



STRESS MANAGEMENT POLICY

WRITTEN BY:

Mrs Sarah Haydon, Chief Officer

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INTRODUCTION

1.1 Biddulph Town Council is committed to protecting the health, safety and welfare of its employees. This policy applies 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 employees with mental health problems.

1.2 Organisations perform better when their employees 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 their employer 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 commits 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 employees 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 employees 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 employees 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 employees.

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 their manager 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 signs of stress are listed below:

- Persistent or recurrent moods – anger, irritability, detachment, worry, depression, guilt and sadness.
- Physical sensations/effects – aches and pains, raised heart rate, increased sweating, dizziness, and blurred vision, skin or sleep disorders.
- Changed behaviours – increased absence levels, difficulty concentrating or remembering things, inability to switch off, loss of creativity, making more errors, double checking everything, eating disorders, increasing use of tobacco, alcohol or drugs.
- Increase in overall sickness absence – particularly frequent short-term absences.
- Poor work performance – less output, lower quality, poor decision making.
- Relationships at work – conflict between colleagues, poor relationships with customers.
- Employee attitude and behaviour – loss of motivation or commitment, poor time keeping, working longer hours but with diminishing effectiveness.

3.3 RESPONSIBILITIES

The Health and Safety Executive expects organisations to carry out suitable and sufficient risk assessments for stress, and to take action to tackle any problems identified by those risk assessments.

Everyone is expected to share the responsibility for identifying and reducing work related stress.

Elected Members are expected to demonstrate their commitment and support to this policy by ensuring that appropriate stress management practices are followed and resources are available for suitable stress management controls.

Chief Officer

The Chief Officer's role is pivotal in identifying and managing excessive pressures at work. The Chief Officer has knowledge of the team and their usual working styles.

- Provide clarity of what's expected in the role and how it should be done, with supporting feedback, coaching and development as required.
- Regular communication ensuring employees are informed and engaged.
- Active work force planning to ensure the right resources are in the right place at the right time doing the right thing, in a planned and balanced way.
- Conduct and implement recommendations of risks assessments. Ensure good communication between employees, particularly where there are organisational and procedural changes.
- Ensure employees are fully trained to discharge their duties.
- Ensure employees are provided with meaningful developmental opportunities.
- Encourage employees to influence where, when and how work is done to sufficiently feel in control of their workload within the remit of their role.
- Monitor workloads to ensure that people are not overloaded.
- Monitor working hours and overtime to ensure that employees are not overworking. Monitor holidays to ensure that employees are taking their full entitlement.
- Ensure that bullying and harassment is not tolerated.
- Be vigilant and offer additional support to an employee experiencing stress outside work e.g. bereavement or separation.
- Promote and encourage employees to access health and wellbeing initiatives.
- Support employees who have been off sick with stress and advise them on a planned return to work.
- Consider any adjustments made in occupational health reports and discuss these with employees.
- Monitor and review the effectiveness of measures to reduce stress.

Employees

- Expected to support the Council's stress initiatives and 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.
- Recognise that they may be a source of stress to others, accept responsibility and take action to deal with this.

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 an employee 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 Employees 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 Equality Act 2010 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 their employer 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.
- 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:

- Given time to access the help of health professionals, such as their own GPs and counsellors.
- Not 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.
- Given time to become re-orientated to the workplace.
- Reasonable adjustments made, for example changes to hours of work and avoiding sources of stress that might trigger symptoms.

RISK ASSESSMENT GUIDANCE

The factors that place employees at risk from work related stress should be assessed in the same way as physical or biological hazards within the workplace. The risk should then be avoided or, where this is not possible, reduced to as low as reasonably practicable. The following factors should be considered:

Step 1 – Identify The Hazard

Qualitative information – can be gathered by informal discussion, team meetings and briefings, appraisal, working groups, leaving interviews and return to work interviews following a sickness absence.

Quantative information – can be obtained from sickness records, performance measurement and stress auditing.

Step 2 – Identify Who Might Be Harmed And How

No-one should be considered immune from the effects of stress and no job is totally stress free. If the pressure exceeds the ability of a person to cope, then they will be stressed to some degree. Most people have periods of vulnerability at certain times in their lives, eg crisis in their private life, during organisational change or when returning to work after a period of absence.

The effect of stress can lead to mental and/or physical illness.

There is convincing evidence that prolonged periods of stress, including work-related stress, have an adverse effect on health. Research provides strong links between stress and the following health issues:

- Physical effects such as heart disease, back pain, headaches, stomach disorders or various minor illnesses: and
- Psychological effects such as anxiety and depression.

Step 3 – Evaluate The Risk

Consider whether there are preventative measures in place to control the risk, whether this is enough to control the risk to an acceptable level and if the risks are still too high, what more can be done to reduce the risk to an acceptable level.

