

SECTION 2(11)

STRESS AT WORK

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Introduction

Bracknell Forest Council (BFC) has a legal duty to ensure the health, safety and welfare of its employees whilst they are at work. Undue stress can adversely affect employees' health and wellbeing and, as such, it is the Council's responsibility to take reasonably practicable steps to avoid and reduce unnecessary workplace stress.

Stress at Work Policy

The Council's Stress at Work Policy outlines the responsibilities towards its staff and identifies ways of managing stress. The policy is available at: at: <https://doris.bracknell-forest.gov.uk/file/1336/download/Stress%2520at%2520work%2520code%2520of%2520practice.pdf>

Practical Ways to Assess and Tackle Stress at Work

Risk Assessment

Risk assessment is the systematic way to identify factors that can lead to stress at work and prevent it getting out of hand. APPENDIX 1 contains a model risk assessment to help managers evaluate whether enough is being done to manage people well or if more needs to be tried. All managers have a responsibility for ensuring that risk assessments are carried out. This does not mean doing a risk assessment for every single employee or activity, but rather being able to identify:

- the likely causes of high or sustained work pressure on employees
- the likely consequences for individuals or groups
- the most suitable ways of reducing work pressure
- the level and type of support likely to be required
- the most realistic mechanisms for recording and monitoring work pressures

This generic risk assessment guidance is intended to help managers assess whether or not their general management and communication arrangements are likely to lead to staff developing work-related stress.

Before completing a risk assessment, it will be helpful to evaluate whether there is any evidence that staff are suffering from work-related stress. The following sources will provide relevant information:

- sickness absence records
- staff performance planning and review meetings, supervision meetings, one-to-one session or work review meetings
- informal staff discussion meetings
- staff turnover
- exit interviews
- biennial staff surveys (results for each department)

If evidence gained from the above indicates that there may be a problem within your section, you need to carry out a risk assessment and identify what measures need to be introduced to minimise the stress being experienced.

Dealing with an individual's absence or illness associated with stress

In some cases managers may not feel able to deal with an individual case such as where an employee has been diagnosed with a stress-related condition or a condition which could be influenced by work pressures, regardless of primary cause.

Where remaining at work or when planning a return to work, specialised advice needs to be sought on how stress could be minimised for the individual concerned. Guidance can be obtained from Departmental Human Resources sections, Occupational Health and/or the Counselling Service. The need to involve such parties, and to what extent, will vary according to each case. In consultation with the manager and the individual concerned, an evaluation will be undertaken to establish recommendations on safe work practice, any reasonable adjustments that might be needed and/or referral to specialist support. In keeping with other health referrals, the manager will be able to use the advice to determine an appropriate course of action.

Adjustment and rehabilitation are the main objectives in this exercise.

Some Suggested Measures

Interventions such as counselling, stress management training, physical exercise and other "self-help" activities are useful to individuals, but they do not eliminate the source of stress and are therefore unlikely to achieve long-term success. Examples of possible strategies to reduce stress in the workplace are:

- Implementing flexible approaches to work activities, working time, how activities are carried out and when. Allowing staff to prioritise their work activities. Discouraging staff from working long hours.
- Encouraging a participative approach to problem solving, project planning etc.
- Providing sufficient resources to complete tasks, eg: time, materials, personnel, training, information, authority.
- Encouraging efficient open communication between all levels of staff, encouraging regular communication and discussion between supervisors and their groups, encouraging a team approach to work activities.
- Developing a supportive and trusting environment such that staff feel able to make suggestions or take decisions without the fear of recrimination if they are proved to be wrong.
- Planning to cope with staff absences to avoid work overload.
- Requiring comprehensive introductions for new staff such that they fully understand their role, responsibilities, level of authority and sources of support.
- Coping with change - explaining to staff why change is necessary; providing a timetable for change; communicating new developments quickly to avoid rumours; providing opportunities for questions and discussion.

Risk Definitions

In completing any risk assessment, we need to identify what level of risk is posed by the findings of the assessment. Risks will fall into one of the following categories:

- **Low Risk** - Unlikely to cause harm to members of staff. Current methods for controlling risk to health are adequate.
- **Medium Risk** - Some risk to members of staff is likely. Current methods for controlling risk to health are inadequate and need to be improved within an agreed time period.

- **High Risk** - Significant risk to members of staff is likely. Current methods are not adequate for controlling the risk to health and improvements must be made as quickly as possible.

