

WARWICKSHIRE COUNTY COUNCIL

Stress Management Policy

Introduction

The Health and Safety Executive (HSE) define stress as:

“ the adverse reaction people have to excessive pressures or other types of demand placed upon them”

Prolonged or intense stress can lead to mental and physical ill health, such as depression, back pain and heart disease. There is an important distinction between the beneficial effects of reasonable pressure/ challenge and work related stress.

Stress within the workplace can lead to: an increased sickness absence, reduced staff morale, reduced staff performance and staff seeking alternative employment. There are therefore strong ethical, legal and economic reasons for managing the issue of stress within the organisation.

Within Warwickshire County Council, staff can be exposed to high levels of stress as part of their job, sometimes also involving the risk of violence (both as verbal abuse and physical). The Personal Safety Policy aims to manage and reduce violent incidents at work (see corporate document library). Warwickshire County Council is therefore committed to the management of stress within the workplace, with the aim of prevention and risk management.

This policy applies to everyone working within the organisation as there is a legal ‘duty of care’ to all members of staff. This legal obligation will be addressed by identifying workplace stressors and conducting risk assessments to reduce or control the risks from stress.

The Legal Perspective

Employers Responsibilities

Warwickshire County Council will seek to comply with:

- Its legal obligation to ensure the health, safety and welfare of all their employees, so far as is reasonably practicable. This applies to both the mental and physical well-being of employees, in addition to the provision of safe equipment, working environments, methods of work, information, instruction and training.
- Its legal obligation to identify and assess risks to employees’ health and safety and take appropriate preventative or protective measures to remove or reduce them.

Employees Responsibilities

Warwickshire County Council will seek to ensure that its employees:

- Exercise their duty to take reasonable care of their own health and safety and that of other persons who may be affected by their acts or omissions at work and that they co-operate with the department, through their line manager, in these matters.
- Take reasonable steps and request support if required when aware that they are experiencing stress.
- Work with managers and/ or professional staff to identify personal causes of stress.

Policy Statement:

Warwickshire County Council is committed to:

- *Placing a high value on maintaining a healthy and safe working environment for all its employees and it recognises its duty of care extends to mental health as well as physical health at work.*
- *Providing a supportive working environment that maintains and promotes the health and well being of all its employees.*
- *Implementing a stress management policy for all employees throughout the organisation. This includes improving the organisational environment through effective and sensitive management; enabling individuals to cope successfully with the demands and pressures of work and providing support for employees whose health and well being are effected by stress.*

Policy Aims:

- To enable staff to feel valued and vital to the success and delivery of effective services.
- To make staff aware of the risk factors for stress and be able to recognise indicators/ symptoms for stress in themselves and their colleagues.
- To identify risk factors for stress within the organisation and take appropriate action to eliminate or control them.
- To make staff aware of the procedures for reporting stress risk factors/ symptoms in themselves or colleagues to their supervisor and to feel able to do so without fear of being judged/ stigmatised.
- To encourage reasonable action to be taken by management in response to stress risk factors being highlighted and to provide appropriate support to staff.

- To acknowledge that some of the work undertaken by staff as part of their role will, unavoidably, be of a stressful nature. The aim will be to minimise and manage the risks in such cases, and provide appropriate support for staff.
- To recognise and accept that pressures arising from an individual's personal life are at times likely to impact on their ability to cope with pressure and perform effectively at work. To provide appropriate support to staff at such times.
- To treat staff with dignity and respect and address unwelcome or discriminatory behaviour such as bullying, sexual or racial harassment.

In order to achieve this we will:

- Ensure that all managers can identify workplace stressors and conduct risk assessments to eliminate stress or control the risks. These risk assessments will be reviewed regularly. See appendix 1 for further information on this and issues identified below.
- Ensure that managers are aware that they need to record sickness absences, manage and monitor individual situations. In this way members of staff experiencing stress can be offered support at an early stage.
- Ensure that managers are aware of the need to provide appropriate support for members of staff returning to work after long term sickness absence.
- Ensure that managers inform staff of the need to keep them informed about how they are coping with work on an ongoing basis so that signs of stress can be identified at an early stage and risk factors managed.
- Ensure that managers inform the departmental health and safety officer/co-ordinator of all violent incidents in order to monitor trends/ patterns to help identify risk factors.
- Ensure that the Occupational Health team keep records of all staff referrals with the aim of monitoring trends and patterns to identify risk factors. Records will maintain confidentiality and anonymity.
- Provide stress awareness training for staff within available resources in order that they may fulfil their duty of care in being able to identify the risk factors of stress in themselves and colleagues, and hence be able to take action. This is not intended to represent a solution in itself for managing stress. Further information about the causes, symptoms, and some practical ideas for managing stress can be found in the appendix.
- Ensure that managers provide every member of staff with induction according to the departmental standard.

