



**Mental Health Charter**  
**Change the workplace**  
**not the worker**



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# Introduction

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## What is well-being?

Well-being is one of those phrases which we intuitively understand but may struggle to define. When asked what they thought it meant, some members said it's *"a healthy balance of family, work, rest and social/leisure life."* Others said it's *"a lack of anxiety and a feeling of confidence, contentment and security."* Whatever well-being means to you, most of us sense the absence of it and may describe ourselves as overwhelmed, anxious or stressed when it is absent.

## Why is the NEU promoting a mental health charter?

All workload surveys reveal the extent to which demands on the profession and working practices in schools are either causing or contributing to the mental ill-health of school and college staff. Ninety per cent (90 per cent) of teachers surveyed by the union said they were considering leaving the profession because of workload and stress. This is an issue which needs to be dealt with as a matter of urgency. Mental ill-health is not an inevitable part of working life. The mental health charter is intended as a focal point around which staff and school/college leaders may collectively develop tools and strategies specific to their needs and aimed at reducing stress. The charter seeks to ensure that the well-being of staff is reflected in the culture, organisation and management of your school or college.

## Shouldn't pupils, and not the staff, be at the centre of everything we do?

Research shows that workplaces which have an adverse effect on the mental well-being of workers suffer, among other things, from poorer quality output, lower productivity, higher levels of absence and lower morale. Schools and colleges which make the mental well-being of staff a central feature of their culture, organisation and management are far more likely to deliver the educational outcomes that children deserve.

**Remember our working environment is our pupils' learning environment.**

## How do we ensure that the well-being of staff is central to what we do?

It is often the case that anything that is not measured and/or monitored in the workplace is ignored. This probably explains why the well-being of school and college staff is often the furthest from the minds of decision makers. For good mental health to play a central role in the ethos of your school or college it must be embedded in relevant policies and practices. These policies and practices must also be monitored and evaluated to see how well they are being implemented. Throughout this document are examples of policies and practices which may require review to safeguard the well-being of school and college staff.

## What does the charter say?

There are six overarching principles contained in the charter, which are discussed in detail at Section 1 of this document. We should all be entitled to:

[A safe workplace](#)

[Support from colleagues \(including managers\)](#)

[Fair and equal treatment](#)

[Clear procedures, roles and responsibilities](#)

[Personal and social time](#)

[Stress risk assessments](#)

## Section 1

# Overarching principles

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There are six overarching principles contained in this charter. They are

- A safe workplace
- Support from colleagues (including managers)
- Fair and equal treatment
- Clear procedures, roles and responsibilities
- Personal and social time
- Stress risk assessments

## A safe workplace

This principle encompasses both physical safety and dignity at work. It requires schools and colleges to monitor, assess and mitigate the risk to staff arising from:

- working practices
- violence or the threat of violence
- harassment
- bullying by colleagues and management
- pressure from Ofsted/Estyn
- pressure from local government
- pressure from central Government

## Working practices

There are various laws which impose on employers a legal duty to ensure that staff are doing their work in a safe way. They include, but are not limited to

- The Health and Safety at Work etc. Act 1974
- The Management of Health and Safety at Work Regulations 1999 (as amended)
- The Manual Handling Operations Regulations 1992 (as amended)
- The Reporting of Injuries, Diseases and Dangerous Occurrences Regulations 2013
- The Control of Substances Hazardous to Health Regulations 2002.

The NEU has produced several guidance documents relating to the law on safe working practices in schools and colleges and these may be found at [www.neu.org.uk](http://www.neu.org.uk)

## Violence, harassment and bullying

Employers have a duty under the Health and Safety at Work Act to provide a safe place of work. An environment in which violence, the threat of violence, harassment and/or bullying is habitual is not a safe

environment in which to work. Teachers and other school staff will feel safe at work only if they are confident that management and/or the employer will deal effectively with their concerns. Assuming they have not done so already, school and college leaders should be asked to take the following steps:

- A zero-tolerance approach to violence and the threat of violence against staff. This approach should be reflected in the school/college's pupil behaviour policy, disciplinary policy and any policies pertaining to the conduct of parents. The concept of zero tolerance should be practised as well as championed on paper.
- Inform the governing body of the number of reported incidents of violence, bullying and harassment against staff each year and provide the governing body with ideas for reducing the number of such incidents. Consult the recognised trade unions.
- Adopt a dignity at work policy or include a dignity at work section in an existing policy document (e.g. the disciplinary policy).
- Conduct an anonymous survey of staff at least once a year to determine whether those who have experienced harassment/bullying in the workplace are reluctant to report the same for fear of victimisation. The survey may form part of an annual stress risk assessment.

