

## NEU Guidance for Members, Reps and Local Officers

*This briefing contains advice about health and safety matters which both newly qualified and student teachers should be aware of when entering the profession. It covers issues such as asbestos, fire safety, accidents at work and good mental health, and signposts readers to further sources of information.*

### HEALTH AND SAFETY AT WORK

#### ➤ Who is responsible for health and safety in schools?

The overall responsibility for health and safety rests with your employer. They have responsibilities under the Health and Safety at Work etc Act 1974 to take steps to ensure the health, safety and welfare of their employees at work. Who the employer is will vary depending on the type of school. In maintained schools the employer is the local authority, in academies that are part of a chain the employer is the academy trust, in stand-alone academies, voluntary aided and foundation schools the employer is the governing body. In independent schools the employer is the governing body or proprietor and in sixth form and FE colleges the employer is the college corporation. Employers must assess risks within the workplace, record their assessment of these risks and put measures in place to remove the risks or minimise them as much as possible. **Employees must be informed of the safety procedures which are in place.**

All types of schools and colleges must have a written health and safety policy which sets out the organisational structure for health and safety, the various procedures to be followed to ensure health and safety is maintained and arrangements for monitoring and review. **The employer also has a legal responsibility to consult union safety representatives on health and safety matters.** More information on these matters is available in the NEU health and briefing Managing Health and Safety in Schools, available at [www.neu.org.uk](http://www.neu.org.uk).

#### ➤ What health and safety responsibilities do teachers have?

You should familiarise yourself and comply with your employer's health and safety policy and any associated procedures. These documents should be made available to you when you join a school.

All employees have a duty under the Health and Safety at Work etc Act 1974 to take reasonable care for the health and safety of themselves and others who may be affected by their acts or omissions at work. Therefore, you have a duty to take reasonable care of your own and your pupils' health and safety at school. It is unlawful to interfere with, or misuse, either intentionally or recklessly, anything which has been provided for the purposes of health and safety, for instance, propping open fire doors or blocking fire exits. Teachers who are provided with Personal Protective Equipment (PPE) by their employer as part of their role, for instance if they work in science labs, should ensure they use their PPE correctly when required to do so.

### ACCIDENTS AT WORK

#### ➤ What can be done to avoid slips, trips and falls in school?

Slips and trips are the most common cause of injury at work and such incidents can cause major injuries. Slips and trips can occur for a number of reasons, including uneven surfaces, obstructions and spillages. The legal requirements for employers to undertake risk assessments includes assessing and controlling the risk of slips, trips and falls on their premises.

Safety precautions instigated by employers to reduce the risk of such incidents are likely to include ensuring floors are routinely cleaned, spillages are identified, reported and cleaned efficiently, traffic routes are not obstructed by items, hazards such as broken floor surfaces are identified and rectified promptly and adequate lighting is provided throughout the school.

If you notice any obvious hazards please report them, even if they seem minor, as these could still lead to serious accidents. If you have any concerns about hazards in your workplace which have not been adequately addressed, you can discuss these with your school safety rep, branch/region health and safety adviser or the [NEU Adviceline](#).

#### ➤ **What should my employer do if an accident or injury occurs?**

All schools should have clear procedures for dealing with accidents and injuries. This includes maintaining an accident/incident reporting system in which details of all accidents/incidents and injuries should be recorded, even if they appear minor at the time. The employer should make all new teachers aware of the reporting procedures should an accident/incident occur. Please ask if you are not given this information. As part of their legal duties, employers should investigate the causes of all accidents/incidents and injuries and take actions to avoid the incident recurring.

Employers are also required to report certain accidents/incidents and injuries to the Health and Safety Executive (HSE). This includes certain 'specified injuries' and those which result in an employee being absent from work for more than seven days.

#### ➤ **What should I do if I have an accident or suffer an injury at work?**

When you join a school please familiarise yourself with the location of the accident book and the procedure for recording an incident. If an accident or injury does occur, it is important that it is recorded even if it seems trivial at the time, as there may be longer term implications. Details that should be recorded include: the date and time of the accident or injury; the name of the person and the nature of the injury; the place where the incident took place and a brief description of the circumstances, including the nature of the activity being undertaken at the time of the accident. More information is available in the Accidents and Injuries NEU health and safety briefing, available at [www.neu.org.uk](http://www.neu.org.uk).

