

Briefing

Employment adjustments for people experiencing Stress, Anxiety and Depression

This briefing is not an authoritative statement of the law. While we have made every effort to ensure that the information we have provided is correct, Business Disability Forum cannot accept any responsibility or liability.

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Introduction

This Briefing focuses on employment adjustments for people experiencing stress, anxiety and depression. All three are commonly experienced by people who work or would like to be working.

Wellbeing and mental wellness

Mental health refers to an individual's mental state or in other words, how they are feeling. An individual's mental wellness is variable and everyone can experience periods of mental distress, when they feel unhappy, anxious, angry or when they find it difficult to cope. Similarly we are all familiar with feelings of self-doubt, loss of confidence, guilt and low self-worth.

What is anxiety?

Anxiety is a feeling that anyone can experience however it can affect people differently. Anxiety can mean constant and unrealistic worry and fear, with difficulties controlling these feelings. It is often accompanied by physical symptoms such as insomnia, sweating, a racing heart or palpitations.

10 million people in the UK are affected by an anxiety disorder,[1] when anxiety interferes with day to day activities.

For people with generalised anxiety disorder, triggers tend not to be specific. It can affect people daily and make it difficult for them to identify days when they were not feeling anxious. It is estimated that up to 5% of the UK population has generalised anxiety disorder.[2]

[1] MQ: Transforming Mental Health - Anxiety disorder

[2] NHS - Generalised anxiety disorder in adults

Linked conditions

Other mental health conditions affecting people of working age have anxiety as their main symptom:

- Phobias e.g. agoraphobia or claustrophobia are extreme anxiety induced by particular objects or situations. This also includes social anxiety disorder also called social phobia.
- Post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD).
- Panic disorder.

What is depression?

Depression goes beyond the feeling of being low or sad that anyone can experience at some point in their life. It can mean feeling low or irritable, losing interest and enjoyment in life and feeling worthless.

Depression can range from reactive depression triggered by an external event such as a bereavement, divorce or post-natal depression, to severe clinical depression with no obvious external cause.

Manic depression, now known as Bi-Polar Disorder is a specific type of mental health condition that can lead to periods of depression.

Stress

According to the Health & Safety Executive (HSE), stress, depression or anxiety account for 40% of all work-related ill health cases, with 12.5 million work days lost as a result of stress, depression or anxiety.[3]

Although stress is not automatically covered by the Equality Act 2010, work-related stress is the leading occupational health problem in the UK. Neither people nor organisations perform at their best when stress is not managed effectively.

Extensive misuse of the word stress in everyday language has caused it to become somewhat devalued as a serious health and safety issue. Although workplace pressure is a part of everyday life and can stimulate and motivate your workforce, it is important to recognise the difference between pressure as a positive, dynamic force and stress or 'distress' which may have destructive and demoralising effects on the mental health of your workforce.

The Health and Safety Executive (HSE) define stress as "the adverse reaction people have to excessive pressure or other types of demand placed on them". The threshold between healthy and excessive levels of pressure is personal and will vary between individuals and across different situations. However, there are a number of organisational factors which make it more likely that a workforce will experience stress.

[3] HSE - Work-related Stress, Depression or Anxiety Statistics

The HSE has identified six key factors, which affect employees as they carry out their work:

- Demands – the demands placed upon an employee in their role, including workload, the skills and capabilities of an employee to fulfil workload, work patterns and the working environment.
- Control – how much say an employee has in the way they do their work.
- Support – includes the encouragement, training and resources provided by the organisation, line management and colleagues to assist an employee to do their work, and systems to support employees when things go wrong.
- Relationships – includes promoting positive working, clear communication and fair treatment to avoid conflict and ensuring that unacceptable behaviour including bullying and harassment is dealt with promptly and effectively.
- Role – people need to understand their role and organisations should ensure that employees do not have conflicting roles.
- Change – how organisational change (large or small) is managed and communicated internally.

Taking a strategic approach to managing organisational pressure will enable you to reduce or eliminate workplace stress. Carry out a risk assessment for stress, identifying hazards and those who might be at particular risk:

- Ensure workloads are realistic and appropriate to the skills and capabilities of the employee and that employees are not working excessive hours e.g. weekends and during holidays.
- Ensure everyone has clear objectives and is not subject to conflicting demands.

