



HR Policy

Stress Policy
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Human Resources

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1. INTRODUCTION

Brent Council is committed to providing excellent, publically accountable services that give real value for money and to improving customer service standards and satisfaction. The council recognises that the health and wellbeing of our staff impacts directly on our ability to provide such services, and the role that the council has in supporting staff affected by or at risk of unwelcome stress.

This policy document outlines the health risks to Brent staff in relation to stress – including workplace stress – and the roles and responsibilities of the council, managers and employees in preventing and managing stress and its effects.

Brent Council recognises its responsibility in controlling the risks which can lead specifically to workplace stress. The council also expects all staff to take responsibility for the management of their own stress. This policy outlines expectations for managers with regards to carrying out suitable risk assessments and attendance at stress management training as well as identifying symptoms of stress so that staff are aware of how to recognise stress in themselves and others.

2. LEGAL AND BUSINESS CONTEXT

Employers have a duty to safeguard the health and safety of their employees under Section 2 of the Health and Safety at Work etc. Act 1974 (HASWA) and the Management of Health and Safety at Work Regulations 1999. Managing stress is an essential element of ensuring that the council's responsibilities for health and safety are met and managers therefore have a duty to ensure that their good practice minimises the occurrence of stress amongst employees.

In addition, the council recognises that taking steps to manage stress can:

- ensure that good management practice supports the avoidance of stress which is detrimental;
- reduce the costs associated with sick pay, replacement cover and recruitment;
- strengthen an employer's position with regard to employer's liability insurance;
- reduce the likelihood of a claim being made for a breach of a duty of care and improve defences against such claims;
- improve the overall morale and commitment of employees;
- improve relationships between members of staff;
- improve relationships with customers.

3. POLICY REMIT AND DEFINITIONS

Not all stress negatively impacts on health and wellbeing, and the council recognises that employees will have individual triggers for negative stress. The Health and Safety Executive's (HSE) formal definition of work related stress is:

The adverse reaction people have to excessive pressures or other types of demand placed on them at work.

Staff are also affected by domestic pressures, which can impact on performance at work or mean that staff are less able to deal with work based pressures.

Managers must therefore be aware of the general symptoms of stress in order to ensure that staff who may be experiencing stress are supported appropriately and service delivery is not affected.

4. HOW TO RECOGNISE STRESS

4.1 The symptoms of stress

The following table highlights some of the emotional, mental and behavioural symptoms managers and staff should be aware of:

Emotional symptoms include:	Mental symptoms include:	Changes in behaviour include:
Depressive feelings, anxiety, tearfulness	Inability to plan, concentrate and control work	Comfort eating (i.e. eating when not hungry) or loss of appetite
Feeling that one can't cope	Indecisive – or making poor decisions	Increase in smoking or drinking
Irritability, anger, frustration, over-sensitivity	Muddled thinking/confusion	Decreased productivity or deterioration in quality of work
Loss of motivation and commitment	Poor memory	Poor relationships with colleagues or clients
Cynicism/loss of sense of humour		Poor time management
Low self esteem/feelings of inadequacy		Nervous habits (fidgeting, impatience, nail biting)
		Disregard for personal appearance
		Lack of confidence – socially withdrawn
		Increased sickness absence

The above list of symptoms is not exhaustive, nor are any of the behaviours in themselves necessarily indicative of an employee experiencing stress. A pattern of uncharacteristic behaviour that continues for some time may indicate an underlying problem. Managers and employees need to be aware of and sensitive to a colleague who consistently shows any of the above changes.

4.2 Stress and other health issues

Stress and its symptoms may be caused by or exacerbate other underlying health problems, including alcohol and substance misuse. The council has a clear policy on alcohol and substance misuse in its Code of Conduct, which should be referred to in conjunction with this policy if appropriate.

4.3 Long term effects of stress

If the signs go undetected, or are not acted upon, the long-term effects of stress will often be serious both for the individual and for the council. Health problems and diseases that have been linked to stress include:

- high blood pressure
- alcoholism
- diabetes
- coronary heart disease
- increased blood pressure
- chronic digestive illness
- ulcers
- asthma
- nervous breakdowns
- chronic depression and anxiety
- skin rashes
- cardiovascular and heart disease

5. ROLES AND RESPONSIBILITIES

Managers, employees, Human Resources and trade unions all have a role to play in ensuring that stress and any related illnesses are identified and managed as effectively as possible.

5.1 Employees

Employees will:

- Take responsibility for their own health and take steps to prevent stress from negatively affecting their wellbeing;
- Raise any issues relating to stress with line managers, union representatives or Human Resources staff;
- Take active steps to access support services early on if they recognise their wellbeing is becoming affected (e.g. their GP or the council's Employee Assistance Programme);
- Encourage colleagues to seek support if they are affected by stress or its effects;
- Use other appropriate procedures if necessary to ensure they receive adequate support.

5.2 Line managers

Managers will:

- Avoid instances where stress negatively influences wellbeing through good management practice;

- Conduct stress risk assessments with staff if they feel it is necessary based on the guidance outlined in 4.0 above, or if a member of staff raises the issue of stress. Otherwise stress should be considered as part of any normal risk assessment process;
- Ensure good communication between management and staff, particularly where there are organisational and procedural changes, and foster an environment in which stress can be discussed openly;
- Ensure staff are fully trained to undertake the tasks associated with their job roles;
- Ensure staff are provided with meaningful developmental opportunities;
- Monitor workloads to ensure that people are not overloaded;
- Monitor working hours and overtime to ensure that staff are not routinely overworking;
- Monitor holidays to ensure that staff are taking their full entitlement;
- Attend training as requested in good management practice and health and safety, including Managing Stress for Managers which is accessed through the Corporate Training Programme;
- Ensure that bullying and harassment is not tolerated;
- Be vigilant and offer additional support – including Occupational Health referrals where appropriate – remembering that stress can originate from situations outside of work;
- Seek guidance from Human Resources if necessary on the above.

