



BRANCH: ABERDEEN CITY
DATE: 06 March 2018
OFFICER: BRANCH HEALTH & SAFETY OFFICER REPORT
TITLE OF REPORT: AGM REPORT

RECOMMENDATIONS:

That the Branch – note contents of this report

MAIN ISSUES:

1. **Stress in the workplace**

The workplace is an environment in which most adults spend a substantial portion of their time. Workplaces have the potential to have both a positive and negative influence on staff health, safety and well-being. However, when staff feel that their employer doesn't care and/or are unconcerned about health, safety and wellbeing, there is a risk of staff become disengaged with the organisation, in turn leading to symptoms of stress. This can then result in an increase in absence, with people leaving the organisation disillusioned and ill due to stress – which in this current climate leads to non-filled vacant posts, increased workloads, and ultimately unwanted pressure and potentially work related stress on the remaining staff.

Stress and the management of mental health in the workplace is becoming one of the biggest health concerns. According to UNISON's 2017 survey on stress, demands on time were one of the biggest causes of workplace stress. The Health and Safety Executive (HSE) has also reported that the number one cause of stress is increases to workload. Lack of support and control, changes at work, role uncertainty and violence and bullying (all possible symptoms of job cuts) are also significant factors.

The increase in stress related cases in recent years has coincided with cuts in public services and job losses. As well as causing anxiety and uncertainty among the workforce it has also led to increases in workloads and fewer staff being asked to do more. During this time of transformation and restructure stress is increasing becoming more and more prevalent across our Council.

In 2016/2017 the HSE reported that stress, depression and anxiety accounted for 40% of all work related ill health causes.

In Aberdeen City Council, over the last 12 months, Psychological disorders (e.g. stress, anxiety, depression etc.) are second only to musculoskeletal disorders as the main reasons for staff absence.

In addition to increases in staff absence, due to the Council's current 'Managing Absence Policy, there may also be an increase, albeit hidden, of what is known as 'presenteeism'. Presenteeism is where staff members attend work when they are not fit to do so. The main reason for this being that the employee feels they need to attend work, stressed or not, to avoid being put in the position that the absence would hit the trigger for commencement of formal absence management procedures. The Sainsbury Centre for Mental health estimates that presenteeism costs 1.8 times more than absenteeism.

So what is 'stress'?

How many times a day do we hear someone (even ourselves) say "This is stressing me out" or "I am so stressed" What do we really mean? Are we really stressed or just under pressure?

To answer this question requires us to know what stress is, or more to the point – our *employer* need to know exactly what stress is and how they should be managing stress at work.

Stress is defined by the HSE as:

“The harmful reaction people have to excessive pressures or other types of demand placed on them at work”

Stress is not an illness – it is a state. When pressure becomes too excessive or prolonged, mental and physical illness may develop (that's the adverse reaction otherwise known as 'stress')

Work related stress develops because a person is unable to cope with the demands being placed on them.

Stress can manifest in a variety of symptoms including:

- Changes in behaviour;
- Unusual tearfulness, irritability or aggression;
- Indecisiveness;
- Increased sickness absence;
- Poor timekeeping;
- Reduced performance;
- Inability to concentrate;
- Overworking, or failure to delegate;
- Erosion of self-confidence;
- Relationship problems, for example becoming withdrawn or argumentative with colleagues;
- Increased unwillingness to co-operate or accept advice;
- Excessive smoking or drinking;
- Drug abuse;
- Anxiety and depression;
- Panic attacks;

- Other health complaints such as headaches; raised blood pressure; muscle tension and increased heart rate.

So what can our employer do/and what should they be doing to address work related stress?

The current fashionable 'resilience' agenda, which concentrates on making workers more resilient - thus shifting the responsibility away from the employer to the individual worker, is not the answer to stress. Instead good systems of work and strong leadership from our employer are needed in improving the working lives of all our employees.

Employers have the same legal requirements to manage work related stress as they have with any other hazard – and like any other hazard must be risk assessed.

