

Experts call for a structural shift in workplace wellbeing to drive productivity as Budget looms

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As unemployment reaches 5% and attention turns to this week's Budget, the [Policy Liaison Group on Workplace Wellbeing](#) brought together leading businesses and HR professionals to examine how the recommendations of the Mayfield Review can be activated to support national productivity, a better economy, and healthier working lives.

The discussion took place on Friday, 21 November. It was chaired by Gethin Nadin MBPsS, FRSA, RSPH, and led by Professor Sir Cary Cooper CBE. There was clear consensus among participants on the need to take forward the Review's recommendations to radically improve employee health and performance.

Sir Cary Cooper's Mental Capital and Wellbeing Review, published in 2008, sets out many of the principles echoed in Sir Charlie Mayfield's recent review. Set against widespread commentary that the government is struggling to reconcile immediate budgetary pressures with its core commitment to delivering growth, leading experts, including several large employers, expressed concern that the wellbeing and productivity agenda is in danger of being side-lined at this critical juncture. This is particularly worrying given the strong - not to mention longstanding - body of evidence that prioritising worker wellbeing increases output, raises job satisfaction and improves retention.

The renewed momentum created by the Mayfield Review must now be quickly converted into action. Structured frameworks for measuring wellbeing, tracking culture, collecting data and benchmarking outcomes are essential to enabling employers to improve both health and performance over time. The Review sets the right direction but leaves open important questions about the infrastructure required to

make change possible. This includes modern internal surveys, clear reporting processes and support for SMEs, which employ most of the UK workforce yet often lack the tools to embed proactive approaches to wellbeing.

A recurring theme of the discussion was the question of ownership. Wellbeing cannot sit entirely within HR or within health and safety and must instead be integrated across leadership, management practice and organisational design as part of a cultural as well as structural shift. Contributors emphasised the importance of promoting managers based on emotional intelligence as well as technical competence. Such a move will enable workplaces to develop cultures that support psychological safety, early intervention and healthy performance. Companies need coherent systems that connect data, management capability and employee voice so that wellbeing is embedded in business strategy.

The government should adopt a proactive approach, including exploring options for tax relief, to help employers build the infrastructure needed to embed wellbeing at the heart of workplace practice and improve performance.

Professor Sir Cary Cooper said: “If we build the systems that allow organisations to measure, track and improve wellbeing, we will have healthier people, stronger workplaces and much better productivity across the economy. We’ve been at the bottom of the league table on productivity per capita for so long. Understandably, we’re preoccupied with breaking out of this stagnation, but we have really good businesses that want to protect the health and wellbeing and the productivity of our country. We need to harness that commitment and ambition.”

Gethin Nadin, Chair, Policy Liaison Group on Workplace Wellbeing, commented: “We must be honest about the direction of travel. Public health is a core function of the state, not a corporate add-on. Expecting employers to shoulder growing elements of the welfare state – without substantial structural support, clear frameworks, or meaningful financial incentives – is not sustainable.”

“The government wants long-term economic improvement, and healthier workplaces are essential to achieving this. But if we want a healthier, more resilient workforce, we need a partnership between government and employers where responsibility is matched with resources.”

Katie Duxbury, Head of Pay & Benefits Services, Bupa, said: “Colleagues are thinking twice, and in some cases opting out of vital healthcare schemes to avoid the taxable benefit, reducing take-home pay. These solutions are essential in keeping people working, not a luxury or perk.”

Clemens Moehring, COO, Hastee, commented: “The Review is very strong in terms of wellbeing, prevention, early intervention, but I’m very conscious that one of the biggest drivers of employee stress and absences is financial pressure, and that barely appears in the report.”

Maria Paviour, Sponsor, Policy Liaison Group on Workplace Wellbeing, said: “Human capital intelligence and consistent measurement are central to the culture change that organisations need.”

Sandra Dyball, independent health, wellbeing, employee relations and benefits strategist, said: “For SMEs, there needs to be guidance on how to support people and businesses. If one person is absent, that could be 25% of the total workforce.”