A guide to writing and implementing a physical activity policy in the workplace

Background

In Scotland, around 60% of the population do not participate in levels of physical activity that will promote good health. The risk of inactivity has been shown to be comparable to that of cigarette smoking or high blood pressure.

It makes good business sense to promote the physical activity among your employees. There is increasing evidence of a strong link between health and productivity; and regular exercisers are consistently shown to utilise less sick leave that those who do not exercise.

Why a policy?

- A physical activity policy is a written document which includes a statement of intent about how a company proposes to address physical activity issues in the workplace.
- A policy offers the opportunity for management to demonstrate a formal commitment to the health of your employees.
- A policy will outline physical activity goals with clear direction and methods for achieving these goals.
- A policy offers a structured and coordinated approach to improving the physical activity status of your workforce.
- A policy offers a basis for consultation with staff over the matter and is likely to be well received. Staff involvement is also an important step in encouraging people to take more control over their physical activity choices.
- A physical activity policy will be complementary to any existing policies within the company such as tobacco or alcohol.
- A policy will give recognition to the good physical activity practices already present in many companies.

A positive policy

One of the most notable benefits of adopting a physical activity policy in a workplace is the way in which the workforce perceives the policy. Unlike many other policies which may appear restrictive to the employee, a physical activity policy makes a very positive statement about the value a company places on the health and well-being of it's workforce. Adopting such a policy is a very practical way of improving company public relations both internally and externally.

The benefits of the policy may include:-

- ✓ Healthier and more energetic staff
- ✓ Better physical activity habits among staff
- ✓ Less sickness and long-term health problems linked to physical inactivity
- ✓ Improved staff relations
- ✓ Good company public relations
- ✓ Reduced absenteeism
- ✓ Increased productivity
- ✓ Enhanced employee recruitment

A step-by-step guide to a workplace physical activity policy

Step 1 – Inform and consult your workforce

- ✓ You may want to set up a short-life working group to develop the policy, with representatives from all sections of the workforce
- ✓ If your organisation has registered for Scotland's Health at Work Award Scheme, the health promotion working group can take on responsibility for developing the policy
- ✓ Inform employees about the development of the policy and explain why a policy is being introduced
- ✓ Explain the benefits of an exercise policy and outline what employees can gain from it
- ✓ Invite ideas and suggestions – ask for volunteers to assist with the developmental process

Step 2 – Identify the needs of employees

- ✓ It is important to find out what your employees want from an exercise/physical activity policy to secure high participation rates in the initiatives developed, and to ensure employees gain real benefits from the policy.
- ✓ Questionnaires can be distributed to elicit opinions, or small groups of staff can discuss informally what they would like.
- ✓ If you have set up a working group, members can act as consultants for colleagues to feed in their suggestions and needs.
- ✓ If your organisation has undertaken a needs assessment for Scotland's Health at Work, information will be available on exercise and physical activity to guide the policy content.

Step 3 – Develop the policy

- ✓ Use the sample policy in this pack as a guide and tailor it to your own organisation and employees.
- ✓ Base the policy on the results of the consultation process and needs assessment.
- ✓ Distribute the draft policy to key employees – ask for feedback to check that all the needs identified at step 2 are addressed.

- ✓ Once the feedback has been gathered, make adjustments and/or additions to the final policy.

- ✓ Step 4 – Notify employees of the launch date

- ✓ Set an official launch date and formally notify employees of it.

- ✓ Organise a fun and physically active launch event to raise awareness of the policy.

- ✓ Ensure that all new employees are made aware of the policy, its conditions and provisions.

- ✓ Include the policy in the staff handbook, and in all employee information and induction packs.

Step 5 – Monitor and review

- ✓ Review your policy at 3 months after implementation

- ✓ Are the initiatives within the policy being carried out?

- ✓ What levels of participation and up-take have there been from staff?

- ✓ Speak to employees and ask them what they think of the policy and its provisions?

- ✓ Continue to review the policy on an annual basis and make amendments as necessary.

