



# Wellbeing guide for staff working in schools and trusts

Managing the wellbeing of staff  
during COVID-19

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## Purpose

This guide aims to provide schools and trusts with information and guidance as well as signposting to other resources to best support the wellbeing of their staff, especially during the coronavirus COVID-19 pandemic.

The coronavirus COVID-19 pandemic has turned the school world upside down and inside out. School staff have been playing a central role in remaining open for some children, keeping in touch with those at home, supporting their communities and in providing remote learning. Schools are now going through the process of phased opening, to support more children as and when it is safe to do so. School staff have been put under an enormous amount of pressure to keep calm and carry on. Schools and their staff are at the forefront of their communities and many parents and carers may expect them to be calm, unflustered and to have all the answers. Therefore, school and trust staff may be feeling anxious about 'getting it right' for their pupils or they may be attempting to carry out their very important roles whilst dealing with their own personal situations and emotions.

This leads to school and trust staff working in an incredibly pressurised environment. School leaders, governing boards and trustees have a powerful role to play in supporting all school and trust employees and have a responsibility to understand how to support the psychological wellbeing of staff who are working in these conditions, and to provide the necessary working conditions and support to staff to reduce stress in school and whilst working at home.

This is particularly important during the coronavirus pandemic when staff who are still working in schools may be worried about their vulnerability to a higher risk of infection, or they may be experiencing additional stress because of having to offer more support to children who are anxious or possibly grieving. Working at home e.g. undertaking and managing virtual teaching as well as school support activities may also increase individual's stress levels.

Employees who are in roles that are exposed to new or additional trauma may therefore have a higher risk of mental health problems such as depression and anxiety and possibly Post Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD), which could severely affect their work, their morale and result in long-term sickness absence, either now or when the crisis has passed.



While many may be aware of the stress this puts on their mental health it can be difficult to manage the effects of this at such a time of rapid change.

While staff in schools and trusts have a responsibility to talk to their managers about issues affecting their ability to do their job, school and trust leaders must ensure that managers are equipped and able to be sensitive to identifying and responding to the signs and symptoms of stress from staff, such as anxiety or social withdrawal.

This guide will help those responsible for governance, leaders and managers to think about the wellbeing of their staff and fulfil their duty of care for their employees.

Wellbeing research suggests that good organisational leadership and a supportive work culture can have a positive impact on the psychological wellbeing of staff. During this period of increased pressure and anxiety, it is essential for leaders and those responsible for governance to send a clear message that staff wellbeing matters.

This guide has been written on behalf of NEOST<sup>1</sup>, the national school teachers employer organisation, to bring together advice, best practice and to sign post where you can find more information.

NB This is the first version of this guide to support school staff wellbeing and our intention is to update this when appropriate. If you have any comments or information to be considered for future editions please email [schoolteachers@local.gov.uk](mailto:schoolteachers@local.gov.uk)

<sup>1</sup> <https://www.local.gov.uk/national-employers-organisation-school-teachers-neost>

## 1. Psychological wellbeing tips for employers of school staff

### **Be proactive and make time to talk about how staff are feeling**

Leaders and those responsible for governance need to lead the way when it comes to raising awareness of the importance of good mental health for their staff. It is important to reduce the stigma when talking about mental health in your workplace, particularly in times of crisis – when almost everybody is going to need some additional time or support at some stage. This situation really is unprecedented. It is equally important for school and trust staff to know that they don't have to feel heroic. Create time and give opportunities for staff to acknowledge that they feel scared or anxious or possibly overwhelmed by the support they need to give to their pupils and parents/carers.

Trying to 'stay strong' for their pupils and parents/carers can leave staff 'running on empty' and it's important for staff to understand that any need for support is not the sign of an inability to cope or of professional incompetence, but a recognition that from time to time, everyone needs help to carry out this demanding role. Acknowledging all our emotions is important to good mental health.

Employees often hide mental health problems because of worries that they are letting people down by 'not coping', or fear that colleagues or managers may think badly of them, either now or in the future. Empathetic communication to staff acknowledging their fears and anxieties together with messages about how to recognise the signs of distress will ensure it is not an issue that is overlooked during long and potentially stressful working days. Emphasise that every employee matters.

### **Encourage open and honest conversations**

Employees need to be encouraged to speak up when feeling overwhelmed or in need. Leaders should create safe spaces/time for staff to talk about their mental health challenges, past and present, and to be able to do this in their own time and without fear of feeling judged or excluded if they open-up in this way. Leaders may be able to help here by sharing their own experiences or stories of other people who have struggled with managing their mental health during stressful times. [Nick Page, the Chief Executive of Solihull, describes his challenges of managing his mental health during a stressful time.](#)

### **Support staff to say 'I don't know'**

Staff in schools and trusts are likely to be responding to a thousand and one questions about the virus, school activities and every other topic of uncertainty under the sun. Pupils and their parents/carers may be worried about COVID-19, or missing lessons or the implications of cancelled exams. Some of these questions may have easy and logical answers, while others won't. They should not feel the need to be an expert on coronavirus or anything else in a world that is changing every day. This is an incredibly pressured environment so it is important that staff have access to as much information as possible about how the school or trust is responding to the changing situation and receive regular updates that they can pass on to their pupils when necessary but it is equally important to ensure that staff understand that sometimes they will need to say 'I don't know'.

