

YOUNG ADULT WORKFORCE HEALTH AND WELLBEING



brook

FOREWORD

There is a public health responsibility to keep people healthy, well, resilient and in work. This report sets out what that means for young people in the workforce and asks where the responsibility of employers begins and ends.

There is quite rightly government emphasis on education and skills, including employers engaging in schools, colleges and universities for young people to be ‘work-ready’. What employers call soft-skills including confidence, self-esteem, communication skills and resilience, these are the same skills and character attributes which schools and families support to for young people to stay healthy, safe and to raise aspirations. However, as young people enter the workplace they face unique pressures without the ring of support that a school or college or, for some, a family can help with. They are less likely to have same age peer support in an all-age workplace setting.

The government has its role to play in raising public health awareness and providing refreshed support for business. There are shared objectives for employers to recruit and sustain a healthy workforce, investing now for increased attendance, retention and training of young people that will also pay dividends for ‘the future workforce’ in their resilience and increased productivity. Compassionate management is threaded through HR good practice of large firms, which can support opportunities and training for their supply chains. Business networks and employer organisations can support smaller companies.

Yet anxiety, mental ill-health, family pressures, relationships and sexual health all impact young employees and cannot be simply left at the office door or factory gate. From workplace health checks to signposting and support for community-based organisations, there are some strong examples to ensure young people can access welcoming, safe and professional support. However, with different life-stage experiences, pressures and demands as young adults, access to high quality advice and support needs to be extended - whether you are an employer, small or large, or a young person working in the gig economy.

Rt Hon Nicky Morgan MP

There is a clear case for employers to take more responsibility for the health and wellbeing of their staff – particularly younger employees, who already face many competing pressures on top of the challenge of entering the workplace for the first time.

This report sets out clear areas for action and offers useful guidance on how to ensure a healthy and productive workforce. Everybody would benefit from following these recommendations – employers will see the positive impact on their bottom line through better productivity, reduced sickness absence and reduced staff turnover, while staff will enjoy more fulfilling careers and an improved overall quality of life.

Rt Hon Norman Lamb MP

INTRODUCTION

The challenges young people face today are numerous, complex and fast-moving. They gain their knowledge from a variety of sources, including schools and online, but notably many rely on family, friends and, for young adults, work colleagues.

Good quality, well-resourced Personal Social Health and Economic (PSHE) education including statutory Relationships and Sex Education (RSE) in schools will support the skills and attributes required to help young people stay healthy, safe and prepare them for life and work in modern Britain. However with different life-stage experiences, pressures and demands as young adults, access to high quality advice and support needs to be extended.

Significantly, 16-24 year olds make up 12% of the UK workforce, with 3.95 million young people in work (including 928,000 full-time students with part-time jobs). With the average worker spending 60% of waking hours in the workplace¹, there is a case to be made to engage employers to ensure workplaces are health promoting, and for evidence based approaches age-appropriate to improve health and productivity.

While the main causes for ‘lost’ working days are muscular skeletal and minor illnesses, significant days are lost through anxiety, stress and depression². The transition from education to employment can be challenging for those entering the workforce for the first time. Young people face unique pressures which can affect productivity, attendance and retention including sexual health and relationships.

There are, therefore, shared objectives for employers to recruit, retain and sustain a healthy workforce for young people to develop life-skills that support:

- o increased confidence, self-esteem and resilience
- o improved skills to develop and maintain healthy relationships
- o mental health and wellbeing

Proactive early intervention provided by work based training providers, further education institutes and employers could facilitate a smoother, more positive outcome for young employees and their employers.



1 ONS Hours Worked in the Labour Market (2011)
2 Health and Work: Public Health England and Work Foundation (2016)

1. SOCIETAL CHALLENGES

In some ways young people's lives are improving. Risky behaviours of alcohol drinking, smoking and drug-taking are down in the UK and teenage pregnancies are at their lowest level for nearly half a century; although the headline figures disguise differences in age and demographics, for example marginalised and deprived groups of young people. Meanwhile there is growing evidence of a mental-health crisis in this age group with increasing rates of depression and anxiety, hospital admissions for eating disorders and self-harm.

