



**Our People**

Your safety

# HOW DO I DEAL WITH STAFF STRESS?

## A MANAGER'S TOOLKIT



INVESTOR IN PEOPLE



Epping Forest  
District Council

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## INTRODUCTION

We recognise that dealing with staff stress is sometimes a complex issue. It can be a bewildering area for a manager to deal with. This guide has been written to help you identify the key issues and plan actions to support your team.

The Council has a legal duty to look after the health, safety and welfare of its employees and this includes a duty to reduce, as far as reasonably practicable, the levels of work related stress likely to cause ill health. Employers have liability for reasonably foreseeable mental as well as physical injury. It is important that we have systems in place to be able to identify the sources of stress and the appropriate resources to take action to minimise levels of stress.

Stress related illness is now the second most common reason for absence from work and according to the Health and Safety Executive about 1 in 7 of the workforce are suffering from stress at any time. Stress results in increased sickness absence and employees suffering from stress become under-productive, demoralised and more prone to accidents and mistakes. As an employer we also have a duty in law to provide safe systems of work. So, there are clearly business, legal and moral reasons for an overall corporate approach to the management of stress.

We recognise that the work the Council does can sometimes be stressful, and have developed a Stress Management Policy and other initiatives, which aim to help managers deal with staff stress.

The Stress Management Policy document shows:-

- basic facts about stress
- a definition of stress
- the policy
- councillors and senior management's role
- a summary of the manager's role
- the employee's role (self help)
- details of how to get help

These guidelines are issued to help us achieve a consistent and systematic approach to the management of stress. We have also produced guidance for staff called "Stress Strategy – Support for Staff".

## **STRESS MANAGEMENT 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 reasonable measures to reduce or prevent stress.

This policy is based on the knowledge that stress management begins with a shared understanding between both 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 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:

- identifying and risk assessing potentially stressful roles and work
- detailed guidance notes to assist managers
- providing stress awareness, stress management and time management training
- external counselling facilities
- promotion of this policy to employees and councillors

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 within their workplace by modifying their behaviour as appropriate.

The statement of policy will be issued to all employees of the Council and revised and updated as and when necessary.

## WHAT ARE MY RESPONSIBILITIES AS A MANAGER?

### The six elements in our corporate approach

These guidelines are designed to assist you in managing staff stress by helping you look at what can cause stress at work and identifying ways of reducing it.

Your responsibility is to be alert to employees displaying signs of stress and to take or offer appropriate action, using the corporate support available.

To ensure a consistent and systematic approach to stress management across the Council you should take the following steps.

There are six elements in our corporate approach:

#### **1. Accept that stress is a legitimate health and safety problem**

Make sure that your staff understand that stress is a legitimate health and safety issue. This is expressly stated in the policy. You must make it clear to all employees by your own behaviour and attitude that suffering from stress does not mean weakness or failure and that ill health caused by stress can be prevented. We must avoid the stigma that makes stressed individuals feel they have failed.

#### **2. Identify the sources of stress**

This is a continuous process. You must understand the demands and pressures in your own service area which could lead to stress. Ongoing stress levels and sources of stress can be identified by:

- regularly listening to your employees' views, individually and as a group through 1-2-1 meetings and team meetings
- holding formal performance and development reviews (PDR)
- reviewing the volume of work especially in areas of unfilled vacancies, such as current and future work loads and overtime hours worked
- monitoring sickness absence particularly for an increase in minor illnesses or a changed rate of absenteeism; monitoring reasons for absence that could be indicative of stress, e.g. depression or headaches
- undertaking risk assessments which will identify those jobs that are more prone to cause stress – comprehensive guidance on this, including the Management Standards and case studies may be found on the Health and Safety Executive's website <http://www.hse.gov.uk/stress/>
- use of the counselling service (although as referrals are confidential, you will not always know about these)

### **3. Recognise the symptoms of stress amongst your employees**

Be aware of the warning signs of stress amongst your employees.

It may not always be possible to identify the sources of stress – you may instead become aware of employees suffering from excess stress from their behaviour or work performance, or in their relations with colleagues. If the warning signs are not recognised or are ignored they can lead to physical or mental illness.

