



TNC 2011/1

Strategy for Teacher  
Health & Wellbeing in  
Northern Ireland



# A STRATEGY FOR TEACHER HEALTH AND WELLBEING IN NORTHERN IRELAND

## 1. Background

The Employing Authorities and the Department of Education commissioned an independent survey carried out by PricewaterhouseCoopers in the period November 2001 to January 2002 to examine a number of aspects of teacher health and wellbeing. Approximately 12,500 teachers responded and it was established that teachers in Northern Ireland for the most part were in good health but that many suffered significant levels of stress related to their job.

The Report of the survey was published in December 2002 and it recognised that training and support were needed to raise levels of awareness and good practice and address possible problems. It highlighted the following areas as being in need of intervention:

- ❖ Teacher health and stress
- ❖ Teacher workload and dealing with change
- ❖ Relationships and support
- ❖ Professional and personal development and training

A Strategy Steering Group comprising representatives of the Department of Education, the Employing Authorities and the Teacher Unions together with experts from the Public Health Agency and the Health and Safety Executive considered the recommendations of the PricewaterhouseCoopers Report.

The Teachers Negotiating Committee (TNC) revisited teacher health and wellbeing following negotiations on Managing Attendance in the Workplace. It was felt that a comprehensive strategy to support teacher health and wellbeing might lead to reduced teacher absence and create happier, healthier environments for both teachers and pupils. It set up a sub-group, comprising representatives of the Department of Education, the Employing Authorities and the Teacher Unions. All members of the sub-group had extensive practical experience of health and welfare issues. The sub-group also gathered information from a variety of sources and welcomed the input of an independent welfare expert.

This strategy has been developed through a process of consultation and the examination of available evidence. The sub-group presented a paper to the TNC outlining a wide range of issues all of which are equally important and need to be progressed. A number of these issues are currently being addressed locally by the various Employing Authorities and there are many examples of good practice already taking place, indicating that a high level of interest and commitment to teacher health and wellbeing already exists.

It is important that where work has started, it should be allowed to continue to develop. There is much more work to be done. It will take time and resources to address all the issues as they exist now and as they emerge in the future. This strategy is about change and building relationships; it is about building upon the work that is currently taking place and

also about ensuring that teacher health and wellbeing becomes ingrained in all policy decisions and initiatives.

This strategy is designed to promote the vision of the TNC which is to improve the health and wellbeing of teachers through an inclusive approach to best policy and practice on all aspects of workplace health. This vision can however only be realised through a high level of commitment and partnership on the part of the Department of Education, the Employing Authorities, the Teachers' Unions, schools and teachers. Other educational stakeholders, namely parents, pupils, School Management Teams, Boards of Governors and Trustees whose actions have a direct impact on the working lives of teachers, have an important role to play in sharing our vision and implementing this strategy.

A great many challenges face our educationalists, and we must engage with our policy makers to ensure that opportunities to make a real difference to the health and wellbeing of our teachers are optimised

The strategy reflects a collaborative, innovative and evidenced based approach to improving the occupational health of teachers and underlies our recognition of the value of our teachers' contribution to society. The importance of a healthy teaching workforce has long been recognised as a contributing factor in ensuring the provision of an effective education service. If schools are to operate to their optimum capacity in providing a rich learning environment for pupils it is vital that teachers are well motivated, that sickness absence is kept to a minimum and that morale is high.

## **2. Context**

Statistics supplied by the Department of Education indicate that the average number of days sickness experienced by a teacher in the year 2009-10 was 7.55 days and a total of 123,675.5 teaching days were lost at an approximated cost of over £15million. Whilst this could be viewed merely in financial terms as a loss to the taxpayer and to the education of children, it might also suggest a system that is in need of welfare support.

At present the Employing Authorities have different approaches to teacher health and wellbeing. Whilst some efforts have been made in recent years to co-ordinate the welfare function nevertheless there is still some way to go in fully integrating the service to ensure that every teacher in every school in Northern Ireland has access to the same level of support. The establishment of the Education & Skills Authority is likely to facilitate a fully integrated approach to health and wellbeing across the education sector as a whole.

The government's decision to raise the normal retirement age for new teachers to 65 coupled with the hard-charging of Employing Authorities in relation to the premature retirement schemes is likely to create the potential for an increased need for health and welfare support. If teachers are to be expected to work longer then the probability of them experiencing health problems is likely to increase. The Teacher Health & Wellbeing Strategy must include measures to deal with problems specific to the older teacher.

