

Extreme heat at work: is the UK prepared?

Discussion meeting held on 29th June 2026 organised by P&SC in partnership with The Physiological Society who are celebrating their 150th Anniversary Year



L-R: **Ruth Wilkinson**, Head of Public Affairs, Institute of Occupational Safety; **Sam Carling MP**, Chair, Parliamentary & Scientific Committee; **Dr Josh Foster**, Lecturer in Environmental Physiology and Director of the Thermoregulation Lab, King's College London; **Professor Emma Howard-Boyd CBE**, Professor in Practice, UK Adaptation and Resilience, Grantham Institute, and Chair National Heat Risk Commission; **Viscount Stansgate**, President, Parliamentary & Scientific Committee; **Lord Taylor of Holbeach CBE**, Member, Parliamentary & Scientific Committee; and **Lord Hacking**, Life Member, Parliamentary & Scientific Committee.

As hotter summers become increasingly common, protecting people at work from extreme heat is becoming an important question for health, productivity and employment policy. But would a maximum working temperature provide the answer, or does the science point towards a more sophisticated approach?

June 2026 provided a stark indication of the challenge. UK temperatures reached 37.7°C, the highest ever recorded for the month, while an estimated 2,700 deaths were linked to the May and June heatwaves. The economic impact was also substantial: the June heatwave alone was estimated to have resulted in 24 million lost working hours and £1.15 billion in lost output.

Against this backdrop, the Parliamentary and Scientific Committee, chaired by Sam Carling MP, brought together parliamentarians, scientists and policy experts on 29 June for a discussion meeting held in partnership with The Physiological Society. Two questions were at its heart: how can the UK respond effectively to extreme heat in the workplace, and how can the UK effectively respond to the growing calls for maximum working temperatures?

The UK currently has no maximum working temperature. With heatwaves expected to become more frequent and intense, and growing political interest in the issue, the attraction of establishing a clear upper limit is understandable. But the discussion highlighted why determining when heat becomes

dangerous is considerably more complicated than reading a thermometer.

More than a number

Ambient air temperature alone does not determine the risk heat presents to a worker.

Humidity, wind speed and solar radiation all affect how the body experiences heat. Individual physiology matters too. Age, pre-existing conditions, medication, pregnancy and menopause can affect vulnerability, while occupational factors such as physical workload, PPE and a worker's ability to adapt their working conditions can compound those risks.

Dr Josh Foster, Chair of the Steering Group for the Physiological Society's work on extreme heat in the workforce, highlighted the importance of these individual variables when determining thresholds for action.

Measures such as Wet Bulb Globe Temperature can provide a more comprehensive picture of thermal stress by taking account of humidity, wind speed and solar radiation alongside ambient temperature. Physiological evidence could therefore support graded

thresholds for action, reflecting different working conditions, workloads and individual vulnerabilities, rather than relying solely on a single maximum temperature.

This human-centred approach also exposes important gaps in the evidence. More research is needed to understand individual responses to heat and its effects on comparatively under-researched groups, including pregnant and menopausal women and older people.

From evidence to action

Understanding the science is only part of the challenge. The discussion also considered how evidence can be translated into practical action by Government and employers.

Emma Howard Boyd highlighted opportunities presented by Government reviews and parliamentary discussions across different policy areas. Schools, public service workers, public awareness, tropical nights and infrastructure for vulnerable communities all form part of the wider challenge of adapting to extreme heat. These themes were

subsequently explored further in the National Heat Risk Commission's first report, *A heat circuit breaker for the UK*, published in September 2026.

Dr Olivia Shears highlighted both the risks presented by extreme heat and the unequal way in which those risks are distributed. While further research is needed, her presentation made clear that uncertainty should not become a reason for delaying adaptation. Some interventions that are 'low-regret' and cost-effective and can be implemented while the evidence base continues to develop.

Many interventions required to respond to the challenge of extreme heat already exist but employers do not understand their responsibility for action uniformly across the economy. Ruth Wilkinson, Head of Policy and Public Affairs at the Institution of Occupational Safety & Health (IOSH), argued that climate-related hazards should be incorporated into established occupational safety and health management systems, using risk assessment and a prevention-first approach through the hierarchy of control.

Practical measures include improving workplace design and ventilation, adapting working patterns, providing suitable welfare facilities and drinking water, strengthening emergency plans and ensuring employees receive appropriate information and training. Her presentation also noted that climate-related occupational risks extend beyond heat to air pollution, ultraviolet radiation, extreme weather and vector-borne disease, affecting indoor as well as outdoor workers.

What should happen next?

The discussion helped inform the Physiological Society's report *Climate change-driven extreme heat, occupational health and productivity: A need for human-centred policy in the UK*, published in September 2026.

The report calls for extreme heat targets that take wider physiological risk factors into account and for physiologically informed guidance to help employers protect workers while maintaining productivity. It also recommends updated regulation, further research into the

effects of heat on health, safety and productivity, and coordinated public health messaging across the four nations. Physiologists and physiological evidence, it argues, should form part of the Government's consultation and decision-making process.

Among the specific proposals are a review of the Approved Code of Practice under the Workplace (Health, Safety and Welfare) Regulations 1992 and Cabinet Office coordination of cross-departmental work on human-centred maximum working temperatures.

As the UK adapts to more frequent periods of extreme heat, the question may therefore be more complicated than simply asking: how hot is too hot to work?

The evidence suggests a more useful question: when does heat become unsafe for a particular worker, doing a particular job, in particular conditions – and what should employers and Government do about it?