

AN EVALUATION OF WORKPLACE HEALTH AND WELLBEING SUPPORT IN WALSALL SMALL AND MEDIUM-SIZED ENTERPRISES (SMEs)

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Research Briefing and Recommendations



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PHIRST Connect

RECOMMENDATIONS

Here are the ten recommendations for workplace health and wellbeing support in small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs) based on the findings from the NIHR PHIRST funded evaluation research. Each recommendation is explained in more detail on subsequent pages and the main findings that led to each recommendation are highlighted.

Implementation of these recommendations may require the input of multiple partners and stakeholders, including the local authority, business organisations, and SMEs.

If you want to know more about the methods used to conduct the evaluation, these are outlined at the end of this document.

Recommendation 1



Increase the level of awareness of the workplace health and wellbeing 'offer'* among SMEs by further developing the marketing and communication of available support.

Recommendation 2



Consider producing and disseminating a simple, accessible guide for SMEs to support their understanding of workplace health and wellbeing. This should introduce the topic of workplace health and wellbeing and its benefits and provide guidance on how workplace health and wellbeing might be supported within SMEs.

Recommendation 3



To encourage SME engagement with workplace health and wellbeing support, consider developing a clearly structured, easily accessible, workplace health and wellbeing support package with a clear pathway and progression to complement other available support.

Recommendation 4



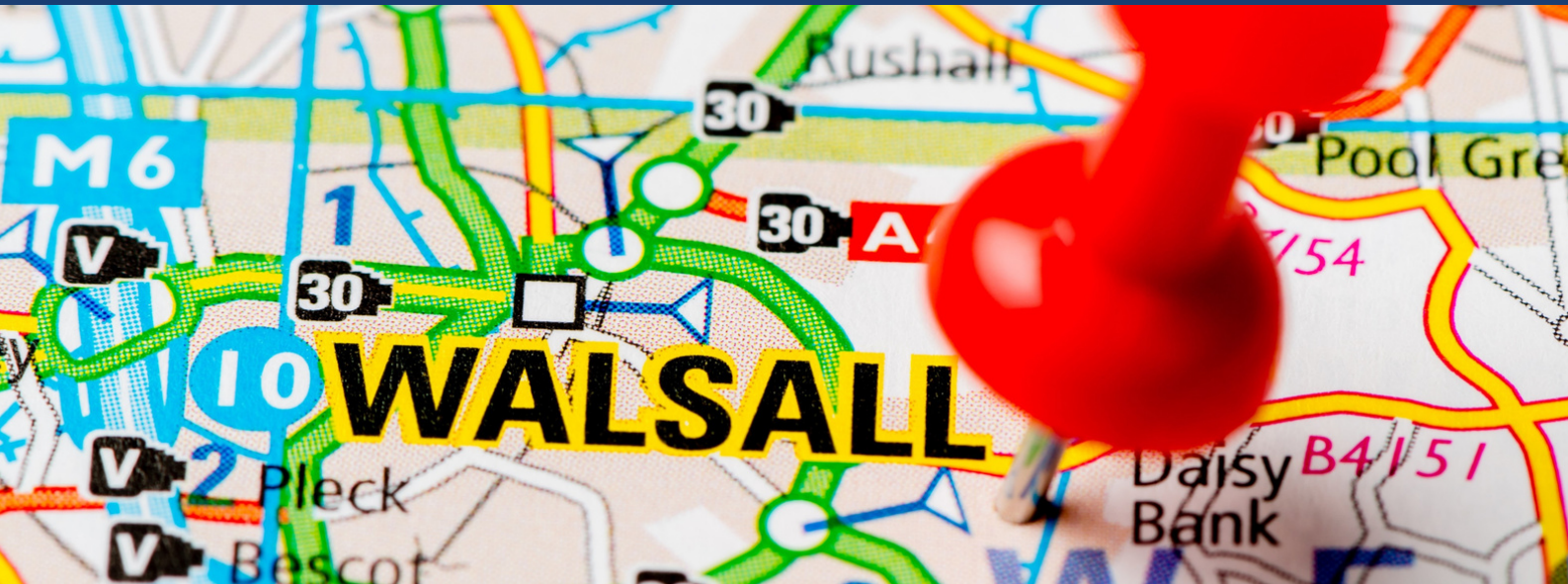
Continue to ensure that, where possible, workplace health and wellbeing support is tailored to the specific needs of individual SMEs.

Recommendation 5



Explore options for supporting SMEs in understanding the scope of workplace health and wellbeing and their current standing, progress, and areas for development towards an integrated approach to workplace health and wellbeing.

