

# The Management of Stress in the Workplace Guidance



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1.0	July 2024	This guidance supersedes all other departmental and Council documents on the same subject	H Williamson – HSW Consultant

# Purpose

Derbyshire County Council recognises that excessive work related stress may affect any of its employees, undertaking any role at anytime, anywhere within the organisation.

Nationally, the incidence of stress related illness at work is increasing and this prompted the Health and Safety Executive (HSE) to publish [six management standards](#) which they have identified as the key areas for focus in relation to work related stress.

The purpose of this guidance is to help managers and employees recognise and manage through early appropriate interventions, the incidences of stress at work.

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## Scope

This document applies to all departments and employees of Derbyshire County Council.

This guidance has been produced as part of the Council's health and safety arrangements. Whilst recognising that some departments/services will have specialist requirements over and above this guidance which necessitate additional specialist arrangements, it sets out the minimum health and safety requirements required across all departments to ensure the Council can implement the stated aims of its Safety Policy and comply with its Statutory Requirements. All managers and employees should therefore make themselves familiar with the requirements of this guidance and ensure they are followed

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# Introduction

The Council has a legal duty under Section 2(1) of the Health and Safety at Work etc Act 1974 to ensure, so far as is reasonably practicable, the health, safety and welfare at work of its employees. This duty includes seeking to protect employees from undue stress at work.

The HSE advised that during 2021/2022, the estimated numbers of workers in the UK suffering with stress, depression and anxiety is around 914,000 with an estimated 17 million working days lost.

Stress, depression, anxiety and mental health remains by far, the biggest primary recorded cause of sickness absence within the Council across all departments. Preventing employees from being absent due to stress or helping them to return to work quickly can benefit both the employee and the Council. For the employee, it can improve their physical and mental wellbeing, and for the Council, it can help to maintain productivity and reduce the cost of absenteeism. Additionally, having a culture that promotes employee health and wellbeing can lead to increased job satisfaction, employee engagement, and employee retention.

Early identification and management of stress is the key to either preventing sickness absence caused by stress, promoting an early return from sickness absence or tackling underperformance.

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# Roles and responsibilities

## **Corporate Management Team (CMT)**

- Will ensure that sufficient resources are provided to ensure compliance with this guidance regarding all types of stress within the workplace.

## **Departmental Senior Management Team (DMT)**

- Will ensure that sufficient resources are provided to ensure compliance with this guidance, tailored to the specific requirements of their department.
- Will regularly review sickness absence data to identify any areas of their department causing concern relating to sickness levels due to stress and ensure this is further investigated

## **Head of Services (HoS)**

- Will ensure suitable and sufficient resources are provided to comply with the requirements of this guidance.
- Will work with their operational managers to identify any areas of concern and ensure suitable and sufficient risk assessments and mitigations are in place.
- Upon request, provide local Union Safety Representatives with all information, including risk assessments, relevant to this guidance.

## **Line Manager**

- Is responsible for ensuring their employees read, understand, and adhere to this guidance and related documents, including risk assessments.
- Regularly check on the wellbeing of their employees during catch ups e.g. 1:1's and ensure early referral to support services where stress is identified or raised
- Undertake any required risk assessments relating to stress on a case by case basis (either for an individual or a work activity)
- Implement suitable measures to control any identified risks.
- Implement any actions identified from risk assessments, etc.



- Raise awareness in relation to stress e.g., via team meetings or one-to-ones, and promote a positive culture to ensure stress and mental health issues are not stigmatised.
- Familiarize themselves with the Wellbeing Action Plan guidance document (see page 13).
- Complete a stress risk assessment for the employee / team (see page 13).
- Identify training requirements across their area of work and ensure that employees complete the required training.
- For those employees unable to access this document electronically, print off a hard copy of this guidance and any relevant hyperlinks.
- Seek additional support where required

### **Employee**

- Ensure good communication with colleagues and their manager.
- Engage in discussion about their performance and act on feedback.
- Raise issues of concern at an early stage and seek constructive solutions.
- Make use of the support and training resources available to them when needed.
- Where relevant complete a Wellbeing Action Plan (see page 13).

### **Health, Safety and Wellbeing Function (HSW)**

- Will provide support, advice and guidance as requested.
- Offer support, advice and guidance to managers carrying out risk assessments.
- Seek assistance from specialist organisations when necessary.
- Will provide advice on medical aspects.
- Monitor the effectiveness of this guidance.



# Arrangements

**Stress** is defined as ‘the adverse reaction a person has to excessive pressure or other types of demands placed upon them’. This makes a distinction between ‘pressure’, which can be a positive state if managed correctly, and ‘stress’ which can be detrimental to health. If this were allowed to continue for some time it could lead to mental and physical ill health.

