

MHFA Statement

The training of Mental Health First Aiders (MHFAs) by employers has become commonplace, gaining support as a useful part of workplace mental health strategies. This in turn led to the introduction of a private members bill by Dean Russell MP making the introduction of mental health first aid training a legal requirement in workplaces.

As the representative body for professional organisations which work on the frontline of employee mental health every day, dealing with the full spectrum of its realities and challenges, EAPA UK believes that clarity on the nature and role of MHFAs is critical.

In essence, we believe that MHFAs are a positive development in raising awareness of the importance of employee mental health and making it easier for staff to have a first conversation, and an early conversation, about any concerns, and to be signposted to advice, resources and professional support. But, crucially, MHFAs have only been equipped with the training to provide that initial signposting and nothing more. MHFAs can only ever be one element in a package of measures that provide preventative and reactive support.

Former board members of Mental Health First Aid England have argued that the proposals in the private members bill “could create unintended and negative consequences” and that MHFA “is only one piece of the jigsaw when effectively managing and supporting mental health in the workplace”. We support this position.

Employee mental health is a highly sensitive area which can involve a great deal of complexity, risks and danger. Being identified as an MHFA can put people in a difficult position, under pressure to provide support they are not trained to provide and exposed to intense and stressful situations that can be triggers for psychological distress of their own.

In order to test thinking, we carried out a small-scale, independent and anonymous survey among employees currently acting as an MHFA. 35% said the issues they had encountered in the role had exceeded the knowledge provided by MHFA training (an additional 14% said this happened frequently). Asked how often they had been asked to go beyond the signposting role, 37% said ‘occasionally’, 26% ‘frequently’ and 37% ‘never’. Only 29% had been given additional support to help them deal with the challenges of being an MHFA. 43% had been pointed towards an EAP for support.

Working in partnership, employers and mental health professionals can provide an accessible, safe and supportive framework of services for their people. We need to ensure that this kind of comprehensive, planned and strategic approach is not replaced by – or even undermined by – a well-intentioned but limited single initiative.