

A guide to

Mental Health in the Workplace



worknest

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Based on the latest statistics from the Health and Safety Executive (HSE), 875,000 workers experienced work-related stress, depression, or anxiety during the period of 2022/23, making mental health the leading cause of ill health in UK workplaces.

Mental health problems impact workers across all industries and it is imperative that every employer, regardless of size or sector, recognises the link between work and wellbeing. According to the World Health Organisation (WHO), work can be a protective factor for mental health, but it can also contribute to it worsening.

Unfortunately, modern-day work environments, and modern-day life in general, can exacerbate the challenge facing employers:

- Increased reliance on technology can lead to blurred work-life boundaries.
- Remote work arrangements can create feelings of isolation and disconnection.
- Global events and economic uncertainty can lead to heightened anxiety.
- Constant exposure to social media and 'information overload' can overwhelm employees.
- Pressures to multitask and maintain high productivity levels can compound stress.
- Challenges in balancing personal and professional responsibilities further intensify the issue.

Organisations cannot afford to overlook these challenges, not least because [the majority of employees](#) (86%) say they would be more likely to leave a job if it did not support their wellbeing.

Thankfully, mental health conditions are preventable. The conditions within the workplace exert considerable influence over individuals' mental health, just as an individual's mental health significantly shapes their ability to perform effectively in their job role. Therefore, it is in employers' gift to create an environment that promotes rather than hinders psychological wellbeing and resilience.

In this guide, we will provide a general overview of mental health in the workplace. We will help you to understand your obligations as an employer, explore the signs and symptoms of mental health issues, and share practical strategies for preventing and addressing mental health concerns. In doing so, we hope that this guide will help you to mitigate the impact of mental health challenges on your organisation and people, ultimately leading to a healthier, more productive work environment.

If you would like support with any of the issues mentioned in this guide, our Employment Law and Health & Safety experts are always on hand to help. You can call our team on **0345 226 8393** or email enquiries@worknest.com. More information on some of the ways we can assist you can be found at the end of this guide.

“

There are three main reasons employers should look to prevent work-related stress and support good mental health; it's the law, it's good for business and it's the right thing to do.

The HSE

”



What is mental health?

Mental health refers to a person's emotional, psychological, and social wellbeing. It encompasses how individuals think, feel, and behave, as well as their ability to cope with stress, interact with others, and make decisions. At its core, mental health influences how individuals perceive themselves, their lives, and the world around them.

Common mental health problems include depression, anxiety, and stress, which can arise from various factors such as genetics, brain chemistry, life experiences, and environmental stressors. Less common but equally significant conditions may include bipolar disorder and schizophrenia, which can profoundly impact an individual's daily functioning and quality of life.

In the context of the workplace, mental health plays a crucial role in employees' ability to perform effectively and maintain overall wellbeing. Work-related stress, depression, and anxiety are prevalent issues that can arise due to factors such as excessive workload, lack of job control, poor working conditions, or interpersonal conflicts. The demands and pressures of the work environment can exacerbate existing mental health conditions or contribute to their development over time.

Addressing mental health in the workplace is essential, as it not only affects individual employees but also impacts overall morale and organisational success. By prioritising mental health in the workplace, organisations can create healthier, more productive environments where employees can thrive both personally and professionally.



What is stress?

Stress is a particularly pervasive mental health problem in modern workplaces.

The WHO states: "Stress can be defined as a state of worry or mental tension caused by a difficult situation. Stress is a natural human response that prompts us to address challenges and threats in our lives. Everyone experiences stress to some degree."

Additionally, the HSE defines stress as "the adverse reaction people have to excessive pressures or other types of demand placed on them". It explains that:

- Workers feel stress when they can't cope with pressures and other issues.
- Stress affects people differently – what stresses one person may not affect another.
- Factors like skills and experience, age or disability may all affect whether a worker can cope.

The fast-paced nature of today's work environments, coupled with high expectations, heavy workloads, tight deadlines, interpersonal conflicts and a lack of work-life balance, all lead to heightened levels of stress among employees. Moreover, the increasing demands of the digital age, including constant connectivity and information overload, can exacerbate stress levels for many workers.

While stress is a normal response to certain situations and can even be helpful in small doses, chronic or excessive stress can have detrimental effects on mental and physical health. Persistent stress can lead to anxiety, depression, insomnia, and other mental health disorders if not properly managed.

