# Mental health report
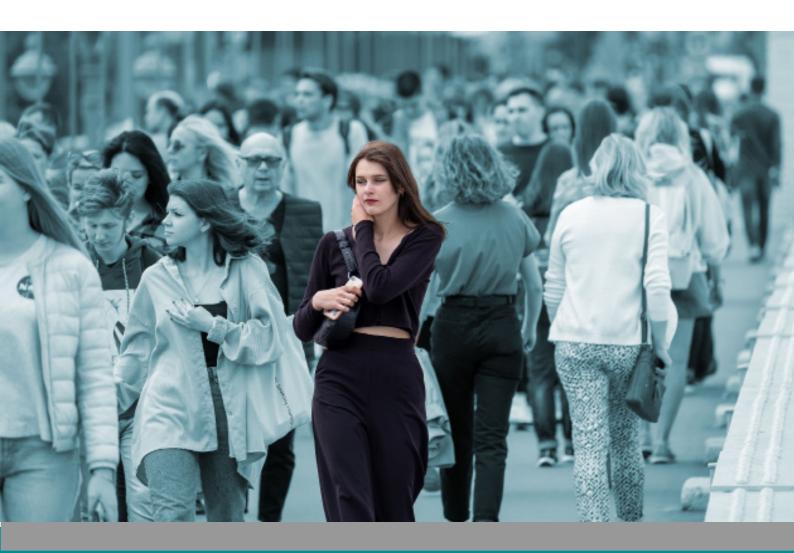
**UNISON**

# Don't just see me see all of us

UNISON report into mental health
as a collective ssue

**June 2021**

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## Introduction

Since the lockdown on March 23 2020, COVID-19 has caused upheaval in the way we work, and an unprecedented media focus on how we do our jobs. The national tragedy of care home deaths has made clear that the organisation of work and working practices, together with terms and conditions of employment, are public health issues, which affect the mental and physical health of the population.

Because of the pandemic we understand better than ever how risks in the workplace can be deadly, and how organising and managing work well can reduce those risks – including risks to the mental health of workers. The COVID crisis has especially shone a light on how work affects our mental wellbeing. We understand the stress caused when employers fail to provide adequate PPE, and the impact of working under intense pressure in a health service stretched beyond capacity. We understand the anxiety caused by sudden changes to the way we work, and the stress created by working in isolation, or in cramped conditions at home, while home schooling children. Millions of people have shared these experiences.

However, all this is not new. After a decade of austerity mental ill-health was already an acute issue in workplaces. A major cause of the growth in mental health difficulties was conditions of work and working practices in public services squeezed to the limit by budget cuts. And this under-funding has made it even harder for us to respond effectively to COVID-19.

The evidence linking work with mental ill-health is abundant, from UNISON Scotland's own Damage series of reports to National Statistics. The Labour Force Survey cites the main work factors responsible for work-related stress, anxiety and depression as:

- Workload pressures, especially tight deadlines, or too much work, or too much pressure or responsibility.
- Lack of managerial support, organisational changes at work, violence and lack of role certainty also contribute[1].

For UNISON members it is no surprise that these problems are especially prevalent in public services. The Labour Force Survey found that within public sector workplaces:

- Work-related stress, anxiety and depression are especially prevalent in education, health and social care and public administration.
- Professional occupations that are common across public service industries demonstrate higher levels of stress as compared to all jobs.

Women are the majority of public service workers and females have statistically significantly higher rates of work-related stress, anxiety or depression compared with the average for all persons.

Public service workers feel an overwhelming and persistent pressure to keep on delivering without adequate resources or support. Job losses, continual restructures and undermining of employment conditions, combined with work intensification, all of this has created – across the public services - working environments in which most of the contributory factors for stress are present.

**The major causes of stress, and the mental health problems which flow from this, are the conditions and organisation of work itself.**

**This is why mental health in the workplace is a core part of the bargaining agenda, and part and parcel of achieving 'Fair Work'.**

This report makes the case for mental health as a bargaining issue and provides an overview of the subject. It helps branches place their local work within UNISON Scotland's overall bargaining and campaigns strategy.

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[1] https://www.hse.gov.uk/statistics/causdis/stress.pdf

## Work-related stress

Stress in itself is not a mental health condition but is a known factor in causing or exacerbating mental health problems in the workplace such as anxiety and depression. Controlling stress is essential to reduce the incidence of mental health problems.

- Work-related stress accounted for 54% of all working days lost due to ill-health during 2019.
- Workload pressures have consistently been identified as the most common cause of work-related stress, anxiety and depression.
- Violence at work continues to be a major problem, with almost 38,000 assaults on Scotland's public service staff in 2019.