Guidance on completing the risk assessment questionnaire

6 aspects of work have been identified which impact on the likelihood of an employee feeling stressed as a result of work activities. These are:

1. **The demands of the job**, eg: workload, work patterns and the work environment.
2. **The control over work**, eg: the amount of freedom to influence/decide on how to carry out their work, when the work can be done and in what way, etc.
3. **Support available**, eg: from colleagues, line managers, the level of encouragement, sponsorship and resources provided by the organisation.
4. **The quality of relationships**, eg: including the promotion of positive working relationships which avoid conflict and seek to remove unacceptable behaviours, such as bullying, lack of respect.
5. **The level of understanding the employee has regarding their role**, eg: the more confusion and uncertainty there is about the role an employee has, the greater is the likelihood that they will feel stressed.
6. **The involvement which employees have in planning change**, eg: what opportunities employees have to get involved in planning change, commenting on proposals, being communicated with, etc?

The risk assessment questionnaire in APPENDIX 1 has been produced to help managers think through the typical types of questions which will help them decide how likely it is that any group of employees or specific task which is required to be carried out could create unacceptable levels of stress. If the answer to some of the question is yes, then the manager needs to decide how high the level of risk is and what he/she can or needs to do about minimising this.

Appendix 2 gives examples of both existing mechanisms designed to minimise stress and also those which managers might want to consider in order to minimise stress.

How Can I Find Out More?

Further information is available from the Health and Safety Executives website:

<http://www.hse.gov.uk/stress/>

APPENDIX 1

Risk Assessment Action Plan: Work-Related Stress

Job/ Department Assessed	Number of people covered by assessment	Responsible Manager
Assessor	Date of assessment	Signature

Contributing work risk factors	Yes/ No	What measures already exist to recognise or control the risks identified? (see guidance notes for suggestions)	Risk category identified from assessment, ie: high, medium or low risk	What else could be done to minimise risks? (see guidance notes for suggestions)
A. DEMANDS OF THE JOB eg: workload, work patterns, working environment				
• Is there evidence of excessive workload or overwork?				
• Do frequent changes mean that work cannot be planned?				
• Are employees unable to adjust their working patterns?				
• Is there evidence of poor time management?				
• Is there evidence that the employee has insufficient challenge and may be bored?				
• Is there a lack of job-related training?				
• Do employees lack the capability and capacity necessary to carry out required work activities?				
• Is there a poor physical environment in which staff work?				

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B. CONTROL How much say the person has in the way they do their work				
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Are employees unable to structure their own work? 				
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Are employees unable to determine for themselves how they complete their tasks? 				
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Do employees lack the skills necessary to do the job well? 				
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Is there a lack of consultation opportunities in which staff are able to participate in decisions that may affect them? 				
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Is there evidence that employees are not encouraged to develop new skills to help them undertake new pieces of work? 				
C. SUPPORT eg: encouragement, resources provided, line managers and colleagues				
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Is there evidence of a lack of job-related training? 				
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Is there evidence of a lack of resources and time available to employees to enable them to carry out their work activities? 				
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Is there evidence of a lack of use of systems put in place to enable employees to raise individual concerns? 				

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<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Is there evidence that employees do not know what support is available? 				
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Is there evidence that employees do not receive regular feedback? 				
<p>D. RELATIONSHIPS Evidence of positive working relationships</p>				
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Is there evidence of poor communications between staff both up and down the management line and at all levels? 				
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Is there evidence of bullying, sexism, racism within the section or team? 				
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Is there evidence that employees do not share information relevant to their work? 				
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Is there evidence that staff are not positively supported when things go wrong/they make a wrong decision? 				
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Do staff have confidence that, if they report any bullying or harassment in the workplace, their concerns will be treated seriously and acted upon? 				
<p>E. ROLE eg: what understanding exists, and an employee's role</p>				
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Is there uncertainty about roles and responsibilities? 				
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Is there conflict between managerial expectations and role and role demands of employees? 				

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<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Is there evidence that staff are unwilling to raise any role conflict issues? 				
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Is there evidence that employees do not understand the requirements of their job? 				
<p>F. CHANGE How is change managed and communicated?</p>				
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Is there evidence that employees are not provided with timely and accurate updates and/or effective communications during periods of change? 				
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Is there evidence that employees do not have the opportunity to comment and ask questions before, during and after change? 				
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Is there evidence of a lack of information, instruction and training given to staff when asked to change their roles? 				

