

Post Traumatic Incident and Resilience policy

**This document outlines the Scottish Prison
Service Policy in relation to Post Traumatic
Incident and Resilience**

Published by Human Resources, Organisational Development
Directorate

Published 21 August 2026

Unlocking Potential - Transforming Lives.

Policy Number:

HR097/001

Directorate Owners:

Organisational Development Directorate, HR

Policy Scope:

All SPS Employees

Associated Policies:

[Employee Wellbeing Policy](#)

[Health and Safety Policies](#)

[Attendance Management Policy](#)

[SPS Information Management Policies](#)

Approved by:

Director, Organisational Development Directorate

Effective date:

21 August 2026

Review Date:

This policy will be reviewed as and when required to reflect changing business and / or legislative requirements



Policy Content

1.0 Introduction.....1

2.0 Aim.....1

3.0 Policy Statement.....1

4.0 Scope.....2

5.0 Definitions2

6.0 Roles and Responsibilities3

7.0 Understanding a Potentially Traumatic Event3

7.1 What is a Potentially Traumatic Event 3

7.2 Exposure to Potentially Traumatic Events 4

7.3 Vulnerability to Potential Traumatic Stress..... 4

7.4 Psychological First Aid (PFA)..... 4

8.0 Post Traumatic Incident Support Proceure5

8.1 Initial Response 5

8.2 Potentially Traumatic Event Reporting Portal..... 5

8.3 Follow-Up Within 28-Day Period 6

8.4 Second Email After Watchful Waiting Period 6

8.5 Secondary Trauma 6

9.0 Extended Support Options7

9.1 Retraumatising Event..... 7

9.2 Post Event Support..... 7

9.3 Informal Peer Support..... 8

10.0Health and Safety Reporting8

11.0Assaults/Injury at Work8

12.0Enhancing Workplace Resilience.....9

13.0Manager Support9

14.0Other Mental Health Support9

15.0Reducing Barriers to Seeking Help10

16.0Information Sharing and Consent10

1.0 Introduction

Employees of the Scottish Prison Service may be exposed to potential traumatic stress as part of their duties. The health, safety and wellbeing of our employees is a priority and therefore the purpose of this policy is to ensure support is available after potentially traumatic workplace events, focusing on reducing the risk of psychological injury.

The policy promotes resilience by encouraging self-care, educates employees on trauma to help them recognise risks, and normalises response protocols. A person-centred approach is taken, emphasising proactive, preventative, and rehabilitative measures to aid in recovery and reduce the risk of re-traumatisation.

Employees experiencing symptoms of psychological injury after trauma can access the trauma helpline or other support services identified in this policy.

2.0 Aim

The aim of this policy is to support our employees by helping them understand and manage their responses following a potentially traumatic event, while also recognising when additional support may be needed. It promotes early identification and consistent management of psychological injuries and remains mindful of the impact on others involved and the potential for recurring symptoms.

3.0 Policy Statement

Effective from August 2026, this policy replaces the Critical Incident Response and Support guidance contained in the Employee Wellbeing policy.

It provides a framework for managing employees affected by potentially traumatic workplace events, prioritising wellbeing, ensuring a supportive and compassionate approach, and offering access to specialist services through Occupational Health (OH) and the Employee Assistance Programme (EAP).

Developed with Trade Union consultation and aligned with best practices, including the internationally recognised Psychological First Aid (PFA) model promoted by the World Health Organisation (WHO), it aims to promote resilience, peer support, and learning to minimise future risks. All personal data will be handled in accordance with General Data Protection Regulation (GDPR).

4.0 Scope

This policy applies to all SPS employees, both operational and non-operational, and focuses on providing post-trauma support and promoting resilience in the workplace.

It emphasises the importance of understanding how to maintain wellbeing after potentially traumatic events.

5.0 Definitions

For simplification of this document the following terms and definitions apply:

- **Potentially Traumatic event** - An event that severely impacts an individual or group's ability to cope, threatening their sense of safety and overall wellbeing.
- **Post traumatic incident support** - Arrangements in place to support SPS employees' wellbeing after exposure to potentially traumatic events.
- **Mental health** – A state of wellbeing where individuals realise their potential, cope with normal life stresses, work productively, and contribute to their community (World Health Organisation, 2022).
- **Lifelines Scotland** – A national NHS project established in 2016 to support the wellbeing of staff and volunteers in high-risk roles.
- **Primary post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD)** - A condition some people develop after experiencing or witnessing a traumatic event (PTSD UK, 2019).
- **Secondary trauma/ secondary traumatic stress/ vicarious trauma (STS)** - Indirect exposure to a traumatic event that can cause symptoms similar to PTSD (PTSD UK, 2019).
- **Resilience** - The capacity to cope with challenges and recover from difficult situations (Gilligan, 2004).
- **Psychological First Aid (PFA)** – A model recommended by the World Health Organisation to reduce distress from traumatic events and promote adaptive functioning and coping (WHO, 2022).
- **Watchful Waiting Period** – A four-week observation period for PTSD, allowing individuals time to adjust to a traumatic event using their own resources, without immediate intervention unless symptoms worsen (NICE, 2005).

