Work and well-being
A trade union resource
## Contents

01 Introduction ......................................................... 2
02 Work and health – the relationship ...................... 3
03 Using the workplace to deal with health issues ...... 7
04 Promoting health through work .............................. 9
05 Monitoring and evaluation .................................. 13
06 Union involvement in workplace well-being .......... 16
07 Well-being at work resources ............................... 19
Introduction

‘Well-being’ has become one of the most over-used phrases in the English language. It helps sell anything from yogurt to holidays, pillows to pills. For some people the phrase refers to levels of happiness, while others think of it as a healthy body and mind. The government has even started a well-being index intended to gauge the quality of life of people in the UK, as well as environmental and sustainability issues and even the country’s economic performance.

The lack of any real agreement means that in the workplace ‘well-being’ has become a convenient label for almost any health-related initiative. That makes it difficult for trade unions to respond, especially when management sometimes uses ‘well-being’ as a way of by-passing union involvement. However, a positive approach to developing ‘good work’ that takes account of health and well-being can lead to improvements in both the health and quality of life of the workforce.

This guide gives advice on the wide range of attempts being made to promote ‘well-being’ and as such does not cover the avoidance of injury and illness in traditional health and safety terms, as that information is freely available elsewhere. However, it will help reps tackle management when work and work practices are likely to be the cause of workforce ill health.
02

Work and health – the relationship

Every year around 170 million working days are lost in Great Britain due to people being too ill to go to work. The best way of reducing that number is by trying to prevent workers getting ill in the first place.

The relationship between work and health is very complex. On the one hand, work is responsible for an estimated 27 million days lost to ill health each year. Of these, 23 million are due to work-related ill health and four million due to workplace injury. Around 1.1 million people who are currently at work are suffering from ill health which they think is work-related.

On the other hand, not being in work can also have a devastating effect on your health. Unemployed people have much higher levels of both heart and lung disease. They also have substantially higher rates of mental health disorders, alcoholism and suicide. Overall, unemployed people have around two to three times the ill health rate of those in employment and a 20 per cent higher death rate. It is estimated that being unemployed is a greater risk to health even than working in one of the most dangerous occupations such as construction or offshore oil drilling.
It is not simply whether someone is employed or unemployed that makes a difference to their health, it is also what they are doing. Those who are not working but have access to a reasonable income and are active through voluntary or community work with a lot of social interaction with others do not have increased health risks. Meanwhile, those on low pay who work long hours or have no or little control over their work can suffer the same health problems as those who are unemployed. Clearly the link between health and work is not as simple as we are often told by those who claim that work is good for you.

Much of the emphasis so far on good work has been on using work to help improve mental well-being. In fact, good work is just as much about physical well-being. There is a growing consensus that, in many cases, physical illness can cause mental illness and vice versa. Many physical problems that manifest themselves as back pain or RSI have a psychological cause and are as much to do with work-related stress as bad manual handling or repetitive movements. This has led some to conclude that it is more important to concentrate on psychosocial factors at work than physical ones.

Unfortunately, some people have misinterpreted this as meaning that you should forget about improving the physical environment and instead try to prevent musculoskeletal disorders through preventing stress at work – a view that could have very dangerous consequences. You have to do both.

Work can also create other health problems. There is a strong link between stress and the use of tobacco, recreational drugs and alcohol. Also having a job that involves sitting down all the time or only having access to junk food during a 20-minute lunch break can lead to obesity and increase the chance of heart disease and diabetes. Trade unions believe that the best way to prevent those is to try to remove the causes, while at the same time supporting anyone whose health does suffer as a result.
RESILIENCE?
In recent years many consultants have claimed that the way to improve productivity in the workplace is to make your staff more “resilient” to stress and work demands. There is now an industry being developed to promote this. However, for unions the issue is not how you change the worker to help them cope with pressure, but how you change the workplace to remove unreasonable stress and demands.

The main indicator of whether workers in an organisation will be likely to have their health affected by their work is the working conditions. In workplaces where less concern is given to risk assessments and the prevention of stress, and where there is generally seen to be poor management, workers are far more likely to have higher rates of absence and illness. Another major factor is whether management treat their workforce with respect and involve them.