- Ensure that managers provide every member of staff with supervision which meets with the departmental standards and procedures.
- Ensure that management provide effective communication to ensure staff are clear about their part in the organisation, department and team.
- Ensure managers provide staff with other training and development according to identified and agreed need.
- Ensure managers offer additional services (both in-house and externally) for members of staff experiencing distress or difficulties which may impact upon their work. This may include: confidential advice, support, counselling, occupational health and mediation according to need and within available resources.
- Work jointly with the Trade Unions to implement this policy.

Review and Monitoring

The implementation of this policy will be monitored on an ongoing basis and reviewed annually by the Health and Staff Support Service.

Bibliography

HSE press release, 25th June 2001, HSE Publishes Guidance to help Stress-Busting Managers Tackle Britain's £3.75 Billion Stress Bill

HSE factsheet, 1 November 2000, Work-related stress- Findings of recent research, HSE website

HSE, 2001, Tackling Work related stress- a managers guide to improving and maintaining employee health and well being, , Norwich

Smith J, July 1998, An Employers Guide to Stress at Work Litigation, part one, Stress News vol 10, no 3

Smith J, July 1998, An Employers Guide to Stress at Work Litigation, part two, Stress News, vol 10, no 4

Leicestershire County Council, Dec 1998, Occupational Stress- Guidance for Managers and Individual Employees

Coventry City Council, Sept 2001, Managing Stress Policy

The University of Essex, 1999, Stress Management Policy

Appendix One

THE DYNAMICS OF WORK RELATED STRESS

Sources of Stress

Intrinsic to job

Inherent risk of threats and violence
Type of role i.e. Social Work
Caring roles

Role in Organisation

Lack of clarity
Conflict/ ambiguity

Relationships at work

Bullying/ harassment
Lack of support

Career development

No opportunities
Under use of skills

Organisational Structure/ Culture

Poor communication/ management style
Change

Non work factors

Personal problems
Personality type (individual difference)

Symptoms

Individual

Behaviour

Tobacco, alcohol or drug abuse
violence, bullying or harassment

Psychological

Sleep problems, anxiety disorders
depression, inability to concentrate,
Irritability

family relationship problems, burnout

Health

Back problems, heart problems, peptic
Ulcers, hypertension
depressed immune system, heart
disease

Organisation

Participation

absenteeism, high staff turn over,
Poor time keeping, disciplinarians,
bullying, aggressive communication,
isolation.

Performance

Reduced output, accidents, poor
Decision making, errors, apathy

Costs

Increased compensation/ health claims
Referrals to health services

Further Reading:

Managing Workplace Stress, Susan Cartwright and Cary L. Cooper, Sage, 1997

Appendix Two

Some Solutions for Managing Stress in the Workplace

Advice for Individual Employees

- Recognise that 'pressure' can be a positive thing in some circumstances. Being under 'pressure' can improve performance and give satisfaction when challenging objectives are achieved. Training can help you to recognise the difference between the 'good' and 'bad' types of stress and achieve the right balance in your life. Work-related stress is experienced when the demands of the work environment exceed ability to cope with (or control) them. When demand and pressures become too much, they lead to stress.
- Attend a Stress Awareness course to learn about identifying your own personal stress symptoms, learn coping techniques and develop a personal stress management plan. You may feel that you would benefit from some individual stress management advice/ support. Contact Occupational Health team on 01926 418176 for further information. See further information on symptoms of stress in appendix four.
- If you have any concerns about your health then seek support by consulting your GP and/ or the Occupational Health team.
- Use the supervision process to communicate any concerns you have about stress risk factors in your job, or your current ability to cope with your current levels of stress. As an employee you have a legal responsibility to highlight any risk factors to health that you are aware of so that appropriate action can be taken to control and manage the risk.
- Sometimes it may not be possible to change things at work due to the inherent nature of the job. In such circumstances you may be able to learn and practice coping skills to improve your stress levels. If you have any concerns then discuss the matter with your supervisor who will be able to offer you appropriate support.

