

Using Workplace Inspections to Identify Risks of Work-Related Stress

A practical guide for union health and safety reps

Why inspect for stress?

Work-related stress is a health hazard, just like unsafe machinery or exposure to harmful chemicals. As a union health and safety rep, you have the right to inspect the workplace to identify hazards and that includes how work is organised and managed.

Stress inspections:

- Make invisible risks visible
- Build collective evidence
- Strengthen the case for a formal stress risk assessment
- Shift the focus from individuals to collective experiences of risks and hazards

Remember: you are not diagnosing stress but rather identifying risk factors that the employer has a duty to assess and control.

Your right to inspect

Union health and safety reps have the right to:

- Inspect the workplace at agreed intervals
- Carry out inspections following changes to work or working practices
- Investigate hazards raised by members
- Be accompanied by the employer if they choose

These rights apply equally to psychosocial hazards, including stress.

A stress-focused inspection:

- Looks at systems, workloads and management practices
- Involves listening to workers
- Uses observation and discussion
- Focuses on patterns, not individuals

Before the inspection: plan and prepare

1. Be clear about the purpose

You are inspecting to:

- Identify sources of work-related stress
- Gather evidence of risk
- Support a request for a stress risk assessment
- Push for preventative action

It's helpful to say this clearly when notifying the employer.

2. Gather intelligence from members

Before the inspection, speak to members and make them aware of your planned inspection. You may choose to carry out a survey first, or follow-up with one. Keep it anonymous, you don't need to pass on names to the employer, just patterns.

During the inspection, member engagement will be key. Your 'walk around' will rely on their feedback, and you may choose to do this in-person or virtually.

3. Let the employer know

You can inform the employer that:

- You are carrying out a routine inspection
- The inspection will include risks related to work-related stress
- You'll be raising findings and recommendations afterwards

This helps set expectations and keeps the process formal.

During the inspection: what to look for

Use your inspection to observe work and talk to workers. The headings below reflect common stress risk factors and are like those used by the Health and Safety Executive in its Management Standards, with points for what to look for, and suggested questions (in quotation marks) you could ask members in a walkaround.

Workload and pace

- Constantly high work intensity
- Unrealistic deadlines or targets
- Staff shortages or unfilled vacancies
- Regular overtime or long hours
- Workers skipping breaks

- "Is the workload manageable?"
- "Do you feel under pressure to work faster or longer?"
- "Are you able to take breaks?"

Control over work

- Little say over how work is done
- Rigid scheduling or lack of flexibility
- Constant monitoring or micromanagement

- "How much control do you have over your work?"
- "Can you adjust how tasks are done if needed?"

Support from managers and colleagues

- Managers who are overstretched or absent
- Lack of supervision or guidance
- Workers unsure who to go to for help

- "Do you feel supported by your manager?"
- "Can you raise concerns about pressure?"

Workplace relationships

- Tense or hostile working environments
- Signs of bullying, harassment or poor behaviour
- Lone working or isolation

- "Is everyone treated with respect here?"
- "Do people feel safe raising issues?"

Role clarity

- Confusing or conflicting instructions
- Workers covering multiple roles
- Unclear responsibilities

- "Is your role clearly defined?"
- "Are you given conflicting priorities?"

Change and uncertainty

- Recent or ongoing restructures
- New technology, systems or targets
- Poor communication about change

- "Are changes explained clearly?"
- "Do you feel supported during periods of change?"

Working environment

- Risk of abuse or violence at work or in journey to/from workplace
- Working temperatures
- Access to welfare facilities

- "Is your working environment comfortable?"
- "Can you access toilets and other welfare facilities when needed?"
- "Do you feel protected from the risk of violence or abuse?"

After the inspection: taking action

1. Write up your findings and any recommendations, e.g. that the employer carries out a suitable and sufficient stress risk assessment, in consultation with union safety reps.

2. Push for preventative action, you might point to a review of workloads and staffing, or measures to prevent risk of stressful scenarios like abuse. Your inspection opens the door, but the risk assessment does the heavy lifting.

3. Feed back to members and let them know what you inspected, what issues were raised and what you've asked the employer to do next. This builds confidence and collective momentum.

Stress Risk Inspection Checklist

This list is designed to help you when carrying out a workplace inspection focused on risks of work-related stress – it is not exhaustive nor specific to any workplace, and is designed as a template for you to adapt to suit your members' needs.

Inspection details

Date of inspection: _____

Site(s) / department(s) inspected: _____

Union health and safety rep(s): _____

Employer representative present (if any): _____

Workload and work demands

- Excessive workloads
- Regular unpaid or excessive overtime
- Staff shortages / vacancies
- Workers skipping breaks
- Constant pressure to work faster

Notes / examples: _____

Control over work

- Little or no control over work
- Rigid schedules or lack of flexibility
- Excessive monitoring or micromanagement

Notes: _____

Support from management and colleagues

- Lack of management support
- Managers overstretched or absent
- Workers afraid to raise stress concerns

Notes: _____

Workplace relationships

- Bullying or harassment
- Poor behaviour going unchallenged
- Conflict within teams
- Lone working or isolation

Notes: _____

Role clarity

- Conflicting demands
- Unclear responsibilities
- Workers covering multiple roles

Notes: _____

Working environment

- Threat of experiencing verbal or physical abuse or assault
- Lack of reliable access to toilet or other welfare facilities
- Cramped, dirty or otherwise unsuitable work site
- Consistent exposure to high or low temperatures without sufficient mitigation

Notes: _____

Change and job security

- Poor communication about change
- Frequent restructures or reorganisations
- Job insecurity or uncertainty

Notes: _____

Overall assessment

- No significant stress risk factors identified
- Some stress risk factors identified
- Significant stress risk factors identified

- Further action required
- Formal stress risk assessment recommended

Notes: _____