The word ‘stress’ is used sometimes to refer to an environmental stimulus (stressor) and sometimes as the response to that stimulus (strain). It may also be defined in terms of a relationship between the environment and the person that is appraised as exceeding their ability to cope.

Often the feeling of ‘not coping’ is seen as a weakness that cannot be acknowledged and people ‘soldier on’. Alternatively, stress is sometimes seen as a status symbol that suffering from excessive stress is part of the territory of particular jobs. Both viewpoints are unhealthy. Individuals generally accept reasonable pressures which are, in the main, considered as positive and motivational and these pressures can provide the key to a sense of achievement and job satisfaction. It is only when there is excessive pressure, whether at work or outside (or both), that stress might become harmful. It can then affect performance and undermine the health of the employee. As individuals we will all react differently to different levels of pressure. It is therefore vital that this is recognised and dealt with on this basis.

If an employee or team starts to act differently it can be a sign that stress is becoming an issue. Managers should look out for signs of stress in their teams and employees and think about whether the stress could somehow be linked to the work.

If early action is taken this can reduce the impact of the pressure and make it easier to reduce or remove the causes. If managers are worried that an employee is showing some of these signs, they should encourage the employee to contact the Occupational Health Team, contact the Employee Assistance Programme (EAP) or contact their GP. These signs can however also be symptoms of other conditions. If there is something wrong at work, and this has caused the problem, managers must take action.

It is also important to bear in mind that individuals are affected by things within the home environment that may prove to be stressful for them. Their inability to cope with stressors in the workplace may therefore be influenced by their coping in the home environments.

There are a number of reasons why stress may occur, from encountering everyday difficulties at work that are impossible to change because they are outside our control, to shift work that has no pattern, or to illness either diagnosed or undiagnosed. Last minute changes or demands should be avoided wherever possible.

### **Fatigue**

Fatigue is the temporary inability, or strong disinclination, to respond to a situation because of previous over-activity, be that mental, emotional or physical. Fatigue should be considered as one of the many causes that may lead to strain for an employee. Managers and employees need to recognise that fatigue is just one of many causes of stress. Outcomes of fatigue include general disinclination for effort, sluggish thinking, reduced alertness, and the reduced ability to perform physical and mental tasks. “The adverse reaction people have to excessive pressures or other types of demands placed on them” (HSE, 2001).

Note: Work-related stress is not an illness, but it can contribute to problems with ill health. Reports of fatigue need to be actively managed.

### **Recognising signs of stress**

The effects of prolonged stress, which may be from events in one's personal life; from events in work life or from a combination of these, may be manifested in three areas - physical, emotional, and/or behavioural.

#### **Physical Signs**

- Shoulders, neck and back pain and more general muscle tension, e.g. sufferers sit in one position and clenches muscles
- Cramps, skin rashes
- Palpitations, chest pain

- Breathing difficulties (hyperventilation)
- Headaches
- Fatigue
- Visual disturbance
- Nausea
- Dizziness
- Unexpected weight loss or gain.

### **Changes in Emotional Outlook**

- Intolerance / irritability - less time for people
- Withdrawal from social contact and taking the lead in work projects
- Emotional irritability, e.g. tearful response to minor issues
- Loss of libido (sex drive)
- Sleep disturbance and nightmares - often an early sign of stress is difficulty getting to sleep and early morning waking
- Low self-esteem
- Guilt
- Panic
- Mood swings - not knowing the person's reaction to routine issues
- Worrying inappropriately.

### **Behavioural Changes**

- Smoking - increasing or taking up after successfully stopping
- Alcohol - stopping for drinks on the way home to wind down or drinking to cope
- Nail-biting
- Changes in eating habits, e.g. eating more or not at all, developing food cravings
- Evading deadlines - tends to interact with absenteeism
- Making excuses
- Daydreaming and lack of concentration
- Indecision
- Complaining unreasonably
- Lying / cheating to 'cover up'
- Absenteeism with poor excuses

- Erratic mood changes
- Avoidance of essential action
- Apathy
- Changes in care about personal appearance (cleanliness, clothing etc)

Stress is not confined to job role or status everyone can suffer from stress. One of the key things to look out for is a change in an individual's normal personality and / or behaviour. Maintaining an environment that promotes interesting and rewarding work along with support and training opportunities is a key consideration.