Advice for Managers

- Include stress as a regular item on the agenda for the supervision process and encourage open communication about the subject. Lead by example without stigmatising the subject or indicating that you see it as a sign of weakness in others.
- Carry out a regular stress risk assessment to identify potential stressors. Contact the Occupational Health team on 01926 418176 for advice. See appendix five for further information.
- Encourage a culture of open communication, support, and mutual respect among staff. Include staff who have the potential to feel more isolated by location or hours worked (i.e. part time or night staff).
- Consider the demands on staff: whether staff are under loaded or overloaded, whether they have the capabilities and capacity for their tasks, the potential effects of physical (e.g. noise, lighting) or psycho-social environment (violence, bullying).
- Consider whether individuals have sufficient say in how their work is carried out. Give staff control over work planning and decisions about how to complete work/solve problems. Allow staff to use their skills to the full by enriching jobs and provide a supportive environment.
- Consider relationships between yourself, individual staff members and between colleagues. Identify any potential bullying or harassment issues and take appropriate action. Develop a culture of trust and openness. Be familiar with disciplinary and grievance procedures and communicate these to staff. Seek advice if necessary from Human Resources or the Occupational Health team.
- Try to minimise the stressful effects of any change happening in the work place. Keep staff informed about what is going on and try to include them as much as possible in influencing the change. Clear communication is important before, during and after change.
- Consider whether staff have clearly defined roles and responsibilities. Avoid any role conflict (conflicting demands) or role ambiguity (lack of clarity).
- Support staff as much as possible by giving encouragement and feedback, even when things go wrong. Involve staff and value diversity.
- Encourage workplace health promotion activities along with a healthy work life balance. Lead by example and examine your own attitudes to work and health.

- Provide support to staff who are on long term sick leave, offering them support from the Occupational Health Service if appropriate. Help and advice in this area can be found in Managing People (under 'Managing Sickness Absence') and by attending the Human Resources Toolkit programme offered by the Corporate Human Resources Development Unit.
- Be supportive of staff who may be experiencing personal stress factors in their life which are unrelated to work, as this may effect their ability to cope in the workplace. Be consistent with the way you approach and manage compassionate leave with individuals. Seek advice from Human Resources if necessary. Support and encourage staff to contact their GP or the Occupational Health Service if you feel they need it. However, allow individuals autonomy in making the choice to seek support. Staff are entitled to confidentiality if they choose to seek support which needs to be respected.
- Attend Stress Awareness training so that you are aware of signs of stress in yourself and staff members. By identifying symptoms at an early stage the situation can be managed more effectively, thus avoiding the long-term health effects. See appendix four for more information.

Appendix Four

Early Signs of Stress

Behavioural

- Loss of interest in work
- Reduced concentration
- Difficulty in making decisions
- Decline in work performance
- Short temper
- Failure to delegate
- Resentment of advice/ constructive criticism
- Conflict with colleagues
- Heavier smoking and or/ drinking

Physical and emotional

- Loss of appetite
- Sleeplessness
- Constant tiredness
- Headache, indigestion, backache, trembling and sweating
- Depression
- Irritability, anger
- Low self esteem
- Apathy
- Anxiety

Long Term Effects

Behavioural

- Inefficiency and incompetence at work
- Frequent absence from work
- Addiction- alcoholism, drug dependency
- An inability to maintain personal relationships at home/ work
- Marital and family breakdown
- Social isolation

Physical and Emotional

- Lowering of resistance to illness
- Infection
- Mental breakdown ulcers
- Allergies
- Skin diseases
- Hypertension
- Heart disease
- Cancer

Appendix Five

Carrying Out a Stress Risk Assessment

Risk assessment for work related stress involves the same basic principles and process for other workplace hazards. Staff should be directly involved in the process and asked what is causing them stress, which groups are suffering and what could be done to help. Examples of ways of doing this include:

- 1) Qualitative methods: informal talks to staff; performance appraisal interview; focus groups and via the managing attendance process (i.e. return to work interview).
- 2) Quantitative methods: via sickness/ absence data; work output; staff turnover; staff questionnaire/ survey.

It is best to collect data from several sources rather than relying on only one method of assessment. Questionnaires alone for example are often not sufficient.

The steps of risk assessment can be summarised as:

- Identify the hazards
- Decide who might be harmed and how
- Evaluate the risk by:
 - Identifying what action is already being taken*
 - Deciding whether this is enough, and*
 - If it is not, deciding what more should be done*
- Recording the findings
- Reviewing the assessment at appropriate intervals and checking the impact of measures taken

Recommended Reading:

Tackling Work related Stress, a managers guide to improving and maintaining employee health and well-being, Health and Safety executive

Work Related Stress, a short guide, Health and Safety Executive

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