APPENDIX 2

Ideas for Managers
Possible Mechanisms to Minimise Stress within the Workforce

Likely existing mechanisms within teams which will/should help minimise stress	Possible additional approaches which could be implemented to further reduce stress levels
<p>Demands of the job</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Means of identifying workload and speed of work expected • Monitoring of hours worked • One-to-one meetings/supervision sessions/work review meetings held regularly • Need for job-related training identified through appraisal process • Opportunity for employees to vary tasks in terms of variety/timings, etc • Monitoring of the working environment to identify possible problems, eg: excessive noise, heat, etc • Use of established systems to recognise and deal with potential violence/abusive behaviour towards team members 	<p>Demands of the job</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Regular discussions on workload, work/life balance • Help provided to prioritise tasks/work activities • Opportunity for staff to share good practice with each other • Plans in place to deal with unexpected demands/changes in workload, eg: provision of temporary cover, etc • Opportunity for employees to work in other locations, from home etc as work demands require • Involvement of team in making changes to work environment and layout to overcome potential difficulties • Greater use of team meetings and briefings • Provision of additional support/changes to working practices to minimise violence and abusive behaviour aimed at team members
<p>Control over work</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Provision of opportunities for staff to adopt flexible working arrangements where possible • Clear focus on quality of outcomes expected rather than time spent working on a task • Opportunity for employees to discuss deadlines/work priorities • Opportunity for employees, where feasible, to determine how they carry out work tasks/when they do them etc • Opportunities for employees to be involved in decision-making relating to work which impacts on them • Employees are encouraged to take sufficient breaks from work 	<p>Control over work</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Increase in involvement in planning work on a personal and team level • Opportunities for employees to set own deadlines for work completion • Opportunities for employees to use other skills, which may not be essential for normal job, ie: increase in variety of tasks • Opportunities to access development activities to enhance/build on skills in order to be able to do the job better
<p>Relationships with others</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Establish mechanisms to ensure that employees are aware of the Council's policies on bullying and harassment • Team meetings and other opportunities taken to observe and work on building better working relationships • Identified tensions and conflict between team members and with others external to the team are recognised and support given to reduce these • Existing mechanisms are used to deal with complaints relating to harassment and bullying • Existing mechanisms used to ensure that communications between staff, both up and down the management line, are maintained 	<p>Relationships with others</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Improve own listening and questioning skills to help team members work more effectively together • Provide team building and interpersonal skills training opportunities for team members • Develop mechanisms for learning from mistakes and sharing learning within the team • Employees are provided with support when issues of unacceptable behaviour are raised • Mechanisms to enable employees to express their views to others at all levels both within and external to the section/team are developed and used • Introduce coaching or mentoring as support mechanisms for employees, where relevant

Likely existing mechanisms within teams which will/should help minimise stress	Possible additional approaches which could be implemented to further reduce stress levels
<p>Changes</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Existing communications mechanisms are used to ensure that employees are aware of the need for proposed changes • Employees' views and ideas are sought and taken into account when planning/ implementing changes • Information on changes is provided in a timely and accurate manner • Employees are given sufficient instruction and guidance on changes to their roles and duties required • The redesign of jobs takes into account employee capabilities 	<p>Changes</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • New mechanisms or specific plans put in place to maximise opportunities for employees to learn more about changes, and have an opportunity to comment on these • Employees are re-encouraged to play an active role in planning changes • Employees are encouraged to ask questions and make recommendations relating to planned/proposed changes • The existing and required skills, knowledge and experience of employees is reviewed during and following any changes to determine what learning may be required to maximise performance
<p>Roles and responsibilities</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Job descriptions and person specifications exist for all jobs within the team and employees are aware of their roles & responsibilities within the team • Employees have opportunities to query their aims and objectives and to make sure that they do understand what is expected from them 	<p>Roles and responsibilities</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Job descriptions and person specifications are updated/reviewed regularly to take account of changing tasks and personal circumstances
<p>Support received</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Feedback mechanisms exist and are used to ensure that employees are aware of their performance against expected standards • Employees have opportunities to discuss non work-related pressures and potential stresses • Support mechanisms aimed at helping employees cope with work demands and external pressures are known and their use encouraged, where necessary • Managers allocate sufficient time/resources to enable employees to carry out their work duties • Encourage employees to seek professional advice about their health, eg: GP, Occupational Health or Employee Counselling support 	<p>Support received</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Managers consider what additional support/options are available to help employees deal with excessive work pressures or deal with non-work stresses • Use discussion groups/focus groups to plan changes/actions • Work with team to identify stress "hot spots" or activities and work with the team to plan how to reduce any potential stress • Decide on improvement targets and action plans in consultation with the team/individuals or following receipt of specialist advice • Ensure that issues affecting an individual are addressed, wherever possible