- **Employee Assistance Programme (EAP)** - provide confidential support for SPS employees dealing with personal or work-related challenges.

6.0 Roles and Responsibilities

This section outlines the duties and expectations of individuals in accordance with this policy. It serves as guidance, not an exhaustive list.

- **Senior Management** - Responsible for making decisions consistent with the policy and ensuring health, safety, and wellbeing risks are identified and managed. They will conduct post incident reviews to identify areas for improvement.
- **Line Manager** – Provides oversight and guidance to team members, ensuring that actions promote emotional wellbeing and support recovery. Acts in accordance with the Post-Traumatic Incident Support Procedure. Contributes to post-incident reviews and is expected to familiarise themselves with the signs of psychological distress and the supportive measures outlined in this document.
- **Employee** – Responsible for promptly reporting incidents and following established protocols. Employees should familiarise themselves with the identified protocols contained in this document and available support measures.
- **Human Resources (HR)** – Provides guidance on this policy and supports managers and employees in its application. HR monitors incident data and outcomes to identify trends, provide oversight, coordinate necessary administration, and manage relationships with service providers.
- **Trade Union Representative (TU)** – Co-operates with SPS to ensure effective implementation of the policy, consulting with management on any concerns and encouraging staff to seek support.

7.0 Understanding a Potentially Traumatic Event

7.1 What is a Potentially Traumatic Event

A potentially traumatic event may involve a direct threat to an employee or colleagues (e.g. major incidents, assaults, accidents, hazardous environments, sudden death) or indirect threats, such as exposure to others' suffering (e.g. dealing with serious injuries, performing or witnessing CPR, the aftermath of suicide, or

interacting with distressed families, friends, or bystanders). An event that is potentially traumatic for one person may not be traumatic for another.

7.2 Exposure to Potentially Traumatic Events

When exposed to potentially traumatic events, individuals may experience varying physiological and psychological responses. Initially, the body may enter a state of hyperarousal, characterised by increased heart rate, rapid breathing, and heightened senses, as the brain perceives a threat.

This response activates the stress system, releasing hormones like adrenaline and cortisol. Severe or prolonged trauma can overwhelm coping mechanisms, potentially leading to conditions like PTSD and symptoms such as intrusive memories, flashbacks, avoidance, and negative mood changes.

7.3 Vulnerability to Potential Traumatic Stress

Various factors influence how individuals respond to potentially traumatic events. These include aspects of the event itself, such as life threats and proximity to the victim, as well as personal factors like pre-existing health conditions, previous trauma, and personality traits. Coping styles also play a crucial role in recovery.

Childhood experiences, including adverse events and insecure attachments, can increase vulnerability by affecting self-esteem and trust in others. Social factors, such as the quality of support networks, socio-economic status, and cultural background, also impact responses to trauma.

7.4 Psychological First Aid (PFA)

Psychological First Aid (PFA) is an evidence-based approach endorsed by the World Health Organisation (WHO) to support individuals in the immediate aftermath of a traumatic event. It focuses on providing practical care, reducing distress, and promoting calm, while encouraging access to further support if needed. PFA involves active listening, ensuring basic needs are met, and offering reassurance, without pressuring individuals to discuss the trauma in detail. It aims to foster a sense of safety aiding in effective recovery.

8.0 Post Traumatic Incident Support Procedure

This section outlines the full response pathway for potentially traumatic events, including immediate actions, digital reporting, follow-up, and extended support. It is designed to ensure timely, compassionate, and consistent support for employees affected directly or indirectly by trauma in the workplace. Where a line manager is unavailable, directly involved in the incident, or otherwise unable to fulfil their responsibilities, the duty manager or another manager designated by the Head of Operations will assume responsibility for the actions outlined in this section.

8.1 Initial Response

When an employee is involved in a potentially traumatic event, they should report it to their line or duty manager as soon as possible. If a line manager becomes aware of such an event but the employee has not reported it, they should proactively check in and offer support.

The line manager's immediate priority is the employee's safety and wellbeing. This may include:

- Providing first aid or arranging medical assistance.
- Offering a safe space for recovery.
- Allowing the employee to leave the workplace if necessary.
- Ensuring the employee is not left alone if visibly distressed.