Addressing stress in the workplace has therefore become increasingly crucial for promoting employee wellbeing, enhancing productivity, and fostering a positive organisational culture.



Did you know?

The most common type of stress experienced by Brits is work stress, with 79% of respondents saying they frequently felt this type of stress. This is followed by monetary stress (60%), which can also be linked to work.

Source: [Statista](#)

The potential impact of poor mental health in the workplace

Poor mental health can have significant ramifications on individuals, and for organisations, the impact can be equally profound.

Some potential consequences for employers include:

- **Employee disengagement:** When employees receive inadequate support for mental health issues, they may become disengaged, leading to decreased productivity and morale among the workforce.
- **Excessive short-term absences:** Mental health issues can lead to excessive short-term absences as individuals may require time off to manage symptoms. Understanding the reasons behind these absences is essential for offering timely support and interventions to prevent prolonged or recurring absences.
- **Long-term absence:** A high proportion of long-term absences stem from mental health issues. Assessing the extent of these conditions is vital for identifying appropriate support measures and determining whether the individual's condition may amount to a disability under the Equality Act 2010.
- **Resignations:** Employees struggling with mental health challenges may feel compelled to resign if their needs are not addressed adequately, leading to talent loss and disruption within the organisation.

- **Claims:** Poor mental health management can leave employers vulnerable to claims such as disability discrimination or unfair dismissal, underscoring the importance of implementing supportive policies and practices to mitigate legal risks.

Issues such as these can be hugely disruptive to an organisation and have significant financial and reputational consequences. It is therefore essential for employers to prioritise mental health not only for the good of their employees but also to ensure the long-term sustainability and success of the organisation as a whole.



Did you know?

According to one survey, poor mental health costs UK employers up to £56 billion a year, an increase of 25% in the cost of poor mental health to employers compared to 2019. It is also a strong driver for the 'Great Resignation'.

Sources: [Deloitte](#)

Responsibilities and best practice as an employer

Employers have a responsibility to promote a supportive work culture, provide resources for mental health support, and implement strategies to mitigate stress and foster psychological resilience among their workforce.

The law

From a legal perspective, employers have a 'duty of care' in regard to mental health, just as they do for physical health and safety. This means they must do all they reasonably can to support their employees' health, safety and wellbeing, including:

- Making sure the working environment is safe;
- Protecting staff from discrimination; and
- Carrying out risk assessments.



Did you know?

Investing in mental health support can generate a return for employers of £5.30 for every £1 spent.

Source: [Deloitte](#)

Employers must treat mental and physical health with equal importance. While most organisations understand the significance of physical safety measures, forward-thinking employers now recognise the value of taking the same level of commitment and rigor and are adopting a psychologically safe workplace.

When an employee is struggling with poor mental health, it is crucial for their employer to approach the situation with the same level of seriousness and care as they would for a physical illness. For instance, engaging in open dialogue with the employee to identify the support they require in the workplace is essential.

Best practice

In addition to legal requirements, there are various proactive steps that companies can take to demonstrate their commitment to addressing mental health issues. Implementing these best-practice measures not only underscores the seriousness with which the organisation approaches such matters but, from an employment law perspective, can also help to strengthen the organisation's defence in the event of a disability discrimination claim.

These include:

- **Establishing a clear and comprehensive stress and mental health policy.** It's crucial to ensure that the policy doesn't just sit on a shelf but is actively implemented and integrated into everyday practices.
- **Providing access to an Employee Assistance Programme (EAP)** – a workplace benefit that provides employees with confidential access to professional support services, such as counselling, mental health resources, financial advice, and legal assistance, to help them address personal and work-related issues that may affect their wellbeing and performance.

Potential triggers in the workplace

- **Conducting regular one-on-one meetings** to offer employees a dedicated space to discuss concerns, receive feedback, and explore solutions, fostering trust, communication, and support in the workplace. These sessions enable employers to address individual needs, boost morale, and prevent potential mental health challenges from escalating.
- **Investing in Mental Health Awareness training.** This will ensure managers are better equipped to handle sensitive conversations about mental health with confidence and competence, enabling them to effectively support their team members and refer them to specialised assistance when necessary.
- **Actively promoting employee wellbeing and work-life balance,** including offering flexible working arrangements, encouraging regular breaks and time off, establishing clear boundaries between work and personal time, and organising wellness programs and workshops. As well as benefiting employees, these approaches can have a direct impact on productivity, morale, retention rates, and reduced absenteeism and 'presenteeism'.
- **Cultivating mental health awareness** throughout the organisation to reduce stigma, increase understanding, and encourage empathy. This can be achieved through company-wide training, recognising awareness days, and providing resources and educational materials.

