

HOLDING IT TOGETHER

UK MENTAL WELLBEING
AND THE ROLE OF EMPLOYEE
ASSISTANCE PROGRAMMES



Contents

2. Foreword, Sir Cary Cooper CBE
2. Aims, Karl Bennett
3. Introduction, Eugene Farrell
4. 5 key findings
5. The data
6. Analysis
9. Expert comment
 9. Emma Parry
 10. Karl Bennett
 11. Andrew Kinder
 12. Dr Zofia Bajorek
13. About us

Foreword

This is the stage we've reached, where figures relating to the mental health of the UK workforce are shocking but also unsurprising.

The two factors that lead to the greatest stress among people are uncertainty and lack of control. And that's what we have plenty of. Energy prices and the cost-of-living crisis. What's happening with the war in Ukraine. Political instability. Worries about recession and jobs.

The growth in the use of EAPs highlighted in this report comes with at least one element of good news to it. It means many more employers have been taking employee health and well-being more seriously; and, that more employees have been willing to make use of an EAP, that there's trust in service providers.

Most worrying about the EAPA UK figures is the number of employees with severe depression, in crisis situations, turning to their EAP. It's critical that the Government, the NHS and other healthcare stakeholders, understand the

role the EAP industry has been playing in supporting mental health, providing immediate access to counselling and professional assessment for millions of people every year. So not a matter of an employee benefit affecting the few, but a significant role in dealing with an urgent and long-term issue for society.

Given the limitations to NHS resources and both the scale and complexity of dealing with people's mental wellbeing, more thought and discussion is needed around the place of EAPs — including how else they can help. Maybe there's a need for extensions to EAP services, to ensure there's provision for longer-term counselling programmes through to recovery.

The EAP sector has coped this far with the giant swell of demand and more serious cases, through training and recruitment initiatives, more online services and apps. But neither employers nor the UK as a whole can afford to see EAPs become overwhelmed.

— **Sir Cary Cooper CBE**

50th Anniversary Professor of Organisational Psychology and Health at the ALLIANCE Manchester Business School, University of Manchester

Aims

The coming years are going to be particularly significant in terms of the evolution of the entire EAP sector. We believe it's crucial that we have these new, top-level figures about the state of the EAP market.

Our aim is for this report to be the first in a biennial series, working as a regular platform for EAPA to explore and

give insights into the ongoing impact of EAPs over time, looking at new issues such as the role of EAPs among SMEs and digging into more of the detail of how employees are actually making use of their EAP and the benefits.

— **Karl Bennett**

Chair, EAPA UK, and Wellbeing Director at Vivup

Introduction

Employee Assistance Programmes were first introduced in the UK in the late 1970s. Basic telephone helplines mostly offering pieces of practical advice on financial and legal matters. The extent of their availability to staff — along with the breadth of offerings and importance to people's lives — has grown sharply ever since.

The last 20 years, in particular, have seen a transformation in attitudes to employee health and wellbeing. The case of [Hatton v Sutherland](#) in 2002, in itself, prompted major change. The case ruled that employers had a 'duty of care' in terms of employee mental health — and that employers who offered workplace counselling services with access to treatment were unlikely to be found in breach of this duty.

In 2003, data gathered by EAPA UK showed that the market size for EAPs was £32m. Since then, the combination of a need to demonstrate compliance, along with greater appreciation of the importance of employee health and wellbeing to productivity levels and organisational resilience, has led to market growth of 368% to £118 million — in spite of decreases over time in the average rate per capita.

A major part of the growth in EAP services in the UK has been mental health support. Data from the [NHS Improving Access to Psychological Therapies service](#) in 2022 shows a total of 1.24 million people across the country accessed IAPT treatment. By comparison, EAP providers offered counselling to 434,250 people (delivering 1.3 million actual sessions); EAPs are supporting 13,000 workers per week in the UK overall and more than 8,300 with counselling — constituting a hugely significant part in the provision of mental health support across the UK. A role that remains largely unrecognised by Government.

