



A CRAVEN SME GUIDE

Workplace Wellbeing

A practical, modern guide for SME leaders

Creating healthier, safer, more supportive workplaces without turning wellbeing into another complicated project.

ONE SIMPLE FRAMEWORK RUNS THROUGH EVERY CHAPTER

Prevent

Notice

Talk

Support

Review

Who it's for: owners, directors and line managers in small and medium-sized businesses.

How to use it: dip in and out. Go straight to the section you need or start with the quick finder in Chapter 1.

Up to date: reflects UK law and guidance as of September 2026.

One trusted partner for people · safety · environment · success

September 2026



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Why This Guide Exists

Wellbeing is not a separate initiative. It lives where people, safety and success meet.

In this chapter

- Wellbeing is not an initiative
- How to use this guide
- Manager's cheat sheet

Wellbeing Is Not an Initiative

Workplace wellbeing is shaped every day by workload, working hours, relationships, role clarity, management behaviour, communication, inclusion, change, and the support available when somebody is struggling. Free fruit and wellbeing days can be positive extras, but they cannot compensate for poor work design or unmanaged stress risks.

That's the whole premise of this guide. Everything in it, including the sections on keeping good people, hybrid working and everyday culture, is here because it affects, or is affected by, how well your people are. None of it is a separate strategy competing for attention. It's all still wellbeing.



IN ONE MINUTE

If you remember nothing else...

Good workplace wellbeing is about getting the everyday things right.

Understand the risks in your workplace. Design work sensibly. Give people clear priorities and manageable workloads. Make sure managers notice changes, have good conversations and act when something isn't right. Use the right support when somebody needs it, and keep checking that what you've put in place is actually working.

For SMEs, it doesn't need to be complicated or expensive.

Some of the most effective wellbeing strategies are simple: regular 1:1s, sensible workloads, proper breaks, clear roles, good communication, flexibility where possible, respectful relationships, early conversations and following through on what you say you'll do.

And importantly, don't wait until somebody is struggling.

Workplace wellbeing also means looking across the organisation at foreseeable risks. This includes work-related stress through the Company Stress Risk Assessment and sexual harassment through the Company Sexual Harassment Risk Assessment, alongside the other health and safety risks relevant to your workplace.

That is the Craven approach:

PREVENT → NOTICE → TALK → SUPPORT → REVIEW

Wellbeing sits where People and Safety meet.



How to use this guide

This guide is designed to dip in and out of. You do not need to read it cover to cover or launch anything all at once.

Each part builds on the last: Prevent, Notice, Talk, Support, Review. It's the same simple framework used throughout.

Dip into whichever part matches where your business is right now, or use the quick finder below to go straight to what you need. Each chapter stands on its own and starts with a short "In this chapter" summary.

Quick finder

If you need to...	Go to
Someone may be at immediate risk	Chapter 11: If Someone's Really Struggling
You have noticed someone may be struggling	Chapter 8: What Might Tell You Someone Needs Support
You need to have a supportive conversation or welfare meeting	Chapter 9: Having the Conversation
You need to decide which support, assessment or adjustment to use	Chapter 10: Using the Right Support at the Right Time
Someone is off sick or returning to work	Chapter 12: Coming Back Well (fit notes and sick pay are in Chapter 9)
You want to prevent problems through better work design	Chapters 4 to 7
Work involves driving, machinery, night shifts or lone working	Chapter 4: When Wellbeing Becomes a Safety Issue
You want to see where your business stands	Chapter 14: SME Health Check
You want a simple plan to get started	Chapter 15: Your 90-Day Plan
You want the key phrases on one page	Chapter 1: Manager's Cheat Sheet



Manager's Cheat Sheet

The one page to keep to hand. Everything here is covered in more detail later in the guide.

Opening the conversation

"I wanted to check in. You've seemed under a lot of pressure recently. How are things for you?"

Choose a private moment. Listen first, solve second.

Questions that help

"Is anything at work making things harder at the moment?"

"What feels manageable, and what feels less manageable?"

"What would make the biggest practical difference over the next couple of weeks?"

Avoid saying

"Everyone is stressed." "You just need to be more resilient." "This stays completely between us."

Don't ask about diagnosis, and don't turn it into a performance discussion.

Be honest about confidentiality

"I'll keep what we discuss confidential wherever I can, but if I'm worried about your safety or someone else's, I may need to involve others to get you the right support."

Before you close

Summarise what you've agreed, who is doing what and a review date, normally within 2–4 weeks.

Then follow up when you said you would.

Choosing the next step

Work is causing stress: offer an ISRA.

Ongoing or fluctuating condition: agree a Wellness Action Plan.

Need specialist advice: Occupational Health, with consent.

Same themes across the team: review the Company Stress Risk Assessment.

If someone may be at immediate risk

Ask directly and calmly about their safety. Don't leave them alone. Call 999 if there is immediate danger and bring in HR or a senior manager.

Samaritans 116 123 · Shout: text SHOUT to 85258 · NHS 111 (mental health option).

Full route in Chapter 11.



Why It Matters Now

The scale of work-related stress in Great Britain, and what that means for a smaller business.

In this chapter

- The cost of getting this wrong
- The SME reality

The Cost of Getting This Wrong

The [Health and Safety Executive reported](#) that 964,000 workers were suffering from work-related stress, depression or anxiety in 2024/25, with 22.1 million working days lost as a result. For a smaller business, the human and operational impact can be immediate: reduced capacity, absence, mistakes, conflict, turnover, and pressure on the rest of the team.

Stress, depression and anxiety now account for more than half of all work-related ill health in Great Britain, and HSE is paying closer attention to how employers manage the risk. In late 2025 it formally notified a large employer that its arrangements for managing work-related stress were not effective. Smaller businesses are unlikely to be first in line, but the expectation is clear: stress is a risk to be assessed and managed, like any other.

The labour market backdrop makes this sharper still. Employee turnover carries real costs through recruitment, lost productivity, management time and onboarding, yet many smaller employers never calculate the true cost until several people have left.

None of this needs a corporate wellbeing programme to fix. It needs work designed sensibly, concerns noticed early, good conversations, and the right support used at the right time, which is exactly what the rest of this guide sets out.

The SME reality

You do not need a 40-page wellbeing strategy.

You do need to understand the risks in your workplace, manage people well, notice concerns early, act on issues, and review whether your actions are working.



The Craven SME Wellbeing Framework

One simple framework runs through everything in this guide.

In this chapter

- The five-stage framework
- Where People and Safety meet
- Who does what

Prevent → Notice → Talk → Support → Review

Wellbeing lives especially where People and Safety meet: how work is organised, how people are managed, how risks are controlled, and how support is provided when someone needs it. The framework gives SMEs a simple, repeatable way to work through that, without needing a dedicated wellbeing team or a large budget.

Prevent

Design work well and manage foreseeable risks.

Notice

Recognise changes without diagnosing.

Talk

Create safe, regular conversations.

Support

Use the right support and adjustments.

Review

Follow up, learn and improve.

People, Safety, Performance, Sustainability

People

A healthy workplace supports trust, inclusion, engagement, retention and conversations that happen early rather than at crisis point.

Safety

Work-related stress is a health and safety risk. Employers must assess and manage foreseeable risks and act where concerns are identified.



Performance

Clear priorities, manageable workloads and good support help people do better work. Wellbeing and performance are not opposites.

Sustainability

Simple preventative actions can reduce avoidable absence, manager time, conflict and the cost of problems escalating.

Who Does What?

Senior leaders

Keep overall responsibility for creating a healthy and safe working environment, and make sure risks are assessed and acted on.

Managers

Manage work well day to day, notice concerns, hold appropriate conversations and escalate where needed.

Employees

Are encouraged to raise concerns early and take part in identifying practical solutions.

HR, H&S and OH

Use HR, Health and Safety, Occupational Health or other competent support where appropriate, particularly for complex or higher-risk issues.

Workplace wellbeing is a shared effort, but organisational responsibility stays with the employer. It cannot simply be handed over to individual managers or employees.

