



South Staffordshire Council

Workplace 
wellbeing

Policy on the prevention and management of stress at work

May 2024



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SECTION ONE - STRESS MANAGEMENT POLICY

1. INTRODUCTION

South Staffordshire Council is committed to ensuring that we have a healthy and safe workplace where employees can thrive whilst staying physically and mentally healthy.

The council takes its approach to psychological wellbeing seriously and seeks to identify and reduce any causes of workplace stress in the working environment. In support of this is our Wellbeing Strategy which actively promotes the personal responsibility everyone has for their own wellbeing, alongside a supportive management approach, culture and working environment.

In line with the council's 'Ways of Working' values (Pride, Trust, Transparency, Positive Relationships and Listening to people), the council wants to create a psychologically safe space for staff. In this regard, the council will promote a compassionate culture of consultation, participation and open communication, part of which includes its commitment to wellbeing conversations. Recognising the stigma associated with mental health illness, it is especially important that staff feel safe to discuss their concerns and issues and feel supported.

2. SCOPE

This policy covers all employees, temporary employees, and any other contracted persons when undertaking work on behalf of the council.



3. WHAT IS STRESS?

The Health and Safety Executive's (HSE) definition of work-related stress is:

'The adverse reaction people have to excessive pressures or other types of demand placed on them'.

There is a distinct difference between stress and pressure, as if managed correctly, pressure can have a positive effect on a person, whereas stress can be seen as detrimental to their well-being. The pressures and demands of work are often unavoidable and some pressure is positive as staff can be motivated by improving their performance and having a sense of achievement.

Stress, however, does not just come from work life. Stress can affect us from our personal life in the form of financial pressure, relationship difficulties or health concerns, amongst others. These external issues can compound any work-related issues which can make managing stress difficult. In addition, everyone's experience of stress is different, and people vary in their capacity and ability to cope with different types of pressure so there is not a 'one size fits all' approach.

Getting help early can minimise the impact upon people's mental and physical health. Stress is however complex as it affects people differently - what stresses one person may not affect another. Unfortunately, everyone is also different in the way they seek help. Staff may vary in their ability to recognise stress and deal with it appropriately. Some people will not recognise or want to acknowledge that they are stressed, although it may be apparent to their manager and work colleagues. Factors like skills and experience, age or disability may also affect whether a worker can cope. Providing good communication, training and support can reduce and prevent stress.

4. RELEVANT LEGISLATION

Stress management is covered in Section 2 of the Health and Safety at Work etc. Act 1974 (HASWA) and the Management of Health and Safety at Work Regulations 1999.

- ◆ **Providing Information, instruction, training, and supervision in relation to health and safety.**
- ◆ **Undertaking risk assessments.**
- ◆ **Creating a safe working environment.**
- ◆ **Ensuring adequate facilities and arrangements for welfare.**
- ◆ **Duty of care to each other.**

This policy and procedure will be reviewed periodically by Health and Safety. Any routine policy/procedural updates will be agreed with the council's appointed Health and Safety Officer.

Any material changes to this policy and procedure will be agreed in consultation with UNISON and the Standards and Resources Committee.

5. ROLES AND RESPONSIBILITIES

- » Overall responsibility for stress management rests with the Chief Executive who is ultimately responsible for providing the necessary resources to manage stress.
- » The Corporate Health and Safety Team are responsible for maintaining/reviewing this policy/procedure, advising on application of this policy and procedure and supporting managers in how to manage absence caused by stress including compiling stress statistics.
- » The Assistant Director for Organisational & People Development is also responsible for ensuring appropriate organisational policies and training to ensure a high standard of inclusive leadership and a positive working environment.
- » Extended Leadership Team will raise role model good wellbeing practice and support through the wellbeing strategies, resources, and interventions. These are summarised in section 10.
- » HR Services are responsible for collating relevant absence statistics including reasons for absence.