The NEU has produced several guidance documents relating to the management of bullying and harassment in a school/college setting and these may be found at [www.neu.org.uk](http://www.neu.org.uk)

## Pressures external to school/college

The Government's [Workload Challenge consultation](#) revealed the extent to which the volume of initiatives from central and local government, as well as Ofsted/Estyn, is contributing to unmanageable workloads and consequently to mental health conditions. Sometimes the excessive demands on staff arise because of the way school/college leaders interpret these initiatives and give effect to them. In other cases, the initiatives themselves give rise to increasing workload because they do not allow sufficient time for new policies and practices to be learnt and embedded in the organisation. In a safe workplace, changes to teaching practice arising from such initiatives are managed, whenever possible, over a reasonable timescale and without adding to overall work demands. Ideally, new tasks should be introduced only after old ones are discontinued.

It is understandable that some school and college leaders feel there is little that can be done to protect staff from the constant onslaught of initiatives from external sources. No one can doubt the immense pressure on headteachers/principals and their staff to produce consistently outstanding results in the face of ever greater challenges. However, there are steps, some more obvious than others, which school/college leaders can take to protect their own mental well-being as well as that of their staff:

- Whenever working practices must change, explain the reasons why to staff.
- Invite suggestions about better ways of working, perhaps by introducing a suggestions box. Staff meetings are not always the best forum in which to elicit ideas. School/college leaders should not only consider the proposals they receive – they should also be seen to consider them.
- Divide new areas of work which must be done as a matter of law from those which are merely recommended as good practice. Recommendations may be embedded only when there is capacity to do so or circumstances demand it.
- Consider whether staff are currently doing work which does not need to be done or is already being done elsewhere. They should consult heads of department, curriculum leaders and union representatives, where appropriate.
- They should ask heads of department to collectively review their systems for process driven work (e.g. marking, target setting, writing reports, lesson planning). Are their systems unnecessarily burdensome? Are they producing the outcomes they want? Refer to NEU guidance at <https://neu.org.uk/workload-advice>

- Discuss better ways of working with other school/college leaders in their area and consider whether certain tasks may be better accomplished by sharing or pooling resources with other schools/colleges.

## Support from colleagues (including managers)

This principle encompasses both professional and personal support from colleagues. All colleagues, not just line managers, have a role to play in contributing to each other's well-being at work. It is well to remember the adage "no one is an island". We all need to feel that our colleagues value the work we do and the contributions we make to the workplace, just as we value them. Clashes in personality, different perceptions, bullying, prejudice and competitiveness may not always make that possible, but it is the role of school/college leaders and governing bodies to provide a shared vision for the school/college in which every member of staff takes individual and collective responsibility. Below are some suggested steps to building a more collegiate working environment:

- Try not to take each other for granted. A favour, no matter how small, should always be acknowledged.
- If a colleague takes time out of their busy day to listen to your concerns, be prepared to lend an ear when they need to talk.
- Where good work is the result of group effort, acknowledge everyone who contributed.
- Try to engage in small-talk whenever a normally bubbly colleague appears downcast or moody.
- Be supportive of colleagues who are experiencing or have experienced ill-health, particularly hidden illnesses.
- Share important work-related information with all relevant colleagues and not just with friends. Selective information sharing can exclude individuals and act as a barrier to effective working.