There is a renewed focus on young people's mental health. This is supported by recent government announcements for PSHE³ and young people's mental health⁴ and wellbeing in schools, such as anxiety reduction and mental health first aid. It is supported by formal and non-formal learning in social action and character education that in turn promotes social mobility. However, understanding of health risks is not limited by age nor is learning restricted to schools. 'Continued learning' is important as the world of work is changing thanks to a range of economic, societal and technological forces.

Resilience, problem solving, creativity and leadership are becoming increasingly important to employers and young people. Equally as young people take their first steps in the workplace they need relevant, good quality, fit for purpose support which provide them with the skills and confidence to explore healthy choices and relationships. This reflects the different life-stage experiences, pressures and demands as young adults.

2. EMPLOYMENT

An objective of government public health strategies for 'health and work' has been to try to keep people "healthy, well, resilient and in work"⁵. Research shows that good work is good for health: 'good jobs' which promote good health, are fulfilling and productive, [are] the foundation of a successful, inclusive and sustainable economy⁶; and "the workplace is now seen as a key setting for addressing working age health. Consequently, employers will also have to take on a role."

The Government has also put mental and physical health on the same footing when it comes to removing barriers to work and promoting healthy workplaces, including long-term health conditions and disabilities. Key economic drivers for this approach are inclusive employment, for example people with disabilities and increased productivity, with measures too for reduced absenteeism and improved health and safety⁷.



3 21st Century Sex and Relationships Education (DfE, March 2017)
4 Transforming Children and Young People's Mental Health (DH, December 2017)

5 Dame Carol Black, former government adviser and National Director for Health & Work
6 The Work Foundation, Health at Work Policy Unit; various research [see infographic 2016](#)
7 'This won't hurt a bit: supporting small business to be healthy, wealthy and wise' (Work Foundation, Nov. 2015)

3. WORKPLACE SUPPORT

The Public Health Responsibility Deal cites case studies and development of workplace provision for issues including domestic violence, smoking cessation and healthy eating. There is also a toolkit and Workplace Wellbeing Charter [award](#) and guides to help employers to support their employees with: mental health; physical health; healthy eating; weight management; equality and diversity; and caring responsibility.

The different aspects of workplace wellbeing are set out in the Business in the Community [Workwell](#) model for a strategic, proactive approach to wellness and engagement. Significantly it provides practical support to help businesses take action for: better physical and psychological health; better work practices; better relationships; and specialist support. Part of the employee's responsibility is to "keep learning". This in turn requires access to quality provision, information and education beyond school, for example where this is embedded in HR-pastoral care, workshops, and out-reach services.

[CIPD](#), the professional body for Human Resources (HR), provide a range of guidance on supporting employees with issues, which would be covered by good quality PSHE in schools, for example: resilience and financial education; mental health, domestic violence and alcohol misuse. There are HR-policies and protocols for the workplace to tackle bullying, harassment, illness, and health and safety, all of which will benefit young employees.

External pressures on young people's lives cannot simply be left at the door when at the workplace: whether it is the examples of sleep patterns and flexible working, or the prevalence of suicide for young men in particular. Meanwhile recent reports on sexual harassment in the workplace show two in five women and one in five men have experienced unwanted sexual behaviour at work. This affects 29% of those employed by a business, rising to 43% of those in flexible working⁸ – including young people who make up the largest number of those employed on zero hours contracts.



4. YOUNG EMPLOYEES

Attitudes to work are a top consideration by businesses when recruiting⁹ and, by extension, attitudes to work are key to retention and career progression. This can be viewed in terms of aspiration, ambition and determination. However, productivity and attitude can be impacted also by external pressures young people face in their lives and on transition to the workplace: anxiety; mental health and depression; family and relationships; sexual health; self-esteem and friendships can all impact young employees.

To ensure continued education and support from school to employment, age and stage appropriate for a young person, messages and campaigns must be carefully targeted to employees, embedding wellbeing into workplace culture.

The government has its role to play in raising public health awareness and providing refreshed support for business. This has been particularly useful for initiatives focused on awareness-raising and education, such as 'stop smoking', drug and alcohol management. As noted above, there is increased awareness and support for mental health and a range of issues including domestic violence. Some local authority areas already provide good links to support with sex and relationships, and more businesses might usefully follow suit to ensure that information, support and treatment is accessible and easy to find for young people.

