

KIRKLEES METROPOLITAN COUNCIL

STRESS

POLICY

CONTENTS:

POLICY STATEMENT

1.0 INTRODUCTION

- 1.1 Definition of what stress is
- 1.2 Why we need to take action
- 1.3 Workplace culture
- 1.4 Aims and objectives

2.0 INFORMATION

- 2.1 Common Causes
- 2.2 Common Effects
- 2.3 Proactive approach to stress
- 2.4 Benefits of taking action

3.0 RESPONSIBILITIES

- 3.1 The Council
- 3.2 Managers
- 3.3 Individuals

4.0 ARRANGEMENTS

- 4.1 Information for employees
- 4.2 Information for managers
- 4.3 Training
- 4.4 Risk assessments
- 4.5 Links with existing Council Policies and Guidance
- 4.6 Support systems
- 4.7 Contact list

KIRKLEES METROPOLITAN COUNCIL

STRESS POLICY

POLICY STATEMENT

Kirklees Metropolitan Council is committed to ensuring the health, safety and welfare of all its employees, and other persons who may be affected by the Councils activities.

As Chief Executive, I recognise the duties imposed upon me, both under current legislation and the Councils Health & Safety Policy to ensure that, so far as is reasonably practicable, a safe and healthy working environment is provided.

Each service has their own Health & Safety Policy outlining employer and employee obligations, the accountability and responsibility of individuals and the arrangements to ensure compliance. This Stress Policy is in addition to your main Policy and sets out the Councils aims and objectives for the management of stress at work, as part of its overall management of occupational health and safety.

Employees with management responsibilities already accept their legal duty to ensure the health, safety and welfare of employees and the information contained in this Policy will assist them in dealing with the issue of stress. By everyone working together to make this Policy effective, the Council seeks to have an organisational culture that is supportive and empowering and that our management style reflects that culture.

The Council has already provided a service for employees and their families with the Care First help line but it is important that we now develop strategies to ensure that stress in the workplace is reduced wherever possible.

Having a good strategy in place will improve morale by demonstrating that we care about individuals and in addition it should also reduce sickness absence and turnover. A happy, healthy workplace will enhance the organisation with improved attendance, motivation and commitment.

I ask all employees, at all levels, to co-operate fully in the measures the Council is taking in implementing this policy, in order to ensure the wellbeing at everyone at work.

TONY ELSON
Chief Executive
April 2003

1.0 INTRODUCTION

1.1 What is stress

There are many definitions of stress; here is just one, “Stress is a mental and physical response by an individual to an inappropriate level of pressure whether real or perceived”. [Raymond & Wilson 1999]. According to the Health and Safety Executive, everyone can in principle, experience stress, as no one is immune. Work-related stress exists where people perceive they cannot cope with what is being asked of them.

Stress and pressure are not the same; stress occurs when an individual cannot cope with the pressures they are under either personally, at work or a combination.

When an individual admits they are feeling the effects of stress, it is difficult to determine exactly what is causing the problem as a certain amount of stress occurs naturally as a result of life events such as bereavement, relationship problems, financial worries etc.

It may be a work-related issue that triggers a stress reaction but there can also be underlying personal pressures that are contributing to the problem. Personal stress may also affect an individual’s ability to work.

Work-related stressors are talked about more frequently as we face more challenges, work at an ever increasing pace and are faced with frequent organisational changes we may not be able to cope with. Work-related stressors are things that may cause stress in the workplace for example physical hazards such as noise, temperature, work environment; psychosocial issues such as bullying, harassment, lack of support; and organisation issues such as excessive hours or workload, poor communications, job insecurity etc.

The effects of the risk (or perceived risk) of stress, can cause symptoms that vary in different individuals and these can be emotional, physical and behavioural. In addition, it has become recognised over recent years that constant exposure to stress can also result in serious mental or physical illness.

1.2 Why do we need to take action?

There are three reasons why we as employers need to take action to reduce work-related stress, moral, economic and legal.

