

Parliamentary and Scientific Committee

‘Extreme heat in the Workplace – developing effective responses’

A meeting held in partnership with the Physiological Society

As we experience more frequent, prolonged intense periods of hot weather in the UK, a better co-ordinated response is required across policy makers, employers, trade unions, health and safety professionals and researchers as well as the general public. Introducing this very topical (and for the first time live-streamed) discussion meeting, Sam Carling MP, Chair of the Parliamentary and Scientific Committee welcomed speakers and visitors, with Viscount Stansgate, P&SC President, taking the opportunity to congratulate the Physiological Society on both its 150 years and new Royal Charter.

Dr Olivia Shears, leads the Climate Change Risk Assessment team in the Climate Change Committee secretariat. She spoke on the impact extreme heat has on productivity today, and what future scenarios we need to protect workers against. UK government has a legal obligation to assess climate risks every five years, and the CCC a statutory requirement to give independent advice to government on those risks. Her team’s fourth Climate Change Risk Assessment Independent Assessment ([CCRA4-IA](#)) and the Well-Adapted UK Report was published in May, setting out priority climate change risks, with a comprehensive package of solutions setting out actions and enablers across 14 key systems in our society, including health, land, energy and the economy. Slides illustrated heat wave health dangers, with the objective to target and stabilise resulting mortality rates.

Human Environmental Physiology Lecturer in the Faculty of Life Sciences and Medicine at King’s College London, Dr Josh Foster, summarised his research, focusing on human physiological response to heat and humidity, worker vulnerabilities, and occupational safety and productivity. He has investigated a variety of groups, including older people, those pregnant, those with co-morbidities and workers in different occupations; why we get hot, and impacts on the body, especially mental and cardiovascular health. People generate heat, and sweating is a very effective process, unique to humans. There is a need to identify and evaluate individuals particularly at risk, and develop sustainable cooling solutions which can maintain and improve health and productivity.

With a distinguished career in environment and climate affairs, Professor Emma Howard Boyd CBE, is currently Chair of the independent National Heat Risk Commission, based at the London School of Economics and Political Science. There has been increased interest in extreme heat since the 2022 heatwave; there are risks for education, transport, and public service workers

amongst others, and we need to move from present emergency responses to heatwaves, to a national debate on long term strategy.

Final speaker Ruth Wilkinson, is Head of Policy at the Institution of Occupational Safety and Health (IOSH), the professional body for health and safety in the workplace; she spoke about the role of OSH organisations in responding to increasing risks from climate change. Describing health hazards at work, there is the necessity for risk assessments. There is currently no maximum legal temperature for workers in the UK; more legislation may be required, and IOSH is taking the threat very seriously.

Beginning a varied Q&A session, Sam asked our speakers what government should be doing now; it was felt that they should sign up to appropriate changes in buildings especially schools, and provide more public information through the media. Schools need more guidance, closures impact working parents.

Massive economic effects would result from a legal maximum working temperature for all workers; different improvements for different workers are better, air conditioning isn’t always necessary, other small practical changes can make a difference.

Further evidence-based research is needed, making use of international practices and experience. Wet bulb measurement, hydration requirements, electrolyte replenishment, effects of higher humidity, and night time working, were areas suggested for further study; not all people react to high temperatures in the same way.

Blanket regulation was not felt not be feasible, sensible practical guidance was suggested; there can be a conflict between H&S and productivity though there is a need to protect those people in the workplace who may not be able to protect themselves.

Government needs to realise that heat causes excess deaths, and should now be considered in national planning; they also need to inform and alert the public to heatwave issues more effectively.

Sue Wharton

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