In addition, the Strategy must consider and address the specific needs of a workforce that is now almost 75% female. Whilst there are common health and welfare concerns for men

and women, there are undoubtedly gender specific needs. There are also differing patterns of health between men and women, including mental health and incidence of smoking, alcohol consumption, obesity and physical activity.

Whilst these are all compelling factors in developing a workforce strategy for Health & Wellbeing, another critical factor is the statutory obligation on the employer to ensure that legislative requirements are being met. European directives covering Health & Safety, Working Time, Disability and Sex Discrimination provide a legal imperative for developing good practice in relation to the teaching workforce.

Finally, the “raising standards” agenda requires that the link between the wellbeing of school staff and school performance be investigated. A recent study undertaken at Birkbeck College clearly shows that there are links between how teachers feel about their work and the performance of pupils in the school, whilst acknowledging other factors that are known to have an influence on pupil performance.

### **School Development Planning**

In support of *Every School a Good School – a policy for school improvement*, the Department of Education published revised regulations and guidance on school development planning in January 2011. One of the areas schools are required to address when carrying out self-evaluation to inform their development planning is its strategies for ‘managing the attendance and promoting the health and well-being of staff.’ The priorities identified by the school and set out in its SDP will inform decisions on its uptake and allocation of school development days (SDDs). Circular 2010/05 provides that, in the 2011/12-2014/15 school years, schools can take up to 5 additional school development days (giving up to 10 days in total) for the purposes of whole-school improvement and staff development. This is to enable schools to devote time to matters they identify as priorities for their school, such as ‘issues related to the professional development, health, attendance and wellbeing of staff’.

### **3. Vision and Aims**

The vision of the Health & Wellbeing Strategy is to create a safe and supportive working environment for teachers in which they are valued as individuals, supported in maintaining good health and treated with dignity and respect. This in turn will contribute to the overall effectiveness of the work of teachers and result in positive outcomes for pupils.

In order to achieve this vision all those involved in developing terms and conditions for teachers must work in partnership to create a culture throughout the education sector that values teachers, prioritises their health and wellbeing and reduces as far as possible levels of work related stress.

Teachers are required to provide the best teaching and learning conditions for the education of pupils, including adjusting the environment to suit the individual requirements of pupils with special needs. Teachers are continually aware of the efforts that must be made to ensure that a pupil maximises his/her potential. The Teachers’ Health & Wellbeing

Strategy must be supportive of the flexibility required of teachers and ensure that there are mechanisms in place to assist them.

The successful implementation of the Strategy is likely to depend upon adequate resourcing. Although it is recognised that finances are particularly difficult, it is considered that without financial support the provision may not become a reality to the extent envisioned.

The Aims are:

- ❖ To create a culture throughout the education sector that openly values teachers, promotes their health and wellbeing and reduces where practicable the potential for work-related stress.
- ❖ To develop partnerships with the Health & Safety Executive and the Public Health Agency to examine ways of working together to design personal wellbeing toolkits.
- ❖ To foster innovative partnerships between the public and private sectors and regionally to develop the provision of occupational health and welfare support according to need.
- ❖ To seek funding from DE to enable the Employing Authorities and Employers to provide resources and develop the structures necessary to implement the strategy.

The success of this strategy is dependent upon the degree to which it will be effectively implemented, monitored and evaluated. The Employing Authorities will seek funding to enable them to provide adequate financial and staffing resources to create an occupational health and wellbeing service.

The Department of Education will champion the cause of teacher health and wellbeing by ensuring that it is given a high priority in the policy making agenda and will also ensure that every attempt is made to secure sufficient resources to sustain the agreed strategy.

Teachers' Unions will encourage their members to look after their own health and wellbeing; contribute to a safe and supportive working environment; engage in professional development and training; and maintain professional supportive working relationships with their colleagues.

The Teachers' Negotiating Committee will work actively to support and promote the strategy.

A Teacher Health & Wellbeing Strategy Implementation Group should be established to oversee the implementation and delivery of the strategy over its lifetime. This group should be comprised of representatives from each of the key stakeholder groups with nominations sought from DE, the Employing Authorities and the Teachers' Unions. The function of this group will be to consider the recommendations of the strategy and to prioritise them into short, medium and long term objectives.

## 4. Strategic Goals

### 4.1 Developing Current Good Practice

#### 4.1.1 Internal Staff Welfare Service

The Employing Authorities provide an internal Staff Welfare Service staffed by experienced personnel with specialist skills who have developed expertise in the areas of staff welfare and wellbeing. Staff welfare officers provide an easily accessed, confidential welfare support service for teachers who are experiencing problems arising from work, personal, domestic or social situations.

