STRESS IN THE WORKPLACE

The Council recognises and accepts its responsibility as an employer for providing a safe and healthy workplace and working environment for all employees so far as is reasonably practicable. This commitment applies not only to physical hazards but also to any aspects of employment that could, reasonably forseeably, give rise to ill health

The Council accepts that occupational stress is a legitimate health and safety issue and wishes to take all reasonable and practical measures to prevent stress in the workplace.

The Council's Stress Policy provides an integrated framework within which to develop a positive and understanding approach towards managing stress at work. It's aim is to create a working environment wherein all employees feel they can express their concerns regarding their own or colleagues stress without fear of reprisal or censure and that they will be fully supported in dealing with the effects of stress by their line manager.

The following guidance is intended for front-line managers and is based extensively on information contained in the HSE'sINDG281; Help on Work-related Stress, a short guide.

The underlying principle is that plain good management can reduce work-related stress where it is already occurring, and can prevent it in the first place.

A definition of stress

Stress is defined by the Health and Safety Executive as:

'the reaction people have to excessive pressure or other types of demands placed upon them. It arises when they worry they cannot cope.'
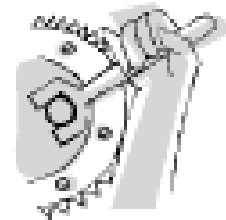
Whilst normal day to day pressures occur within any job, the emphasis is on identifying and containing excessive and sustained job pressures and demands.

Most of us are familiar with the concept of fight or flight syndrome. When under perceived threat the body releases chemicals that will enable an appropriate response – fight or flight. These are subsequently broken down in the activity involved in the response. However, if the perceived threat is not physical and the fight or flight response is not invoked, then the chemicals remain in the body and only breakdown over extended periods of time. It is the repeated production of these chemicals and their slow breakdown that is thought to give rise to the ill effects produced in cases of stress.

It is acknowledged that no job is pressure-free and that some pressure can be a good thing (i.e. challenges in the job). However, an individual's ability to deal with pressure is not limitless and it is important to identify and contain unreasonable and unnecessary workplace demands. Whilst the effects of stress are usually short lived and cause no lasting harm, where pressure is intense or prolonged the effects of stress can be more damaging and lead to longer-term psychological problems and physical ill health.

Not all stress is attributable to work and it is essential managers are aware of the possibility that an employee's domestic situation may be contributing to their stress levels and offer support. Temporary arrangements may be needed to allow staff time to sort out problems or seek help.

III health resulting from stress caused at work has to be treated in the same way as ill health due to physical causes present in the workplace. As such the employer has a legal duty to:

'ensure that health is not placed at risk through excessive and sustained levels of stress arising from the way work is organised; the way people deal with each other at their work or from the day to day demands placed on their workforce, stress should be treated like any other safety hazard.'
HSE

As such the Council will utilise risk assessment to identify work place stressors and implement appropriate safety measures to reduce the risk.

The Health and Safety Executive say that stress is a major contributor to work related illness and sickness absence.

STRESS AND THE LAW

Employers have legal duties to control stress problems. The Health and Safety at Work Act 1974 requires employers to ensure that their workplaces are safe and healthy.

The management of Health and Safety Regulations 1999, place a duty on employers to assess the risks to health of stress and to bring into being measures based on that assessment to reduce stress.

Stress should be treated like any other health hazard. Employees' health should not be placed at risk through excessive and sustained levels of stress arising from the way work is organised or the way in which people deal with each other at work (managerial styles of harassment etc.)

The Council has a legal duty to ensure that its employees aren't made ill by their work and prolonged exposure to stress can make them ill. It also makes sound economic sense. Stressed employees will not function very well; output and its quality will fall, relationships within the workforce and with your customers will suffer, levels of short and long-term absenteeism will rise giving increased levels of stress for those who remain at work. The problem cannot be ignored – it will not right itself or go away.

Deal with it   **before it grows!**

THE CAUSES OF STRESS

Poor workload management can be a cause of stress. This happens where employees feel trapped or unable to control the demands made on them or where there is a high degree of uncertainty about work such as during periods of change where all employed can be subject to conflicting demands. Other potential causes of stress are where there is conflict between individuals, including sexual or racial harassment, bullying or where staff are not properly valued.

Employees who work directly with the public are also at risk as their work involves exposure to human suffering, responsibility for people and the possibility of violence and danger.

Effects of Stress

We are all different but there are a number of signs of stress in individuals that should be noticeable to managers and colleagues. These include: changes in behaviour, such as deteriorating relationships with colleagues, irritability, indecisiveness, absenteeism or reduced performance. Those suffering from stress may also smoke or drink alcohol more than usual or even turn to drugs. They might also complain about their health, for example they might get frequent headaches.

Stress is linked to a number of serious ill-health conditions that may be experienced over the short-term and in severe case may have long-term effects.

Table 1

Behavioural effects may include	Physical effects may include	Long term effect:-
Irritability	Raised heart rate	High blood pressure
Worry about not coping	Increased sweating	Heart disease
Sleeping difficulties	Headaches	Thyroid disorders
Poor concentration	Dizziness	Ulcers
Anxiety	Blurred vision	
Depression	Skin rashes	
Difficulty with dealing with everyday tasks and situations	Lower resistance to infection.	