Step 4 – Record The Findings

The findings of the risk assessment should be recorded and the assessment should be signed and dated.

Step 5 – Review

A review should be carried out (and recorded) periodically and when significant changes occur, eg restructure, change in working patterns or workload, recruitment, ill-health associated with stress, or if staff are perceived to be unhappy.

EMPLOYEE QUESTIONNAIRE

A key part of the stress assessment process is to carry out a stress audit, using the 'indicator tool' provided by the Health and Safety Executive. This is a confidential employee questionnaire (Appendix 2).

Demands – includes issues like workload, work patterns and the work environment. The standard is that:

- Employees indicate that they are able to cope with the demands of their jobs; and
- Systems are in place locally to respond to any individual concerns.

What should be happening – states to be achieved:

The Council provides employees with adequate and achievable demands in relation to the agreed hours of work:

- People's skills and abilities are matched to the job demands;
- Jobs are designed to be within the capabilities of employees; and
- Employees' concerns about their work environment are addressed.

Control – how much say the person has in the way they do their work. The standard is that:

- Employees indicate that they are able to have a say about the way they do their work;
- Systems are in place to respond to any individual concerns.

What should be happening – states to be achieved:

- Where possible, employees have control over their pace of work;
- Employees are encouraged to use their skills and initiative to do their work;
- Where possible, employees are encouraged to develop new skills to help them undertake new and challenging pieces of work;
- Employees are encouraged to develop their skills;
- Employees have a say over when breaks can be taken; and
- Where possible, employees are consulted over their work patterns.

Support – includes the encouragement and resources provided by the Council, line management and colleagues. The standard is that:

- Employees indicate that they receive adequate information and support from their line manager and colleagues; and
- Systems are in place to respond to any individual concerns.

What should be happening – states to be achieved:

- The Council has policies and procedures to support employees adequately:

- Systems are in place to enable and encourage managers to support their employees;
- Systems are in place to enable and encourage employees to support their colleagues;
- Employees know what support is available and how and when to access it;
- Employees know how to access the required resources to do their job; and
- Employees receive regular and constructive feedback.

Relationships – includes promoting positive working to avoid conflict and dealing with unacceptable behaviour. The standard is that:

- Employees indicate that they are not subjected to unacceptable behaviours, eg bullying at work; and
- Systems are in place to respond to any individual concerns.

What should be happening – states to be achieved:

- The Council promotes positive behaviours at work to avoid conflict and ensure fairness;
- Employees share information relevant to their work;
- The Council has agreed policies and procedures to prevent or resolve unacceptable behaviour;
- Systems are in place to enable and encourage managers to deal with unacceptable behaviour; and
- Systems are in place to enable and encourage employees to report unacceptable behaviour.

Role – whether individuals understand their role and whether the Council ensures that the person does not have conflicting roles. The standard is that:

- Employees indicate that they understand their role and responsibilities; and
- Systems are in place to respond to any individual concerns.

What should be happening – states to be achieved:

- The Council ensure that, as far as possible, the different requirements it places upon employees are compatible;
- The Council provides information to enable employees to understand their role and responsibilities;
- The Council ensures that, as far as possible, the requirements it places upon employees are clear; and
- Systems are in place to enable employees to raise concerns about any uncertainties or conflicts they have in their role and responsibilities.

Change – how organisational change is managed and communicated. The standard is that:

- Employees indicate that the organization engages them frequently when undergoing an organizational change; and
- Systems are in place to respond to any individual concerns.

What should be happening – states to be achieved:

- The Council provides employees with timely information to enable them to understand the reasons for proposed changes;
- The Council ensures adequate employee consultation on changes and provides opportunities for employees to influence proposals;
- Employees are aware of the probable impact of any changes to their jobs.
- If necessary, employees are given training to support any changes in their jobs;
- Employees are aware of timetables for changes;
- Employees have access to relevant support during changes.

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 Equality Act 2010. Employers must consider making ‘reasonable’ adaptations for individuals with a disability. *A person (P) has a disability if – a) P has a physical or mental impairment, and b) the impairment has a substantial and long-term adverse effect on P’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.

Appendix 1 - Risk Assessment Checklist for Workplace Stressors

1	Describe the stressor or hazard:
2	Circle which areas or risk the stressor comes under: DEMANDS CONTROL SUPPORT RELATIONSHIPS ROLE CHANGE
3	Consider who might be harmed by this stressor and list them below. Don't list individuals by name (use job titles), but think about groups of people doing similar work or who might be affected. Keep in mind employees that are inexperienced, or working alone:
4	Have you already taken precautions against this stressor? If yes, list existing controls/precautions below or where the information about them may be found. Also list what information, instruction or training has been provided, including dates:
5	Consider what further action is necessary to control this stressor. Outline any actions planned below, including who will carry them out and by when:
6	Set a date for reviewing the actions listed in 5 above. Date:
7	Completed by:
8	Date:

Appendix 2 – Employee Questionnaire

It's recognised that working conditions affect worker well-being. Your responses to these questions determine our working conditions now and enable us to monitor future improvements. For us to compare the current situation with past or future situations, it's important that your responses reflect your work **in the last 6 months**.