It has been proved that work-related stress can lead to ill health and can seriously affect the quality of life of employees. As we all know, employees are an organisations most valuable asset and therefore, morally we must take steps to do everything possible to control the risk.

The true cost of work-related stress is not known but from figures quoted by the Health and Safety Executive, we know that this is extremely high. As well as the total cost to the economy, work-related stress can have a huge impact on the organisation where resources are scarce and losing even one member of a team because of a stress-related illness can have a dramatic impact on the rest of the workforce.

Current legislation requires us to deal with work-related stress. Whilst the main requirements come under health and safety legislation, there are other pieces of legislation that may also apply. The Health and Safety at Work etc Act 1974 states that employers have a duty to ensure the health, safety and welfare of all employees and this includes work-related stress.

The Management of Health and Safety at Work Regulations 1999 outline the employer's duty to undertake a suitable and sufficient risk assessment of all work activities, including the causes of stress related ill health.

The main provisions of the Regulations, with regard to stress, are that:

- hazards are identified, risk is determined and that controls are applied
- employee capability is considered – i.e. is this the right person for the job
- training is provided that is adequate for the individual
- due regard is taken of vulnerable individuals i.e. young people, pregnant women

1.3 Workplace culture

It is vital that an organisational culture develops that is supportive and empowering. Tackling stress in the workplace will flow from good management styles that will in turn improve our organisation culture.

Managers and employees are required to work together to make this Stress Policy effective. Those with management responsibilities have a duty to ensure the health, safety and welfare of all their employees. Similarly, employees have a duty to be responsible for their own health and safety and that of anyone who could be affected by their activities.

It is important therefore that managers discuss this Policy with employees and that they are encouraged to discuss any issues that affect them and the work they do, before problems become serious.

1.4 Aims and objectives

This Policy should be used in conjunction with guidance provided for both managers and employees. The aim is to ensure that all employees in the Council are aware of possible causes of stress and steps they can take to help themselves. In addition, managers will be aware of their duty to ensure stress is risk assessed, know how to recognise the symptoms of stress, deal sympathetically with employees and put into place adequate interventions to deal with the issues.

The objective is to demonstrate that, as a caring employer the Council will endeavor to eliminate work-related stress wherever possible or reduce the incidence or the effects. To ensure that managers are equipped to undertake this task, training will be provided for all managers, in support of the Policy and Guidance. Running concurrently with this training, there will be stress awareness sessions throughout the Councils premises to ensure employees know about stress and what they and their managers can do about it.

2.0 INFORMATION

2.1 Common causes of stress

Life events that can cause stress could be the death of a partner, member of the family or close friend; illness of self, close family or friend; financial worries; divorce or relationship problems and moving house.

In addition, there are everyday pressures such as parenting, travelling, caring for relatives, living alone etc.

Possible work-related stressors are job insecurity; violence; lone working; conflict with home/life balance; unrealistic deadlines; increased workload; excessive hours; boredom; poor communications; relationship problems; lack of reward, either financial or otherwise; harassment and/or bullying and physical hazards such as noise, heat, ventilation etc.

2.2 Common effects of stress

Stress causes a variety of symptoms and these vary in different individuals. The effects of the risk (or perceived risk) of stress, can be emotional, physical and behavioural. Examples of the effects are panic attacks; lack of concentration; mood changes; insomnia; headaches; skin ailments; increased or reduced appetite; increased smoking or alcohol consumption and relationship problems etc.

It has also been recognised over recent years that constant or prolonged exposure to stress can result in serious mental or physical illness, such as depression, ulcers, diabetes, heart problems, high blood pressure etc.

2.3 A pro-active approach rather than a reactive approach

The Council is adopting a pro-active approach, aiming to prevent work-related stress occurring whenever possible and where this cannot be achieved, to reduce the incidence and the effects. A reactive approach would be to deal with the symptoms as and when they occur, rather than identifying causes and reducing the risk.

Taking a pro-active approach to stress management we need to consider the following levels of intervention, primary, secondary and tertiary.