The cost of these EAP services is being met by employers and delivered by an EAP industry workforce of around 2,000 full-time equivalent staff and a network of qualified, professional counsellors. Access to both advice and professional counsellors is immediate. Outcomes from EAP services are also strong. Completion of therapy is an essential component in terms of recovery, and research

into EAP outcomes showed “overall, almost three-quarters of clients were estimated to have completed their EAP intervention” (Mellor-Clarke, Twig, Farrell, Kinder, 2012), compared with 53% in the NHS IAPT service.

At 24.45 million employees covered, the data shows that EAPs are covering a significant portion of the [UK working population](#) (estimated at 32.84 million employees and 28.35 million after deducting self-employed).

In the [REBA Employee Wellbeing Research](#) report, published in 2022, the Reward and Employee Benefits Association (REBA) estimated that 96% of organisations have an EAP, and that their data represents 88% of businesses over 250 employees; it then follows that if the working population in businesses over 250 employees is 10.6 million, EAPs are covering 10.38 million and the remaining 19.97 million employees must be within the SME sector.

We can also see that EAPs cover 105,275 businesses. With [7,675 businesses](#) being large corporate (over 250 employees), this figure must include a significant number of businesses in the SME sector. The data from REBA is skewed to large corporate businesses and reflects that not all size of organisations will have an EAP.

Data from [EAPA's latest ROI Report](#) shows that EAPs cover a wide range of public and private sectors, including finance, charity, public administration, manufacturing, retail, agriculture, transport and utilities. The value that EAPs bring to organisations (from reduced absence, presenteeism, lost management time etc) is significant too. The data shows that for every £1.00 spent on an EAP in the UK, employers have seen an average return on investment of £10.85.

EAPs have become a pillar of mental health provision for the UK — providing rapid access to professional support for the majority of the workforce, delivering value-for-money for employers. The question now is what happens in the next 20 years. Can EAPs continue to take on an ever-increasing mental health role as society's demands grow and thicken with complexity?

— Eugene Farrell

Immediate past chair, EAPA UK, and
mental health lead at AXA Health

Five key findings

1

The UK EAP market is valued at more than £118 million. Providers employ around 2,060 full-time staff (not including networks of associates who work as advisors and counsellors).

2

UK EAP services are available to 24.45 million employees working across more than 105,000 organisations.

3

In 2022, EAPs in the UK provided more than 1.375 million counselling sessions.

4

68% of employees contacting EAP services in 2022 needed to be offered the support of counselling (640,250 people used an EAP service, and 434,250 were offered counselling).

5

On average, 1.7% of counselling cases came with a 'red flag' (involving an immediate and serious risk of self-harm and suicide). This translates to more than 10,000 lives at risk. Some EAP providers report red flag cases as being at levels above 3%.

The data

Data was provided by UK members of EAPA UK during January 2023. The information relates to the previous 12 months of company activities, since January 2022. In a small minority of cases where complete sets of figures have not been provided, or not been available, reasonable estimates have been included.

The figure for the number of organisations providers work with includes membership bodies and benevolent funds as well as employers, and EAP schemes delivered indirectly to employers via a third party.

The number of employees able to access an EAP means the total number of employees, not solely full-time employees, and includes EAP schemes delivered indirectly to employers via a third party. It does not include the access provided to family members via EAPs; or students whose university has an EAP; or policy holders of insurance schemes where an EAP is included as part of the insurance cover.

The number of people who have contacted the EAP only includes those accessing specific core EAP services by telephone or online — not web hits or use of apps.

Data on people offered counselling refers to the total number of individual counselling 'cases' opened in the

period, both 'single-session' and 'multiple session', including online counselling and Cognitive Behavioural therapy cases delivered online.

The number for counselling sessions delivered includes all those delivered within EAP contracts, and all modalities (in-person, telephone, video, online CBT).

