



Protecting workers' health and safety

in renewable energy

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Introduction

The renewables industry has witnessed massive growth in the last decade, but this has not been accompanied by the robust health and safety processes we see in other forms of energy generation.

As a result, professionals in renewables are exposed to a significantly higher risk of injury or ill-health.

Working in any job should not compromise your wellbeing, but there is a unique dynamic in renewables because it is growing rapidly as we respond to the climate emergency.

Estimates suggest we need to create a 400,000-strong skilled energy workforce over the next three decades to deliver net zero.

To achieve this, the renewables industry must be welcoming and inclusive for all new employees, and ensuring their safety, health and dignity is a key part of this.

Expert evidence shows that effective worker engagement is key to health and safety. Prospect, with our long involvement in the energy sector, is actively tackling the issues that matter to people working in renewables.

Prospect represents the interests of over 22,000 members working across all parts of the energy sector, and increasingly, in renewables.

Our members are engineers, managers and specialists and we campaign on their behalf for a sensible, informed approach to critical questions, such as energy resilience, their pay and conditions and health and safety.



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HSE intervention

Renewables – offshore wind in particular – has never had a strong safety record.

Construction, operation, maintenance and decommissioning of windfarms, be that offshore or on, present significant unique challenges and multiple hazards. These have led to a number of high-profile incidents in recent years.

While safety standards have generally improved over the last decade, in more recent years worrying evidence has emerged that this is tailing off, perhaps even going backwards.

Following serious incidents both in the UK and elsewhere, the Health and Safety Executive was forced to intervene.

It wrote to G+ and SafetyOn, the employers' health and safety bodies covering offshore and onshore wind respectively, warning that "improvement in health and safety performance has at best stalled if not reversed".

The HSE highlighted a series of concerns, including fatigue, cost-reductions, training and supervision and inspections of work equipment.

This is underlined by the fact that, in 2020, the rate of lost time to injuries in offshore renewables was four times as high as in offshore oil and gas, itself a high hazard industry. While the rate in onshore renewables was far better, it was still higher than in the oil industry.

There are no published figures for rates of occupational ill-health in renewables, but across the economy as a whole they are rising at worrying speeds.


We know from members that long hours, fatigue and stress are rife in renewables. The industry already publishes data on accident and incidents, and it must urgently supplement this with health data so we can collectively work together to reduce the risk to health.

"Prospect, with our long involvement in the energy sector, is actively tackling the issues that matter to people in renewables."

Sue Ferns

Prospect senior deputy general secretary



A close-up photograph of a worker wearing a high-visibility yellow and orange safety vest and yellow gloves. The worker is using a yellow and black power drill to work on a dark, reflective solar panel. The background is slightly blurred, showing more solar panels and a clear sky. The overall scene is brightly lit, suggesting an outdoor setting during the day.

Union safety reps
and joint consultation
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Employee consultation

While the hazards in renewables are various and complex, they are not the only industry with these risks.

As a union, we have huge experience of working with employers in many high hazard industries – including conventional and nuclear generation, electricity transmission and distribution, aviation and scientific research – to deliver a healthy and safe workplace.

Trade unions are the most effective tool we have in ensuring healthy and safe workplaces – our experience tells us this, but independent safety experts agree.

Union safety reps and joint consultation arrangements have been shown to reduce accident rates by as much as 50%, and the higher the number of trade union members in a workplace the lower the number of accidents and cases of ill health.

Despite this employee consultation in renewables on health and safety matters is poor – members, the HSE and employers have told us so.

Consulting staff on health and safety risks is vital – workers well understand the risks they work with and often know how to control them too and Prospect believes that renewables workers should expect at least the levels of engagement and informed consultation as their colleagues in other comparable industries.

We are therefore extremely concerned that UK laws requiring employers to consult employees and their representatives on health and safety matters do not extend to the territorial seas, the UK continental shelf or Renewable Energy Zones.

Nearly all other health and safety laws apply offshore, and the offshore oil and gas sector has regulations that allow for

health and safety committees to be formed at installation level. But the same does not apply in offshore renewables, and this is a huge oversight.

We are therefore calling on the government to extend the scope the laws that govern consultation with employees and their representatives to offshore renewables.

