

ANGUS COUNCIL

PERSONNEL AND PROPERTY SERVICES COMMITTEE - 1 FEBRUARY 2000

REPORT BY DIRECTOR OF PERSONNEL

MANAGEMENT OF STRESS AT WORK

ABSTRACT

This report incorporates a suggested Management of Stress at Work Policy for adoption by Angus Council.

1 RECOMMENDATION

The Committee:

- i approve the terms of this report
- ii adopt the attached Management of Stress at Work Policy
- iii authorise the Director of Personnel to submit a further report on Employee Counselling and Employee Assistance Programmes.

2 INTRODUCTION

- 2.1 Workplace stress is a growing concern for employers. An Industrial Society study in 1995 indicated that 83% of managers believed stress to be a problem in their organisation with 60% reporting an increase in stress during the preceding three years. It is estimated that 30-35% of absenteeism is due to stress related illnesses, anxiety or depression with the Institute of Management estimating that this costs the public and private sectors around £7 billion per annum.
- 2.2 In addition to direct absenteeism, it is generally accepted that employees suffering from stress will underperform at work. This manifests itself through such factors as poor working relationships, poor timekeeping, loss of motivation and commitment, deterioration in quality and quantity of work, poor decision making and loss of productivity.
- 2.3 There appears to be a growing trend of employees pursuing their employer for damages resulting from the effect of work related stress. A Social Worker with Northumberland County Council accepted £175,000 compensation after two breakdowns caused by stress at work. An officer in a home for the elderly accepted £66,000 compensation from South Lanarkshire Council for stress related illness as a result of workplace bullying. Such cases help clarify the obligations placed on employers in relation to work related stress under the Health and Safety at Work Act 1974 and the Management of Health and Safety at Work Regulations 1992 and illustrate just how expensive stress issues can be for employers if not adequately addressed.

- 2.4 Although a fact of life, a lot of stress is manageable and/or avoidable and a Court hearing a compensation claim for stress is likely to look at measures an organisation takes to manage and alleviate stress and, in particular, whether it has a clear stress policy.
- 2.5 Defence in a compensation claim should not however be the prime reason why a stress policy should be introduced. As indicated a lot of stress is manageable and/or avoidable and a policy which promotes such a culture can help overcome the negative organisational outcomes of stress such as poor working relationships and poor timekeeping as outlined in paragraph 2.2 above.
- 2.6 Angus Council does not have a stress policy. Neither Angus District nor Tayside Regional Councils had a policy although work on developing a programme of stress management was underway in Tayside prior to Local Government reorganisation. The Personnel Department's Action Plan for 1999/00 contains a commitment to develop a stress policy for Angus Council.

3 DEVELOPING A POLICY

- 3.1 In developing a policy it is important to recognise that:
- all jobs contain the potential for stress - there is no such thing as a pressure free job - every job brings its own set of tasks, responsibilities and day to day problems, and the pressures and demands these place on employees are an unavoidable part of working life
 - some pressure can be a good thing - all employees need some pressure and challenges at work to maintain motivation and to feel a sense of achievement and job satisfaction
 - every individual's response to pressure is unique - what is healthy and stimulating to one may be stressful to another
 - an individual's ability to deal with pressure is not limitless - when the limits are passed stress becomes negative and harmful to the individual and the organisation
- 3.2 Accordingly while eliminating pressure from work is neither possible nor desirable a stress policy should be designed to manage stress and control, and if possible eliminate, harmful and unnecessary levels of stress - recognising that individuals react in different ways.
- 3.3 It is also important to recognise that not all stress stems directly from the workplace. Employees can come to work against a background of bereavement, family illness, financial, marital or other personal problems. Employees themselves have a responsibility and a duty to themselves to minimise stress and such factors are outwith the responsibilities of the employer. However such factors all play their part in creating the whole person and as stress is a cumulative force, these factors can be responsible for, or contribute to, stress effects displayed within the workplace.

- 3.4 On this basis it is considered that it is appropriate for a stress policy to include a means by which employees can receive counselling on these and other non-related work matters which can lead to stress.
- 3.5 The policy does not incorporate a proposal to undertake a specific stress audit of employees. Stress exists within organisations and Angus Council is no different in this respect. Acknowledging that stress exists within the organisation the policy has been designed to concentrate on how managers at departmental, section and team level can identify the indicators and causes of stress and manage, alleviate and perhaps eliminate unnecessary levels of stress.

Having said that, general stress audits contain questions similar to those included in the Employee Attitude Survey undertaken in 1998. The results of this have been analysed at both a corporate and departmental level and it is proposed that these results act as a basis for comparison with any future survey, which it is recommended contain similar type questions.

