

BACP Workplace means business

Why is there so little mention of the role of counsellors in the recent *Thriving at Work* review on mental health and employers? Nicola Banning and Nicola Neath argue that BACP Workplace needs to join policy makers at the table

At the end of last year, *Thriving at Work*, the review led by Dennis Stevenson and Paul Farmer, CEO of Mind, was published with much interest in the media as society increases its awareness of the mental health at work agenda. The review into workplace mental health, commissioned by the Prime Minister last January, looks at how employers can better support all employees, including those with poor mental health or wellbeing, to remain in and thrive at work. The report can be found at: <http://bit.ly/2iC9EvH>

In November, members of the BACP Workplace Executive Committee were invited to attend the Westminster Events Forum on mental health in the workplace, with speakers from a range of sectors referencing *Thriving at Work*. It was an opportunity to hear business people discuss the review, and the initiatives that had been in taken in their respective workplace.

Statistics from the Department of Work and Pensions reveal that 300,000 people with a long-term mental health problem lose their jobs each year. Analysis by Deloitte, commissioned by the reviewers, reveals a demonstrable cost to employers, and quantifies how investing in supporting mental health at work is good for business and productivity. Poor mental health costs the UK economy between £74 billion and £99 billion a year. Deloitte's analysis shows that the cost to employers is between £33 billion and £42 billion of this sum, not to mention the individual cost, which we witness daily.

The review focuses on establishing mental health core standards for all employers, including:

- Producing, implementing and communicating a mental health at work plan;
- Developing mental health awareness among employees;
- Encouraging open conversations about mental health and the support available when employees are struggling;
- Providing employees with good working conditions and ensuring they have a healthy work-life balance and opportunities for development;
- Promoting effective people management through line managers and supervisors;
- Routinely monitoring employee mental health and wellbeing.

Broadly speaking, the therapy profession is likely to agree with the aim of moving to a society where all of us become aware of our own mental health, other people's mental health, how it fluctuates and an understanding of how to look after it. We are encouraged that more employers, business leaders and the Government are all beginning to understand what we workplace specialists have known for decades.

At the Westminster Events Forum on mental health in the workplace, the speakers overwhelmingly welcomed the changes in how mental health might be understood in the workplace and addressed the areas where they had made progress towards changing the

culture or improving mental health awareness. However, having read the review, and listened to a wide range of speakers on the subject of mental health at work, we are left with concerns about the limitations of the review and the possible implications of some of its recommendations. As a general point, there is a worrying lack of understanding being demonstrated about the existing psychological and therapeutic support systems already working within the public and private sectors, which contribute to cultural change and support good mental health at work.

If you haven't had time yet to read the report, please do, and let us know if you have any comments or queries, so that we can be sure to represent your views. In the meantime, we offer some of our concerns.

What is mental health awareness training for?

If mental health awareness training is to help staff to have better conversations at work and to signpost people who need help, to get help, then this is a positive step. It is important that employers can signpost their staff to appropriate support. However, as we know, access to IAPT or other NHS providers can involve long waiting times (up to six weeks), and there is little reference in the review to the access employees have to psychological support and talking therapies via their employers. It's of concern that some employers could see training staff in mental health awareness as a form of treatment or intervention in itself, which we believe is not acceptable; and in the

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ongoing context of austerity and constrained budgets, this is a very real danger.

How will the new carers and champions be supported at work?

We are concerned too much responsibility for providing mental health support could be placed upon people who don't have any mental health training. Health and safety executives, line managers and senior executives will have greater responsibility for having better conversations to support mental health at work, but there is no mention of what support or clinical care they might need.

Already, there are cases of workplace champions being overloaded with the concerns of others, squeezing their capacity to do their day job and leaving them feeling overwhelmed. This is unsafe and potentially dangerous for those they might wish to support. There is no mention in the review of supporting carers with reflective or clinical supervision, nor mention of the need for workplace competencies in mental health. Our work is complex, multifaceted and often involves the psycho-education of people in organisations to help foster transparency, eradicate blame cultures, manage fear and take reasonable responsibility for complicity and culpability in illness, when work is a factor.

