

WORKING WITH SCHOOL AND COLLEGE LEADERS ON MANAGING STAFF WELLBEING

Staff wellbeing is crucial to the effective running of any school or college. As well as comprehensive research evidence, it is simply common sense that teachers who are relaxed, enjoy a good work/life balance and are not stressed or overworked will be more effective and productive, be less prone to illness and less likely to leave the organisation. This not only improves standards in the school/college, but also saves money. The Health and Safety Executive (HSE) has estimated that for every £1 spent in improving wellbeing, an average payback of £5 results. Expenditure on wellbeing should, therefore, be seen as an investment in the workforce, not a cost to the school/college. For example, Scottish Power reduced its stress sickness absence rates by 11% by addressing wellbeing issues.¹

Managing wellbeing is therefore a key duty of school and college leaders. The School Teachers' Pay and Conditions Documents (STPCDs) in England and Wales, for example, state that they have a duty to ensure an adequate work/life balance, and the SNCT Handbook in Scotland also references the need for a work/life balance, as does the Workload Agreement in Northern Ireland. By working with leaders, Workplace Representatives can make tangible improvements to the wellbeing of teachers and other staff.

Whilst employers are usually effective at addressing physical hazards, such as slips and trips, or working at height, psychosocial hazards, such as stress and anxiety, are, by definition, more nebulous and person-specific. They are all too often overlooked by employers, or are only paid lip service to. Work-related stress cannot be dismissed as an individual problem.

It is of vital importance that the causes of wellbeing issues are addressed, not just the symptoms. There are numerous examples of schools holding 'wellbeing days', with sessions such as relaxation, or procuring mindfulness or resilience training. Although these can be enjoyable and relieve stress in the short term, they do not address any of the causes of work-related stress, and can only delay people becoming ill with stress.

Wellbeing is also not exclusively about workloads and demands. It must also be remembered that equalities issues can have huge impacts on wellbeing, as can management styles.

It should also be appreciated that events and circumstances outside the workplace can impact on wellbeing, and schools/colleges should be alert to these and prepared to offer support to employees experiencing non-work-related trauma.

A common misconception is that some stress can be good. Pressure can be good, and indeed lack of pressure can cause stress itself. But excessive pressure will result in stress, which is always bad and causes physical illness when not addressed.

This guidance is intended to give practical advice and suggestions on how workplace representatives can work with school and college leaders to improve wellbeing in their workplace. The actions are presented in no particular order, and Workplace Representatives can choose the most appropriate route, depending on their workplace and management.

Action: Risk Assess the Stress

Under the Health and Safety at Work Act 1974/Health and Safety at Work (Northern Ireland) Order 1978, all employers have a legal duty to ensure, as far as reasonably practicable, the health, safety and welfare of all employees. This includes addressing psychosocial hazards just as much as it does physical hazards.

In addition, the Management of Health and Safety at Work Regulations 1999/Management of Health and Safety at Work Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2000 state that all employers have a duty to risk assess hazards that can be reasonably foreseeable. **This includes psychosocial hazards such as work-related stress.**

¹ https://books.hse.gov.uk/gempdf/Stress_Case_Study.pdf.

In the same way as an employer will conduct a working-at-height risk assessment before someone falls off a roof, they must conduct a general stress risk assessment before someone becomes ill. Individual stress risk assessments are important when someone is suffering from work-related stress, but if this occurs, it is a sign that the employer needs to do more to prevent work-related stress generally.

Workplace Representatives looking at wellbeing should ensure the school/college has a general stress risk assessment. This should be requested from the school/college leaders. Leaders should have access to competent health and safety advice, usually through the local authority, academy trust or other employer, and they should use this to obtain a general stress risk assessment.

Once the risk assessment is received, it should be checked by the representative – this is not an onerous task, but is simply about reading through and seeing if there is anything else that could be added. Advice can be obtained from your Local Association Secretary. The risk assessment should then be shared with staff.

Any risk assessment should always be reviewed. Workplace Representatives should consult with members after the assessment has been in operation for a period, and feedback any issues to school/college leaders, particularly around measures that are not working, or addition stressors that have been missed.

Further guidance on stress risk assessments can be found at: <https://www.hse.gov.uk/stress/risk-assessment.htm>.