Some practical ideas for promoting physical activity in the workplace

There are numerous ways in which an organisation can promote physical activity, some of which are VERY SIMPLE and inexpensive. These include:-

- Promoting activities such as stair-walking and walking at lunch times.

- Providing bicycle racks to encourage people to cycle to work

- Providing information on local opportunities for physical activity. This could include:-

  - maps of local walking trails
  - information on local sports and leisure facilities, classes and clubs
  - publicising physical activity through noticeboards and newsletters
  - providing advice booklets

- Purchasing corporate memberships of local sports facilities or health clubs.

- Providing on-site facilities (this is an option which many larger employers take)

- Providing changing facilities and lockers for those who wish to participate in more vigorous activities in and around the working day

- Providing incentives to promote physical activity as opposed to car use during the working day. In areas where traffic is congested, encouraging employees to use bicycles and public transport can often cut down on travelling time. Some employers now offer the equivalent car mileage rate for such travel. This measure promotes not only the individual's health but the health of the environment.

- Providing flexible lunch times or working hours to allow physical activity participation before, during or after the working day.

APPENDIX 1

Meeting Scotland's Health at Work - Core Criteria (1C)

The promotion of physical activity

General information

A policy on physical activity should include a workplace written "statement of intent" to support and promote physical activity amongst all staff. The main aim should be to encourage all staff to be regularly active (i.e. more people, more active, more often).

Workplaces must fulfil at least two of the following:-

- ✓ *Organise a workplace physical activity event on an annual basis e.g family fun days, mini olympics, swimming gala, etc.*
- ✓ *Company membership of a sports/leisure club (or vouchers)*
- ✓ *On-site keep fit classes*
- ✓ *Provision of equipment, showers, bike racks, etc.*
- ✓ *Provision of information on local opportunities for physical activity*
- ✓ *Flexible lunch hours to allow time for exercise*
- ✓ *Incentives for staff to walk/cycle on business*
- ✓ *Participation in national events (eg. National Cycle Week, National Swim Week)*
- ✓ *Mapped out cycle/walking routes*

It is recommended that health information be supplied to support any of these activities.

Evidence required

- ✓ *A copy of the policy including a written statement of intent*
- ✓ *Dates and details of events organised*
- ✓ *A description of facilities/activities/provisions in place*
- ✓ *Details of staff participation (eg. numbers and grades if available)*
- ✓ *How events/facilities are promoted to staff*
- ✓ *Examples of health information supplied*

APPENDIX 2

Physical activity policy – sample

An exercise/physical activity policy for: ……

Effective from: ……

Introduction to the Organisation

Tell us a bit about the company, how many employees, shift patterns, male/female ratio, etc.

The need for a policy

It is now widely recognised that physical inactivity is a serious risk to health. Inactivity carries a risk for Coronary Heart Disease which is roughly equivalent to the risk of smoking, having high blood pressure or high cholesterol. Inactive people have twice the risk of suffering from CHD compared to their active colleagues.

At least 70% of the UK population fail to do enough physical activity to benefit their health (this is a much higher proportion than have the other key CHD risk factors). In addition to protecting an individual from CHD, being moderately active on a regular basis can:-

- ✓ Significantly improve mental health by helping to control or reduce stress and anxiety
- ✓ Offer protection against obesity, osteoporosis, diabetes and some forms of cancer
- ✓ Maintain functional ability for older people
- ✓ Plus there are many social benefits for all ages

Work-site health promotion programmes which include physical activity promotion are becoming increasingly prevalent in the US and the UK. There is increasing evidence of a strong link between employee health and productivity. Regular exercisers are consistently shown to utilise less sick leave than those who do not exercise. The promotion of physical activity has been described as "today's best buy in public health".

Physical activity includes participation in sport or formal exercise, but also includes activities such as walking, dancing and heavy housework or gardening.

