AYLESHAM PARISH COUNCIL

Workplace Stress Management Policy

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1.   INTRODUCTION

Across the Country, more workdays are lost through stress than any other health issue. Therefore, Aylesham Parish Council believes that it is in the best interests of the Council and the community that the Council strives to make optimum use of the skills and talents of its employees. It recognises that, in delivering services to its residents, employees are subject to pressures and that, in the way it manages its human resources, the Council is committed to ensuring that pressures are not excessive nor to a level that can cause harm to an individual.

The Council also recognises that:

Demands: workload, work patterns and the work environment
Control: the amount of say staff have in how they do their work
Support: encouragement, and resources provided by BrightHR
Relationships: positive working to avoid conflict and dealing with unacceptable behaviour
Role: the understanding by employees and the avoidance of conflicting roles
Change: the organisation and management of large and small change within the organisation are key to the control of adverse pressures or stress at work and is committed to working with the staff and their representatives to protect the health, safety and welfare of all employees.

Aylesham Parish Council's aims and objectives are only achievable with the sustained effort, support and commitment of all its members and staff.

The Parish Council's belief in the pursuit of excellence in all its dealings with customers, employees and other bodies is stated in its health and safety policies and these encourage all staff to not only be aware of their own legal responsibilities but to be actively involved in developing a positive and progressive safety culture. The need to minimise work-related stress and alleviate its effects when it occurs is paramount in the context of the safety culture and this document is intended to define Aylesham Parish Council's policy for minimising the risks to health and safety at work from the effects of stress.

1.1 In formulating this policy, the Council recognises that:

(1) anyone can suffer from stress
(2) that stress is not a mental illness, but the natural reaction people have to excessive pressures and demands imposed on them
(3) that ill-health effects can often be caused by stress due to problems outside work, which may then affect the employee's performance and relationships at work and that, as the employer, it can take positive steps to assist staff by examining the context to work and content of work to control the stress levels at source before referring those affected for counselling sessions

(4) that there are in fact beneficial effects of reasonable pressure and challenge, which stimulate and motivates the workforce

(5) people have a varying ability to deal with the pressures encountered in life and some people are particularly vulnerable, but if the emotional and physical demands on a person are greater than their capacity to cope with them, ill-health may occur.

1.2 The likelihood of harm occurring will be influenced by factors such as age, experience, training, current state of health and financial or personal relationship problems. In a few cases where breakdown occurs, the individual may take a long time to recover or may never fully return to his or her previous state of health.

1.3 It is not possible to predict individual responses to all sources of stress at work, since some people are stimulated by challenges that may overwhelm others. However, certain factors are known to be associated with adverse effects on health and well-being, which may be physical, psychological or a combination of each.

1.4 The Parish Council acknowledges its duties under health and safety legislation. The Health and Safety at Work etc. Act 1974 requires the Council to ensure, so far as is reasonably practicable, the health, safety and welfare at work of all its employees. Under the Management of Health and Safety at Work Regulations 1999, the Council is required to make a suitable and sufficient assessment of the risks to the health and safety of its employees to which they are exposed whilst they are at work."

1.5 "Risks to health" includes stress and the Council accepts its legal duties to take reasonable steps to make sure it does not cause or exacerbate work related stress to an unacceptable level to its employees. In particular, it will address the following statutory obligations:

- duty to carry out a suitable and sufficient risk assessment
- duty to apply the principles of prevention
- duty to ensure employees' capability and to provide training
- duty to ensure welfare of young people.

1.6 Although there is no legal duty on the Council to prevent ill-health caused by stress due to problems outside work (e.g. domestic and personal issues), the Council recognises that non-work problems can make it difficult for people to cope with the pressures of work and that their performance at work might suffer. Therefore, the Council will try its utmost to empathise with employees' domestic situations without undue interference and to support employees where possible, with a view to enabling the employee to achieve their full capability.

1.7 Whenever feasible, the Council will encourage and support employees to take steps to manage their own stress. Support may be through the application of Council policies– such as Dignity and Respect at Work or Discipline, and/or by encouraging staff to consult their own General Practitioner, or other medical support as may be appropriate.

2. STATEMENT OF INTENT

2.1   Aylesham Parish Council strives to create an environment where staff are able to undertake stimulating, challenging and satisfying work which does not adversely affect their health and wellbeing. Our employment policies are designed to support staff to be successful in their day-to-day activities and their future development.

2.2   The Council recognises that there are occasions when pressures at work and/or home can affect people's behaviour and their ability to achieve the required standards of performance within their job. Stress can have far reaching affects both on the health and the performance of an individual employee as well as on colleagues and the organisation.

