

Stress management policy and guidelines

1. Introduction

- 1.1 Dacorum Borough Council (the Council) is committed to maintaining a healthy and safe working environment for all its employees and its elected members. The Council recognises that work related stress is a health and safety issue and, as an employer, it has a duty under the Health and Safety at Work Act to protect the mental and physical health of its employees whilst they are at work and to ensure that employees' health is not placed at risk through excessive and sustained levels of stress. This can arise from the way work is organised, the way people deal with others, or from the day-to-day demands placed on them.
- 1.2 The Council aims to create a culture where it is recognised that stress is an organisational issue and not just a problem for individuals. It is important that an environment is created where individuals are encouraged to seek support and assistance when they feel they are experiencing excessive levels of stress.
- 1.3 Stress is different from pressure. Being under pressure often improves performance. But when demands and pressures become excessive, they lead to stress which can be detrimental to health. There may be a number of contributory factors relating to both in and out of work.
- 1.4 The Health and Safety Executive (HSE) defines stress as:

'The adverse reaction people have to excessive pressure or other types of demand placed on them'. Anyone can suffer from stress – no job should be considered stress-free.
- 1.5 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 relation to personal stressors, line managers are requested to act sympathetically within the organisational constraints and to offer referral to Occupational Health or the use of the Employee Assistance Programme (EAP), where appropriate.

2. Aims and Objectives

- 2.1 The delivery of public services brings with it both challenges and achievements. All employees are individuals and the impact of delivering services will be different for everyone in that, what is stressful for some, will not be for others.
- 2.2 It provides a framework within which stress can be managed and where practicable, pressures are reduced. There is an assumption when applying the policy that the right employee is in the right job.

2.3 The guidelines aim to:

- Make clear the roles and responsibilities of all employees, managers and Occupational Health in relation to workplace stressors.
- Generally increase awareness of the causes of excessive and harmful work related stress and the measures that can be taken to reduce it.
- Identify workplace stressors, risk assess them where appropriate and set out any relevant means of minimising them.
- Assist managers in recognising the causes of work-related stress in their areas of responsibility and the measures they may need.
- Manage mental health issues in the workplace by referring employees to the Occupational Health service and encourage them to use the Employee Assistance Programme (EAP) and other relevant agencies.
- Work with employees affected by stress or mental health issues to manage an efficient return to work in line with the Absence Management Policy and Procedure.
- Promote consultation with Trade Union Safety Representatives on proposed actions relating to the prevention of work-related stress.
- Promote wellbeing and encourage employees to achieve a successful work life balance.

3. Factors that may cause stress

3.1 Environment

High levels of noise, poor lighting or heating, poor ventilation, overcrowding, badly designed or inadequate furniture or equipment, poor maintenance of work environment.

3.2 Design of Job

Repetitive or boring tasks, too little or too much work, too little or too much supervision, lack of clear direction or effective decision making, unexpected and/or unexplained change, insufficient training or resources to cope with change, uneven distribution of work, new technology.

3.3 Relationships

Harassment – sexual or racial, bullying, a breakdown in relationships with managers and/or colleagues, excessive competition from colleagues, lack of communication, lack of support, personality conflict, discrimination, poor customer relations, actual or threatened violence, for example, from the public, customer/client complaints, unresolved grievances.

3.4 Conditions of Employment

Long hours, inadequate breaks, job insecurity, failure to take holiday entitlement.

3.5 External

There may also be pressures faced by individuals outside the work environment that may cause stress symptoms that are demonstrated whilst at work. For example financial concerns, problems with health or with family, bereavement, discrimination or harassment.

4 Recognising the Signs of Stress

4.1 Managers are likely to recognise signs of stress in an individual such as:

- Persistent or recurrent mood swings
- Physical ill health
- Behavioural changes
- Working excessive hours
- Poor Performance
- Increase in absence
- Inability to relax
- Lack of interaction

4.2 Stress can also be observed in teams and demonstrated by overreaction to relatively minor problems.

4.3 In addition to the above signs, stress can be exhibited by disputes between colleagues, poor time keeping; excessive drinking; smoking, loss of appetite or over-eating; disturbed sleep patterns; reduced work performance; cynical and negative attitudes; withdrawal from social contact; confusion and increased forgetfulness.