## Below are some specific steps for line managers to consider:

- Promote open dialogue and involve staff in decision making.
- Ensure good, clear communication and develop trust.
- Encourage peer support and buddy systems (e.g. health and wellbeing buddies).
- Discourage working in isolation – group working should be the norm.
- Encourage colleagues to respect diversity at work.
- Encourage colleagues to set realistic expectations of themselves and others.
- Arrange regular catch-ups with those you line manage and use them as an opportunity to normalise conversations about mental health.
- Ask colleagues who appear to be struggling whether they want direct support. Don't wait to be approached.
- Ensure that colleagues who struggle to cope at work have early access to occupational health services.
- Modify performance management practices (e.g. stop learning walks and drop-ins) where a colleague has been, or is, experiencing ill-health.
- If someone you line manage tells you they are stressed, or that they cannot undertake additional duties, do not reply by making a direct comparison between their workload – or their workload as you perceive it – and that of other colleagues. It takes a lot of courage for some people to admit to stress and your obligation to that person under the Health and Safety at Work etc. Act is not met by dismissing their disclosure or by telling them to pull themselves together.

- Treat people as individuals. Change your management style to suit the needs of the staff member and the task.
- Think about what those you line manage need from you rather than just what you need from them.

For more advice on how to support colleagues with invisible impairments refer to the TUC guidance document *"You don't look disabled....."*.

## Fair and equal treatment

The very large majority of people can detect from words, body language and atmosphere when they are being judged based on prejudiced assumptions rather than on individual merit. Staff from disadvantaged groups (e.g. women, Black, LGBT+, disabled staff) are aware of what it means to be in a minority (or in the case of women, a disempowered majority) in ways which members of the dominant majority group cannot easily understand. They know when they are not being given a fair deal.

The principle of fair and equal treatment does not contain the expectation that schools, and colleges will be places free of conscious or unconscious bias. That would be an undeliverable goal. Instead, school and college leaders are asked to be live to the issue of conscious and unconscious bias in the workplace, their effect on disadvantaged groups and the steps which may be taken to mitigate them.

The NEU has produced several guidance documents relating to equality, discrimination and harassment in the workplace and these may be found at [www.neu.org.uk](http://www.neu.org.uk)

## Clear procedures, roles and responsibilities

This principle is intended to highlight the importance of clear procedures, roles and responsibilities as a necessary part of mitigating conflict in the workplace. This principle should work together with the principle of support from colleagues.

School and college leaders should:

- Remember that they have a duty to consult employees on the policies and practices of the workplace.
- Seek to ensure that every staff member understands the part that other staff members play (consider developing an organisational flowchart for the staff bulletin board or staff handbook).
- Have a clear definition of roles and responsibilities where possible.
- Seek to ensure that individuals are not overloaded with responsibility.
- Where areas of work and responsibility overlap, seek to ensure that individuals are clear about who should take the lead.
- Seek to ensure that staff members are asked to undertake only those roles and responsibilities they have the skills, training or experience to undertake.
- Seek to ensure that where two or more managers direct or influence the work of a colleague, those managers keep each other regularly informed of the tasks they have delegated to avoid overloading an individual with work or creating conflicting expectations.
- Recognise that teachers expect to exercise professional autonomy in the workplace. Allow them to use their judgement and initiative.
- Provide staff members with a revised job description when their roles and responsibilities change materially.

## Personal and social time

This principle recognises that for most of us, work is a place in which to socialise and foster personal, as well as professional relationships with our colleagues. A school or college devoid of such interaction can be a very isolating and consequently stressful place in which to work. Schools and colleges should also be places where individuals are not discouraged from working flexibly (e.g. part-time and job sharing). The Government White Paper 'Educational Excellence Everywhere' says: *"schools should be leading in this area, offering equal opportunities for all and modelling these values for children and young people."*

School and college leaders should:

- create a space (if they have not already done so) in which staff members may socialise during breaks, share ideas, hold meetings, discuss projects, catch-up with personal emails, arrange medical appointments etc.;
- discourage a culture in which staff members regularly forgo lunchbreaks/eat lunch at their desks or undertake an unequal share of break duties;
- keep track of the hours staff are working. In this context there should be acknowledgement and consideration given to the non-academic role performed by teachers, often exercised at times when they should be on break;
- accommodate flexible working;
- ensure that directed time is clearly defined in teachers' contracts and that an annual directed time calendar is provided in advance of the beginning of each academic year;
- provide teachers with the option to use at least one of their INSET days to develop personal as well as professional interests;
- where possible, provide staff with "down-time" or lighter duties after a particularly stressful period of work (e.g. after Ofsted/Estyn inspection);
- consider introducing a 'family day', which is paid leave once a year to enable staff to spend time with family during term time.