3. WHAT IS STRESS?

3.1   A certain amount of both physical and mental stimulation is essential for healthy living. Too much or too little can cause overload or boredom which are unhealthy and classed as stress.

3.2   Stress occurs when there is an imbalance between the demands/pressures on an individual and their ability to cope. It is a reaction people experience when faced with excessive pressures or other types of demand that are placed upon them. It arises when they worry that they cannot cope. It can affect people who have too much work and cannot deal with it as much as those who have too little work and become bored and disillusioned.

3.3   The Health and Safety Executive defines stress as "the adverse reaction people have to excessive pressures or other types of demands placed on them". Defining stress in this way focuses attention on the work-related causes and the control measures required. It also acknowledges the distinction that pressure, if managed properly, may be positive, rather than stress, which can be harmful.

4.RESPONSIBILITIES

4.1 Employer's Responsibilities

4.1.1   To carry out and record risk assessments, where appropriate, to minimise the stress hazards involved in any work activity.

4.1.2   To implement effective control measures, precautions, employment adjustments and training to reduce the health risks associated with stress hazards and to communicate such controls to the staff concerned.

4.1.3   To ensure that changes in working procedures are planned and relevant systems and controls are in place to ensure that:

- the changes are risk assessed
- appropriate consultation takes place
- the process is managed sensitively
- effective communication is maintained throughout.

4.1.4   To ensure that adequate training is given relating to the identification and risk assessment of stress hazards and appropriate controls to minimise them.

4.1.5   To encourage staff to raise problems, which are likely to cause health or stress hazards in the workplace, and to jointly initiate appropriate action (e.g. through supervision, one-to-one or performance and development review scheme).

4.1.6   To ensure the work environment, job design and facilities provided to carry out tasks are, as far as reasonability practicable, suitable and adequate for the work undertaken.

4.1.7 To ensure that, in the event of a member of staff being absent from work as a result of stress in their job:

- A review of the risk assessment has been completed
- Any further controls identified following the assessment process are implemented.

4.2 Employee Responsibilities

4.2.1   To acknowledge that the management of health and stress hazards in the workplace is a joint responsibility between Aylesham Parish Council and its employees.

4.2.2   To take personal preventative action in terms of stress management.

4.2.3   To highlight to the Council through the correct procedure working practices and environments which, if allowed to continue, may lead to stress or other health related hazards.

4.2.4   To identify health and stress related hazards in themselves, at the earliest opportunity, and to seek appropriate help.

4.2.5   To avoid harmful ways of coping with stress, such as being aware that excessive drinking and smoking can increase stress levels.

4.2.6   To respect the needs of others and to take responsibility for actions which may have an effect on the health of other individuals.

4.2.7 To ensure annual leave and flexible working are used to good effect in reducing stress hazards.

5. STRATEGIES TO DEAL WITH STRESS

5.1 General

There is no single way of preventing stress or ensuring that work issues do not contribute to stress. As previously outlined, people do not necessarily react in the same way to pressure/demands. Equally, if staff are showing signs of stress, this should not be seen as a sign of 'failure' or 'inadequacy'. We all from time-to-time display signs of stress but it is how we cope with the stress that is the important factor.

There are a number of strategies that can be used both by staff and managers to identify and deal with potential stressful situations and to look at ways of helping staff who are experiencing stress.

5.1.1 It is the responsibility of the Council to ensure that:

- they set clear objectives, have good communication channels, involve staff in decision making, provide management support and appropriate training
- all jobs are risk assessed regularly and that measures are put into place to address jobs with high demands/pressures
- staff are treated with respect and dignity, training is available in interpersonal skills, effective systems are in place for dealing with interpersonal conflict e.g. bullying/harassment
- they set realistic deadlines, plan and agree working hours, look at flexibility in work schedules
- tasks and responsibilities are well defined, ways of avoiding boring repetitive jobs are considered, skills are used appropriately, suitable training is provided
- they seek help/advice when required.

5.1.2 It is each employee's responsibility to ensure that they are fit for work and should:
- highlight to the Council in an appropriate way, any health or stress related matters that may affect their work
- avoid harmful ways of coping with stress, e.g. excessive drinking, smoking, drug taking
- respect the needs of others
- ensure that they take adequate breaks and get sufficient sleep
- ensure that annual leave and flexible working hours are used to good effect.

6. ACTION BY THE COUNCIL AND EMPLOYEES

6.1 Action by employees
6.1.1   Employees have duties under Section 7 the Health and Safety at Work etc Act 1974 to cooperate with their employer to enable the employer to comply with statutory duties for health and safety.

