

## Guidance on dealing with stress in the ministry

This guidance complements the advice available in *Supporting ministers who experience ill health - a good practice guide (Parts 1 and 2)*. It builds upon the principles set out in them, focusing specifically on the issue of stress in the ministry. The aim of this information is to provide ministers, circuits, chairs, districts and the Diaconal Order with a straightforward and practical tool for supporting ministers who are experiencing stress, and to put in place preventative measures. It draws on and adapts the guidance issued by the Health and Safety Executive (HSE), placing this within a ministerial context. Use of this tool is entirely voluntary, and may be triggered (for example) by a fit note which states ‘stress’ or ‘work related stress’ as the reason for the minister’s absence. It may also be used as a preventative measure. The assessment may be undertaken by the superintendent or another person whom the minister considers to be appropriate.

### What is stress?

There are many definitions of stress, and it is a term which is often used somewhat loosely. However the HSE definition offers a useful approach for our purposes:

*“Stress is the adverse reaction people have to excessive pressures or other types of demand placed on them. It arises when they worry that they cannot cope.”*

**The HSE goes on to add:**

*“There is a clear distinction between pressure, which can create a ‘buzz’ and be a motivating factor, and stress, which can occur when this pressure becomes excessive.”*

The distinction between pressure and stress is important. We often thrive on a certain amount of pressure in life and this can lead to personal growth, but when this becomes excessive it can turn into stress, with adverse consequences. Key factors include the nature of the pressure, our individual personality and the effectiveness of the coping mechanisms we use.

### Symptoms of stress

It is important to state that there is no stigma attached to experiencing stress. Given our busy lives and the complexity of modern society, it is likely that most of us will experience some form of stress, whether this is brought about by work-related pressures or those stemming from our personal lives. There is now convincing evidence that prolonged periods of stress, including work-related stress, have an adverse effect on health. Research provides strong links between stress and:

- physical effects such as heart disease, back pain, headaches, gastrointestinal disturbances or various minor illnesses;
- psychological effects such as anxiety and depression, loss of concentration and poor decision making.

Stress can also lead to other behaviours that can have an adverse effect on psychological and physical health and well-being, for example, social withdrawal, aggressive behaviour, alcohol/drug abuse, addictions, eating disorders and working excessive hours.

This guidance confines itself to work-related stress, that is the significant pressures and demands that may arise in ministerial work. It looks at ways of identifying and minimising such stress. That said, it is recognised that a significant cause of stress may derive from pressures outside of the ministerial working environment, such as family difficulties, bereavement and relationship breakdown. Given the unique nature of the ministerial role and calling, it is sometimes inevitable that stress coming from issues outside of work will impact on the minister’s overall ministry. The experience of personal stress derived from factors outside work may call for measures to be taken to support an individual minister (for example the provision of counselling or colleagues assisting with preaching duties). These issues need to be considered carefully, but these are outside the scope of this guidance except where they impact directly on the ministerial role. The approach here is provide strategies for dealing with stress brought on as a result of ministry and should not be confused with personal stress issues, which require separate and often quite different interventions.

### The legal position

It is important to realise that there are legal responsibilities which circuits, districts and the Diaconal Order must take

account. Under the Management of Health and Safety At Work Regulations 1999 organisations (including churches) must assess the risk of stress-related ill health arising from work activities. This is underpinned by the Health and Safety at Work etc Act 1974 which requires organisations to take measures to control any risks. These duties apply not only to employees, but all those connected with the work of the church or church-related organisations, such as volunteers.

**Our approach to supporting ministers experiencing stress - the ‘standards for healthy working’**

Whilst the use of this tool is entirely voluntary, it is important to take a proactive approach to dealing with stress. This not only prevents difficulties arising for individuals, but creates a positive and healthy environment for the minister and the circuit. The HSE has developed what it describes as ‘management standards’ for assessing the risks associated with stress. We have adopted and modified these, placing them within the ministerial context rather than that of secular employment and calling them ‘standards for healthy working’.