- Allow as much flexibility as possible in working arrangements and allow employees as much control as possible in the way they plan their time and perform their duties. Encourage employees to show initiative and where possible allow flexible working hours and remote working patterns.
- Provide every employee with good management on a day to day basis and fair performance appraisals; ensure they receive regular feedback, development and training opportunities.
- Take appropriate initiatives to raise awareness of stress and promote a healthy work/life balance.
- Introduce appropriate initiatives to assist employees to manage their time and control the pace of work.
- Encourage employees not to work through lunch, and to take advantage of flexible working practices if available.
- Ensure your organisation promotes a positive and inclusive culture and has clearly signposted policies on workplace bullying and harassment and that complaints are investigated promptly and effectively.
- Ensure that you have policies and procedures in place to uphold the personal safety and security of employees at work.
- Make sure that your organisation's communications are honest and open.
- Consult your employees and ensure that relevant stakeholders are involved at every stage of decision making and be particularly mindful of anxiety levels during times of job insecurity or restructuring.

Employment and people experiencing Stress, Anxiety or Depression

Many people who experience stress, anxiety or depression will be protected under the Equality Act 2010 but may not consider themselves to be disabled.

Nevertheless employers have a legal obligation to make reasonable adjustments and not discriminate against employees who might be facing barriers at work because of a disability or long-term condition – even if it has not been diagnosed as a disability or accepted as such by the individual.

Employers should be aware that non-visible disabilities such as stress, anxiety or depression mean that barriers can be less obvious. This means reasonable adjustments may be harder for employers to determine and put in place.

Employers can seek advice from Work Coaches and Disability Employment Advisers at Jobcentre Plus who refer people with anxiety or depression for positions. There are also organisations which offer specialist advice and appropriate disability awareness training to help employers ensure that their recruitment process accounts for barriers faced by those experiencing stress, anxiety or depression – see page 29 for further details.

It is important that employers have an open and honest conversation with new employees and their support staff about the barriers that may be present in the workplace and what simple measures might help. The best practice approach is to make reasonable adjustments for anyone who needs them in order to work effectively and contribute fully to your organisation.

Most employers will want to know what is 'reasonable'. Doing what seems fair for the individual and others who work for you given the size and resources of your organisation is a good place to start.

This guidance will help you deliver best practice.

- You might need to treat people differently in order to treat them fairly.
- Don't make assumptions about what people can and can't do.
- Ensure that everyone knows who is responsible for doing what and when it must be done.
- Involve the individual in generating solutions and respect their right to confidentiality.

For more detail on the law and making reasonable adjustments contact **Business Disability Forum's Advice Service** on telephone number **+44-(0)20-7403-3020** or by email **advice@businessdisabilityforum.org.uk** or see the Briefing on The Equality Act 2010.

Reasonable adjustments and best practice

Research shows that employment is good for mental health, while unemployment can be extremely damaging.

Reasonable adjustments and support enable many people experiencing stress, anxiety and depression to lead stable and productive working lives, making a valuable contribution to the workplace.

Some people manage their stress, anxiety or depression and there will be little or no effect on job performance, with them being fully capable of performing well in pressurised and responsible positions, for others their mental ill health may only affect work temporarily.

Effective management of mental health in the workplace is good for business. 1 in 6.8 people will experience some kind of mental health condition in the workplace.[4] Mixed stress, anxiety and depression are the most common mental health conditions in Britain.[5]

[4] Mental Health Foundation: Statistics - Mental health at work

[5] Mental Health Foundation: Statistics - the most common mental health problems

- 1 in 4 unemployed people have a common mental health problem.[6]
- Mental health problems translate to a cost to employers between £33 and £42 billion each year,[7] with sickness absence representing between 19% and 24% of this cost. Attending work whilst unwell, referred to as 'presenteeism' costs employers between 16.8bn and 26.4bn every year around mental health problems alone.[8] Failure to manage mental health effectively can also have high costs in terms of productivity, team morale and interpersonal relationships, staff turnover and individual performance.