Managers

- » Are responsible for implementing this policy and undertaking risk assessments as appropriate and complying with relevant policy and guidance and will.
- » Provide support to staff, including referrals to relevant occupational workplace professional advisors where appropriate.
- » Ensure clear communication between management and staff, specifically on organisational changes that may affect them personally.
- » Monitor staff working hours if they suspect someone is over-working and manage holidays to ensure staff take their full entitlement where possible.
- » Ensure bullying or harassment is not tolerated.
- » Provide guidance regarding modification of work for employees who are stressed, e.g., reviewing work responsibilities, and making return to work arrangements after sickness absence.
- » Signpost staff to a relevant training including stress management courses, time management and dealing with difficult situations.

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Individuals

- » Should take personal responsibility to look after themselves and take advantage of the support provided through the wellbeing initiatives, wellbeing conversations and other interventions offered by the council and their manager.
- » Will raise any issues relating to work-place stress to colleagues, well-being contact points, Health and Safety, human resources, any line managers of their choice or occupational health. They may self-refer to Psychological Support via Ros Howard (contact details: 07952 405763, Email: ros.howard.psychology@gmail.com)

The council will:

- » Ensure a high standard of inclusive leadership and a positive workplace culture.
- » Monitor occurrence of stress and sickness absence levels and continue to provide a high-quality employee assistance service.
- » Develop a reporting procedure to provide feedback from managers and employees, trade union representatives, occupational health, and training providers on the effectiveness of this policy.
- » Promote the importance of positive wellbeing and psychological safety at work.
- » Support flexible working and hybrid working where job roles permit.
- » Adapt our communication and practices to ensure that our high standards regarding, healthy working practices, communications and connections with teams are consistent for office based and hybrid/remote workers.



6. SPOTTING SIGNS OF STRESS

The effects of long-term stress can be seen in physical, intellectual, emotional, and behavioural signs. Recognising the signs of stress will help managers to take steps to stop, lower and manage stress in their workplace. Signs of stress in teams include:

- » **Arguments.**
- » **Higher staff turnover.**
- » **More reports of stress.**
- » **More sickness absence.**
- » **Decreased performance.**
- » **More complaints and grievances.**

If people start acting differently, it can be a sign they are stressed. Signs of stress in individuals can include:

- » **Taking more time off.**
- » **Arriving for work later.**
- » **Acting twitchy or nervous.**
- » **Mood swings.**
- » **Being withdrawn.**
- » **Loss of motivation, commitment, and confidence.**
- » **Increased emotional reactions - being more tearful, sensitive, or aggressive.**

Everyone should aim to look after their own stress levels at work as much as possible. If, however people experience health difficulties they should talk to their manager, a colleague or a GP for advice. Managers should be alert to signs of stress as acting early can reduce the impact and make it easier to reduce or remove the causes.



7. STRATEGIES FOR DEALING WITH STRESS

The council is acutely conscious of the stigma that exists around mental health and this can discourage people seeking appropriate help. In this regard, the council commits to running workshops around mental health and well-being that encourage 'it's okay not to be okay' conversations. The council's commitment to create a kind culture where people at all levels of the organisation reach out to colleagues who are struggling should create the psychological safety to speak up without judgement.

Managers should be developed to feel confident in having wellbeing conversations (Annex 1) and lead by example. Managers should be trained to identify stress and use the Guidance Notes, Risk Assessment tool and the Stress Questionnaire (see appendix 3 onwards).

If managers are worried that a worker is showing signs of stress, they should initially engage in a well-being conversation and if considered appropriate, they may encourage the person who is stressed to see their GP for advice. Signs of stress can be prevalent in other conditions, so it is important to seek medical advice. If there are issues at work that are exacerbating stress, managers should act. This may include signposting to Employee Assistance, Counselling and Psychological service or Occupational Health service. Workload may also be adjusted to reflect the situation e.g., reviewing work responsibilities especially following a return to work from sickness absence. Stress management courses e.g., time management, stress awareness and dealing with difficult situations can be a proactive method of helping people to recognise and manage when it occurs in themselves and others.