All attendees should be given a copy of the **Employee Support Booklet** (digital or paper) before leaving or as soon as practicable.

8.2 Potentially Traumatic Event Reporting Portal

Once immediate support has been provided, the line or duty manager must enter details of the incident on the **Potentially Traumatic Event Reporting Portal**, available via SharePoint. This is a mandatory step in the post-incident process.

Completing the portal:

- Formally records the incident.
- Triggers an automated email detailing support options.
- Sends the email to all impacted employees, their line and second line managers, Head of Operations, and HR Business Partner.

If an impacted employee is currently absent:

- The line manager should contact them by phone to relay the contents of the message.
- With the employee's consent, the message may be forwarded to their personal email address.

8.3 Follow-Up Within 28-Day Period

During the 28-day watchful waiting period, the line manager must maintain regular contact with the employee to monitor wellbeing and ensure they are aware of available support.

Managers are expected to use the **Watchful Waiting Contact Form** to:

- Confirm the employee received the initial support email.
- Ensure they understand the support options available.
- Check whether a referral to any support services is needed.
- Explain that a follow-up email will be sent at 28 days post-incident.

The form must be completed and returned to HR for retention in the employee's digital career folder.

Employees are also encouraged to complete the **EAP Post-Incident Support Questionnaire** during this period to assess their recovery and identify any further support needs.

8.4 Second Email After Watchful Waiting Period

At 28 days post-incident, an automated follow-up email will be sent to impacted employees. This email will:

- Re-share support resources.
- Prompt a wellbeing check-in.
- Encourage completion of the **EAP Post-Incident Support Questionnaire** again.

This second touchpoint ensures continued support and helps identify any emerging needs that may require further intervention.

8.5 Secondary Trauma

Secondary trauma can occur when individuals are indirectly exposed to potentially traumatic events, often through supporting others who have experienced trauma.

This can impact employees by causing emotional distress, burnout, or feelings of helplessness.

Individuals affected by secondary trauma can also access the EAP trauma helpline for confidential advice, guidance, and resources to help manage their wellbeing.

The **EAP Post-Incident Support Questionnaire** and **Watchful Waiting Contact Form** can also be used to provide support in these circumstances.

9.0 Extended Support Options

9.1 Retraumatising Event

When individuals face a potentially retraumatising event, it may trigger feelings similar to the original trauma, such as loss of control or safety, leading to emotional and physiological stress responses.

This can happen in various settings, often unintentionally. Line Managers should be mindful of events (e.g. DIPLAR, FAI, investigations, court proceedings) that could retraumatise employees.

In such cases, the line manager should complete the **Watchful Waiting Contact Form** with the employee and provide support if needed. Employees involved in any subsequent event can contact the EAP trauma helpline for support.

Employees are also encouraged to complete the **EAP Post-Incident Support Questionnaire** during this period to assess their recovery and identify any further support needs.

9.2 Post Event Support

Post event support is available for employees adversely impacted by potentially traumatic events, with particular attention to line managers dealing with significant risks or teams exposed to multiple serious incidents or accumulated stress. This support is also offered to those identified as being at higher risk due to repeated exposure to trauma.

Support is tailored to the individual's specific needs, considering the most challenging aspects of their role. Employees, including line managers, may request assistance when they or their teams have been affected by multiple incidents, exceptionally difficult situations, or particularly impactful bereavements.

Employees can engage with their local HR team, who will coordinate with the EACH team, Occupational Health, or the EAP to determine appropriate interventions. These may include:

- Referrals for psychological assessments or surveillance.
- Counselling or trauma-focused therapies.
- Group support for teams impacted by particularly traumatic events.

All responses and follow-up consultations remain confidential, with recommendations provided only with the employee's consent. For more information or to request support, managers should contact their local HR team, who will guide them through the available options.

9.3 Informal Peer Support

The SPS recognises the invaluable role of informal peer supporters in helping employees cope with potentially traumatic events. To support these individuals, informal peer supporters have access to additional resources, including the trauma helpline, if needed.

For more information, please refer to the available resources section.

10.0 Health and Safety Reporting

Employees should report any potentially traumatic event to their manager as soon as possible. The manager will follow local Health and Safety protocols, liaising with the Health and Safety coordinator as necessary. Reports will be handled confidentially, and statements may be requested in accordance with process. Managers should monitor employees for any adverse reactions throughout this process and offer support as necessary. For further information, please refer to the SPS Health and Safety policy.

11.0 Assaults/Injury at Work

Employees who sustain an injury while carrying out their duties may be eligible to apply for injury benefits. Employees should contact their line manager and/or HR for details on how to apply or refer to the [SPS Injury at Work Guidance](#) for further information.

