



## STRESS MANAGEMENT POLICY

### WRITTEN BY:

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## INTRODUCTION

1.1 Biddulph Town Council is committed to protecting the health, safety and welfare of its employees. This policy will apply to everyone who works for the Town Council.

This document contains information about the Council's approach to managing workplace stress effectively. The Town Council recognises the impact that stress can have on the mental health of its employees. As a result, this policy considers both the effective management of stress, and the approach to supporting staff with mental health problems.

1.2 Organisations perform better when their staff are healthy, motivated and focused.

The Town Council recognises the importance of identifying and reducing workplace stressors.

Effective employers support employees who are experiencing mental health problems to cope and recover. The support people receive from employers is key to determining how well and how quickly they are able to get back to peak performance.

1.3 The Health and Safety Executive define stress as *'the adverse reaction people have to excessive pressure or other types of demand placed on them'*.

This makes an important distinction between pressure, which can be a positive state if managed correctly, and stress which can be detrimental to health.

1.4 Through this policy, the Town Council has committed to:

- identify all workplace stressors and conduct risk assessments (Appendix 1) to eliminate stress or control the risks from stress. These risk assessments will be regularly reviewed.
- provide adequate resources to enable the implementation of appropriate recommendations.
- support the development of a workplace culture where staff feel empowered. Employees with mental health problems will be encouraged to communicate with colleagues, as appropriate, and receive a positive response.
- send a clear signal to staff that their mental health matters, and being open about it, will lead to support, not discrimination. A simple way to communicate this is to explain that mental health will be treated in the same way as physical health. Absence from work will be managed through the **Sickness, Absence and Well-being Policy**.

## OBJECTIVES OF THE POLICY

2.1 The Town Council aims to put in place both preventative and reactive measures in relation to the management of stress and mental health problems, including:

- promoting a culture of encouragement, participation and open communication.
- increasing awareness of the phenomenon of work-related stress and the methods available to combat this.
- assisting staff in managing stress in themselves and others
- providing appropriate and confidential support for those who are experiencing stress.

The Town Council seeks to promote a positive working environment that does not adversely impact on the mental health and wellbeing of staff members.

2.2 There are clear benefits to preventing work-related stress:

- ✓ **quality of working life:** employees feel happier at work and perform better
- ✓ **management of change:** introducing a new pay system or new patterns of work are easier when 'stress' is managed effectively

- ✓ **employment relations:** problems can be resolved at work rather than at an employment tribunal
- ✓ **attendance and sickness:** attendance levels go up and sickness absence goes down.

## MANAGEMENT OF STRESS

3.1 The Health and Safety Executive identify six management standards concerned with the main stressors at work:

1. **Demands:** employees often become overloaded if they cannot cope with the amount of work or type of work they are asked to do.  
**What you can do about it:** Pay attention to the way the job is designed, training needs and whether it is possible for employees to work more flexible hours.
2. **Control:** employees can feel disaffected and perform poorly if they have no say over how and when they do their work.  
**What you can do about it:** Think about how employees are actively involved in decision-making, the contribution made by teams and how reviewing performance can help identify strengths and weaknesses.
3. **Support:** levels of sick absence often rise if employees feel they cannot talk to managers about issues that are troubling them.  
**What you can do about it:** Give employees the opportunity to talk about the issues causing stress, provide a sympathetic ear and keep them informed.
4. **Relationships:** a failure to build relationships based on good behaviour and trust can lead to problems related to discipline, grievances and bullying.  
**What you can do about it:** Check the organisation's policies for handling grievances, unsatisfactory performance, poor attendance and misconduct, and for tackling bullying and harassment.
5. **Role:** employees will feel anxious about their work and the organisation if they don't know what is expected of them.  
**What you can do about it:** Review the induction process, work out an accurate job description and maintain a close link between individual targets and organisational goals.
6. **Change:** change needs to be managed effectively or it can lead to huge uncertainty and insecurity.  
**What you can do about it:** Plan ahead so change doesn't come out of the blue. Consult with employees so they have a real input, and work together to solve problems.

Biddulph Town Council will use these standards when completing risk assessments in relation to stress management.

### **3.2 Signs of Stress in the Workplace**

In general, potentially harmful levels of stress are most likely to occur in the following circumstances:

- when pressures or stressors accumulate or are prolonged;
- when individuals perceive themselves as being unable to exert any control over the demands that are placed upon them,
- and/or are left feeling confused by conflicting demands that are made upon them.

Some of the common symptoms of stress problems in an organisation include: inferior work performance, loss of motivation and commitment, tense relationships at work and increased sickness absence.

### **3.3 RESPONSIBILITIES**

#### **Chief Officer**

- Conduct and implement recommendations of risks assessments (Appendix 1). Ensure good communication between staff, particularly where there are organisational and procedural changes.
- Ensure staff are fully trained to discharge their duties.
- Ensure staff are provided with meaningful developmental opportunities.
- Monitor workloads to ensure that people are not overloaded.
- Monitor working hours and overtime to ensure that staff are not overworking. Monitor holidays to ensure that staff are taking their full entitlement.
- Ensure that bullying and harassment is not tolerated.
- Be vigilant and offer additional support to a member of staff who is experiencing stress outside work e.g. bereavement or separation.
- Support individuals who have been off sick with stress and advise them on a planned return to work.
- Monitor and review the effectiveness of measures to reduce stress.

#### **Employees**

- Raise issues of concern with the Chief Officer.
- Accept opportunities for counselling when recommended.
- Take reasonably practicable steps to minimise their own stress levels and those of their fellow workers who may be affected by their acts or omissions.

