MENTAL HEALTH IN THE WORKPLACE

OCCUPATIONAL SAFETY & HEALTH STEAKHOLDER ALLIANCE

Occupational Safety and Health Stakeholder Alliance

Mental Health Position Paper

The Occupational Safety and Health Alliance is a coalition of 9 of the UK's most prominent safety and health organisations, formed (May 2023) with the sole objective of leveraging its unique 360 degree combination of competencies, experience and credibility to advance progressive improvement in the mitigation of risk factors which cause physical or mental health issues where people work.

Collectively the Alliance members' competencies span the full spectrum of Occupational Safety and Health related factors, from education and regulation to policy creation, professional standards and thought leadership. The Alliance will deliver a unified voice for the Occupational Safety and Health Industry, drawing on members collective expertise to inform and support OSH decision making across government policy maker, corporate and professional levels.

The Alliance will be selective in its engagement with subject matter, prioritising subjects which already pose substantial threat to the well-being of people, businesses, the economy and our Public Health infrastructure. For this reason, the Alliance's first point of engagement will be that of Mental Health. We will identify, prioritise, develop and implement measures to equip Occupational Safety and Health personnel together with department/function leaders within the (profession and thereby the) organisations they represent, to more effectively manage and mitigate the risk factors giving rise to mental issues in the workplace. This multi touch-point engagement recognises that issues can arise at any point within organisations and that mitigation and management is a collective responsibility.

In so doing the Alliance recognises and is respectful of the myriad initiatives led by such organisations as MIND, the Mental Health Foundation, the Chartered Institute of Personnel and Development, the British Standards Institution and others together with initiatives already deployed by individual members of the Alliance and the good practices evident in parts of our industrial landscape. Opportunities for smart collaboration will be taken.

It is the very fact of the formation of the Alliance and the unique opportunity its collective influence and credibility presents, which gives us the confidence to believe that we will add incremental value to the initiatives of others and the commitment to deliver.

While the UK has an enviable record in safety compared to many Western European Nations the continuing high incidence of injuries and fatalities confirms that there still remains significant scope and need for improvement.

However, the UK is less well advanced regarding the mitigation of mental health issues, where the upward trajectory of reported incidence is alarming and the consequences of which go far beyond the direct impact on individuals, their families and employers, to an already stretched NHS and social care structure.

Why focus on mental health?

The socio-economic backdrop to this mental health crisis is both stark and inter-connected and while the direct and legacy effects of the pandemic are likely to have exacerbated the scale of the problem, the underlying incidence trend and the consequences thereof, confirm that the call to action is of singular criticality.

The human cost: The true effects of mental health issues can only be truly known to the sufferer but the impact of such effects on the immediate family and wider social community is incalculable. Economic impact can be broadly determined but there is no such number for the human cost. The moral responsibility alone to reduce this burden in unarguable.

Work related statistics: The HSE in its most recent report (November 2023) confirms that:

- 875,000 workers were suffering from work-related stress, depression or anxiety (new or long-standing) which equates to approximately 50% of all reported workplace issues.
- 338,000 workers suffered a new case of work-related stress, depression or anxiety.
- Over 17 million working days were lost due to work-related stress, depression or anxiety.

It should be noted that these statistics refer to reported issues only and it is generally accepted that the actual number could be 2-3 times greater.

NHS statistics reveal the following…..waiting on statistical data from LH.

Overall UK statistics: In 2022 a joint report by the Mental Health Foundation and the London School of Economics estimated that the cost to the economy of all mental health issues was £117.9 billion. The charity MIND together with Deloittes, estimated the cost of work-related mental health issues to be between £53 billion and £56 billion, £10bn from the public sector and £43-46bn from the private sector.

To place the scale of these costs in context, the 2021/22 budgets for Defence, Transport and Education were £46bn, £30bn and £76bn respectively; source Public spending Statistics-gov.uk.

Productivity: The ONS confirmed a 0.6% reduction in Q1 2023 compared to Q1 2022 making it the weakest quarter since Q1 2013. Preliminary data form Q2 2023 suggests it is flat to Q1.

It is reasonable to assume that mental health issues are contributory.

