

Stress Management Health & Safety Management Standard Issue 2 (June, 2009)

Part C: Individual Reactive Stress Risk Assessments – ‘Stress Action Plans’

This document should be read in conjunction with Parts A, B, and D of the Stress Management Health & Safety Management Standard.

Responsibilities

It is the responsibility of managers to ensure that risk assessments are carried out within their area of control. Managers can either carry out risk assessments themselves, or delegate this task to individuals within their area of responsibility. If a manager delegates the task of carrying out a risk assessment, they must ensure that the person(s) is competent to carry out the assessment and takes all reasonable care when doing so.

Investigating stress in individuals

The Stress Action Plan process is a reactive tool for investigating the perceived causes of stress in individuals. The process is not intended to be used proactively/preventatively, on a group/team basis - the ‘Stress at Work - Assessment of Good Management Practice’ should be used for that purpose.

There may be occasions when it is necessary to reactively investigate the causes of an individual’s stress. For example:

- When investigating the causes of sickness absence due to stress, or when planning a phased return to work after sickness absence due to stress (particularly long-term sickness absence).
- As a result of a proactive team/section based ‘Stress at Work - Assessment of Good Management Practice’ being carried out, which has highlighted potential stress issues in particular employees.
- During a line manager’s incident investigation, following an individual reporting they are experiencing work-related stress or clearly exhibiting signs of stress.

Management issues

Occasionally in cases of work related stress, employees may refuse to cooperate with their manager, or the council's other arrangements for investigating the causes of stress. In these circumstances every effort should be made to encourage the employee to enter into dialogue with their manager. If the individual refuses to talk to their manager, the individual can suggest an alternative person who they feel confident in talking to, or ask someone to mediate in the process. In such cases the manager should contact HR to identify an alternative party to undertake discussions with the employee (e.g. HR, OH, another manager, etc.).

Overview of the Stress Action Plan process

The 'Stress Action Plan' tool is taken from a successful approach used by Bradford MD Council. This approach is not intended to address the medical aspects of stress (e.g. clinical depression), which should be addressed through an Occupational Health referral. However, it is intended to help identify and address personal and work issues that have led to the individual's perceptions of stress.

The overall aim of the process is for the individual employee and their manager to investigate the causes of (and solutions to) stress together. It is not a blaming opportunity but rather a chance to reflect upon the situation and the circumstances around it, and to identify how to reach a satisfactory outcome (e.g. employee is able to return to work). Approaching it in the manner described below means the employee plays a major part in identifying the issues involved in their feelings of stress and how they may be addressed.

NB. Additional guidance is provided on stress and sickness absence in Part D, including OH's role in carrying out stress risk assessments.

Stage 1 – The employee's perceptions

The first stage of the process is for the employee to complete Stage 1 of the Stress Action Plan form. Guidance for employees is provided on page 2 of the form.

Stage 2 – The manager's response

- **Agreeing specific actions**

The manager should first consider their response to the issues raised. A face-to-face meeting should then be arranged between the individual employee and their manager (and if necessary HR) to discuss the actions to be taken. The purpose of this meeting should be to allow open and constructive communication between the two parties and enable a two-way sharing of views in an open and positive way. If there is a valid reason why a face-to-face meeting is not appropriate, then the manager should respond in writing detailing the actions to be taken, including an offer to have a face-to-face meeting.

The manager should give objective consideration to the employee's ideas on how they wish to see any work-related issues resolved, including clarifying them with the employee where this is necessary.

Both the employee and manager must recognise that the manager needs to balance the individual's wishes with; the needs of the business, the potential effect on co-workers and the reasonable expectation that the employee should be able to cope with the normal pressures of the job. In making their decisions, the manager should ensure they take account of any issues arising from the Disability Discrimination Act (see Part D).

Although the individual's requests cannot be guaranteed, in most cases many requests can be achieved or a reasonable compromise or outcome reached. Managers should however, not agree to support unrealistic measures that cannot be sustained.

- **Documenting actions and review**

Following the meeting with the individual, the manager should document the actions agreed and the reasons where they are unable to take action. A copy of the document should also be provided to the employee. The manager and employee should also agree review dates (no more than one month after the creation of the Stress Action Plan) to discuss and review progress against the actions agreed.