The government agency Acas suggests that there are six indicators of a healthy workplace:

- Line managers are confident and trained in people skills.
- Employees feel valued and involved in the organisation.
- Managers use appropriate health services (e.g. occupational health where practicable) to tackle absence and help people to get back to work.
- Managers promote an attendance culture by conducting return-to-work discussions.
- Jobs are flexible and well-designed.
- Managers know how to manage common health problems such as mental health and musculoskeletal disorders.

This means that, to improve well-being, the first step must be to look at the management of the workplace, how work is organised and how workers are supported. The reality is that well-being at work will be difficult to attain without some basic standards of working life and that involves looking at wider issues such as management style, workload, hours of work, worker involvement, and the level of control a worker has over their work.

There is already helpful and simple guidance for employers on how to manage stress available from the HSE website, and there is similar guidance on musculoskeletal disorders and a range of other health issues that are caused by work. Unions should ensure that employers consider these first as part of any well-being programme.

PREVENTION FIRST!
However much an employer does to promote well-being in the workplace, the real gains are to be made by preventing people becoming ill or injured. Every year 1.2 million people who are in work suffer from an illness they believe is caused by their work. A further 700,000 people who are no longer in work are suffering ill health because of a work-related illness.

The biggest cause of work-related sickness is musculoskeletal disorders such as back pain and RSI, followed closely by stress, anxiety and depression. Between them they make up over 70 per cent of work-related sickness absence. These illnesses are all avoidable, as are injuries at work.

If an employer wants to improve the health of the workforce then they should address the issue of ill health and injury caused by work first, as that is what they have most control over.
Unfortunately, many employers prefer to look at changing the behaviour of the workers rather than the workplace. They seem to think that, rather than remove stress in the work, they should introduce on-site massage or after-work yoga classes. This approach is little to do with promoting well-being in the workplace and instead is using the workplace to promote changes in how workers live their lives.

HEALTH AND WELL-BEING – THE ACAS APPROACH
What makes a healthy workplace?
Good relationships have the potential to make workplaces healthy and productive. But promoting a healthy and productive workplace is not just about being nice to each other (although this obviously helps). Good employment relations are built upon:

- effective policies for managing people issues such as communication, absence, grievances and occupational health
- high levels of trust between employees and managers – trust is often nurtured by involving employees in decision-making and developing an open style of communication.

(Extract from Acas guidance)
03

Using the workplace to deal with health issues

The best way of improving well-being in the workplace is by changing how work is organised and managed, yet the message that is often heard from government and employers is that individual workers should change their lifestyle by exercising more or eating better.

The government has set up a ‘responsibility deal’ to try to persuade employers to promote good health through the workplace by making a pledge to take action in at least one area such as exercise or nutrition. Most of these pledges have been written by groups of employers including food manufacturers.

These initiatives are often popular with workers, especially when they involve things like subsidised gym membership, but in practice they are usually taken up by a small number of workers who are most likely to use them anyway.

However, where employers are introducing changes to promote healthier lifestyles unions should be involved. Employers should do this in partnership with the workforce and their unions rather than on behalf of the workforce. Employers must make sure that they consult with the workforce, through their

BODY MAPPING

The PCS branch at the Newcastle Contact Centre of Jobcentre Plus worked with management to develop a joint ‘body map’ survey to identify health concerns. Staff with problems were offered further help (such as a desk station assessment). The overall results were used to produce a joint guide to healthy and safe working which was sent to all staff.
union. There should also always be an element of choice rather than compulsion.

The workplace can, like any other environment, be a useful place to encourage people to make healthy choices, but it must be done in a non-judgemental way that creates the opportunities for people to make healthier choices, rather than forcing them to adopt a particular lifestyle that has no bearing on their employment. Trade unions should resist attempts by employers to introduce moral elements to health, e.g. by criticising employee lifestyles. A typical example is the stigma attached to overweight people. Obesity can be a serious health condition needing medical support. Employers can help prevent obesity by providing choices over working methods (e.g. not sitting down all day) that will help those people who want to control their weight. Providing access to healthy meals, a proper lunch break and exercise classes will also help.

Drug and alcohol issues are a concern when they affect the performance of a person in the workplace or put at risk the safety of workers or the public. Good employers will also wish to assist any employees who have an addiction problem that is affecting them or their work. However, that is a very different matter from the employer seeking to prevent drug or alcohol use outside the office if it has no bearing on the person’s work.