6.1.2   Under the Management of Health and Safety at Work Regulations 1999, employees must inform the Council of any work situation which might present a serious and imminent danger. Employees should also notify any shortcomings in the health and safety arrangements, even when no immediate danger exists, so that the employer can take remedial action if needed.

6.1.3   To the above end, employees are encouraged to participate in the risk assessment process and MUST inform the Council in the appropriate way of any proposed or existing policies, procedures and practices, which might affect or is already affecting the staff with stress. If the Council is not made aware of a problem, then they cannot be of assistance.

6.1.4   Mental and physical health are closely linked. All employees therefore are encouraged by the Council to adopt a healthy lifestyle, which enables a more holistic management and control of stressful situations. In particular, the following are promoted:

- Healthy eating
- Stopping smoking
- Keeping to Government's recommendations as regards alcohol consumption
- Reducing caffeine intake
- Regular exercise
- Inclusion of relaxation techniques in daily routines
- Developing a support network for sharing and discussing concerns.

6.1.5   Individuals can benefit greatly from becoming more aware of their own range of feelings and reactions, particularly the causes of stressful situations in their home and work, learning from past experiences and ways of dealing with them.

6.1.6   It is important for individuals to recognise when they need help and support from friends, family, colleagues or, ultimately, from professionals. People can gain immensely from sharing experiences with a network of support individuals and / or groups and thus be able to make the necessary adjustments to deal with stressful situations.

6.2 JOINT ACTION BY THE COUNCIL AND STAFF

6.2.1   Because the causes, effects and solutions to stress-related problems involve so many factors and are very dependent on individuals, a rigid procedure for handling such issues cannot be provided. However, the following procedure provides a framework for management action:

Initial action when stress is suspected:

6.2.2   Where an employee's work performance and/or behaviour becomes a cause for concern, or both factors indicate STRESS as a primary factor, or where an employee considers that they are affected by undue pressure, then the Chief Executive Officer or Chair of the Council should:

6.2.3   Discuss the matter fully with the employee with a view to monitoring work performance or behaviour over a defined period of time, agreed by the Chief Executive Officer/Chair of the Council and employee

6.2.4   Discuss managerial concerns with the employee and explore the causal factors. Some problems may be resolved at this stage. This should form part of the appraisal system but should not be put off until the next appraisal meeting if the issues are currently a cause for concern. Regular team meetings and one-to-one meetings should be in place to ensure issues are discussed frequently and any remedial actions taken.

6.2.5   The manager should carry out a risk assessment (or revise an existing one) as outlined in Section 5 above.

6.2.6   Where appropriate, employees who agree to suitable recommendations or treatment will have the support of the organisation.

6.2.7   The manager should maintain periodic contact with the employee throughout any absence to monitor progress and assess changes in support requirements.

6.2.8   Recommendations for changes in an employee's work, or working environment, made by the Council's advisers, will be accommodated, where reasonably practicable, by the organisation. This will enable the individual to continue to be supported at work during treatment or successfully return to work after a period of absence.

6.2.9   The Line Manager will monitor the individual's progress during the period of supported employment, or a defined period on return to work, and assess the need for continued support. Where an employee has suffered a stress-related illness and is not under medical supervision, the employee may be required to undergo a medical assessment before returning to work. A decision must then be taken on future work position, following the outcome of a risk assessment in the workplace.

Unacknowledged Stress Problems

6.2.10 Where stress-related problems or behaviour are seen to affect an employee's ability to do the job, but are not acknowledged or acted upon by the individual, then the Chief Executive Officer or Chair of the Council should:

6.2.11 Discuss deficiency in work performance/behaviour with the employee, making him/her aware that a problem exists.

6.2.12 Discuss the available options for promotion of improvement, which may involve a suitable referral, changes to the workplace or task, and / or take other appropriate action or intervention.

6.2.13 At all stages of the process, the parties should conduct themselves in an appropriate manner as regards confidentiality, use of language and respect for the individuals.

