



3.13 MANAGING STRESS AT WORK

Guidance and Procedures

These arrangements set out the Council's aims and objectives for the management of health and safety in relation to stress at work.

The Council, as an employer, places a high value on maintaining a healthy workforce and ensuring a safe working environment for all of its employees. The Council also recognises that this duty of care extends to mental health as well as physical health at work.

Mental health problems have many causes, including stresses in the workplace and in the life of employees away from work. A controllable level of pressure can in some cases lead to improved motivation, job satisfaction and performance, but In contrast, excessive pressure can become harmful and result in stress.

The Council is committed to identifying sources of stress in the workplace and taking action to reduce harmful stress and secure the health of the workforce.

Definition of stress

The Health and Safety Executive defines stress at work as follows:

"Stress is the reaction people have to excessive pressures or other types of demand placed upon them, and arises when an individual believes they are unable to cope".

Every job brings its own pressures and demands, these are an unavoidable part of working life. Some pressure can be a good thing, keeping staff motivated and providing a sense of achievement and job satisfaction. However, people's ability to deal with pressure is not limitless. Excessive workplace pressure can cause stress, which may be harmful.

The legal position

There is no specific legislation on controlling stress at work, but broad health and safety law applies.

Under the Health and Safety at Work etc Act 1974 employers have a duty to ensure, so far as is reasonably practicable, the health, safety and welfare at work of all their employees.

Under the Management of Health and Safety at Work Regulations 1999 employers have a duty to assess and control significant health and safety risks to which their employees are exposed to at work.

Ill health resulting from stress caused at work has to be treated in the same way as ill health due to physical causes in the workplace. This means that employers do have a legal duty to take reasonable care to ensure that the health of any employee is not put at risk through excessive and sustained levels of stress arising from the way work is organised, or from the day-to-day demands placed on an individual.

Stress and feeling unable to cope can become a disability in severe cases, if there is a long-term affect. Where this is the case, an individual's condition may satisfy the definition of disability within the Equality Act 2010 and the Council will be obliged to make reasonable adjustments.

Aims and objectives

The aims and objectives of the Council's arrangements on managing stress at work are to:

- Increase general awareness of stress and methods to prevent and combat harmful, excessive work place stress through training initiatives for all employees;
- Take action to combat and prevent workplace stressors;
Assist employees manage stress in others and themselves;
- Manage problems that do occur and provide a confidential counselling service and support mechanism;
- Manage the return to work of those who have had stress related problems;
- Monitor and evaluate stress indicators.

Early Detection of Stress (Risk Management Process)

Anyone responsible for managing employees has an important role to play in identifying potential symptoms of stress and should discuss workload and other stress related factors in PDP sessions.

Managers and supervisors must monitor employees work performance so that stress related issues can be resolved (e.g. by reviewing the person's duties). Managing risk is an important management responsibility and the benefits of early detection should not be underestimated. To assist Managers in identifying and managing stress within their respective areas of operation, comprehensive guidance is available in the Personnel Manual and is also appended to this document (Appendix H).

Stress Prevention

The Council recognises that the most effective way of tackling harmful, excessive work place stress is to prevent it at source as part of a coherent overall prevention policy, covering a range of issues. This includes a continuous review of employment policies, improving communication systems, redesigning jobs and encouraging decision making and autonomy.

Early recognition of problems and encouragement of self-reporting before stress becomes harmful is important.

Precise prevention strategies will vary according to prevailing stressors. The Council will monitor and assess priorities through induction, PDP, exit information, stress related sickness, employee turnover rates, grievances, complaints, statistics from the counselling service and reviews of employee opinion.

A key factor in prevention is the development of a supportive organisational climate where stress is not perceived as a sign of weakness or incompetence. In order to create a supportive organisational climate, the Council will work to remove the stigma frequently attached to those adversely affected by stress and maximise the support available to employees. Senior managers and others in a supervisory position have a crucial role in this respect.

There will be demonstrable commitment to the issue of stress and mental health at work from Senior Management. This will require a dismantling of cultural norms, which inherently promote stress. One example would be norms that impact on a healthy work life balance i.e. encourage employees to work excessively long hours and feel guilty about leaving on time.

The traditional approach towards work related stress has been to focus on treating the symptom rather than the cause. The Council will aim to change unhealthy cultures with the promotion of a culture, which is both healthy and supportive and will include:

- Council's endorsement of these arrangements and a regular review of the arrangements by the Corporate Human Resources Service;
- Inform employees of sources of support and advice within the organisation;
- Establish a risk management process by extending and improving the inter-personal skills of supervisors and managers so they convey a supportive attitude and are able to recognise the signs of stress and can more comfortably handle employee problems;
- To develop mechanisms to advise and support individuals when the Council is embarking on major organisational change, during which either job changes or potential redundancies are a possibility;
- The continuation of employee development and training that already exists including various courses covering inter-personal skills and stress management workshops with the aim of developing individual stress management skills and the ability to monitor and manage stress levels in themselves and their colleagues;

- Through health screening/health promotion programmes the Council will support further initiatives that directly promote positive health behaviours in the workplace e.g. the encouragement to use health and fitness strategies, smoking cessation programmes, advice on lifestyle management, advice about alcohol consumption.

Management of Harmful Stress

Where the above preventive mechanisms fail, stress related conditions should be recognised as soon as possible. Facilities will be available for discussion, advice and appropriate referral as necessary.

Most people who develop stress related conditions make a full recovery, often without interruption to working lives. If time off has been required, it can be far more costly to the organisation to retire a person early on medical grounds, re-recruit and train a successor than to spend time easing a person back to work.

The Council's mechanisms for support are:

- Counselling and Welfare Support -The Council will provide welfare information and confidential support via it's Human Resources Service. Confidential and professional counselling services for any employees experiencing problems in their workplace can be sought via the Occupational Health Unit.
- Facilitating a return to work when employees are absent from work as a result of stress, the return to work itself is likely to be a 'stressful' experience. Employees are encouraged to discuss their return to work with their immediate supervisor or manager. A manageable programme of work will be worked out with the individual and the manager. If a referral to Occupational Health has not already been made, this would be an appropriate time to enable advice to be given on reasonable measures to be taken to avoid a recurrence of stress.

Individual Action and Unacceptable Stress

Any employee who feels that they are at risk of unacceptable stress should follow the advice given below:

- It is important not to feel stressed to a point where it becomes intolerable, by taking action early, it is possible to minimise the harmful effects of stress;
- It is important to speak (or if easier, to write) to your immediate supervisor or manager as soon as possible, they may be unaware of the stress you feel you are under and may be able to make changes, to alleviate the situation;
- Make an appointment through your Manager with the Occupational Health Nurse/ Adviser or contact the Counselling Service directly;
- Seek the advice and support of your Union;
- If the informal approach above does not work for you, then you may wish to take advice about the Council's Grievance Procedure if the cause of your stress is work based.

Monitoring and Evaluation

The measurement of levels of stress is complex. There are no simple measures, which can be used as direct indicators of levels of stress. However, it is important that the Council is committed to monitoring potential indicators of stress so that both potential problems and variability in stress between different departments and occupations can be identified. South Tyneside Council Human Resources Service will support Corporate Groups and undertake such monitoring and information will be reported to Elected Members, the Corporate Group Team, Senior Managers and Trade Union Representatives at appropriate forums.