- **Encouraging a culture of open communication** where employees feel comfortable discussing mental health issues without fear of judgment or reprisal. This can be achieved by leaders demonstrating openness and empathy, implementing policies that prohibit discrimination or retaliation against employees who disclose mental health issues, and ensuring all concerns are treated seriously and confidentially, all of which will help to build trust.



Did you know?

Almost eight in 10 (79%) employers and HR professionals have not provided line managers with training to support employees with their mental health and wellbeing.

Source: [WorkNest](#)



Various factors within the workplace environment can act as triggers for poor mental health or worsen pre-existing conditions among employees. Recognising and addressing these factors is essential for fostering a mentally healthy workplace.

Some common triggers include:

- **Workload:** Excessive work demands, unrealistic deadlines, and overwhelming tasks can contribute to stress, anxiety, and burnout among employees.
- **Poor working conditions:** Inadequate facilities, uncomfortable workspaces, and lack of proper equipment can negatively impact employee wellbeing and morale.
- **Health and safety issues:** Unsafe working conditions, insufficient safety protocols, and the risk of accidents or injuries can lead to heightened anxiety and stress levels.
- **Poor working relationships:** Conflict, lack of communication, and strained relationships with colleagues or superiors can create a toxic work environment and increase feelings of isolation or distress.
- **Poor employee engagement:** A disengaged workforce characterised by low morale, lack of motivation, and feelings of demoralisation can contribute to heightened stress levels and deteriorating mental health.

- **Events outside the workplace:** Personal issues, such as financial problems, relationship issues, or health concerns, can spill over into the workplace, affecting concentration, productivity, and overall mental wellbeing.

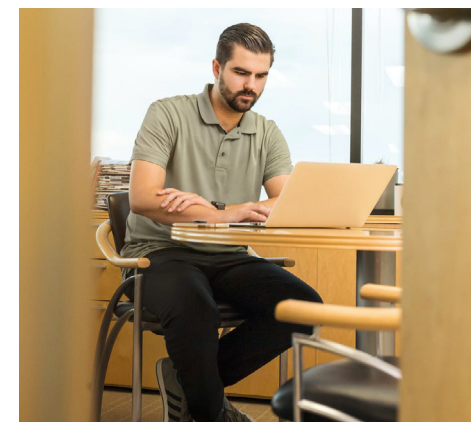
By recognising the individualised nature of mental health triggers in the workplace and conducting thorough risk assessments, employers can better understand the unique challenges faced by their employees and implement targeted interventions.



Did you know?

Women in full-time employment are nearly twice as likely to have a common mental health problem as full-time employed men (19.8% versus 10.9%).

Source: [Mental Health Foundation](#)



Spotting the signs of a mental health problem

Recognising the signs of a potential mental health issue among employees is crucial for early intervention and support.

On an individual level, some common indicators that an employee is struggling with their mental health include:

- **Appearing tired, anxious, or withdrawn.** This may suggest underlying stress or emotional strain affecting their wellbeing.
- **An increase in sickness absence, frequent lateness, or leaving early without explanation.** This may suggest difficulties coping or reluctance to engage in workplace activities.
- **Changes in their productivity or performance,** which may manifest as difficulties with concentration or focus, making more errors than usual, missing deadlines, or changes in their standard of work.
- **Showing less interest in tasks they previously enjoyed.** This may be indicative of diminished motivation or emotional distress.
- **Noticeable shifts in an employee's behavior, mood, or interactions with colleagues,** such as increased irritability, arguments, mood swings, withdrawal from social interactions, or uncharacteristic outbursts. This may suggest underlying psychological struggles impacting their interpersonal relationships and overall functioning in the workplace.