### **Reporting stress**

Employees should inform their line manager promptly of any concerns they may have about their wellbeing and work situation potentially leading to work-related stress. Alternatively, they can you talk to their line manager's manager, another manager, Occupational Health or other advocate. Managers should consider reports of stress seriously and in confidence and should put aside time to fully explore the possible reasons for the employee reporting stress. Alternatively, speaking to a friend or colleague may help identify the root cause. Advice can also be sought from the Council's counselling service, Mental Health First Aiders or the Employee Assistance Programme (EAP), which provides a confidential counselling service (see links at the end of this guidance).

### **Responding to reports of stress**

Managers will investigate the facts of the report.

- What does the person mean by "stress"?
- How is the perceived stress affecting them?
- How long has it been going on?

### **Identifying the Risk Factors:**

- Identify the hazards (the things causing stress).
- Identify the people that might be harmed and how this could occur (those likely to be adversely impacted by stress).
- Evaluate the risk - to enable a 'reasonably practicable' response to the identified risk.
- Record the results.
- Monitor and review regularly - particularly during periods of change and uncertainty.

Discuss and agree with the employee how the issue could be addressed and the type of support that is available. Is the control of the problem within the manager's jurisdiction or ability to influence? If not, seek guidance from a senior manager. Support may be required from other departments such as Human Resources Operations, Occupational Health Team and / or the Employee Assistance Programme (EAP).

All employees may experience periods of pressure at work and short periods of pressure are not necessarily of concern. It is the risk from sustained and / or excessive pressure, without the opportunity to recover, that needs to be assessed and measures put in place to control the risk of adverse effects. All managers should conduct a work-related stress risk assessment covering their areas of responsibility and review this regularly or when changes to the team, working environment or workloads have occurred.

Recognising and understanding the causes of work-related stress will assist managers and employees examine ways in which 'stressors' should be prioritised and tackled.

For individuals, a Wellbeing Action Plan (WAP) and a stress general risk assessment should be completed.

- [Guide and Template for Employees Wellness Action Plan \(WAP\) - Mind Charity.](#)
- [Guide and Template for Line Managers Wellness Action Plan \(WAP\) - Mind Charity.](#)
- [Stress General Risk Assessment Form](#)

The HSE have also produced a Talking Toolkit which can be used to start off a conversation.

- [Talking Toolkit: Preventing Work-Related Stress](#)

The action plan and the stress risk assessment should be reviewed through management supervision 1:1 meetings or a review meeting organised within a 4 to 6 week period.

For a team, an operational stress risk assessment should be completed (see [Stress General Risk Assessment Form](#))

Note: Where stress is experienced by new or expectant mothers, guidance is available from the Occupational Health Team.

## **Training and support**

The Council will support and encourage employees to attend appointments with Occupational Health or their General Practitioner if they feel they are stressed so they are better able to handle pressure they may encounter and they are able to recognise stress when it occurs in them.

### **Employees can be supported by:**

- Seeking help from managers, Occupational Health and / or the Employee Counsellor Service, Mental Health First Aiders or the Employee Assistance Programme.
- Speaking to their GP.
- Speaking with their manager about reasonable adjustments for their role.
- Being open about disability ensuring appropriate assessments are carried out and if necessary, collaborating in making reasonable adjustments in the workplace.
- Focusing on fixing rather than worrying.
- Recognising that stress is not a weakness.

## **Records Management**

Records of managing work-related stress will be kept in the individual's personal file.

## **Links to other relevant documents/references**

There is no specific legislation which regulates stress in the workplace, but the prevention of stress is included in the general duty of an employer to their employees under the following:

The Health and Safety at Work etc Act 1974 - places a duty on every employer to ensure, as far as is reasonably practicable, the health, safety and welfare at work of all their employees. 'Health' includes mental health.

The Management of Health and Safety at Work Regulations 1999 - place a duty on employers to make a suitable and sufficient assessment of the risks to health and safety to which employees are exposed whilst they are at work for the purpose of identifying the measures they need to take to comply with the law.

The Equality Act 2010 applies to employees with a substantial long-term mental (or physical) impairment and protects them from discrimination in the workplace.

**Further information on stress can be found on the following links:-**

- [Help and advice around dealing with stress \(NHS\).](#)
- [Derbyshire Mental Health Helpline](#) (or phone 0800 028 0077)
- [Derby and Derbyshire Emotional Health and Wellbeing website.](#)
- Further information can be found on [Health and safety - Our Derbyshire](#)
- Council employees can also talk to [mental health first aiders](#) - a team of trained colleagues who can provide reassurance and help to guide you to the support you need such as the [Employee Assistance Programme \(EAP\)](#) and the [Occupational Health Referral Form](#)