The Health and Safety Executive (HSE) Stress Management Standards  recommend that workplaces are assessed for:

- **Demands** – workloads, conflicting priorities, unrealistic deadlines, emotional demands.
- **Control** – how much say a worker has in the way they do their work, including 'target driven' cultures
- **Support** – the support & encouragement workers get from their employer, manager and colleagues including management style
- **Relationships** – including procedures for managing conflict and dealing with unacceptable behaviour including bullying and harassment.
- **Role** – ensuring workers understand their roles and that these roles do not conflict
- **Change** – how employers manage and communicate organisational change and restructures

## Mental health as a collective issue

There has been a lot of discussion of the mental health impact of COVID-19, and this is part of a positive trend in the workplace towards helping individuals manage their mental health, by promoting coping strategies such as mindfulness and resilience.[2] There is a very welcome focus on tackling the stigma around mental health and making it easier for people, especially men, to talk about how they are feeling.

The emphasis has also been on providing managers with Mental Health First Aid training to improve their awareness and confidence in dealing with individuals with mental health difficulties.  This includes improving their awareness of employers' duties under the Equality Act. Organisations like Scottish Union Learning and SAMH provide useful support and resources at this end of the spectrum.[3]

All of this is important, and many UNISON branches are working on these with employers to improve the support available both to employees and line-managers, and to tackle stigma.

However, telling people that "It's okay to not feel okay" is not acceptable when it is their work that is making them unwell.

If the working environment and the organisation of work are contributing to mental ill-health, then these must be tackled at source.

Employers must focus on the major causes of harm at work as this is where they have control, are responsible, and have a legal duty. Unfortunately, many organisations continue to treat this as an individual health issue. For example, the Scottish Association for Mental Health (SAMH) guide, How to be mentally healthy at work, mentions trade unions just once (for help with bullying), does not reference wider workplace issues, and omits trade unions from its list of useful contacts.[4]

It is because of this emphasis on the individual that branches should be wary of the 'resilience' agenda. This is often used to shift the focus away from what employers should be doing.

Proactive leadership by union stewards to address the causes of stress amongst groups of workers is vital. We should remember that the very presence of an active trade union branch can be a positive intervention for improving mental health, because it counteracts the powerlessness and lack of control felt by many workers which is a major contributor to stress and stress-related mental ill-health.[5/6]

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[2] *British Psychological Society, Covid-related anxiety and stress in the workplace.*

[3] *Scottish Government funding for Mental Health First Aid in the workplace is provided through the Scottish Union Learning Fund. SAMH provide 'Mental health at work' resources, for promoting individual staff wellbeing and to assist employers make the workplace 'mental health friendly', reducing stigma, and promoting both self help and sources of support offered by the employer.*

[4] *https://www.samh.org.uk/documents/SAMH_How_To_Be_Mentally_Healthy_At_Work_1.pdf*

[5] *Health & Safety Executive Management Standards for work related stress*

[6] *The evidence suggests that higher national trade union density is associated with positive life satisfaction at a population level, whilst worker control and involvement in decisions about how work is planned and carried out contributes towards employee wellbeing. Myers F., Dickie E., Taulbut M. (2018) Employee voice and mental wellbeing: A rapid evidence review. Edinburgh: NHS Health Scotland.*

## Tackling work-related causes of mental ill-health

**Thriving at Work review**

The Thriving at Work review written by Stevenson and Farmer is a landmark report published in 2017.[7] In Scotland, it has informed the development of a Mentally Flourishing Workplace Standard for employers (which Public Health Scotland is working on).[8]

Stevenson and Farmer were asked by the UK Government to look at the role of employers, of government, and of regulators in tackling work-related causes of mental health problems.

They looked in detail at public service employers and said:

- these employers should be providing leadership on tackling work-related mental health problems; especially within the NHS, Education and the Civil Service – **all areas devolved to the Scottish Government**.

- priority should be given to public services where staff are at the highest risk of stress and trauma, such as emergency services and social work – **again areas that are devolved to Scotland**.

Stevenson and Farmer said that it was realistic to expect that in 10 years' time (i.e. by 2027) effective action would have been taken in every workplace in the UK to address work-related causes of poor mental health and to provide 'good work' (known in Scotland as 'fair work').[9]

**Their review involved trades unions and produced recommendations and actions for employers, governments, and regulators.**

**What should employers do?**

All employers should be asked to implement what Stevenson and Farmer call their *Mental Health Core Standards* – a set of evidence-based actions, drawn from best practice, which they believe are do-able quickly.

