The Highland Council
Comhairle na Gàidhealtachd

Stress Management

1. Introduction

An important element in the achievement of the Highland Council's strategic goals is the effective management of staff. HR policies guide and set the style for management, reflect the Council values, and ensure consistent treatment of staff. The policy on Stress Management incorporates and reflects this in terms of focusing and promoting effective management practice and ensuring high standards of health and safety.

Stress and Pressure

Pressure occurs in most jobs - each job brings its own set of tasks, responsibilities and day to day problems. It is these tasks and challenges at work that provide structure, improve motivation and are the key to a sense of achievement and job satisfaction. The ability to deal with pressure however, is not limitless.

Stress is the physical, emotional and behavioural response to an inappropriate level of pressure. Excessive workplace and/or domestic pressures, leading to stress, can be harmful, undermining the health of employees and damaging business performance. No-one is exempt from stress and it can vary from person to person.

Stress is a serious health issue and the importance of managing it as part of an overall approach to occupational health and safety cannot be overstated.

The cost to the employee and the employer will be measured in terms of absenteeism, poor motivation and staff turnover. This in turn will create additional stresses and workload for colleagues, who may then enter the vicious circle.

Employee Health and Welfare

Employers have a duty under the Health and Safety at Work Act 1974 to ensure, so far as is reasonably practicable, that the workplace is safe and healthy, and under the Management of Health and Safety Regulations 1993 employers are obliged to assess the nature and scale of risks to health in their workplace and take action where this is necessary.

Ill health resulting from stress caused at work has to be managed in the same way as ill health arising from other physical causes present in the workplace.

2. Scope & Responsibility

The Stress Management policy covers all Services of the Council and as such is the responsibility of all Elected Members, Directors, Corporate Managers, Service Managers and any employee in a supervisory role.

To manage stress effectively, managers will promote and maintain systems of management and behaviour at work consistent with the principles of this policy and of the various strategies outlined in the section on management interventions.

The Occupational Health Adviser, who is in the Health and Safety Team, is available to all employees of the Highland Council. The Service is confidential and information will only be divulged with the consent of the individual concerned. However in certain circumstances the Occupational Health Adviser, with the knowledge of the employee, will advise on employment issues e.g. ability to carry out their normal range of duties.

The Occupational Health Adviser will encourage and support activities which promote good health and a healthy lifestyle.

Employees also have a responsibility and will be expected to co-operate in the implementation of the Council's Stress Management policy, and to report matters of concern relating to health and safety, including stress at work, to an appropriate manager/supervisor.

3. Communication & Training

To be effective the policy must be communicated to staff and elected members to ensure that staff are aware that the problem is recognised and that excessive stress is not only seen as a personal problem. Communication of the policy and what it means in terms of effective working practices will take

place through a range of methods, as appropriate to individual responsibilities and needs e.g. directed training programmes, short seminars, tutorials, leaflets and articles.

Managers will be involved in training programmes designed to enable them to implement and adhere to the policy procedures as noted in the Management Guidelines.

These programmes will include information on:

- a theoretical appreciation of stress
- a consideration of duty of care and how to manage stress more proactively.
- identifying and developing strategies to support staff who may be feeling undue pressure
- developing and practising interventions effectively when a member of staff is experiencing stress
- eradicating as many stressors as possible

As appropriate, individual staff members will be provided with information to enable them to:

- recognise stress in themselves and others, when this is perceived as a threat and not a stimulus
- cope with stress more effectively
- know where to turn for further help

4. Auditing & Monitoring

Elected Members, Directors and Area Service Managers in conjunction with the Depute Chief Executive will be responsible for monitoring changes in the areas which reflect stress, i.e. work performance, relationships at work, staff attitude and behaviour. Reviews of sickness absence and periodic anonymous staff surveys will also be conducted to indicate the success or otherwise of the management programme.

5. Stress Management Action

(i) Causes of Harmful Levels of Stress

Stress is our physical, emotional and behavioural response to an inappropriate level of pressure.

The Highland Council Stress Management policy addresses stress at work, and provides strategic and defined responsibilities for individuals and management.

People may come to work against a background of bereavement, family sickness, marital or other interpersonal problems or exhausting travel. Although these factors are beyond our responsibility, as managers we should try to be aware of them since they could make employees more vulnerable to stress at work as well as affecting their performance and judgement.

In general, harmful levels of stress are more likely to occur where:

- pressures pile on top of each other or are prolonged
- people feel trapped or unable to exert any control over the demands placed on them
- people are confused by conflicting demands made on them

Problems can be triggered or made worse where:

- there is a high degree of uncertainty about their work, their objectives or their job and career prospects
- work schedules are inflexible and over-demanding
- there is prolonged conflict between individuals i.e. harassment, discrimination
- there is a lack of understanding and leadership response from managers or supervisors

(ii) Management Interventions

There is no single or best way of preventing harmful levels of work related stress. Managers should adopt a systematic and problem solving approach. Just as with any other workplace hazard the risks should be assessed, and then practical steps should be taken to remove or minimise them, in other words it is for managers to intervene. To manage the causes of stress account must be taken of organisational culture and functions, individual's role, personal development, empowerment, interpersonal relationships, relationships between home and work, task design, workload and the pacing of work and work schedules. These interventions are detailed below.

