



Supporting occupational health
and wellbeing professionals

Developing a COVID-19 secure **mental health and wellbeing strategy**

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Who is this factsheet for?

Employers who are reviewing their strategy for workplace mental health and wellbeing, national policy makers, and the community and voluntary sector.

This document highlights best practice pre COVID-19 and provides new information concerning what is a rapidly evolving situation. It was informed by a review of research, evidence-informed resources and tools offered by professional bodies, and a webinar involving experts on work and wellbeing.

This document aims to:

- provide organisations with guidance on effective mental health and wellbeing strategies
- highlight best practice to help employers develop effective and sustainable COVID-19 secure wellbeing strategies.

INTRODUCTION

According to a recent survey, 45% of employees reported deteriorating mental health due to the pandemic, rising to 56% for those with an existing mental health issue¹. The pressures will not disappear when lockdown eases. The business case for investing in the mental health and wellbeing of staff is therefore stronger than ever. To build back better, effective strategies are needed to support staff through the pandemic and beyond. By taking action to develop a wellbeing strategy that is COVID-19 secure, businesses can help create a more productive, healthy and satisfied workforce and save money^{2,3}.

Organisations are facing many challenges in supporting the mental health and wellbeing of their staff during the COVID-19 pandemic. These include helping people manage changing working patterns and practices, ensuring that key transitions (such as returning to on-site working) are handled safely and sensitively, supporting people with caring responsibilities, and how best to monitor and support the wellbeing of the workforce during such challenging times. To respond to the current crisis and post-COVID conditions, organisations will need to review their existing wellbeing strategies and incorporate new initiatives.

Supporting the psychosocial wellbeing of employees

Organisations have a duty of care to support the psychosocial wellbeing of staff during the COVID-19 crisis. The World Health Organization provides [guidance](#) on how this can be done.

- Ensure that all staff are regularly provided with good quality communication and accurate information.
- Rotate workers from higher-pressure to lower-pressure areas and functions.
- Introduce a buddy system by partnering inexperienced workers with more experienced colleagues to provide support, monitor stress and reinforce safety procedures.
- Encourage and monitor regular breaks from work.
- Implement flexible schedules for workers who are directly impacted, or who have a family member affected, by a stressful event.
- Ensure that you build in time for colleagues to support each other.
- Ensure that staff are aware of how to get support for mental health and facilitate access.
- Be a good role model for self-care strategies.

FIVE STEPS TO REVIEWING YOUR WELLBEING STRATEGY

1. Obtain information on the demographics of your company and the provision and utilisation of current employee benefits. Consider whether your current policies and procedures are fit for purpose in supporting health and wellbeing during the pandemic and beyond.
2. Ask your employees.
3. Design your strategy.
4. Launch your programme.
5. Evaluate and refine your programme.

Returning to the workplace

As organisations are reopening their workplaces, it is crucial to ensure the health and safety of workers. Before bringing staff back to the workplace, businesses should ensure they can meet three key tests:

- **Is it essential?** Is returning to on-site working vital for the productivity or wellbeing of staff?
- **Is it sufficiently safe?** Employers have a duty of care to identify and manage risks.
- **Is it mutually agreed?** Are there mechanisms in place to encourage staff and employers to raise concerns and mutual flexibility to accommodate different needs and working patterns?

The CIPD also provides [guidance](#) and a [planner](#) to help businesses facilitate return to work.

The Health and Safety Executive (HSE) provides guidance on conducting a [risk assessment](#) during the pandemic. Acas also offers [guidance](#) and a [podcast](#) for employers, managers and workers on how to return to work well. All guidance is subject to change depending on government announcements.

When planning return to work, employers should consider the mental health as well as the physical safety of staff. People will have different responses to 'on-site' working: for some it will be a welcome relief, whereas for others it may be challenging and frightening. Research findings show that 45% of employees report feeling anxious about returning to work during the pandemic, and people with existing health conditions are at greater risk¹.

HOW TO ENSURE THAT THE RETURN TO WORK IS SAFE, HEALTHY AND PRODUCTIVE

Organisations could consider the following actions.

- **Encourage a strategic and coordinated approach:** ensure that all employees can access support; involve all stakeholders in planning; review arrangements regularly based on feedback.
- **Assess the risks of new ways of working:** consider using the HSE Management Standards framework (see below) to identify hazards arising from new work processes and homeworking.
- **Consider diversity:** take an inclusive approach to meeting differing needs and circumstances.
- **Ensure 'at risk' groups are identified and supported.** A risk assessment approach can highlight groups that may need support in particular areas.
- **Consider a range of support options:** employees are more likely to benefit from a 'tool-box' approach than generic solutions; ensure interventions are evidence-based.
- **Ensure staff are aware of the services available:** provide guidance on internal and external sources of support. Guidance on supporting the mental health of employees is [here](#) and [here](#).