To conclude, workers who eat well and are physically active are healthier and, usually, feel better. There is evidence that people who take more exercise and eat better are less likely to take time off sick. In addition, increased exercise can help prevent or manage 20 different conditions from diabetes to heart disease. Yet the biggest lifestyle gains can be made through reducing stress, long hours and introducing policies that promote work/life balance.

However, there are also other steps that employers can take to help support workers who want to live a healthier lifestyle.

**HEALTH SCREENING**

Providing access to annual health screening may be a very useful way of ensuring people are aware of any potential health problems and are given advice on how to reduce any health risks. Although experts disagree whether such screening is effective in identifying problems that would not otherwise be detected, testing the heart, lung function and weight of people can be important factors in encouraging them to stop smoking or exercise. Health screening also needs to be linked to prevention programmes to ensure that any ill health that may be linked to work is investigated and risks removed. There are a lot of consultants who offer very comprehensive health screening programmes. Many of these are very good and can be geared towards the type of workforce and the hazards they face. For instance, the screening programme for construction workers would probably be different to that for call centre staff. However, it is important that employers make sure that the programme fits workers’ needs, is comprehensive and does not include unnecessary or intrusive tests. Workers also need reassurances on confidentiality.

**LOOK OUT FOR...**

Some health providers offer health screening paid for by the employer but then try to get the worker to pay for additional tests privately, such as a H-pylori test (for a bacteria that can cause stomach ulcers) or a PSA test (for prostate cancer). Often these tests are unnecessary but if required are free when arranged through a GP.
Promoting health through work

Initiatives aimed at encouraging workers to get or stay healthy can have a mixed response from workers.

At times workers will welcome them as a sign that their employer is taking an interest in their health. Other workers may feel that their employer has no business getting involved in what they consider to be their private life.

It is therefore important that any activities are introduced in a way that makes it clear that there is no compulsion and that employees are not necessarily expected to take part. Involving the union at an early stage can help this.

Among the activities that might be considered are:

+ **Putting on exercise classes at lunchtime**
  There are a wide variety of classes to choose from that are aimed at improving people’s strength, flexibility or cardiovascular fitness. These include circuit training, jazz dance, pilates, yoga and step classes. If taught properly these have the benefit of involving a variety of people across the age range and from both sexes. Make sure they are taught by a qualified instructor and that there is sufficient space. However it is also important that people have time to have something to eat after the class rather than having to rush back to work.

+ **Provide access to a gym**
  This can either be a gym on the employer’s premises which is available to staff or a local fitness centre where the employer has negotiated a reduced rate and where people can go at a time that suits them. If the employer provides a gym on its premises it must ensure that the equipment is properly maintained, and that instruction is available so that people know how to use it effectively and safely.

**LOOK OUT FOR...**
Some deals through an employer are more restrictive or lock you in to a contract for longer. Check this out. Also, if the employer makes an arrangement with an outside fitness centre then the subsidy they pay is likely to be taxable.
Cycling
This is a good exercise for the heart and lungs, and it doesn’t rain in Britain as many days as people think! Employers can help by providing safe provision for cycle parking. The government has a scheme ‘cycle to work’ whereby if employees can get a bike and accessories at discounts of around 40 per cent. On the downside, although cycling is great exercise, riding a bike in heavy traffic can be a scary and dangerous experience so employers should distribute maps of local cycle routes. Many local authorities and cycling organisations produce these.

Sponsorship of sports and social activities
Some employers support and help finance a range of activities at competitive sports clubs, sometimes on employer premises or grounds. Employers can also support staff involvement in events such as cycle runs or “fun-runs” by providing sponsorship or time off. They should also consider sponsorship and time off for any employees who are involved in competitive events outside work such as amateur athletics, martial arts competitions or other sporting meets. Employers can also be asked to provide more flexible working to those who are training at competitive level.