Until that happens, we want all offshore renewables employers to consult their workforce via health and safety committees and to uphold the onshore rights of health and safety representatives in offshore environments.

Given the companies' commitment to good safety, often with Health and Safety representatives in other parts of their UK business, this would help them to protect your health and safety by going beyond compliance with inadequate UK law.

National electricity health and safety committee



Over decades of operation in the energy sector we have established national consultation frameworks with employers, including the main generation and distribution employers' associations.

Prospect is an active member of the National HESAC, the national health and safety committee, which provides


the union with a forum to discuss concerns, how they should be addressed and share information.

For over 20 years, National HESAC has run a health and safety strategy which aims to ensure the continuous improvement in the energy sector's management of health and safety.

The current work programme, in addition to developing safe systems of working under Covid includes arrangements to tackle musculoskeletal disorders, fatigue and work-related stress. This has valuable experience that can be applied to renewables.

The National HESAC programme includes arrangements to tackle musculoskeletal disorders, fatigue and work-related stress



A low-angle photograph of a white wind turbine tower against a clear blue sky. A worker in a safety harness and helmet is climbing the tower, suspended by a rope. The worker is positioned in the lower third of the frame. The tower's surface shows horizontal ribbing. In the bottom left corner, there are overlapping geometric shapes in shades of green and yellow.

Working over
16 hours has a
similar impact on
your reactions
as drinking two
pints of beer

Fatigue and human factors



Energy is an inherently hazardous industry, which is only compounded by the harsh and remote environments in which wind farms are located and the low margins with which the industry operates.

Wherever you are working, be that in an office or a nacelle, and whatever task you are carrying out, it is vital that anything which impedes your ability to make sound decisions is thoroughly assessed and carefully managed.

We have pushed energy employers hard to consider these “human and organisational factors” more actively, be that competence standards, clear communications and procedures, workload and staffing levels, and leadership.

Fatigue is one such factor we have significant concerns about. Not only can fatigue lead to health problems in itself, but it can also result in slower reactions, reduced ability to process information and underestimation of risk, leading to errors and accidents, ill-health and injury.

Prospect research has shown that energy sector employees are struggling with fatigue, potentially, inadvertently, putting themselves and their colleagues at risk.

Despite employers highlighting the risks, one in five respondents to our recent survey said that at some point in the past year they had felt too fatigued to work safely. Of these, three in five did not feel comfortable telling their employer.

Fatigue needs to be actively managed, just like any other hazard, through a process of risk assessment and review.

Prospect believes that in line with industry advice, employers should adopt a risk-based approach to fatigue which ensures that risks are identified, understood, monitored and controlled.

We have guidance to support our members and reps in identifying working arrangements that are likely to cause fatigue, and to support them during discussions with their employers about what should happen to control it.

We continue to engage with employers on fatigue at a national and company level to push for better risk management and better working environments.

Stress guidance



Cost pressures can mean work must be completed within tight timeframes, which is exacerbated by weather conditions, or due to many different companies working on the same project, all of which can increase risk.

These factors also pile pressure on employees, who face increasing workloads, long hours and excessive pressure to deliver on time. All of this has led to a mounting problem with stress.

Recent Prospect research has highlighted the depth of the problem. Our survey revealed:

- More than one in five (22%) members working in the electricity industry feel overwhelmed or highly stressed most of the time, or every day.

- A further 47% said they feel this way some of the time.
- Two in three members said their typical workload was heavy or extremely heavy.