### **Put wellbeing support in place and make it widely available**

Staff should know where they can go and who they can talk to about difficulties they are having with their wellbeing. This might be their line manager, an organisation's occupational health service or employee assistance provider and mental health champions/first aiders. In schools and trusts with a religious character, there may also be faith-based organisations who provide counselling and support. Other options may be to share open online resources on coping with anxiety and stress with staff, or to set up dedicated confidential mental health support for them. For staff members who are struggling to have good mental health it is important to have different ways they can access support to suit their particular needs or working patterns.

Many employees may be unaware of the support available to them, and leaders may need to put additional communications in place to ensure information on wellbeing support is seen by everyone. Line managers are key for communicating what resources are available and therefore need to be kept up to date on what is available and how they can help staff access it. This can be a difficult topic to discuss, so it may help to have additional tools to help managers to feel more comfortable raising this with members of their team, like this short video from The Samaritans. The video gives tips on how to ask simple questions, and importantly, how to listen to the answer to help someone work through what's on their mind.



Crucially, there should be no threshold or qualifying conditions for staff to access the support such as being on sick leave or requiring a recommendation from occupational health. Also, support should stay in place for as long as it is needed, which may well be after the coronavirus crisis has ended.

### **Take stock/check the effect of these measures regularly**

It is important to check how staff are doing and whether your school or trust's wellbeing offers are appropriate and helpful to their needs and working conditions. Data is key: ask managers to speak regularly to their teams and feedback concerns and requests; ask for advice from your providers of mental health support about what else you may be able to do as an employer; and encourage staff to tell you directly what they need. You may want to consider undertaking a staff wellbeing survey in order to develop a tailored action plan to support staff. See Appendix 1 for some example questions you may wish to consider. Wellbeing support plans must be dynamic and able to adapt to changing conditions and needs.

## 2. Employees undertaking unfamiliar work - supporting their learning

During this crisis we may not have enough staff to do all the work needed, whether due to sickness or self-isolation, and you may ask other staff to take on additional or new work. However, some staff may feel particularly vulnerable at being asked to do things that they do not feel trained or experienced in. It is important to make time to provide training, support, ongoing supervision and feedback on practical skills or new ways of working. Consider whether staff who are worried about what you are asking them to do can work with a more experienced team member.

## 3. Managing the working environment

Providing a safe place for pupils to learn and play during COVID-19 will make schools challenging environments to work in, but there are things that employers can do to help manage the emotional impact of the work.

Here are some ideas:

- Increase civility: rudeness can increase when stress levels are high, but this can lead to more mistakes. Experiencing rudeness can affect the quality of an employee's work. Take steps to remind staff, parents and pupils of positive behaviours and attitudes to ensure that rudeness doesn't impact on staff and their interactions with pupils.
- Design well-balanced working days: try to organise rotas or tasks to balance demands and pressures on staff and try, where possible, to provide positive experiences with pupil and parents.
- Create time to share: ensure regular opportunities for staff to discuss work levels and concerns. Allowing time to share and process the anxieties or difficulties of work or talking about things that are going well at work in a structured way can help to reduce stress and support learning.
- Organise social time and activities: Look for opportunities and ways for staff to socialise so that people working at home don't feel isolated e.g. Zoom staff quiz.

## 4. LGA COVID-19 employment law FAQs

The Local Government Association (LGA) provides a range of information in relation to the workforce implications of the COVID-19 pandemic, including a series of employment law focussed frequently asked questions covering leave, sickness, isolating, redeployment and the Coronavirus Job Retention Scheme (furloughing). There is also information on the new emergency volunteer scheme and updates on consequential amendments to legislation. See the LGA website for more details:

<https://local.gov.uk/covid-19-employment-law-faqs>

## 5. Building your employees' resilience

Being resilient is the ability to cope under pressure and recover from difficulties. It allows you to take on new situations and demands positively, approaching things with a problem-solving attitude and keeping a sense of perspective and understanding of what needs to be done. It means being able to recognise and respect your own limits.

During the pandemic staff in schools and trusts are trying to react, cope and plan across a range of issues at a pace that may be new to many of them. It can be hard to feel resilient in these circumstances. Good teachers have developed a strong sense of emotional intelligence and self-awareness and must be able to look after their own wellbeing as well as that of their teams.

