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## HEALTH AND SAFETY EXECUTIVE

### The HSE Board

#### Reducing Stress at Work in HSE: Issues and recommendations arising from stress management surveys

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#### Issue

1. This paper summarises the findings from the approach HSE has adopted for tackling work related stress. The key finding is that staff across HSE report the extent of **change** as being the most significant factor affecting their well-being at work. There is a consequent lack of clarity about what is expected of them (**role**) and how this relates to the roles of others (**relationships**) and resulting discomfort from new **demands**.

The paper recommends action, taking account of the discussion at the SCS Leadership meeting and consideration of paper B/05/055, 'Change In HSE: Getting A Grip'. The recommended action also aims to align the process in HSE more closely with our published guidance on the Management Standards approach.

#### Timing

2. Stress survey activity has been going on since April of this year. The recent Exchange Briefing exercise will undoubtedly also have contributed relevant information. Momentum needs to be maintained. While the pursuit of a clearer focus on the issues in a complex and changing organisation meant the process could not be unduly accelerated, it is important that we now get quickly to the most pertinent issues and take action, in terms that staff will recognise as the senior management team being actively engaged in understanding and addressing their concerns.

#### Recommendation

3. That the Board:
- Agrees that managing stress will be an explicit part of the Corporate change management activity that will follow from the recent SCS conference.
  - Agrees the other actions at para 21.

## Background

4. The Board agreed previously to adopt a target for managing stress - that is, to be in the top twenty percent for the standard for each of the six primary sources of stress at work under the Management Standards regime.

5. The updating of the risk assessment process started with an initial staff survey in April 2005, which was completed by sixty one percent of all staff. The headline findings of the survey were communicated to the Board at the July 2005 Meeting. The NOP report is attached for reference (Annex 2).

6. Following that analysis, focus group sessions took place across HSE and reported in August and September. The majority of these were facilitated, with independent facilitators being provided for twenty-five groups. Other forms of consultation meetings also took place. However, the survey and focus group activity has not yielded quite the degree of clarity that might have been hoped for. There are learning points for us from the process and from our application of the Management Standards approach. These include:

- The involvement of trade union health and safety representatives was not specifically planned and has been patchy. Their opportunity to shape the collection of information and contribute to the analysis and interpretation of findings was therefore limited. The trades unions have a perception of an inconsistent approach across HSE and departures, without further consultation, from the agreements reached at the CHSC about the conduct of the focus group process.
- The presentation of information from both the statistical survey and focus groups was not always easy to interpret, both by managers and staff.
- Where facilitated focus groups were used, the facilitators were not always able to challenge and probe perceptions accurately, partly due to the broad-brush breakdown that resulted from the statistical survey and partly from insufficient knowledge of the nature of the work and organisation represented at the focus groups. Problems were often recorded as being for “the Board/top of the organisation” to sort out when more rapid local action might have helped.
- Directorate and Divisional analysis of the outcomes from the focus groups has not necessarily been able to take place until now, nor action plans yet produced.

*Nevertheless, some clear high level messages have emerged from the process.*

7. HSE has some way to go to meet its own target of being within the top twenty percent of organisations. HSE continues to loose in excess of six thousand working days (WTE) to stress and depressive illness each year, although this is for both work related and non-work related causes. The position has not shown any significant improvement over the last three years. In 2004/2005, there were thirty-eight reports of work related stress, the same as in 2003/2004. This year, to the end of September, there have been twenty-

one cases of work related stress which gives a projected number for the year end of forty-two.

## **Argument**

8. The cross-cutting issues which have clearly emerged from the process so far are:

- Handling of change
- Clarity of role and consequent demands
- Working relationships

More specific comments which were commonly reported from focus groups are listed at Annex 1.

### Handling of Change

9. The clear message from the survey activity is that staff across HSE perceive change as affecting their well-being. (Pay and reward policies figured far less.) There were issues to do with the pace of change, planning, timing, phasing, communications and skills for new roles, as well as the nature of the changes. These varied from structural and organisational changes to different ways of working, the move to greater programme and project working, and to moves to open plan office accommodation.

### Clarity of Role and Demands

10. The interaction between change, role and demands is a strong reoccurring theme throughout the feedback from the focus groups. Changes in role have led to staff feeling uncomfortable with new demands. Many staff report being unclear what is expected of them. The perceived lack of clarity extends to uncertainty over relative priorities - staff are not sure what tasks could be dropped and what is high priority during and after change. There is a feeling that workloads only increase and that these were not being managed during times of change.

### Relationships

11. Change has produced uncertainties about others' roles and responsibilities and this has led to more demands while these are clarified.