Action: Meet with School/College Leaders

It may sound obvious, but regular meetings with school/college leaders are important to ensure issues are raised and addressed. Indeed, in England and Wales, the SPTCDs include professional responsibilities to promote the safety and wellbeing of pupils and staff and to 'Maintain relationships with organisations representing teachers and other members of the staff'. The Terms and Conditions Document in Northern Ireland also states that principals have a duty to maintain relationships with organisations representing teachers and other persons on the staff of the school, whilst the SNCT Handbook in Scotland states that headteachers must take overall responsibility for the management of health, safety and wellbeing. In small schools, it can be tempting to meet with leaders on an ad-hoc basis, but it is important that meetings have a degree of formality and should be timetabled within the school day and have an agreed agenda.

These can be used to discuss issues, including wellbeing issues, or to review absence or survey data and devise action plans. It is important that meetings are for genuine discussion, rather than information giving.

Meetings should be minuted, and action points agreed.

Action: Valued Worker Scheme

The Valued Worker Scheme is a way for schools/employers to demonstrate their commitment to valuing their workforce, through working towards compliance with six key principles, and can be a powerful tool in improving wellbeing and general conditions in a workplace. Full details on the Valued Worker Scheme can be found at: <https://www.nasuwt.org.uk/news/campaigns/valued-worker-scheme.html>. However, in brief, employers joining the scheme agree an action plan to improve compliance with one of the principles. Schools/employers are not expected to be fully compliant to join the scheme, and it can be used to recognise employers who are already treating their workforce well, or as a carrot for schools/employers who could be performing better.

If you would like to explore your school joining the scheme, discuss this with your Local Association secretary or National Executive Member.

Action: Signpost Staff to Support

Workplace Representatives should ensure that school/college leaders are signposting staff to support resources. Often staff have access to a whole range of resources, but awareness can be very low. For example, many local authorities have Employee Assistance Programmes (EAPs) which include confidential counselling services, but these are not always highlighted in schools. In England, many multi-academy trusts (MATs) also have EAPs that staff can access. In some cases, EAPs will extend to close family members. Workplace Representatives should ascertain from school/college leaders what is available, and ensure this is highlighted, including any mental health first aiders.

In addition to EAPs, schools should have access to Occupational Health (OH) services, which can be of great help when staff are unwell. Workplace Representatives should discuss the arrangements for OH referrals with school/college leaders, and in particular whether staff can either self-refer, or request a referral to OH. Early referral often leads to a better outcome, especially if it occurs before absence results.

In addition to school-based support, Education Support is an independent charity and can provide counselling and financial assistance to all teachers. Education Support can be contacted on 08000 562 561 (UK-wide, including the Channel Islands and Isle of Man) or at: <https://www.educationsupport.org.uk/>.

Action: Collect Data

It is impossible to ascertain whether there is a wellbeing problem in a school or college without collecting data. This data can come in several forms, the most useful generally being absence data and data from wellbeing surveys.

Absence data can provide a wealth of information about wellbeing. Ideally, this should be examined in a Health and Safety Committee (see section below) but can be done in the regular meetings with management. Absence rates should be cross-referenced with the school calendar as it is useful to look for peaks in absence at certain times of year, which could indicate unmanageable workloads at those times. For example, although rates of illness are always higher in winter, if there is a sudden peak that coincides with an event such as mock exams, this could indicate workloads are too high.

In larger schools/colleges, departments with higher or lower rates of absence should be identified. Higher absence rates are not necessarily a cause for concern, but they could indicate something needs to be addressed. Conversely, a department with lower absence rates could be doing something that needs to be shared more widely. The rates in teachers and support staff should also be compared and any discrepancies probed.

It should be remembered that often staff will be reluctant to declare work-related stress as a cause of absence. Therefore, just looking at stress-related illness, although helpful, can be misleading and all absences should be considered.

Equalities data must also be considered, and the school/employer should be encouraged to ensure records are accurate. The impact of policies and procedures on people with protected characteristics and part-time employees should be investigated to ensure that they are being applied fairly and equitably. Absence records should also be cross-referenced to ensure those with protected characteristics are not experiencing higher absence rates. With disabled employees, any absence related to the disability should be recorded separately to enable an analysis of non-disability-related absence to be undertaken.

Wellbeing Surveys

These can be extremely useful in determining the situation with regard to wellbeing within a school/college. The most useful surveys will be linked in some way to the HSE's Management Standards. Some different types are described below.

Surveys are always more effective when conducted in partnership between the NASUWT and school management. Workplace Representatives should engage with school and college leaders to instigate a wellbeing survey across all employees, ideally with the school providing specific time for the survey to be completed within directed/working time.

Any survey conducted should be anonymous to ensure staff can reply honestly, and the results should also be held securely. Depending on the size of the school, it can be useful to ask respondents to identify which role and/or department they work in, as this can identify specific issues. This should not be done, however, if it could be used to identify specific people such as those in single-person departments. In any case, it is important that questions are left optional.

