

## **EAST AYRSHIRE COUNCIL**

### **PERSONNEL AND PROPERTY SUB-COMMITTEE OF THE POLICY AND RESOURCES COMMITTEE - 2 APRIL 2001**

#### **MANAGING STRESS IN THE WORKPLACE POLICY**

##### **Report by the Depute Chief Executive / Director of Corporate Resources**

## **1. PURPOSE**

- 1.1** To recommend to the Sub-Committee the introduction of a Managing Stress in the Workplace Policy, subject to consultation with the relevant Trade Unions.

## **2. BACKGROUND INFORMATION**

- 2.1** There are a number of indicators highlighting that stress has become one of the most serious occupational health challenges facing employers in Britain:

- According to the Health and Safety Executive (HSE), 1 in 5 employees admit to taking time-off work because of work related stress and 1 in 3 consult their GP on stress related problems;
- The HSE estimate that 60% of all work absence is caused by stress related illness, totalling 40 million working days per year;
- The CBI estimates that in financial terms stress costs some £7 billion per year. This is about 2-3% of gross domestic product or £310 per employee per year;
- Research findings now place stress as the second largest category of occupational ill-health after muscular-skeletal disorders such as back pain.

- 2.2** It is difficult to ascertain whether life in general and at work in particular has become more stressful in recent years or whether there is an increased awareness of stress and its effects on both individuals and organisations. However, it is recognised that employers must acknowledge that the potential for stress exists and that it must be addressed on both organisational and individual levels.

- 2.3** Local Authorities have been regarded as "good employers" who recognise and value the contribution made by their employees in delivering their Council's services. It follows therefore, that identifying and addressing issues surrounding stress within the employment context will support the "good employer" principle and in turn, aid service delivery.

## **3. LEGAL IMPLICATIONS**

- 3.1** As well as the "good employer" principle of addressing stress in the workplace, an organisation that fails to protect an employee from exposure to harmful stress at work may find itself facing a claim for compensation and prosecution for negligence. Under

common law, employers have a duty to provide a safe system of work. In the landmark case of Walker v's Northumberland County Council, the judge pronounced that the employer's duty of care also extended to protection against "psychiatric harm".

**3.2** The Health and Safety Commission has announced that it is planning a programme of work to tackle occupational stress through a range of actions, including the development of standards of good management practice. This decision followed a major consultation exercise on their discussion document "Managing Stress at Work". From responses HSC concluded that:

- a) work-related stress is a serious problem
- b) work-related stress is a health and safety issue
- c) it can be tackled in part through the application of health and safety legislation

It is anticipated that the introduction of the Managing Stress in the Workplace Policy will stand the Council in good stead by addressing issues of good management practice.

#### **4. PROPOSED MANAGING STRESS IN THE WORKPLACE POLICY**

**4.1** The proposed Managing Stress in the Workplace Policy is attached as Appendix 1 to this report. Associated Employee and Manager Guides have also been developed in support of the Policy and are available to members from the Head of Personnel.

**4.2** The main policy points summarised for the attention of Members are as follows:

- (i) The policy outlines a holistic approach to managing stress in the workplace. The issue of stress is not viewed as an isolated management issue but one that links into many other management activities such as recruitment and selection, training and development, health and safety etc.
- (ii) Section 2 of the policy provides a definition of stress and its possible causes. It recognises that stress can be both positive and negative and that where negative stress exists the causes can come from work or outside of work.
- (iii) Section 3 of the policy details the methods that the Council may use to identify stress such as risk assessment; use of organisational indicators and use of individual indicators.
- (iv) Section 4 of the policy details the responsibilities of Directors/Heads of Service, Managers/Supervisors and Employees in managing stress in the workplace.
- (v) Section 5 of the policy highlights the significance of training and the availability of training from the Corporate Training and Development Section.
- (vi) Section 6 of the policy details the monitoring and review arrangements that must be put in place following implementation.

**4.3** The development of the policy follows a period of joint working on the issue between Councils in the former Strathclyde Regional Council area. The intention is that the policy work will be shared with other Councils across Scotland.

4.4 The policy content has also been considered and approved by the Council's Employee Counselling and Occupational Health Services.

## **5. POLICY IMPLICATIONS**

5.1 The introduction of the Managing Stress in the Workplace Policy will complement the Council's existing employment and health & safety policies. In addition, the introduction of the policy will support the Council's participation in Scotland's Health at Work Scheme that aims to promote health awareness within the workplace.

5.2 Fundamental to the successful implementation of the Policy is the need to ensure that it is effectively communicated and appropriate awareness training is available for employees, managers and others that may be involved in assisting employees such as Personnel Officers and Trade Union Representatives. It is therefore recommended that the policy be introduced with effect from 1 October 2001, to enable a training and communication programme to be implemented in advance.

## **6. FINANCIAL IMPLICATIONS**

6.1 It is anticipated that any costs associated with the introduction of the Managing Stress in the Workplace Policy can be met from existing departmental budgets.

6.2 As detailed at Section 3.1.2. of the Policy document, there are a variety of organisational indicators that can be reviewed to identify stress within the Council including absence levels and reasons for absence. The recent reporting of absence to service committees in respect of the period ended 31 December 2000 showed that approximately 19% of all absences are for stress/emotional or personal reasons.

6.3 It is anticipated that the introduction of the Managing Stress in the Workplace Policy will complement the Council's Managing Absence and general Welfare policies with a view to reducing the levels of stress related absence within the Council.

## **7. TRADE UNION IMPLICATIONS**

7.1 Informal discussions with trade union representatives indicate that the Council's approach to managing stress in the workplace is welcomed. The Head of Personnel is keen to involve trade union representatives in implementing the policy and communicating its contents to all employee groups.

## **8. RECOMMENDATIONS**

8.1 The Sub-Committee is asked to:

- (i) to recommend to Council the approval of the introduction of the proposed Managing Stress in the Workplace Policy, subject to consultation with the relevant Trade Unions;

- (ii) instruct the Head of Personnel to implement a training and communication programme in advance of its introduction on 1 October 2001;
- (iii) instruct the Head of Personnel to report to the Committee on annual basis in accordance with the monitoring and review arrangements set out within Section 7 of the Policy.

Fiona Lees  
Depute Chief Executive / Director of Corporate Resources  
21 March 2001

### **LIST OF BACKGROUND PAPERS**

1. HSC Discussion Document – Managing Stress in the Workplace, April 2000.

Anyone wishing further information on the content of this report should contact Graham Haugh, Head of Personnel (Tel: 01563 576092).

**AGENDA**