Do this now

Choose one area of the framework where your business is strongest and one where it needs more attention. That is enough to start.



Start with the Work, Not the Perks

The HSE's [six Management Standards](#), company-wide risk assessments, and where wellbeing becomes a safety issue.

In this chapter

- The six HSE Management Standards
- Simple prevention strategies that cost little or nothing
- Company stress risk assessment
- Company sexual harassment risk assessment
- Don't forget the person leading the business
- When wellbeing becomes a safety issue

The Six HSE Management Standards

The Health and Safety Executive uses six Management Standards to describe the main areas of work that can contribute to work-related stress. They are a useful practical checklist for SMEs, whether or not anybody has yet reported feeling stressed.

Demands

Workload, deadlines, work patterns and the working environment.

Control

How much say people have in how they do their work.

Support

Resources, information, encouragement and practical help from managers and colleagues.

Relationships

Positive working relationships, communication, conflict, bullying and unacceptable behaviour.

Role

Whether people understand what is expected of them and whether expectations conflict.

Change

How organisational change is communicated, consulted on and managed.



Simple Prevention Strategies That Cost Little or Nothing

Workload reset

At least monthly, ask: what can stop, wait, move or be shared? Do not let every task remain a priority.

Protect breaks

Make it normal to take lunch and rest breaks. Managers should model this too.

Clear the fog

Confirm the top 3 priorities for the week and what “good enough” looks like.

Meeting hygiene

Shorten meetings, cancel those without a purpose and protect focus time where practical.

Working-hours check

Watch for repeated early starts, late finishes or out-of-hours messages. Explore the reason, not just the symptom.

Role clarity

Make sure people know their responsibilities, decision-making limits and who to go to when priorities conflict.

Change updates

During change, communicate what is known, what is not known, what happens next and when people will hear more.

Team norms

Agree simple expectations on response times, handovers, meetings, interruptions and respectful communication.

Recognition

Notice contribution, progress and effort. Recognition does not need to be expensive or formal.

Connection

Use brief team check-ins, buddying, shared lunches or occasional informal time together, especially in remote or hybrid teams.



Quiet options

Where possible, offer quiet space, headphones, focus blocks or flexible location for concentration-heavy tasks.

Manager availability

Make it clear how and when employees can raise a concern before it becomes urgent.

Watch out

Wellbeing initiatives can become tokenistic if the root issue is excessive workload, poor management, conflict or unclear roles. Fix the work issue first.

Two Organisation-Wide Risk Assessments That Support Wellbeing

For SMEs, wellbeing and psychological safety are strengthened when foreseeable organisational risks are assessed rather than waiting for individual concerns to escalate. Two important organisation-wide assessments sit particularly closely alongside workplace wellbeing: the Company Stress Risk Assessment and the Company Sexual Harassment Risk Assessment. Craven has practical toolkits and templates available to support these assessments. These can be used alongside this guide, and the Craven team can provide further support where required.

Simple strategy

Put both organisation-wide assessments on the annual H&S / People calendar. Review sooner after significant change, repeated concerns, complaints, stress-related absence, conflict, major growth, new customer-facing risks or other evidence that the risk picture has changed.

Company Stress Risk Assessment

Use this as the organisational baseline for foreseeable work-related stress risks. It is aligned to the HSE Management Standards: Demands, Control, Support, Relationships, Role and Change.



Review practical evidence such as working hours, absence themes, workload pinch points, turnover, conflict, change activity, welfare themes and employee feedback. Identify the top 3–5 priority actions, each with an owner, target date and evidence of completion, and name a manager responsible for tracking them. Craven recommends communicating the key outcomes to staff within 14 days. A team briefing, staff meeting or email is enough.

The assessment can be completed as a management-led baseline, but don't rely solely on management's perspective. Use appropriate employee feedback, consultation, team discussions, survey information and other relevant evidence to understand how work is actually experienced, and involve employees, where appropriate, in identifying practical controls and solutions. Employers also have a legal duty to consult employees on health and safety matters, either directly or through safety representatives.

How often should it be reviewed?

Craven recommends a formal review at least annually as good practice, with an earlier review whenever there is reason to believe the risk picture has changed. This is Craven's recommended SME practice, not a statutory annual frequency prescribed by HSE.

Sooner than that if any of the following happen: repeated stress-related absence themes or rising turnover; sustained overtime, long hours or fatigue concerns; employee feedback or pulse survey results suggesting pressures have changed; conflict, bullying, harassment or grievance activity; a restructure, new systems or rapid growth; or a serious incident or near miss linked to workload or wellbeing.

A named manager or responsible person should own progress against the actions between reviews. An assessment nobody is tracking is just a document.

An individual concern may lead to an ISRA or WAP; repeated individual themes across several employees are themselves a trigger for reviewing the Company Stress Risk Assessment early, rather than waiting for the next scheduled date.



Company Sexual Harassment Risk Assessment

Use this to identify foreseeable risks of sexual harassment and the controls needed to create a safe, respectful and psychologically safe workplace. Consider culture and behaviour, power imbalances, reporting confidence, work environment, lone working, social events, third-party contact, training and manager capability.

The legal position: Since 26 October 2024, employers have been required to take reasonable steps to prevent sexual harassment of their employees in the course of employment (Equality Act 2010, as amended by the Worker Protection Act 2023). From 30 October 2026, the Employment Rights Act 2025 strengthens this to a duty to take all reasonable steps. New provisions on third-party harassment also take effect from 30 October 2026, including protection where employees are harassed by customers, clients, contractors or visitors and the employer has failed to take all reasonable steps to prevent it. Since 6 April 2026, reporting sexual harassment has also counted as a protected whistleblowing disclosure. Regulations are expected to set out which steps count as “reasonable”; check Acas or the EHRC for the latest position. The Employment Rights Act 2025 also introduces restrictions on the use of non-disclosure agreements in cases involving workplace harassment or discrimination. These provisions are expected to take effect in 2027; check Acas or GOV.UK for the latest commencement position.

This is not just a policy check: assess the real working environment, identify 3–5 priority actions, share the key outcomes and behavioural expectations with staff within 14 days, and review it regularly. Craven recommends at least an annual review as good practice, and sooner when concerns, incidents or change increase the risk. The law does not prescribe an annual assessment.

People + Safety

This is where HR information and health and safety risk management meet. Individual cases can reveal wider organisational risks; wider risk-assessment findings can show where individual support may be needed.



Don't Forget the Person Leading the Business

Managers, leaders and business owners can themselves carry significant, sustained pressure, often more than anyone else in the business, because operational, financial and people responsibilities are all concentrated on a small number of people in an SME. It's easy for this to go unnoticed, including by the person carrying it.

Management capacity and wellbeing deserve the same attention as everyone else's in this guide. If you're the owner or senior manager reading this, that includes you: notice your own warning signs, protect some of your own time and support, and don't assume the standards in this guide are only something to apply downwards.

When Wellbeing Becomes a Safety Issue

In many SMEs, wellbeing is not only about how people feel. Where work is safety-critical, such as driving, operating machinery, working at height, working alone or working night shifts, fatigue, stress, a health condition or medication can affect someone's ability to work safely. That puts them, and sometimes others, at risk. This is where People and Safety meet most directly.

Safety-critical work

If stress, fatigue, a health condition or medication side effects may affect someone's ability to do safety-critical work, act promptly. A temporary change of duties, Occupational Health advice or a health risk assessment should be a supportive safety step, not a disciplinary one. Managers need to know whether someone can work safely, not their diagnosis.

Fatigue and shift work

Treat fatigue as a risk to assess, not just a sign to notice. Look at shift patterns, night work, overtime, early starts, rest between shifts and driving after long shifts. Night workers must be offered a free health assessment before starting night work and at regular intervals afterwards.



Violence and aggression

Abuse, threats and aggression from customers, clients or the public are a significant source of stress. Assess the risk, agree how staff should respond and report incidents, support anyone affected and review controls after an incident. Some incidents that cause injury must be reported under RIDDOR.