4 THE PROPOSED POLICY

- 4.1 The proposed policy as attached is presented in a different format from other personnel policies with which the Committee is familiar.
- 4.2 The terminology *policy* tends to imply that there is one single way of preventing harmful levels of work related stress. Just as there is no one reason for stress however, there is similarly no one solution. Accordingly, whilst this terminology may be commonly used, within the context of stress, a management strategy or programme for assessing, monitoring, managing and alleviating stress would perhaps be a more appropriate description.
- 4.3 The policy commences with a general policy statement, followed by a definition of stress, indicators of stress, potential causes of stress and highlights the factors which can help manage, alleviate and perhaps eliminate stress. The policy also makes reference to related policies and procedures already adopted by the Council all of which play a major role in the strategy to manage and reduce harmful levels of stress.
- 4.4 As can be seen from the policy, it is perhaps reassuring to note that many of the factors for managing stress are 'good management practices' which are already promoted within Angus Council.
- 4.5 As indicated at the end of the Policy there are limitations in our in-house ability to offer counselling to employees and reference is made to referral to an appropriate agency. This aspect of the policy requires further development and it is proposed to submit a more detailed report on this specific issue. This reports will also consider the feasibility of a full counselling service being provided by one external provider in what is commonly referred to as an Employee Assistance Programme.

5 IMPLEMENTATION

5.1 The Health and Safety Executive has indicated that the introduction of statements of intent or a policy are not enough to satisfy an organisation's legal obligation. Similarly statements of intent or a policy in themselves do not promote the health and wellbeing of an organisations employees. Accordingly it is essential to have an implementation (action) plan associated with the introduction of this policy. Such a plan is outlined below:

- advise employees of policy
- encourage employees to attend personal development courses organised by the Personnel Department and in particular the personal stress awareness course.
- ensure line managers are aware of their role in the management of stress and their responsibility for identifying early signs of stress
- train line managers in the management of stress
- prepare a report on the provision of counselling facilities for employees

The cost of implementing this plan would be contained within the Council's budget.

6 CONSULTATION

6.1 The Chief Officers' Management Team and the trade unions have been consulted on and are supportive of the attached Policy on Management of Stress at Work.

7 CONCLUSION

7.1 One of the Council's Key Themes is to value its employees. Employees of the Council are our most important asset. A healthy, happy workforce co-operates with management led change and progress and can initiate new and productive working practices and procedures. On the other hand the cost of not dealing with stress can result in increased absence and related costs; lost productivity; apathy and low motivation; increased ill health and retiral costs; and, financially cumulative damages awarded by courts.

Janice Torbet
Director of Personnel
December 1999
HMR

No background papers, as defined by Section 50D of the Local Government (Scotland) Act 1973 (other than any containing confidential or exempt information), were relied on to any material extent in preparing this report.

MANAGEMENT OF STRESS AT WORK POLICY

STATEMENT OF INTENT

The Council:

- wish to attain an environment and culture in which stress can be acknowledged, discussed and dealt with openly
- do not wish to subject any employee to unnecessary, excessive or undue stress
- recognise that good management and regard for employees is an effective way of reducing the effects of stress
- is committed to identifying stressful work situations and to managing them in a way which will ideally eliminate the harmful effects of stress or at least reduce them to manageable levels

OBJECTIVES

The objectives of the Policy are to:

- raise awareness amongst management and employees of the causes, indicators and effects of work related stress
- raise awareness amongst management and employees of the control measures available to manage stress
- encourage and promote the adoption of good management practice
- offer support and guidance to employees suffering from the effects of stress

DEFINITION

The Health and Safety Executive define stress as "the reaction that people have to excessive pressure or other demands placed upon them. It arises when they worry that they cannot cope".

For the employee stress can result in *physical effects* such as raised heart rate, increased sweating, headache, dizziness, blurred vision, aching necks and shoulders, skin rashes and a lowering of resistance to infection or, *behavioural effects* such as increased anxiety and irritability, a tendency to drink more alcohol and smoke more, difficulty sleeping, poor concentration and an inability to deal calmly with everyday tasks and situations.

While these effects are usually short lived as the pressure or demand recedes, in some cases and particularly where pressures are intense and continue for some time the effects of stress can be sustained leading to long term psychological or physical ill health problems.

CAUSES OF HARMFUL LEVELS OF STRESS

There is no simple way of predicting what will cause harmful levels of stress. There is a wide variety of causes which may have a bearing. Some of these may often not feature in particular jobs. Acknowledging that stress impacts differently on individuals it is unwise to generalise too much, however the Council acknowledges that it is generally recognised that harmful levels of stress are most likely to occur where:

- there is poor *job design*

- employees are unclear of their *role in the organisation* eg confused by conflicting demands made on them and uncertainty about their work, objectives
- *work organisation* is poor
- over demanding *work schedules*
- there is poor *performance management* eg employees are unaware of how they are performing; lack of understanding and leadership from managers
- the *management culture* is not supportive eg employees subject to harassment or bullying; treated with contempt or indifference
- there are poor *recruitment* practices and a lack of adequate *training* eg employees not able to cope with demands of job

It is also recognised that certain kinds of jobs can also, by their nature, place heavy emotional demands on employees which, if not properly addressed, can result in harmful levels of stress. The physical conditions of the working environment in some jobs can also be stressful.