When deciding on a survey, it is important to consider when the survey will be carried out. It is best practice to avoid particularly difficult periods, such as immediately before or after Christmas, or relatively easy periods, such as just before the summer holidays, in order to get an accurate picture. Early October can be a good time, as can the second half of the spring term. It will also be important to repeat surveys on a regular, usually annual, basis, in order to gauge progress. It is important that when repeated, the survey is conducted at the same time of year with broadly the same questions.

Once a survey has been completed and analysed, it is crucial that an action plan is devised to address the issues uncovered. The compilation of an action plan should be a joint exercise between the

school/college leaders and the Workplace Representatives, and it can be useful to create a working party to look at the results and devise actions.

It is also extremely important that the results of the survey are shared in full with all staff, and explanations given for how the data will be used to address any issues uncovered. Staff may not complete future surveys if they do not see any benefits arising from the survey.

Types of Surveys

1. NASUWT Wellbeing Survey

The NASUWT has an online wellbeing survey that can be set up for individual workplaces, and is based on the HSE Management Standards. This is free and confidential, and can be extended to all employees. For this to be set up, Workplace Representatives should contact their Local Secretary who can request this from the NASUWT IT department.

2. HSE Management Standards Indicator Tool

By definition, this is based on the HSE Management Standards and is therefore fully aligned with best practice. The tool will benchmark against other employers, highlight where specific issues exist, and suggest actions.

There are two versions of the indicator tool. One paper-based survey that is completed manually with the results fed into an Excel spreadsheet. This is free, but labour-intensive, especially for large schools/colleges. There is also an online version of the tool. This has a cost attached, which depends on the number of employees. There is a free version for up to 50 employees.

3. Third-party Surveys

There are a number of providers which offer wellbeing surveys to employers, including schools. These can be very effective, particularly those that benchmark against other schools. However, they can be expensive. If using a third-party survey, representatives should satisfy themselves that it is truly anonymous and data is held in accordance with General Data Protection Regulation (GDPR) requirements. These can also be very expensive to procure.

4. 'DIY' Surveys

These can be effective, especially if there are specific issues that need to be investigated. On the downside, they can be very time-consuming to compile and may fail to drill down issues in sufficient detail. If a 'DIY' survey is suggested, care should be taken to avoid leading questions, or questions that have an insufficient range of responses. There may also be concerns from staff that they are not anonymous. The advantage of DIY surveys is that they can be very low cost to implement, especially if an existing survey account such as SurveyMonkey exists.

Action: Audit Workload

Workload is normally, but not always, the key driver of wellbeing issues in schools. In addition to wellbeing surveys, it is good practice for workload, and its drivers, to be audited. This does not need to be an onerous task – it can be as simple as asking staff what they do that generates the most workload, what they perceive as unnecessary workload, and what is useful but is given insufficient time. The [School Workload Reduction Toolkit](#) may be helpful in this process.

The review of the audit should be done in partnership with the Workplace Representative, and any unnecessary workload should be removed, and workload-intensive but required tasks should be reviewed to ensure they are effective and efficient.

The audit should also look at tasks which are being undertaken by teachers, but not require the skills of a qualified teacher, and ensure these are eliminated, or transferred to appropriate support staff.

Action: Limiting the Impact of New Initiatives

Workload is often driven by new initiatives and processes that are being put in place, especially where these are in addition to existing procedures. An issue can often arise where different SLT/middle managers introduce new initiatives without consulting with their colleagues, which result in numerous new tasks being put on classroom teachers. To counteract this, Workplace Representatives should work with school and college leaders to agree a process for the introduction of new initiatives to prevent multiple-initiative overload. New initiatives should be workload impact assessed (an example assessment is included in appendix 1) and where a new process is introduced, something should be removed to prevent an increase in workload.

In addition to workload impact assessments, new initiatives must be equality impact assessed, and the school/employer must be meeting its Public Sector Equality Duty. Further information on these can be found [here](#).

Action: Request a Health and Safety Committee

Health and Safety Committees have a proven track record of benefiting both employers and employees. Employers see benefits through reduced illness and accident rates, as well as higher productivity and retention of the workforce as a result of employees working in a safer and healthier environment. Having an effective Health and Safety Committee should also make it easier to recruit Health and Safety Representatives.

The effectiveness of these committees has been demonstrated throughout the COVID-19 crisis, as they have been an effective vehicle to ensure that plans and risk assessments are developed in consultation with Health and Safety Representatives.