A set of *Enhanced Standards* are proposed for public service employers.

**Stevenson and Farmer's Mental Health Core Standards**

- Produce, implement and communicate a Mental Health At Work Plan;
- Develop mental health awareness among employees;
- Encourage open conversations about mental health and the support available when employees are struggling;
- Provide employees with good working conditions and ensure they have a healthy work life balance and opportunities for development;
- Promote effective people management through line-managers and supervisors;
- Routinely monitor employee mental health and wellbeing.

**Stevenson and Farmer: Enhanced Standards for public service employers**

- Increase transparency and accountability through internal and external reporting;
- Demonstrate accountability;
- Improve the disclosure process;
- Ensure provision of tailored in-house mental health support and signposting to clinical help.

**Stevenson and Farmer: What else should public service employers do?[10]**

- Identify those employees in 'high risk' occupations particularly vulnerable to stress and trauma and produce a national framework which coordinates support for these employees and establishes clear accountability for their mental health.
- Use public procurement processes to encourage suppliers to implement the mental health core standards in their own businesses.

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[7] https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/658145/thriving-at-work-stevenson-farmer-review.pdf

[8] This is due to be piloted in summer 2020 and will be published thereafter.

[9] Thriving at Work. The Stevenson/Farmer review of mental health and employers. 2017, p.41

**Stevenson and Farmer: What should Government do?**

- Explore further the role of incentives and public procurement to drive implementation of the mental health core standards;
- Set clearer expectations of employers through legislation and make Statutory Sick Pay more flexible to better support people with mental health problems to make voluntary phased returns to work where appropriate.
- Do more to prevent and end employer practices which contravene employment and equalities legislation including legislative change where necessary.
- It is recommended that the Scottish Government with NHS Scotland should consider how best to prioritise mental health at work in line with local needs, and their specific mental health plans.

**Stevenson and Farmer: What should regulators do?**

**The Health and Safety Executive should:**

- Revise its guidance to raise employer awareness of their duty to assess and manage work-related mental ill-health, in the same way as physical health, as part of the **Management of Health & Safety at Work Regulations 1999**.
- Build on its risk assessment guidance and Management Standards approach by highlighting how these actions will help employers deliver key parts of the mental health core standards.
- Increase the focus on workers' mental health and safety during workplace inspections.

**Workforce regulators, such as the Nursing & Midwifery Council, should:**

- Use the most suitable regulatory approaches available to encourage the take-up of the Mental Health Core Standards by employers.

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[10] *Thriving at Work. The Stevenson/Farmer review of mental health and employers. 2017, p.47*

## The Context in Scotland

**The Fair Work Framework**

In Scotland the term 'fair work' is the equivalent of 'good work', the term used by Stevenson and Farmer. Scotland's Fair Work Convention established by the government in 2015 defines fair work as: "...work that offers effective voice, opportunity, security, fulfilment and respect; that balances the rights and responsibilities of employers and workers..."

The Fair Work Convention's aim is that:

*"...by 2025, people in Scotland will have a world-leading working life where fair work drives success, wellbeing and prosperity for individuals, businesses, organisations and society."*

A world leading working life is a far cry from condition in Scotland's squeezed public services. Through UNISON's Damage series ambulance staff, social workers, and education support staff talk about the struggle to deliver underfunded services.

**Delivering mentally healthy Fair Work: UNISON Scotland's view**

At a national level, UNISON Scotland works to ensure that public employers address the causes of stress and mental ill-health by improving employment practices and the organisation of work. The union brings its influence to bear through the national forums and partnerships it is involved in, including the Partnership on Health and Safety in Scotland (PHASS).

UNISON promotes mental health as a bargaining issue, by making sure that at a national level this is properly and effectively joined up with the Fair Work Framework[11], with health and safety enforcement and with employer responsibilities within the national Mental Health Strategy.

UNISON believes we must use the levers available to us to take practical steps to deliver good employment practice:

1.  As a starting point we must identify and deal with poor employment practices wherever they exist. At the very least this means ensuring that minimum standards of employment, including health and safety duties, are complied with.

2.  Second, we must promote positive standards and best practice in employment. For example, UNISON has sought to persuade employers within the care sector to sign up to its Ethical Care Charter, on the basis that the quality and dignity of care is best achieved by securing best standards of employment for carers. During the pandemic we secured from the Scottish Government funding so that any care worker who needed to self-isolate would receive their full wage from their employer, rather than rely on statutory sick pay. In other words, a levelling up of conditions to match the higher standard within the public sector

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[11] *Thriving at Work. The Stevenson/Farmer review of mental health and employers. 2017, p.41*

3. Taking steps to control stress factors means securing a range of agreements to embed protection of mental health across workload, flexible working, bullying and harassment, organisational change, recruitment, supervision and sickness absence policies and ensuring these are consistently applied.