8. STRESS RISK ASSESSMENTS

There are six main areas of work design which can affect stress levels. They are:

DEMANDS

CONTROL

SUPPORT

RELATIONSHIP

ROLE

CHANGE

Employers should assess the risks in these areas to manage stress in the workplace via a stress risk assessment. (refer to Corporate Risk Assessments)

The ideal time to carry out a stress assessment may be:

- » **Following a wellbeing conversation.**
- » **Following a period of absence due to stress.**
- » **For members of staff who perceive they are feeling stressed or working under pressure.**
- » **If a line manager sees a member of staff behaving out of character.**
- » **When Health and Safety or HR advises to undertake an assessment.**

The assessment can be used for any employee as a tool to help identify any specific areas of stress or to identify triggers of stress for an individual or team.

The organisation will aim to identify all workplace stressors via risk assessments, stress indicator questionnaire and where it is possible, identify the risks and eradicate them. These risk assessments should be regularly reviewed. When making proposals to prevent workplace stress, the Trade Union Safety Representative will be consulted with. Training will be provided for all managers and supervisors in dealing with workplace stress. The training covers how to implement the stress management policy and identifying any warning signs. Furthermore, the confidential counselling service for staff affected by workplace or external stress will be actively promoted by the organisation.

9. DIGNITY AT WORK

The council recognises the potential adverse effects on the mental health of employees through harassment, victimisation, or intimidation at work. It has an established Grievance and Dignity at Work Policy aimed at preventing problems through having a structured mechanism in place to respond to any concerns. Fundamentally, the policy robustly sets out the council's commitment to ensuring a discrimination free and inclusive environment.

10. OTHER RELEVANT POLICIES, RESOURCES AND SUPPORT

The council has agreed other policies which, if properly implemented and carried out, have a beneficial impact on workplace stress. Examples of these policies include:

- » Sickness absence.
- » Grievance and dignity at Work.
- » Health and safety.
- » Ways of working.
- » Drug, alcohol and substance misuse policy.

The council also has a Wellbeing Strategy and Well Being resource hub which can be found here - <https://sstaffsgovuk.sharepoint.com/sites/TheCore/health-and-wellbeing>. The resources include tools and suggestions that staff can consider supporting healthy wellbeing choices.

Our communications include weekly wellbeing articles to our employees through our newsletters and intranet to promote health and wellbeing information and resources.

Regular training is provided ranging from relevant policy issues, inclusive leadership, and webinars on a range of wellbeing themes.

The council provides an employee assistance programme which includes an occupational health, counselling & psychology, and physiotherapy service for staff.

In recognition of financial wellbeing the council has a comprehensive employee benefits scheme. (Vivup). This includes access to a range of life-style benefits and discounts and also health promotion information including:

HEALTHY EATING	SMOKING CESSATION	THE MENOPAUSE
BETTER SLEEP	DEBT MANAGEMENT	EXERCISE & FITNESS
MENTAL HEALTH & WELLBEING	MUSCULOSKELETAL HEALTH	RELAXATION

The council offers discounted leisure services and periodically provides health promotion activities.

The council is committed to positive collaboration with UNISON and have a range of engagement forums to ensure our staff are well informed and involved in our work activities and plans.

11. WELLBEING CONVERSATIONS

The council recognises the importance of promoting a culture of psychological safety and in line with the council's 'ways of working' values (Pride, Trust, Transparency, Positive Relationships and Listening to People), is committed to ensuring staff feel safe to discuss concerns and feel supported. Annex 3 includes management guidance to provide a framework for conducting wellbeing conversations.

12. MONITORING AND REVIEW


Monitoring and reviewing the effectiveness of this policy is essential to the development of a positive stress management culture.

The following performance indicators will be monitored so that areas of the policy that require further consideration can be highlighted. The following statistics will help the organisation spot variability in stress levels between different service teams and occupations:

- » **Review of staff sick absence levels and reasons.**
- » **The number and quality of stress risk assessments completed.**
- » **Themes from stress risk assessments.**
- » **Leaver's information.**
- » **Referral rates and user feedback from occupational health, counselling, and physiotherapy services.**
- » **Staff engagement surveys.**
- » **Information collated from team managers and assistant managers dealing with staff work-related stress.**

This policy will be reviewed annually by the Corporate Health and Safety Steering Group.