Where an employee experiences an assault in the workplace, additional support may be available. For more details, employees can contact their line manager and/or HR or refer to the [SPS Assaults on Duty Guidance](#).

12.0 Enhancing Workplace Resilience

Employees are encouraged to take proactive steps in managing their mental, emotional, and physical health, as these are essential for building resilience. Incorporating regular self-care practices, such as maintaining a healthy work-life balance, staying physically active, and engaging in mindfulness or relaxation techniques, can greatly enhance an employee's ability to manage workplace challenges effectively.

The SPS provides a range of wellbeing resources to support staff, including the [Lifelines Scotland](#) website, which offers advice and information on topics such as staying well, seeking help, and supporting others. Employees also have access to the SPS specific e-module, Staying Well Road Trip, an interactive course on resilience and self-care. Additional resources include a Psychological First Aid toolkit, guidance on wellbeing conversations, peer support, reflective practice, and various online tools. Staff are encouraged to explore these resources or speak with their line manager or HR for further support.

13.0 Manager Support

A range of resources have been developed to assist line managers in supporting employees through this process. These include process flows, short videos, Q&A documents, training presentations, and booklets, all accessible via the resources link. Line managers should also note that they can contact the Trauma Helpline for personal support or to receive coaching advice on managing these incidents effectively.

14.0 Other Mental Health Support

The SPS have a variety of mental health services available to employees with any mental and/ or emotional wellbeing concerns. These include EAP, virtual mental health clinics, wellbeing apps/ desktop support, text support service and other supportive mechanisms available through charitable/ third party organisations.

Additionally, the SPS has developed a [Employee Wellbeing platform](#) available on SharePoint that serves as a comprehensive support hub, providing staff with access to a wealth of mental health resources and tools.

15.0 Reducing Barriers to Seeking Help

The SPS is committed to eliminating stigma, including self-stigma, which prevents individuals from seeking mental health support. Employees are encouraged to discuss their wellbeing concerns with their manager or HR.

The SPS does not tolerate any form of bullying or discrimination, and any instances will be addressed under the appropriate policies.

16.0 Information Sharing and Consent

All interactions related to this policy will be handled sensitively and confidentially in accordance with GDPR principles, with any information about potentially traumatic events retained by HR.

Occupational Health (OH) will use this information solely for assessing employee wellbeing and support needs, with all interactions based on consent and conducted in line with the OH provider's relevant policies.

Further Information:

The SPS recognises that from time-to-time employees may have questions or concerns relating to the Post Trauma and Resilience Policy. In certain situations, employees' rights and obligations regarding the Post Trauma and Resilience Policy may change. In these circumstances the SPS will abide by any statutory obligations.

The SPS wishes to encourage open discussion with employees to ensure that questions and problems can be resolved as quickly as possible. Employees are encouraged to seek clarification on any issues with the appropriate Line Manager in the first instance.

Sustainability

Improving our environmental performance and doing things in a more sustainable way should be seen as integral to our core business practices.

In line with the SPS Sustainable Policy and to demonstrate compliance with the Scottish Government's commitment to improving environmental and sustainable development performance, please be mindful if printing this document – keeping paper usage to a minimum (print only version), printing on both sides, and recycling.

Equality Statement

The SPS is an equal opportunities employer where all employees are treated with dignity and respect. We are fully committed to equality, diversity and human rights and to ensuring our culture, working environment, policies, processes and practices are free from bias. This policy applies to all employees regardless of protected characteristics, and, subject to any eligibility criteria, length of service, grade, working pattern or operational status.

This Policy has been subject to an Equalities & Human Rights Impact Assessment (EHRIA).

GDPR

This Policy has been subject to a Data Protection Impact Assessment (DPIA).

All personal or sensitive data processed under this policy must be managed in accordance with the SPS Information Management Policy. Employees responsible

for handling such data must ensure collection, storage, and disposal practices align with the relevant security standards, retention schedules and confidentiality protocols.

Inclusive Communications

It is our ambition to ensure that SPS documents are readable, accessible, and engaging for staff.

In formatting this document, good practice principles around engagement and inclusive communications have been adhered to.

If you require this document in an alternative format, please contact Human Resources.

Review and Monitoring

This policy will be reviewed as and when required to reflect changing business and/or legislative requirements.

Human Resources Policy and Guidance in SPS

SPS policies take into account current legislation, rules, regulations and best practice guidance from a range of professional and public bodies, including the following:



UK Civil
Service
Management
Code



UK Legislation



EU
Legislation



ACAS



CIPD Best
Practice