[6] Mental Health and Social Exclusion, Social Exclusion Unit, London: Office of the Deputy Prime Minister, (2004) p13, quoting Singleton N, Bumpstead R, O'Brien M, Lee A, Meltzer H. Psychiatric Morbidity Among Adults Living In Private Households, (2000) London: The Stationery Office, (2001)

[7] and [8] Deloitte UK, Mental health and wellbeing in employment, a supporting study for the Independent Review

Providing a supportive work environment will benefit both employers and employees alike. Protecting the mental health of your workforce and supporting and retaining employees with mental health conditions can contribute to:

- More effective recruitment, drawing from a wider pool of talent.
- Increased loyalty and better retention.
- Reduced absences and associated savings.
- More effective rehabilitation and reduction in early ill-health retirement.
- Better working conditions and interpersonal relations contributing to higher levels of motivation and productivity.
- More responsive and flexible management.
- Enhanced reputation as an employer.
- Reduced risk of litigation under the Equality Act 2010 or personal injury claims.

Decisions about suitability for employment, promotion or retention are too often based on general assumptions or misconceptions, rather than a factual assessment. This can lead to discrimination against existing or potential employees. Consider the skills, abilities and aspirations of each individual and implement appropriate and reasonable support so that everyone can maximise their potential; this can have a positive effect on an organisation as it unlocks different ways of tackling problems and making decisions.

Many people experiencing stress, anxiety or depression are able to perform their role while managing their conditions. The employer may not even be aware that they are experiencing stress, anxiety or depression. However, for some people a few minor adjustments could be needed.

Recruitment and selection

Candidates experiencing stress, anxiety or depression may be prevented from demonstrating their abilities and potential by conventional recruitment processes.

You need to make sure you do not discriminate against any job applicant during the recruitment process. You may also have to take reasonable adjustments into account. It is important not to make assumptions about what the applicant can or cannot do; instead, ask applicants about any reasonable adjustments they may require. If you use external recruitment agencies, ask for evidence that they make reasonable adjustments for disabled applicants and work to the standards that underpin this guidance.

Having a positive approach to recruitment of people experiencing stress, anxiety and depression can help to ensure that you are seen as an employer of choice and help you to attract and appoint the best candidates for the job.

Further information on best practice for recruitment and selection is also available from the Government's Disability Confident scheme; for further information, visit: disabilityconfident.campaign.gov.uk or contact **Business Disability Forum's Advice Service** on telephone number +44-(0)20-7403-3020 or by email advice@businessdisabilityforum.org.uk.

Remember it is unlawful to ask questions about health or a disability prior to job offer under the Equality Act 2010 unless the question relates directly to an intrinsic aspect of the role for which the person is applying, or is for the purpose of making reasonable adjustments to the application or interview process. Questions about disability can still be asked on equal opportunities monitoring forms.

Job descriptions

Unreasonable expectations, conflicting demands and a lack of clarity about the scope or responsibilities of a role can generate work-related stress and may cause or exacerbate a person's anxiety or depression.

When drawing up job descriptions and candidate specifications:

- Be specific about what skills are needed and what the job involves.
- Do not place undue emphasis on formal qualifications or work experience where they are not essential to a role.
- Ensure that the job description clearly describes the purpose and scope of the role, as well as management support associated with the post.
- Be flexible. Distinguish between essential and desirable criteria, so that you can be flexible when considering adjustments.
- Concentrate on what is to be achieved in the job as opposed to how it is to be achieved. Someone with a mental health condition may be able to produce the results you are looking for by different means. For example, focus on output rather than time spent at a desk and allow employees to work flexibly to achieve core tasks.
- Avoid an over-emphasis on soft-skills when these may not be strictly essential, e.g. try to avoid requirements like:
 - Must be fun loving and bubbly with an outstanding personality.
 - Must be a strong and committed team player.

Instead focus on ability required and write:

- Must be able to build and maintain productive relationships with colleagues, clients and customers.
- Must be able to work effectively in a team environment.

It may be appropriate to communicate to prospective candidates that there is a particular level of pressure or responsibility attached to some roles. However such statements in job descriptions should not be regarded as an abdication of responsibility.

Employers still have a duty of care to manage the pressure and levels of stress to which they expose their employees. Generalities such as: “must be able to work under pressure” or “must be able to work in stressful situations” should be avoided.