### **FIRST AID**

#### ➤ **Am I responsible for administering first aid to pupils?**

No. Teachers' contracts of employment do not include any requirement to give first aid to pupils and **they cannot be compelled to do so**. Being a first aider is entirely voluntary and NEU advice is that teachers should consider carefully before agreeing to become the school's only first aider as this can lead to practical difficulties, for instance, not being able to leave the classroom easily.

Of course, if a pupil suffers an injury, you will want to make them as comfortable as possible, and then if you are not a trained first aider, you should obtain the necessary medical assistance as soon as possible. If you are a trained first aider, once initial first aid has been provided, you should then proceed to obtain further medical assistance as necessary.

There is no absolute legal requirement for school employers to provide a trained first aider in the workplace (apart from in early years settings). However, NEU policy is that all schools

should have a minimum of one first aider and that a first aider should be present on school visits. More information on first aid is available in the NEU health and safety briefing First Aid in Schools, available at [www.neu.org.uk](http://www.neu.org.uk).

## ADMINISTRATION OF MEDICINES

### ➤ Can my employer require me to administer medicines to pupils?

Schools have a statutory duty to support pupils with medical conditions; however, there is no legal or contractual duty on teachers to administer medicine to pupils. Instead, teachers have a general legal duty of care in the case of accident or emergency to act as any reasonably prudent parent would.

Any decision to administer medicines or medical procedures must be your individual choice, and the NEU strongly advises that teachers should only agree to do so if they are provided with appropriate information and training by their employer. Any teachers who do volunteer to administer medicines should be aware that they are taking on a legal responsibility to do so correctly. More information is available in the NEU health and safety briefing Administration of Medicines, available at [www.neu.org.uk](http://www.neu.org.uk).

## ASBESTOS

### ➤ What are the risks associated with asbestos in schools?

Around 86% of schools in England and Wales contain asbestos, and any school built before the year 2000 may contain asbestos. When asbestos containing materials are disturbed, fibres are released and these can cause a number of illnesses, including mesothelioma, a cancer of the lung and stomach lining. On average, 19 teachers per year die from mesothelioma.

Asbestos was used widely in the construction of schools, particularly during the 1940s-1970s and can be present in a variety of areas within a school. Asbestos containing materials can be commonly found in sprayed coatings on walls and ceilings, in floor and ceiling tiles and in insulating boards behind walls and in air cabinet heaters. Asbestos is more commonly disturbed in schools than in other workplaces because of the fact that the majority of their occupants are children who engage in normal but boisterous behaviour. However, even day-to-day activities, such as putting pins into walls can release asbestos fibres.

### ➤ What are my employer's responsibilities regarding asbestos?

School employers have duties under the Control of Asbestos Regulations 2012 to manage the asbestos in their premises safely. This includes carrying out an asbestos survey to find out where asbestos is located, preparing and maintaining an up-to-date asbestos management plan and informing staff, visitors and the emergency services where asbestos is located in the premises.

### ➤ What can I do to protect myself from exposure to asbestos?

It is important that all new teachers and members of staff are made aware if their school contains asbestos, and where it is located within the school so that they can avoid disturbing it. **If you aren't told whether your school contains asbestos and if so, where it is located, please ask.** It is particularly important for you to know if your classroom and the areas around them contain asbestos. For instance, if walls and ceilings contain asbestos, you should not stick pins or attach work to these. If you have any concerns about asbestos in your school you can speak to your safety representative, health and safety adviser or contact the [NEU Adviceline](http://www.neu.org.uk).

The NEU has lots of guidance on asbestos available from the health and safety section of the NEU website at [www.neu.org.uk](http://www.neu.org.uk).

## **SCHOOL TRIPS**

### ➤ **What are my responsibilities regarding school visits?**

If school visits are not undertaken in school time and are not part of the curriculum for a particular subject, then the involvement of teachers in school visits is entirely voluntary. NEU advice regarding participating in school visits outside of school hours is that you must use your professional judgement to decide whether you are able to take part. However, it is likely that all teachers will be involved in school visits at some stage, as visits also take place during school hours. The NEU advises that newly qualified teachers should not be expected to lead school trips during their first year of teaching.