Provision of showers
One of the biggest factors preventing people cycling or running to work, or exercising at lunchtime, is a lack of washroom or shower facilities. Simply providing these can make a major difference to take-up.
**Healthy eating**

Far fewer employers provide canteen facilities than in the past. This is partly to do with organisation size, but it is also because many employers fail to see the benefits of providing workers with good food and encouraging them to eat together rather than at their desks or a local park. As a result far more people are eating fast or junk food at lunchtime. Also people are now taking, on average, far less of a break at lunchtime. Both these factors can harm people’s health. Ideally, employers should provide a range of food in a subsidised canteen. Failing that they can provide a separate area for people to take their rest breaks or eat meals (this is actually a requirement under the Workplace Regulations). If there are no canteen facilities they can provide access to a microwave and other preparation facilities. Even small initiatives like having a regular supply of free fruit can encourage people to swap the chocolate bar for the apple.

**LOOK OUT FOR...**

If your employer does provide canteen facilities make sure that any healthy food changes are introduced with consultation and that new options are agreed. If you suddenly replace the traditional fried breakfast with muesli expect to get complaints!

In addition to these there are also initiatives that are organised or managed by workers themselves. Many of the most successful workplace social and sports events are those organised by unions or groups of workers. These have usually grown from a few union members organising lunchtime exercise club or five-a-side football team. Often employers have been persuaded to subsidise these or provide facilities. Where they exist they have become the focus of social activities in the workplace and are often the only regular exercise that some people get. By organising social events unions can recruit a range of new people into the union and also show that they are active in all aspects of working life, not just pay and conditions.
**Employee Assistance Programmes**

Many employers, especially larger ones, give their staff access to an Employee Assistance Programme (EAP). These are intended to help employees deal with personal problems that might adversely impact their work performance, health, and well-being. It is estimated that over eight million people have access to an EAP and around 10 per cent of these will use it at some time in their working lives.

EAPs can often offer advice on a range of issues such as money problems, domestic issues, and difficulties with work colleagues. They can act as a confidential way for people to report and seek help for bullying, harassment and stress. Most EAPs offer an element of individual counselling, although these are often restricted to a limited number of sessions. Some also allow family members to use the service. Most are provided by an outside contractor with the first point of contact being a confidential phone line.

Usually the EAP provider will supply the employer with details of the types of problems that are dealt with. This can allow them to see whether there is a significant problem in some area such as bullying which needs addressed. EAPs can also act as a go-between a worker and the management on a confidential issue.

Unions will usually welcome any provision such as this although there are occasionally concerns over a lack of impartiality where an employee seeks assistance due to a work-related problem. Also the level of support is usually limited by the contract and at the end of the contracted number of sessions the EAP provider may try to get the employee to pay for further sessions privately or refer them to a commercial provider, even where free services may be available through a CAB or the NHS.

A review of EAPs conducted in 2012 by researchers in Sheffield showed that there was little evidence that EAPs actually made any difference to either the well-being of the workers in general, or to sickness absence or performance. Nevertheless, it is clear that, for some people, access to a service such as an EAP can be of major help in supporting them to deal with a problem.

**LOOK OUT FOR...**

Employers sometime use an EAP scheme as being an alternative for introducing effective policies on stress and bullying. They are not. Instead they are a last resort if prevention fails.

**CONSTRUCTING BETTER HEALTH**

Construction is one of the most dangerous industries when it comes to safety. However, it also has one of the worst records on occupational health. Unions and employers have been working together to drive up standards through practical measures in a partnership called Constructing Better Health. It is aiming to:

- set industry standards for work related health issues
- build a construction-specific knowledge portal, giving consistent advice, guidance and support in the management of health-related risks
- centralise the collection of work-related health data
- give out information to enable employers to manage work-related health risks at site level
- provide a referral route through to specialists in the field of return to work and rehabilitation.

Many of the lessons from the project were used in the building of the London Olympic Park with great success. Unions are now trying to get the good practice from this spread throughout the industry.
05
Monitoring and evaluation

Whatever measures an employer introduces it is important that they are evaluated to see if they are having an effect, and the evaluation system has to be in place right from the start. Baseline data should be established – that is, simply measuring what the situation is, before any changes are introduced. That should come from an employee needs’ assessment (see box overleaf).

Usually the employer will set targets for what they want to achieve and these need to be agreed right at the beginning along with how they are going to be measured. The best ways of monitoring are usually the simplest, by using information that is already collected, such as sickness absence levels, but sometime the employer may want to use surveys or the results of health checks.

