



Working Together

Stress at Work

Using HSE(NI) Management Standards

Stress and excessive workload are covered by H&S legislation and guidance.

Tackling stress is paramount to effective management of health, safety and wellbeing in every workplace, including schools.

What is Health , Safety and Welfare about?

- **Health** – relates to the physical and mental health of the employee
- **Safety** – relates to the requirement of employers to provide safe systems of work and for employees to work safely
- **Welfare** – relates to the requirement to ensure that the welfare or wellbeing of employees is protected during their working day and that outside their working hours they can maintain a positive work–life balance

Who is covered by H&S legislation?

- **Employers** – those who engage others under a contract of employment or service.
- **Employees** – i.e. those employed under a contract of employment or those engaged under a contract of service – e.g. visiting contractors, etc.
- **Note** – in schools pupils are not employees and are not covered by Health and Safety legislation, they are covered by **Third Party Liability insurance**

H&S Legislation is also reinforced by the role of the Health and Safety Executive (HSENI).

The key objectives of the HSENI focus on:

- ✓ preventing the most serious workplace health and safety issues.
- ✓ high risk industries and activities.
- ✓ sensible and proportionate risk management.
- ✓ effective regulation; and
- ✓ supporting businesses and the economy.

Health and Safety Executive for Northern Ireland

83 Ladas Drive, Belfast, BT6 9FR

Email: mail@hseni.gov.uk

Phone: 0800 0320 121

What are the responsibilities of the parties?

- **Employers** – must provide employees with a safe place of work and safe systems of work. This includes protection of the physical and mental health of their employees.
- In addition they must report any accident, incident of dangerous occurrence which results in the death or serious injury of an employee.

What are the responsibilities of the parties?

- **Employees** – must work safely and ensure that their fellow employees also work safely.
- They also have a duty to report and matter which is likely to damage their or their colleague health, safety or welfare.

Good work is important for mental well-being

Work has an important role in promoting mental well-being. It is an important determinant of self-esteem and identity. It can provide a sense of fulfilment and opportunities for social interaction. For most people, work provides their main source of income.

Work can have negative effects on mental health, particularly in the form of stress. Work-related stress is defined as 'the adverse reaction people have to excessive pressure or other types of demand placed upon them'. Stress is the biggest hindrance to productivity, efficiency and even profitability. It can lead to absenteeism, low morale and increase in staff turnover.

While every job brings its own demands and pressures, people's ability to deal with pressure is not limitless; excessive pressure can cause stress, which is harmful.

It is widely recognised that teaching is one of the most stressful professions.

- ✓ Stress is the predominant cause of work-related illness in the education sector, according to the Health and Safety Executive (HSE).
- ✓ According to the union workload surveys, 81 per cent of teachers considered leaving the profession in the last year because of workload.
- ✓ A survey carried out by the BBC in 2015 found that 83 per cent of teachers had experienced workplace stress.

There is clearly, therefore, a 'business' case for tackling stress among teachers and school staff.

What is 'work related stress'?

Stress can be caused by a single momentous change, or a build-up of smaller anxieties. It usually leads to a feeling of being out of control or an inability to cope.

It is what happens when the demands placed on someone exceed what he or she can readily cope with, and while a certain amount of pressure is a part of everyday life, and can actually help people to perform better, too much pressure can cause stress to build.

The Health and Safety Executive define stress as:

"the adverse reaction people have to excessive pressure or other types of demand placed on them".

This makes an important distinction between pressure, which can be a positive state if managed correctly, and stress which can be detrimental to health.

Under the Health and Safety at Work legislation 1974 employers have a general duty to ensure, so far as is reasonably practicable, the health of their employees at work. This includes taking steps to make sure they do not suffer stress-related illness as a result of their work.

This statutory regime supplements the 'common law' obligations on employers to provide reasonably safe working environments for their employees.

Employers also have a specific duty under the Management of Health and Safety at Work Regulations 1999 to undertake risk assessments that seek to identify and eliminate or reduce risks to their employees' health, safety and welfare.

Stress is one of the risks to health, safety and welfare that must be assessed.

Our view is that all employers of teachers must:

- ✓ consider the risk of stress among their workforce.
- ✓ take steps to remove the risk.
- ✓ where removal of the risk is not possible, reduce the risk by any necessary changes in working practices or by introducing appropriate protective or supportive measures.

Doing something about stress in schools may seem daunting to principals and other managers.

They may not know where to start.

The joint unions (INTO/NEU/UTU) are not seeking to blame school leaders for this situation.

Stress is undoubtedly more difficult to tackle than, say, a straightforward slip/trip hazard.

The unions want to provide assistance to principals and others who are responsible for tackling stress in schools and colleges, and who may be daunted by the prospect.

We recognise that a collective approach, involving management and trade union representatives, will lead to the best possible outcome.

Education Authority sign Mental Health Charter

It is also noteworthy that the Education Authority (EA) has recently signed up to Northern Ireland's Mental Health Charter highlighting its commitment to promoting positive mental health and wellbeing in the workplace.

The Charter, which is a joint project between the Equality Commission, Action Mental Health, Change Your Mind, Disability Action, the Mental Health Foundation, MindWise and Inspire, sets out five commitments that the EA will work to deliver.

The Charter commitments include:

- ✓ creating an open and inclusive workplace culture;
- ✓ promoting equality of opportunity and challenging discrimination in the workplace;
- ✓ ensuring equality of opportunity in recruitment and selection; and
- ✓ identifying and providing sources of information and support.

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