Primary - through the process of risk assessment, possible causes of stress will be identified and the seriousness of risk determined, to both the individual and the organisation. A risk assessment need not be complex but must be thorough and should include employee involvement to ensure their awareness of work-related stress and input into the control measures.

Secondary - implementing risk assessment recommendations aims to eradicate or reduce stress levels. This level of intervention will include a stress awareness programme aimed at dispelling myths, improving communications and providing suggestions for dealing with stress causation, both for management and individuals.

Interventions must follow the guidance in the Management of Health and Safety at Work Regulations 1999, i.e. avoid risk, combat risk at source, adapt work to individuals, develop procedures, prioritise collective protective measures and give appropriate information and instructions.

Tertiary - unfortunately, there will still be individuals who suffer ill health caused by stress, either because the intervention came too late, or that it didn't go far enough. For this reason, we need to ensure there are suitable and adequate support systems in place to provide contacts where individuals can get advice, counseling if appropriate and, where necessary, to rehabilitate employees back into the workplace after a period of absence.

Counseling can take place at any time, not only when an individual becomes ill.

2.4 Benefits of taking action and the potential costs of not taking action

Risk assessments and the resulting control measures form the basis of a proactive approach to preventing or reducing work-related stress. A good intervention strategy is a sound investment for the Council as this will:

- improve the wellbeing of employees
- promote improved management of working conditions
- reduce the cost of sick pay, replacement cover, recruitment etc.
- provide opportunities for development
- reduce the likelihood of claims
- prevent increased Employers Liability Insurance

Effective people management, development policies and practices, are key drivers of good performance and productivity.

If we do not take action the financial costs could be:

- sick pay, that can often be for a considerable length of time
- replacement or temporary cover by colleagues
- high turnover in staff
- recruitment and training for replacements
- legal fees, court costs and possible compensation following a claim
- and finally, increased insurance premiums

Most of the above will be uninsured costs and very often will be substantial. If more than one employee is absent, the escalating problems of spreading the workload can start to effect colleagues and the situation can become critical.

Having looked at financial costs, consider the human costs, often linked:

- the pain and/or suffering of the individual involved
- long term or even permanent debility
- an inability to work, either in the existing job or not to work ever again
- the knock-on effects on family, friends, colleagues
- the loss of confidence, dignity, status etc.
- in extreme cases, the effects of stress can lead to death.

3.0 RESPONSIBILITIES

3.1 The Council

As the employer, the Council is responsible for ensuring the health, safety and welfare of all its employees as part of its overall management of occupational health and safety, including the management of stress at work. The Executive Management Group will be responsible for ensuring that this Policy is implemented throughout the Council.

3.2 Managers

Employees with management responsibilities already have a legal duty to ensure the health, safety and welfare of employees and the information contained in this Policy will assist them in dealing with the issue of stress. Managers need to discuss this Policy with their employees to ensure that anyone suffering from stress feels confident in discussing this issue with them confidentially, and that action will be taken. This can also be discussed in any one to one meetings, personal development interviews etc.

Managers are responsible for ensuring risk assessments are undertaken, that the nature and volume of work are not likely to cause stress, monitoring sickness absence and where possible, identifying adverse affects of stress on employees and taking appropriate action.

3.3 Employees

Employees are responsible for their own health and safety and that of others that could be affected by their activities. This duty should be extended to incorporate the risk of stress and for them to help minimise work-related stress wherever possible and take an active part in any stress management initiatives. In addition, it is vital that every employee knows that they are supported, not only by this Policy, but also by their own line manager. Two-way communications are important, as one of the most fundamental aspects of this Stress Policy is that individuals speak to their line manager about any concerns at an early stage, thereby eliminating or reducing work-related stress.

If an individuals line manager is part of the problem then they should seek help from their line managers manager or Personnel.

4.0 ARRANGEMENTS

4.1 Information for employees

Information can be found in the accompanying guidance for employees, covering the possible causes and effects of stress and the actions an employee should take if they consider they may be suffering from stress. It also covers the things individuals can do for themselves such as relaxation, exercise, diet, being assertive and practicing time management.