'Red flag' cases are those identified by the EAP professional handling an enquiry as involving an employee at risk of taking their life by suicide.

EAP revenues are the total figure for all EAP schemes sold in the UK; it excludes all non-core EAP activity and insurance product schemes such as Group Income Protection, provided to employers where an EAP is a free 'add-on' feature. It does include EAP schemes delivered indirectly to employers via a third party.

Numbers of staff employed relate to full-time equivalent staff directly employed by the provider only; those who deliver EAP services; and does not include affiliate counsellors, suppliers or other non-salaried consultants.

Analysis

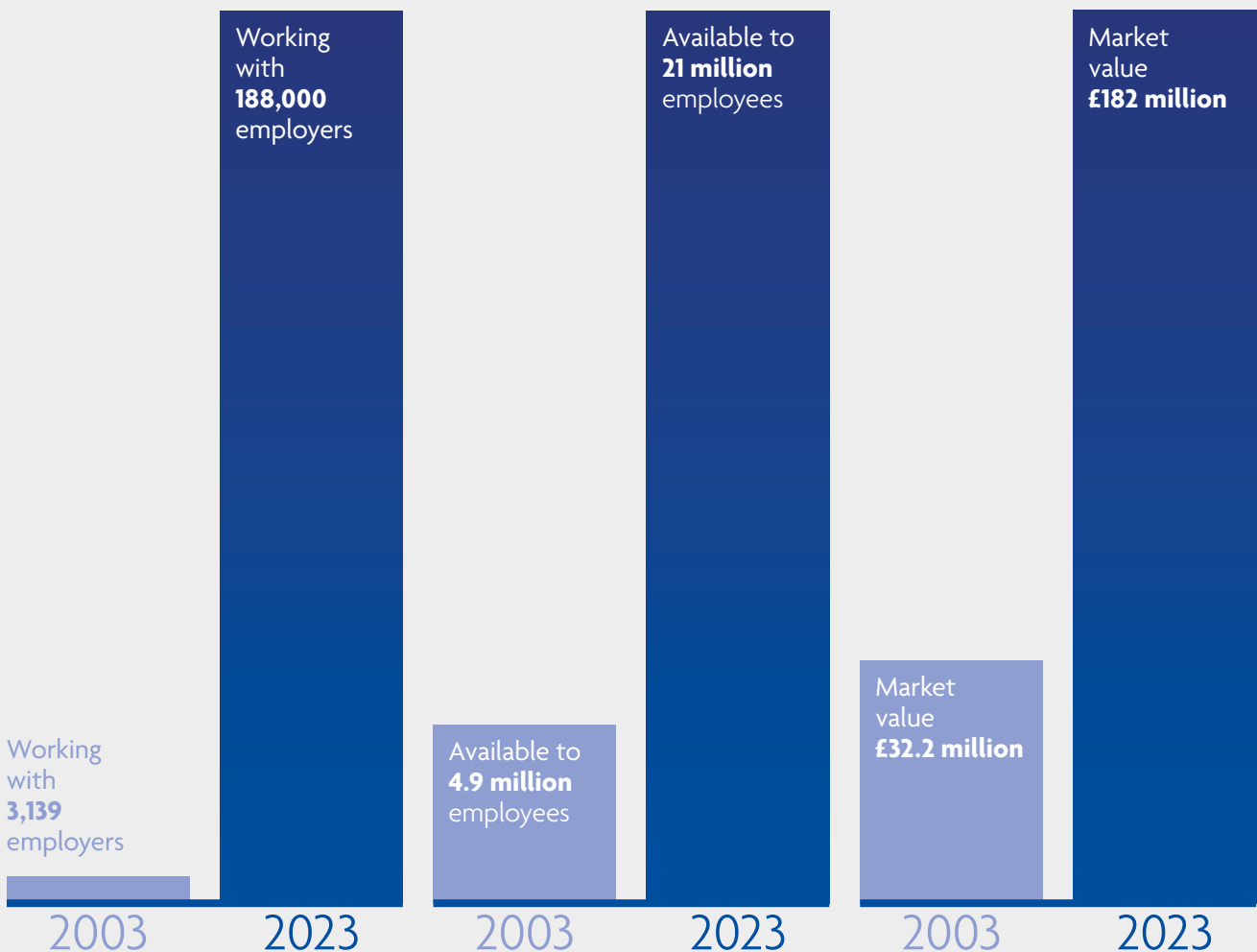
Data on the EAP market is a striking illustration of something bigger: how the whole landscape of attitudes to mental health in UK society has been transformed over the past 20 years.