The NEU has produced several guidance documents relating to flexible working in schools and colleges and these may be found at [www.neu.org.uk](http://www.neu.org.uk)

The following documents may be found at [www.neu.org.uk](http://www.neu.org.uk)

Work-life balance model policy

Work your proper hours timesheet

## Stress risk assessments

This principle emphasises the importance of monitoring levels of stress in the workplace and reviewing its effects on the workforce. Persistently high levels of pressure can lead to distress, exhaustion, and a feeling of being overwhelmed. The Health & Safety Executive (HSE) defines work-related stress as: *"The adverse reaction people have to excessive pressures or other types of demand placed on them at work."* It is counter-productive and not only impacts on the mental and physical wellbeing of school/college staff, but also impacts on the school/college by affecting job performance and productivity, not to mention the financial costs of covering sick leave and recruiting replacement staff.

School and college leaders should be encouraged to build processes in the workplace which assist in the detection of both individual and organisational stress. There are many diagnostic tools available for this purpose, some of which are set out in the following NEU documents:

- how to undertake a stress risk assessment
- preventing work-related mental health conditions by tackling stress

- tackling stress
- NEU online stress survey

## Section 2

# How to Promote the NEU Mental Health Charter

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The NEU Mental Health Charter is intended for use by school and college leaders, as well as staff.

The charter encourages school and college leaders to take steps to ensure that the way work is organised does not cause or contribute to ill-health.

The charter also encourages the use of diagnostic tools to ensure that where work gives rise to ill-health remedial steps are taken at the earliest opportunity.

Without active promotion and scrutiny, however, the charter will not improve the working lives of anyone. Experience shows that where mental health can be made a whole workplace issue, and staff and management cooperate to challenge aspects of work likely to give rise to additional pressure, all parties see the benefit.

## Making the business case for a mental health charter

- Schools are facing a recruitment and retention crisis in many areas of the country. There is therefore greater competition than ever for staff. In an increasingly competitive employment market, no educator will be tempted to work in a school or college which does not take steps to ameliorate the pressures of work.
- The steps recommended in the charter cost nothing. They simply require school staff – and managers in particular – to think in advance about the impact of their working practices on their own as well as colleagues' health.
- Both schools and colleges are experiencing substantial cuts to their budgets, which has led in many cases to a reduction in staff numbers. This means there are fewer staff to manage the same workload, which gives rise to increasing levels of sickness absence. In the circumstances, it is less cost effective for schools and colleges to lose staff to illness than to engage in low or no-cost practices which promote staff well-being.
- The charter has the potential – when implemented – to foster better working relationships between management and staff, which will in turn create greater levels of well-being in the workplace.

## A whole workplace approach

A key aspect of successful workplace well-being management is cooperation. To be effective, this cooperation needs to be between management and staff but also between colleagues. Only through such a broad approach can we seek to address the isolation and stigma experienced by staff and arising from workplace stress.

To achieve this, it is insufficient for a union representative, or safety representative to seek to agree the charter with management with no discourse with the membership. Similarly, were management to seek to introduce the charter with no discourse with the workforce any opportunity to truly embed the principles would be missed.

At school and college level therefore, we need to be strategic if we are to win the gains set out in the charter.

## Getting the charter adopted: suggested steps for union reps to take

### Review what you already have in place (steps for school/college reps)

- Does your school/college have a policy for tackling stress?
- Are diagnostic tools used to monitor stress levels? If so, how often are they used and how effective are they?

This will give you an indication of how much work and/or persuading needs to be done.