*The standards* (see diagram 1 below) are designed to foster a ministerial working culture where any risks from work-related stress are identified and controlled. They cover six key areas of the ministerial role which, if not properly supported, may lead to poor health and wellbeing, and increased

sickness and stress. *The standards* are shown below in Diagram 1:

The Standards for Healthy Working approach provides a simple and effective way to identify the key stress risks associated with ministerial work by focusing on common underlying causes of stress and their prevention. This approach also provides a step by step way to carry out an individual risk assessment based upon the minister’s own context. It encourages ministers and superintendents/the warden to work in partnership to identify sources of work related stress and joint solutions.

**Carrying out a stress risk assessment**

Often the issues relating to a person’s experience of stress are emotive and complex. A risk assessment framework helps us to look at a person’s situation in a more objective way, establishing what is important in any given situation and working through a process in a logical way to agree a range of supportive actions which can be monitored and reviewed. A risk assessment of this nature will also help us to fulfil our legal obligations.

Putting it simply, a risk assessment consists of five stages (these are shown as a cycle of support in diagram 2 opposite):

**Diagram 1: The Church’s six standards for healthy working**

The demands placed on you as a minister	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>workload; work patterns (breaks, days off, holidays); the working environment (noise, interruptions, suitable office equipment); the demands and expectations you place on yourself, or others place upon you</li> </ul>
The control you have in your ministerial work	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>how much say you have in what you do and the way you do your work; balancing your needs with others; inclusive decision making; the opportunity to use your gifts and skills</li> </ul>
The support you receive as a minister	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>the encouragement you get in your work; the quality of supervision and oversight; the resources you need; the support provided by colleagues and others; your own ability to set realistic boundaries in your work and a reasonable work/life balance; and the role of your superintendent</li> </ul>
Your working relationships in the circuit or team	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>the quality of your relationships within the circuit, churches or team; how conflict is processed and unacceptable behaviour dealt with; your sense of how the team works together</li> </ul>
The overall scope of your ministerial role	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>whether you are clear about what you should do; and whether the expectations on you are reasonable; your understanding of what others do and whether they fulfill their roles; the expectations you place on yourself and whether these reasonable</li> </ul>
Dealing with change in your work	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>how change that affects you is communicated to you and dealt with; the support you receive; how you deal with the change that you have to bring about yourself</li> </ul>

- **Stage 1:** Carefully identify the key issues creating stress for the minister using the six parts of the 'standards for healthy working'. This should be done by means of a meeting between the minister and the superintendent or warden, or other identified person, as appropriate.
- **Stage 2:** Put in place reasonable control measures to remove or reduce the stress being experienced by the minister. As an example, support for a minister who is struggling with their workload might include a temporary reduction in some of their responsibilities, along with the minister working with an appropriate person in order to understand the demands and expectations they place on themselves, in addition to those placed on them by the circuit.
- **Stage 3:** Over the course of the next 6-12 months, monitor how effective these measures are at reducing stress. This should be done by means of regular meetings between the minister/superintendent/warden, or other appropriate person. The frequency of these meetings will be determined by the nature and seriousness of the stresses identified and the minister's response to them.