There has been a growing recognition of the importance of employee wellbeing, mental and physical, to employers. Wellbeing as a foundation of productivity and performance, motivation and engagement — and to overall organisational resilience.

At 24.45 million employees covered, the data suggests that EAPs provide cover for 75% of the UK working population (estimated at 32.84 million employees, according to [Office for National Statistics](#), February 2023).

As levels of awareness and willingness to talk about mental health have increased nationally, so have expectations around support. At the same time, work pressures have intensified with the adoption of digital technologies; over the past 20 years, employees have experienced a series of shocks — from the global financial crash of 2008 to the Covid-19 pandemic and cost-of-living crisis — that have involved waves of disruption, uncertainty and insecurity.

We have an increasing culture of self-awareness when it comes psychological health, combined with more reasons for anxiety.



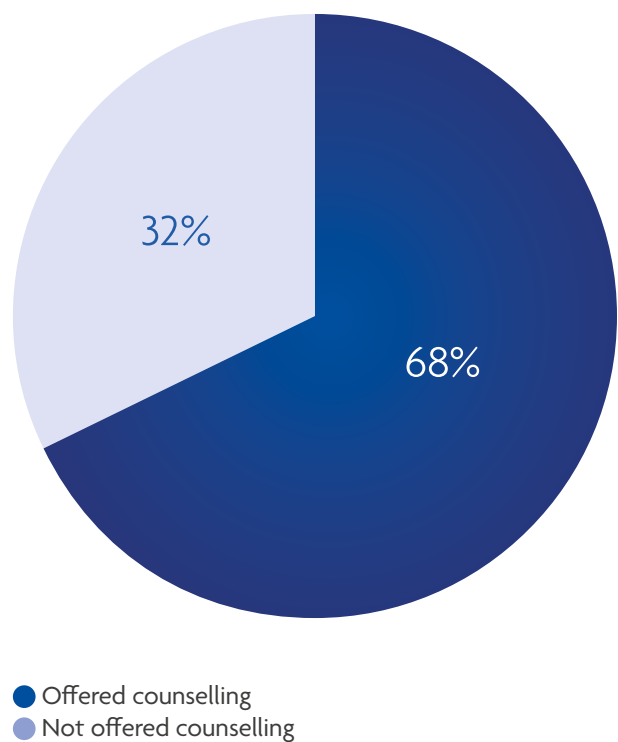
More open conversations and a willingness to look for professional support have been important and positive developments in terms of the state of the nation's wellbeing. But the UK's new world of mental health awareness has meant consequences for the NHS, EAPs and health services of all kinds.

NHS mental health provision has been overwhelmed by demand and continues to be a work-in-progress. An investigation by [BBC News](#) in January 2023 claimed that 418,000 calls to new NHS mental health helplines went unanswered in 2021/22. The crisis lines, run by NHS mental health trusts, are said to receive more than 200,000 calls every month in England. In ten trusts, callers had to wait more than an hour for their call to be answered. Fewer than one in six trusts were able to confirm that crisis line staff were qualified mental health professionals. A study by the [Royal Society of Psychiatrists](#) published in October 2022 suggested that one in four patients needed to wait 12 weeks before being able to start any treatment, and that many people were turning instead to A&E services.

