



Briefing Note: RED Talk 4 Creating Good Mental Health

Rural Policy Group is a visionary think tank shaping the future of the rural economy established by Mark Lumsdon-Taylor earlier this year. It holds a series of debates – Rural Economic Development Talks – to investigate the impact of the Coronavirus pandemic on rural economic development and help rural businesses to succeed in this unprecedented climate.

The RED Talk on Thursday, 11 June 2020 looked at the importance of mental wellbeing in the workplace, salutogenesis, self-care strategies for good mental health and how to implement a corporate culture which removes stigma from mental illness and creates an environment for wellness to flourish.

The Talk was led by heavy-hitting speakers and panellists:

- Sir Norman Lamb, Mental Health Advocate and former Minister for Health
- Robert Verkerk BSc MSc DIC PhD FACN
- Dr Philip Hopley, Managing Director of Cognition
- Duncan Cochrane-Dyett, National Lead for Healthcare at MHA MacIntyre Hudson
- Christopher Longden, Partner at Whitehead Monckton
- Mark Lumsdon-Taylor, Founder & Chair of Rural Policy Group
- Chair: Sarah Calcutt, Chair of the National Fruit Show and NED of Covent Garden Market Authority

Watch again

A link to the full Talk can be found on our website www.ruralpolicy.group.

Summary of insights

- Mental ill health costs the economy over £100 billion per year and poses a significant financial challenge to business.
- Prevention healthcare happens at home and in the workplace.
- Interventions to improve corporate culture do not need to cost the Earth but they do need to have buy-in from the leadership.
- Business leaders recognise the scale of the work-related mental health problem and are overwhelmingly in support of change. The status quo is no longer acceptable.
- More education around prevention healthcare is needed.
- Nine out of 10 business leaders are ready to invest in prevention and mental healthcare, including making changes to their corporate culture.

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Keynote speaker: Sir Norman Lamb

There has been a psychological fallout from the COVID crisis: loneliness and isolation; anxiety around money and loss of employment; business survival; the rising prevalence of domestic violence; bereavement. All these factors can increase psychological distress and even lead to mental ill health. Sir Norman Lamb was part of a 75-organisation network to call on government for a resilience task force to plan now for the wave of mental ill health that is still to come from the pandemic. Individuals and communities will need to be supported through some very difficult times.

Mental ill health has a significant impact on society and the economy; its cost has been calculated to be over £100 billion per year. The loss of economic productivity from absenteeism due to mental ill health and presenteeism when employees not particularly effective is a major contributor to that figure. Then we must add the cost of care to the NHS and policing. Mental ill health and muscular-skeletal problems account for 80% of total sickness absence. Clearly, mental ill health is a significant challenge for business.

It is enlightened self-interest that directs us to get to grips with this problem rather than allowing mental ill health to worsen within the workplace. We know there are lots of things we can do which according to the evidence will have a positive impact. For example, training of line managers to be better managers - to avoid bullying, to be empathetic and achieve greater competence. Also, raising awareness and understanding of mental ill health is impactful. Coronavirus has shown us that the introduction of flexible working and working from home can help with mental health. If you allow people to adjust their working patterns to meet particular pressures (such as childcare) it can have a positive impact on their state of mind.

Some businesses understand and do good things to help their employees. It is more difficult in smaller businesses as they have less capacity to support the wellbeing of their workforce. The 'Wellbeing Premium' is currently being trialled in the West Midlands. A discount is applied to rates or taxes to help businesses apply evidence-based methods of improving mental health in the workplace. It is a win-win solution. Businesses benefit from improved bottom line, reduced absenteeism and presenteeism and lower staff turnover. Staff benefit from improved welfare and more enjoyment coming to work, and government benefits from a reduced reliance on the NHS. Investing in mental wellbeing at work is about enlightened self-interest. We can make a big impact on the experience of people in the workplace and we can have a big impact on the bottom line.

Question to Sir Norman: How do we track stress and distress in society?