### Take the temperature of the workplace (steps for divisions or school/college reps)

1. Is there a desire to promote a healthier workplace? If so, how strong is it? Speak to people on a one-to-one basis first, and if there's interest, organise a staff meeting.
2. Test the level of enthusiasm for a mental health charter – [arrange a meeting](#) with the support of management if possible. If you are a school/college rep, speak to your district first.
3. Is management likely to be uncooperative? If so, discuss how best to progress with your district (if you are a school/college rep).

### Take decisive measures (steps for districts or school/college reps)

1. If you get positive feedback from colleagues and management start a discussion about the content of the charter. Use existing structures within the school/college to get going (e.g. school group, H&S committee, governing body meetings etc.) and take as many views from as many groups as time will allow.
2. Get the governors on board – use your staff governor to persuade other governors of the benefits of adopting a charter.
3. If you don't have the support of management, you can develop a model charter with colleagues in your district/branch. Just because your school leaders don't want to be proactive doesn't mean other schools in your area will not appreciate your ideas or incites.

## The status of the charter

- The charter should have the status of a policy document. This means its contents should be negotiated and agreed with the recognised trade unions. A model policy is available at [Section 3](#) of this document.
- The charter can be adapted by each school and college to meet its own needs.
- The charter should be a living document – easy to access and regularly referred to for guidance.

## Raising awareness – an ongoing commitment

- Use what is happening in the headlines to talk about mental health and well-being.
- Engage in genuine partnerships with third sector organisations like MIND.
- Mention the charter in workplace inductions.

- Use your workplace structures to discuss the charter and mental health in general.
- Form a network of people prepared to speak on mental health and well-being.
- Promote [World Mental Health Day](#) at your school/college.

## Section 3

# Model Mental Health at Work Policy

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**This model policy may be amended by school/college groups to take account of local circumstances.**

The Health and Safety at Work etc. Act places a responsibility on *[insert name of employer]* to provide a safe system of work and that extends to protecting the general well-being of staff members. The purpose of this policy is to ensure that *[insert employer's name]* commitment to providing a safe system of work is reflected in the culture, organisation and management of *[insert name of school/college]*.

This document should be read in conjunction with all workplace policies, including the following policies:

- Capability;
- Disciplinary;
- Grievance; and
- Bullying and harassment

The *[insert name of employer]* commits to ensuring that:

## Safe workplace

- Staff work in premises that are safe and fit for purpose;
- There is a zero-tolerance approach to violence or the threat of violence from pupils, parents and colleagues;
- Staff are protected from harassment by pupils;
- Staff are protected from bullying by colleagues and management;
- Staff are protected, as far as is reasonably practical, from pressure from Ofsted/Estyn, local or central government;
- A dignity at work policy is adopted, or is included in an existing policy document (e.g. a disciplinary policy) where appropriate;
- An annual anonymous survey of staff is conducted to determine whether those who have experienced harassment/bullying in the workplace are reluctant to report the same for fear of victimisation. The survey may form part of an annual stress risk assessment;
- Whenever working practices must change, the reasons why are explained to staff;
- Contributions from staff are recognised and valued, and positive suggestions are acted upon;
- There is consideration of whether staff are currently doing work which does not need to be done or is already being done elsewhere.
- There is a review of systems for process driven work (e.g. marking, target setting, writing reports, lesson planning).
- There are discussions around better ways of working with other school/college leaders in the area;
- The school/college considers whether certain tasks may be better accomplished by sharing or pooling resources with other schools/colleges.

## Fair and equal treatment

- All staff are valued and not unreasonably judged;
- Management is live to the issue of conscious and unconscious bias in the workplace, their effects on disadvantaged groups and the steps which may be taken to mitigate them;
- Reasonable steps are taken to reduce the risk of unconscious bias in management decision making.

