

# **Social Worker Self Care – more than a personal responsibility**

**Mike Hines**  
**Assistant National Officer (Health and Safety)**  
**UNISON**

## Social Worker Self Care



What type of things  
affect or limit your ability  
to practice self-care?

# The scale of the (2021)



Health and safety at work  
Summary statistics for Great Britain 2021



## Work-related ill health

**1.7 million**

Workers suffering from work-related ill health (new or long-standing) in 2020/21

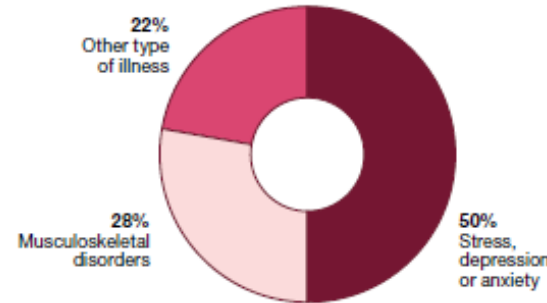
**850,000**

Workers suffering from a new case of work-related ill health in 2020/21

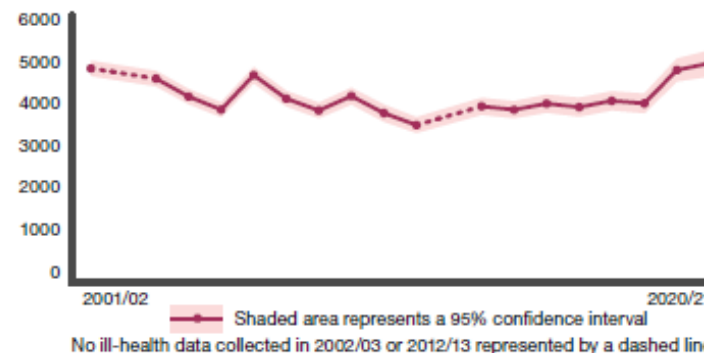
**13,000**

Deaths each year estimated to be linked to past exposure at work, primarily to chemicals or dust

New and long-standing cases of work-related ill health by type, 2020/21



Work-related ill health per 100,000 workers: new and long-standing



In the recent years prior to the coronavirus pandemic, the rate of self-reported work-related ill health had been broadly flat. In 2020/21 the rate was higher than the 2018/19 pre-coronavirus levels.

No new data on working days lost is available for 2020/21. Data for earlier periods can be found at <https://www.hse.gov.uk/statistics/lfs/lfs-archive.htm>

*Estimates of ill health based on Labour Force Survey (LFS) self-reports and deaths based on counts from death certificates and estimates from epidemiological information.*

To find out the story behind the key figures, visit <https://www.hse.gov.uk/statistics/causdis/index.htm>

# The scale of the problem



## Work-related stress, depression or anxiety

Stress, depression or anxiety per 100,000 workers:  
new and long-standing

### 822,000

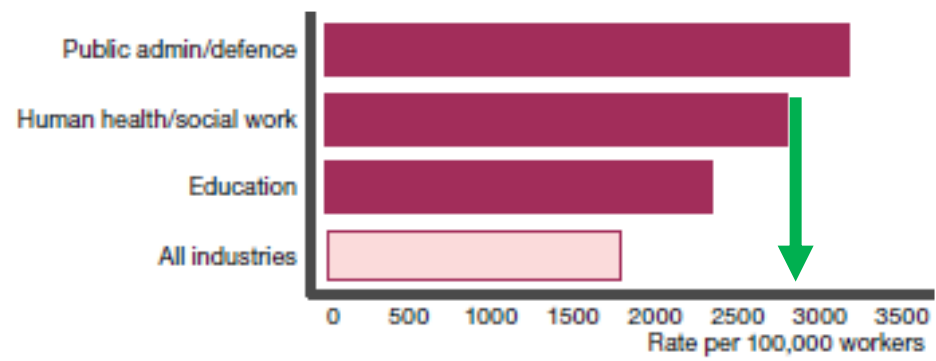
Workers suffering from work-related stress, depression or anxiety (new or long-standing) in 2020/21

### 451,000

Workers suffering from a new case of work-related stress, depression or anxiety in 2020/21



Shaded area represents a 95% confidence interval  
No ill-health data collected in 2002/03 or 2012/13 represented by a dashed line



Source: <https://www.hse.gov.uk/statistics/overall/hssh2021.pdf>

# The scale of the problem (2022)

Health and safety at work  
Summary statistics for Great Britain 2022



## Work-related stress, depression or anxiety

**914,000**

Workers suffering from work-related stress, depression or anxiety (new or long-standing) in 2021/22