Advertising and attracting applicants

When advertising a job:

- Use positive wording like “we welcome disabled applicants” or “being part of Business Disability Forum’s membership, highlights our commitment to becoming a disability-smart organisation”.
- Provide a point of contact for people who are concerned about the recruitment process, using a range of contact methods, e.g. email and telephone.
- Display or mention the Disability Confident symbol if you are a symbol holder.
- Be clear that you are willing to make reasonable adjustments.
- Consult your local Jobcentre Plus which can help you make your recruitment process accessible. As well as advising on your recruitment process, Work Coaches and Disability Employment Advisers at Jobcentre Plus will also know of individuals experiencing stress anxiety or depression who may be suitable candidates. Business Disability Forum Members and Partners can contact us for help.

Application forms

Adjustments may need to be made to the short-listing process because an applicant may:

- Apply for a job for which they are over qualified because they need to regain confidence.
- Have gaps in their CV due to periods of stress, anxiety or depression.
- Have gained experience outside of paid employment, e.g. work experience and voluntary work.

Interviews, tests and assessment centres

Ensure that candidates who experience stress, anxiety or depression are able to demonstrate their ability to do the job and what they can contribute to your organisation. Focus on the person's abilities not on the person's anxiety and depression. If you have any doubts about a person's ability to do an intrinsic function of the job simply ask how they would do it.

When you invite applicants for an interview make sure you ask all candidates if they require any adjustments to be made for the interview. With adjustments, the interview allows you to assess the ability of candidates experiencing stress, anxiety or depression.

If selection normally involves a test, be sure that it does not discriminate against someone experiencing stress, anxiety or depression:

- Allowing candidates to be supported or accompanied at meetings and interviews by a support worker or advocate.
- Being flexible around time and dates. This is especially important if a candidate requires a support worker or if they experience side effects such as sleep disturbance or fatigue associated with medication.

- Allowing a candidate more time to complete tasks or tests devised to assess skills, which are not time critical. This may be especially appropriate for candidates who are not used to a working environment.
- Building in rest or toilet breaks and provide ready access to drinking water. This will be especially important for candidates taking medication, which can have side effects like fatigue or excessive thirst.
- Consult candidates experiencing stress, anxiety or depression so that necessary adjustments can be made, e.g. providing written tests in large print if there is an associated sight problem or allowing breaks.
- Discuss the test with the test publisher and seek guidance on possible adjustments.

Remember people returning to work after a period of mental illness or unemployment may lack confidence, but communication and interpersonal skills are likely to develop once in post.

Post job-offer

Once someone has been offered a job you may need to put in adjustments to ensure they can perform to the best of their ability.

Start getting the adjustments in place as soon as is practicable after you have made an appointment – it may take time to set up reasonable adjustments and, in some instances, to secure Access to Work funding.

People who experience stress, anxiety or depression are not all the same and any adjustments required will vary from person to person. Many people need few, if any, adjustments. The most important single adjustment many organisations need to make concerns attitudes and assumptions:

- Ensure that you have a clear, credible and well communicated disability policy that includes mental ill health so that employees feel safe talking about their mental health.
- Ensure that training on managing disability and appropriate disability awareness is provided regularly.

Consult the individual and make sure the employee's manager or supervisor understands the agreed adjustments. Appropriate disability awareness training can be useful for the candidate's team but only if the individual is comfortable with this.

Completing a 'tailored adjustment plan' with new employees who have a disability, mental health condition or with an employee who develops one is a good way of recording and reviewing adjustments that have been agreed and actions that will be taken if the employee is off sick.

To see an example of a tailored adjustment plan and to download a template, visit Business Disability Forum's website at **businessdisabilityforum.org.uk** or contact **Business Disability Forum's Advice Service** on telephone number **+44-(0)20-7403-3020** or by email **advice@businessdisabilityforum.org.uk**.

Building in regular reviews of adjustments, for example at the end of the probationary period, in regular supervisory sessions and performance appraisals will help ensure that the adjustments are still effective.

Ensure that you take the same approach to adjustments when a person who experiences stress, anxiety or depression applies for promotion, again not making assumptions about what the employee can or cannot do.

Working arrangements to retain employees

You may need to provide additional workplace adjustments after induction, for those who either acquire a disability during the course of their employment or whose condition or needs change.

The following list is not exhaustive and you may need to explore other adjustments in consultation with your employee.