Lone working

People who work alone or remotely may have nobody to notice if they are unwell, injured or struggling. Agree check-in arrangements, make sure they know how to get help, and consider whether the work is suitable for them to do alone.

When incidents or near misses happen, look beyond “human error”. Consider whether fatigue, workload, time pressure, stress or unclear procedures played a part. HSE’s human factors approach looks at the organisation, the job and the individual together. Where drugs or alcohol may be a factor, particularly in safety-critical roles, follow the organisation’s drugs and alcohol policy. When you review your first aid needs assessment, consider mental health as well as physical health.

Physical health matters too

Wellbeing is not only mental health. Musculoskeletal disorders, such as back, neck and upper-limb problems, are one of the biggest causes of work-related ill health, and physical and mental strain often feed each other. Assess manual handling, repetitive tasks and workstation set-up. Under the Display Screen Equipment Regulations 1992, employers must assess workstations for people who use screens as a significant part of their normal work (HSE generally treats daily use for continuous periods of an hour or more as a guide) and arrange eye tests when those users request them.



Why Good Work Design Keeps Good People

Good workplace wellbeing supports retention, and many of the things that help people stay are the same things that create healthier work.

In this chapter

- Why people really leave
- What keeps people
- A word on pay

Why People Really Leave

It's tempting to treat "people leaving" simply as a recruitment problem. Often, the reasons sit much earlier in the employee experience. As Chapter 2 set out, turnover can be expensive, yet many employers never calculate the cost of replacing someone, so it stays hidden until several people have gone.

The pattern behind most of that movement is familiar to anyone who reads the earlier chapters of this guide: unmanageable workload, unclear roles, poor management behaviour, badly handled change, and a sense that nobody would notice if things got difficult. In other words, many of the workplace factors that increase stress risk (including workload, control, support, relationships, role clarity and poorly managed change) can also contribute to disengagement and decisions to leave.

The first few months matter

When new starters leave early, poor onboarding is often part of the reason: unclear expectations, no real induction, nobody checking in. Good onboarding is one of the cheapest retention tools available, and it's entirely within an SME's control.

What Actually Keeps People

Pay matters, but it is rarely the whole story, and it's the lever SMEs can move least easily. What tends to keep people is far more within reach for a smaller business:



- A manager who notices them and treats them fairly.
- Work that feels manageable, with priorities that make sense.
- A genuine sense that raising a concern early leads to something changing.
- Being trusted with some control over how their work gets done.
- Feeling that their contribution is seen, not just their output.

None of that requires a formal retention strategy, a benefits platform, or a big budget. It requires the same things this guide has already covered: sensible workload, clear roles, good conversations, and support that's actually used. Retention isn't a separate project competing with wellbeing. Good wellbeing practice, done consistently, is one of the strongest foundations for it.

A word on pay

Fair, transparent pay matters and should never be an afterthought. But a pay rise rarely fixes a role that's badly designed, a manager who doesn't listen, or a workload that's been unmanageable for months. Fix the work first. Pay conversations land better once it has been.



Hybrid & Flexible Working, Done Well

Flexibility can be an important wellbeing and retention consideration where the nature of the work allows it.

In this chapter

- Where hybrid working has landed
- Being honest about where this does and doesn't apply
- Making it work for wellbeing, not against it
- The statutory right to request

Where Hybrid Working Has Landed

Hybrid and remote working are now an established part of UK working life in roles where they are practical, and flexibility is something many employees consider when deciding whether a role works for them.

For SMEs where it's a genuine option, this isn't really a technology or policy question. It's a wellbeing and trust question. Done badly, hybrid working blurs boundaries, isolates people, and makes it harder to notice when someone's struggling. Done well, it gives people the control over their working pattern that the HSE identifies as one of its six Management Standards, and it can be a genuine reason good people stay.

Be honest about where this does and doesn't apply

Hybrid working simply isn't an option for a lot of SMEs. Manual, site-based, retail, hospitality and other hands-on roles need people physically present, and that's not a wellbeing failing. Trying to force a flexibility offer that doesn't fit the work only breeds resentment between office-based and frontline staff.

The underlying wellbeing principle still applies everywhere, though: give people whatever genuine control and flexibility the work allows (choice over shift patterns, notice of rota changes, input on breaks, swapping days with a colleague) rather than assuming "flexible working" only means home working.



Making It Work for Wellbeing, Not Against It

Set a rhythm, not a rulebook

Agree core hours or days for collaboration, then trust people with the rest. Output-based working, judging what's delivered rather than when someone's visibly online, respects both flexibility and accountability.

Watch for the quiet extension of hours

Home working can blur into longer days. Notice when someone's messages start creeping earlier or later and ask about it rather than assuming it's fine.

Keep connection deliberate

Camera-on culture isn't proof someone's well, and its absence isn't proof they're not. Build in regular, purposeful check-ins rather than relying on informal office chat that hybrid teams simply don't get.

Be honest about what needs office time

Some work and some relationships genuinely benefit from being in the same room. Say so clearly, with reasonable notice, rather than eroding trust with vague expectations.

What about a “right to disconnect”? The UK has no statutory right to disconnect; the government has said it intends to address out-of-hours contact through a Code of Practice. Whatever form that takes, working time rest rules and your duty to manage work-related stress apply.



Good to know

Every employee has the statutory right to request flexible working from day one of employment, whatever the role, and it doesn't have to mean working from home. For site-based and manual roles this might mean requesting a different shift pattern, compressed hours, or a fixed start time, and it can be worth proactively opening that conversation rather than waiting to be asked.

This is a right to request flexible working, rather than an automatic right to the arrangement requested. Employers must deal with statutory requests reasonably, consult with the employee before refusing a request unless it is accepted in full, and make a final decision, including any appeal, within two months unless the employee agrees to extend this.

Change under the Employment Rights Act 2025: the Act adds a requirement that any refusal must be reasonable, with regulations setting out the consultation steps employers must follow. Check Acas or GOV.UK for when this applies.



The Everyday Things That Make People Feel Valued

Recognition, fairness and inclusion as daily wellbeing practice, not policy on a shelf.

In this chapter

- Affordable strategies for SMEs
- Fairness and inclusion, done practically
- Employee involvement

Affordable Strategies for SMEs

Wellbeing support doesn't have to mean a big budget or a dedicated wellbeing team. Depending on the size and nature of the business, the right supportive measures range from completely free to a modest, one-off or annual cost. Here's what that looks like, banded by what it takes to set up.

Free: Just Takes Intention

- Walking 1:1s where appropriate.
- Optional shared lunch or coffee catch-up.
- Meeting-free focus blocks.
- Peer buddy arrangements for new starters or periods of change.
- A Wellness Action Plan (WAP). [Mind provides a free template](#) and guidance for employees and managers to complete together.
- Clear, known escalation routes for workload or wellbeing concerns.
- Celebrating milestones, improvement and contribution, not just big wins.
- Inviting employees to suggest one small thing that would make work easier this month.
- A phased return or temporary reassignment after stress-related absence: it costs management time and flexibility rather than money.
- Access to Work: government-funded support for employees with a disability, long-term health condition or neurodivergent needs. Employees apply themselves, and it can fund equipment, coaching or adaptations, often reducing the cost to the business, although employers may be asked to contribute in some cases.



Lower-Cost Support

- An Employee Assistance Programme (EAP): costs vary considerably by provider and level of support, but SME packages can be relatively affordable. They may provide confidential helplines, counselling and online support. Usage can be lower than employers expect, so regularly remind employees what is available and how to access it.
- Stress awareness, mental health awareness or manager wellbeing training, often available as a short session or e-learning module (for example, Craven's [Mental Health First Aid Awareness](#) e-learning course).

A One-Off Investment: Worth Planning For

- Training a Mental Health First Aider: this can provide an additional trained point of contact for employees and support early conversations and signposting. It should complement, rather than replace, good management, workplace risk assessment, Occupational Health or professional mental-health support. The full Mental Health First Aider qualification is available through [MHFA England](#).
- Quiet space, headphones, or basic equipment adjustments for concentration-heavy or sensory-sensitive roles.