You should also be aware that an individual might find it difficult to recognise that they are suffering adverse effects of stress and may need their colleagues or manager to help them to identify this. The warning signs may include:

Work performance	absenteeism, poor timekeeping, inability to concentrate, overworking, failure to delegate, drop in usual standards of work, increased accidents
Interpersonal relationships	unusual irritability or aggression, becoming withdrawn or unsociable, increased resentment of advice, unwillingness to co-operate
Behaviour	moodiness, uncharacteristic reaction to a normal event, false cheerfulness, nervous twitches, changes in eye contact, overeating, smoking, drinking or anxiety

Physical symptoms of stress can include headaches, indigestion, muscle tension, chest and back pains. Prolonged stress may make worse more chronic health problems such as raised blood pressure, heart disease, stomach ulcers and depression.

The Health and Safety Executive's Management Standards Indicator Tool (available on the intranet) may be used to survey staff to identify where stress may be an issue. Advice on it's use may be obtained from Human Resources or the Safety Officer. Further information on it's use may be found on the Health and Safety Executive's website (<http://hse.gov.uk/stress/>).

### **4. Take action to reduce stress**

A combination of organisation interventions, personal coping mechanisms and confidential employee counselling is likely to be most effective in reducing stress, but we must address the source of the problem to make any strategy effective. The case studies on the Health and Safety Executive's Stress website give good examples of how stress may be reduced. The measures shown on the following pages use all three approaches.

### **(i) Develop a supportive culture**

Employees can often feel isolated and unable to share their problems with others; creating a supportive culture can help eliminate feelings of failure and isolation. In particular consider the following:

- Take a lead in accepting that employee stress is not an indication of failure or weakness. Encourage employees to discuss feelings of stress and encourage and commend supportive behaviour from others.
- Help individuals to define causes of stress and seek out guidance, resources or training to assist them to learn new ways to cope.
- Encourage employees to make use of outside help such as the external counselling service.
- Make sure you are accessible to employees to discuss problems and anxieties. For example, hold regular planned meetings with both your team and individuals, and have an "open door".
- Look at ways to improve the working environment. Can you reduce over crowding or improve poor lighting and furniture?
- Review your procedures for:
  - § the induction of new employees
  - § providing support when people return to work after sickness absence
  - § dealing with people who are failing to cope with their work
  - § dealing with critical incidents
- How do you "reward" employees? Do you show appreciation of good work?
- Think of other ways to develop a team spirit.

### **(ii) Management style**

Management style has a major part to play in reducing or increasing stress. An involving and participative style (where appropriate) will reduce uncertainty and fear. In particular,

- Analyse your own management style and its effect on employees. Seek feedback from your staff on this
- Develop a co-operative group problem solving approach rather than competitive management ("I know what is going on and you don't"), by encouraging teamwork, employee participation in decision making and control over their work

- Learn how to recognise stress in yourself and others and develop personal coping mechanisms

### **(iii) Organisation of Work**

Do you allocate resources appropriately, make best use of your staff and are employees fully using their skills and capabilities?

- Make sure your staff have realistic goals and deadlines, and are aware of them. You can do this with clear job descriptions and regular discussions about their performance.
- Make sure your staff are aware of the likely impact of change on their jobs and workload; consult them and give them adequate information and support for planned changes at work.
- Make sure your staff receive sufficient training and information to carry out their jobs effectively
- Help people manage their time better and try to avoid work underload or overload
- Appraise your staff regularly, giving praise and constructive criticism and identifying mismatches of person and work, as part of the employee's development process
- Review workloads and work programme planning. Do employees regularly take work home, work through their lunch hours, or work long hours?
- Look at informal and formal communication within the team, with other teams and externally to identify causes of stress and take action as appropriate.

### **(iv) Training and development**

Doing a job for which you are not adequately trained can lead to increased and unnecessary stress. When jobs or teams are restructured, training needs must be identified. Identifying and meeting training needs should not be seen as a one-off annual exercise but as a continual process. Appropriate training may include project-work, coaching or attending relevant courses.

Review how you identify and meet training needs within the department.