Steps to increase your levels of resilience may include:

- being flexible and willing to adapt to change
- recognising your thoughts and emotions in different situations and having positive ways to manage them
- asking for help when you need it.

In a blog for the LGA, Jim McManus, Director of Public Health, Hertfordshire County Council shares his personal experience of learning to be more resilient.

Read it on the LGA website:

<https://local.gov.uk/our-support/workforce-and-hr-support/workforce-blog/april-2020-resilience-and-leadership-during>

Also, The British Psychological Society has produced a helpful guide on resilience in teaching during the coronavirus pandemic that may be useful to share.

<https://www.bps.org.uk/sites/www.bps.org.uk/files/Member%20Networks/Divisions/DECP/Teacher%20resilience%20during%20coronavirus%20school%20closures.pdf>

## 6. Building resilience across the leadership team

The basic principles of good leadership can be best described as: listen, learn and then act. This is particularly important during a challenging time.

Leading in this uncertain period of time, with an undoubtedly epic 'to-do' list of conflicting priorities is understandably likely to cause a wave of panic. This is because it all feels urgent, and the adrenalin starts pumping.

Good mental wellbeing among leaders is essential, to ensure the right decisions are taken at the right time.

Despite the many negative experiences of COVID-19, we have seen remarkable things in our communities, and it is the same in our school communities.

Those responsible for governance should ensure that leaders (including headteachers, deputy and assistant headteachers, SENCOs and other members of each senior leadership



team) all have time and a safe and confidential space in which they can talk through the challenges, stresses and frustrations of running schools and educational settings during this unprecedented situation.

Protecting this time for reflection will allow teams to:

- reflect and explore the experience of lockdown on them individually and on their school community. Identifying successes and what has been learnt
- identify staff and children who may need extra support going forward
- consider those who have experienced trauma and bereavement
- enhance teacher resilience by promoting teachers' sense of belonging, their ability to seek help, and continue learning at this time
- consider what needs to be achieved, identify the challenges, develop a plan and a timescale that works
- discuss with staff how everyone's emotional and physical health can be safeguarded and enhanced
- consider practical advice, when responding to how staff may be feeling
- facilitate management and staff teams to develop a positive vision for the future.

## **7. Recognising social stigma facing key workers**

Staff in schools and trusts are obviously reflective of the wider community, so some will have been able to keep working, some will have had to shield, some will be anxious about the situation and others, not. Some will have wanted to open schools up sooner, and others will want that to move more slowly – but all staff risk hearing robust views from the public which may be based on assumptions. Being at the centre of a public policy debate is never easy.

Leaders and those responsible for governance can help by empathising the point that stigma is unsurprising but can be distressing within the COVID-19 situation, and they can highlight camaraderie whilst working. Schools have been a major part of the UKs' COVID-19 response. It may also be useful to point out that there has been a reported increase in regard for school staff/professionals during this time. As many parents and carers endeavour to 'home school' their children, they now know that this is not as easy as they previously thought!

## **8. The impact on employees of supporting pupils with bereavement**

Dealing with death can be an inevitable part of working in schools, especially during this difficult time. Staff may be struggling with the loss of friends, family members or colleagues. Being isolated from friends and family can make feelings of grief much more intense. School staff are often called upon to support pupils and their families when a family or staff member dies and supporting someone experiencing a loss can be emotionally draining, particularly if it's a bereaved child.

It is important throughout the pandemic for leaders to pay attention to the support their staff may need, including time to reflect and deal with the emotional impact of supporting pupils and colleagues through their bereavement and grief.

In schools with a religious character, leaders might also speak to their diocesan or religious authority as there are many faith-based organisations also providing bereavement support.

Child Bereavement UK has a comprehensive guide for schools and staff on how to support children in understanding and responding to bereavement.

<https://www.childbereavementuk.org/pages/category/primary-schools>

Cruse Bereavement Care offers advice and support on dealing with bereavement and grief during the coronavirus outbreak.

<https://www.cruse.org.uk/get-help/coronavirus-dealing-bereavement-and-grief>

At a Loss provides signposting to other services across the UK that can provide resources and support to those that are bereaved.

<https://www.ataloss.org/>

## **9. The importance of looking after yourself**

In addition to schools and trusts providing the necessary resources, space and tools to support staff, it's also worth remembering the simple common-sense advice that we know we should do, but we don't always find the time to.

Sometimes we have to remind one another of these things, and to give one another permission to take the time we need, to invest in ourselves and to keep our own well-being in a positive place.