5.3 Human Resources

Human Resources will:

- Provide training for all line managers to assist them identify and manage stress related health and performance issues amongst their staff;
- Provide an Occupational Health service which is available to all employees subject to appropriate referrals;
- Ensure staff have access to free and confidential support services;
- Ensure its risk assessment procedure incorporates the assessment of risk factors which could cause stress or exacerbate existing stress issues experienced by staff;
- Monitor data to identify any areas with high incidences of stress and devise interventions or otherwise try to reduce the potential for stress.

5.4 Trade unions

The role of the trade unions is to represent the views and interests of their members on this policy and associated procedures, as a need arises, and to advise and represent individual members as appropriate.

6. MANAGING STRESS

6.1 Risk Assessments

A proactive approach must be taken to manage stress amongst employees. Where appropriate to the job role, new starters – including existing council employees starting in new roles or secondment placements – should conduct a thorough risk assessment with their line manager including the assessment of any workplace stressors.

Additionally, line managers will meet with employees if they have concerns about any employee exhibiting symptoms or signs of stress, or who they think may be at risk of stress. If necessary, the manager and employee in question will then complete a stress risk assessment. Any reasonable controls should be identified and recorded on the risk assessment, along with any other practicable actions. Any control measures or other actions which arise as a result of the risk assessment must be actioned within a reasonable time frame (maximum 1 month).

The risk assessment is a live document and should be revisited and revised as and when deemed necessary by the individual employee.

In addition, all staff should be encouraged to raise any stress-related issues as they arise. If staff raise issues, or managers become aware of symptoms in 4.1 which they feel may be stress related, managers should then follow procedure outlined 6.4.

6.2 Stress triggers in the workplace

When undertaking the risk assessment, managers and employees should consider the following stress triggers which can occur in the workplace¹:

- Demands of e.g. workload, work environment, work patterns;
- Lack of control, e.g. how much say an employee has in how they do their work;
- Lack of adequate training, lack of constructive advice/feedback, lack of general managerial support;
- Bullying, harassment or other negative relationships with colleagues or residents;
- Any conflict or ambiguity around an employee's role;
- Organisational change.

6.3 Stress hotspots

It is also important that to be able to identify areas – or hotspots – where large groups of staff are experiencing or are likely to experience stress. HR officers will monitor incidences of reported stress to identify any areas where high incidences of stress related absences are occurring, or situations which are likely to put staff in stressful situations. Managers will also notify HR if they identify a potential/current stress 'hotspot'. If such an area is identified managers will be expected to work with HR to take appropriate action.

6.4 Managing employees who are experiencing stress

Despite efforts to control the risk of stressors emerging in the workplace, many employees will

¹ Health and Safety Executive; <http://www.hse.gov.uk/stress/standards/index.htm>

experience stress at some point in their careers, much of which will not be negative or detrimental. If managers become aware that a member of their staff is experiencing stress which is having a detrimental impact or notice that one of their staff is persistently exhibiting the symptoms outlined in 4.1 above, they must ensure that adequate support is in place by following the procedure outlined below:

- Hold a meeting with the individual as soon as possible in a suitably private location to discuss the issue;
- If appropriate, refer the individual to the Employee Assistance programme for support;
- If appropriate, recommend the individual sees their GP and/or make a referral to Occupational Health;
- Identify the cause(s) of the individual's stress including any specific work-based factors that may be contributing to an employee's stress and record appropriately using a stress risk assessment²;
- Work with the individual to identify any changes or adjustments that can be made to support the employee, and explore actions the employee can take to manage their own stress and identify coping strategies;
- Monitor any changes made to ensure they are effective, review the plan or risk assessment regularly to ensure that measures identified are addressing the issue. Include the employee in any further conversations about their health;
- Seek advice and guidance from Human Resources as required.

6.5 Employee Assistance Programme

The Employee Assistance Programme (EAP) is a free, confidential and professional support service available to all Brent staff. The EAP, run by Lifestyleaction, offers impartial advice and support – including telephone counselling – to all staff. There is no limit on how frequently employees can use the service. All employees experiencing stress should be encouraged to contact the EAP to discuss what support may be available. More information is available on the intranet.

6.6 Occupational health service

Occupational health services are available to council employees subject to referrals made by managers in conjunction with the Employee Relations Teams. For more information please see the intranet pages on [Occupational Health](#).

6.7 Rehabilitation of an individual following absence through sickness

When an employee returns to work following stress related sickness absence it is important to:

- make sure the individual feels they are welcome back;

² Risk assessment template can be found on the intranet alongside this policy.

- conduct a thorough stress risk assessment making sure the individual is not exposed to the same factors that originally caused the stress; if this is not possible, make reasonable adjustments to reduce stressors;
- make arrangements for the individual to have an early return-to-work interview — at the interview focus on the individual rather than any work problems that may have arisen during the absence;
- communicate regularly with the individual to make sure there are no further difficulties; ensure that regular review meetings are put in place and timescales for actions are agreed.

7. FURTHER INFORMATION

Any clarification in respect of the application of this policy should be sought from Human Resources.