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A photograph of a man and a woman in a professional setting. The man, on the left, is wearing glasses and a light blue shirt, looking towards the woman. The woman, on the right, is wearing a dark blue polka-dot shirt and is looking back at him with a focused expression. They appear to be in a meeting or discussion. The background is a plain, light-colored wall.

The council recognises the importance of promoting a culture of psychological safety and in line with the council's 'ways of working' values (Pride, Trust, Transparency, Positive Relationships and Listening to People), is committed to ensuring staff feel safe to discuss concerns and feel supported.

What is stress?

Stress is the feeling of being overwhelmed or unable to cope with mental or emotional pressure.

Stress is our body's response to pressure. Many different situations or life events can cause stress. It is often triggered when we experience something new, unexpected or that threatens our sense of self, or when we feel we have little control over a situation.

We all deal with stress differently. Our ability to cope can depend on our genetics, early life events, personality, and social and economic circumstances.

When we encounter stress, our body produces stress hormones that trigger a fight or flight response and activate our immune system. This helps us respond quickly to dangerous situations.

Sometimes, this stress response can be useful: it can help us push through fear or pain so we can run a marathon or deliver a speech, for example. Our stress hormones will usually go back to normal quickly once the stressful event is over, and there will not be any lasting effects.

However, too much stress can cause negative effects. It can leave us in a permanent stage of fight or flight, leaving us overwhelmed or unable to cope. Long-term, this can affect our physical and mental health.

What makes us stressed?

Many things that can lead to stress: bereavement, divorce, or separation, losing a job or unexpected money problems. Work-related stress can also have a negative impact on your mental health. People affected by work-related stress lose an average of 24 days of work due to ill health.

Even positive life changes, such as moving to a bigger house, gaining a job promotion, or going on holiday can be sources of stress. If you feel stressed in these situations, you may struggle to understand why or be unwilling to share your feelings with others.

What are the signs of stress?

You may feel:

Anxious, afraid, angry or aggressive, sad, irritable, frustrated or depressed.

These feelings can sometimes produce physical symptoms, making you feel even worse.

Guidance - 1. What is Stress, Signs, Body Reaction, Who Is Affected

How your body might react

If you are stressed, you may experience:

HEADACHES	NAUSEA	INDIGESTION	DIGESTIVE PROBLEMS SUCH AS CONSTIPATION, BLOATING OR DIARRHOEA.
SHALLOW BREATHING OR HYPERVENTILATING	SWEATING	HEART PALPITATIONS	ACHES AND PAINS

How you might behave

You may behave differently if you are stressed. You may:

WITHDRAW FROM OTHER PEOPLE OR SNAP AT THEM	BE INDECISIVE OR INFLEXIBLE	BE TEARFUL
HAVE PROBLEMS GETTING TO SLEEP OR STAYING ASLEEP	EXPERIENCE SEXUAL PROBLEMS	ADDICTION HABITS MAY INCREASE

If the stress is long-lasting, you may notice your sleep and memory are affected, you are eating habits change, or you feel less inclined to exercise.

Some research has also linked long-term stress to gastrointestinal conditions like irritable bowel syndrome (IBS) or stomach ulcers, as well as conditions like cardiovascular disease.

Who is affected by stress?

All of us can recognise some of the feelings described above. Some people are more affected by stress than others. For some people, getting out of the door on time each morning can be a very stressful experience, whereas others may be less affected with a great deal of pressure.

Some people are more likely to experience stressful situations than others. For example:

- » People with a lot of debt or financial insecurity are more likely to be stressed about money.
- » People from minority ethnic groups or who are LGBTQIA+ are more likely to be stressed about prejudice or discrimination.
- » People with disabilities or long-term health conditions are more likely to be stressed about their health or about stigma associated with their condition.

How can you help yourself?

If you are feeling stressed, there are some things you can try to feel less tense and overwhelmed.