Qualitative data sources:

- MIND: Their 2021/22 Workplace Wellbeing Index reported that 70% of employees experienced poor mental health because of work.
- British Safety Council: “according to a Business in the Community report, 61% of employees have experienced a mental health problem due to work and that one in three were diagnosed with a mental health issue”.
- Chartered Institute of Environmental Health (CIEH): A survey conducted in 2022 showed that the bosses of 46% of UK businesses had seen an increase in employees experiencing mental health issues.
- The WHO predicts that depression will be the most common global illness by 2030.

The Business case.

Pursuit of economic growth is regarded as the well-spring for future prosperity and competitive advantage and the stimulants from all sides of the political landscape are the subject of continuous debate and conjecture. What is not in debate is the fact that viable, profitable, sustainable UK businesses are pivotal to macro-economic and social well-being and productivity is to an increasing effect linked to the health of the employees.

Organisations whose Safety and Health culture is not cognisant of or conducive to the pro-active mitigation of factors which give rise to mental health issues could and do suffer multiple cost and operational complications including but not limited to:

- Reduced productivity
- Increased safety incidents
- Staff turnover and skills loss
- Recruitment challenges and costs
- Reputational damage
- Risk of litigation
- Loss of competitive advantage

It is the progressive reversal of this scenario which creates a realisable opportunity for businesses to critically assess their Safety and Health strategy and culture creating the opportunity to progressively and simultaneously improve employee and operational health.

In their 2022 Mental Health and Employees, March 2022, report Deloitte's estimate that for every £1 spent of addressing mental health issues, businesses could see a £5.30 return on investment.

The conclusion of multiple research papers in recent years indicate the high probability of a causal link between employee well -being and productivity.

It is against this backdrop of very serious, worsening human, social and economic challenge that the Alliance will act.

Where and how we intend to act:

It is acknowledged that the Mental Health subject is complex and the Alliance is clear that our engagement will evolve and widen over the long run. A broad-spectrum approach would be inappropriate and not conducive to making a meaningful difference through our actions. Given this judgement the Alliance has identified 4 points of engagement to and through which we will channel support:

- Occupational safety and health personnel, human resources, line managers and business leaders, within organisations.
- The Boardroom
- SME's
- Local Government

The rationale supporting this is as follows:

The role of the organisation, its culture and collective responsibility

The overarching objective is to stimulate a top-down and bottom-up investment in the proactive reduction of the incidence of mental health issues in the workplace. Business leaders are responsible for defining and maintaining the culture of their organisation, irrespective of size or scale. Culture in all its guises cascades from the top and good leadership is the force which empowers all managers to act and workers to be the beneficiaries, whether active on the shop-floor or elsewhere in the structure.

It is the Alliance's contention that executive ownership of Safety and Health culture is under-represented at Board level and that this can undervalue and limit the perceived importance of Safety and Health strategy and its direct impact on productivity, cost and skills retention.

We believe that a strong case can be made regarding the quality of strategy and the financial resilience of businesses and intend to pursue this through consultation with organisations such as the CBI, IOD, FSB along with others and onward to the businesses they represent, with the objective of embedding ownership of Safety and Health more prominently at Board level.

Occupational safety and health personnel duty holders and responsible managers

OSH personnel are wholly or partly responsible for the implementation of safety and health strategy and well placed to intervene in the identification of behaviours which could be suggestive of an underlying mental health issue and the likely causative factors. This is especially the case on the so called shop-floor where physical activity, interaction with machinery and exposure to environmental risks demands skilful risk assessment and vigilance.

Mental health issues can of course present at anywhere in an organisation and human resources personnel (where they exist) have a pivotal role alongside line managers and senior leaders in engagement.

It cannot be assumed that OSH personnel have the knowledge, awareness, skills or confidence to engage with a subject which can be complex and uncomfortable and it is in this space that the Alliance believes it can make a valuable contribution. It can be argued that any advance in awareness is a good outcome however its value will only be realised through total organisational ownership of and commitment to developing a robust mental health management strategy within its overall OHS management plan sitting on an equal footing alongside the plan for physical safety.