In this context, EAPs have become a highly valuable resource to employees. [Anecdotally](#), EAP providers know that GPs are increasingly encouraging patients with mental health concerns to contact their EAP if they have one. As the report data shows, this also means EAPs are being treated as a frontline emergency service and involved with complex, long-term cases of mental illness (68% of employees contacting EAP services in 2022 were offered the support of counselling (640,250 people used an EAP service, and due to their situation and symptoms, 434,250 were offered counselling). In 2022, EAPs in the UK provided more than 1.375 million counselling sessions. On average, 1.7% of counselling cases came with a 'red flag' (involving an immediate and serious risk of suicide). This translates to more than 10,000 lives at risk that EAPs support. Some EAP providers report red flag cases as being at levels above 3%.

Employees contacting EAP services in 2022:

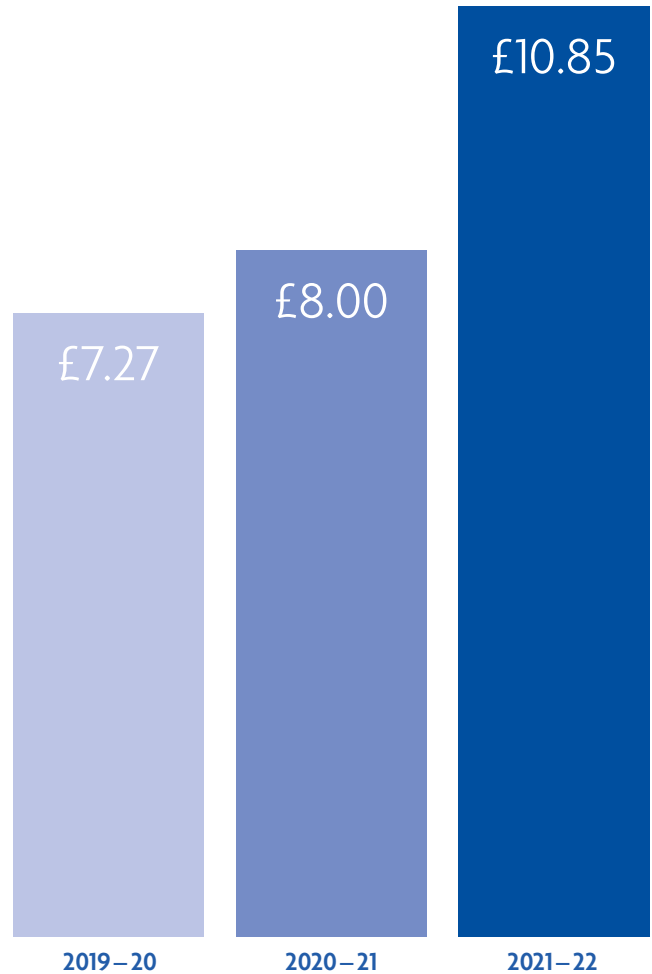
Of 640,250 people who used an EAP service, 434,250 (68%) were offered counselling.



Return on Investment

According to [EAPA's Return on investment calculator](#), organisations are reporting more savings in terms of reduced staff absence and gains in productivity. [Figures](#) from the period between October 2021 and October 2022 show that for every £1.00 spent on an EAP in the UK, employers have seen an average ROI of £10.85. This compares with a previous average of £8.00 in the previous year, and £7.27 in 2019.

Average return on investment per £1 spent





One of the most worrying aspects of the new EAP figures is that few people will be surprised by them — it's what has been expected in the wake of the pandemic years and new anxieties created by the cost-of-living crisis. Evidence, again, that poor mental health is a growing problem for the UK.

In this context, employers need to acknowledge the stresses these kinds of external pressures can cause for their people. Increased investment in EAP services is a positive sign of how employers have taken steps to respond to the challenges of a changing world. More and more, EAPs play an important role for employees. There has also been increased investment in other activities designed to support positive employee wellbeing, such as training for resilience or mindfulness, and wellbeing-related smartphone apps.