1. Recognise when stress is a problem

It is important to connect the physical and emotional signs you are experiencing to the pressures you are faced with. Do not ignore physical warning signs such as tense muscles, tiredness, headaches, or migraines.

Think about what is causing your stress. Sort them into issues with a practical solution, things that will get better with time and things you cannot do anything about. Take control by taking small steps towards the things you can improve.

Plan to address the things that you can. This might involve setting yourself realistic expectations and prioritising essential commitments. If you feel overwhelmed, ask for help and say no to things you cannot take on.

2. Think about where you can make changes

Are you taking on too much? Could you hand over some things to someone else? Can you do things in a more leisurely way? You may need to prioritise things and reorganise your life, so you are not trying to do everything at once.

3. Build supportive relationships

Find close friends or family who can offer help and practical advice can support you in managing stress. Joining a club or a course can help to expand your social network and encourage you to do something different. Activities like volunteering can change your perspective and have a beneficial impact on your mood.

4. Eat healthily

A healthy diet can improve your mood. Getting enough nutrients (including essential vitamins and minerals) and water can help your mental wellbeing.

5. Be aware of your smoking and drinking

Cut down or cut out smoking and drinking if you can. They may seem to reduce tension but make problems worse. Alcohol and caffeine can increase feelings of anxiety.

6. Get some exercise

Physical exercise can help manage the effects of stress by producing endorphins that boost your mood. It can be hard to motivate yourself if you are stressed, but even a little bit of activity can make a difference. For example, you could aim to walk for 15-20 minutes three times a week.

7. Take time out

Take time to relax and practice self-care, where you do positive things for yourself. For instance, you could listen to our podcasts about relaxation to calm your body and mind. Striking a balance between responsibility to others and responsibility to yourself is vital in reducing stress levels.

8. Be mindful

Mindfulness meditation can be practiced anywhere at any time. Research has suggested it can be helpful for managing and reducing the effect of stress and anxiety.

9. Get some restful sleep

If you are having difficulty sleeping, you can try to reduce the amount of caffeine you consume and avoid too much screen time before bed. Write down a to do list for the next day to help you prioritise, but make sure you put it aside before bed. For more tips on getting a good night's sleep, read our guide 'How to sleep better'.

10. Be kind to yourself

Try to keep things in perspective and do not be too hard on yourself. Look for things in your life that are positive and write down things that make you feel grateful.

11. Get professional help

If you continue to feel overwhelmed by stress, do not be afraid to seek professional help. It does not mean you are a failure. It is important to get help as soon as possible so you can start to feel better. Talk to your doctor about how you are feeling. They should be able to advise you on treatment and may refer you for further help. They may suggest talking therapies such as:

- Cognitive Behavioural Therapy (CBT), which can help reduce stress by changing the ways you think about stressful situations.
- Brief interpersonal counselling, which can give you the chance to talk about what causes you stress and develop coping strategies.
- Mindfulness-based approaches.

If your stress is work-related, our page on work-life balance may help. If you feel comfortable, talk to your manager or HR team about how you are feeling to see if they can make changes to your workload or hours. If your workplace has an Employee Assistance Scheme, you could contact them for confidential support or counselling.

Stress Assessment Guidance Notes and Background for line managers

This note provides guidance for those requesting staff members to complete the Stress Indicator Questionnaire which is designed to identify and RAG rate the potential factors leading the to the staff member feeling stressed.

Stress is not covered by any specific piece of legislation; however, the Health and Safety at Work etc Act and the Management of Health and Safety at Work Regulations apply in regard to the requirement to assess the risks relating to stress within the workplace.

Identify the Hazard:

Identify all the common organisational stressors (hazards) relating to the work activities; describe all existing control measures and identify any further measures required.

Some common organisational stressors to consider may include:

- » **Heavy targets and workloads**
- » **Insufficient resources**
- » **Long working hours**
- » **Rapid change**
- » **Conflicting priorities**
- » **Uncertainty or insecurity**
- » **Poor communication**
- » **Lack of involvement**
- » **Poor delegation**
- » **Management style and conflict**

A variety of methods can be used to identify these including informal staff talks, focus groups, sickness/absence records, questionnaires, and workplace inspections.