What does it mean to routinely monitor employees?

We are concerned at the suggestion that employers 'routinely monitor employee mental health and wellbeing'. How will staff be monitored? By whom? And for what purpose? We know we need to engender trust in our organisations in order that employees, especially hard-to-reach client groups, are willing to access our services. Consequently, therapists build good relationships at every level of the organisation, and routine monitoring and company disclosures could cause a loss of trust and dissuade employees from accessing help. What also of the right to non-disclosure and the Equality Act, 2010?

What is the quality of support that is being offered?

It is of concern that there is an emphasis being placed upon digital forms of support when

employees require help. Potentially lonely and anxious members of staff will remain at risk if the message is that the only support they can expect to receive through their employer will be online.

At the Westminster Events Forum, reference was made to employees making use of digitised-CBT as a good way to support large groups of the workforce. While apps may indeed form part of a therapeutic intervention, it's concerning to increasingly be hearing people who are not clinicians speaking about this alone being a legitimate therapeutic intervention.

What will it really cost?

There is insufficient mention of how employers are going to finance these initiatives to support good mental health or where the experts/trainers will come from. The review claims that the measures will cost 'little or no money', a message repeated by many of the speakers at the Westminster Employment Forum event. This seems at best naïve. In an age of ongoing austerity, it's likely that employers will have to divert money from one place to another to fund support. We know that the NHS needs more funding to adequately provide mental health support, and employers should not be used as an alternative source of funding.

Of particular concern is the lack of acknowledgement in the review of BACP's members, many of whom are supporting employees and employers, working in professional in-house counselling services or via EAPs. These are our colleagues, many of whom have been working in the field of workplace mental health for over 20 years, and whose work is covered regularly in *Counselling at Work*. We are concerned that as the mental health at work agenda is more widely understood, emerging opportunities could arise for unethically minded opportunists, who are neither trained nor skilled, to step in and exploit the sea change.

The review drew on the expertise of a Leadership Panel, an Advisory Group and consulted with over 200 employers and stakeholders, as well as with professional bodies. It's disappointing that BACP was not consulted during the process, and that there is no mention in the review of the extensive

evidence base about the efficacy of counselling to support good mental health at work and to reduce sickness absence.

The task ahead

All of the above raises further questions for how we, as workplace specialists across the four nations, can influence and shape what happens in the future; in particular, how we ensure that best practice is offered to our employee and organisational clients.

Looking ahead, the review suggests that the public sector is ideally placed to play a key role, as it employs 17 per cent of those in work. It asks that the Government commit three main employers to take part in implementing 40 recommendations and identifies three main areas: the NHS, the education sector and the civil service. Frontline services and those at high risk of stress trauma are also mentioned as requiring support, including the blue light services, prison staff and social workers.

There is an opportunity now for us to take a lead. BACP Workplace members are actively involved in these sectors and have knowledge and expertise in the context in which employees are working, particularly the context of austerity in our public services. Austerity contributes not just to the poor mental health of our society, but impacts on key personnel who are tasked with supporting those most at risk, at a time of reduced resource, increased demand and with consequences for staff morale, productivity and wellbeing.

Finally, we are committed to ensuring that the work of our sector is more widely understood. We will be requesting that BACP works to ensure that the voice of our profession is represented during any next phases of implementation. We will need to be able to explain in clear language to non-therapists, the value of psychological wellbeing at work and the ways that we support employers every day to maintain the mental health of the workforce. Our work is integral to the health and wellbeing of a healthy economy, and we need to seize this moment to ensure that the services we provide are firmly embedded into the infrastructure of the workplace for the 21st century.

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Your feedback please

If you have thoughts about any of the issues raised in this article or would like to write an article of your own, we would like to hear from you. Please email the editor: counsellingatwork@bacp.co.uk