The Council also recognise that stress at work can derive from personal factors such as family illness or bereavement, health, financial, marital, or other personal problems.

INDICATORS OF STRESS

There are various means by which managers can identify a potential stress issue both for individuals and for groups of employees:

- *sickness absence* - increase in overall absence, increase in frequent short periods of absence
- *work performance* - reduction in productivity, increase in errors, poor decision making, deterioration in planning and control of work
- *relationships* - tension and conflict between colleagues, poor relationships with clients, increase in industrial relations or disciplinary problems
- *employee attitude/behaviour* - loss of motivation and commitment, working increasingly long hours, poor timekeeping, increase in employee turnover

At a corporate level it is recognised that employee surveys can also gauge the extent of work related stress. Questions about hours of work, workload, responsibility, and whether employees know who to go to for help are relevant in this respect.

MANAGEMENT OF STRESS

The following aspects of management are critical to identifying, removing and minimising potential sources of stress at work.

Job Design

- clearly defining tasks and responsibilities of the job
- wherever possible ensuring a degree of variety in jobs and minimising repetitive and unstimulating aspect
- promoting good management practice

Employee's Role in Organisation

- clearly defining objectives and responsibilities of the employee and explaining how they fit into the wider context

- clarifying role of employee in relation to workgroup and department
- ensuring employees have current and accurate job outline
- clearly defining range of authority
- encouraging employees to make decisions within agreed parameters
- providing opportunities for employees to contribute ideas, in particular in the planning and organisation of their jobs
- ensuring proper use of skills
- being realistic when assessing career opportunities

Work Organisation/Working Hours/Workload

- being realistic with demands on employees by prioritising workload, delegating responsibility and ensuring targets and objectives are reasonable
- respecting others time and seeking to negotiate efficient and effective solution to workload problems
- promoting effective time management by monitoring working hours, overtime and use of holiday entitlements
- being flexible and co-operative with requests to change work arrangements

Performance Management

In the context of undertaking employee development and review meetings:

- ensuring objectives are achievable
- defining performance standards
- regularly reviewing performance and giving feedback
- providing support to employees
- responding promptly to problems
- providing positive feedback
- discussing poor performance promptly, honestly and constructively

Management Culture

- promoting culture of respect, trust and openness
- encouraging two way communication
- listening to and giving appropriate consideration to comments and representations from employees
- involving staff as far as possible in decisions that affect them
- considering and seeking to manage impact of change on employees
- involving and informing employees appropriately during change
- not tolerating bullying and harassment
- being fair and consistent when dealing with employees
- engendering team spirit

Recruitment and Training

- following good recruitment practice matching job to abilities and training of the individual
- providing a comprehensive planned induction programme
- ensuring employees are adequately trained to undertake duties and responsibilities
- providing training in dealing with potential health and safety aspects of the job
- encouraging employees to develop stress and time management techniques

- encouraging employees to attend the Council's personal stress awareness course
- providing adequate information to new recruits in job, department, organisation, personnel policies, procedures etc
- making time available to meet new recruits when they start and at frequent intervals during the induction period

The following range of Council policies and procedures complement the above and provide support and assistance to managers in the management of stress.

Adoption Leave	Leave of Absence
Alcohol and Drugs Policy	Maternity Leave
Disciplinary Procedure	Maternity Support Leave
Equal Opportunities in Employment Policy	No Smoking Policy
Flexible Public Holidays	Performance Appraisal and Development
Grievance Procedure	Performance at Work Guidelines
Harassment at Work Policy	Recruitment Policy
Health and Safety Policy	Sickness Absence Guidelines
HIV and AIDS Employment Policy	Training and Development Policy
Job Sharing	Violence at Work

The Council recognises that central support is necessary to both managers and employees in the management of stress. Accordingly the Council, through the Personnel Department, will:

- encourage managers to attend stress management training courses
- give guidance to managers on the stress policy
- give assistance to managers and individuals on particular issues and where appropriate refer individuals to other agencies
- give guidance on matters related to this policy or on any of the policies and procedures outlined above
- provide advice and guidance to managers on good general management practices
- raise awareness on how behaviour/management style can impact on team members
- support and encourage healthy lifestyle activities

The Council also recognises its own limitations in offering counselling to employees and where appropriate will encourage/make referral to an appropriate agency.