Investing Further: For Businesses Ready to Do More

Some SMEs, particularly as they grow or where a competitive labour market makes benefits a genuine differentiator, choose to invest more deliberately in wellbeing. None of this is required to do wellbeing well, but it's worth knowing what the next level up typically looks like:

- Private medical insurance or a health cash plan, giving employees faster access to physiotherapy, counselling or specialist treatment.
- A retained Occupational Health provider on a contract basis, rather than one-off referrals, so advice is quicker and more joined-up.
- A dedicated wellbeing app or platform (such as Unmind, Spill or Headspace for Work) offering self-guided support, therapy access and manager training in one place.
- Group income protection or critical illness cover, which softens the financial impact of long-term ill health for employees and their families.
- Enhanced family leave pay: topping up maternity, paternity, adoption or shared parental pay beyond the statutory minimum.
- Financial wellbeing support, such as an advice service, salary advance scheme or workplace pension guidance.



- A dedicated internal wellbeing lead or People/HR hire once headcount justifies it, giving the whole approach a consistent owner.
- Regular, structured engagement or wellbeing surveys (rather than ad hoc feedback) to track whether things are improving over time.
- Investment in the physical workplace itself, such as better break-out space, natural light, outdoor access or quiet rooms, where premises allow.

Before you launch anything

Ask: What are we trying to improve? Have employees said this would help? Is it inclusive and accessible? Can people realistically take part? How will we know if it made a difference?

Fairness and Inclusion, Done Practically

A workplace where people feel fairly treated and able to be themselves is, in itself, a wellbeing outcome. People who feel judged, overlooked or unsafe raising concerns are people who stay quiet until things are already serious. This doesn't need a separate EDI programme bolted on top of wellbeing work; it needs the same everyday attention as everything else in this chapter:

- Base decisions about recruitment, workload and opportunity on merit and fit for the role, not on assumptions about someone's circumstances.
- Make it genuinely safe to disclose a health condition, caring responsibility or need for adjustment, and follow through when someone does.
- Notice if particular groups are consistently missing out on flexibility, recognition or development, and ask why.
- Treat neurodivergence, menopause, and other common but under-discussed experiences as ordinary adjustments conversations, not awkward exceptions.
- Remember employees with caring responsibilities: there is a day-one right to up to one week's unpaid carer's leave in any 12-month period, and a little flexibility often matters more than anything formal.
- Respond to bereavement with compassion and flexibility. Parents who lose a child have a statutory right to two weeks' parental bereavement leave (for a child under 18, or a stillbirth after 24 weeks of pregnancy), but anyone losing someone close may need time off, a gradual return and a manager who checks in. The Employment Rights Act 2025 also introduces a wider day-one right to unpaid bereavement leave, including for pregnancy loss; check Acas or GOV.UK for when it applies.



Employee Involvement

Ask employees what would genuinely help. Consulting employees on health and safety is a legal duty, and involving them in identifying stress risks and solutions, as HSE recommends, avoids spending money on initiatives that miss the real problem.



What Might Tell You Someone Needs Support

Managers do not need to diagnose a health condition. They need to notice and respond.

In this chapter

- Everyday early-warning questions
- Signs across work, behaviour, attendance and communication
- Remote and hybrid teams
- When to offer more structured support

Everyday Early-Warning Questions

Managers do not need to diagnose a health condition. What matters is noticing meaningful changes, creating an opportunity to talk and responding appropriately.

- How is your workload feeling now?
- What is taking most of your time or energy?
- Is anything getting in the way of doing your job well?
- What feels manageable, and what feels less manageable?
- Is there anything we could change, clarify or support?
- Is there anything you're quietly absorbing that we should talk about?

Don't take "fine" at face value. "I'm fine, just busy" is often a cue rather than an answer. A gentle follow-up, such as "What's making it feel particularly busy?", usually helps more than moving on, reassuring or jumping straight to solutions.

Signs Worth Noticing

Area	Signs worth noticing
Work	More mistakes; difficulty prioritising; falling output; overwork
Behaviour	Withdrawn; irritable; emotional; loss of confidence



Area	Signs worth noticing
Attendance	Repeated lateness; short absences; presenteeism; long hours
Communication	Unusually quiet; conflict; avoiding contact; disengagement
Wellbeing	Fatigue; overwhelm; poor concentration; burnout signs

Manager moment

One sign alone does not mean somebody has a mental health condition or is experiencing work-related stress. Look for change, context and patterns, then ask rather than assume.

Remote and Hybrid Teams

Changes can be harder to spot when people work remotely. Do not rely on camera-on culture or constant availability as proof somebody is well. Use regular 1:1s, clear work expectations, reasonable response-time norms and purposeful check-ins. Watch for people quietly extending their working day or becoming disconnected from the team.

Do this now

Make wellbeing one normal question in regular 1:1s, not a separate conversation that only happens when something has gone wrong.

When It's Time to Offer More Structured Support

A normal conversation is usually enough. But there are moments where it's worth proactively offering an Individual Stress Risk Assessment (ISRA): a short, voluntary process to identify what's driving the pressure and agree practical changes.

Consider offering one when:

- The employee says directly that they feel stressed, overwhelmed or burnt out.



- Someone returns from stress-related absence and a return-to-work conversation surfaces workplace factors worth exploring further.
- You notice early warning signs in attendance, behaviour or performance during normal management observation.
- It comes up naturally during a wellbeing check-in or regular 1:1.
- The business is going through major change, a workload spike, or a period of conflict that's likely to be landing hard on someone.

Offering an ISRA is not an accusation that something is seriously wrong. It's simply making a supportive assessment available before things escalate.



Having the Conversation

Good conversations are a management skill, not therapy.

In this chapter

- Start softly and be specific
- Holding a welfare meeting
- What good looks like
- What to avoid
- If work isn't the main cause
- Where neurodivergence may be a factor
- Fit notes and sick pay

Start Softly and Be Specific

A supportive conversation should feel human, private and purposeful. Explain why you are checking in, share what you have noticed where appropriate, and give the employee space to describe what is happening in their own words.

Swap “why” for “what”. “What's got in the way of this?” lands better than “Why is this late?”, and “What's been weighing on you lately?” better than “Why are you stressed?”.

Try this

“I wanted to check in. You have seemed under a lot of pressure recently. How are things for you?”

Try this

“Is anything at work making things harder at the moment?”

Try this

“What would make the biggest practical difference over the next couple of weeks?”

Try this

“Which parts of your role feel manageable, and which feel more difficult right now?”



Listen first. Solve second.

Managers often rush to fix the problem. Start by understanding what the employee is experiencing, what may be work-related, what support they want and what action is realistically available.

Holding a Welfare Meeting

A regular 1:1 is the right place for a normal wellbeing question, but it shouldn't turn into a detailed health conversation. When a health or wellbeing concern needs more than a quick check-in, arrange a separate, confidential welfare meeting. Its purpose is to understand how the person is, identify any impact on their work, and agree support that helps them stay at, or return to, work safely.

Consider one when an employee tells you they feel stressed, overwhelmed or burnt out; raises a health or wellbeing concern; returns from absence related to mental health or wellbeing; or when changes in behaviour, attendance or performance haven't been resolved through normal 1:1s.

1. Prepare

Book a private, quiet room and allow enough time. Around 10–15 minutes is often enough, but don't rush it. Review recent attendance, previous adjustments or risk assessments, and have EAP, Mental Health First Aider or flexible-working details to hand. If the concern involves you, offer another manager or HR to lead.

2. Open

Explain that this is a supportive conversation, not a disciplinary one, and be honest about confidentiality from the start (see the example wording below).



3. Explore

Ask open questions: how they are physically and mentally, what's been difficult at work, what feels manageable, and whether they need time or flexibility for appointments or external support. Listen first, problem-solve second.

4. Agree support

Work through practical options together, such as adjusted duties, flexible or reduced hours, a phased return, regular check-ins, quiet space or equipment. Decide whether an ISRA, Health Needs Assessment, Wellness Action Plan or Occupational Health referral would help.