Answer: There is a lot of data that we can use. Non-payment of council tax is a clear indication of a family moving into a financially distressed situation. The number of presentations at GP surgeries and A&E. Police data. DWP data. We now have technology which can make sense of this information and indicate when a response is needed. We can use this information to intervene early. So to go back to council tax, rather than wait and issue a debt recover letter we can contact the family to see

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what help they need and offer guidance towards debt advice or other services. Debt is one of the biggest causes of suicide.

Prevention health speaker: Rob Verkerk BSc MSc DIC PhD FACN

The Salutogenic Model is concerned with the relationship between our health, stress and coping.

Ultimately, coronavirus is helping us see an opportunity for a paradigm change. Most people think of healthcare as a reaction to a health problem. We need to reframe healthcare and understand that healthcare happens at home and in the workplace. As a society we need to identify problems at the earliest possible stage; to use an analogy we need an annual MOT so we don't break down on the side of a road.

Mental health is determined by multiple systems in the body, trauma experiences and how we interact with our environments. The food we eat is one of the most intimate ways we experience our environment and it plays an important role in our health.

A disturbing trend is that younger people are being more affected by mental ill health. There is also a strong socioeconomic bent towards poor mental health in those who have fewer opportunities and more stress. The COVID-19 pandemic is exacerbating mental health problems. Furlough and other government support schemes are protecting people from the worst financial impacts and it may take years for the full extent of the mental health implications to unfold. But we do know it will have a disproportionate impact on the most disadvantaged.

Stress itself is not the problem, it is our response to the stress. We need to love ourselves, value ourselves, look after ourselves and judge ourselves kindly. The distortions of social media have impacted on self-worth and even caused suicides because of how we judge ourselves.

A pill cannot solve all our problems; we need a society-wide approach. As a society we have not spent time and effort creating good health across the multiple systems in our body. We need to rectify this by develop a common language across different medical groups and move away from the silo culture that currently prevails in medicine. The systems in our body interact with one another and balance needs to be maintained.

The two super systems – the nervous system and the endocrine system – play a role in all the main categories of mental health problems. The way we move, the way we eat and the way in which we take time out is critical to restoring balance within these systems. Balance in these systems is critical to building resilience into individuals and society. As is understanding that behaviours can be a trauma or stress response. The brain can become locked into a survival response and individuals need treatment to allow them to move away from that primitive part of the brain and access its more sophisticated functions.

Things everyone can do to help restore balance:

1. Breathwork
2. Recovery and relaxation

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3. Positive mindset to reframe stress
4. Sleep quality and quantity. Remove bluelight and digital
5. Social and nature connections
6. Eat fresh unprocessed foods: cook together, eat together
7. Physical activity
8. Sense of purpose and life meaning

Mental health speaker: Dr Philip Hopley

Mental ill health is a massive issue and we need to move to a stage where physical and mental health have parity. They really cannot be separated.

It is a massive problem for business. There is a cost to mental health of £1700 per employee per annum. This figure demonstrates that mental health is costing businesses and builds the business case for intervention to remove stigma, remove old-fashioned thinking about mental health and change the culture of an organisation. The cost would be much higher for SMEs if an employee was lost to long period of sickness. If just some of that can money be invested we will shift the needle.

Interventions need to start top-down to have a chance of sustaining any kind of impact. Gearing up middle managers in mental health first aid will not change anything unless the leaders walk the walk.

Stress itself is not necessarily a problem. It can be broken down into manageable quanta so we can cope with it. It is chronic long-term stress which causes mental ill health. Training programs are available to identify thinking styles and help people with unhealthy thinking patterns move to a more positive mindset. Recovery behaviours around sleep, exercise and diet are also important when managing work-related stresses.

Improving mental health in the workplace doesn't have to be a major investment but it needs a clear strategy and must be led by the top, and those individuals will need some self-awareness of how their behaviour influences others in the organisation.

Question to Dr Philip Hopley: Is this an opportunity for personal growth, not just mental health?

Answer: It all comes down to attitude. So many people are suffering from anxiety, depression, boredom, bereavement and stress. It is an opportunity for all of us and leaders in business to make significant and sustainable improvements in resilience. Training of two to three hours can be of significant benefit and the results last six to 12 months.

Panel discussion on corporate culture

Duncan Cochrane-Dyett (DCD): We need to create the right culture in the organisation. Knowing your colleague is as important as knowing your customer.