Monitoring also has to be over a long period. This is because the effects of some changes, such as introducing stress risk assessments, may not result in major change for quite a while. Also some interventions may seem to be successful at first, but may be less successful in the long term. This is often the case with weight loss programmes.

As well as employer surveys, the union should also be doing its own monitoring. Even if the employer says that something is working, is that what your members are telling you? The employer may also say that something is not proving ‘cost-effective’, but it is still having a positive effect on your members’ health. After all well-being is not just about trying to improve productivity, it is about making your members healthier.
If targets are not being met, rather than just throw in the towel, ask why. Is there anything than could improve the effectiveness of what is being done? Perhaps people do not know about it, or managers have not been trained in implementing it.

Finally, if what you are doing works, then let others know. We need to share good practice. Get the employer to report what they have done in any trade journals, and if it is a joint initiative with the union make sure that your union knows.

**LOOK OUT FOR...**
The survey forms should be returned to, and analysed by, an outside organisation and confidentiality must be guaranteed. Workers need to be confident that there is no possibility of personal information being misused.

**HEALTH NEEDS ASSESSMENTS**
Some employers conduct surveys of behaviour around exercise, smoking, diet, alcohol, etc. This is used to prioritise what they do and also to provide a benchmark so they can measure what progress is being made. Unions should try to ensure that issues like stress, bullying, workload, and hours of work are included (for some reason employers often omit any questions about work from these assessments). If the union believes that the survey will be helpful they may want to run the survey jointly with management.
TUC HEALTHY WORKPLACES PROJECT

The northern region of the TUC has set up a Healthy Workplaces Project as a way of using the workplace to involve employees in health improvement activities. It is a partnership between the unions, employers and the NHS. So far around 200 employers have been involved, 30 of them intensively, and around 60 union workplace representatives have taken part.

An evaluation of the project showed that 90 per cent of the employers and employees said the project encouraged the employer to implement health and well-being initiatives that otherwise would not have been introduced. Forty per cent of employers reported a fall in sickness absence as a result of the project while more than 70 per cent of employers and 90 per cent of employees reported the workplace was a better place to work.

As well as the health and productivity benefits, 50 per cent of employees and employers felt that relationships between the management and workplace had improved. The Northern TUC has also reported that they have managed to recruit and train more union representatives, and strengthened positive perceptions of unions among both the workforce and management.

One of the key elements used to promote workplace involvement in public health was the creation by the regional NHS of the North East Better Health at Work Award and workplace 'health advocates'. These advocates, who volunteer from within the workplace, have responsibility for driving health initiatives forward in conjunction with the NHS or the TUC, in response to employee demands. These advocates are not seen as an alternative to traditional health and safety representatives, although many union representatives have successfully volunteered for the role of health advocate. The Northern TUC has been a key partner in the award since its inception. Workplaces have to demonstrate that they fulfil the criteria of bronze, silver and gold standards over a three-year period. Assessment takes place once a year and full consultation and involvement of trade unions is an essential component.

200 EMPLOYERS HAVE BEEN INVOLVED

40% OF EMPLOYERS REPORTED A FALL IN SICKNESS ABSENCE AS A RESULT OF THE PROJECT

90% OF EMPLOYEES REPORTED THE WORKPLACE WAS A BETTER PLACE TO WORK
Union involvement in workplace well-being

One of the biggest criticisms of well-being initiatives is that management often exclude unions. Sometimes this is just an oversight, but often it is deliberate.

If there are trade union health and safety representatives recognised in the workplace then they have to be consulted on any health and safety matter. The law is very clear on this. Unfortunately some employers are saying that this only applies to health and safety and that well-being is a different issue because it is not about protecting the workers health or safety, it is about promoting health and well-being.

As a result they may set up non-union well-being committees or appoint non-union ‘well-being ambassadors’.

Whether this is legal or not depends on the issue, but most well-being issues relating to work organisation, such as stress and workload, are clearly health and safety issues relating to prevention.
Unfortunately, where employers fail to involve unions they are also making it far less likely that any initiative will succeed. This guide has featured several case studies where unions have made a difference through their involvement.

If your employer is resisting union involvement then the first thing to do is ask “what are they scared of?” Is what they are trying to do something that the union is likely to have concerns about?