So, don't forget to:

- stay connected with friends, family and colleagues. Keep talking, even if that means by on-line methods
- take a break from the social media, switch off the news sometimes, give your brain a break from the information overload and the worry
- get some physical exercise, whatever that means for you
- keep your COVID-19 response factual, don't guess or catastrophize about what's going to happen, focus on what you know
- make sure you're getting some fresh air, sit outside, get out the office or classroom, feel the sun on your face
- try and keep your diet healthy, with plenty of fresh fruit and veg
- try not to lean too much on the crutches, whether that's coffee or alcohol, be sensible
- step away from the screens, and find a good book
- allow yourself some time to acknowledge your own emotions, whatever they are.

## 10. Additional resources

- **Able Futures** – delivering the Department for Work and Pensions [Access to work mental health support service for individuals, employers and apprenticeship providers](#)
- **ACAS** - [fear and trust in the evolving world of work](#)
- The **Australian education department**, which has a long history in supporting remote learning, has a [useful article in connecting with students in the online classroom](#)
- **British Safety Council** – a [free online course for managers that highlights some of the pressures their teams might face](#), and helps managers become more aware of their own actions and behaviours, and most importantly it helps manage and reduce stress levels within their team
- **British Safety Council** – a [free online course that provides line managers with the skills and confidence to listen to and talk](#) with someone who feels that they need to share a problem regarding their mental health
- **British School of the Netherlands** [has a range of activities to help children recognise and explain their emotions](#)
- **Catholic Education Service** provides links to a range of [mental health resources](#)
- **Church of England Education** has resources on bereavement on its website
- A blog by Dr Chris Moore writing for **Ed Psych Insight** giving [tips for teachers to manage their wellbeing during the coronavirus crisis](#)
- **Education support** produced these mental health resources for teachers, lecturers and support staff dealing with the COVID-19 crisis. These are the topics which have been highlighted as especially difficult. View the [resources](#) or [view all our short video guides here](#).
- **Education support network** has a free telephone service for education staff.
- The **General Teaching Council for Scotland** has created and curated [a variety of resources and advice to support teacher and lecturer health and wellbeing during the Covid-19](#)
- **HAYS** are offering [free Wellbeing First pack](#) to help teachers and support staff make it through this difficult period by adding a range of new online courses around the best practice for remote working and wellbeing
- **Mental Health Foundation** [Looking after your mental health during the coronavirus outbreak](#)
- **Schools in Mind** network where school staff can find and share resources, research and training
- **Teach Together** – a [free text messaging service launched to support teachers](#) during COVID-19

## Appendix 1

16 example questions you may wish to consider for a staff wellbeing survey during Covid-19 pandemic.

NB you may wish to customise the language to suit the needs of your organisation.

Response options	1= strongly agree, 10= strongly disagree	Select response
1. My school actively demonstrates that it cares for its staff *	1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10	
2. I feel generally supported in my role at this time by colleagues	1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10	
3. I feel generally supported in my role by school leaders	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Very well supported</li> <li>• Sufficiently supported</li> <li>• Insufficiently supported</li> </ul>	
4. My manager makes an effort to keep in touch with me when I'm working from home (during lockdown for example)	1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10	
5. Do you feel able to contact your line manager directly to discuss your individual constraints and working practices?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Yes, I can contact my line manager easily</li> </ul>	
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• I have not been able to discuss my situation with my line manager</li> </ul>	
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• I am not sure how to best contact my line manager</li> </ul>	
6. Do you feel you have someone from the school that, should you need to, you could talk to about concerns or anxieties you might have?	Yes / No	

7. How would you rate your current mental health and well-being?	1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10	
8. How would you say that your mental health is at the moment?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Better than before Covid-19</li> <li>• Worse than before Covid-19</li> <li>• Same as before Covid-19</li> </ul>	
9. I understand my role and where it fits into our school structure	Yes / No	
10. I am supported with the right equipment and information in order to perform my job effectively?	1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10	
11. Do you feel able to manage your current workload?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Yes - I have enough time to relax and manage my personal / family circumstances</li> <li>• No - Work demand does not allow me sufficient time for relaxation and personal commitments</li> </ul>	
12. What support and/or training do you think would be most useful to support (tick as many as you require)	<p>Time-management guidance e.g.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• how to work efficiently at home / how to prioritise e-mails</li> <li>• how to access and use online platforms for content creation &amp; communication e.g. MS Teams, zoom, school email, learning platforms</li> <li>• Online training related to my role (please specify)</li> <li>• Other (please specify)</li> </ul>	

<p><b>13. I know where to access school provided support regarding my health, safety and wellbeing.</b></p>	<p><b>Agree/Disagree</b></p>	
<p><b>14. Overall how well do you believe the school has communicated with staff in respect to its response to the Coronavirus Pandemic?</b></p>	<p><b>1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10</b></p>	
<p><b>15. Would you like to share any further thoughts or ideas you would like to share on how the School might support you (in specific relation to your mental health and well-being) further?</b></p>		
<p><b>16. Do you feel some pride, at being a member of staff at this school?</b></p>	<p><b>Yes / No</b></p>	