4.2 Information for managers

Information can be found in the accompanying guidance for managers, covering causes and effects, the costs involved, why we need to take action, risk assessments and support for employees.

4.3 Training

In order to ensure that managers have sufficient knowledge to deal with the issue of stress, training will be provided to cover the causes and effects of stress, both personal and work-related, examples of effective coping strategies and most importantly, how to undertake risk assessments.

In addition, stress awareness sessions should be available in all service areas, for employees.

4.4 Risk assessments

Risk assessment has been described as “a process of looking forwards, to anticipate and prevent harm before it occurs”. The risk assessment process identifies hazards, assesses the risks to health and safety, prevents the hazards/risks from occurring or if they cannot be avoided, controlling the risks so they are reduced to a minimum.

Risk assessments undertaken on work activities should include the risk of work-related stress. As stress has a variety of causes, managers need to consider not only the objective risks that can be calculated from statistical evidence but also the subjective risks that come from an individual's perception of a risk. The assessments must take into consideration individuals who may be vulnerable, especially young people, pregnant women etc.

When assessing the risks of work-related stress, it is important to consider the following:

- the assessor to be aware of the basic facts about work-related stress and how to undertake a risk assessment (to be covered in the Stress Awareness training for managers)
- the hazards to be assessed are the ‘stressors’ and work-related stress is the harm that can occur as a result of occupational stressors
- even though individual stress responses to a particular stressor may vary from one individual to another, this does not lessen the potential for harm. If there is a potential for harm, the risk of the harm occurring must be assessed and controlled
- the harm that can result from occupational stressors can affect both physical and mental health, and can involve both health and safety. This can also vary with the level, duration or frequency of exposure

The risks that are associated with violence and lone working, can also be contributory factors when considering work-related stress, and therefore must be included in the assessments.

Risk assessments should be undertaken in consultation with the individuals involved undertaking the activities as they will have valuable information to contribute and this process will reassure them that action is being taken. It will also ensure that any control measures to be implemented are accepted and integrated into existing working practices.

Findings from the risk assessments must be shared with all those concerned and the control measures implemented and monitored to ensure effectiveness. Assessments must be reviewed annually or if there are any changes that could increase the risk and these changes communicated to employees.

There is an example risk assessment and blank risk assessment form included in the Guidance for Managers and if any manager needs assistance, they can contact the Senior Group Safety Advisor on 860 6457.

4.5 Links with existing Council Policies and Guidance

This Stress Prevention Policy links with:

- the existing Health & Safety Policy within each Service
- The Alcohol & Drug abuse Policy
- the Dignity at Work Policy, especially where it covers bullying and harassment, two common causes of work-related stress
- Working arrangements to achieve work-life balance
- the Attendance Improvement – Managers Toolkit
- the Disability Discrimination Act

4.6 Support systems

Support for individuals who demonstrate symptoms of stress or who ask for help, starts with their line manager. Matters should be discussed at an early stage and individuals should not be made to feel that they will be regarded as wimps or discriminated against.

Employees can contact Care First for confidential advice on the telephone or if necessary, face to face. This is a free service provided by the Council.

If necessary, managers can refer employees to Employee Healthcare where they can be seen by a professional counsellor, experienced in dealing with issues of this nature.

Support can also be provided by managers, Personnel and Employee Healthcare. If someone has been absent due to a stress-related illness, keeping communications open at such time can assist with both recovery and rehabilitation back into the workplace. Return to work should be handled with care in order to ensure that individuals return to work as soon as possible and that any previous concerns have been dealt with.

If an individual cannot talk to their manager due to that person being part of the problem they should either speak to their line managers manager or Personnel.

4.7 Useful contacts (more can be found in the Guidance)

Alcoholics Anonymous	(0845)	7697555
British Heart Foundation	(08450)	708070
Care First	(0800)	174319
Carers Line	(0808)	8087777
Employee Healthcare	(01484)	226424
Gamblers Anonymous	(02073)	843040
Gingerbread	(0800)	0184318
National Drugs Help Line	(0800)	776600
Samaritans	(08457)	909090
Unison	(01484)	511826