This requires senior management to take a lead and for positive role models in the workplace. Although leadership from employers is important it is critical that young people's voices and expressed needs are at the heart of decision making.



Relationships & sexual health

Further consideration needs to be given to employers' greater understanding of sexual health and relationships issues and the support and continued education that need to be put in place.

This has particular resonance for young adults in the workforce. For example, young people are at higher risk of poor sexual and reproductive health outcomes: Sexually Transmitted Infections (STI) rates in 15-24 year olds are twice as high in men and seven times as high in women as they are for 25-29 year olds¹⁰. For 16-19 year olds 88% of pregnancies (and for 20-24 year olds 60%) were described as unplanned or ambivalent (as opposed to planned). Meanwhile both adolescent girls and boys experience a high level of emotional abuse, physical violence, sexual violence and controlling behaviour in their relationships¹¹.

Digital

Young people's time spent online has grown exponentially, living and working in a digital world, in 2010 52% of 16-24 year olds owned a smartphone now that figure stands at over 90%, and 99% regularly use social media. This transcends school or college, the workplace and home. It brings a range of challenges with which young people are faced. Behind the headlines of 'fake news' and safeguarding concerns for grooming and bullying, young people struggle with decisions about their own behaviour or dealing with the negative behaviour of others online.

Conversely the use of new digital technologies will revolutionise how services and support can be provided for young people. For example, to increase knowledge and understanding of sexual health issues, care and treatment options; to reduce waiting times; and to offer online testing and counselling via new platforms developed and championed by Brook.

Health checks

Health checks in the workplace offer individual staff members appropriate information or signposting links to empower staff to be able to make positive lifestyle changes. They are used to assess basic measures of health and fitness such as cholesterol, blood pressure, weight, BMI etc.; this could be extended to a sexual health module of a workplace wellness programme. The most appropriate and effective method of offering such health checks will depend on the type of business, number of employees, working patterns of staff and resources.

Meanwhile continuous surveys and staff wellness campaigns can ensure staff needs are being met, help identify training and information needs and inform a tailored approach.

Flexible working

Where political debate has been dominated by zero-hours contracts, flexible working is now mainstream for some industries, and as young people join the workforce, there is concern that this is not "too flexible" with the tone and targets set through negotiated contracts or shared understanding between managers and supervisors with the young employee.

5. COMMUNITY

Access to external services or support is crucial, whether you are an employer, small or large, or a young person working in the gig economy. Such access is important in smaller businesses in particular who do not have the capacity or resources, but where the employees' health and relationships can have significant impact on the business.

Partnerships with local community based organisations to co-locate services can complement health and wellbeing in school, college and the workplace. Commissioners are now seeking greater impact through each contact with a young person, with a more holistic approach to young people's health and wellbeing. Business sponsorship and, where appropriate, staff volunteers are important to many local voluntary and community organisations.

Awareness-raising and signposting without stigma can be supported by business and promoted to employees. This might involve having medical facilities on a project site open in the day for employees then available in the evening for the local community, or encouraging workers to go out into the community and volunteer. Equally facilitation of out-reach teams for work-based counselling, advice or pop-up services can ensure services from community hubs are accessible, welcoming, safe and professional.

A generational shift in awareness, attitudes and behaviour provides an opportunity for long-term change. It entails a long-term Board-level strategy and needs managers/supervisors to be engaged and educated. Investment is needed in 'front-line' managers to embed and sustain change.

Where business can take a lead – as employers or public-facing brands – to ensure such provision is visible and celebrates young people as a priority, it will ensure that young people have the best possible experience; and change cultural attitudes, break taboos, build resilience, develop skills and help young people flourish.



6. MAKING THE CASE FOR BUSINESS

The case is made by the [CBI for Workplace Health](#) as a business issue:

“In the past, organisations have approached health and wellbeing at work with caution. It is difficult to quantify the highly subjective area of employee ‘wellbeing’ and, without a generally accepted framework, firms have found it hard to demonstrate tangible benefits or a return on investments made.