## Clear procedures, roles and responsibilities

- Staff are consulted on the policies and practices of the workplace;
- Every staff member understands the part that other staff members play at the school/college;
- There is a clear definition of roles and responsibilities where possible;
- Individuals are not overloaded with responsibility;
- Where areas of work and responsibility overlap, individuals are clear about who should take the lead;
- Staff members are asked to undertake only those roles and responsibilities they have the skills, training and experience to undertake;
- Where two or more managers direct or influence the work of a colleague, those managers keep each other regularly informed of the tasks they have delegated to avoid overloading an individual with work or creating conflicting expectations;
- Staff can exercise professional autonomy in the workplace;
- Staff members are provided with a revised job description when their roles and responsibilities change materially, e.g. when moving from one team to another.

## Personal and social time

- Staff have a space in which they may socialise during breaks, share ideas, hold meetings, discuss projects, catch-up with personal emails, arrange medical appointments etc;
- Staff members do not regularly forgo lunchbreaks/eat lunch at their desks;
- Break duties are shared equally;
- The hours worked by individual staff members are tracked;
- Directed time is clearly defined in letters of appointment;
- Flexible working is accommodated unless there are very good reasons why it cannot be;
- Teachers are encouraged to use at least one of their INSET days to develop personal as well as professional interests;
- Staff are provided with “down-time” or lighter duties after a particularly stressful period of work (e.g. after Ofsted/Estyn inspection);
- Staff are granted a ‘family day’, which is paid leave once a year, to enable staff to spend time with family during term time.

## Stress risk assessments

- Levels of stress in the workplace are monitored and its effects on the workforce are reviewed annually;
- School and college leaders are encouraged to build processes in the workplace which assist in the detection of both individual and organisational stress;

- Diagnostic tools are made available for this purpose.

**Staff members commit to ensuring that:**

## Support from colleagues (including managers)

- Where good work is the result of group effort, they acknowledge everyone who contributed;
- They are supportive of colleagues who are experiencing or have experienced ill-health, particularly hidden illnesses;
- They share important work-related information with all relevant colleagues and not just with friends.

## Additionally, management commits to:

- Promoting open dialogue and involving staff in decision making;
- Ensuring good, clear communication and developing trust;
- Encouraging peer support and buddy systems (e.g. health and wellbeing buddies);
- Encouraging colleagues to respect diversity at work;
- Setting realistic expectations of themselves and others;
- Discouraging working in isolation – group working will be the norm;
- Arranging regular catch-ups with those they line manage and using them as an opportunity to normalise conversations about mental health;
- Anticipating the needs of colleagues who appear to be struggling and asking them whether they want direct support;
- Ensuring that colleagues who struggle to cope at work have early access to occupational health services;
- Modifying performance management practices (e.g. stop learning walks and drop-ins) where a colleague has been, or is, experiencing ill-health;
- Responding positively if told by someone that they are stressed, or that they cannot undertake additional duties;
- Treating people as individuals and changing their management style to suit the needs of the staff member and the task;

## Complaints

A complaint may be made through the grievance procedure if a member of staff is not satisfied that the terms of this policy are being met either by other members of staff or by *[insert name of employer]*.

## Monitoring and Review

The governing body and headteacher/principal will monitor the operation and effectiveness of this policy annually. In developing, applying and evaluating this policy *[insert name of employer]* will monitor the impact on staff by reference to their protected characteristics. The results of monitoring will be shared with the recognised trade unions.

## Section 4

# Negotiated mental health policies

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Below is a summary of additions to the 'Mental Health at Work' model policy negotiated by NEU reps and employers.

## Tower Hamlets

### Safe workplace

- Pressure on staff from Ofsted and local inspection, local and central government is reasonable and based on individual role responsibilities.
- A display board provides information on mental health in the workplace.

### Fair and equal treatment

- Managers are aware that the absence of complaints of discrimination does not necessarily mean that discrimination is absent.
- All staff have access to relevant training, such as anti-bullying and mental health first aid training, to enable them to support colleagues.
- Existing council policy such as the core values and code of conduct safeguards staff dignity at work.

### Clear procedures, roles and responsibilities

- Procedures are communicated to all staff clearly, with transparency and parity.

### Personal and social time

- Managers are mindful of the need to consider staff workload demands after a particularly stressful period of work (e.g. after Ofsted/local area inspection).