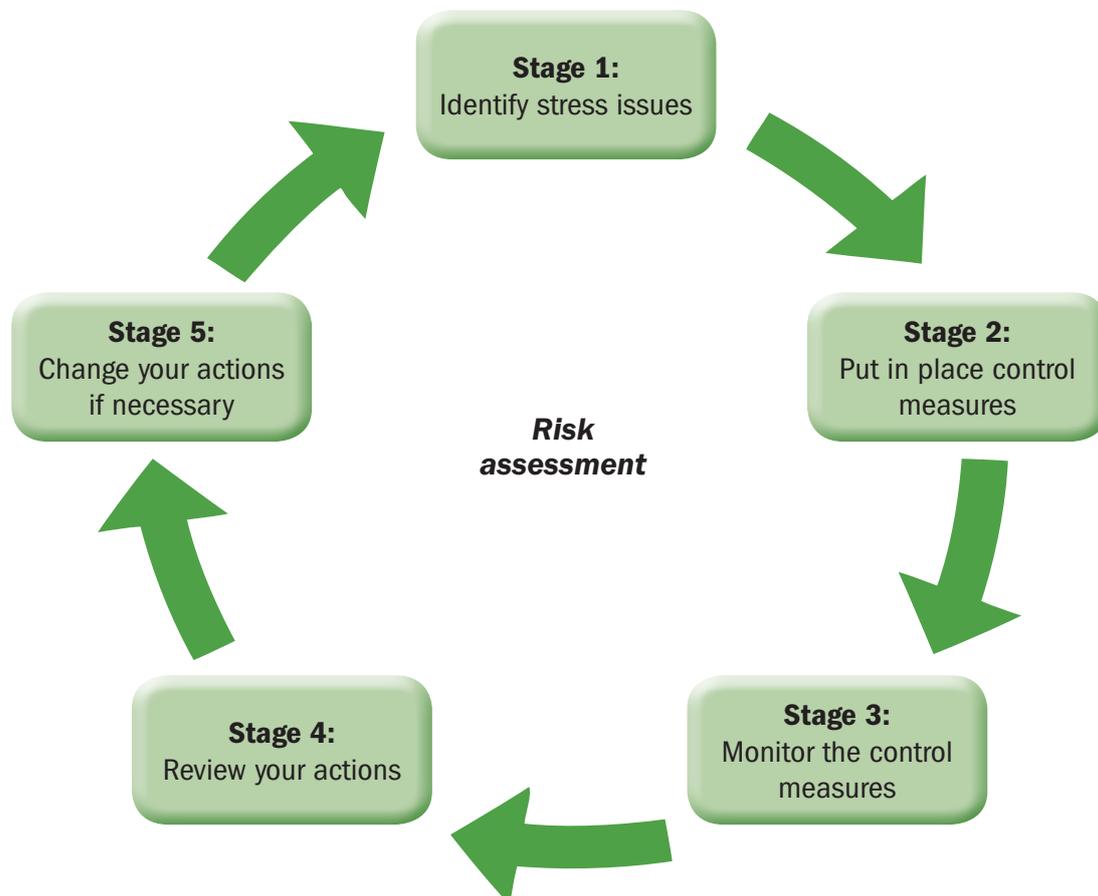
and at the end of this period:

- **Stage 4:** Review how effective the control measures have been. This can be done by means of a discussion with the minister, and by seeking (with agreement of the minister) feedback from others with whom they work.
- **Stage 5:** Modify the control measures in light of what has happened. It may be appropriate to make some permanent changes to either the minister's workload or support arrangements, depending on resources available and the individual context. In many situations the minister will have begun to work in a different way and these changes should be supported and encouraged.

**Standards for healthy working:  
risk assessment proforma**

This proforma (see appendix 1) may be completed as a joint exercise between the minister and their superintendent/the warden, or other appropriate person. It provides a framework for identifying the stresses being experienced by the minister, using the six 'standards for healthy working', and actions to take in order to minimise and control stress. In carrying out this assessment it is important to focus on the specific

**Diagram 2: The five stages of stress risk assessment**



ministerial role that the individual carries out. Whilst there is much similarity between ministerial roles, there are often key differences which need to be taken into account. In addition to considering the risks inherent in the role, it is also useful to consider how the individual responds to these. In looking at this you should consider whether the minister:

- has a history of mental or physical health problems;
- has been absent due to stress which is related to their ministerial role or has had difficulties with coping with their work in the past;
- has personal difficulties which may be unrelated to work, but have the potential to impact on it;
- are new to their station, or are relatively inexperienced in their ministerial calling;

- have a tendency to over work, be very conscientious or find it hard to cope with pressure.

You may also be aware of some other additional factors which are unique to the minister's personal situation, and which will need to be handled sensitively and in confidence.

A worked example of the proforma is shown in appendix 2. Please note that this is not a 'model' approach - every situation is different and must be looked at individually.

### Sources of further advice and guidance

Please see the website of the Health and Safety Executive for further information about stress at work: [www.hse.gov.uk/stress/](http://www.hse.gov.uk/stress/)

## Appendix 1

### Stress risk assessment proforma (blank)

#### Standard for healthy working: the **demands** placed upon you

What should be happening?	What stress risks do you face in your individual ministerial context?	What measures can you/ your superintendent/ the warden put in place to reduce or minimise these risks?	When will these be actioned and who will do them?
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>✓ You have appropriate and achievable demands and can carry them out in reasonable hours of work.</li> <li>✓ Your skills and calling fit well with the demands of your ministerial role.</li> <li>✓ Any concerns you have about your work environments are dealt with (eg temperature, noise, lighting, ventilation, layout).</li> </ul>			