Staff welfare officers are available to meet confidentially one-to-one with individual teachers to offer welfare guidance and support. They can draw on an extensive knowledge of the education sector and teaching terms and conditions of service and are well-placed to source a broad range of education support services to assist in the resolution of work-related stress issues. Staff welfare officers can facilitate discussion as appropriate between relevant individuals (e.g. teachers, principals, trade union representatives, human resource staff) to help address teachers' welfare concerns at work.

Staff welfare officers have developed knowledge of and contacts with a broad range of support organisations and, where appropriate, can assist the individual teacher to identify and access external specialist organisations such as Relate, Cruse Bereavement Care and Women's Aid, to seek the right kind of professional help to solve the problem.

The Staff Welfare Service also has a role to promote teacher health and wellbeing at work through awareness raising and training.

#### 4.1.2 External Counselling Service and Telephone Care-line

In addition to the Staff Welfare Service, the Employing Authorities provide access to an external counselling service for teaching staff. This is provided by a regional network of professionally qualified counsellors who are external to the Employing Authorities.

The service consists of a 24-hour free telephone Care-line manned by qualified counsellors and normally up to four face-to-face counselling sessions (or more in exceptional circumstances) are provided. It is confidential and independent, and is funded by the Employing Authorities.

It is the responsibility of the Employing Authorities and school principals to raise teacher awareness of both these welfare support services.

**Recommendation:** A review should be undertaken of welfare service provision to ensure that it effectively meets the needs of all teachers in NI.

#### **4.1.3 Flexible Working Arrangements**

A comprehensive set of flexible working arrangements have been negotiated for teachers:

- (i) Job Share Scheme
- (ii) Career Break Scheme
- (iii) Flexible Working Scheme
- (iv) Temporary Variation of Contract

**Recommendation:** These schemes should be promoted in schools and information should be readily available to teachers, principals and members of Boards of Governors.

#### **4.1.4 Managing Workload**

It is widely accepted that efforts need to be made to reduce bureaucratic burden and allow teachers the time to focus on their core business of teaching and learning.

**Recommendation:** Guidelines on Managing Workload should be developed through the Teachers' Negotiating Committee, to include recommended limits on administrative tasks.

#### **4.1.5 Promoting Good Health**

Excellent work has been done in promoting health and wellbeing for pupils in some schools. Employing Authorities have in some cases been involved in organising health promotion events for schools or clusters of schools.

**Recommendations:** Schools adopt best practice and include teacher health and wellbeing as an integral part of any existing Health Promotion activities. Advice on best practice is available from the Employing Authorities. The Board of Governors of each school should consider annually how well the school is implementing its Health and Wellbeing policy and to what extent the Governors statutory responsibilities are being met. Good health promotion emphasises the need for early detection of health problems. Teachers should be encouraged to take responsibility for their own health and should seek medical advice at an early stage where they have health concerns. Teachers' attendance for health checks should be facilitated by their employer.

A review of the current Occupational Health Service provision should be undertaken, particularly with reference to the provision of "fit" notes.

#### **4.1.6 Industrial Relations Training**

As a result of a proposal from the Teachers' Negotiating Committee the Regional Training Unit has developed a programme focussed on Promoting Effective Industrial Relations in schools.

**Recommendation:** The programme should be continued for selected schools and that elements of it be included in other RTU Training programmes such as PQH.

#### 4.1.7 Winding Down and Retirement

Pending the outcome of the Hutton Review, discussions have been suspended on the possible development of a “winding down” scheme for teachers in their last few years of service, some of whom may find it difficult to sustain a full teaching commitment. A winding down scheme would allow teachers to reduce their hours and pay while maintaining their pension benefits.

**Recommendation:** In the interim, DE should publish information about the currently available phased retirement option within the NI Teachers’ Pension Scheme. Guidance on all aspects of retirement should be developed through the Teachers’ Negotiating Committee, with input from the Occupational Health Service, to include information on the application process for ill-health retirement.

#### 4.1.8 Pupil Discipline

It is acknowledged that there are already support strategies in place to help schools to deal with difficult pupils; nevertheless, poor pupil behaviour is seen as a source of stress for teachers. There is a statutory requirement that all schools have school discipline policies and these should be applied rigorously with immediate support provided where necessary to any teacher experiencing difficulties with discipline.

**Recommendation:** A review of the effectiveness of these strategies be undertaken.

#### 4.1.9 Technology

Schools are now advanced in terms of technology and this should be utilised where possible to make administrative tasks easier and reduce workload.

**Recommendation:** The potential of the C2K system should be fully utilised by schools. Optional further training should be available for staff.