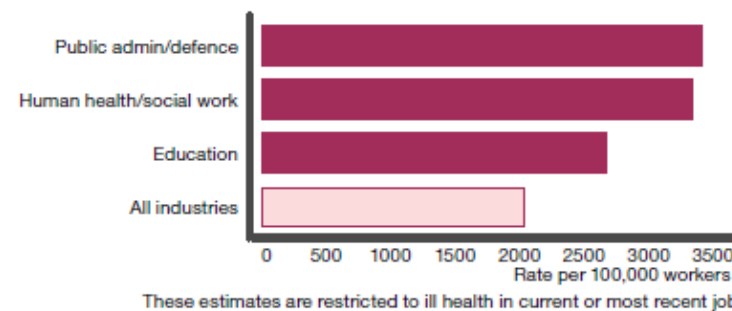
**372,000**

Workers suffering from a new case of work-related stress, depression or anxiety in 2021/22

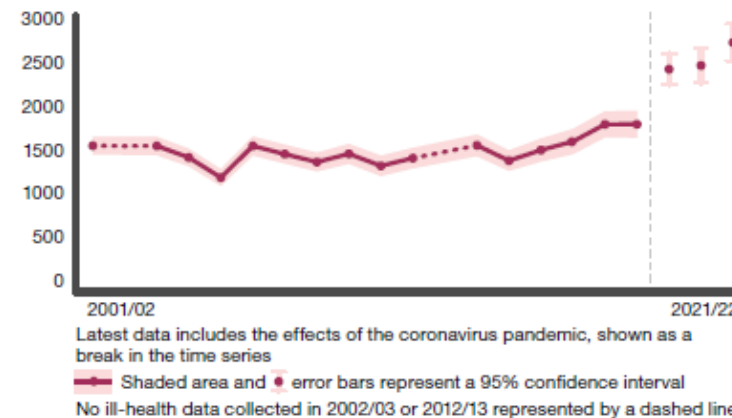
**17.0 million**

Working days lost due to work-related stress, depression or anxiety in 2021/22

Industries with higher-than-average rates of work-related stress, depression or anxiety, averaged 2019/20–2021/22



Rate of work-related stress, depression or anxiety per 100,000 workers: new and long-standing



In the recent years prior to the coronavirus pandemic, the rate of self-reported work-related stress, depression or anxiety had shown signs of increasing. The current rate is higher than the 2018/19 pre-coronavirus levels.

Working days lost per worker due to self-reported work-related stress, depression or anxiety shows no clear trend.

In 2021/22, the effects of the coronavirus pandemic were found to be a major contributory factor to work-related stress, depression or anxiety.

*Estimates of work-related stress, depression or anxiety based on self-reports from the Labour Force Survey (LFS)*

To find out the story behind the key figures, visit <https://www.hse.gov.uk/statistics/causdis/stress.pdf>

## Work related stress

*“The adverse reaction people have to excessive pressures or other types of demand placed on them”* (Health and Safety Executive)

Work related stress can –

- lead to anxiety and depression
- exacerbate existing mental health conditions
- and cause/exacerbate physical health conditions.

# Symptoms of Work related stress



**BRAIN**  
Difficulty concentrating, anxiety, depression, irritability, mood, mind fog

**SKIN**  
Hair loss, dull/brittle hair, brittle nails, dry skin, acne, delayed tissue repair

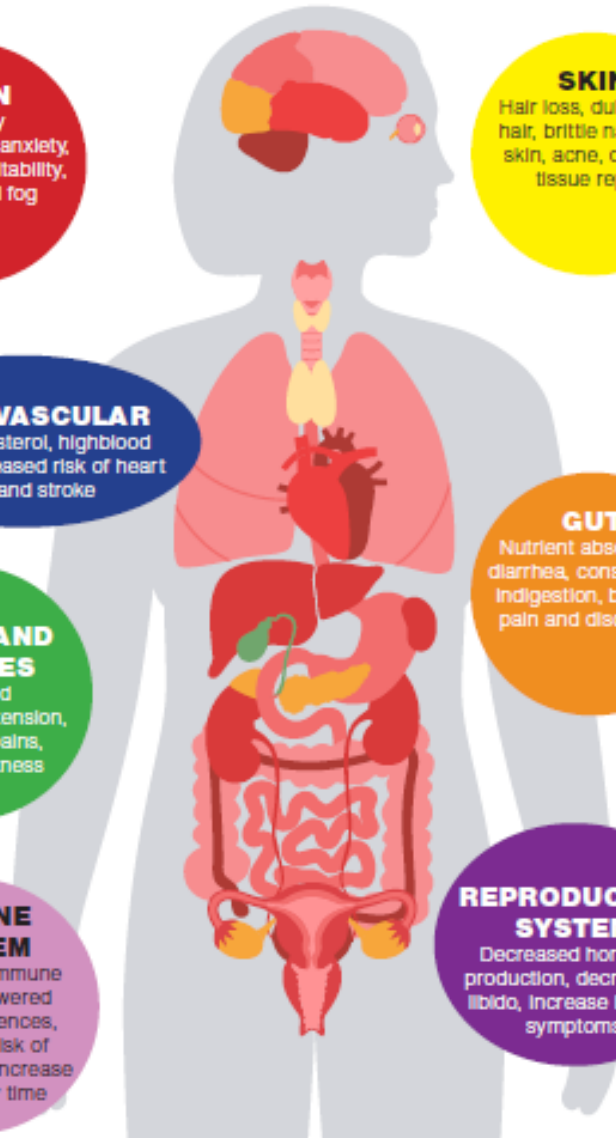
**CARDIOVASCULAR**  
Higher cholesterol, high blood pressure, increased risk of heart attack and stroke