These should be addressed in conjunction with appropriate training and information delivered to help people cope with the remaining pressures.

Where issues arise that are beyond the scope of the manager in dealing with stress related issues, HR Business Partners and the Occupational Health Advisers should be informed and involved.

The following are management measures which should be used in the promotion and maintenance of employee well-being at work:

Organisational Restructuring/Change:

- Recognise the impact of change on staff
- Involve and inform employees appropriately
- Consult staff and trade unions at the earliest appropriate stage with a view to gaining co-operation

Communications:

- Establish systems which encourage two-way communication with staff
- Check that communications with staff have been received and understood
- Listen and give appropriate consideration to comments and representations from staff
- Involve staff as far as possible in decisions that affect them
- Establish systems which encourage employees to report stress in themselves and seek support to alleviate it

Health and Safety Risk Management:

- Undertake risk assessments of hazards which may cause stress, e.g. violence, poor working conditions, heavy workload
- Ensure employee involvement in stress awareness and management programme
- Recognise that stress at work can result from a single incident or an accumulation over time, and seek to minimise both types of risk

Job Design/Workload Management:

- Analyse jobs to ensure plenty of variety avoiding short work cycles whenever possible
- Ensure jobs have well defined tasks and responsibilities
- Avoid placing unreasonable demands on employees, e.g. constant demand for long hours through unreasonable requests, by prioritising workload and delegating appropriately
- In consultation seek to negotiate an efficient and effective solution to workload problems
- Ensure that employees take annual leave and work breaks (e.g. lunch breaks) in order to avoid fatigue
- Promote flexible working arrangements
- Match the job with the abilities and motivation of the person

Recruitment:

- Provide adequate information for candidates on working conditions including special features of the job such as tight deadlines or dealing with disturbed or aggressive clients
- Select by reference to a person specification which reflects the job and takes into consideration the ability to meet any special requirements

Induction:

- Provide adequate information to new recruits using the Highland Council Induction pack
- Make time available to meet new recruits promptly when they start and at frequent intervals during the induction period

Training:

- Ensure that employees are adequately trained to undertake their duties and responsibilities
- Provide training as appropriate in dealing with the potential health and safety hazards of the job
- Encourage employees to attend training in stress and time management and practice techniques learned

Supervision:

- Agree clear objectives with reasonable time scales, taking care to explain how duties and responsibilities fit into the wider work context
- Ensure regular supervision of employees in order to respond promptly to problems
- Provide positive feedback and recognition of good performance when appropriate
- Discuss poor performance promptly, honestly and constructively to agree appropriate action

Staff Development and Performance Review:

- Undertake regular scheduled staff development and review meeting

Employee Care Counselling:

- Be aware of you own limitations in counselling staff with problems
- Make staff aware of information on available counselling services through HR

Occupational Health Screening:

- Seek advice on any health issues, from Occupational Health Adviser/HR/Health and Safety Advisers as appropriate
- Seek advice on staff with health problems which affect their work from the above Advisers as appropriate
- Ensure that employees who are referred to any of the above HR are fully aware of the reasons for their referral and the nature of the service

6.	Support For Stress Management

Stress management is not a standalone function. It must be recognised as part of the management of self, and of the organisation. Support is available from line management in the first instance. The trade unions represented throughout the Council can also provide support and direction, and have been consulted in the formation of this policy document.

HR will provide ongoing practical advice and support in the application of the policy and HR Business Partners or the Occupational Health Advisers can also be contacted by staff to discuss stress.

Appendix 1 provides a listing of policies within the Highland Council which relate to and support Stress Management and its successful application.

Council policies and procedures which relate to this policy:

- Flexible Working Hours
- Working Time Directive
- Guidelines on use of Temporary Contract
- Special Leave
- Absence Management
- Redundancy Procedure
- Discipline Procedure
- Health and Safety Policy
- Substance Misuse Policy
- Smoking Policy
- Equalities in Employment
- Job Share Scheme
- Harassment Policy
- Disability Discrimination Act - Guidance Note
- Adoption of Disability Symbol
- Qualification Guidance
- Employee Development Strategy

The Action Plan for implementation of attached policy and management guidance is as follows:

Policy Statement	Action	Who
Communication	Implementation of policy. Articles/leaflets - communication strategy	P PTH
Training	Appropriate and varied training initiatives for all levels of staff - as directed by training objectives within the Policy and the Management Action Points denoted	T H
Auditing & Monitoring	Development of a variety of audit tools for discussion and selection as appropriate	P
Management Guidelines	Procedural system to be developed if we wish to record/monitor/evaluate the policy and intervention methods adopted.	P H T
Policy Support	Ensure Absence Management and Induction pack are implemented prior to introducing Stress Management Policy	P T

Key:

P = Personnel Team
T = Training and Development Team
H = Health and Safety Team