Teachers have a legal duty of care to pupils on school trips. In practice this means you should ensure supervision of pupils throughout the journey or visit according to professional standards and common sense and take reasonable steps to avoid exposing pupils to foreseeable dangers. See detailed NEU health and safety briefing on School Visits, available at [www.neu.org.uk](http://www.neu.org.uk).

### ➤ **What must my employer do to ensure safety for staff and pupils on school visits?**

The school employer should have guidelines for staff to assist them in organising school visits. Employers must also conduct a risk assessment prior to school visits taking place. The risk assessment should identify hazards to health and safety, evaluate the risk of harm from these hazards and take appropriate action to protect employees and pupils. The risk assessment should also consider issues such as the steps to be taken in an emergency, the age of pupils, transport requirements and safety and any special educational or medical needs of pupils. All teachers attending the visit should be provided with a copy of the risk assessment.

Should something unfortunately go wrong on a school trip, employers have 'vicarious liability' which means that employers generally take responsibility if their employees do not properly fulfil their safety obligations at work.

## **MINIBUS SAFETY**

### ➤ **What safety issues should I consider before agreeing to drive a school minibus?**

School minibuses can be a very useful resource and provide pupils with access to out of school activities such as sport fixtures. However, teachers cannot be required to drive a school minibus, and any decision to undertake this must be voluntary. You should only agree to drive a minibus if you have been provided with proper training by your employer. In addition to the driver, another member of staff should be present in the minibus to supervise pupils. A teacher who drives a school minibus is personally responsible for its roadworthiness, and employers must ensure that they have a comprehensive insurance policy which would prevent staff members being liable for any damages caused when driving the minibus.

Drivers of minibuses must wear a seat belt, and there are specific regulations about the use of seat belts and child restraints for pupils which vary depending on the age of the child and where they are seated in the minibus. Details of these requirements and more information about school minibuses is available in the NEU health and safety briefing Minibus Safety, available at [www.neu.org.uk](http://www.neu.org.uk). Employers should provide all drivers of school minibuses with procedures to follow should an emergency occur when the minibus is in use.

## **VOICE CARE AND CLASSROOM ACOUSTICS**

### ➤ **How can I protect my voice from damage when teaching?**

The nature of teaching means that teachers are at greater risk than many other groups of workers of experiencing vocal problems. Therefore, it is important that new teachers joining the profession take steps to protect their voices from the outset. Steps that can be taken include warming up the voice at the start of the day, making use of pauses, practicing relaxation techniques and 'centred breathing' and seeking medical advice if any symptoms of vocal fatigue are experienced. More information is available in the NEU health and safety briefing Voice Care, available at [www.neu.org.uk](http://www.neu.org.uk).

➤ **What can be done about poor classroom acoustics?**

Considering the best acoustic layout of a classroom will also help to reduce the need for you to strain your voice and reduce the possibility of hearing damage. Modern buildings and open-plan designs may increase the spread of background noise within a school, and increase teachers' vocal strain. Some groups, such as music teachers, may be at particular risk of sustaining hearing damage. Your employer has a legal duty to control excessive noise and must include acoustics in their risk assessment. Measures to control excessive noise including changing working methods and equipment and alterations to the design of classroom layouts and work stations. Employers should also consider the impact of environmental noise if the school is situated in a noisy area, for instance, close to a road or railway line. More information is available in the NEU health and safety briefing Classroom Acoustics, available at [www.neu.org.uk](http://www.neu.org.uk).

## **CLASSROOM ERGONOMICS**

➤ **I've heard that many teachers experience aches and pains as 'part of the job'. Can anything be done to avoid this?**

Some teachers experience musculoskeletal disorders (MSDs) such as back, neck, shoulder, knee and hip problems associated with their work. Activities associated with such conditions include bending over low tables, sitting on children's chairs and kneeling at low tables or on the floor. Provisions should be made so that teachers can vary their position within the classroom between sitting (on appropriate chairs, designed for adults not children), standing and walking around.

You should never accept MSDs as 'part of the job' and if you do experience any MSD related discomfort, report this to your line manager and speak to your safety rep. Much can be done to improve ergonomics in classrooms such as the provision of height-adjustable chairs and stools and ensuring there is sufficient space under work stations for legs. More information on classroom ergonomics and MSDs is available in the NEU health and safety briefing Classroom Ergonomics, available at [www.neu.org.uk](http://www.neu.org.uk).