**GUT**  
Nutrient absorption, diarrhea, constipation, indigestion, bloating, pain and discomfort

**JOINTS AND MUSCLES**  
Increased inflammation, tension, aches and pains, muscle tightness

**IMMUNE SYSTEM**  
Decreased immune function, lowered immune defences, increased risk of becoming ill, increase in recovery time

**REPRODUCTIVE SYSTEM**  
Decreased hormone production, decrease in libido, increase in PMS symptoms



# Work related stress risk assessment



HSE Management Standards



# Work related stress: The scale of the problem

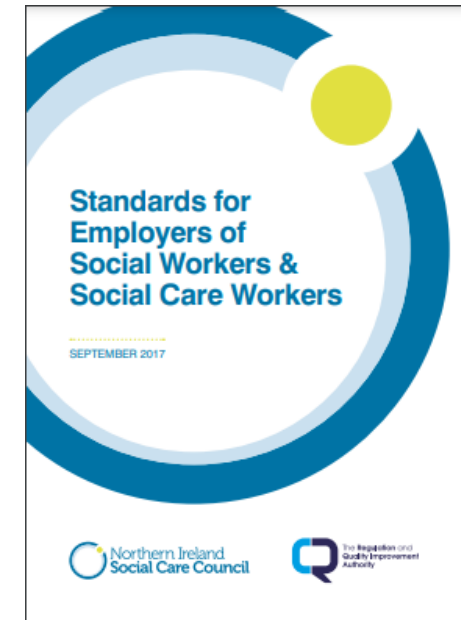
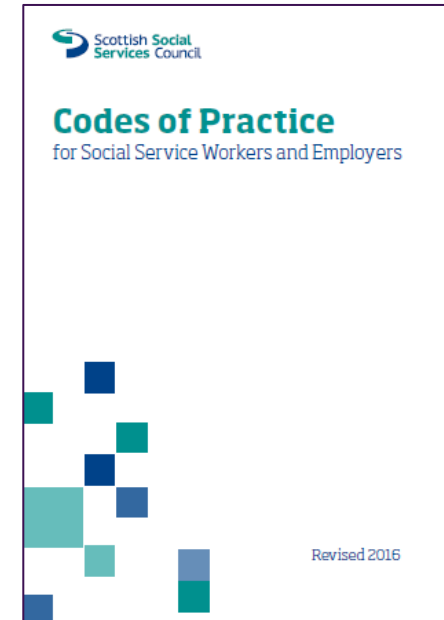
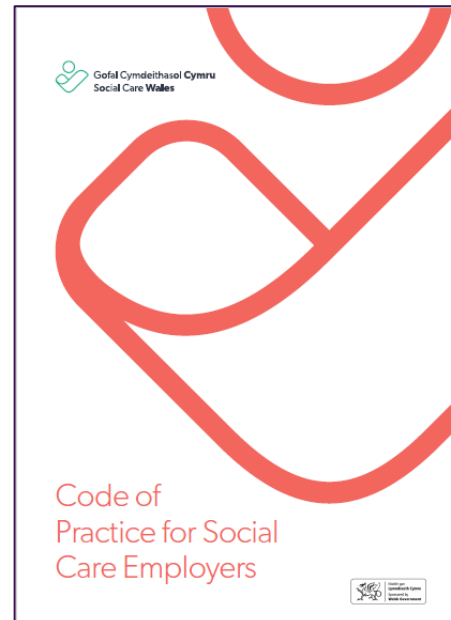
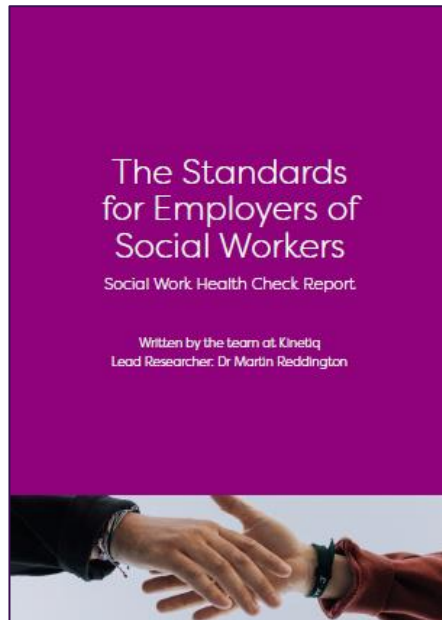