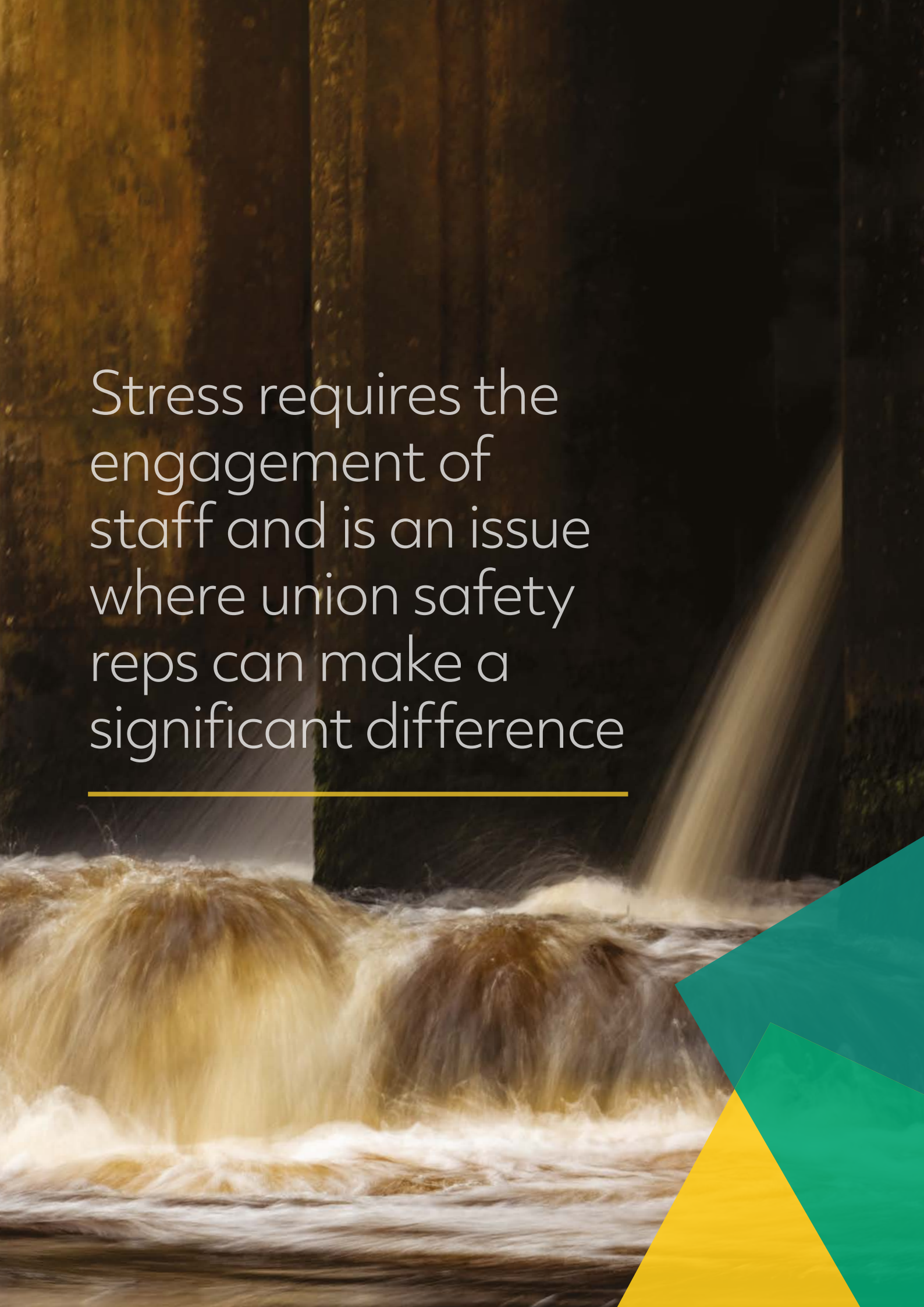
As well as being physically and psychologically harmful, stress affects how people behave and the decisions they make, potentially increasing the risk of accidents.

While employers in the sector increasingly recognise the toll that stress has on staff health, safety, attendance, morale and service delivery, too few have implemented sustainable solutions that get to the root of the problem.

We continue to work with many employers at a national and company level to implement tried and tested

methodologies to tackling stress and we are pressing others to follow this good practice.

We have extensive guidance for members and reps on workplace approaches to supporting employees with poor mental health, and how to tackle stress at source – the only truly sustainable approach.



Stress requires the
engagement of
staff and is an issue
where union safety
reps can make a
significant difference



How Prospect can help you

As well as working to protect your health and safety, Prospect membership offers plenty of other benefits for professionals working in renewables.

We ensure that our members' voices are heard in all aspects of their work, such as pay and conditions, training and development and making sure that you are treated fairly and respectfully.

Other Prospect member benefits:

- Professional and expert advice
- Career development
- 24-hour LegalLine
- Personal injury scheme
- Free wills
- Financial advice and planning
- Discounts on shopping and bills

Find out more and join Prospect now:

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