and skin or sleep disorders.

- Mental health symptoms include irritability; depression; and anxiety.

- Changed behaviour includes an increased use of tobacco, alcohol, coffee or drugs; increased accident rates; eating disorders; social withdrawal; difficulty concentrating or remembering things; poor decision making; inability to switch off; loss of creativity; working long hours and an increased number of errors.

When stress is experienced over **long periods** other signs may develop, for example high blood pressure, heart disease, ulcers, anxiety or long term depression.

Causes of work-related stress

- Poor physical working conditions.

- Poor job design which may include lack of variety, short work cycles or fragmented or meaningless work.

- Excessive or uncontrolled workloads and/or conflicting demands.

- Inconsistent or poorly communicating management.

- Tasks inappropriate to the person's ability.

- Bullying, harassment or intimidation.

Home-Work interface

Stress can also arise from the pressures people experience in their home and personal lives, e.g. bereavement, relationship or family problems, or financial difficulties. These factors can make people more vulnerable to stress at work. Conflicting demands of work and home life can cause stress.

Often, the harmful effects are caused by a combination of work and home stress.

KEY POINTS

- **Stress can be physically or psychologically harmful, or both.**

- **Personal or work-based pressures or a mixture of the two can cause stress.**

- **Stress can be reduced by organisational changes; training for managers and employees in recognising and handling stress; and help for individuals.**

- **The Council has a responsibility to control excessive stress caused by work**

2.   POLICY STATEMENT

We recognise that stress at work is a health and safety problem. As an employer, we have a duty to take all reasonable measures to prevent stress in the workplace by assessing the causes of stress and introducing measures to reduce or prevent stress.

This policy is based on the knowledge that stress management begins with a shared understanding between managers and employees that stress is a significant and legitimate health issue at work. Excessive or negative stress should not be seen as an inevitable part of modern life or as a sign of individual weakness. Employees suffering from stress and stress related illness will be encouraged to seek help and support and will not be subjected to unfair discrimination in any way.

We are committed to the development of stress management initiatives, including:

•   Directorate action plans to address stress management

•   Detailed guidance notes to assist managers

•   Providing Stress Management, Stress Awareness and Time Management training for all staff

•   External counselling services

•   Promoting this policy to employees and Members

We believe that stress management must be an initiative that forms part of the organisation's culture and way of working. Primary responsibility for tackling stress lies with management although everyone has a duty to themselves and others to reduce stress in their workplace by modifying their behaviour as appropriate.

This Policy Statement will be issued to all employees of the Council and Members and will be reviewed and updated as and when necessary.

3.   MEMBERS AND SENIOR MANAGEMENT'S ROLE

Members and Management Board recognise that stress is a legitimate problem at work and that they have a responsibility to adopt a positive approach to stress reduction. They are committed to tackling stress in the workplace and this is demonstrated by the adoption of this policy and the introduction of the stress related initiatives.

Members and Management Board acknowledge that a fundamental part of all the stress management measures is the need to develop a supportive culture and way of working. They aim to develop this supportive culture, and an involving and participative style of management. They will give clear management objectives, promote good communication and close employee involvement. These measures will help managers to tackle the sources of stress and take positive action to minimise stress.

4.   MANAGERS' ROLE

Managers must be alert to employees displaying signs of stress and take appropriate action, using the corporate support available. Recognition and management of stress are integral to the roles of managers and supervisors.

Managers should adopt a range of initiatives to make a significant impact on the reduction of stress amongst employees. These initiatives will include a variety of measures, which are summarised below. Some managers may be doing some of these things already, some may be doing all of them, but all managers should endeavour to improve their practice to obtain beneficial results.

Managers and supervisors must:

- Identify jobs where stress has been, is, or has the potential to be a problem.

- Through risk assessment, see what can be done to reduce the risk of stress to jobholders.

- Meet all employees reporting directly to them on a planned and regular basis. Provide space to discuss their concerns and listen to what they say.

- Take care over the allocation of work. Do employees have the required skills? Are timescales reasonable?

- When employees are absent, find out why. Visit employees on longer-term absences and offer support.

- Ensure that all new employees receive a planned induction programme that fully prepares them, (over a period of time), for their employment with the Council.

- When employees are promoted or their job changes make sure they are given advice and support to help them adjust to the changed situation.

- Identify the training and development needs of their staff and make arrangements to monitor progress in meeting those needs.

How do I deal with staff stress? – A manager's toolkit gives more detailed advice to assist in these tasks.

5. EMPLOYEE'S ROLE - SELF HELP

We all have a responsibility to ourselves and others to take steps to minimise or reduce stress in the workplace, beginning with our own stress. Here are some ideas which may help us cope better with stress.

- **Good health** - eat sensibly, get enough rest and avoid the harmful effects of alcohol, drugs and tobacco.

- **Exercise** - take regular exercise such as walking, swimming, cycling or jogging.

- **Life style** - make time for yourself. Enjoy leisure activities and interests.

- **Talking** - talking things through with friends and relatives can help. 'A problem shared is a problem halved'. If problems become too much, talking to a counsellor may help. Also, the Workplace Chaplains make regular visits to the Council Offices if you would like to talk to them.

- **Time to think** - giving yourself 'thinking time' each day can help you to manage your time and priorities.

- **Rest and relaxation** - learn to relax. Taking short breaks throughout the day will make it easier for you to wind down at the end of the day.

- **Talk to your work supervisor or manager** - discussing the problem with your manager may also help. If the problem is a work related one or your work is being affected your manager needs to know you are experiencing stress. Once they know about the problem they will be able to work with you to reduce the causes of the stress, and/or introduce measures to help you cope with the stress.

As well as taking steps to minimise our own stress we should modify our behaviour if it is causing stress to others. Placing undue stress on a colleague or team member will not be tolerated. If a member of staff is bullying or harassing a colleague that person will be dealt with under the terms of the harassment and bullying policy and may be subject to disciplinary action.

Everyone must be aware of and considerate to colleagues who are suffering from stress.

Under the Health and Safety at Work Act 1974 we all have a duty to take reasonable care for our own health and safety and that of others who may be affected by our acts or omissions at work. We also must co-operate with the Council which has statutory duties imposed on it.

6. GETTING HELP

Most of us get help informally from family, friends and colleagues. Sometimes we may need to talk to someone who is outside the situation. If you are feeling under stress, it is better not to wait for the problem to build up but to talk to someone straight away. There are a number of options open to you.

- If it is a work problem or a home problem affecting your work discuss it with your manager or supervisor. You may use the regular supervision sessions which you have, or you may prefer to make a special appointment. She or he will then know the situation and be able to help you. Your manager will always hear your problems and concerns, in confidence. Your manager or supervisor may recommend the involvement of the Human Resources Unit.

- If you do not wish to approach your manager you can contact the Human Resources Unit direct.

- The Human Resources Unit can arrange for you to receive staff counselling for any problems affecting your work. If you would like to see a counsellor, contact Human Resources. The service is strictly confidential.

- Workplace Chaplains make regular visits to the Council Offices. If you would like to talk to one of them, their visiting timetable and contact details are displayed outside the Open Learning Resources Centre, near Human Resources, on the 1st floor of the Civic Offices.

- If you are experiencing bullying or harassment in your workplace or you are accused of bullying or harassing someone else, please contact the Human Resources Unit for advice and support. This will be kept in strict confidence.

- If you belong to a trade union they may be able to provide support and advice.