- Main causes: work load, cuts in staff, long working hours and change at work (TUC)
- The majority of current social workers report stress (85%) as a result of their job. (SWE - YouGov report 2020)
- The most common causes of stress are
  - a high administrative workload (62%),
  - a focus on targets rather than user issues (56%),
  - a high caseload (48%)

(SWE - YouGov report 2020)

# What can you do to hold employers to account?

## Social Work Employers' standards.



## **What health and safety law says**

“It shall be the duty of every employer to ensure, so far as is reasonably practicable, the health, safety and welfare at work of all his employees”.

*Section 2(1) Health and Safety at Work etc. Act 1974/*

*Article 4(1)The Health and Safety at Work (Northern Ireland) Order 1978*

## What health and safety law says

### Risk assessment

3. (1) Every employer shall make a suitable and sufficient assessment of—
- (a) the risks to the health and safety of his employees to which they are exposed whilst they are at work;

### Principles of prevention to be applied

4. Where an employer implements any preventive and protective measures he shall do so on the basis of the principles specified in Schedule 1.

# What should employers be doing?



- Recognise work related stress as a factor that leads to poor mental health
- Commit to tackle it as part of a workplace mental health policy or strategy
- Comply with legal duty to risk assess work related stress
- Use HSE's management standards and talking toolkits as a means to implement 'suitable and sufficient' stress risk assessments
- Consult with trade union health and safety reps
- Recognise overlap with equalities

## **What can you do to hold employers to account?**

### **Social Work England's Professional standards.**

6.2 Reflect on my working environment and where necessary challenge practices, systems and processes to uphold Social Work England's professional standards.

6.5 Raise concerns about organisational wrongdoing and cultures of inappropriate and unsafe practice

## **What can you do to hold employers to account?**

- Organise - collective approach
- Support of UNISON branch to escalate issues
- Become a UNISON health and safety rep
- Record concerns in writing
- Respond to employer surveys on stress/health and wellbeing
- Assert your rights to breaks/annual leave
- Seek help at earliest opportunity



## Supporting social workers in 2021

CommunityCare  
**inform**Adults

CommunityCare  
**inform**Children

  
UNISON  
the public service union

Gill Archer National Officer UNISON Local Government



# Managing stress in social work



- While pressure & deadlines can be good, stress is not – nor is it a sign of individual weakness
- Resilience depends on the personal circumstances & support social workers have
- UNISON is wary of 'resilience' training simply to try to make staff cope with ongoing stress
- This shifts focus from what organisation should be doing to manage H&S towards reasons to blame a social worker when something goes wrong
- Secondary trauma is an occupational hazard social workers may not be aware they are suffering from

# Impact of workplace culture on managing stress



- A healthy organisation culture is where:
  - Open and honest communication exists at all levels
  - Where staff feel encouraged, enabled & supported to deal with the complex situations they face
  - Where mistakes are understood, a blame culture is not allowed to flourish & where mutual respect is established
- The Standards for Employers of Social Workers in England set out core expectations of employers to enable social workers to work effectively & safely
- These Standards are sector agreed
- Meeting the Standards includes an annual 'health check' to assess practice conditions & working environment

# UNISON tips for social worker self-care



- Monitor any changes to how you are feeling
- Inform your line manager as soon as you feel yourself under stress & ask for help to deal with the difficulties
- Make sure you are getting regular supervision
- Keep a log of your working hours, take leave
- Remember, if you are suffering from stress it's not your fault
- Ensure your concerns & any action to address these are recorded. Your employer has a legal duty to risk assess
- Consider accessing any other additional support from occupational health or your GP

# A Social Worker's own tips



“ I have a metaphorical box beside me with a heavy lid. If I am continually thinking and worrying about something, I put it in the box and close the lid. I know it is there when I need to think about it, but for now it is held securely in the box and I do not need to be thinking about it.”

