

The importance of partnership working

Trade union safety representatives working in partnership with managers to support improvement in staff health, safety and wellbeing can assist in ensuring optimum shift patterns are in place that comply with the relevant standards and working time regulations outlined in this guidance.

The Health and Safety Executive recognises that change is a key stressor and changing shift patterns without sufficient consultation with staff and their representative may lead to poor wellbeing and stress-related illness. For those with caring responsibilities, it can be even more stressful as many plan caring arrangements around their shift work.

Furthermore, changes to shift patterns may impact on personal safety e.g. moving to a twilight shift which may finish at 2 am and the implications for shift workers leaving work and getting home safely in the early hours. For these reasons, it is important that employers work with both trade union stewards and safety representatives when looking at shift working patterns.

Equally, it is important to consider the requirements of the service to deliver safe patient care around the clock when discussing shift patterns and options for flexible working.

Under the Safety Representatives and Safety Committee Regulations 1977 and the Safety Representatives and Safety Committee Regulations (Northern Ireland) 1979, safety representatives have a right to be consulted on matters that have the potential to affect the health and safety of the members they represent. Consultation should be in 'good time', i.e. before the changes take place, and representatives should be given adequate time to discuss the matter with the members they represent and feedback their concerns. Trade union health and safety representatives should be consulted on any plans to change shift patterns as this could have a significant impact on the health, safety and wellbeing of the members they represent.

The HSE stresses the importance of employers consulting and involving trade unions' health and safety representatives in the risk assessment process and in getting views on the advantages and disadvantages of current shift systems.

Working with health and safety representatives, the HSE suggest that employers seek the views and stimulate discussion by:

- encouraging workers to share their experiences of shift work

- discuss which shifts are hardest and why

- provide examples of different shift work schedules and invite contributions of ideas.

Further information

For further information on partnership working, please see the group's partnership working on health and safety guidance, welfare facilities at work and stress management guidance.

Our full range of guidance and resources published by the NHS Staff Council Health, Safety and Wellbeing Group (HSWG) can be found on our dedicated HSWG web page.