*Walsall council currently commissions a Healthy Workplace Programme to deliver a range of health and wellbeing support to SMEs. There is also other support available to SMEs from Walsall Council and other organisations. Together these are referred to as the support 'offer'.

**Recommendation 6**

Prioritise guidance and support for SMEs on assessing the workplace health and wellbeing needs of their employees.

**Recommendation 7**

Explore routes to support and encourage employee involvement in shaping employer-provided workplace health and wellbeing support. This might be through collaboration with trade unions, business organisations, or individuals within SMEs with responsibility for workplace health and wellbeing.

**Recommendation 8**

Place specific focus on supporting workplace health and wellbeing within SMEs that are relatively small in terms of numbers of employees.

**Recommendation 9**

Continue to target the workplace health and wellbeing 'offer' at SMEs based on identified sector or employee demographic needs.

**Recommendation 10**

Make addressing barriers to employee uptake of employer-provided workplace health and wellbeing support a key focus.



RECOMMENDATIONS: IN DETAIL

Recommendation 1



Increase the level of awareness of the workplace health and wellbeing 'offer' among SMEs by further developing the marketing and communication of available support.

- Considered together, our findings suggest that the workplace health and wellbeing support available to SMEs in Walsall is broadly sufficient to meet SMEs' needs. A range of support is available, some of which can be tailored to the specific needs of individual SMEs. However, our findings indicate that a major barrier to SMEs engaging with support is a lack of knowledge and awareness of its existence.
- Our survey of SMEs found that the most frequently cited reason for not accessing support was 'because we were not aware that this support existed', indicating a lack of knowledge among SMEs of the availability of workplace health and wellbeing support.
- Stakeholders and SMEs have identified some effective ways of increasing awareness of, and engagement with, available workplace health and wellbeing support. Particularly useful strategies suggested included: using health checks as an initial introduction to receiving external support; tailoring support to the SMEs needs; collaborative working with partners with joint objectives around workplace health and wellbeing; and highlighting the business benefits to SMEs.
- SMEs had differing understandings of what workplace health and wellbeing was and what engaging with available support would involve.
- Ensuring there is clear, consistent, and accessible messaging regarding the existence/scope of available support, the availability of free support, the potential benefits of engagement, and the level of commitment required from SMEs, would help to address other key barriers to SMEs' engagement with workplace health and wellbeing support.

- Stakeholders suggested that a varied, multi-pronged approach to marketing and communication is likely to prove most successful in encouraging greater engagement from a range of SMEs. Suggested routes for communicating the workplace health and wellbeing 'offer' to SMEs include publicising through campaigns and events; visiting businesses to raise awareness of the support offer; and providing tangible examples of how businesses have benefited from engaging with workplace health and wellbeing support.

Recommendation 2



Consider producing and disseminating a simple, accessible guide for SMEs to support their understanding of workplace health and wellbeing. This should introduce the topic of workplace health and wellbeing and its benefits and provide guidance on how workplace health and wellbeing might be supported within SMEs

- Although SMEs have a broadly positive attitude towards workplace health and wellbeing, they may have different understandings of what constitutes workplace health and wellbeing provision.
- Some SMEs face practical barriers to engaging their employees in in-house or external support (e.g., employees working off-site). Guidance on overcoming these barriers would be useful.
- Stakeholders and SMEs stated that highlighting the business benefits of engaging with available support - for example, with examples/case studies from local businesses - might encourage greater SME take-up of support.
- Some SMEs are uncertain about how best to support the health and wellbeing of their employees and would benefit from guidance in this area.
- Interviews with employees suggest that in some cases, there may be limited employer-provided support within the workplace, and where it does exist some staff may not be aware of the support available to them.
- Workplace health and wellbeing provision is sometimes de-prioritised in SMEs (e.g., at particularly busy business times).



Recommendation 3

To encourage SME engagement with workplace health and wellbeing support, consider developing a clearly structured, easily accessible, workplace health and wellbeing support package with a clear pathway and progression to complement other available support.

- Simple, free options, that require little SME commitment, are important for encouraging initial SME engagement with available support.
- Workplace health and wellbeing programmes can be perceived as daunting by SMEs; a simple, yet structured, package of support might encourage greater SME engagement.
- Stakeholders commented that where initial SME engagement with workplace health and wellbeing support is achieved, sustaining engagement can be challenging. A structured support package with a clear pathway might be beneficial.



Recommendation 4

Continue to ensure that, where possible, workplace health and wellbeing support is tailored to the specific needs of individual SMEs.