1 I am clear what is expected of me at work

Never 1 Seldom 2 Sometimes 3 Often 4 Always 5

2 I feel responsible for what I do at work

Never 1 Seldom 2 Sometimes 3 Often 4 Always 5

3 Different people at work demand things from me that are hard to combine

Never 5 Seldom 4 Sometimes 3 Often 2 Always 1

4 I know how to go about getting my job done

Never 1 Seldom 2 Sometimes 3 Often 4 Always 5

5 I am subject to personal harassment from customers in the form of unkind words/behaviours

Never 5 Seldom 4 Sometimes 3 Often 2 Always 1

6 I have unachievable deadlines

Never 5 Seldom 4 Sometimes 3 Often 2 Always 1

7 If work gets difficult, my colleagues will help me

Never 1 Seldom 2 Sometimes 3 Often 4 Always 5

8 I am given supportive feedback on the work I do

Never 1 Seldom 2 Sometimes 3 Often 4 Always 5

9 I have to work very intensively for more than 50% of my working time

Never 5 Seldom 4 Sometimes 3 Often 2 Always 1

10 I have a say in my own work speed

Never 1 Seldom 2 Sometimes 3 Often 4 Always 5

11 I am clear what my duties and responsibilities are

Never 1 Seldom 2 Sometimes 3 Often 4 Always 5

12 I have to neglect some tasks because I have too much to do

Never 5 Seldom 4 Sometimes 3 Often 2 Always 1

13 I am clear about the Council's goals and objectives

Never 1 Seldom 2 Sometimes 3 Often 4 Always 5

14 There is friction or anger between colleagues

Never 5 Seldom 4 Sometimes 3 Often 2 Always 1

15 I have a choice in deciding how I do my work

Never 1 Seldom 2 Sometimes 3 Often 4 Always 5

16 I am unable to take sufficient breaks

Never 5 Seldom 4 Sometimes 3 Often 2 Always 1

17 I understand how my work fits in to the overall aims of the Council

Never 1 Seldom 2 Sometimes 3 Often 4 Always 5

18 I am pressured to work long hours

Never 5 Seldom 4 Sometimes 3 Often 2 Always 1

19 I have a choice in deciding what I do at work

Never 1 Seldom 2 Sometimes 3 Often 4 Always 5

20 I have to work at a pace that can feel out of control

Never 5 Seldom 4 Sometimes 3 Often 2 Always 1

21 I feel bullied by colleagues

Never 5 Seldom 4 Sometimes 3 Often 2 Always 1

22 I have unrealistic time pressures

Never 5 Seldom 4 Sometimes 3 Often 2 Always 1

23 I can rely on my manager to help me out with a work problem

Never 1 Seldom 2 Sometimes 3 Often 4 Always 5

24 I get help and support I need from colleagues

Strongly Disagree 1 Disagree 2 Neutral 3 Agree 4 Strongly Agree 5

25 I have some say over the way I work

Strongly Disagree 1 Disagree 2 Neutral 3 Agree 4 Strongly Agree 5

26 I have sufficient opportunities to question managers about changes at work

Strongly Disagree 1 Disagree 2 Neutral 3 Agree 4 Strongly Agree 5

27 I receive the respect at work I deserve from my colleagues

Strongly Disagree 1 Disagree 2 Neutral 3 Agree 4 Strongly Agree 5

28 Staff are always consulted about change at work

Strongly Disagree 1 Disagree 2 Neutral 3 Agree 4 Strongly Agree 5

29 I can talk to my manager about something that has upset or annoyed me at work

Strongly Disagree 1 Disagree 2 Neutral 3 Agree 4 Strongly Agree 5

30 My working time can be flexible

Strongly Disagree 1 Disagree 2 Neutral 3 Agree 4 Strongly Agree 5

31 My colleagues are available to listen to my work related problems

Strongly Disagree 1 Disagree 2 Neutral 3 Agree 4 Strongly Agree 5

32 When changes are made at work, I am clear how they will work out in practice

Strongly Disagree 1 Disagree 2 Neutral 3 Agree 4 Strongly Agree 5

33 I am supported through emotionally demanding work

Strongly Disagree 1 Disagree 2 Neutral 3 Agree 4 Strongly Agree 5

34 Relationships at work are strained

Strongly Disagree 5 Disagree 4 Neutral 3 Agree 2 Strongly Agree 1

35 The management team encourage me at work

Strongly Disagree 1 Disagree 2 Neutral 3 Agree 4 Strongly Agree 5

Name.....Date.....

Thank you for competing this questionnaire