The Health & Safety at Work Act requires employers to ensure the health, safety and welfare of their employees. The Management of Health and Safety at Work Regulations 1999 requires employers to assess the risks of ill health (including stress related conditions) arising from work-related activities, ensuring that the hazards are removed or proper control measures are put in place to reduce the risk so far as is reasonably practicable. This is defined by the HSE as 'balancing the risk against the measures needed to control the real risk in terms of money, time or trouble'.

Stress Management Policy

Our Council currently has a stress management policy in place – signalling that our employer is committed to meeting its legal entitlement of reducing and minimising stress. The policy is currently under review to ensure that the risk of stress is not only being addressed when someone is off with stress. Instead all of our Services across the Council should be, or have already, undertaken a risk assessment in relation to stress.

So what can we do if we feel we are suffering from work related stress?

Our employer has a duty to provide support for staff identified as suffering from work related stress. However, too often workers suffering from stress are signed off work for long periods of time with little support from the employer. In many cases they are then eventually forced out of the workplace through ill health or retirement, or in some cases on capability grounds.

However, with the right type of support there is no reason why a worker should not be able to return to work. This support could include measures such as phased return and changes to the job.

Regular one to one (1:1) meetings

One very important way to reduce pressure at work from becoming stress is to discuss any work related issues with your manager during regular one to one meetings. Although all employees are supposed to have regular 1:1 meetings with

their manager, and in many services this is the case, there are many teams within the Council where employees does not regularly meet with their manager to discuss work issues. As such, the opportunity for early intervention to tackle pressure at work is lost often resulting in additional pressure and resulting stress.

If you are feeling stressed, then in the first instance, where possible, discuss your concerns this with your manager. It may be however that your manager is the person who is causing the stress, if this is the case then if possible speak to the manager above them.

UNISON Health & Safety Representatives

In addition our UNISON health & safety (H&S) reps. are trained and equipped to raise issues with employers in the workplace. Our elected H&S reps can work with our employer to help to ensure that they fulfil their legal obligations in relation- to stress, and other work related issues.

Additional Support for stressed workers

Time for Talking - Counselling Service – Employee Assistance Service

Aberdeen City Council provides a free, confidential, 24-hour counselling service, 365 days a year. They are **time for talking** and they provide:



- A helpline for general advice and guidance
- Psychological guidance and emotional support when things are getting you down
- Individual counselling, either face to face or over the phone

There are three different ways to contact the service:

- Call **0800 970 3980** - you do not need to give your name but you should say that you work for Aberdeen City Council.
- Via the website - www.timefortalking.co.uk Here you can access a lot of useful information or make contact with a counsellor.
- You can send an email to admin@timefortalking.co.uk.

The service is free and available to all employees, Foster Carers, Elected Members and members of their immediate family, living at the home address and over 16 years of age.

UNISON Welfare – There for you

Members experiencing emotional difficulties can contact UNISONS support service, 'There for You'. 'There for You' provides a confidential advice and support service, over the phone or in person, for members and their dependents.

For more information contact UNISON'S 'There for You' support service on 020 7121 5620 or email thereforyou@unison.co.uk or contact our branch welfare officer.

2. Musculoskeletal disorders

Work related musculoskeletal disorders (MSDs) are the most commonly reported cause of occupational ill health in Great Britain. MSD's account for 41% of all health related absence in the UK.

MSDs are prevalent in all sectors, but many council services e.g. fleet, craft workers, health and social care etc. have significantly higher than average rates of absence.

What is a musculoskeletal disorder (MSD)?

Answer: MSD is a broad umbrella label for many types of aches and pains, and treatment is determined by the exact medical diagnosis. They fall largely into three types:

- [Upper limb disorders](#)
- [Lower limb disorders](#)
- [Back pain](#)

MSDs have commonly been associated with physically demanding working conditions. Exposure to all types of risks of MSDs (manual material handling, repetitive movements and constrained postures as well as vibration and working in low temperature) has traditionally been the main causes of MSDs. In all sectors and especially office work, however, the use of computers for long periods has increased leading to new kinds of risks for MSDs. Work with computers is physically light and the risk of upper limb disorders is low in comparison with the traditional occupations that involve repetitive work. However, the enormous numbers of computer workers makes the absolute number of workers with disorders large and a health & safety priority.