1. Does the available training meet these needs?
2. Do you have a system for briefing and de-briefing the employee?
3. How do you train and develop employees for promotion or succeeding with new tasks?
4. Consider appropriate training and development activities to help individual employees cope with and reduce their own stress such as:



- induction
- time management
- assertiveness
- team building
- managing meetings

#### **(v) Recruitment and selection**

Be sure to seek occupational health advice if you are concerned about an applicants' tolerance of stress, especially for posts where it is recognised that a higher than normal level of pressure exists. Under the Disability Discrimination Act it may be discriminatory to refuse to select a person who is the best person for the job but who has, or has had a mental health problem or other stress-related illness. Seek advice from Human Resources if this situation arises.

To minimise any problems:

- The full range of tasks and demands of the job should be set out clearly in the job description. These and areas of potential pressure, should be identified and fully discussed at the interview.
- All references requested will ask about candidate's sickness and absence records but take care in the interpretation of the reference. Where there is cause for concern, you must investigate sensitively, as there may be a perfectly legitimate reason for any absence.
- Where appropriate, employment referees should also be asked specific questions about the candidate's ability to handle stressful situations. If you wish to do this, seek advice from Human Resources.
- Where, in the initial screening process, a potential stress difficulty has been identified but the person has still been employed, you should enquire about his or her well-being and progress at regular intervals, on a confidential basis.

#### **(vi) Induction and promotion**

- All new employees must receive induction into their jobs. Starting a new job can be a stressful time and a planned induction programme will eliminate many concerns.
- The Stress Policy should be discussed as part of the induction programme and employees advised where they can turn for help and support.
- Existing employees can be at particular risk of stress when they are promoted or take on new roles. A similar induction activity should be arranged where appropriate.
- 1-2-1 coaching may be considered, especially for those promoted to a senior role. Further advice on this may be obtained from Human Resources.

## **(vii) Absence management**

The corporate procedure on sickness absence management must be followed:

- You must ensure that all employees' absences are recorded accurately.
- As part of regular supervision processes, all absences should be discussed with the employee and underlying reasons identified.
- You should arrange to talk with or to visit any absent employee in accordance with the sickness absence procedure to discuss any underlying causes and to arrange support and assistance if the absence is likely to continue.
- You should not encourage or condone employees using their annual leave for sickness absence. This could mask underlying problems from showing up in absence statistics and delay a problem being identified.

## **(viii) Return to work after absence**

- In consultation with the employee and, if necessary, advice from Human Resources, you should plan an individual's return to work after a stress related illness. For example, a person may be ready to return to some aspects of their job but not others and it may be possible to adjust work responsibilities. A phased return or part-time work may be considered initially, following advice from the Occupational Health Service.
- After the employee returns to work, continue to meet them to discuss their recovery and the factors which may have contributed to the stress. Meetings may be required more frequently than would be normal.
- If the employee is still finding difficulties coping, try to redesign the job temporarily or to transfer the employee to a less stressful post. Ask Human Resources for advice on suitable alternative employment. Any alternative working arrangements should be for a short period in the first instance, after which time the situation should be reviewed in accordance with the Council's sickness absence management arrangements.

## **5 Treat employees suffering from excessive stress fairly**

People differ in how they respond to stress depending on things like their own expectations, past experience, personality vulnerabilities and resources. People also differ in how they cope with stress, so that no single approach helps all situations. Someone may be suffering from stress due to external pressures such as finance, arranging childcare or divorce. These pressures may spill over into work and affect their performance. As a manager you can have little practical effect on these external factors beyond recommending expert advice or counselling as appropriate, but you can watch for signs of undue stress and be supportive.

Stress can lead to a severe medical problem resulting in the inability of the person to undertake the duties of their post. If it is not reasonable or possible to alleviate the cause(s) of stress, the situation should be fully explored with the employee and

where necessary, the Council's sickness absence management arrangements should be used.

## **6 Evaluate the measures taken**

Evaluate the effectiveness of the measures taken to minimise stress in terms of:

- whether the measures met the desired objectives
- the effect on the levels of stress in the service area

These two activities will also enable measures to be improved over time and enable resources to be effectively targeted.

## **A FINAL WORD**

Dealing with staff stress is often a complex matter, needing sensitive handling. We hope that this booklet gives you a framework which will be useful in dealing with individual situations. Please contact Human Resources as early as possible when you encounter issues of staff stress, so that we can help you to plan effective strategies.