➤ **What can I expect from my employer?**

Employers have a general duty to protect their workers' health, safety and welfare. This includes taking steps to ensure they do not develop disorders as a result of their work activities. Employers also have a specific duty to provide a suitable seat for employees who are required to sit as a substantial part of their job. Employers should consider good ergonomic practices in their risk assessment and health and safety policy.

## **KEEPING HAPPY AND HEALTHY**

➤ **What are my employer's responsibilities regarding work-related stress and associated illnesses?**

Unfortunately, work-related stress is extremely prevalent within the teaching profession. Stress can lead to health problems such as depression, anxiety and insomnia, so it is vital that employers take steps to tackle the causes of work-related stress. Employers' duties to

undertake risk assessments include establishing the causes of work-related stress within the school and putting measures in place to address these causes.

Employees with mental health conditions may be classed as disabled under the Equality Act 2010, and if this is the case, employers have duties to make 'reasonable adjustments'. This may include, but isn't limited to, removing some of the person's duties, altering hours of working and arranging training or mentoring. More information on the NEU's suggested approach for school leaders in tackling work-related stress and mental health conditions is available from the NEU document Preventing Work-related Mental Health Conditions by Tackling Stress, available at [www.neu.org.uk](http://www.neu.org.uk).

➤ **What can be done to help me stay happy and healthy?**

Signs that a mental health condition may be developing include feeling overwhelmed, experiencing headaches, difficulties sleeping, mood swings or feeling tearful. Early intervention is recognised as facilitating recovery, so if you feel as if you are suffering this way, please do consider seeking help at the earliest opportunity. Mental health conditions are common, so no-one should feel isolated or stigmatised for seeking help. In the first instance you can contact the [NEU Adviceline](#). You should also consider seeking support from your GP and any employee assistance programme which may be in place. More NEU guidance is available from the health and safety section of the NEU website.

## **E-SAFETY**

➤ **How can I protect myself online and on social media?**

You can use social networks safely by being vigilant about how you post information online. Employers may search for personal information on the internet as part of pre-employment checks, so you may wish to search your name in several search engines to monitor your online profile. When posting information and pictures on social media, do not put anything online that you wouldn't want employers, colleagues, pupils or parents to see. Do not post anything on social media about school related matters and do not befriend pupils or other members of the school community on social media.

➤ **What should I do if I receive bullying messages online from pupils or parents?**

If you receive any bullying or inappropriate messages from pupils or parents online, **do not respond**. Make a copy of the messages and show them to your employer. Schools must have a policy on cyberbullying, and make it clear to pupils, parents and all members of the school community that any form of cyberbullying will not be tolerated. More information is available in the NEU self-help briefing Cyberbullying, available at [www.neu.org.uk](http://www.neu.org.uk).

## **FIRE SAFETY**

➤ **What must my employer do to address fire safety in the school?**

Employers have legal responsibilities regarding fire safety; both to prevent fires breaking out and to ensure the safety of occupants should a fire occur. Employers should identify any fire hazards in the workplace and evaluate the risk of a fire occurring. They should then remove or reduce these risks. Your employer must have adequate fire detection and warning systems and conduct regular fire drills. Fire alarm systems should be tested on a weekly basis and serviced regularly by qualified engineers. There should be designated escape routes in the building, and routes to emergency exits and the exits themselves should be kept clear at all times.

➤ **What should I do if a fire breaks out?**

As an employee, you should co-operate with your employer to keep your workplace safe from fire and its effects, and you must not do anything to place yourself or others at risk.

If a fire breaks out, your first priority should be to raise the alarm and ensure pupils and others on the site are safely evacuated. You should not be expected to use firefighting equipment such as extinguishers if you have not received appropriate training. You should not block or obscure emergency exits and the routes to emergency exits. Fire doors should not be propped open. Please see the NEU health and safety briefing Fire Safety in Schools (available at [www.neu.org.uk](http://www.neu.org.uk)) for more information on fire safety in schools.

## **ADDITIONAL SOURCES OF ADVICE AND SUPPORT**

**NEU Adviceline (England only)** – NEU members in England seeking support should contact the NEU Adviceline in the first instance on 034 811 811.

Members in Wales should contact NEU Cymru on 029 2046 5000.

[NEU Campaigns](#)

[Education Support Partnership](#)

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