“The challenge is made all the greater by the impact of lifestyle choices and home-life on the health of employees, an area which is beyond the control of a business.”

The policy-drivers for this can also be found in the industrial strategy for inclusive growth. New and increased levels of employment skills are identified for increased productivity and for future jobs, within the context of an ageing population, and technological advances changing the nature of work and careers. The employment skills required from a young workforce post-Brexit are matched by the need for a healthy workforce.

There are strong business examples of support for mental health, such as Mental Health First Aiders in the workforce; and where financial wellbeing is seen as an increasing priority, for example providing rent deposits for young employees. Other initiatives include domestic violence, substance misuse smoking cessation and healthy eating, and where consideration might be given to sexual health and relationships support. Expanding what can be done and is being done by leading players: this is led by major employers and principal contractors, and may include an extended supply chain of SMEs, micro-businesses and sole traders.

Indeed the CBI recommends businesses can be proactive in leading the way, by ‘getting upstream’ and developing joined-up programmes as part of a holistic approach: “By raising the awareness, health education and health literacy of the workforce, information and support can empower employees to take responsibility for their own health.”

How do we address the costs for business and smaller employers?

In the NHS Five Year Forward Review (2014), NHS Chief Executive Simon Stevens argued that incentives should be put in place for workplace health programmes. A ‘wellbeing premium’ is being trialled in the West Midlands, “a financial incentive, accompanied by an employer action plan, reduces staff sickness absence, improves productivity and prevents people leaving work due to ill health.”¹²

This provides one hundred employers a financial incentive (discount on business rates and future consideration of National Insurance) in return for a commitment to implement programmes and evidence interventions in the workplace. The development of the model will test the tipping point at which an employer would initiate wellbeing programmes into the workforces; as well as developing wellbeing across mental health, musculoskeletal and obesity as the health indicators and interventions.

Where a similar approach could be taken to include sexual health and relationships, a clear starting point for young adults in the workforce would be in support of apprenticeships across the supply chain, including training providers and colleges.

Significantly this does not have to be costly or time-consuming. Businesses can piggyback on national health initiatives or align their approach to charities, for example: health-checks, promotional days, or sign posting to services offered by charity providers or by local NHS trusts.

While this cannot be a burden, in particular for smaller employers, more can be done, including:

- o Positive role-models as well as a senior manager post that has specific responsibilities to include: access to and visibility of quality advice and guidance for (young) workers
- o Continuous training for managers and mentors to help safeguard young employees and inspire them to thrive in their roles
- o Health checks that are physical, psychological and include relationships
- o Clarity of language used and expectations of employers, which can be supported by voluntary and community service (VCS) providers and public health bodies, including use of online platforms
- o The potential of co-location of services in the workplace, or facilitation of outreach teams ‘brought in’ to the workplace, and sponsorship by larger employers of VCS providers
- o Staff volunteering and training with VCS providers (in turn bringing those skills back into the workplace for on-going peer support)



7. CONCLUSION

There is a public health responsibility to keep people healthy, well, resilient and in work. Business has a role to play for young people: to provide upstream support for the 'future workforce' of young people and their families; and to value young employees, supporting the recruitment, retention and productivity to sustain the workforce – including reduced illness, absenteeism and increased morale.

Overall corporate responsibility starts with compassionate management at induction days and is threaded through HR good practice; it also works externally to take a lead on wellbeing in Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR) programmes. For larger businesses this would include opportunities and training to support their supply chain; and for businesses to embrace wellbeing within CSR for charities, volunteering and staff initiatives.

There is an opportunity for a generational shift in awareness, understanding and support for a young adult workforce. Fundamentally this 'whole person and whole system' approach needs to be led from the top at Board and CEO level but also embedded for the longer term through education with management and supervisors.

ABOUT BROOK

Brook has been at the forefront of providing wellbeing and sexual health support for young people for over 50 years. Our services in local communities, our education programmes, our training for professionals and our campaigning work means that young people are better equipped to make positive and healthy lifestyle choices. Last year 235,000 young people were supported through our clinical services, education and wellbeing work and through our Ask Brook digital service. Our vision is that young people should have access to great services and wellbeing support. Brook is dedicated to making this happen.

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