- Allowing flexible working hours and working arrangements. For example, a later start and finish time or more regular rest or toilet breaks during the day.
- Offering support with prioritising workload, e.g. time management training and stress management training.
- If required, providing a safe, secure and confidential place to store and take medication and easy access to drinking water.
- Accepting inconsistencies in behaviour or mood.
- If required, allowing time off work for rehabilitation, assessments and medical, counselling or psychotherapy appointments.
- Encouraging feedback. Praising employees' achievements instils confidence; constructive criticism helps to define boundaries and expectations.
- Appreciating that a person with anxiety or depression may require extra management support. Allow additional time for supervision where necessary and if appropriate provide a support worker.

- Allowing the employee extra time to carry out certain tasks where appropriate.
- Providing equipment to help the employee, e.g. colour coding, an electronic calendar or a Dictaphone can be useful for employees experiencing memory difficulties.
- Making changes to the work environment. For example, room dividers, other soundproofing or visual barriers can be useful for an employee who has difficulties with concentration or memory, a private room where an employee can take a rest will help an employee experiencing distress or fatigue.
- Being prepared to reallocate some duties throughout the team, remember this does not mean that the core tasks need to be removed from the job.
- Providing formal and informal support systems such as employee welfare schemes or disability networks and encouraging employees to take advantage of them.
- Recognising that everyone is different and will have their own distinctive mannerisms, behavioural patterns and personality traits. Promote an open and supportive culture that recognises and accepts that, at times, some people with mental health conditions may communicate or behave in ways that are different to other employees.

Induction, training and development

Disability and the need to make adjustments should be embedded in all policies such as policies on sickness, training, and performance appraisals.

New recruits should be made aware of these policies during the induction procedure.

Whether an employee experiencing stress, anxiety or depression is returning to work or starting work for the first time, ensure they have a thorough induction.

It is important that your standard induction and training programme are accessible, so an employee experiencing stress, anxiety or depression can access the same information as everyone else.

You may also want to provide a workplace mentor to ensure supportive training. This can provide another employee with valuable personal development.

- Communicate expectations of the employee clearly. Outline the job requirements and how they fit into the overall business objectives.
- Ensure that the person is confident and comfortable with existing tasks before you look at increasing the pace of the work or introducing new tasks.
- Be sensitive. Group induction activities can require strong social skills and be difficult for those who lack confidence or have low self-esteem. Provide support in team building and icebreaking activities if appropriate.

Employment adjustments for people experiencing Stress, Anxiety and Depression

- Provide training and resources to equip the individual to perform their role. Some employees experiencing stress, anxiety and depression may need additional managerial support and supervision in the induction period.
- Use an external support worker if the employee would find this useful.
- Make sure everyone is aware of any employee support and welfare services and knows how to access them.

Ensure that employees experiencing stress, anxiety or depression have equal access to further in-house and external training, meetings and career development opportunities.

Supporting an employee who becomes distressed at work

Anyone can become upset and distressed at work, regardless of whether they have a mental health condition. Managers need to be able to identify and respond sensitively and appropriately to individuals who are going through a difficult time.

Line managers should be alert to the possibility that their employees are under excessive pressure or that they might have an undisclosed or as yet undiagnosed disability and need support.

Be alert to the following potential warning signs and symptoms:

- High levels of sporadic or prolonged absence.
- A significant change in mood or uncharacteristic behaviour.
- An unusual deterioration in the standard of the employee's work, reduced productivity, poor judgement or indecision.
- An insistence on taking on unrealistically high levels of work or working unsustainable hours.
- Poor morale or lack of co-operation.
- Uncharacteristic mistakes or accidents.
- Frequent complaints of tiredness or aches and pains.
- Significant weight gain or weight loss.
- Alcohol or drug abuse.

It is important that line managers and others feel confident about how to support an employee who becomes distressed. However, while you should be alert to the signs of mental distress you should not attempt diagnosis or treatment. The following principles may be helpful:

- Ask the person how you can support them and what they would find useful, e.g. someone to talk to, or some time to be on their own.
- Ask if there is anyone they would like contacted, e.g. a friend, partner, relative, or colleague.
- Provide a suitable space for the person to express emotion and compose themselves in comfort and privacy.
- Once the person has recovered sufficiently, they may want to carry on working or they may need to take a break or just go home early. Try your best not to let the person leave your premises alone if they are still very distressed.
- The employee may feel embarrassed about the incident. Reassure them that they are valued and supported. If the individual requires a longer period of absence stay in regular contact and give them every opportunity to request any adjustments that would enable them to return to work.