- **Observable physical symptoms,** such as headaches, changes in appetite (eating more or less than usual), tiredness (from difficulty sleeping), or smoking, drinking, or taking drugs (to 'cope' with the stress).
- **Expressions of anxiety, sadness, frustration, or overwhelm** during interactions with colleagues or supervisors, including feeling unable to cope with their workload or personal life.
- **Feelings of negativity,** including pessimism, cynicism, or a generally bleak outlook on work or life.

On an organisational level, **higher staff turnover, increased sickness absences,** and an **uptick in complaints and grievances** may suggest underlying systemic issues related to mental health within the workplace. These broader indicators can signal a need for company-wide interventions to address the overall well-being of employees.

By being attentive to these signs and symptoms, employers can proactively offer support and resources to employees experiencing mental health difficulties. Keep in mind, however, that not everyone will show obvious signs of poor mental health; it's therefore important to avoid making assumptions.

Strategies for managing stress

As eluded to earlier in this guide, employers have a legal duty to protect workers from stress at work.

The HSE explains: "Although employers have a legal duty to protect employees from stress at work, diagnosing and treating stress isn't your responsibility. Your responsibility is to identify the risks of stress and act on them."

You should assess the risk of stress, and its impact on mental and physical ill health, in the same way as you assess other work-related health and safety risks. You should also communicate the findings of these assessments to your employees.



Did you know?

Despite the high prevalence of stress at work, staff still don't feel comfortable telling their employer if stress has caused them to take time off. In fact, 95% of employees who call in sick with stress give a different reason for their absence.

Source: [Mind](#)

The HSE's Management Standards



One way to meet this obligation is to follow the [HSE's Management Standards approach](#), which provide a framework for employers to assess and manage work-related stress in their organisations.

The Management Standards encourage organisations focus on six main areas that can lead to work-related stress if they are not managed properly. These are:

- **Demands:** Ensuring employees' workload, work patterns, and the work environment are manageable and reasonable.
- **Control:** Providing employees with the opportunity to have a say in how they do their work and empowering them to influence decision-making processes.
- **Support:** Offering adequate support and resources to employees, including encouragement, supervision, and access to information and training.
- **Relationships:** Promoting positive working relationships and addressing any conflicts or issues that may arise.
- **Role:** Clarifying employees' roles, responsibilities, and objectives to avoid ambiguity and reduce stress associated with uncertainty.
- **Change:** Managing organisational change effectively and involving employees in the process to minimise stress caused by uncertainty and insecurity.

Control

- Do employees have control over their pace of work (where possible)?
- Are employees encouraged to use their skills and initiative to do their work?
- Are employees consulted over their work patterns?
- Are employees encouraged to develop new skills to help them undertake new and challenging pieces of work (where possible)?
- Does the organisation encourage employees to develop their skills?
- Do employees have a say over when breaks can be taken?

Change

- Does the organisation provide employees with timely information to enable them to understand the reasons for proposed changes?
- Does the organisation ensure adequate employee consultation on changes and provide opportunities for employees to influence proposals?
- Are employees aware of the probable impact of any changes to their jobs? Are employees given training to support any changes in their jobs (if necessary)?
- Are employees aware of timetables for changes?
- Do employees have access to relevant support during changes?

Relationships

- Does the organisation promote positive behaviours at work to avoid conflict and ensure fairness?
- Do employees share information relevant to their work?
- Does the organisation have policies and procedures to prevent or resolve unacceptable behaviour?
- Are there systems in place to enable and encourage managers to deal with unacceptable behaviour?
- Are there systems in place to enable and encourage employees to report unacceptable behaviour?



