

Core standard four

Provide your employees with good working conditions

Providing good working conditions for all employees, volunteers and athletes can help to prevent new mental health problems and support everyone with an existing condition to get on in work and thrive.

Promote work/life balance

Over time, constant pressure and a poor work/life balance can lead to stress and burnout, reducing people's productivity, performance and morale. Seven-day contracts and lots of time away from home can be core features of many roles, particularly in elite sport. That's why it's especially important for people to work with their line managers and coaches to create an effective work/life balance. This means spending time on interests outside of the sport including breaks during the season for time off.

Line managers and coaches should encourage and help their people to:

- work sensible hours
- take full lunch breaks
- rest and recuperate after busy periods, for example competing and testing periods
- avoid working outside agreed hours
- take their full annual leave entitlement
- see their career as part of their life, not their whole life.



Offer flexible working

Giving people some control over where, when and how they work can help everyone be more healthy and productive. For example, you could help someone manage stress by allowing a later start time twice a week so they can do the school run.

An athlete's mental health may be improved by having regular training time in their own space, away from the elite environment, and by being encouraged to use their rest time to recover effectively.

You can achieve this by creating a flexible working policy. Flexible working can also help people who've been absent return to work gradually. Senior leaders, line managers and coaches should be role models for healthier work habits and encourage people by example.

Provide opportunities to develop

Encourage line managers and coaches to give people opportunities for development. You can do this in a cost-effective way by using skills and knowledge within the organisation. For example, providing opportunities such as project management, public speaking or chairing a group to colleagues who have identified these development needs. Offer shadowing days to teach them about another role or part of the organisation, or arrange for coaching with a line manager from a different department.

Understand the impact of insecure and unstable work

Many people who work in sport and physical activity don't have stability or security in their careers, so they may struggle to plan for the future. For example, elite sport offers a unique and exciting work environment – but it's rarely stable. A bad performance by an elite athlete may mean that they are suddenly dropped. For support staff, a relegation or funding cut can often follow.

Despite this, employers, line managers and coaches can and must take action to support athletes' mental health throughout their careers. During periods of change it's important to check in with people regularly and to signpost to support both inside and outside the organisation.

Prepare athletes for life beyond sport

Research by the Professional Players Federation found that only 29 per cent of players were able to choose when they stopped playing professional sport. For the rest, retirement was due to injuries, general wear and tear or inability to get a contract. Only 50 per cent of the players surveyed felt in control of their lives within two years of finishing their playing careers.¹⁷

Your self-esteem is shot down; you don't know who you are as you've spent all your life pleasing others: managers, coaches, fans – you're by yourself, no one wants a photo or autograph anymore.

– Retired professional athlete

We should recognise that a career as a professional athlete is a huge achievement and an exciting opportunity that is likely to be central to a person's sense of identity. However, it's important for employers to start early in preparing athletes for a transition to life beyond sport – whenever that transition eventually happens.

Performance directors and people who run sports talent programmes should encourage athletes to use player associations and **performance lifestyle services**.¹⁸

¹⁷ www.thepfa.com/news/2018/2/5/ppf-initial-career-transition-research-findings

¹⁸ www.eis2win.co.uk/expertise/performance-lifestyle/

Growing a supportive and inclusive workplace culture

Liz Burkinshaw,
Development Lead Officer,
UK Coaching



“Coaching isn’t just about the technical side of sport – it’s the social and mental side too,” explains Liz.

“Coaches are positive towards the mental health of the people they coach, whether that’s an elite performer or someone doing a Couch to 5k. “So one of the reasons we focus on wellbeing internally is to live by what we say.”

As coaching experts, you might expect their wellbeing programme to focus on the benefits of exercise. However, Liz has been careful to promote activities that suit everyone.

“Not everyone at our organisation is sporty,” she says. “Plus, our industry is inundated with ideas like going for a walk every Wednesday – we almost get a bit fed up of it. So it’s about asking: ‘What else could we do?’”

One of the first initiatives was putting together a wellbeing pack for staff to open up the dialogue about mental health. This included information on the Five Ways to Wellbeing, along with feel-good items like tea bags and hot chocolate.

Another low-cost initiative Liz launched this year was Project Sunflower. This involved giving people sunflower seeds to grow at home (or another green space) as a way to connect people.

“We had 50 people sign up, and the response has been really positive. So, you go into the finance department and you’ve got something to talk about that’s not work. Building relationships is important in coaching, and important for mental health as well.”

Creating a mentally healthy organisation

Zoe Tootle, Executive Office Director,
English Football League (EFL)

“People work here because they love sport, and football can be very demanding,” says Zoe.

“We invest in people’s wellbeing because it means they stay fit and healthy and perform really well in their jobs. But there’s an important moral perspective too. We want to support them – whether that means having discussions about mental health, providing time off for appointments, or just trying different ways of working that suit the employee.”

Modern football is a 24/7 sport and that’s why the EFL offers flexible working to help people strike the right work/life balance. There’s also a peaceful Tranquillity Room where staff can go and de-stress during a busy day.

One new initiative that Zoe is introducing offers the services of a Sports Chaplain in the office.

“They’re not focused on religion, but can definitely offer a friendly ear and support to anyone, whether that’s because they have a problem to discuss or more generally for an impartial ear on any matter that may be on their mind,” says Zoe.

“It’s someone that comes from outside the EFL that people can go and have a quiet coffee with. Because I think sometimes you don’t necessarily want to speak to your manager or your colleague. You want someone that’s independent of all that.”

To ensure mental health stays high on the agenda, Zoe is also organising a series of Doing Days where EFL staff can attend workshops on a variety of topics from wellbeing to healthy eating.

“It’s about providing initiatives that people actually want to do and will enjoy,” says Zoe.

“That way they feel part of what’s happening and can choose what they want to focus on and what will benefit them most.”

Creating a culture where it's OK not to be OK

Dr Hannah MacLeod,
GB Hockey Olympic gold medallist.

GB Hockey has worked hard to create a culture where mental health is talked about more openly and encourages people to support one another.

Staff check in on wellbeing and support needs at regular one-to-one catch ups and as teams. The organisation also raises awareness about the specialist support available, which includes access to sports psychologists. It enables players to take time off for mental health days, just as they would for a physical illness. This means people understand it's OK not to be OK.

“For our team to be successful, we had to ensure that we'd created an environment where it felt safe to be authentic. It's about allowing people to say they're not feeling great today,” says Dr Hannah MacLeod, GB Hockey Olympic gold medallist.