- Survey findings indicate that SMEs have a range of differing needs and requirements in terms of workplace health and wellbeing support.
- The needs and circumstances of SMEs can vary greatly and tailoring health and wellbeing support to the specific requirements of SMEs is important to ensuring accessibility and engagement.
- Stakeholders highlighted the importance of tailored support, stating that it had been important in encouraging SME engagement with support in the past.





Recommendation 5

Explore options for supporting SMEs in understanding the scope of workplace health and wellbeing and their current standing, progress, and areas for development towards an integrated approach to workplace health and wellbeing.

- Interviews and focus groups with stakeholders, SMEs, and employees indicated that some SMEs have a relatively narrow, rather than broad or holistic view, of what workplace health and wellbeing might include and involve. They may also be unclear about what they can do to improve the support they provide for employees. Supporting SMEs' understandings of workplace health and wellbeing and strategies for development would help.
- SMEs and employees sometimes stated that there was no systematic approach to delivering workplace health and wellbeing support within their organisations.
- Rather than having an embedded culture of workplace health and wellbeing, some SMEs took a reactive rather than proactive or preventative approach to providing support to employees (e.g., primarily providing support to employees only when specific issues or needs had been identified).
- In some SMEs, there is limited employer-provided support within the workplace.
- Some SMEs have few mechanisms for enabling employees' involvement in workplace health and wellbeing provision, and this can be a barrier to ensuring that provision meets the needs of employees.



Recommendation 6

Prioritise guidance and support for SMEs on assessing the workplace health and wellbeing needs of their employees.

- 'Identifying the health and wellbeing needs of staff' was one of the most common support needs highlighted by SMEs that completed our survey.
- Findings suggest that a lack of awareness of the health and wellbeing needs of staff may be a significant barrier to SMEs' provision of support to their employees.

- Interviews and focus groups with stakeholders, SMEs and employees indicated that some SMEs take a reactive rather than proactive or preventative approach to providing support to employees, primarily providing support only when specific issues or needs have been identified.
- Employee reluctance to disclose their support needs can be a barrier to SMEs' identification of need and provision of support.
- Mechanisms to support employees' discreet and confidential disclosure of workplace health and wellbeing needs would be beneficial and likely to increase the ability of SMEs to effectively assess employee needs.



Recommendation 7

Explore routes to support and encourage employee involvement in shaping employer-provided workplace health and wellbeing support. This might be through collaboration with trade unions, business organisations, or individuals within SMEs with responsibility for workplace health and wellbeing.

- Interviews with SMEs and employees suggest that employees are typically not involved in directly shaping the nature and extent of workplace wellbeing support within their SME. However, employee involvement may be important in ensuring that provision is adequate and appropriate.
- Some SMEs have few mechanisms for enabling employees' involvement in workplace health and wellbeing provision; this may be a barrier to ensuring that provision meets the needs of employees.
- Focus groups with stakeholders and interviews with SMEs suggest that lack of awareness of the health and wellbeing needs of staff may be a significant barrier to SMEs' provision of support to their employees.
- Survey findings suggest that having a dedicated individual to promote workplace health and wellbeing and/or a recognised trade union in the SME is associated with greater breadth of the employee support available. These mechanisms may be useful routes through which to improve the involvement of employees.





Recommendation 8

Place specific focus on supporting workplace health and wellbeing within SMEs that are relatively small in terms of numbers of employees.

- Survey findings show that SMEs with fewer than 50 employees are less likely to have accessed external support and are less likely to have consulted staff about their workplace health and wellbeing needs. Targeted support for smaller organisation may be needed.
- Some SMEs indicated that staff in small organisations may be less likely to disclose workplace health and wellbeing needs.
- In smaller SMEs, not having a dedicated individual to coordinate health and wellbeing support can be a barrier to provision of support for staff. Having a dedicated individual to promote workplace health and wellbeing is associated with greater breadth of the employee support available.



Recommendation 9

Continue to target the workplace health and wellbeing 'offer' at SMEs based on identified sector or employee demographic needs.

- The survey of SMEs identified some differences in workplace health and wellbeing support provision and practice between SMEs from different sectors and with different workforce compositions. Some employees and SMEs also identified differences in the nature and extent of workplace wellbeing support in different sectors.
- The survey of SMEs identified some variations in the support requirements of SMEs by industry sector and workforce composition, suggesting that these are factors that should be considered when targeting support.





Recommendation 10

Make addressing barriers to employee uptake of employer-provided workplace health and wellbeing support a key focus.