5. Close

Summarise what has been agreed, who is doing what, and a review date, normally within 2–4 weeks. Thank them for being open and invite them to come back sooner if anything changes.

6. Follow up

Record the discussion confidentially, do what you said you would, and check whether adjustments are helping. Consider whether any themes point to a wider issue for the Company Stress Risk Assessment and seek HR advice if the case is complex or high-risk.

Try this: opening the meeting

"Thank you for meeting with me. This is a supportive conversation to check in on how you're doing, physically and mentally. It isn't a disciplinary meeting. I'll keep what we discuss confidential wherever I can, but if I'm worried about your safety or someone else's, I may need to involve others to make sure you get the right support."



Handle health information carefully

Information about someone's physical or mental health is special category personal data. Only record information that is relevant and genuinely needed, keep records factual and secure, restrict access to those who need the information for a legitimate purpose, and be clear with the employee about how their information will be used and shared. Detailed medical information should not be circulated simply because somebody is their manager. This applies equally to records from welfare meetings, ISRAs, Occupational Health, Wellness Action Plans and health assessments: keep them relevant, proportionate, factual and securely stored.

Follow your organisation's privacy notice and data protection arrangements and check with whoever is responsible for data protection if you are unsure.

If conduct or performance concerns also need addressing, deal with them in a separate meeting, so the employee can speak openly here without worrying that it will be used against them.

If Work Isn't the Main Cause

Stress from outside work

Sometimes the pressure someone's carrying has little to do with their job. Respond just as supportively, because this isn't a reason to disengage. Consider whether any temporary workplace adjustment would help regardless of the cause, signpost to an EAP, GP or Occupational Health where available, and involve HR if it starts affecting attendance, needs an ongoing adjustment, or raises a safeguarding concern.



When something outside work creates a workplace risk

Wellbeing concerns may sometimes involve domestic abuse, stalking or another safeguarding issue. Managers should not investigate someone's private life or pressure them to disclose more than they wish to share.

Listen, consider whether there are any immediate workplace safety concerns and discuss practical support that may help.

This might include changes to workplace contact arrangements, working location or hours, how calls or visitors are handled, emergency contact arrangements, or additional security measures where appropriate. Seek HR or specialist advice where needed. If there is an immediate risk of harm, follow the organisation's emergency or safeguarding process.

Where Neurodivergence May Be a Factor

If you suspect an employee may be neurodivergent (for example autistic, dyslexic or with ADHD) and is finding parts of their role difficult, approach it with curiosity rather than assumptions. Focus on what's hard about how the role is currently set up, not on labelling the person. You might say:

Try this

"I've noticed a few things that seem to be causing some difficulty. Would it be helpful to talk about how we can make things work better for you?"

Don't wait for a formal diagnosis before considering support. A neurodivergent condition may amount to a disability under the Equality Act 2010, and that duty to consider reasonable adjustments applies from day one regardless of length of service.

Fit Notes: When They Help and When They Don't

Employees can self-certify for the first seven calendar days of sickness absence, including non-working days. After that, an employer can ask for a fit note.

Fit notes can also be helpful when an employee may be able to work with some support or adjustments. A healthcare professional may indicate that the employee



“may be fit for work” and suggest things that could help, such as amended duties, altered hours, workplace adaptations or a phased return.

However, a fit note is not automatically needed simply because somebody is experiencing a health issue at work. If they remain at work and the purpose of the conversation is to understand what support or adjustments may help, you can usually have that conversation without asking them to obtain a fit note. Where more specialist advice is needed, Occupational Health may be more appropriate.

Sick pay has changed too. Since 6 April 2026, Statutory Sick Pay is payable from the first full day of sickness absence. The previous three waiting days and Lower Earnings Limit have been removed, meaning eligible employees can qualify regardless of their earnings. SSP is paid at 80% of average weekly earnings or the applicable weekly flat rate, whichever is lower. Make sure your absence policy and payroll arrangements reflect the current rules. [Acas: Statutory sick pay](#)

What Good Looks Like

- Use open questions and allow silence: ask, then pause before you say anything else.
- Acknowledge what you have heard without trying to diagnose it.
- Be clear about confidentiality: information will be handled sensitively but cannot always remain entirely private where safety, safeguarding or legal duties are involved.
- Separate health and wellbeing support from performance or conduct processes where possible.
- Agree actions, owners and a review date.
- Follow up when you said you would.

What to Avoid

- “Everyone is stressed.”
- “You just need to be more resilient.”
- Promising absolute confidentiality.
- Asking intrusive questions about diagnosis or private life that are not relevant to work or support.



- Turning the conversation immediately into a capability or disciplinary discussion.
- Saying you will help and then failing to follow up.

Managers are not therapists

Your role is to notice, listen, understand the impact on work, act on workplace risks, agree reasonable support and escalate appropriately. You are not expected to diagnose, counsel or manage a mental health crisis alone.



Using the Right Support at the Right Time

Which route should you use? A simple map through the options.

In this chapter

- Which route should I use?
- Reasonable adjustments: think possibilities, not promises
- Occupational Health
- Health needs / health risk assessment
- Access to Work
- Pregnancy, new and expectant mothers
- Menopause at work
- Young people and apprentices

Which Route Should I Use?

If this is happening	Start here	Then consider
Routine workload, priorities, development or early concerns	Regular 1:1	Separate welfare meeting if a significant health/wellbeing issue emerges
A health or wellbeing concern needs confidential discussion	Welfare meeting	Adjustments, OH, WAP, ISRA or health assessment as relevant
Work is causing or contributing to stress	Individual Stress Risk Assessment (ISRA)	Practical controls, action plan and review; consider wider Company Stress RA themes



If this is happening	Start here	Then consider
A team or organisational pattern is emerging	Company Stress Risk Assessment	Controls at organisational/team level and targeted individual support where needed
Health condition may affect safe/effective work	Health Needs / Health Risk Assessment	Occupational Health and reasonable adjustments
Health, fatigue or medication may affect safety-critical work	Temporary change of duties and Health Risk Assessment	Occupational Health advice, fatigue controls and review before return to full duties
Staff have experienced violence, abuse or aggression	Immediate support and incident report	Review the violence risk assessment and controls; report under RIDDOR if required; EAP or other support
Ongoing or fluctuating wellbeing condition	Wellness Action Plan	Agreed support, early-warning signs and regular review
Independent specialist advice is needed	Occupational Health	Fitness for work, adjustments, phased return, prognosis or workplace impact advice
Long-term health/disability support may need specialist provision	Reasonable adjustments / Access to Work	Access to Work can provide additional support but does not replace the employer duty to make reasonable adjustments



If this is happening	Start here	Then consider
Immediate concern for safety or risk of self-harm/suicide	Crisis / emergency pathway	Urgent support, HR/senior escalation and emergency services where necessary
Culture, behaviour, reporting, power-imbalance, social-event or third-party harassment risks	Company Sexual Harassment Risk Assessment	Preventative controls, training, reporting routes, manager action and HR/H&S follow-up as needed
Employee is pregnant, has given birth in the last 6 months, or is breastfeeding	Pregnancy (New or Expectant Mother) Risk Assessment	Reasonable adjustments, KIT days, maternity policy, breastfeeding and expressing facilities; OH referral if needed
Menopause-related symptoms are affecting someone at work	Supportive conversation and reasonable adjustments	Consider Equality Act protection, OH referral and practical workplace changes

Good to know: the ISRA is voluntary

An Individual Stress Risk Assessment is a supportive process, not a form to enforce. Completing it is the employee's choice, and they can share as much or as little as they're comfortable with. If they'd like to, they can complete their part of the ISRA beforehand to help shape the discussion. Craven recommends reviewing the agreed support plan within 2–4 weeks to check whether it's helping, then adjusting it, continuing it or standing it down as appropriate.



Look beyond the individual

One individual concern may need individual support. Similar concerns affecting several people may indicate an organisational risk. Repeated ISRAs, stress-related absence, workload concerns, conflict or similar themes should trigger consideration of whether the Company Stress Risk Assessment needs reviewing.