4.4 It is important to bear in mind that not everyone reacts in the same way to stress or its causes.

5. Stress Prevention and Management

5.1 The HSE has emphasised that work related stress should be managed on the same lines as other occupational health risks. The Council will try to eliminate or control organisational stress in order to prevent or reduce job stress for individual employees.

5.2 The Council has adopted a stress questionnaire designed by the (HSE), which staff can use to identify stressors and share with the manager.

5.3 The following warning signs may indicate to managers that an employee may be suffering from stress.

Work Performance

- Reduction in output
- Poor decision making
- Deterioration in planning and control of work

Behaviour

- Loss of motivation and commitment
- Erratic/poor time keeping
- Working longer hours with little return

Sickness/Absence

- Increase in overall sickness absence, especially short frequent absences

6 What is the Council doing about this?

6.1 The Council is taking reasonable steps to remove, prevent and reduce risks by:

- Creating a supportive organisational climate, ensuring that employees have access to an Employee Assistance Programme
- Encouraging employees to make a difference. This may be achieved through the Appraisal Scheme, secondment opportunities, participating in project work etc. This will provide the possibility of increased achievement, advancement and growth.
- Having a stress questionnaire to identify stressors in staff.
- Reducing conflict and clarifying organisational roles so that associated causes of stress can be eliminated or reduced.
- On occasions arranging social gatherings for the team to help to improve morale.

6.2 Effective management can reduce stress and there are various options at the Council that can help managers deal with this. Examples include:

- Ensuring the Council recruits and retains the right people in the right jobs with the correct competencies.
- Training in Stress Management, Time Management, Recognising and Dealing with Change.
- Policies and Procedures, in relation to: Violence and Aggression at Work, Absence Management, Dealing with Bullying and Harassment, Alcohol, drug and substance abuse.
- Counselling services via the EAP.

- Support from Management.

6.3 When dealing with stress, it is very important to:

- Ascertain the causes of the stress and if it is work-related.
- Recognise that there may be factors causing the stress that are beyond the Council's control.

6.4 Managers should consider steps that may be appropriate in order to alleviate stress:

- Flexible working hours
- Being aware of employees' training and development needs.
- Reviewing job description and responsibilities
- Agreeing work/programme/action plans with employee, linked to service plan
- Relocating noisy equipment from main work areas
- Using positive feedback and ensuring any criticism given is constructive.
- Investigating and addressing employee relations issues
- Creating a supportive organisational climate, that ensures employees have access to an Employee Assistance Programme and that they are comfortable to use it.
- Maintaining good communication at all time; this should be face to face whenever possible
- Managing poor performance and attendance effectively in order to prevent unnecessary pressure on colleagues.
- The possibility of temporary redeployment as an alternative to the employee taking sick leave.

It must be noted that the consideration of options must take into account both:

- The needs of the individual employee, and
- The Council's operational and business needs

7 Employee's Responsibilities

- 7.1 Employees have a responsibility to themselves and others to minimise or eradicate stress in the workplace, including taking steps to minimise their own stress, and change behaviour if they are causing stress to others.
- 7.2 It is important for employees to acknowledge that their manager has the right to request them to carry out reasonable tasks. There may be occasions when employees do not agree with their managers' views. In these circumstances, it is vital for all concerned to make every effort to resolve these types of issues by talking them through.
- 7.3 Employees should make every effort to attend work unless they are too unwell to do so as sometimes the absence of one person results in increased pressure being placed on colleagues.
- 7.4 Employees should not hesitate to seek support at any time. If they feel they cannot approach their line manager about their stress related problem, they should approach Human Resources directly for support. Employees can also approach the Occupational Health Department on **01992 588750** for advice.
- 7.5 When answering the question "Do I suffer from Stress?" the signs to look for include:
- Irritability
 - Suppressed anger
 - Fatigue
 - Lack of sleep
 - Inability to cope
 - Poor decision making

7.5 What can I do about it?

- **Take regular exercise:** It is recommended that adults have a minimum of 30 minutes moderate exercise five times per week.
- **Have a well-balanced, nutritious diet:** Change to diet can have beneficial results and can also reduce the effects of stress. Try to eat a balanced diet, always have breakfast and eat regularly. Research has shown that people who skip breakfast are often more tired at the end of the day.