Evaluate the risk:

- » **Assess the likely impact of the identified causes on staff.**
- » **Remember that different times of the year may result in different risks, depending on priorities and workload. For example, the start of the financial year, etc may require to be considered separately.**
- » **Try to speak to staff to ascertain the problem.**
- » **If speaking to an individual who is known to suffer from stress, this will require a careful, planned approach and should be done sympathetically.**
- » **If speaking to an individual who is known to suffer from stress, this will require a carefully planned approach and should be done sympathetically.**

Appendix 3

Identify Control Measures - Possible Solutions

For advice refer to HSE Stress talking Toolkit

Further information is available on HSE website - [Stress and mental health at work](#)

Please contact Internal Health and safety team if you require any further assistance.

Persons at Risk:

Some people may be more vulnerable to developing work related stress illness than others. In particular those who:

- » **have a history of significant or physical health problems.**
- » **have been absent work due to work-related stress or difficulties with coping in the past.**
- » **have personal difficulties which may be unrelated to work.**
- » **are inexperienced in their role.**
- » **are of a personality type which tends towards over work or being unable to cope with pressure.**

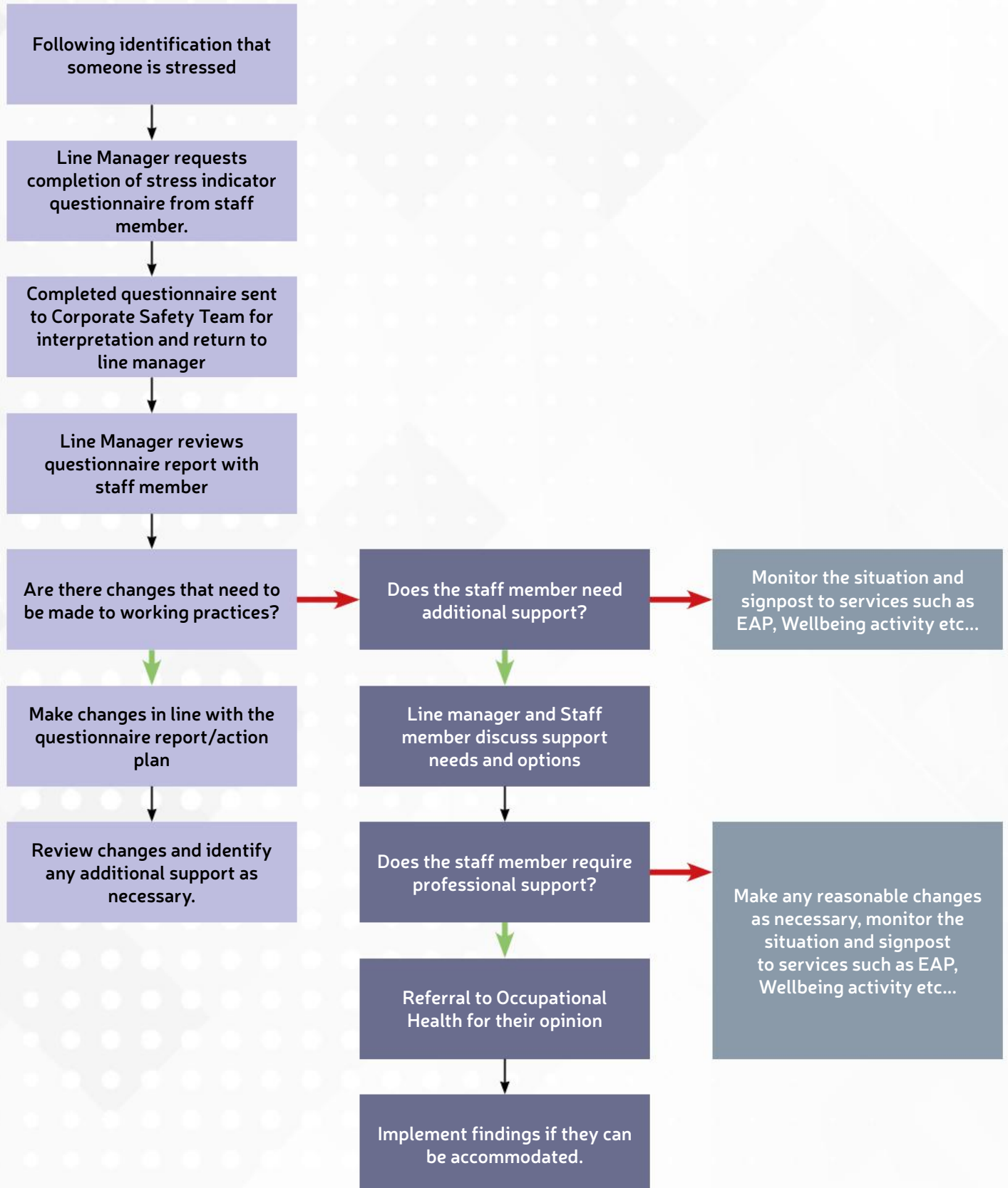
You may be aware of some additional factors which will need to be handled sensitively and in confidence.