Most cases can be satisfactorily dealt with by your Doctor/GP. There are other alternative methods of treatment – such as through physiotherapists, chiropractors and osteopaths – that can be helpful in the assessment and treatment of these disorders.

MSD's are not always caused by work but they are often aggravated by the work we do; where this is the case there is a requirement for our employer to assess the causes and take remedial action. For example the Manual Handling Regulations and the Display Screen Equipment Regulations both require that a risk assessment must be undertaken by the employer, to ensure that where necessary, action is being taken to reduce the risk of injury/illness.

If you are suffering from MSD's then in the first instance, where possible, discuss this with your manager. Your manager should then ensure that all measures that can reasonably and practicably be taken to reduce and/or remove the risk of MSD's are being done.

In-house training

The Council also offer short training courses on manual handling etc. More information on such course can be found on the Zone or by contacting our HR Employee Development Team.

UNISON Health & Safety Representatives

In addition our UNISON health & safety (H&S) reps. are trained and equipped to raise issues with employers in the workplace. Our elected H&S reps can work with our employer to help to ensure that they fulfil their legal obligations in relation- to MSD's, and other work related issues.

3. Health & Safety (H&S) representation in the workplace

What is a Union health & safety representative?

An H&S rep is a fellow worker elected by other union members to look after the health and safety at work of people they work with. Much of what they do benefits everyone in their section, both union and non-union workers.

What rights do safety reps have?

Trade unions have the right under the Safety Representatives and Safety Committees Regulations 1977 to appoint workplace safety reps. The Regulations give various rights to safety reps, require employers to set up a safety committee and to inform and consult safety reps in good time on matters relating to health and safety. H&S reps have the right to:

- take an active part in workplace risk assessments;
- investigate potential hazards and 'dangerous occurrences', and examine the accident book;
- investigate members' complaints;
- carry out inspections of the workplace in work time, at least every three months;
- be consulted on new working practices and new technology;
- receive safety information from their employer (e.g. inspectors' reports, hygiene surveys and risk assessments);
- attend union-approved training courses without loss of pay; and
- have access to a phone and office equipment, and paid time off work, both to carry out inspections and to meet staff and other safety reps.

Are H&S independent from management?

Yes. They are not part of the management team. Their job is to make sure that management follows health and safety regulations, and provides you with a safe place of work.

How can a safety rep help me?

The training and support H&S reps receive from our Union mean that an experienced H&S rep is in a good position to help you. UNISON provides our H&S reps with information, training and support over a wide range of health and safety issues. They are trained to spot hazards at work, assess risks, carry out inspections and negotiate improvements with management. Their back-up includes specialist advice from union safety experts, and access to legal advice if needed.

Can I speak to an H&S rep in confidence, or will they tell management?

H&S reps will give you confidential help and advice. They know about health and safety procedures, how to take out a grievance if necessary, and how to help you resolve a problem at work

H&S reps care about workers' safety and campaign for better working conditions. They play a vital role in keeping our members healthy and safe at work. They:

- investigate potential hazards
- consult members on working conditions
- lobby your employer to improve safety
- support members with complaints about safety
- recruit new members
- identify members who could become more involved in health and safety issues.

UNISON aims to have at least one health and safety representative in every workplace where we have members. New H&S reps are always welcome so if you are interested in becoming a health & safety representative in your workplace, or want to find out a bit more about this role then please do not hesitate to contact the branch on 01224 522239, or email unison@aberdeencity.gov.uk

BACKGROUND PAPERS / LINKS: None

REPORT AUTHOR DETAILS:

Alison Robertson

AliRobertson@aberdeencity.gov.uk

01224 522214