#### Standard for healthy working: the **control** you have in exercising your ministry

What should be happening?	What stress risks do you face in your individual ministerial context?	What measures can you/ your superintendent/ the warden put in place to reduce or minimise these risks?	When will these be actioned and who will do them?
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>✓ You have reasonable control over the pace of your work and the various demands you face.</li> <li>✓ You are able to develop new skills, and your overall ministry.</li> <li>✓ You are able to take reasonable breaks and pace yourself.</li> <li>✓ You are able to balance the demands of your work and those of your personal life.</li> </ul>			

Standard for healthy working: the **support** you receive

What should be happening?	What stress risks do you face in your individual ministerial context?	What measures can you/your superintendent/the warden put in place to reduce or minimise these risks?	When will these be actioned and who will do them?
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>✓ You receive appropriate pastoral support in your ministry.</li> <li>✓ Colleagues within the circuit support each other.</li> <li>✓ You are able to access specific support when you face difficult situations.</li> <li>✓ If you have a disability, you receive appropriate support and adaptations.</li> <li>✓ If you are ill you have a return to work arrangement which balances your needs with those of the circuit.</li> <li>✓ You receive constructive feedback when you seek it.</li> <li>✓ The circuit is sensitive and responsive to any cultural or other specific needs you have.</li> </ul>			

Standard for healthy working: the **working relationships** in the circuit or team

What should be happening?	What stress risks do you face in your individual ministerial context?	What measures can you/your superintendent/the warden put in place to reduce or minimise these risks?	When will these be actioned and who will do them?
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>✓ Positive behaviours to deal with conflict and ensure fairness are displayed by you and colleagues.</li> <li>✓ Colleagues (lay and ordained) share information relevant to their work and ministry.</li> <li>✓ If unacceptable behaviour occurs you are able to report this, and it is dealt with appropriately and swiftly.</li> </ul>			



Standard for healthy working: the overall scope of your ministerial **role**

What should be happening?	What stress risks do you face in your individual ministerial context?	What measures can you/ your superintendent/ the warden put in place to reduce or minimise these risks?	When will these be actioned and who will do them?
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>✓ The various requirements placed upon your ministerial role are compatible.</li> <li>✓ You understand your ministerial role and responsibilities within the context of your station.</li> <li>✓ You are able to raise concerns about any issues relating to your role.</li> </ul>			

Standard for healthy working: dealing with **change** in your work

What should be happening?	What stress risks do you face in your individual ministerial context?	What measures can you/ your superintendent/ the warden put in place to reduce or minimise these risks?	When will these be actioned and who will do them?
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>✓ You are provided with timely information to enable you to understand the reasons for any change.</li> <li>✓ You are consulted about change and have the opportunity to influence it.</li> <li>✓ You are aware of the likely impact of any change on your ministerial role.</li> <li>✓ You have access to appropriate support during change.</li> </ul>			

**Arrangements for regular monitoring of progress (people involved, frequency of meetings and other actions):**

**Date for overall review of this risk assessment (usually between 6 months and 12 months later):**

**Signature of minister:** ..... **Date:** .....

**Signature of superintendent or other appropriate person:** ..... **Date:** .....

## Appendix 2

### Worked example of a stress risk assessment

#### Background:

The Revd P is an experienced minister of many years standing. She is well regarded within her circuit, being both dedicated and hard working. Over the last six months she has felt permanently tired, and has had a number of minor infections such as colds and coughs. She experiences what she describes as an ever increasing workload, and at the end of the working day is not only very tired, but also anxious and tearful. She feels she is on a treadmill and that she has to work ever harder just to stand still. She also has a long

standing diagnosis of dyslexia, and recently has found that her existing ways of working with this have been ineffective, but that her needs in this area are not appreciated within the circuit. Matters recently came to a head when she had a chest infection that did not clear up for six weeks. She sought a meeting with her superintendent and he suggested that they carried out a stress risk assessment in order to systematically identify what the problems were and seek effective solutions. The proforma below records their findings and the agreed actions that will follow.