Role

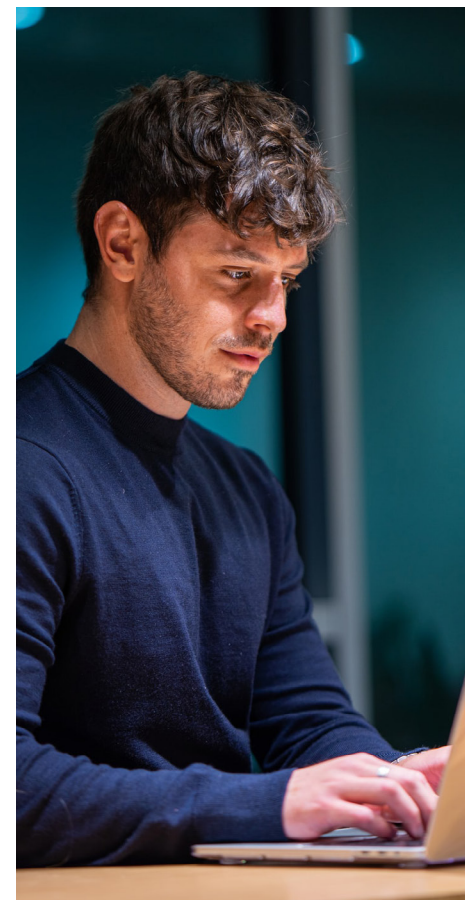
- Does the organisation ensure, as far as possible, that the different requirements it places upon employees are compatible?
- Does the organisation provide information to enable employees to understand their role and responsibilities?
- Does the organisation ensure, as far as possible, that the requirements it places upon employees are clear?
- Are there systems in place to enable employees to raise concerns about any uncertainties or conflicts they have in their role and responsibilities?

Support

- Do you have policies and procedures to adequately support employees?
- Are there systems in place to enable and encourage managers to support their staff?
- Are there systems in place to enable and encourage employees to support their colleagues?
- Do employees know what support is available and how and when to access it?
- Do employees know how to access the required resources to do their job?
- Do employees receive regular and constructive feedback?

These are the sorts of questions employers should consider within their risk assessments. If problems are identified, employers should then consult with staff about possible solutions. This should lead to an action plan spelling out what steps are to be taken, such as additional training for managers, as well as a timeframe for review.

Although the HSE's Management Standards are voluntary, they would be used as evidence against employers that continue to ignore their responsibilities in managing stress under the Health and Safety at Work etc Act 1974.



Top tip

As part of its Working Minds campaign, the HSE is encouraging employers and managers to complete five steps over five weeks:

1.

Reach out and have conversations.

2.

Recognise the signs and causes of stress:

3.

Respond to any risks identified by agreeing action points:

4.

Reflect on the actions take – have things improved?

5.

Make it **Routine** to check back in on how things are going

Learn more about the campaign and access tools and resources [here](#).

How to address mental health issues when they occur

Effectively addressing mental health issues in the workplace requires a combination of proactive measures, some of which we have explored earlier in this guide, and timely support.

Indeed, while the employers' primary goal should be to minimise the potential for mental health problems to occur, they must also be prepared to respond effectively should issues arise.

Generally speaking, we recommend the following steps:

- **Conduct a welfare meeting:** Speak to the employee in private to better understand the nature of the issue and determine whether it is work-related or not.
- **Signpost to support:** Direct employees to relevant resources such as their GP, Occupational Health services, Employee Assistance Programme (EAP), or mental health charities for specialised assistance.
- **Consider adjustments:** Discuss potential adjustments to alleviate the issue(s) with the employee, such as reviewing workloads. It's important to note that in some cases, employers may be legally obligated to make accommodations, as we will discuss further in the follow section.



Discriminating against someone with a disability

From an employment law perspective, it is important to consider whether the employee's mental health condition falls within the definition of a disability set out in the Equality Act 2010.

Under the Act, a person is disabled if they have “a **physical or mental impairment** which has a **substantial and long-term adverse effect** on their ability to carry out **normal day-to-day activities**”.

Breaking this down further:



Definition	In practice, this may mean...
“Substantial adverse effect”	The employee regularly cannot focus on a task or it takes them longer to complete tasks.
“Long-term”	The condition has lasted, or is expected to last, for at least 12 months.
“Normal day-to-day activities”	The employee's condition affects their ability to do routine tasks such as interact with people, follow instructions, stick to set working times, etc.

It's important to note that some mental health conditions will meet the above criteria, classifying the employee as disabled, while others will not. If, based on the above definition, an employee is deemed to be disabled, employers:

- **Must not** discriminate against them because of their disability; and
- **Must** make reasonable adjustments.

Making reasonable adjustments for mental health

Reasonable adjustments are changes that an employer makes to remove or reduce a disadvantage related to someone's disability. Due to the unique nature of each employee's experience with poor mental health and its underlying causes, reasonable adjustments will vary from person to person.

Adjustments will also vary from company to company. What might be reasonable for one company won't necessarily be reasonable for another.