- Interviews with employees and SMEs highlighted a range of practical barriers to employee engagement with employer-provided support. These included the off-site working location of some staff, and difficulties in staff finding time to engage with support during working hours. These barriers may be more common in certain sectors.
- Some employees viewed workplace health and wellbeing support as something they would only access to remedy a specific issue or need. Helping employees to understand the potential protective and preventative benefits of engaging with support is likely to increase the chances of their engagement.
- Some employees are not aware of the workplace health and wellbeing support available through their employer and this is a significant barrier to their engagement.
- Interviews with employees and SMEs highlighted that, in small organisations in particular, concerns about anonymity and confidentiality may prevent some employees from disclosing their wellbeing needs. Mechanisms to support employees' discreet and confidential disclosure of workplace health and wellbeing needs, and access to support, would be beneficial.
- Interviews with employees indicated that, in some cases, employees' beliefs and attitudes about workplace health and wellbeing can act as a barrier to engagement with employer-provided support (e.g., beliefs about the appropriateness of discussing wellbeing issues in the workplace).

METHODOLOGY: HOW DID WE DO THIS WORK?

The evaluation was made up of five 'workstreams' which are described below.

1

Workstream 1: Focus groups with Walsall stakeholders directly involved in encouraging SMEs' engagement with workplace health and wellbeing services and support.

Walsall Council and the Workplace Health Team helped to identify a list of key stakeholders to talk to for this workstream. Stakeholders were invited to take part in a videoconference focus group discussion. Focus group discussions aimed to explore: the different strategies used to engage SMEs in workplace wellbeing support and how effective those had been, and stakeholder perceptions of barriers to SME's engagement with support.

Three focus groups were conducted with a total of nine participants. Focus group size varied from two to five participants.

2

Workstream 2: Survey of Walsall based SMEs with ten or more employees.

A survey of SMEs was developed to gather information on SMEs' knowledge and awareness of available health and wellbeing support; levels of engagement with different types of wellbeing support services; SMEs' health and wellbeing support needs; the extent to which wellbeing services/support offer meets the needs of employers; any perceived gaps in provision; and views about health and wellbeing support in the workplace.

The survey was publicised with the help of various Walsall stakeholders and organizations. Publicity routes included: newsletters, publicity flyers, business events, emails to SMEs, posters in public spaces, and word of mouth.

Participants were able to complete the survey via a telephone survey or online in the following ways:

- 1) Via an independent research company who were commissioned to conduct telephone interviews with SMEs on our behalf.
- 2) Online self-completion via a secure system.

A total of 103 SMEs completed the survey, with three responses via the online survey and 100 completed via telephone.

3

Workstream 3: Interviews with representatives from a sample of Walsall SMEs.

With help from Walsall Council and the Workplace Health Team, SMEs were invited to take part in one-to-one interviews or focus group discussions. Participants were representatives from SMEs with 10 or more employees, and were business owners, directors within the SME, and/or responsible for human resources or employee wellbeing. Participants were recruited to the evaluation in several ways:

- As a result of having completed the online or telephone survey.
- Using a commercially available list of SMEs.
- Via Walsall Council contacts and Council dissemination of an invitation to participate.
- 'Snowball' sampling via existing participants.

A total of eight participants took part in an online, one-to-one interview. Interviews explored topics such as SMEs' experiences of accessing workplace health and wellbeing support; gaps in available support; barriers to engagement with support; factors that would facilitate greater SME engagement with support services; and perceptions of the health and wellbeing needs of employees.

Participants were from SMEs of different sizes and sectors (including health and social work, accommodation and food services, transport and storage, wholesale and retail, and manufacturing).

4

Workstream 4: Interviews with a selection of individuals employed/working within Walsall based SMEs.

With the support of Walsall Council and other partners and stakeholder, employees were invited to take part in a one-to-one interview (online, over the phone or face to face).

Participants were recruited in several ways, including through:

- Visits to SMEs by the Workplace Health Team.
- Community organisations or groups.
- Employers publicising the opportunity to participate to employees.
- Wellbeing activities and sessions.
- Word of mouth.

Interviews focused on topics such as employee experiences of the workplace health and wellbeing services available through their workplace; employee health and wellbeing support needs; and the extent to which employer-provided support met employee needs.

All interviews were conducted remotely and a total of eight interviews were conducted. Participants worked within SMEs of varying sizes and from a range of sectors.



Workstream 5: Synthesis of workstream findings and the co-production of recommendations for future service delivery.

This workstream involved bringing together findings from workstreams 1 to 4, to generate recommendations for how workplace health and wellbeing provision and support services in Walsall might be best delivered in future. It involved working in partnership with multiple stakeholders, to develop ways of widely communicating evaluation findings to a range of interested parties. This workstream included consultations with stakeholders and employees about the research findings and recommendations.



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