4. Third, we must use the Scottish Parliament's devolved powers to deliver Fair Work, for example in important areas such as public procurement and sectoral bargaining, and by developing a Workforce Strategy for the public sector as a whole.

5. National level initiatives can both encourage, and bring pressure to bear on employers who deliver public services to provide a mentally healthy working environment. The promotion of a fair work agenda and sectoral bargaining arrangements for the social care sector is a key example.

Action by employers is essential if we are to make real the vision outlined in the Fair Work Framework. But action by workplace stewards is vital to make this happen.

## The Scottish Government approach

The Scottish Government through its agencies is focusing on meeting minimum standards and promoting and supporting good practice by employers, largely using a voluntary approach.

One example of this is The Scottish Business Pledge, a voluntary pledge scheme for employers. Through this scheme employee engagement is promoted to employers, citing the well-evidenced benefits for improving staff wellbeing, productivity and innovation, and for reducing absenteeism and staff turnover.[12] Employee engagement is one of ten elements which employers may select in order to sign up to the voluntary Pledge.

**What else is the Government doing?**

Fair Work First

By April 2021, as part of the initiative *Fair Work First*, the government intends, 'where it is appropriate to do so':

- to include some minimum employment standards within government support grants, including regional selective assistance grants;
- to extend the use of minimum employment standards within public procurement contracts.
- In practice this means asking employers to commit to criteria such as:
- payment of the Real Living Wage;
- no 'inappropriate' use of zero hours contracts;
- action on gender pay, and;
- genuine workforce engagement, such as trade union recognition.[13]

The devil here is in the detail and depends what 'inappropriate' and 'such as' mean in practice. However, this is an improvement on the government's previous approach which was to provide statutory guidance on fair work practices when awarding public contracts.[14]

Scotland's Mental Health Strategy

The Scottish Government's ten-year Mental Health Strategy 2017-2027[15] contains two actions about employment. These commit the government to:

**Action 36. Work with employers on how they can act to protect and improve mental health, and support employees experiencing poor mental health.**

**Action 37. Explore innovative ways of connecting mental health, disability, and employment support in Scotland.**

These actions are less challenging than those in the Thriving at Work Stevenson/Farmer review. However, they should be seen in the context of activity by a range of agencies, including the Fair Work Convention.[16]

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[12] https://scottishbusinesspledge.scot/

[13] *The detail of this is not currently available.* https://economicactionplan.mygov.scot/fair-work/fair-work-first/

[14] https://www.gov.scot/publications/statutory-guidance-selection-tenderers-award-contracts-addressing-fair-work-practices/pages/1/

[15] https://www.gov.scot/publications/mental-health-strategy-2017-2027/pages/2/ https://www.fairworkconvention.scot/

[16] https://www.fairworkconvention.scot/

## Conclusion

This report has explained that it is not enough for employers – or unions – to view mental health as an issue of individual wellbeing unconnected to peoples working lives. This is an issue present at epidemic levels and needs to be tackled collectively.

UNISON cannot allow its members' mental health to be compromised in the name of budget cuts. Working people should not be paying the price for austerity with their health. Neither should working people's families be paying the price: stress at work comes home at the end of a shift and affects relationships. It's by no means a silver bullet, but much would be done to improve the mental health of workers in public services if the Scottish Government used all of the powers at its disposal to ensure services had adequate funding

At a national level, there is some positive work going on to encourage employers to consider and take action on the mental health impacts of employment practices, and we welcome this. However, this is voluntary and pilot work can only involve a few public service employers.

We are always happy to work with employers to improve conditions for members however relying on the better nature of employers has never been enough. By itself it certainly won't deliver enough the aspiration of the Fair Work Convention, for workers to have "a world-leading working life where fair work drives success, wellbeing and prosperity..."

Trade union organisation and action in the workplace is the key to achieving fair work, locally and nationally; using legal duties and standards of good practice to challenge poor practice and win the improved working conditions that will deliver physically and mentally healthy work and better public services.

Across sectors UNISON branches are already pushing back against the root causes of workplace stress such as heavy workloads and violence at work and bargaining around these. Branches' experience of campaigning and bargaining around the root causes of mental health difficulties, together with advice and resources, will be the subject of a forthcoming report. It is not enough for an employer to say that they "See Me". They need to see all of us"