12. There were also issues about respecting others' roles. Behaviour was an issue in terms of how different disciplines recognise, understand and value each others' contributions. While levels of bullying, compared with other organisations, are not high, it was identified as a problem in most parts of HSE. Focus groups felt that greater clarity was needed about the difference between firm management and unacceptable behaviour. The behaviour of some visiting staff towards administrative staff is still an issue in some quarters. Some focus groups felt that line managers often lacked people management skill, and saw their role primarily as chasing outputs.

13. These findings are consistent with the argument in the "Getting a Grip" paper and have already largely been recognised in the themes which came out of the SCS conference. Much work is already underway which will clearly help towards managing these sources of discomfort for staff - for instance the

HR modernisation road map includes a number work streams which will address the development of skills, as well as cultural, leadership and work force behaviours. Annex1 contains a list of actions already underway to address some of the specific issues which were common findings from the focus groups.

14. The case for a more corporate, cohesive and coherent approach to managing the change agenda was set out clearly in the “getting a grip” paper. Whether or not a corporate change programme is badged as such for the purpose of communications to staff (and the paper advocated not doing so) it seems clear that what emerged from the SCS conference was, in fact, an early skeleton for such a change programme. An integral part of this, particularly with regard to the necessary clarity on direction, priorities and personal accountabilities and the making of connections with wider internal and external agendas, is going to be a prominent communications plan. Components of this are already in progress.

15. It is important to recognise the implications for staff at all levels from their perspectives – and if it means the acquisition of significant new skills (e.g. in managing contracts, in marketing rather than writing guidance) then there needs to be clarity about this and a consistently managed process to achieve them.

16. There therefore appears to be a strong convergence between what staff are looking for by way of clarity, leadership and management and what the senior team have already recognised is necessary for the success of HSE’s business. Even though the size of the task is great, the findings from the stress surveys reinforce the imperative to embark on a comprehensive, corporate change management programme.

### Good News

17. In addition, the focus group activity did highlight good examples of addressing work pressures in a positive way. Examples include:

- A clear message from peer (same band) focus groups that staff valued their immediate colleagues and there appears to be a culture of mutual support throughout most of HSE.
- Legal Advisors had made big improvements in improving managers’ support over the last year.
- The Band 6 induction process in FOD .
- Giving staff the opportunity to discuss stress in focus groups
- A culture in many parts of HSE where staff can discuss problems
- Good managers and management practices do exist in HSE.

### **Presentation**

18..HSE would be expected, by both its staff and by external stakeholders, to be implementing its own guidance fully. There is likely to be external interest in the findings from our survey and management of the process. HSE needs to be prepared to share what we did and the action we are taking.

19. An important issue for getting staff buy-in, as well as greater insight into both examples of good practice and specific issues to be addressed, is greater involvement of employee health and safety representatives, along with management, in steering the interpretation of results, the agreement of action, the monitoring of progress, and the planning of follow-up surveys (we will need to be able to measure the effectiveness of the actions).

### **Costs and Benefits and Financial/Resource Implications for HSE**

20. It is suggested that these would be largely subsumed within the programme of work envisaged by the SCS conference.

### **Action**

21. The Board is requested to:

- Make the management of stress related risk an explicit part of the change management activity from the SCS conference. Articulating this should be a specific part the communications plan.
- Agree to the reconstitution of the management/trade union stress steering group, as a sub-group of the Corporate H&S Committee, and actively support its work of developing HSE-wide actions. Board representation at the group would be welcomed and would be enthusiastically received by the trade unions.
- Arrange for Directorate and Divisional action plans to be produced, clearly responding to issues from specific focus groups, with staff and, where present, trade union involvement to encourage the learning of lessons and rewarding of success. Recognising that in some Directorates there is a substantial amount of analysis required, the end of January is proposed as a reasonable time for these to be completed and being actioned.
- Ensure consistent implementation of agreed actions.
- Agree to align a repeat stress survey with the next staff attitude survey, to enable monitoring of progress.

### **Contact**

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**Annex 1: Work already underway and in development to address issues from focus groups**