THE IMPORTANCE OF BEING CONSULTED AND INFORMED

A survey of UK workers conducted by the CIPD¹ found that:

- only just over half (55%) said they had been given adequate information and 44% had been adequately consulted about returning to work
- 62% of people who did not feel adequately consulted were anxious about returning, compared with 42% of those who had been adequately consulted.

The Society of Occupational Medicine provides a [guidance framework](#) to help organisations support the psychological wellbeing of their staff when returning to the workplace. It highlights the importance of the 6 'Rs'.

- **Recognise:** many people have experienced significant losses, such as the death of colleagues, collective redundancies and loss of business. Acknowledging such losses collectively and providing opportunities to share feelings can provide comfort and a shared sense of belonging. Guidance on support after the death of a colleague is available [here](#).
- **Review:** many people have developed new skills during lockdown. Evaluate these changes and consider how they can benefit the organisation and employees.
- **Respond:** the pandemic has highlighted how communication and support could be more efficient and effective. Consider how these new insights can change policies and practices.
- **Respect:** identify team members who are struggling (e.g. changes in mood or engagement, deteriorating work quality, or increased sickness absence) and offer help and support.
- **Refresh and renew:** consider how the changes brought about by the pandemic could bring about opportunities for personal and organisational growth.

Employers should have conversations with **any staff at higher risk** (particularly those who are clinically extremely vulnerable) and seek advice from occupational health when supporting their return to the workplace. A COVID-19 [return to work guide](#) and [podcast](#) is available for health professionals who are advising patients and employers.

Supporting carers

Studies show that nearly one-third (30%) of employees had their ability to work during the pandemic impacted by a change in their caring responsibilities¹. [Guidance](#) is available on how to support employees who are caring for others during the crisis, and this will also help organisations develop effective policies and practices over the longer-term.

Working at home: assess the risks and provide support

More than four in ten (43%) are currently homeworking due to coronavirus. Homeworking is set to continue, at least in the short-term, as many employers and staff are recognising the benefits⁵. Many organisations are considering introducing a 'hybrid' pattern, where on-site working is combined with homeworking. Organisations have a duty of care to provide a safe place of work, so risk assessments are crucial for homeworkers (whether temporary or permanent). Employers should consider⁶:

- how to keep in touch with them
- what work activities will they be doing (and for how long)?
- can these work activities be done safely?
- do you need to put control measures in place to protect them?

The HSE highlights the risks of work-related stress, social isolation, as well as physical complaints such as upper limb disorders, for homeworkers and provides [guidance](#) on how employers should protect them. Other guidelines on health and safety for remote workers and useful checklists are available [here](#). This information will provide a basis for organisations to develop strategies to support staff who are working from home or adopting a hybrid approach.

Sustaining work-relevant mental health

To build back better, a strategic approach to wellbeing is needed. Many UK organisations have signed up to the [Mental Health at Work Commitment](#).

This comprises six standards:

1. Prioritise mental health in the workplace by developing and delivering a systematic programme of activity
2. Proactively ensure work design and organisational culture drive positive mental health outcomes
3. Promote an open culture around mental health
4. Increase organisational confidence and capability
5. Provide mental health tools and support
6. Increase transparency and accountability through internal and external reporting

When developing a COVID-19 secure strategy for employee wellbeing, a [three-stage approach](#) can help organisations eliminate or mitigate the stressors that can contribute to work-related mental health problems.

	Organisation	Team	Individual
Prevent <i>(primary)</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Job (re)design • Assess work stressors • Assess leadership • Assess the risks • Provide training • Worker involvement • Communication 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Train supervisors • Enhance the support between team members • Foster a 'we've got each other's back' climate 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Be informed • Be prepared • Ask questions • Involve family
Detect <i>(secondary)</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Assess work stressors • Provide training • Adopt a 'nip it in the bud approach' 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Provide training • Assess psychological safety • Assess support systems • Assess work ability • Peer support • Empower supervisors 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Seek help • Engage with support systems • Active coping
Treat <i>(tertiary)</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Assess work stressors • Provide training • Adopt a 'nip it in the bud approach' • Provide and support occupational health services • Provide and support employee assistance programmes (EAPs) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Remain in contact • Provide and support workplace adjustments • Provide and support a graded return to work 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Use occupational health services, if needed • Assess support systems • Request training • Assess work ability • Use EAPs if needed • Request counselling, if needed • See your General Practitioner

The Health and Safety Executive Management Standards approach

The HSE supports organisations to take a strategic approach to employee wellbeing, by providing a toolkit to prevent, assess and manage work-related stress. The key causes of work-related stress are:

- **Demands** e.g. workload, patterns of work and the working environment.
- **Control** e.g. how much say employees have in the way they do their work.
- **Support** e.g. the encouragement and resources provided by managers and colleagues.

