

## STRESS MANAGEMENT GUIDELINES

### Introduction – what is stress?

Watford Borough Council is committed to protecting the health, safety and welfare of all employees and recognises that their well-being is important for the Council's performance and service delivery. The Council therefore has a responsibility for identifying and reducing workplace stressors. This can be delivered through good management policies and guidelines and monitoring them effectively.

The Health and Safety Executive define stress as “the adverse reaction people have to excessive pressure or other types of demand placed upon them.” This makes an important distinction between pressure, which can be a positive state if managed correctly, and stress which can be detrimental to health.

Primarily these guidelines are concerned with stress arising from the work environment but it recognises that the employee's personal life may also lead to stress. In cases of work related stress, where the Council is aware of work-related stress, it has a responsibility to support and help the employee, where possible. In relation to personal stressors, line managers are requested to behave sympathetically within the organizational constraints, and to offer referral to the Occupational Health Advisor or the use of the Employee Assistance Programme, where appropriate.

These guidelines apply to all our employees within the Council. We will provide the necessary resources and information to give our managers support on how to deal with causes of stress at work and to implement these guidelines.

### Aims

The guidelines aim to help managers and employees identify, assess and manage possible causes of work-related stress. We hope to provide a workplace for our employees that promote good health and well-being, and we will manage ill health caused by stress in the following ways:

1. Making clear the roles and responsibilities of all our employees, managers and the Occupational Health Advisor in relation to workplace stressors.
2. Ensure managers carry out risk assessments to reduce risk of stress-related absence
3. Giving all our managers appropriate training, including how to respond to employees who may be suffering from ill-health and/or anxiety resulting from stress. Early detection and problem-solving prior to employees becoming ill with stress is advocated.
4. Reducing the risk of stress by promoting good communication through team briefings, sound operational processes, and by managing change sensitively.
5. Making employees more aware of how to detect stress and its causes and how to manage it, by using campaigns to promote health and provide health-education programmes (e.g. lunch and learn sessions, an information pamphlet designed to assist employees in identifying symptoms and giving advice on where to go for assistance – appendix 3).

6. Providing support and confidential welfare services through the Employee Assistance Programme.
7. Managing cases where employees are on sick leave due to stress in line with our Sickness Policy.

## Roles and Responsibilities for managing stress

### **Corporate Management Board**

The CMB will periodically review these guidelines after consulting trade unions, risk assessments and the Corporate Health and Safety Committee's recommendations.

Members of the CMB will ensure that:

- all managers participate in appropriate training, (e.g in stress identification and management, and redundancy handling or emotional intelligence training as needed)
- managers carry out risk assessments in each service area
- there are effective strategies for good communication between all staff
- employees have appropriate opportunity for consultation
- managers are encouraged to celebrate success and excellent work
- where stress seems to be affecting several members of staff in a particular section, the causes are investigated and an action plan developed to address the issue
- staff and trade unions are consulted about changes which may involve restructurings
- Corporate Directors inspect health and safety in the workplace every year as part of which workplace stressors need to be considered
- Corporate Directors track and monitor progress on managing stress related absence on an annual basis as part of their Service Plan.

### **Human Resources**

Human Resources will

- give advice to managers on the stress management guidelines
- assist in monitoring the effectiveness of measures to address stress by analysing sickness absence statistics on a quarterly basis
- provide training in stress awareness for managers and employees
- encourage referrals to the Occupational Health Advisor or counselling services as appropriate
- Health and Safety Advisor should oversee and provide guidance in the risk assessment and monitoring process in relation to stress factors in the environment.