#### Standard for healthy working: the **demands** placed upon you

What should be happening?	What stress risks do you face in your individual ministerial context?	What measures can you/your superintendent/ the warden put in place to reduce or minimise these risks?	When will these be actioned and who will do them?
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>✓ You have appropriate and achievable demands and can carry them out in reasonable hours of work.</li> <li>✓ Your skills and calling fit well with the demands of your ministerial role.</li> </ul>	<p>Excessive working hours due to trying to meet the needs of two very demanding congregations.</p> <p>This leads to the minister feeling overwhelmed, anxious, poor sleep and digestive difficulties.</p>	<p>Urgently identify ministry priorities with superintendent and then agree these with individual churches.</p> <p>Minister reflects on her difficulty in saying 'no' to requests in meeting with a trusted friend and develops approaches to help her do this.</p>	<p>Meet with superintendent within two weeks to agree changes to workload.</p> <p>Meet with trusted friend within one month, with a follow up meeting planned after that. Appointment with medical practitioner also made.</p>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>✓ Any concerns you have about your work environments are dealt with (eg. temperature, noise, lighting, ventilation, layout).</li> </ul>	<p>High temperatures in the study during summer months due to south facing aspect, lead to fatigue and inability to concentrate.</p>	<p>Provision of window blinds and mobile air cooling unit.</p>	<p>Circuit steward to purchase these before summer.</p>

Standard for healthy working: the **control** you have in exercising your ministry

What should be happening?	What stress risks do you face in your individual ministerial context?	What measures can you/your superintendent/ the warden put in place to reduce or minimise these risks?	When will these be actioned and who will do them?
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>✓ You have reasonable control over the pace of your work and the various demands you face.</li> <li>✓ You are able to develop new skills, and your overall ministry.</li> <li>✓ You are able to take reasonable breaks and pace yourself.</li> <li>✓ You are able to balance the demands of your work and those of your personal life.</li> </ul>	<p>Feelings of tiredness and a succession of viral infections due to excessive working hours over the last year accompanied by tiredness, a sense of burnout, and staleness in personal prayer life and ministry.</p>	Minister to devise a daily pattern of working that allows time for regular breaks and a regular day off.	Immediately.
		Minister to ensure holidays and quarter days are taken.	Over the next six months.
		Minister to set clearer boundaries by installation of a personal telephone line and setting up of a personal email account.	Over the next two weeks.
		Superintendent to offer pastoral support and accountability to ensure minister develops a healthy and sustainable approach to work.	Monthly meetings over the next year.
		Minister arranges to attend an extended retreat to provide spiritual and physical refreshment.	Retreat to take place in two months time.

Standard for healthy working: the **support** you receive

What should be happening?	What stress risks do you face in your individual ministerial context?	What measures can you/your superintendent/ the warden put in place to reduce or minimise these risks?	When will these be actioned and who will do them?
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>✓ You receive appropriate pastoral support in your ministry.</li> <li>✓ Colleagues within the circuit support each other.</li> <li>✓ You are able to access specific support when you face difficult situations.</li> </ul>	<p>Feelings of isolation and loneliness in day to day ministry. Difficulties with coping in demanding pastoral situations, leading to tearfulness and headaches.</p>	Discussion of issues with superintendent followed by establishment of support group.	Superintendent to set up support group within one month.
		Provision of counselling from the Churches' Ministerial Counselling Service.	Minister to arrange counselling immediately

<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>✓ If you have a disability you receive appropriate support and adaptations.</li> </ul>	<p>Feelings of lack of practical support and equipment for minister's dyslexia symptoms.</p>	<p>Discussion of issue with superintendent. Bid for financial support for professional assessment, equipment and adaptations made to Access To Work and to the Connexion.</p>	<p>Superintendent to liaise with connexional officers about funding provision within two weeks.</p> <p>Minister to contact Access To Work immediately.</p>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>✓ If you are ill you have a return to work arrangement which balances your needs with those of the circuit.</li> <li>✓ You receive constructive feedback when you seek it.</li> </ul>			
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>✓ The circuit is sensitive and responsive to any cultural or other specific needs you have.</li> </ul>	<p>Lack of awareness in circuit about minister's dyslexia.</p>	<p>Discussion with superintendent and agreement about how to communicate minister's needs to circuit and support for them.</p>	<p>Meeting with superintendent within three weeks to identify practical actions to take, such as use of emails, coloured paper, overlays and fonts in written documents across the circuit.</p>