Follow-up actions:

- Do not ignore the fact that the person was distressed or pretend it did not happen. Instead deal with the situation directly and honestly in a supportive way.
- Ask the employee if there is anything you can do to support them and make sure they are aware of the support the organisation offers including reasonable adjustments.
- When the person feels ready, discuss if work has contributed to their distress. Listen without passing judgement and make sure you address their concerns seriously.
- If appropriate, discuss the possibility of seeking professional help. Encourage the person to get help, if applicable, from the welfare officer or occupational health department, their GP or other health professional.

Crisis

In rare circumstances you may be required to support an employee who is in crisis, and is a risk to themselves or to others.

In this situation, where possible alert the emergency contact of their choice. Ensure that these are kept up to date for every employee. A tailored adjustment plan is a good way of doing this. Go to [**businessdisabilityforum.org.uk**](https://businessdisabilityforum.org.uk) to download a copy.

If this is not possible, contact the duty social worker at your local social services for advice or intervention or if necessary and appropriate in the circumstances, the emergency services.

Try to work with the individual to remove or manage the triggers that exacerbate their distress.

Consult the employee about what they would like to be done should they experience such distress at work again.

Harassment

A person who is experiencing stress, anxiety or depression may be particularly vulnerable to harassment from their colleagues.

As an employer, you must take all reasonable steps to deal with harassment. Harassment includes not only physical or verbal abuse but also anything which violates a person's dignity or creates an intimidating, hostile, degrading humiliating or offensive environment.

Harassment stems from stereotyping, lack of understanding, intolerance of difference and fear. To prevent bullying and harassment of anyone you should:

- Ensure your organisation has clear policies on workplace bullying and harassment and that complaints are investigated promptly and effectively. Ensure these policies are communicated across the organisation through campaigns and awareness raising initiatives.
- Make it clear that any harassment, including on the grounds of disability, will not be tolerated and that offenders will be dealt with through your disciplinary procedures.
- Ensure management understands that people who experience stress, anxiety or depression experience increased risk of harassment and provide training for line managers to help them to identify and manage incidents connected to bullying and harassment in the workplace.
- Make the employee aware of their right to equal treatment, their entitlement to make a complaint and to initiate a grievance.
- Allow employees access to support networks internally or externally from work. If possible ensure employees who have experienced bullying or harassment have access to professional and confidential counselling.
- Ensure appropriate training is implemented across your workforce to challenge stereotyping.

Further sources of reference

Useful organisations

Business Disability Forum

Nutmeg House, 60 Gainsford Street,
London SE1 2NY

Tel: +44-(0)20-7403-3020

Website: businessdisabilityforum.org.uk

Business Disability Forum (BDF) is a not-for-profit membership organisation that supports businesses to recruit and retain disabled employees and serve disabled customers.

Business Disability Forum provides pragmatic support, expertise, advice, training and networking opportunities between businesses. Our aim is to transform the life chances – and experience – of disabled people as employees and consumers.

Mind

15-19 Broadway,
Stratford, London E15 4BQ

Tel: +44(0)20-9519-2122

Email: supportservices@mind.org.uk

Website: mind.org.uk

Mind is a charity that provides information about mental health via their info line, their legal line as well as on their website.

Business Disability Forum gratefully acknowledges the help of Mind with the advice and guidance included in this Briefing.

Mental health foundation

Colechurch House,
1 London Bridge Walk,
London SE1 2SX

Tel: +44(0)20-7803-1100

Website: mentalhealth.org.uk

The Mental Health Foundation specialises in research and policy development, with a focus on preventing mental health problems.

Centre for mental health

2d21, Technopark,
90 London Road,
South Bank,
London SE1 6LN

Tel: +44(0)20-7717-1558

Email: contact@centreformentalhealth.org.uk

Website: centreformentalhealth.org.uk

The Centre for Mental Health is an independent UK mental health charity aiming to inspire people of all ages with or at risk of mental ill health.

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Registered in England No: 2603700.**



Contact us

Business Disability Forum
Nutmeg House
60 Gainsford Street
London
SE1 2NY

Tel: +44-(0)20-7403-3020

Fax: +44-(0)20-7403-0404

Email: enquiries@businessdisabilityforum.org.uk

Web: businessdisabilityforum.org.uk