Reasonable Adjustments: Think Possibilities, Not Promises

Time

Flexible start/finish times; shorter or more frequent breaks; time for appointments; temporary reduced hours; phased return.

Work

Reprioritise tasks; adjust deadlines; temporarily reduce certain duties; break work into smaller steps; clarify priorities.

Place

Quieter workspace; homeworking where suitable; environmental changes; reduced sensory distractions.

Communication

Written instructions; planned check-ins; preferred communication methods; extra notice of changes where practical.

Support

Buddy or mentor; additional supervision; training; coaching; equipment; Occupational Health advice.

Process

Review how policies are applied where appropriate, including absence triggers or return-to-work arrangements, while remaining fair and consistent.



Important

If a mental health condition amounts to a disability under the Equality Act 2010, the employer must make reasonable adjustments where it knows, or could reasonably be expected to know, about the disability and the employee is at a substantial disadvantage. Not every health condition is a disability, but even where the condition is not a disability, Acas recommends exploring practical support that may help.

Occupational Health

Occupational Health can provide independent advice where health may be affecting work or work may be affecting health. It may be particularly useful where absence is repeated or long-term, a fit note suggests adjustments, support has not resolved the issue, the condition is complex or fluctuating, or specialist advice is needed about fitness for work or reasonable adjustments.

Good to know: Occupational Health needs consent

An Occupational Health assessment will normally require the employee's cooperation and consent. Explain why a referral is being suggested, what it involves and how the information will be used. If an employee declines to participate or does not consent to relevant medical information being shared, respect that decision, but explain that the employer may need to make decisions about work, support or capability based on the information reasonably available.

Health Needs / Health Risk Assessment

Where a physical or mental health condition may affect someone's ability to do their role safely, or creates additional workplace health and safety considerations, a Health Needs or Health Risk Assessment is the right assessment. Its purpose is not to diagnose or assess the medical condition itself, but to understand what it means in practice for the workplace and what controls, support or adjustments would help. Occupational Health or other specialist advice should be sought where appropriate.

A Health Needs or Health Risk Assessment sits alongside, not instead of, other risk assessments: it looks at one individual's health condition and its practical workplace



implications, whereas the Company Stress Risk Assessment looks at organisation-wide patterns, an ISRA looks specifically at work-related stress for one person, and a Pregnancy Risk Assessment covers pregnancy, new mothers and breastfeeding. Where more than one applies, use them together rather than choosing just one.

Access to Work

Access to Work may provide practical and financial support for eligible people with a disability or health condition, including some mental health support. It does not pay for reasonable adjustments that an employer is legally required to make. Employees apply themselves (the employer can't apply on their behalf), and Access to Work may then contact the employer for information or ask it to put in place or part-fund some recommendations. It is less likely to help where the issue is short-term or situational work-related stress on its own.

Pregnancy, New and Expectant Mothers

Pregnancy, maternity leave and return to work deserve the same ongoing, proactive support as any other wellbeing area, not a single conversation or a form completed once and filed away. Every employee's experience is different, and needs can change throughout pregnancy, leave and return.

Employers must already consider risks to women of childbearing age as part of their general risk assessment. Once an employee has told the organisation in writing that they are pregnant, have given birth within the last six months, or are breastfeeding, HSE guidance is clear that the employer must complete an individual Pregnancy (New or Expectant Mother) Risk Assessment with them, taking account of any advice from their doctor or midwife. These duties come from the Management of Health and Safety at Work Regulations 1999. The assessment is separate from the Company Stress Risk Assessment and from an individual Health Needs Assessment. It should be reviewed as the pregnancy progresses, if work or the workplace changes, and again on return to work, not treated as a one-off exercise. **Change under the Employment Rights Act 2025:** the Act strengthens protection from dismissal for pregnant women and new mothers. Check Acas or GOV.UK for when this applies.



- Consider workload, fatigue, working hours, travel, standing, lifting, and any physical or environmental hazards relevant to the role.
- Keeping in Touch (KIT) days are optional and must be agreed by both employer and employee, including the type of work and pay, before the day. Up to 10 can be used during maternity leave without bringing it to an end or affecting maternity pay.
- Breastfeeding or expressing support should include a private, clean space that is not a toilet, reasonable flexibility for breaks, and access to storage such as a fridge where needed.

If a significant risk cannot be controlled

If a significant health and safety risk to a pregnant worker or their baby cannot be adequately controlled, the employer should first adjust the employee's working conditions or hours where reasonable. If that does not remove the risk, consider suitable alternative work on terms that are no less favourable. If suitable alternative work is not available, it may be necessary to suspend the employee from work on full pay for as long as needed to protect their health and safety.

Good to know

After up to 26 weeks' maternity leave, employees have the right to return to the same job. After longer leave, they have the right to return to the same job or, if that is not reasonably practicable, to a suitable alternative job on terms no less favourable. There is no automatic right to a paid phased return. If hours are temporarily reduced, pay is normally reduced in line with hours worked, though employers may choose to offer a short period of full pay or allow annual leave to top up pay.

Menopause at Work

Menopause and perimenopause symptoms, including hot flushes, disrupted sleep, fatigue, difficulty concentrating, low mood or anxiety, and joint pain, can significantly affect someone's ability to work, yet the topic is still often under-discussed and treated as awkward rather than ordinary. Managers do not need special expertise to support this well; the same open, curious approach used for any other health conversation applies. Under the Employment Rights Act 2025, employers with 250 or more employees can publish an action plan covering their gender pay gap and



support for employees experiencing menopause. Publication has been voluntary since April 2026 and becomes mandatory once secondary legislation takes effect. The government's guidance on creating these plans also encourages smaller employers to use it, and it can offer a useful structure for any SME.

- Temperature control: a desk fan, a seat near a window that opens, or permission to step outside briefly.
- A breathable uniform option or more flexible dress code.
- Easy access to cold water and toilet facilities.
- Flexible or later start times where disrupted sleep is a factor.
- Rest breaks, a quiet space, or the flexibility to step out of a meeting if needed.

Try this

"I wanted to check whether menopause or perimenopause might be part of what's making things harder now, and if so, what would help. There's no pressure to share more than you're comfortable with."

Important

Menopause symptoms can amount to a disability under the Equality Act 2010 where they have a substantial, long-term effect on someone's ability to carry out normal day-to-day activities. Where that duty is engaged it applies regardless of length of service, and a formal diagnosis is not necessarily required before adjustments are considered. Many of the reasonable adjustments already set out in this guide, such as flexible hours, a quieter or cooler workspace and adjusted breaks, apply equally well here.

Young People and Apprentices

Young workers and apprentices bring energy and fresh perspective, but they also need a different level of support. That's not because they can't cope, but because they're newer to work itself, often still developing confidence, and legally owed some extra protection.

- **Young workers and risk assessment.** For workers under 18, the employer's risk assessment must take account of risks arising from their lack of experience, awareness of risk and maturity. Review the existing risk assessment before they start work and make sure these factors are properly addressed. A



completely separate young person's risk assessment is not always necessary where the existing assessment already adequately covers the relevant risks.

- Young workers also have stricter working-time limits: normally no more than 8 hours a day or 40 hours a week, a 30-minute break when working more than 4.5 hours, 12 hours' rest between working days, two days off each week and restrictions on night work.
- Apprentices must receive protected off-the-job training time. For apprenticeships in England starting from August 2025, each standard has a fixed minimum number of hours, replacing the old 20% rule. Plan this time into their week and don't let operational pressure quietly erode it.
- A named mentor or buddy, more frequent check-ins during the first few months, and clear written instructions all help someone new to the world of work settle in and feel able to ask questions.
- Be alert to safeguarding considerations for any employee under 18, and make sure young workers know exactly who to go to if something at work worries them.

Try this

"How are you finding things so far? Is there anything about how work works that nobody's explained, or that would help to go over again?"



If Someone's Really Struggling

A clear route for immediate welfare concerns.