Standard for healthy working: the **working relationships** in the circuit or team

<b>What should be happening?</b>	<b>What stress risks do you face in your individual ministerial context?</b>	<b>What measures can you/your superintendent/ the warden put in place to reduce or minimise these risks?</b>	<b>When will these be actioned and who will do them?</b>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>✓ Positive behaviours to deal with conflict and ensure fairness are displayed by you and colleagues.</li> <li>✓ Colleagues (lay and ordained) share information relevant to their work and ministry.</li> </ul>	<p>Feelings of isolation from colleagues in the circuit and lack of information/feedback due to heavy workload, leading to episodes of low mood.</p>	<p>Superintendent to ensure that minister is notified of all key meetings in advance. Minister diarises these and prioritises them.</p>	<p>Meeting dates notified to minister at least one month in advance wherever possible. Minister plans work to ensure attendance.</p>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>✓ If unacceptable behaviour occurs you are able to report this, and it is dealt with appropriately and swiftly.</li> </ul>	<p>Feelings of misunderstanding and mild bullying from one of the congregations, due to minister's dyslexia.</p>	<p>Superintendent and minister to agree a communication and awareness raising process within the circuit, so that everyone understands dyslexia and how it affects the minister.</p>	<p>Superintendent and minister agree how to communicate this with circuit within one month.</p>

Standard for healthy working: the overall scope of your ministerial **role**

What should be happening?	What stress risks do you face in your individual ministerial context?	What measures can you/your superintendent/ the warden put in place to reduce or minimise these risks?	When will these be actioned and who will do them?
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>✓ The various requirements placed upon your ministerial role are compatible</li> <li>✓ You understand your ministerial role and responsibilities within the context of your station</li> <li>✓ You are able to raise concerns about any issues relating to your role</li> </ul>	<p>Pressure from the conflicts between a growing and well regarded chaplaincy role to local employers and the demands of circuit life, leading to feelings of exhaustion and burnout.</p>	<p>Discussion with superintendent about how this chaplaincy need should be met, including possible sharing of the work with lay worker or volunteer.</p> <p>Minister to reflect on their difficulty to refuse requests for this work, despite their existing workload.</p>	<p>Initial discussion with superintendent within two weeks, to include identifying and agreeing priorities and the resources needed to support them.</p> <p>Minister reflects on difficulty in refusing requests for help during their counselling sessions (referred to above), and develops new approaches.</p>

Standard for healthy working: dealing with **change** in your work

What should be happening?	What stress risks do you face in your individual ministerial context?	What measures can you/your superintendent/ the warden put in place to reduce or minimise these risks?	When will these be actioned and who will do them?
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>✓ You are provided with timely information to enable you to understand the reasons for any change.</li> <li>✓ You are consulted about change and have the opportunity to influence it.</li> <li>✓ You are aware of the likely impact of any change on your ministerial role.</li> <li>✓ You have access to appropriate support during change.</li> </ul>	<p>Anxiety due to potential changes to circuits within the district and how these impact on the minister, who feels excluded from consultation processes.</p>	<p>Minister to prioritise attending relevant consultation meetings, which were missed due to pressures of work.</p> <p>Superintendent to brief minister on progress with planned changes.</p>	<p>Minister to reprioritise existing diary commitments with immediate effect.</p> <p>Superintendent briefs minister within two weeks.</p> <p>Minister identifies a spiritual director to assist with discernment of their future calling within three months.</p>

**Arrangements for regular monitoring of progress (people involved, frequency of meetings and other actions):**

In addition to the specific actions agreed in this risk assessment, the superintendent will meet with the minister once a month to review progress with the action plan, and the minister's own sense of health and wellbeing. There will also be an overall review of progress after six months. Although the meetings are informal in nature the superintendent will provide a brief record of the issues discussed and agreements reached after each meeting to aid future recall. This will be provided to the minister and will remain confidential between the two parties.

**Date for overall review of this risk assessment (usually between 6 months and 12 months later):**

A full review of outcomes from the risk assessment will take place after six months.

**Signature of minister:** ..... **Date:** .....

**Signature of superintendent  
or other appropriate person:** ..... **Date:** .....