

How to ensure work pays through effective wellbeing policies and practices

Roundtable with Lord Bethell, Chair and Director at Business for Health, former Health and Innovation Minister; Tina Woods, CEO and Founder of Business for Health; and Peter Cheese, CEO of the Chartered Institute of Personnel and Development. Chaired by Gethin Nadin, Chief Innovation Officer at Benefex.

Westminster



Gethin Nadin, Chair of the Policy Liaison Group on Workplace Wellbeing

Introduction

The roundtable focused on aligning workplace wellbeing with economic growth and other government missions and agendas, including the Make Work Pay Plan and the Employment Rights Bill. Participants emphasised evidence-based approaches geared towards outcomes including productivity and reduced employee absenteeism. There was also clear consensus towards systemic shifts whereby businesses are incentivised to prioritise employee health, especially where initiatives support wider government aims like reducing NHS waiting times and lowering the number of economically inactive.

Key takeaways

Policy context

- The government's Make Work Pay Plan is timely – the UK still has not returned to pre-pandemic levels of labour market participation, and the UK's recovery has been slow compared to international peers.
- Similarly, making the links between economic growth and individual employee health is critical. This takes the wellbeing conversation forward to encompass return on investment, driving performance and productivity and not simply just reducing risk.
- However, Labour's agenda post-budget lacks some of the detail required by employers to begin to consider how best to implement and support government plans.
- The Employment Rights Bill is about “trying to treat staff better”, but there's a danger of putting pressure and cost on businesses. Evidencing outcomes would enable policymakers to have a clearer idea of what practices deliver better wellbeing, helping to drive effective and potentially low-cost changes in behaviour leading to wholesale improvements in workplace wellbeing.

Data

- There's currently too much reliance on input metrics such as hospital waiting lists, which do not capture the true reflection of the current situation alone. A focus on outcomes, like improved productivity and performance, lower presenteeism or reduced absenteeism, is key.
- Input metrics tend to be narrow. Holistic approaches lead to preventative solutions, “you actually have to start with people's lives and where they are”.
- Some companies report they don't experience a discernable improvement in absenteeism and presenteeism from implementing wellbeing policies or fail to measure the impact of their initiatives. Wellbeing initiatives must be evidence-based and measurable.
- Business for Health is working with the ONS to link business practices with health outcomes, helping businesses, local authorities, and policymakers understand the impact of health on workforce productivity and economic growth while encouraging corporate responsibility for health and wellbeing.

Culture – “What does good look like?”

- Workplace wellbeing is not widely understood by employers so there's a pressing need for a shared understanding, starting with a unified national definition.
- HR teams, managers, and leaders often know they need to improve employee

wellbeing but not how to go about it. The Policy Liaison Group is developing Duty of Care guidelines so that companies know what good looks like and can see the evidence base. This feeds into an imperative in many organisations for deeper cultural change.

Issues Raised

“Businesses have to be a force for good”

- Free market orthodoxy under the banner, “the sole purpose is profit for shareholders” has reigned for decades. We are transitioning to a more ethical model where employers are conscious they have a responsibility to multiple stakeholders, many of whom are now incredibly interested in driving positive social impact.
- The government needs to be conscious of this evolution and encourage its potential to deliver wellbeing holistically for all workers. Policymakers need to focus on harnessing this potential, not disrupt it - links back to ensuring the Employment Rights Bill is appropriate and proportionate and delivers for all stakeholders, not just the employee or the government.
- Nevertheless, businesses need to justify the allocation of resources towards wellbeing. Senior management will likely gravitate towards lower-level “tick-box” solutions. If wellbeing language is built around value and return on investment we will likely see fewer passive approaches and more better-resourced programmes instead.
- SMEs often lack access to resources to measure and act on wellbeing effectively, exacerbating inequalities between different-sized businesses, the policy and corporate architecture around wellbeing must account for these limitations.
- Sectoral differences need to be accounted for, e.g. retail workers are confronted with theft and physical violence, a different cause of trauma and anxiety to those experienced by workers in other sectors. SME employers and public sector employers often struggle to be able to invest adequately in employee wellbeing.

Wellbeing vs. disorder

- The distinction between general wellbeing and clinical mental health is blurred. Over-medicalisation of the workplace undermines simple, cost-effective solutions such as peer support or social spaces.
- The NHS itself is the ultimate case study, “it has terrible absenteeism rates” and employs nearly 1.5m people. There’s a long way to go, however the NHS Staff Council’s Health, Safety, and Wellbeing Group (HSWG) has taken positive steps in surveying staff on what they need, a physical meeting space where staff can “sit and chat to other doctors or nurses, talk about their cases, have a cup of tea” is a prominent solution, which is simple, effective, and low-cost.

Moving forward

- Building evidence-based best practices – e.g. workplace savings schemes, mental health support etc. – is critical. Business for Health’s work with the ONS is vital in creating a direct link between outcomes and practices. We are encouraged by the links between the Policy Liaison Group’s plans and the work of Business for Health.
- Initiatives such as Duty of Care Guidelines must consider all business sizes, industries, and employee demographics to succeed. It must also focus on delivering for those with large wellbeing budgets and those with small investments.
- Government can use incentives such as a wellbeing levy or a similar policy instrument to encourage businesses to prioritise employee wellbeing. We feel this may also create aspirational goals for other employers, by showcasing and celebrating those that prioritise employee wellbeing in the right ways.
- Sustained government engagement is essential for the success of long-term health initiatives, particularly through policies that support employer contributions without imposing restrictive regulations. Employers and government must work more closely to achieve successful outcomes that are aligned.

Links

[NHS Safety and Wellbeing Group \(HSWG\) guidance](#)

We would like to thank the members of our Advisory Board for their contributions and continuing support.



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