Examples of reasonable adjustments for an employee with mental health issues may include:

- Allowing **flexible work hours or remote work options** to accommodate fluctuations in the employee's mental health symptoms.
- Allowing the employee to take **shorter, more frequent breaks** during the day to aid concentration.
- Helping the employee **prioritise their workload** to enable them to manage tasks more effectively and alleviate feelings of overwhelm or anxiety.
- Providing **access to a quiet or private workspace** to reduce distractions and promote focus.
- Offering **additional training or resources** to support skill development or confidence-building.
- Implementing a **buddy system or mentorship program** to provide emotional support and guidance.
- **Adjusting communication methods or frequency** to minimise stress and promote clear understanding.
- **Modifying performance expectations or deadlines** during periods of heightened symptoms or recovery.
- Providing **access to counseling services** or mental health resources.

Top tip

A medical report can provide valuable insights into an employee's health condition, including the nature and severity of their mental health issues, which can inform decisions regarding reasonable adjustments and support in the workplace.

It's important to ensure access to reasonable adjustments is communicated effectively and without stigma, and that employers regularly review and reassess adjustments to ensure they remain effective and supportive over time.

Only if the employee cannot carry out the role that they are employed to do and no adjustments are possible should an employer consider terminating employment on the grounds of medical capability. This will usually involve obtaining medical evidence. Given the potential for costly discrimination claims, which we will explore further below, we recommend seeking advice before making any decisions around dismissal.

Disability discrimination claims

As mentioned, mismanagement of an employee's mental health condition can give rise to discrimination claims, including claims for:

- **Direct discrimination:** This occurs where someone is put at a disadvantage or treated less favourably because they are disabled, they have a connection with someone who is disabled (known as 'discrimination by association'), or someone thinks they are disabled when they are not (known as 'discrimination by perception').
- **Indirect discrimination:** This occurs where a working practice, policy or rule applies to everyone but puts a person or group at a disadvantage because of their disability.
- **Harassment:** This involves unwanted behaviour related to disability.
- **Victimisation:** This occurs where someone is treated less favourably as a result of being involved with a discrimination or harassment complaint.
- **Discrimination arising from disability:** This occurs where someone is discriminated because of something that results from a disability rather than the disability itself. An example may be disciplining or dismissing someone because of absences due from hospital appointments related to their disability, or for requiring more breaks as a result of their disability. In certain situations, discrimination arising from disability may be justified if an employer can

demonstrate an objective need for their decision, even if it results in adverse treatment due to someone's disability, leading to 'lawful discrimination'. For instance, if an employee's disability prevents them from performing a specific job task, despite reasonable adjustments, the employer may be justified in dismissing them based on the genuine requirements of the role.

- **Failure to make reasonable adjustments:** This occurs when an employer doesn't make reasonable adjustments for someone who needs them. As mentioned above, employers must make reasonable adjustments by law, and what is reasonable will depend on the situation.

In our experience, discrimination arising from disability and failure to make reasonable adjustments are the two that tend to catch employers out most often.

Compensation

Compensation in discrimination cases is likely to cover financial loss and injury to feelings and there is no statutory cap on discrimination compensation awards. When calculating financial loss, a Tribunal can consider not only loss of salary but loss of any other benefit that can be quantified financially and any out-of-pocket expenses. The bands for injury to feelings that a Tribunal would likely award for discrimination are currently:

Band	Compensation range
Lower band (applies to less serious cases, such as where the act of discrimination is an isolated or one-off occurrence)	£1,200 to £11,700
Middle band (applies to serious cases which do not merit an award in the highest band)	£11,700 to £35,200
Higher band (applies to the most serious of cases, such as where there has been a lengthy campaign of discriminatory harassment)	£35,200 to £58,700

On top of this, if the individual has two years' service or more, they may be able to claim unfair dismissal. Given these potentially significant costs, it's imperative that employers understand their legal obligations in respect to mental health, and provide training to managers, to avoid inadvertently falling foul of the law when managing these situations.

Struggling to manage mental health issues in your workplace?

Our Employment Law, HR and Health & Safety experts are here to assist you.

Whether you need support navigating tricky absence management processes, want to establish proactive policies and risk assessments to prevent issues before they arise, or seek [effective training](#) to better equip your management team, WorkNest can help you to address mental health related challenges while avoiding

discrimination pitfalls and meeting your obligations as an employer.

For personalised advice and solutions, contact our team today.

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