

HEALTH & SAFETY: MANAGEMENT OF STRESS POLICY

INTRODUCTION

Council has legal duties to its employees. It is sensible that those duties be regarded as applying also to Councillors where possible. This policy has been drawn up on that basis.

1. Council has the responsibility to ensure, as far as reasonably practicable, that Council duties do not adversely affect the health, safety and welfare of Councillors or Employees. This includes taking reasonable and practicable steps to reduce stress created by Council activities and in the workplace.
2. Stress is a natural reaction to the pressures which individuals are put under in life; its function is to trigger physiological reactions to challenging situations.
3. At work, short term stress can offer some advantages to some people. However, prolonged exposure to raised levels of stress carries certain risks, including:
 - a. **Physiological Effects.** E.g. raised heart rate, high blood pressure, increased sweating, headaches, dizziness, blurred vision, aching neck and shoulders, skin rashes, lowered resistance to infection or illness.
 - b. **Behavioural Effects.** E.g. increased anxiety, irritability, increased alcohol/cigarette consumption, drug abuse, inability to sleep, poor concentration and a heightened emotional state.
4. It follows that the effects of stress usually abate when the excessive stress is removed.
5. Given the potential for such stress, Council needs to:
 - a. Comply with the provisions of the Health and Safety at Work Act 1974.
 - b. Comply with the national guidance and approved codes of practice on occupational stress.
 - c. Provide confidential support for Councillors and Employees that feel they are suffering from occupational stress as a result of their Council activities.
6. All Councillors should recognise that stress is detrimental to both individual welfare and Council's efficiency. Steps are to be taken to reduce stress to the lowest practicable levels and to prevent recurrence.
7. Stress has the potential to damage the health of individuals, to undermine efficiency and to expose the Council to civil litigation. All reasonable steps should therefore be taken to avoid excessive levels of stress, and, where it does occur, to remove the causative factors.
8. Stress is a difficult subject because it is invariably steeped in emotion; attitudes to it are often biased and mean different things to different people. It can be extremely destructive to the individual with genuine stress issues.
9. The Aim of this policy is to outline the measures needed to allow all members and employees to cope effectively with pressure, to reduce levels of stress that may be created by Council activities.



10. An appropriate definition of stress is: *The adverse reaction people have to excessive pressure or other types of demand placed upon them and which results in a deleterious effect on health and capacity that may reduce performance.*

11. Pressure can be physical or psychological and, in itself, is not a problem. It only becomes a problem when the individual views or experiences the pressure (consciously or subconsciously) as unreasonable or beyond their capabilities; it is the individual's perception - the meaning they attribute to their experiences - that produces stress. Pressure is a physical or physiological challenge to an individual that causes a change in either internal function or external action.

12. Pressure itself should not be seen as a normal aspect of daily life. It can be good, adding challenge and excitement to life and stimulus to succeed. Pressure is only a problem if it is excessive, not properly managed and leads to regular or prolonged periods of stress. Problems are the potential reduction in performance that accompanies stress, and, a particular concern, the development of stress-related illness.

13. Short term stress itself is usually no great problem. It is a normal part of daily life. Individuals will recover from short-term stress and will be unlikely to suffer from any chronic health effects. While they are experiencing the feeling of stress, their performance will be degraded to some extent, but this too will usually be overcome unless they make a serious error of judgement.

14. One reason for stress assuming a key importance to management today is the realisation that is linked to health and safety, and therefore not only affects the health of those involved, but can be subject to legal action.

15. Excessive or uncontrolled stress is bad for the individual, and for business. Good stress management is good leadership; it is integral to man-management of staff and colleagues by all Councillors.

16. Good management of pressure at work has a profoundly positive effect on output in both the short and long terms. All Councillors need to understand the principles of good stress management and apply them to get the best out of those for whom they are responsible.