Rob Verkerk (RV): The priority for improving health in the workplace is engagement. We need to be more engaged in prevention healthcare as individuals. Simple things such as the concept of food as medicine and exercise as medicine are available to us but we don't necessarily know how to use

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them. A one size fits all approach doesn't work as has been consistently demonstrated by government advice; we need personalisation in our prevention healthcare. We believe there should be investment in health coaches to guide people on their health journeys within the community.

Chris Longden (CL): There are simple and practical steps to change culture and improve openness such as mental health champions.

CL: There has increasingly been a theme of mental health problems in the employment mediations I have been involved with. It is critical business gets this right.

Take home statements from the speakers and panellists

Sir Norman Lamb

Mental Health Advocate and former Minister for Health

"The truth is that it is in their self-interest for companies to focus on the health and wellbeing of their workforce. If we improve workplace practices, we can have a positive impact on employees' well-being, but we can also reduce sickness absence and reduce the problem of presenteeism thereby increasing productivity. It's a win-win for everyone. So, my message is act now. Don't delay."

Rob Verkerk

Founder and Scientific & Executive Director of ANH International

"Sitting down for eight to 10 hours a day is the new smoking. We need to build more physical activity into offices".

Dr Philip Hopley

Medical Doctor, Consultant Psychiatrist and Founder & Managing Director of Cognacity

"Let's not waste this opportunity. We are spending more time with family and less time community. Let's use this time to adapt so we prioritise mental wellbeing".

Duncan Cochrane-Dyet

Partner and National Lead for Retail, MHA MacIntyre Hudson

"Mental Health awareness and concern should not be another corporate initiative; it should be part of the culture of the organisation. "Know your colleague" is as important to success as "know your customer".

Christopher Longden

Head of Dispute Resolution, Whitehead Monckton

"Seize this opportunity to re-think how you run your business to create the right culture".

Mark Lumsdon-Taylor

Corporate Financier and Founder & Chair of Rural Policy Group

"There are two things that matter in business. Money and people. Leaders must recognise mental ill health and realise that it has real implications for individuals and their performance at work. It is down to those at the top of their organisation to address mental wellness in their people positively

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and proactively. It is time we broke down the stigma and changed corporate culture. Mental illness is not a weakness and it is not an indicator of ability”.

The polls

Rural Policy Group sought to gain insight into whether business is ready to take action on improving mental wellbeing in the workplace by polling the delegates three times during the debate.

Poll overview: the polls showed business leaders recognise the scale of the work-related mental health problem and are overwhelmingly in support of change for both the welfare of individuals and as a business strategy for bottom line gain. However, one in 10 businesses do not feel equipped to implement a prevention and mental healthcare strategy.

Poll 1: In the words of Chris Witty, does “prevention beat cures”? (November 2019, Financial Times)

- 42% Yes, but I don't really understand what prevention is
- 54% Yes, totally understand and plans to change
- 00% No, carry on as we are
- 04% Don't really understand why this is important

Business strongly supports the role of prevention healthcare in creating good mental health and the status quo is no longer acceptable. However, more education around prevention health strategies is needed.

Poll 2: As an individual and business leader/owner will I change my approach to work-related mental health?

- 38% Yes, I can see issues coming
- 62% Yes, I have seen first-hand the impact of work-related mental health issues
- 00% No, you should leave problems at the door when you walk into work

100% of businesses will be changing their approach to work-related mental health. Business leaders and owners are concerned about their peoples' mental wellbeing and are ready to take action. The universal support for improving the culture around mental health in the workplace may be due to its prevalence; nearly two thirds of businesses have experienced the impact of mental illness first-hand.

Poll 3: Would you invest in the prevention health and mental health agendas for your business?

- 58% Yes, the bottom line will benefit in the long run
- 32% Yes, we need to recognise this in our staff
- 05% I don't need any more costs right now; not that interested
- 05% I need to learn

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90% of business leaders are ready to invest in improving workplace wellness through prevention and mental healthcare. This is the lowest level of support for change we have polled; cost and know how are barriers for one in 10 businesses.