Health and Safety Committees produce these benefits by providing a forum to raise health and safety issues, and for monitoring and responding to trends in health and safety-related statistics, such as accident and illness figures.

Further details on the creation of Health and Safety Committees can be found at: <https://www.hse.gov.uk/involvement/hscommittees.htm>.

Even if there is no Health and Safety Committee, health and safety issues, including wellbeing issues, can be raised and addressed in the regular meetings with leaders.

Action: Culture of Openness

It is an unfortunate truth that there is perceived stigma around mental health issues, and often people struggling with mental health issues will seek to hide these. Indeed, there is research to show that 'pleasanteism', whereby employees feel the need to put a 'brave face' on and hide issues, actually contributes to higher levels of sickness and absence. As a result, some staff who become ill with mental health-related conditions will instead cite other reasons for absence, such as colds, or stomach bugs.

It is important for leaders to encourage a culture of openness so that employees feel confident in coming forward with issues. This can be done in a number of ways, but one of the most powerful is for senior leaders to talk about their own mental health. In addition, Workplace Representatives can engage with leaders around other strategies, such as having a focus on mental health in training days, having guest speakers on the matter, and encouraging two-way conversations between managers and employees. The NASUWT has produced guidance on this with the HSE which can be found [here](#).

Mental health first aiders can also help to encourage a culture of openness, and Workplace Representatives should encourage school and college leaders to invest in mental health first aiders, the number of which will depend on the size of the school/college.

The culture of openness needs to also extend beyond declaring mental health issues. It must be extended so that staff can feel confident that if they raise **any** issue, it will be treated seriously and will not result in detrimental treatment.

Action: Policies and Procedures

Having effective policies and procedures will also help to encourage a culture of openness. However, these policies are normally devised by the employer, such as local authority or academy trust, rather than the individual school. As such, school/college leaders do not usually have control over these. If you have concerns around the policies or procedures in your school, these should be discussed with your Local Association Secretary in the first instance.

Action: Collective Action

In some cases, it is an unfortunate truth that school/college leaders are intransigent and refuse to take proactive measures to improve wellbeing in the workplace, despite all the clear benefits to the school/college. In these circumstances Workplace Representatives should discuss the possible further steps with your Local Association Secretary. This could include possible collective action. Where there is sickness absence relating to work-related ill-health, a referral to the HSE may also be possible.

Appendix 1: Example Workload Impact Assessment

WORKLOAD IMPACT ASSESSMENT of

.....(insert name of policy under review)

Under the European Working Time Directive employers have a duty to monitor the workload of their staff.

Step		Yes	No
1.	Is this policy new or existing? <i>(delete as appropriate)</i>		
2.	Which staff does this policy affect?		
3.	Context Where has this policy originated from? What is this policy designed to achieve? Is this policy relevant?	Go to step 4	Do not adopt
4.	Is the policy compliant with the relevant Terms and Conditions Document (STPCD/SNCT Handbook/contract of employment etc.)?	Go to step 5	Do not adopt
5.	[England only] Does this policy comply with recommendations of the Independent Teacher Workload Review Group (TWRG)?	Go to step 6	Do not adopt
6.	Does this policy duplicate work?	Go to step 7	Go to step 8
7.	Can the work that this policy is duplicating be replaced with this policy?	Go to step 8	Do not adopt
8.	Does this increase workload?	Go to step 9	Go to step 10
9.	Approximately, how many hours per week will this policy generate? Can some other task be reduced or eliminated?	Go to step 10	Do not adopt
10.	Does the policy result in additional meetings?	Go to step 11	Go to step 12
11.	When will the work in this policy be expected to be undertaken? Is this in directed/working time?	If policy new, go to Step 12. If policy piloted or is existing, policy can be adopted	Do not adopt policy

12.	Which staff will the policy be piloted on?		
13.	How long will the pilot last for?		
14.	How will the pilot be assessed?		
15.	What recommendations arise from the pilot for the policy prior to Implementation?		
16.	Does the pilot reveal that extra workload is generated? (Go back to step 6 of Workload Impact Assessment)	Do not adopt policy	Go to step 17
17.	Is staff training needed?	Go to step 18	Policy is ready for adopting
18.	Does staff training generate extra workload? (Go back to step 7 of Workload Impact Assessment?)	Do not adopt policy	Policy is ready for adopting

What resources are needed before policy is adopted?

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Joint NASUWT and employer statement of impact on workload of this policy

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Date for review of policy? (NASUWT recommend an annual review)