CONTEXT

17. Employers owe a 'Duty of Care' to their employees and can be sued for psychiatric injuries caused by the pressures of work that was reasonably foreseeable. The Health & Safety at Work Act 1974 is the foundation to the legal provisions governing Stress at work. Additionally, Health & Safety at Work Regulations 1999 require an employer to assess the risk to employees' health and safety.

18. Stress management is, therefore, the responsibility of all Councillors, who have a responsibility to ensure adequate provision for health & safety of the employees under their control and this includes the management of stress. They also have a similar responsibility to their colleagues under the Code of Conduct.

ASSESSING AND MANAGING THE RISKS

19. Pressure is a hazard that may pose a risk. The management of pressure is no different to the management of other health & safety issues. The process should include a hazard survey with significant findings recorded on a Risk Assessment, which will require monitoring and reviewing (annually or on significant changes). A Risk Assessment is attached to this policy.



20. Once Councillors understand the sources of pressure, and their effects, they must also be able to identify individual exposure to these. As well as stress arising from the pressure of senior positions, stress levels from any cause rise lower down the workforce structure.
21. Councillors need to understand and quantify pressures that can present highly damaging levels of pressure purely through poor management.
22. Vulnerability has two aspects. Firstly, individuals are always susceptible in some areas; no one, despite appearances, is immune to stress. Secondly, pressure may be cumulative, and it is important to be able to take a holistic view.
23. Councillors must therefore be able to identify those who are vulnerable because they are already under significant pressure from elsewhere, particularly if sources of pressure are occupationally driven. They must acknowledge that vulnerability does not equate to weakness as everyone has both strengths and weaknesses.
24. Having identified the signs of stress, Councillors must then identify the cause. This can only be done with a combination of personal discussion with the individual concerned and discussion with others (e.g. the Personnel Group). There will almost certainly be a combination of pressures and, unless all are identified, the key cause may be missed.
25. Pressure that can be reduced can then be addressed. If necessary a period of rest or leave may be required. Alternatively, for the individual who is insufficiently challenged, a change of task with an interesting project may provide the answer.
26. The solution is unlikely to be immediate or complete. Follow-up and additional management input is essential to ensure the process is successful. A flow chart is attached at Annex A which will be useful to Councillors.
27. It may not be practicable to prevent work-related stress at source. Council must in these circumstances seek to mitigate the remaining stress so far as is reasonably practicable and to provide support.
28. Where Councillors feels that an individual has suffered a significant stress-related disorder, or might in the future develop such a disorder, that individual should be encouraged to seek specialist help from whatever sources are locally available. Compulsion should not be used, nor should any stigma be attached to such a referral. Individuals also have a responsibility to seek assistance, particularly when support has been offered.

AUDIT

29. Audit is an essential part of the management system. Unless Councillors can see the benefits of managing pressure, they will be reluctant to commit additional time and resources to the policy. A balance will have to be struck and Councillors will need to assess the point at which managing pressure is no longer cost effective.
30. The audit should be an in-depth review of the sources of pressure and the systems in place to manage pressure. This is a valued approach to all health & safety management systems.

SUMMARY



31. Councillors are to make employees aware and encourage those who feel that they may be suffering with stress to talk confidentially to them in the first instance.

32. When Council is made aware of high or unplanned stress levels it should review local working practices and the division of work. After this review, it must attempt to reduce stress to the lowest practicable level in order to prevent recurrence.

33. All Employees who believe they are suffering from the symptoms of stress as a result of Council activities are strongly encouraged to talk with their Line Manager or Personnel Group in the first instance. In doing so, it may be possible to manage specific pressures once identified. If an individual decides to suffer in silence then the situation will inevitably escalate and at worse result in a stress related illness.

34. Alternatively, an individual may wish to seek support and advice from an agency that provides occupational stress support.

This policy includes the following documents:

- Stress Management Flowchart
- Risk Assessment for Employees
- Guide to best practice for Councillors

This Policy was approved by Council on 6/11/2019 (minute ref: 2019.11.06.10.d.i) following the recommendation of the Personnel Working Group.

Simon Bower

Clerk