At the same time, employers have to recognise that work itself can be a driver of poor wellbeing. External and internal issues combine: worries about finances, worries about workloads and attitudes of a line manager. Even before the pandemic we were seeing increased levels of exhaustion and burnout due to work-related stress. Work is hugely valuable in people's lives as a source of recognition, routine and feelings of belonging, but it can also be a major contributing factor to mental health issues.

To improve employee wellbeing, organisations need to become a very practical part of the solution. Rather than solely focusing on providing support for people who are already suffering, or helping people to deal with stress better, they need to concentrate on eliminating work-based causes of poor wellbeing and mental health. That means not only addressing immediate workload issues but also the bigger cultural picture — building a workplace that encourages a sense of choice and control over how work is carried out: an environment of trust, autonomy, social support and psychological safety.

Recent survey evidence suggests many managers feel “out of their depth” when supporting their team members through mental health issues. Line managers have an important role in monitoring employee wellbeing and offering support — including directing employees towards their EAP. Employers need to be thinking about how they best develop skills among their line managers in recognising wellbeing and mental health issues in employees, and long before they get to the ‘red flag’ stage.

Employers should be thinking about how they can work with EAP providers more strategically, developing more tailored support when it comes to the specific stressors of today, like financial wellbeing and risks from long-term health conditions.

— **Emma Parry**
Professor of Human Resource Management and
Head of the Changing World of Work Group,
Cranfield School of Management



The figure of 68% of people accessing an EAP requiring counselling is a telling one — and significant in a number of different ways.

It's another signal of the changes brought about by the pandemic years; concerns over the lack of timely access to NHS mental health services. But for the industry it's also a very positive indication in terms of how services are being promoted and used. Employers are becoming more conscious of the hard value of EAPs in terms of employee wellbeing, productivity and absence. The status of EAPs has changed. Employees with worries about mental health have the confidence to reach out to their EAP, knowing that access to counselling is an immediate option.

A critical part of the future picture for EAP providers will be about managing this situation: the double-edged sword of a growing demand for counselling. It will be so important for EAPs to continue to be part of the landscape of mental health provision in the UK, to be a genuine source of added value via employers.

That means a shift in positioning for EAPs: taking on a more pro-active preventative role, ensuring there are earlier interventions among employees in order to avoid the need for extended programmes of counselling, a strong non-clinical service dealing with underlying issues such as the fall-out from a cost-of-living crisis, backed up by more training for staff around mental health.

At EAPA UK we are committed to working with our membership as a community on shaping the most effective future for EAPs — drawing on their insights into what works and what doesn't — on the mix of clinical and non-clinical services and the supporting spine of codes of best practice and ethics which will come together to provide the best outcomes for employees.

— **Karl Bennett**

Chair, EAPA UK, and Wellbeing
Director at Vivup



The 'red flag' statistic is very concerning. We must however state that the ways in which EAPA providers record a red flag (meaning an urgent risk of self-harm) can differ. Some providers might flag someone presenting with 'suicide ideation' or self harm, while another might flag only cases where there is immediate and urgent risk of harm to self or others, such as imminent suicide. Nevertheless, the numbers overall are an indication not only of the scale of the mental health crisis facing the UK, but the severity of so many individual cases.

Although there is a lot of work being done to address the concerns about long waiting lists and problems of accessing mental health services through the NHS, the EAP figures are another signal of the implications of potentially limited support for the population nationally. What the red flag statistic also says is that EAPs are playing a critical role in helping to prevent suicides. EAP services are used and trusted by employees when they have reached a serious state of desperation.

It's clear that employers, working with their EAP providers, need to have strategies in place to help pick up on, and support, individuals with poor mental health before they reach the red flag stage. That means involving line managers and colleagues in understanding and being receptive to warning signs, and knowing how to provide the best forms of support and signposting to professional resources, through an EAP or the suicide advice provided by charities such as Business in the Community, The Samaritans and MIND.