“I have a pad of paper and pencil by the bed and if I wake up in the night thinking about something which needs action following day, I scribble a brief note (often just one word) knowing that I do not need to stay awake thinking about it as the note will remind me in the morning.”

# Managing fear in social work



- Employers are responsible for supporting & making staff safe including:
  - seeking injunctions & criminal prosecutions when threats are made or violence experienced
  - making alternative working & personal arrangements for staff
- Unions support members in ensuring protection & safety measures are in place

# UNISON tips for social worker self-care



- If your employer has no (or inadequate) lone working policies & tools raise through your union
- If you work alone regularly, your employer should provide you with a mobile phone.
- Take responsibility for your own personal safety & follow safety procedures
- Find out whether you can access training on managing aggression
- Keep factual notes with dates/descriptions of any behaviour you would describe as intimidating
- Report all incidents including near-misses
- Consider your online presence - UNISON actively discourages members accepting friend requests from service users

# A Social Worker's own tip



“If I am in a potentially or actually threatening situation I symbolically move down through the gears, as when driving a car, so that I become more aware and alert but also more in control.”

Rhea Mills  
National Officer  
UNISON PSU

Ben Jones  
Social Worker  
UNISON PSU



## UNISON PROFESSIONAL SERVICES UNIT

Referral and Self Referral to Social  
Work England

UNISON

UNISON



# WHO ARE UNISON PSU?

You may be entitled to be advised and represented by UNISON's Professional Services Unit (PSU) if:

- You face allegations that your fitness to practise is impaired OR
  - You have applied for registration or renewal of your registration with Social Work England, but your application has been refused.
- ▶ ~ how to make contact

## What to do if a concern is raised?

REMEMBER Anyone can make an allegation that your fitness to practise is impaired and refer the allegation to your professional regulatory body SWE at any time. Do not delay - inform your UNISON branch right away!

- ▶ Public
- ▶ Employer
- ▶ Colleague
- ▶ Another regulatory body

What should you do if your professional regulatory body SWE sends you a letter asking you to respond to allegations about your fitness to practise?

If a UNISON member, immediately ask for UNISON help. Advice and representation from UNISON's PSU will assist you with your response. Do not reply to your regulatory body without obtaining advice from UNISON.

If you receive a letter from your professional regulatory body SWE informing you of a hearing including an Interim Order Hearing?



Contact UNISON immediately to ask for UNISON's PSU for advice and representation do not ignore it!

Interim Order Hearings are scheduled with very little notice (usually up to 7 days)

UNISON

UNISON

## What to do when considering self-referral?

### When you MUST self-refer:

- You receive a conviction, charge, caution or harassment notice
- You are placed on a barred list
- Findings of impairment by other bodies

### Ambiguous areas / areas of contention between SWE and UNISON:

- Mental / physical health
- Fixed penalty
- Employment / disciplinary investigations

Link to SWE guidance: [Safe and effective practice - Social Work England](#)

### Key points:

- ▶ Discuss with UNISON first
- ▶ Just because you may have a health condition, or are subject to an employment process, does not mean your fitness to practise is impaired or that you have to self refer.

# What to expect

- ▶ YOUR UNISON PSU REPRESENTATIVE WILL:
- ▶ Analyse and assess the available evidence provided by SWE and advise you whether the evidence is likely to prove or disprove the allegations against you
- ▶ Advise and discuss with you about what matters you should address in your written response to the regulatory body's Investigation to Case Examiners.
- ▶ Advise and discuss with you any consensual disposal options.

# What to expect cont...

- ▶ Advise and discuss with you what you should do when faced with full hearing should your regulatory body decide there to be a case to answer including :
  - a) Advising and assisting you with gathering evidence in support of your response to the allegations:
  - b) Advising you on which witnesses should be called to give evidence to support your case.
- ▶ Advise and assist you with writing your witness statement for hearings
- ▶ Represent you at all hearings of SWE process
- ▶ Advise, discuss and identify with you any steps you could take should you need to improve your practice or conduct.

Quick word on .....

# Disclosure and Barring Service (DBS)



# ‘Insight’ in Fitness to Practise Proceedings...



- ▶ Importance of ‘insight’ in all fitness to practise proceedings
- ▶ 3 ‘R’s for demonstrating insight into regulatory concerns:
  - ▶ Reflection
  - ▶ Remorse
  - ▶ Remediation

UNISON

UNISON

# Thank You

## Contact Details

- ▶ UNISON Direct 0800 0857 857
- ▶ [www.unison.org.uk](http://www.unison.org.uk)