#### 4.1.10 Teacher Abuse

Some excellent work has been done by the Teachers Negotiating Committee in developing a policy and guidelines on handling abuse of teachers by pupils and other third parties. In addition Management Side has undertaken a baseline survey on this topic.

**Recommendation:** The policy and guidelines should be finalised and distributed to schools as soon as possible.

#### 4.1.11 Health and Wellbeing Audit

Information on Workplace Health and Wellbeing can be found on the Health & Safety Executive’s website at [www.hseni.org](http://www.hseni.org). There is further useful information on [www.healthyworkinglives.com](http://www.healthyworkinglives.com) and [www.workpositive.com](http://www.workpositive.com).

#### 4.1.12 Engagement with Outside Organisations

There are some organisations whose remit is to provide additional specialist resources to schools, for example, the Inclusion and Diversity Service, Language Programmes and Sports Coaching.

**Recommendation:** Schools should be encouraged to use these services in order to provide additional time within the school day for teachers to plan, prepare and reflect.

#### **4.1.13 Transferred Redundancy**

The arrangements for transferred redundancy have been of significant assistance in helping schools to manage the pupil teacher ratio and to facilitate those teachers who wish to retire.

**Recommendation:** Employing Authorities should continue to avail of the transferred redundancy process to assist in the management of staff reductions.

### **5. Future Initiatives**

#### **5.1 Health and Wellbeing Policy**

**Recommendation:** A model Health and Wellbeing Policy should be developed by the Teacher Health and Wellbeing Strategy Implementation Group and ratified by the Teachers' Negotiating Committee for distribution to schools.

#### **5.2 Professional and Personal Development**

Meaningful professional and/or personal development can have a positive impact upon teachers' health and wellbeing.

**Recommendation:** Progress should be made in setting up a comprehensive programme of Continuing Professional Development, to complement existing Induction, EPD and PQH provision. Teachers participating in courses should be provided with sufficient time to follow their agreed course of study.

It is acknowledged that on occasion teachers will opt to study a topic of their own choice rather than those identified by the school. It is recommended that schools be encouraged to allow flexibility in the interests of the teacher's wellbeing and, where possible, support the teacher in engaging in personal development.

#### **5.3 Communications**

One of the most common causes of friction in organisations is the lack of effective channels of communication. This in turn can lead to misunderstandings and difficulties between members of staff.

**Recommendation:** Schools should examine their current systems, ensuring that there is input from all staff, with a view to putting in place effective communications systems that are open and transparent.

#### **5.4 Staff Turnover/Absence**

High staff turnover in a school may be symptomatic of underlying problems. This may also be true for high levels of staff absence.

**Recommendation:** Improved systems be put in place at school, employing authority and Department of Education level to monitor both staff turnover and high absence

levels. A mechanism should then be developed, in partnership with the teacher unions, for dealing with any problems that are identified. Any issues that are identified should be referred back to the Teachers' Negotiating Committee.

#### **5.5 Impact of Pupil Mental Health Issues on Teachers**

There is a growing awareness of the extent of mental health issues affecting pupils and the impact dealing with these issues may have on teachers.

**Recommendation:** Teachers should be trained to identify the symptoms of pupils suffering from mental health problems and be aware of the correct reporting procedures so that pupils can access the appropriate help.

#### **5.6 Lone Workers**

Certain teachers may be required to travel on their own outside the school environment in connection with their duties and this may place them in a vulnerable position.

**Recommendation:** A policy on lone working should be drawn up through the Teachers Negotiating Committee and teachers who are likely to be involved in lone working should be offered the opportunity to be trained in strategies and techniques that will enable them to work safely.

#### **5.7 Health and Safety Risk Assessment**

**Recommendation:** All teachers carrying out risk assessments should be fully trained in this process. All actions identified through risk assessments should be implemented in full.

#### **5.8 Disability Awareness**

**Recommendation:** Guidance should be provided to principals and members of Boards of Governors on their responsibilities under the Disability Discrimination legislation and on their duty to make reasonable adjustment in the workplace to facilitate teachers with a disability.

#### **5.9 Review of Health & Wellbeing**

**Recommendation:** In order that improvements in the Health & Wellbeing of teachers can be monitored it is recommended that on a regular basis the Employing Authorities, in conjunction with the Department of Education, carry out a review similar to that administered in 2001 by Pricewaterhouse Coopers.

#### **5.10 Policies**

**Recommendation:** The Department of Education consult with the teacher unions on the impact that new policies may have on the health and wellbeing of teachers.

This Strategy should be reviewed and updated on a regular basis, and at least every three years.