The situation with men highlights the challenges being faced — and the need for active communications to help employees recognise and accept their need for help. Around three-quarters of suicides in the UK are among men. And all the evidence, from research and anecdotally, suggests that the reason is that men don't and won't ask for help. Men appear to be more likely to act on suicidal thoughts and tend to choose a more lethal method compared to women.

What we don't know at this stage from the data is how the red flag numbers compare with the past, and this is where more work is needed: to understand the trends, which are the sectors where employees are most at risk, and what the causes might be for changes.

— **Andrew Kinder**

Vice chair at EAPA UK and professional head of mental health services at Optima Health



The research and policy interest into workplace wellbeing has increased significantly over the last two decades, especially since Dame Carol Black's seminal report '[Working for a healthier tomorrow](#)' showed the link between good employee health and individual, organisational and societal outcomes. It is now not contentious to say that a healthy workforce (in comparison to an unhealthy one) is more innovative, motivated, engaged and loyal. The Black review concluded that there needed to be a shift in organisational attitudes to ensure that both employers and employees recognise the importance of preventing ill-health at work and ensuring that staff have access to good quality work and evidence-based wellbeing interventions.

Workforce wellbeing has once again been promulgated up ongoing agendas as a result of the Covid-19 pandemic, the resultant lockdowns, and how organisations have managed the return-to-the-workplace. Alongside operational and logistical challenges that the pandemic presented both organisations and employees, workers also had to adjust to a number of changes including social isolation, balancing home and work-life (which may have been harder for those home-schooling or those with caring responsibilities) and acclimatising to new work conditions, whilst balancing the need to remain productive and the uncertainty and fear of becoming ill. All of these challenges would have posed a risk to employee physical and emotional wellbeing. The full nature of the impact of the pandemic on employee health and wellbeing is yet to be seen, however organisations and managers need to consider how health and wellbeing policies and practices need to be adapted in the future.

Even before the pandemic there was evidence to suggest that the knowledge about 'good quality work' and the need to develop a more proactive approach to workplace health was not being put into practice. The [Farmer and Stevenson \(2017\) report](#) focussing on mental health in the workplace suggested that organisations needed to pull their socks up when it came to employee wellbeing and do more to prioritise the issue. They recommended that organisations need to provide tools to: prevent employees' mental ill-health being caused or worsened by work; make employees aware of how they can access timely help in an attempt to reduce sickness absence caused by mental ill-health and support individuals to help them thrive at work.

This is exactly where EAPs can play a vital role, in helping employers assist their employees in providing workplace support for emotional, practical financial, and employment issues. Research into workplace counselling and the utilisation of EAPs undertaken by the Institute for Employment Studies has found that if implemented and used effectively EAPs can be positive for both employees and organisations wishing to provide timely support, to minimise sickness absence and presenteeism and could maximise job retention. There is also evidence that EAPs can provide a return-on-investment, even with minimal use. It can therefore be argued that if more employees can access high quality, trained workplace counselling through EAPs then this can be a cost-effective approach to providing employee wellbeing services and improving the mental health outcomes of employees across the UK economy.

— **Dr Zofia Bajorek**

Senior Research Fellow, Institute for Employment Studies

About us

EAPA UK — the Employee Assistance Professionals Association — is a not-for-profit organisation that represents the interests of individuals and organisations concerned with employee assistance, psychological health and wellbeing in the UK.

Members include external and internal EAP providers, purchasers, counsellors, consultants and trainers working in the field of employee health and wellbeing.

Our mission is to promote the highest standards of practice and the continuing development of employee assistance programmes (EAPs) in the UK and the Association exists to:

- Support and promote the EAP industry in the UK.
- Promote the development of the employee assistance profession.
- Develop, maintain and apply standards of practice, guidelines and a code of ethics to members.

UK EAPA was established in 1998 and works beyond the EAPA global standards that are adapted local to the UK market; this makes the UK EAPA Standards of Professional Practice the only credible set of standards to which EAP providers operate.



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EAPA UK