There are various ways that you can attempt to encourage your employer to work with you. These could include coming up with some low-cost suggestions that would benefit the workforce and the employer, or offering to promote any initiative that involves the workforce. If, however, your employer continues to refuse to involve the union then it is likely that there are deeper issues around your relationship with that employer and you may wish to raise that with your union at a higher level.

Health and well-being is also an issue that should involve all union workplace representatives. Health and safety representatives have a key role, but so do learning representatives. Stewards and equality representatives may also have an important role. Some union branches have even set up a health and well-being committee.

**CHECKLIST FOR UNION REPRESENTATIVES**

Well-being initiatives provide an important way of improving the health and well-being of members. They can also be a way of helping develop a union relationship with your employer. However, employers can introduce schemes as a way of passing responsibility for workplace health onto the worker. There are four simple things that unions should consider before being involved in any well-being proposals.

- **Does your employer have prevention measures in place for stress, musculoskeletal diseases and other occupational health issues? If not – that should be done first.**

- **Have you surveyed your members to find out what health problems they have and are they related to work? This can be done jointly with management.**

- **Is management involving the union, through its union representatives, in the development of a health and well-being programme?**

- **Is there an evaluation planned and are there baseline figures available before the programme starts?**

Remember that well-being at work initiatives can be very popular with workers and unions should also use them as a way of recruiting new members and building activist numbers.
UNIONS IN ACTION

The trade union PCS has produced a well-being at work toolkit that aims to help activists in all parts of the union to push the government and the contracted companies that deliver its services towards adopting personnel management practices that create healthy and supportive workplaces. The resources cover health and attendance, learning and skills, performance and appraisal and work/life balance. The union hopes the toolkit will help union representatives resist the attacks on good personnel practice that have resulted from the government’s efficiency agenda and to improve policies, procedures and working conditions for all members across the public and commercial sectors of the union.

Unite has produced a negotiators’ guide on women’s health, safety and well-being at work. This covers a wide range of well-being issues and is available on their website.

Teaching union NASUWT has produced a number of resources to help both their members and head teachers promote well-being at work. Along with producing guides to managing well-being and managing mental health, it has created a well-being at work survey. Using the responses, the union can also produce anonymised reports on the conditions within a particular workplace. This can identify areas of common concern and allow union representatives to raise issues with the school management. To try to ensure action by schools they have used a statutory requirement for maintained schools in England and Wales to “promote the safety and well-being of pupils and staff” and “lead and manage the school’s workforce with a proper regard for their well-being and legitimate expectations, including the expectation of a healthy balance between work and other commitments.”

The union Prospect, in response to its members’ concern over how management was dealing with organisational change, produced a guide, Fair Change, for their members. This outlined how best to deal with organisational change. One of the main recommendations was simply involving the workforce through their union.
07

Well-being at work resources

Acas
The Acas guidance may be helpful in trying to get your employer to see the importance of dealing with the issue through changing the workplace. www.acas.org.uk/media/pdf/g/h/Health-work and-wellbeing-accessible-version.pdf

DWP
Working for a Better Tomorrow
This report by the government’s health and work advisor, Dame Carol Black, outlines the link between health and work. www.dwp.gov.uk/docs/hwwb-working-for-a healthier-tomorrow.pdf

HSE
The HSE website contains guidance on all aspects of prevention of ill health. www.hse.gov.uk

NICE
The government’s National Institute for Health and Clinical Excellence (NICE) has produced guidance on promoting mental well-being at work. There is also NICE guidance on the workplace promotion of physical activity and smoking cessation. http://publications.nice.org.uk/promoting-mental-wellbeing-at-work-ph22

TUC
The TUC website contains advice on a range of prevention issues. www.tuc.org.uk

In Sicknss and In Health – this booklet from the TUC explores the relationship between health and work. www.tuc.org.uk/extras/goodwork.pdf

Work Foundation
The Work Foundation has produced a number of reports on well-being. The main one, which includes a number of case studies, is Health and Well-Being at Work in the UK. www.nhsehealthandwellbeing.org/pdfs/Interimper cent20Report per cent20Appendices

Literature per cent20Review.pdf
TUC Education offers a variety of training programmes for union workplace representatives. For more information contact the Regional Education Officer for your region:

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