Employees have a legal responsibility to comply with the Health and Safety at Work legislation and other statutory regulations to take reasonable care of

their health and safety and that of other persons with whom they work. Employees should, therefore, raise any concerns about work-related stress which might present a health hazard to themselves or other persons.

### **3.4 Procedure for Handling Cases of Work Related Stress**

When it is brought to the attention of the Chief Officer that a member of staff has symptoms of stress, including frequent short-term absences, which is affecting their work, there should be a joint discussion with the person concerned in the first instance.

Wherever reasonably practicable, an employee experiencing excessive and sustained work-related stress will have their work adapted, including the possibility of an alternative role or tasks, so as to remove the risk or reduce it to an acceptable level.

A joint strategy will be agreed with the person concerned, the Chief Officer and the Finance Strategy and Management Committee. If there is no suitable alternative tasks or role which would not involve the risk of reasonably foreseeably exacerbating their condition, an employee should recognise that, ultimately, it may be necessary, for sufficient reason, to terminate their employment.

The Chief Officer must keep records of the advice and action they have taken in relation to an employee suffering from work-related stress. In accordance with the Data Protection Act, the employee has the right to access such information. Progress should be recorded, monitored and reviewed appropriately.

## **SUPPORTING EMPLOYEES WITH MENTAL HEALTH PROBLEMS**

4.1 In practice, it can be hard to distinguish when 'stress' turns into a 'mental health problem' and when existing mental health problems become exaggerated by stress at work.

The most common forms of clinically diagnosed mental health problems are depression and anxiety. Many of the symptoms are similar to those that people experience when they are under considerable pressure e.g. sleepless nights, loss of or increased appetite, increased use of alcohol, etc. The key differences are in the severity and duration of the symptoms and the impact they have on someone's everyday life.

4.2 Staff at Biddulph Town Council will encourage each other to stay healthy. Techniques include:

1. Keep physically active
2. Eat well
3. Only drink in moderation
4. Value yourself and others
5. Talk about your feelings
6. Keep in touch with friends and family
7. Care for others
8. Get involved, make a contribution
9. Learn a new skill
10. Do something creative
11. Take a break
12. Ask for help

4.3 When there is a recruitment process, there are a range of actions that should be considered. The Town Council is committed to implementing these recommendations, which include:

- publish a positive statement about employing people with disabilities in job advertisements
- ensure that the recruitment process is fair; if a person with a mental health problem fulfils all the selection criteria, his or her disability should not be a barrier, and
- ensure that you can give fair and truthful justification to a person with a disability who is turned down.

4.4 If an employee is distressed, the Chief Officer will consider raising the following issues:

- Ask open questions about what is happening, how they are feeling, what the impact of the stress or mental health problem is and what solutions they think there might be
- How long have they felt this? Is this an ongoing issue or something that an immediate action could put right?
- Are there any problems outside work that they might like to talk about and/or it would be helpful for you to know about? (Pressure should not put on the person to reveal external problems).
- Are they aware of possible sources of support such as: relationship, bereavement counselling, drugs/ alcohol services/advice, legal or financial advice?
- Is there any aspect of their medical care that it would be helpful for you to know about? (For example, side effects of medication that might impact on their work). While the employer has no right to this information, the employee should be aware that they cannot be expected to make 'reasonable adjustments' under the terms of the

Disability Discrimination Act (DDA) if you are not informed about the problem.

- Does the employee have ideas about any adjustments to their work that may be helpful? These could be short or long term
- Do they have any ongoing mental health problem that it would be helpful for the manager to know about? If so, is it useful to discuss their established coping strategies and how the organisation can support them? It is the employee's choice whether to reveal this. But the employer cannot necessarily be expected to make reasonable adjustments for a condition if you don't know it exists.
- Establish precisely what they wish colleagues to be told and who will say what. Any inappropriate breach of confidentiality or misuse of this information might constitute discrimination under the DDA.
- Agree what will happen next and who will take what action.
- The employer might also consider whether the employee has been affected by an issue that may affect others in the team/organisation? If the latter then you need to undertake a stress risk audit followed by team-based problem solving.

It is important that the Chief Officer records all conversations accurately - not just to protect the Town Council and the employee, but also to show that the actions have been carried out fully.

4.5 Employees with mental health issues who have taken a related leave of absence will receive the following support:

- Being given time to access the help of health professionals, such as their own GPs and counsellors.
- Not being pressurised to return to work prematurely, but instead being given time, space and a sense of control over the pace of their return to work.
- Being given time to become re-orientated to the workplace.
- Reasonable adjustments being made, for example changes to hours of work and avoiding sources of stress that might trigger symptoms.

## RELEVANT LEGISLATION

**5.1 Under the Health & Safety at Work etc. Act 1974** and the **Management of Health and Safety at Work Regulations 1999**, employers are obliged to undertake a risk assessment for health hazards at work – including stress – and to take action to control that risk.

**5.2 Disability Discrimination Act 1995 & 2005 (DDA)**. Employers must consider making 'reasonable' adaptations for individuals with a disability. A disability is classed as: 'A physical or mental impairment which has a substantial and long-

term adverse effect on a person's ability to carry out normal day-to-day activities.'

**5.3 Human Rights Act 1998 (HRA).** Human rights are the basic rights and freedoms that belong to every person in the world. They are based on important principles like dignity, fairness, respect and equality; human rights are protected by the law. As a public authority, Biddulph Town Council must follow these principles.