- **Role** e.g. whether people understand their role within the organisation.
- **Relationships** e.g. avoiding conflict and dealing with unacceptable behaviour such as bullying.
- **Change** e.g. how organisations manage change and how well this is communicated.

The standards define the characteristics (or culture) of an organisation where stress is being managed effectively. Each of the six areas has a 'state to be achieved' for organisations to work towards. More information on this approach is [here](#) with a step-by-step [workbook](#).

The HSE approach to managing work-related stress involves a continuous improvement model.



Taking action to protect and support the health and wellbeing of staff

PHE provides a [tool](#) for organisations to assess different aspects of workplace health and wellbeing (such as activity, sleep, the working environment, workplace culture, and mental health). This can also inform a holistic programme of interventions relevant to the current crisis and beyond. A [toolkit](#) is also available to help organisations develop and evaluate health interventions. This has four stages.

- **Analyse** e.g. establish internal support; set up a steering group; identify needs at an individual and organisational level; specify goals and outcomes.
- **Plan** e.g. prioritise goals and outcomes; plan an evaluation strategy; identify tasks for the steering group and develop a community strategy.
- **Implement** e.g. ensure clear roles, pilot interventions and monitor progress.
- **Evaluate** e.g. develop an evaluation design; review and reflect on practice.

More information on this process is available [here](#).

Small and medium sized businesses

Small and medium organisations account for 99% of the businesses in the UK, but they often find it challenging to develop policies and practices to support the mental health of their staff. Guidance is available to support wellbeing in small and medium organisations during the pandemic and beyond.

- A [toolkit](#) is available for small and medium sized businesses (SMEs) who are planning a return to on-site working during the pandemic.
- The Federation of Small Businesses provides guidance for the self-employed and small business on supporting their [own](#) mental health and on supporting their [staff](#) during the pandemic.
- The HSE also provides guidance for [smaller employers](#) on using the Management Standards approach and a [mobile app](#) to help small and medium sized businesses better understand the law, their health and safety rights and their responsibilities.
- Mental health support for small business owners is available [here](#) and [here](#).



FURTHER RESOURCES

BT. **Wellbeing toolkit for small businesses**

<https://www.bt.com/bt-plc/assets/documents/about-bt/our-company/group-businesses/enterprise/wellbeing-toolkit-for-small-businesses.pdf>

CIPD. **Coronavirus: Mental health support for employees**

<https://www.cipd.co.uk/knowledge/culture/well-being/supporting-mental-health-workplace-return>

Gov.UK. **Workplace health needs assessment**

<https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/workplace-health-needs-assessment>

HSE. **How to tackle work-related stress**

<https://www.hse.gov.uk/pubns/indg430.pdf>

HSE. **Talking Toolkit**

<https://www.hse.gov.uk/stress/assets/docs/stress-talking-toolkit.pdf>

Mental Health at Work. **Mental health for small workplaces**

<https://www.mentalhealthatwork.org.uk/toolkit/mental-health-for-small-workplaces>

Mental Health at Work. **Guide for line managers: what can you do to help a team member returning to work?**

<https://www.mentalhealthatwork.org.uk/resource/guide-for-line-managers-what-can-you-do-to-help-a-team-member-returning-to-work/?read=more>

IOSH. **Out of sight, out of mind. Research into the occupational health and safety of distributed workers**

<https://iosh.com/outofsight>

Propel Hub. **Help boost productivity – and wellbeing – through supporting the growth of better workplaces in the UK**

<https://www.propelhub.org/>

SOM. **Returning to the workplace after the COVID-19 lockdown – toolkits**

<https://www.som.org.uk/return-to-work/>

SOM. **Mental health support for small business owners and team leaders**

<https://www.som.org.uk/mental-health-support-small-business-owners-and-team-leaders>

What Works Wellbeing. **Guidance for better workplace wellbeing**

<https://whatworkswellbeing.org/guidance-for-better-workplace-wellbeing/>

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3. <https://whatworkswellbeing.org/resources/how-cost-effective-is-a-workplace-wellbeing-activity/>
4. <https://www.cipd.co.uk/about/media/press/anxious-returning-workplace>
5. https://www.som.org.uk/Returning_to_the_workplace_COVID-19_toolkit_FINAL.pdf
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