Individuals suffering from stress often display a range of outward signs that may be noticed by colleagues and other managers.

These signs include:

- » **Tiredness and irritability.**
- » **Reduced quality of work indecisiveness and poor judgement.**
- » **Loss of sense of humour.**
- » **Physical illness such as headache, nausea, aches, and pains.**
- » **Poor sleep pattern or excessively 'jumpy'.**
- » **Increased sick leave.**
- » **Poor time keeping.**
- » **Staff taking work home or staying late excessively.**

FLOWCHART OF STRESS RISK ASSESSMENT



Appendix 5

Stress Indicator Questionnaire

To be completed in all cases

Employee Name		Other Person(s) presents at the discussion:	
Service		Name	
Job Title		Role	
Line Manager		Contact Number	
Date of questionnaire			

Reason for completion of the Risk Assessment

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Stress Indicator Questionnaire

Instructions: It is recognised that working conditions affect worker well-being. Your responses to the questions below will help us determine our working conditions now, and enable us to monitor future improvements. In order for us to compare the current situation with past or future situations, it is important that your responses reflect your work in the last six months.

		Never	Seldom	Sometimes	Often	Always
1	I am clear what is expected of me at work					
2	I can decide when to take a break					
3	Different groups at work demand things from me that are hard to combine					
4	I know how to go about getting my job done					
5	I am subject to personal harassment in the form of unkind words or behaviour					
6	I have unachievable deadlines					
7	If work gets difficult, my colleagues will help me					
8	I am given supportive feedback on the work I do					
9	I have to work very intensively					
10	I have a say in my own work speed					
11	I am clear what my duties and responsibilities are					
12	I have to neglect some tasks because I have too much to do					
13	I am clear about the goals and objectives for my Service Team					
14	There is friction or anger between colleagues					
15	I have a choice in deciding how I do my work					
16	I am unable to take sufficient breaks					
17	I understand how my work fits into the overall aim of the organisation					

Appendix 5

Stress Indicator Questionnaire

		Never	Seldom	Sometimes	Often	Always
18	I am pressured to work long hours					
19	I have a choice in deciding what I do at work					
20	I have to work very fast					
21	I am subject to bullying at work					
22	I have unrealistic time pressures					
23	I can rely on my line manager to help me out with a work problem					
24	I get help and support I need from colleagues					
25	I have some say over the way I work					
26	I have sufficient opportunities to question managers about change at work					
27	I receive the respect at work I deserve from my colleagues					
28	Staff are always consulted about change at work					
29	I can talk to my line manager about something that has upset or annoyed me about work					
30	My working time can be flexible					
31	My colleagues are willing to listen to my work-related problems					
32	When changes are made at work, I am clear how they will work out in practice					
33	I am supported through emotionally demanding work					
34	Relationships at work are strained					
35	My line manager encourages me at work					

Thank you for completing the questionnaire, please return it to your line manager or the person who asked you complete it.