In this chapter

- If you are worried somebody may be at immediate risk
- Support contacts
- Further support organisations

If You Are Worried Somebody May Be at Immediate Risk

Ask, listen, stay, escalate

Ask directly and sensitively about immediate safety if you are concerned. Listen without judgement. If there is an immediate risk, do not leave the person alone. Get urgent professional help and follow your organisation's emergency, safeguarding or crisis process.

Managers Should

- Take disclosures of self-harm or suicidal thoughts seriously.
- Stay calm and listen without judgement.
- Ask direct but sensitive questions where there are concerns about immediate safety. Asking about suicide does not create suicidal thoughts.
- Seek urgent support from HR or a senior manager.
- Call 999 where there is an immediate risk of harm or urgent medical emergency.
- Encourage appropriate professional support such as GP, NHS 111, local crisis services or Samaritans.
- Record necessary information sensitively and limit sharing to those who need to know.
- Follow up after the immediate situation has been made safe.



Watch out

Do not attempt to assess clinical suicide risk, provide counselling, promise secrecy or send somebody home alone where you believe there is an immediate safety risk.

Support Contacts

Service	When	Contact
Emergency services	Immediate danger or medical emergency	999
NHS 111	Urgent health advice where it is not a 999 emergency In England, select the mental health option for 24/7 urgent mental health support.	111 / NHS 111 online
Samaritans	Confidential emotional support, 24/7	116 123
GP / local NHS mental health services	Assessment and ongoing professional support	Use local NHS route
Shout	Free, confidential 24/7 crisis text support, including for self-harm and suicidal thoughts	Text SHOUT to 85258
CALM (Campaign Against Living Miserably)	Support for anyone struggling or in crisis, particularly men	0800 58 58 58, 5pm–midnight daily
Sift (formerly Self Injury Support) / Harmless	Specialist information and support around self-harm	Visit sift.org.uk or harmless.org.uk



Service	When	Contact
Mind Infoline	Information and signposting on mental health and where to get support	0300 123 3393

Organisations should also maintain their own up-to-date internal escalation contacts and EAP details where applicable.

Further Support Organisations

Beyond an immediate crisis, a number of reputable UK organisations offer ongoing information, signposting and specialist support that employees (and managers) may find useful:

- Mind: mental health information, support and local services (mind.org.uk)
- Rethink Mental Illness: support for people affected by severe mental illness (rethink.org)
- Mental Health Foundation: research and practical mental health resources (mentalhealth.org.uk)
- SANE: emotional support, information and a specialist textcare service (sane.org.uk)
- Anxiety UK: support specifically for anxiety conditions (anxietyuk.org.uk)
- Mental Health at Work: free, practical workplace mental health tools and resources for employers (mentalhealthatwork.org.uk)
- Business in the Community: Wellbeing Toolkit and guidance for employers (bitc.org.uk)
- Carers UK: support for employees with caring responsibilities (carersuk.org)
- Rock My Menopause / Menopause Matters: menopause information and support (rockmymenopause.com, menopausematters.co.uk)



Coming Back Well

Support people to stay in, return to and sustain work.

In this chapter

- Returning to work well
- Performance and conduct

Returning to Work Well

A return-to-work conversation should do more than confirm that somebody is back. It is an opportunity to check how they are, understand any continuing impact on work, discuss fit-note recommendations, agree support and identify whether further assessment is needed.

Before return

Agree contact, discuss likely needs and consider a phased return or temporary adjustments where appropriate.

First day / week

Reconfirm priorities, workload, hours and support. Avoid immediately returning the employee to a backlog of every missed task.

First review

Check what is working, what is not and whether the plan needs changing. Review adjustments rather than assuming they are permanent or fixed.

Longer term

Continue ordinary 1:1s and monitor the work factors that contributed to the issue. Look for wider team or organisational themes.

Simple strategy

When someone returns after stress-related absence, agree a short “must do / can wait / not for now” priority list. It can be more useful than a complicated wellbeing plan.



Performance and Conduct

Health and wellbeing concerns do not remove reasonable standards of performance or behaviour, but they may affect how concerns should be managed. Where performance or conduct issues arise alongside health concerns, seek HR advice, explore relevant support and adjustments, and keep the welfare discussion distinct from any formal process wherever possible. Where a genuine performance concern exists on its own, a Performance Support Plan (an early, informal, coaching-based route with clear objectives and review dates) is often a sensible first step before any formal capability process, giving the employee a fair, structured opportunity to improve with support. From 1 January 2027, the qualifying period for unfair dismissal is six months rather than two years, so fair, well-documented and supportive handling matters from much earlier in someone's employment. From 1 October 2026, the time limit for bringing most employment tribunal claims is six months rather than three, so concerns may surface some time after the event: keep records factual and handle issues properly from the start.



A Simple Rhythm for the Year

Build wellbeing into normal management, and keep an eye on a few simple indicators.

In this chapter

- A simple wellbeing rhythm for SMEs
- Wellbeing initiatives: useful extras, not the foundation
- What to actually keep an eye on

A Simple Wellbeing Rhythm for SMEs

Rhythm	What it can look like
Every week / routinely	Clear priorities, sensible work allocation, informal check-ins, respectful communication and breaks.
Monthly / regular 1:1	Contribution, workload, priorities, support, development and one normal wellbeing question.
During change	Explain what is changing, why, what is known, what is not, what happens next and how concerns can be raised.
After sickness absence	Return-to-work conversation; consider welfare meeting, adjustments, OH or assessment if indicated.
When concerns arise	Welfare meeting / ISRA / health assessment / WAP / OH depending on the issue.
Periodically	Review the Company Stress Risk Assessment and Company Sexual Harassment Risk Assessment, alongside absence themes, feedback, working hours, turnover, culture indicators and whether wellbeing actions are actually helping.



Wellbeing Initiatives: Useful Extras, Not the Foundation

Social connection, physical activity, learning, mindfulness, healthy eating initiatives, volunteering, peer support and wellbeing campaigns can all be positive. The best choice depends on your people and your workplace. They work best layered on top of the everyday rhythm above, not instead of it.

What to Actually Keep an Eye On

An SME does not need a complicated wellbeing dashboard. Use a small number of indicators to help you see patterns, ask better questions and decide where action is needed.

Absence

Look for patterns and themes, not assumptions about individuals.

Turnover

Exit themes can reveal workload, management or relationship issues.

Employee feedback

Use short pulse questions, 1:1 themes or small-team discussions.

Workload / hours

Repeated overtime, missed breaks or backlog can be risk indicators.

Stress RA actions

Are agreed controls actually implemented and reviewed?

Adjustments

Are they helping? Do they need changing?

Conflict / grievances

Recurring themes can indicate relationship or culture risks.

Initiatives

Measure usefulness and impact, not just attendance.

Do not measure wellbeing by attendance alone

Twenty people attending a wellbeing event does not tell you whether workload is manageable, managers are supportive or employees feel safe raising concerns.



SME Health Check

Nineteen questions to turn this guide into action.

In this chapter

- The checklist
- How to use your answers

The Checklist

Check	Yes	Partly	No
We understand our main workplace stress and wellbeing risks.	☐	☐	☐
Managers know how to recognise and respond to concerns.	☐	☐	☐
Employees have regular opportunities to discuss workload and support.	☐	☐	☐
Working hours, breaks and workload are actively managed.	☐	☐	☐
We assess fatigue risks from working patterns, and managers know what to do if someone may not be fit to carry out safety-critical work safely.	☐	☐	☐
We assess the risk of violence and aggression towards staff, and people know how to report incidents and get support.	☐	☐	☐
People understand their roles, priorities and where to go when expectations conflict.	☐	☐	☐
We have clear routes for welfare meetings and return-to-work conversations.	☐	☐	☐



Check	Yes	Partly	No
We know when to use an ISRA and when the organisation-wide Company Stress Risk Assessment needs to be completed or reviewed.	☐	☐	☐
Managers understand reasonable adjustments and when to seek OH advice.	☐	☐	☐
We know how Access to Work fits alongside our own duties.	☐	☐	☐
Managers know what to do if someone may be at immediate risk.	☐	☐	☐
Employees are involved in decisions about wellbeing priorities.	☐	☐	☐
We review whether our actions and adjustments are actually working.	☐	☐	☐
We have assessed sexual harassment risks and know when to review the Company Sexual Harassment Risk Assessment.	☐	☐	☐
Employees know how and where to raise concerns about bullying, harassment, sexual harassment or other unacceptable behaviour, including where the concern involves their manager.	☐	☐	☐
We support pregnancy, maternity and menopause needs proactively, including pregnancy risk assessments, and do not treat them as awkward exceptions.	☐	☐	☐
We make sure our risk assessment covers the specific risks to young workers, and give young workers and apprentices the supervision, protected training time and check-ins they need.	☐	☐	☐



Check	Yes	Partly	No
Good work design, fair treatment and flexibility are genuinely part of how we retain people, not treated as separate initiatives.	☐	☐	☐

How to use your answers

Do not try to fix everything at once. Pick the three “No” or “Partly” items that create the greatest risk or would make the biggest practical difference.