| <b>Stress Management Standard</b> | <b>Outcome from Focus Groups</b>  | <b>Work already underway or planned to address these issues</b>  |
|-----------------------------------|---|--|
| <b>1. Change</b>                  | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Change is seriously affecting staff well-being</li> <li>• Staff feel unsupported during change</li> <li>• When staff are consulted the results disappear into a black hole</li> <li>• Not enough opportunity is given to staff to comment on issues of national importance</li> <li>• During change people feel as if they lose a sense of what they are supposed to be doing</li> <li>• People don't feel listened to when consultation does take place</li> <li>• Changes in accommodation are particularly stressful</li> </ul> | <p>Stronger, clearer vision for HSE as an organisation – corporate statement on where we want to get to and reasons why we must change.</p> <p>Strengthen two way communications through existing channels - exchange briefings, express and e-express and ensure business change programmes incorporate communications strategy through project and programme governance. More communication along the lines of “you said &amp; we did”</p> <p>Look at improvements to managing change more effectively within HSE through project and programme and management training. Ensure this is taken forward through the existing work on ‘embedding project and programme working’ and the development of L&amp;D strategy and management capabilities project.</p> <p>Look at improvements to employee support arrangements eg employee assistance service, occupational health provision. Through the H&amp;S communications strategy ensure line managers and H&amp;S site co-ordinators raise awareness of these services. Strengthen the existing service provision through contract management arrangements.</p> |
| <b>2. Demands</b>                 | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Some staff have more than one line manager making oversight of work and accountability strained</li> <li>• People suffer from ‘too much information’ – particularly email traffic</li> <li>• Project work is often felt to be badly organised and managed</li> <li>• People feel that they have too many conflicting priorities.</li> <li>• Too many people in the organisation are doing similar things</li> <li>• The stress that management is under is passed down to other staff members</li> </ul>                           | <p>Include within the project and programme skills training the challenges of managing people within this way of working, and encourage staff to recognise potential conflicts and have the confidence to raise these issues.</p> <p>Management capabilities project is seeking to redefine the expectations of managers, improve management skills and encourage fewer, better managers.</p> <p>Reinforce through the communications strategy existing policy on the golden rules of email. Use the transition to Microsoft Outlook as an opportunity to make improvements.</p>   |

| Stress Management Standard   | Outcome from Focus Groups   | Work already underway or planned to address these issues  |
|------------------------------|---|---|
| <b>3. Role</b>               | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Line managers don't always have the necessary people skills needed for the job.</li> <li>• Lack of clarity over job descriptions prior to appointment can lead to confusion afterwards</li> <li>• Staff don't feel appropriately appreciated or commended by existing rewards for good performance</li> <li>• It's very difficult to know who does what and when people are available</li> <li>• Staff sometimes feel out of their depth regarding their skills</li> </ul> | <p>The HR Modernisation roadmap includes a number of work streams to address these areas:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• L&amp;D Strategy under development (Dec 05)</li> <li>• Development of HSE core skills framework and application of the framework to staff development (March-June 06)</li> <li>• Review of HPA process (March 06)</li> <li>• HRST SAP e-Hr will replace the Staff Directory to provide a better picture of people's position in the organisation (April 06)</li> <li>• Management Capabilities will place more greater priority and value on people management skills</li> </ul>   |
| <b>4. Management support</b> | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• The board doesn't value the work that staff do</li> <li>• When thanks is given it's too vague</li> <li>• Staff report a divide between HQ staff and field staff</li> <li>• Staff feel that Board members should have a strong foundation in health and safety</li> <li>• When it comes to values there's a sense that the Board are not leading the way</li> <li>• Some staff members have been on TP for extended periods of time</li> </ul>                              | <p>Initiatives at Board level include H&amp;S leadership training, SCS performance management development programme and it also planned to completely re-engineer SCS performance management processes to align with the Professional Skills for Government Framework (March 06)</p> <p>Raising awareness of roles and responsibilities across the organisation through exchange briefing and more interchange opportunities. Recognise business change projects that aim to release resource to front-line activity eg back office review and HRST.</p> <p>T/Ps are currently monitored and challenged. Arrangements are currently being examined under the review of the internal vacancy filling system.</p> |

| Stress Management Standard | Outcome from Focus Groups   | Work already underway or planned to address these issues   |
|----------------------------|---|--|
| <b>5. Relationships</b>    | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Staff report being exposed to unacceptable behaviour from others in the organisation</li> <li>• Bullying was raised as an issue although some expressed a concern that it was being confused with something less objectionable</li> <li>• Where relationships break down there's seems to be no way to get resolution</li> <li>• There is sometimes a divide between visiting staff and their admin support</li> <li>• Line managers don't know what to do when internal conflict or stress occurs</li> <li>• The relationship between HSL and HSE is not what it should be</li> </ul> | <p>Improving guidance and awareness to line managers on unacceptable behaviours and resolving conflict through the Management Capabilities project. The Board need to lead on this area.</p> <p>Promote the positive work within some Divisions to improve relationships and follow up the outcomes of the focus groups to highlight 'hot spots'.</p> <p>Refresh the working relationships through leadership from the new Chief Executives (HSL and HSE).</p> |
| <b>6. Control</b>          | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Project working leads to a sense of loss of autonomy</li> <li>• Scotland, Wales and England increasingly have different pressures to work under. One size fits all may not work across the country</li> <li>• Poorly designed IT equipment and programmes lead to frustration</li> </ul>   | <p>Ensure this is taken forward through the existing work on 'embedding project and programme working.</p> <p>Specifications for new IT systems already include strict usability assessments and adaptability assessments for staff with special needs.</p>  |