A - SIGNS AND EFFECTS OF STRESS

A.1   All staff are encouraged to become aware of signs of stress in others so that any early symptoms can be resolved. Stress can become noticeable and show one or more of the following symptoms:

Personal / Physical Effects

- Body Language
- Tone of voice
- Tearfulness
- Tense posture
- Nail biting
- Frowning
- Twitching
- Changing sleeping patters
- Blurred vision
- Aches in neck/shoulders
- Increased sweating
- Tiredness
- Lowering of resistance to infection
- Increased smoking
- Increased coffee driving
- Alcohol or drug abuse
- Weight change / skipping meals
- Breathlessness
- Increased colds and other infections
- Trembling and shaking
- Pallor or blushing, skin rashes
- Raised heart rate
- Raised breathing rate
- Headaches
- Dizziness
- Anxiety or depression

Workplace Effects

- Increased absenteeism
- Reduced efficiency and output
- Poor time management
- Frustration/aggression
- Poor decision making
- Impaired judgement
- Low morale/commitment
- Lateness for work/meetings
- Poor performance
- Clock watching/leaving early
- Social withdrawal
- Conflict with other staff
- Mood swings and loss of temper
- Lack of self esteem
- Over-reactions
- Failure to meet deadlines
- Poor quality of work
- Increased errors and/or accidents

- Working increasingly long hours but for diminished returns

- Unexpected difficulties with training or examinations

Clearly, the presence of one or more of the above does not in itself necessarily mean that a person is suffering from stress (e.g. poor timekeeping and time management). Managers may, however, need to deal with the issues because the rest of the team could become affected (e.g. an increase in absenteeism due to alcohol intake 'the night before' would lead to increased workload for the rest of the team).

A.2   Over a longer period, the effects of stress may also contribute to chronic health problems such as raised blood pressure, heart disease and stomach ulcers. Responses to stress vary in individuals; over time, some may primarily experience physical symptoms while others may experience psychological disturbance. These effects however are usually short lived and cause no long-lasting harm. If the pressures recede, there is often a quick return to normal.

A.3   In cost terms, sickness, absenteeism, reduced productivity and loss of trained Human Resources, with associated replacement and recruitment costs, can add up to a lot of money that could be better spent in other areas. Therefore, once a stress-related problem has been recognised, it is often cost-beneficial for the organisation, and the manager, to do something about it. Indirect costs related to decline in the quality of service and increased demand on health service resources are difficult to quantify but should also be recognised.

B - CAUSES AND RISK FACTORS

B.1   The process of risk assessment involves identification of hazards as its first step. The Health and Safety Executive have identified seven broad categories of "risk factors" for stress. These are outlined below and amplified further within the Stress Audit and Risk Assessment paperwork. It is important to recognise that stress is often the result of the combined effect of a number of different inter-related factors, as well as striking the right work-life balance.

B.1.1   Culture

The work culture is an important factor to consider. Communication, support and mutual respect form the essence of this risk factor. The way these issues are embraced influences how committed the employees feel towards the organisation and how committed they feel the organisation is to their welfare. It also affects how willing the employees are to share matters of concern.

B.1.2   Demands

Demands on individuals are often quoted as the main cause of stress and can be broken down into:

(1) work overload
(2) work underload
(3) physical environment
(4) psychosocial environment.

Work Overload

Work-overload happens when there is an excessive and unreasonable amount of work to do in time available or when the work is beyond the capability of the employee. The latter can happen if the employee has been asked to undertake a task without knowledge or the intellectual or physical capacity to do the work or if they have been set an impossible task regardless of resource or ability.

The effects of excessive work overload on employees may lead to problems such as detrimental effects to performance at work, on family and social life.

Work-overload can also occur when tasks are set with unreasonable deadlines or conflicting priorities.

The Management of Health and Safety at Work Regulations 1999 requires employers to take into account an employee's capability and training when work is allocated. Providing adequate training for the job is an important factor, especially stressed in these Regulations for young workers who may not be experienced enough to deal with demanding, aggressive and violent people or who may find it difficult to make decisions under pressure.

Work-Underload

It is also the case that a reasonable degree of challenge and pressure keeps staff interested in the work and motivated. Job under-load, associated with little work or constant, boring and under-stimulating work can lead to dissatisfaction and stress.

Physical Environment

The following physical factors can have an effect on a person's well-being at work, noise, temperature, ventilation, humidity, lighting, hygiene and welfare facilities. Excessive exposure to adverse conditions has been shown to cause fatigue, headaches, irritability, effects on attention span and ability to concentrate, as a result of which employees make greater number of errors, their performance is compromised, and their health is jeopardised.

Psycho-Social Environment

The Council's function inherently involves dealing with the public, as a result of which the staff can be exposed to aggressive or violent behaviour. Being sworn at, threatened or physically assaulted, is likely to affect employees emotionally and physically. Aylesham Parish Council recognises this and has a robust and supportive policy on Aggression at Work.

B.1.3   Control

The less that staff are involved with discussions about their work, the more they tend to become dissatisfied. Research has shown a correlation between non-participation and stress and ill-health. Aylesha, Parish Council believes that the revised Performance and Development Plan will increase staff consultation and staff involvement in their work as well as departmental and corporate plans.