Implicit to this approach is the role of the organisation and all management stakeholders in enabling OSH personnel to actively and with surety of support, to proactively engage with the indicators of possible mental health issues and those affected. OSH personnel can be a catalyst for early recognition but the constructive involvement of other managers such as but not limited to HR is the optimum path to issue management and mitigation and ultimately risk reduction.

The role of the organisation and its culture

Business leaders are responsible for defining and maintaining the culture of their business, irrespective of size and scale. Culture in all its guises cascades from the top and good leadership is the force which empowers managers to act and workers to be the beneficiaries of good practice. It is however the contention of the Alliance that executive ownership of Safety and Health culture is under-represented at Board level and that this can undervalue and limit the importance of the Safety and Health strategy specifically it's impact on productivity and cost.

The Alliance believes that there is a strong case to be made regarding the quality of strategy and the financial resilience of businesses and intends to pursue this through consultation with organisations such as the CBI, IOD and FSB., with the objective of embedding ownership of Safety and Health more prominently at Board level.

The overarching objective is to stimulate a top-down and bottom-up investment in the pro-active reduction in the incidence of mental health issues in the workplace whereby OSH professionals in the front line know that they have the support of business leaders to engage.)

Small to Medium size Enterprises

The private sector SME community is comprised of 5.5mn businesses, 4mn of which are classed as "sole proprietorships", 1.4m have between 1-49 employees (8.5m employees in total) and by definition these 1.4m businesses are less likely to have dedicated OSH resources yet face the same burden of obligation under law and generally, to ensure their workers are protected from harm to the greatest extent possible.

The prevailing conditions of UK PLC including persistent inflationary pressure on costs, skills shortages and competition for market share which for many amount to the question of survival, can render understanding of and execution of, safety and health obligations very difficult. The Alliance believes that it has a role to play in providing support and guidance to this community in conjunction with organisations such as the FSB to help them mitigate the incidence and risk associated with mental health issues.

In similar vein Local Government organisations delivering basic and vital services throughout the UK and employing 2mn workers are likely to be facing the same balancing act as SME's and are expected to benefit from the support and guidance which will be developed by the Alliance.

Source: ONS

OSH Stakeholder Alliance

The foundation of support for the OSH Profession

Front and centre in the Alliances intention to provide support is the matter of education and knowledge transfer. The Alliance will draw heavily on the comprehensive guidance set out in ISO 45003-"Psychosocial behaviour in the workplace" which describes the factors which can contribute to mental health issues, the indicators that such issues exist through observing people's behaviour and options to mitigate those causative factors.

Empowering OSH professionals to engage mental health in the same way they engage physical safety through risk assessment cannot and should not require that they become experts in a clinical sense, but empowerment which leads to early intervention can reduce the potential for the work environment and work practice to induce or compound (outside work factors) mental health issues which can limit the scope, frequency and impact of such issues.

Our preparation in the immediate term will focus on the composition of content to support guidance and knowledge transfer together with the most effective methods of engaging OSH professionals and those employees charged with a Safety and health responsibility as an adjunct to their primary role. This will include communications with business leaders to secure their support for OSH engagement.

Advancing the prominence of Safety and Health at Board level

The Alliance considers that Safety and Health strategy should be treated as an asset within any organisations' cost structure and "P&L" it requires resource to deliver and like any cost factor needs to be justified in ROI terms. The extent to which such valuation throughout the working environment is not known but it seems reasonable to assume that the linkage between the composition and quality of delivery of strategy and its direct effect on multiple cost and operational factors, is worthy of analysis.

In pursuit of this, the Alliance will develop a business case which values the quality of strategy and its deliver within the asset structure of businesses. This will feature quantifiable content supported by qualitative factors which have an incremental impact on cost base elements.

Our intention is not to "tell" businesses how to operate but to induce a paradigm shift in the perceived importance/value of Safety and Health strategy (within the wider context of ESG) progressively improving the profile of workplace risk factors and the prominence of Safety and Health around the Board table.

Summary/timeline

The Alliance expects to complete the development of content and to define how best to optimise delivery to the 4 audiences listed within Q1 2024 enabling implementation as soon as practicable thereafter.