### **Occupational Health Advisor**

The Advisor will:

- give managers and employees specialist advice on managing stress
- refer employees who complain of severe stress to a confidential counselling service, the NHS or specialist agencies as appropriate
- support individual employees who have been off sick with stress and advise them and their manager on a planned return to work
- monitor patterns in stress-related ill health

- ensure managers and Human Resources are aware of cases where there are concerns
- monitor and review the effectiveness of measures to reduce stress
- promote health and health-education programmes to make employees more aware of stress

### **Manager**

Managers will give reasonable support to employees who show signs of stress, taking advice from the Occupational Health Advisor and Human Resources. This support may include:

- discussing with the employee the reasons for their stress and problem-solving around these reasons jointly with the employee
- monitoring workloads to ensure employees are not regularly overloaded by holding regular one-to-ones with employees to discuss how work is progressing, any problems with unrealistic deadlines or excessive workloads, giving guidance on prioritisation of work as needed and having discussions with employees about any issues they want to discuss which are concerning them
- monitoring working hours to ensure employees are not overworking
- sharing tasks differently
- re-arranging administrative support
- tackling harassment and bullying
- arranging for training to be provided
- referring the employee to the Occupational Health Advisor for confidential counselling and/or recommendations

Managers will:

- Consider stressors of job role as part of the selection process and the use of appropriate recruitment tools (e.g. personality profiling, tests of mental robustness, etc) to assess the ability of candidates coping with these stressors
- Conduct a suitable and sufficient risk assessment and implement recommendations of risk assessments within their jurisdiction.
- Ensure good face to face communication between management and employees, particularly where there are organisational and procedural changes.
- Attend training as requested in promoting good management practice in health and safety, stress identification and management, and on handling challenging issues with employees sensitively
- Be vigilant to ensure bullying and harassment is identified to ensure such behaviour is not tolerated.
- Manage poor performance and attendance effectively in order to prevent unnecessary pressures on colleagues.
- Conduct a return to work meeting and complete the return to work support form personally (appendix 1).

## **Employees**

Individual employees have a clear responsibility to themselves and others to minimise excessive pressures and demands by acting reasonably and reporting any concerns regarding stress to their line manager.

- If an employee is concerned that they are suffering from stress (either at work and/or because of their personal life) they should speak to their line manager without delay and be prepared to explain the sources of their stress so that the situation can be addressed. As an employer, we can only help alleviate stress if we know what is causing it. If an employee does not feel they can talk to their line manager, they can approach HR.
- The employee and their line manager/HR should keep a record of their discussion, including any medical evidence.
- Having spoken to the line manager/HR, if the employee still believes the matter has not been addressed, they should write to their next level of management. If the issues involve a particular line manager, the employee can miss this level of management and approach the next level directly.
- Employees may also refer to the Human Resources Department or their Trade Union Representative for advice. A referral may be obtained to see the Occupational Health Advisor through the line manager.
- The employee should accept opportunities for counselling when recommended.
- The employee can also attend relevant training courses on stress management.
- Employees have the option of taking advantage of the staff discount offered at the Council's Leisure Centres since physical exercise can act as a destressor.
- If an employee is concerned that a colleague may be suffering from stress, they should encourage their colleague to report it to their line manager without delay. Any such report will as far as is reasonably practicable, be treated in confidence.
- Employees are expected to be adaptable and flexible in the face of change within the public sector as their ability to cope will have a direct effect on their stress levels. A participative approach during consultation and discussions will enable us to resolve issues in any change management programme and in particular would be valuable in assisting the employee to cope with stress.

### **Risk Assessment for Stress**

Managers need to regularly consult their employees about their work, preferably through regular one-to-one meetings and be alert to any signs of stress; if an employee says they are suffering from stress, or a report from their doctor mentions stress, a risk assessment should be conducted by the manager as follows:

1. The manager should arrange to meet the employee within 5 working days to discuss whether there are any work-related matters that need to be addressed. If there are any, the manager should advise the employee to complete our questionnaire (appendix 2), a copy of which is also available from the Health and Safety Advisor or the Occupational Health Advisor.
2. The manager and the employee should then meet again within an agreed timescale to discuss the completed questionnaire and the manager will confirm

what action (if any) needs to be taken arising from it. Ideally this meeting should take place no more than 5 days from receipt of the questionnaire. The manager should have sought advice from the Health and Safety Advisor or the Human Resources Officer regarding appropriate action.

3. The manager should arrange for the action points to be implemented and then monitor the effectiveness on an on-going basis and if problems persist seek further advice from Human Resources.