B.1.4   Relationships

Positive interaction with others at work is an important factor in motivation, support and encouragement. Negative interaction, however, can take the form of bullying and harassment from managers, supervisors, peers and subordinates. Bullying and harassment are unacceptable to Aylesham Parish Council and policies and procedures are in place to combat this potential source of stress at work (see Dignity at Work Policy).

Bullying

The HSE refer to bullying as "persistent unacceptable behaviour (or a single, grossly unacceptable act) by one or more individuals working in the organisation against one or more employees". It includes:

- Any act or threat of physical violence
- Persistent or gross verbal abuse (including shouting or swearing)
- Insubordination
- Victimisation, humiliation or ridicule
- Libel, slander or malicious gossip
- Spying, pestering, or other inappropriate intrusive questioning, particularly into personal or domestic life
- Setting impossible or arbitrary objectives or deadlines
- Excessive supervision
- Unjustified fault-finding
- Unreasonably withholding information that the employee should have an expectation of being given; exclusion from meetings that the employee should have a reasonable expectation of attending or other forms of unreasonable ignoring of the employee
- Refusing, without reasonable cause, reasonable requests for leave or training
- Maliciously preventing career development.

Harassment

HSE's definition of 'harassment' means unwanted conduct based on sex (including transgender status), race, colour, religion, nationality, ethnic or national origin or disability that affects the dignity of people at work.

B.1.5   Change

It is inevitable for most organisations to have to undergo change to keep up with central government requirements, new technology, restructuring and new working practices. Poor

management of change can lead to individuals feeling anxious about their employment status and reporting work-related stress.

Subtler, frequent, changes can affect staff just as much as a large-scale change, if not properly managed. Social changes (e.g. if staff are now working with a completely different group of people) may have more of an impact on the individual than technological or geographical changes.

B.1.6   Role
Stress can be produced if a person's role in the organisation is not clearly defined and misunderstood and if the expectations placed on them conflict. Role conflict and 'role ambiguity' are two potentially stressful areas to be considered:

Role Conflict
Role conflict exists when an individual is torn by conflicting job demands or by doing things he or she does not really want to do or things that the individual does not believe are part of their job. Workers may often feel themselves torn between two groups of people who demand different types of behaviour or who believe the job entails different functions.

Role Ambiguity
Role ambiguity arises when individuals do not have a clear picture about their work objectives, their co-workers' expectations of them and the scope and responsibilities of their job. Often this ambiguity results simply because a manager or supervisor has never adequately explained what is required of them or because the job has changed without this being acknowledged in the job description.

A wide range of situations can create role ambiguity. For example, entering a new job or department, a promotion or transfer, a new manager, the first supervisory responsibility or adapting to a change in the structure of the organisation.

B.1.7 Support, training and factors unique to the individual
As mentioned in paragraph 2.3 above, the Health and Safety at Work etc Act 1974 and the Management of Health and Safety at Work Regulations 1999 require that every employer provides adequate health and safety information, instruction, and training. This can be extended to the staff receiving sufficient training to undertake the core functions of their jobs, without which they could be affected by stress.

When new members of staff are recruited, so far as possible, they should be matched to the job (in terms of skills, ability, capability and commitment) and should receive appropriate induction, during which they are made aware of various corporate policies including the policy on work-related stress.

The way that both new and existing staff are supported is key to reducing, or moderating, work-related stress. Support includes offering help in times of crisis and informally congratulating a member of the team for a job well done.

Low social support at work has been associated with poor mental health, poor health functioning and increased sickness absence. However, high social support at work has a protective effect, being associated with reduced risk of both short and long spells of sickness absence. Aylesham Parish Council values its staff and strives to guide managers at all levels through positive Human Resource intervention.

Managers should adopt a positive attitude even when the work has not been completed to the standards required. Provision of constructive and supportive advice, instead of reprimanding the staff, is more likely to be productive – the staff will learn from past mistakes instead of becoming anxious about undertaking similar tasks in the future.

Managers should take into account the 'make-up' of the team, appreciating that some members may thrive on working to tight deadlines, whilst others may like to plan their work so that they know what they have to do and when. Therefore, as far as possible, managers should try to cater for these individual differences by talking to their staff as a team; there might be scope to allocate the work in a way that suits all team members or that the work is managed in a different way for different people.

Finally, the HSE advises that stress prevention rather than stress management is the answer. "Do not try to train staff to become 'stress-resistant'".

-End of Policy-

Chair Signature	Print Name	Date
Officer Signature	**Print name**	**Date**
Date of policy adoption		
Review Date		