Eat complex carbohydrates such as wholemeal pasta and bread rather than refined carbohydrates such as biscuits, crisps etc. Avoid too many saturated fats and eat plenty of fresh fruit and vegetables. Reduce caffeine consumption, avoid drinking alcohol for the wrong reasons and most importantly drink water to ensure you are not dehydrated.

- **Learn to relax:** Ensure you relax when you are not working. Having a period of relaxation every day is vital to give yourself time to switch off and recharge. Relaxation is different things to different people, but this should be something you enjoy that fits in your life. This could be reading, watching TV, listening to music, meditation etc. - -
- **Learn to know the warning signs:** The body gives us warning signs that we may be suffering from stress. This is similar to the warning light showing in a car when there is a problem. Sometimes when we are busy, we will ignore our own warning signs. These signs might include: feeling anxious, tearful, or withdrawn.
- **Control your worries:** Keep your worries in perspective. Can you remember what you were worrying about this time last year? Many of us waste a lot of time and create a lot of stress, worrying about unimportant things in the 'what if' cycle. Instead of worry about the 'what if', ask yourself what is the probability of that thing actually happening and consider whether you are wasting energy on something that may not happen. -
- **Using your time well:** if you miss deadlines and are late to meetings, it may be due to the fact that you have too many things to do, but it could also be a result of how you manage your time. Time can be wasted in a variety of ways e.g. getting side tracked by unimportant things, staying on the phone after all important aspects have been discussed, having trouble delegating, trying to do too many tasks at once, and going to meetings where there is no formal agenda. -.
- **Learn to say "No":** Many of us say 'yes' when we really want to say 'no'. It is not always easy to say what we really mean and poor communication is frequently a cause of stress at work. Learning to be assertive (not aggressive) can assist with this problem. Assertiveness is about the ability to negotiate, having the confidence to say what you want to, but remembering this must not be at the expense of others. -asp
- **Avoid harmful ways of coping such as drinking, smoking, drugs and over-eating as they only mask the problem.** Please see below for further information:

www.drinkaware.co.uk
www.nhs.co.uk

- **Seek help:** There may be a point in all our lives when we need the help and support of other people. If you ever feel you cannot cope or are unsure of which way to turn, consider talking your problem

over with someone. Your choice of person to confide in is very important.

If the problem is being caused at work, you could discuss with your manager, your HR department, the Employee Assistance Programme or a Union Representative. Close friends and family can be very helpful, but do consider that they may have problems of their own or that they are too close to be objective. The EAP are also there to offer support about home and life issues and your immediate family can also use this service. If you feel that your problem is too intimate that you cannot discuss with any of the above people, you should consider seeking professional help, which would be through your Doctor.

- **Take your holiday entitlement:** It is essential that you have regular breaks from work. This can help with your motivational levels and your performance at work.

8 Counselling

8.1 Many employees need some form of counselling at some time or other. Formal counselling is available from the Employee Assistance Programme. Managers sometimes engage in activity that might be termed as counselling and these include:

- **Recognition and understanding** – recognising the indicators of problems and issues
- **Empowering** – enabling the employee to recognise their own pressures or situations and encouraging them to express them
- **Resourcing** – managing the problem, which will include the decision as to who is best able to help e.g. the manager, HR, Employee Assistance Programme etc.

8.2 Managers should be aware of their own limitations when dealing with particular issues and should consider referring the employee to the EAP or a doctor. The counselling available through EAP is available to both employees and their family members. The service is totally confidential, face-to-face and free to the employee and family members. Employees can contact the EAP through free-phone 0800 243 458 or www.orkplaceoptions.co.uk

9 Training

9.1 The Council believes that employees can do a lot to help themselves and will encourage staff to attend training courses in order to improve their awareness and ability to cope in stressful situations.

- 9.2 There are various courses open to employees and these can be found on the Council's online Training system called DORIS. Alternatively please speak to a member of the Organisational Development and Training team. -

10 Conclusion

Dealing with stress is a continuing process requiring a positive commitment from employees at every level: it is not a one-off process. There is no remedy for pressure, but improvements can be made in almost all work situations with the aid of these guidelines and the associated help available through the Council's training and support arrangements

11 Contact numbers

Employee Assistance Programme: 0800 243 458 (Workplace Options)

Corporate Safety, Health and Care Officer: 01442 228518

Human Resources: 01442 228052

Trade Union, (Unison) 01442 228878 / 228574