CONTROLLING STRESS

The Council has developed a Risk Assessment process specifically to identify areas of work where employees may experience stress to a greater degree than would otherwise be the case. The intention is that managers should use the assessment process to identify situations which might reasonably be expected to give rise to stress (hazards) and where possible, remove them. Where this is not possible, they must identify current management protocols (controls) or introduces additional systems (actions) to reduce the likelihood that this will give rise to feelings of stress (risk). This system and the associated paperwork are provided as an appendix to this document.

Obvious signs of stress problems may include high staff turnover and increased sickness absence.

A simple risk assessment / questionnaire is provided at the end of this guide. It will help you to decide whether or not the nature of your team's work, the way it is organised and the individuals concerned may give rise to stress in all or some of the team members.

Use the risk assessment as the basis of a discussion with your staff, listen to their views and ideas for improvements. Take care to explain that feelings of stress are not signs of weakness. However, if staff feel uncomfortable about discussing their feelings in this respect publicly, make sure you offer them a confidential forum, e.g. as part of his or her one to ones or appraisals and respect their desire for confidentiality. Are they disillusioned with their work? Ask them to describe the three best and three worst aspects of their work and do any of these put them under uncomfortable pressure. If they do, put them on the action sheet for further consideration. Don't forget to keep them informed of planned action and involve them wherever possible. Make the risk assessment and action sheet readily available for staff and / or their representatives. Remember to review your findings periodically or whenever significant changes occur.

Table 2

Aspects of work that can give rise to stress	Possible management solutions
Doing the job	
Boring or repetitive work or too little to do.	Change the way that jobs are done by moving people between jobs, giving individuals more responsibility, increasing the scope of the job, increasing the variety of the tasks, giving a group of workers greater responsibility for effective performance of the group.
Too much to do, too little time	Try to give warning of urgent or important jobs, prioritise tasks, and cut out unnecessary work.
Too little / too much training for the job	Make sure individuals are matched to jobs, provide training for those who need more, increase the scope of jobs for those who are over trained.
The working environment	Make sure that other workplace hazards, such as noise, harmful substances and the threat of violence, are properly controlled.
Responsibilities.	
Confusion about how everyone fits in	Make sure that everyone has clearly defined objectives and responsibilities linked to business objectives, and training on how everyone fits in.
Having responsibility for looking after others as part of the job.	Provide training and support for those with the responsibility of caring for others.
Relationships	
Poor relationships with others.	Provide training in interpersonal skills
Bullying, racial or sexual harassment.	Set up effective systems to prevent bullying and harassment (policy, agreed grievance procedure and proper investigation of complaints)
Balancing work and home	
Inflexible work schedules	See if there is scope for flexible working schedules (e.g. Flexible working hours, working from home).

Working conditions.	
Physical danger (e.g. hazardous chemicals, risk of violence) and poor working conditions (e.g. noise and vibration).	Provide adequate control measures.

Management attitudes

Lack of control over work activities.	Provide opportunities for staff to contribute ideas, especially in planning and organising their own jobs.
Lack of communication and consultation.	Introduce clear business objectives, good communication, and close employee involvement particularly during periods of change
Lack of support from managers and co-workers Not being to balance the demands of work and life outside work,	Support and encourage staff even when things go wrong Encourage a healthy work-life balance Remember that everyone's different and try to allocate work so that everybody is working in the way that helps them work best.
Negative culture, e.g. a culture of blame when things go wrong, denial of potential problems.	Be honest with yourself, set a good example, and listen to and respect others.
Lack of support for individuals to develop their skills.	Provide as much support as possible (e.g., leave, financial help) for individuals to develop their skills.
An expectation that people will regularly work excessively long hours or take work home with them.	Avoid encouraging people to work excessively long hours

Remember - General Tips

- ❖ Show that you take stress seriously and be understanding towards people who admit to being under too much pressure.
- ❖ Look for signs of stress in your staff
- ❖ Use any available training budgets and the appraisal process to ensure that staff have appropriate skills training and the resources they need.
- ❖ Look for ways to vary working conditions and introduce flexibility staff to influence the way their jobs are done.
- ❖ Ensure that people are treated fairly and consistently. Bullying and Harassment must not be tolerated
- ❖ Ensure good communication – especially at times of change. Change must be managed effectively and prolonged periods of uncertainty must be avoided; Staff must be dealt with effectively and consulted frequently during periods of change.

Good management should include: -

- ❖ Planned agreed hours or work and the provision of cover allowing people to take time off after working excessive hours;
- ❖ Well defined tasks;
- ❖ Realistic work targets;
- ❖ Fair and consistent treatment of staff. Managers must have an open attitude to what employees say about their jobs and the effect which work may have on their health;
- ❖ There must be flexibility on the part of Managers

If an employee approaches you to complain about being stressed: -

- ❑ Listen to what they have to say,

If the stress is work-related: -

- ❑ Try to address the source(s)
- ❑ Involve the employee in decisions
- ❑ Seek the employee's permission to involve your personnel section, being careful to maintain confidentiality. If necessary, encourage them to seek further help from a doctor or possibly through the Council's counselling scheme.
- ❑ If you are not the employees line manager, encourage the employee to approach his or her line manager and do your best to ensure that they treat the employee with understanding and maintains confidentiality.

Remember-----------

if one employee is suffering from work-related stress, they may just be the tip of the iceberg. Find out if others feel the same, before things go badly wrong.

N.B. The risk assessment forms can be found, with the guidance, in the Health and Safety Handbook – in the Safety Matters folder of Corporate Folders on the Outlook system.