There are 2 stages to the current recommendations for physical activity:-

Stage one: To benefit health, individuals should **accumulate 30 minutes of moderate physical activity (equivalent to brisk walking) on most days of the week.**

Stage two: More benefit can be achieved for both health and cardiovascular fitness if periods of activity are continuous (ie. 20 minutes continuously rather than 5 minutes here and there) and more vigorous (ie. Working hard enough to get slightly out of breath and sweaty). The stage two target is therefore: **20 minutes of continuous, vigorous activity, 3 times a week.**

A WORKPLACE PHYSICAL ACTIVITY POLICY SHOULD AIM TO GET MOST EMPLOYEES SATISFYING STAGE ONE OF THE RECOMMENDATIONS.

When providing or promoting opportunities for physical activity, companies should ensure that activities are provided for, and are appropriate to, all staff including those with special needs. A range of opportunities and provision will therefore be required.

THE POLICY AIM

To promote and encourage employees regular participation in moderate physical activity.

OBJECTIVES

1. Raise awareness of the health related benefits of physical activity and the health risks of physical inactivity.

2. Educate employees concerning the types and amount of activity necessary to benefit health.

Policy actions

The company will:-

- ✓ Provide educational leaflets and resource information on health-related activity
- ✓ Provide staff seminars on the benefits of activity and the risks of inactivity
- ✓ Hold physical activity promotional events

3. Advertise and promote opportunities for participation in health related physical activity to all employees

Policy actions

The company will:-

- ✓ Liaise with local health promotion or local authority departments to access information, resources and expertise
- ✓ Establish a physical activity notice board or circulate opportunities to staff via newsletters, pay slips, memos, etc.*

*Check that advertised opportunities for exercise classes and sessions are provided by bona fide groups or individuals, *or* provide employees with information on what they should check when signing up for a class.

4. Develop formal mechanisms, appropriate to the size and resources of the company, which will make participation in physical activity easier for employees.

Policy actions

The company will:-

- ✓ Utilise promotional and motivational posters encouraging employees to make active choices, such as using the stairs in preference to lifts or escalators.
- ✓ Provide details or maps of suitable lunch-time walking routes to promote walking/jogging.
- ✓ Establish a representative working group, or for small companies, nominate a motivated individual to take on the promotion of physical activity.
- ✓ Provide on-site facilities and/or on-site classes or opportunities for physical activity.
- ✓ Subsidise staff participation at local facilities.
- ✓ Provide corporate memberships to private or local authority facilities.
- ✓ Provide interest free loans to join a local sports club.
- ✓ Provide exercise leadership training for a staff member*
- ✓ Establish and support employee sports teams or activity groups.
- ✓ Establish badminton/squash/tennis ladders for fun or for competition.
- ✓ Organise or participate in an annual sports activity.
- ✓ Provide opportunities for physical activity consultations or more formal fitness assessments.

- ✓ Provide flexible lunchtimes or working hours to allow physical activity participation before, during or after the working day

* Possible contacts include local authorities, educational institutions, private sports clubs, community groups

5.	Promote active commuting to and from work

Policy actions

The company will:-

- ✓ Provide safe storage racks for bicycles
- ✓ Provide showering and/or changing facilities (where feasible)
- ✓ Detail or advertise local public transport routes to work
- ✓ Provide cycle mileage (preferably equivalent or greater than car mileage)
- ✓ Provide interest free loans for the purchase of cycles
- ✓ Provide a company pool bicycle for use during short journeys to meetings
- ✓ Provide a car pool or encourage car sharing*

*This may allow people to leave their car and actively commute part or all of the journey to work, event if they require the car during working hours.

6.	Consider the impact of new working conditions on employees health and physical activity participation

Policy actions

The company will:-

- ✓ Ensure that the effect of policy changes on health and physical activity participation is a criteria for assessing new working practices prior to implementation
- ✓ Ensure that new working practices conform to statutory health and safety legislation
- ✓ Ensure that new working practices do not contribute to existing barriers to physical activity participation

REVIEW AND MONITORING

- This policy will be reviewed at 3 months following implementation and then annually after that.

- All new employees will be made aware of the policy and its provisions, via the staff handbook or other information/induction packs.