Your 90-Day Plan

A simple 30 / 60 / 90-day route from this guide into action.

In this chapter

- Your top three priorities
- First 30 / 60 / 90 days

Your Top Three Priorities

Priority	What will we do?	Owner	By when?	How will we know?
1				
2				
3				

A Simple 30 / 60 / 90-Day Route

First 30 days

Complete the health check. Review stress risks, manager capability and any urgent gaps. Choose three priorities.

By 60 days

Put practical controls in place. Brief managers. Make sure employees know how to raise concerns and access support.

By 90 days

Review what changed, gather feedback, update the action plan and decide what needs to continue, stop or improve.



Where This Comes From

Current law and official guidance behind this guide.

In this chapter

- Key legal and guidance framework
- Official guidance and research
- Key terms used in this guide

Key Legal and Guidance Framework

- [Health and Safety at Work etc. Act 1974](#)
- [Management of Health and Safety at Work Regulations 1999](#)
- [Equality Act 2010](#)
- [Working Time Regulations 1998](#)
- Employment Rights Act 1996 (including flexible working requests and suspension on maternity grounds)
- Workplace (Health, Safety and Welfare) Regulations 1992 (including rest facilities for pregnant and breastfeeding workers)
- Employment Relations (Flexible Working) Act 2023
- Carer's Leave Act 2023
- Parental Bereavement (Leave and Pay) Act 2018
- Health and Safety (Consultation with Employees) Regulations 1996 and Safety Representatives and Safety Committees Regulations 1977
- Health and Safety (Display Screen Equipment) Regulations 1992
- Manual Handling Operations Regulations 1992
- Reporting of Injuries, Diseases and Dangerous Occurrences Regulations 2013 (RIDDOR)
- Health and Safety (First-Aid) Regulations 1981
- UK GDPR / [Data Protection Act 2018](#) for handling health information
- [Employment Rights Act 2025](#) (Statutory Sick Pay payable from the first full day of sickness absence since 6 April 2026; "all reasonable steps" sexual harassment duty and third-party harassment liability from 30 October 2026; six-month time limit for most tribunal claims from 1 October 2026; six-month



qualifying period for unfair dismissal from 1 January 2027; restrictions on non-disclosure agreements covering harassment and discrimination)

- [Maternity and Parental Leave etc. Regulations 1999](#), and Regulations 16–18 of the Management of Health and Safety at Work Regulations 1999 (New and Expectant Mothers)

Official Guidance and Research

- Health and Safety Executive: Work-related stress and Management Standards (hse.gov.uk/stress/)
- HSE: Management Standards for work-related stress (hse.gov.uk/stress/standards/)
- HSE: Health and safety statistics 2025 (2024/25 data) (hse.gov.uk/statistics/)
- Acas: Supporting mental health at work (acas.org.uk/supporting-mental-health-workplace)
- Acas: Health and wellbeing at work (acas.org.uk/health-and-wellbeing-at-work)
- Acas: Reasonable adjustments at work (acas.org.uk/reasonable-adjustments)
- Acas: Neurodiversity at work (acas.org.uk/neurodiversity-at-work)
- Acas: Menopause at work (acas.org.uk/menopause-at-work)
- Acas: Statutory sick pay (acas.org.uk/checking-sick-pay/statutory-sick-pay-ssp)
- Acas: Code of Practice on flexible working requests (acas.org.uk)
- HSE: New and expectant mothers at work (hse.gov.uk/mothers)
- HSE: Fatigue and shift work (hse.gov.uk/humanfactors/topics/fatigue.htm)
- HSE: Work-related violence (hse.gov.uk/violence)
- HSE: Lone working (hse.gov.uk/lone-working)
- HSE: Display screen equipment (hse.gov.uk/msd/dse)
- GOV.UK: Maternity pay and leave (gov.uk/maternity-pay-leave)
- GOV.UK: Access to Work (gov.uk/access-to-work)
- NHS: Mental health services (nhs.uk/nhs-services/mental-health-services/)
- Samaritans (samaritans.org)
- Mind: Wellness Action Plans (mind.org.uk/workplace/)
- Equality and Human Rights Commission: Sexual harassment and harassment at work: technical guidance (equalityhumanrights.com)



- Information Commissioner's Office: Employment and data protection, including workers' health information (ico.org.uk)
- World Health Organization: Mental health at work (who.int)

Key Terms Used in This Guide

- **Access to Work:** government-funded support for employees with a disability or health condition.
- **DSE:** display screen equipment, such as computers, laptops and tablets.
- **EAP:** Employee Assistance Programme, a confidential helpline, counselling and support service funded by the employer.
- **ISRA:** Individual Stress Risk Assessment, a voluntary assessment of work-related stress for one employee.
- **KIT days:** Keeping in Touch days, up to 10 optional working days during maternity or adoption leave, agreed in advance.
- **MHFA:** Mental Health First Aider, a trained colleague who can offer initial support and signposting.
- **OH:** Occupational Health, independent professional advice on fitness for work and adjustments.
- **RIDDOR:** the regulations requiring certain workplace injuries, diseases and dangerous occurrences to be reported.
- **SSP:** Statutory Sick Pay.
- **WAP:** Wellness Action Plan, an agreed plan recording what helps someone stay well at work and early warning signs.
- **Welfare meeting:** a separate, confidential conversation about an employee's health or wellbeing.

About this guide

This guide brings together Craven's manager guidance on welfare meetings, work-related stress, Individual Stress Risk Assessments and serious welfare concerns, and links them with the Company Stress Risk Assessment and Company Sexual Harassment Risk Assessment, which Craven's practical toolkits can support. It is designed as a practical SME framework rather than a substitute for tailored legal, HR, Health & Safety or clinical advice.



About Craven

One Trusted Partner for People, Safety, Environment, Success.

In this chapter

- Who we are
- Our pillars
- Need support?

Who We Are

Craven Consultancy Services Ltd is a multi-disciplinary consultancy providing integrated HR, Health & Safety, Environmental, Training and Software solutions through one joined-up system. We help organisations reduce risk, strengthen their culture, develop their people and operate with confidence, combining professional expertise with practical support, digital tools and a genuine commitment to continuous improvement.

Our Pillars

People

We help businesses manage, develop and lead their people effectively, from practical HR support and workplace culture to leadership and wellbeing.

Safety

We help businesses create safe, healthy and compliant workplaces through practical Health & Safety support, strong safety cultures and workforce competence.

Environment

We support organisations to understand and manage their environmental responsibilities, reduce their impact and build more sustainable practices.

Success

We help businesses build the knowledge, skills and capability they need to succeed through training, learning, digital tools and joined-up support across our other pillars.



Need support?

Craven Consultancy Services can support SMEs with HR, Health & Safety, workplace wellbeing, stress risk assessment, manager guidance, training and practical workplace tools. Get in touch to talk through where to start. Call [01756 860 600](tel:01756 860 600), email hello@cravenconsultancyservices.co.uk or visit cravenconsultancyservices.co.uk.

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