

SECURING THE FUTURE OF THE EAP

WORKING TOGETHER IN 2024



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Introduction

Employee Assistance Programmes have never been more important: for the mental health of the UK workforce, for the productivity and performance of employees.

EAPs adapted quickly and continued to deliver high quality services through the severe challenges of the Covid-19 pandemic — and now, with sharp increases in both levels of demand for support from employees due to the limitations of NHS mental health services, and issues such as the cost-of-living crisis, and a growing intensity and complexity of needs, they need to find yet another gear.

While mental health continues to be rooted at the top of most organisation's agendas, we live in an age when businesses are increasingly expected to compete on price. Customers want to see 'value'. But what does that mean for an area like mental health? What happens to quality of services, relationships and clinical outcomes?

In 2024, the EAP sector needs to be clear on what an EAP is: in terms of standards and types of support provided, the commitment to employees and their specific needs. Employee mental health is too important for EAPs to become diluted — just a low-cost offering to suit mass markets. EAP providers need to keep their identity and reputation as a high quality and high impact service: a valued partner at the centre of organisational wellbeing.

The aim of this report is to raise awareness of where we are as a sector, how EAPs have evolved, and how we can best work together to make sure EAPs evolve in the right ways — as a powerful source of support and impact — for the future. What can we do together to share aims and aspirations around employee mental health?

At EAPA, we are committed to ensuring trusted standards and practices as the sector continues to change through challenging times; to providing a clear sense of direction and principles of what an EAP is and should be.

— **Karl Bennett**
Chair, Employee Assistance
Professionals Association (EAPA UK)

Expert contributors to this report include:

Sir Cary Cooper

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

Dame Carol Black

Advisor to Government departments on health, work and wellbeing

Jayne Andrews

Clinical Lead and Counselling Services Manager, Smart Clinic

Karl Bennett

Wellbeing Director, Vivup

Catherine Betley

Managing Director, Professional Help

Dr Emelina Ellis

Chief Clinical Operations Officer, Spectrum.Life

Eugene Farrell

Mental Health Consultancy Lead, AXA

Harry Key

Head of Global Specialist Services, CiC

Andrew Kinder

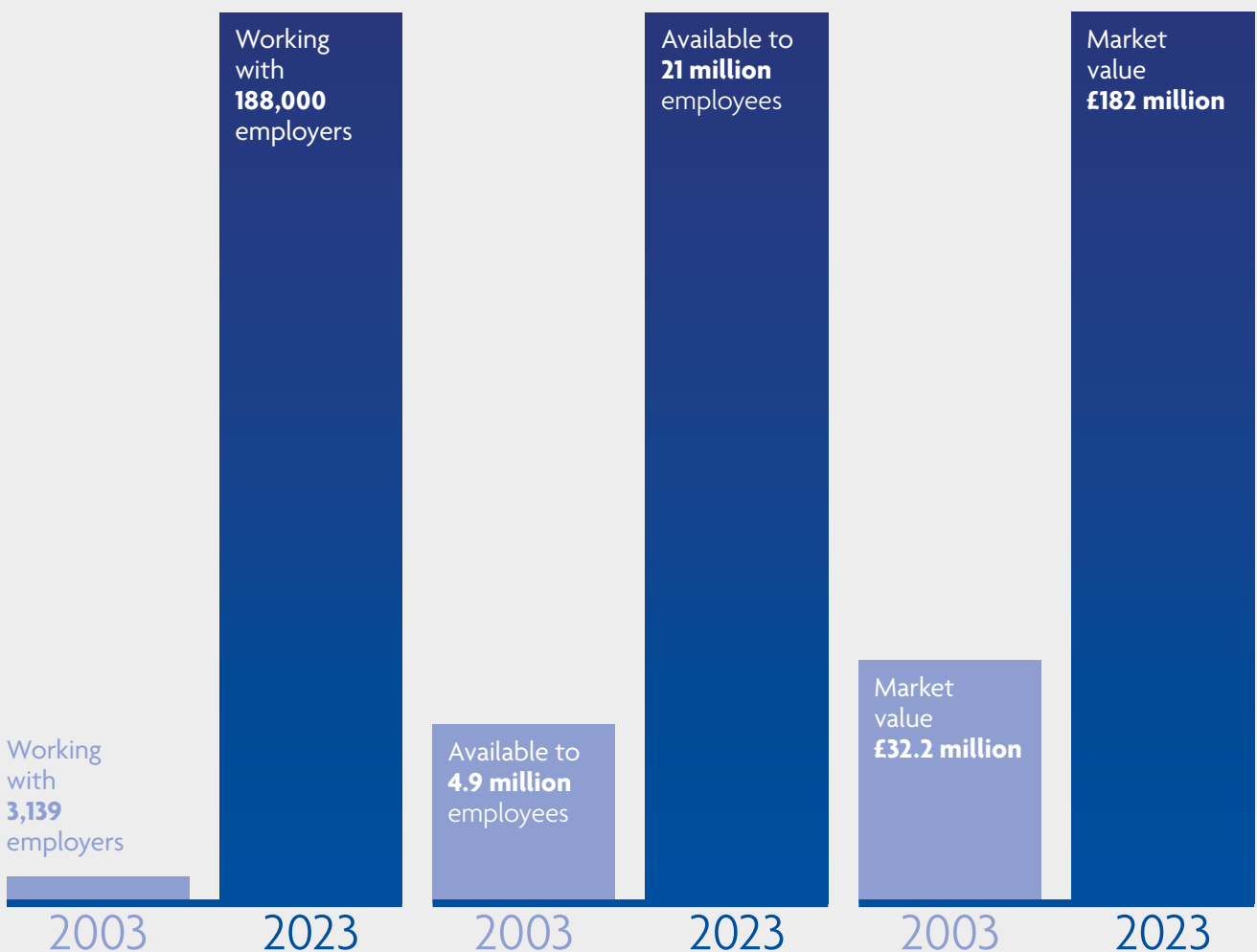
Professional Head of Mental Health Services, Optima Health

Key figures

“While mental health and wellbeing might have slipped away since Covid-19 as a priority, the issues have not slipped in reality. There is so much fear in people’s lives, the energy crisis, the cost of living, wars. My particular concern is around the young, the labour force of the future, where mental ill-health is on an ever-rising trajectory. Hybrid working may suit some, but when you first join workplace you need people around you, to learn from, to be mentors.”

— Dame Carol Black

Advisor to Government departments
on health, work and wellbeing



Data from *Holding it Together: UK Mental Wellbeing and the Role of Employee Assistance Programmes* (EAPA UK, January 2023)

How the EAP market has evolved

The rise of the mental health conversation

Society as a whole has been opening up and feeling able to talk about mental health issues. The stigma around mental health conditions has been reduced — and the Covid-19 pandemic served to heighten awareness and accelerate the trend towards conversations, and therefore for more people to look for support. Speaking up at work itself is a wider phenomenon — linked to awareness around campaigns such as #MeToo and Black Lives Matter, and the use of social media — leading to greater expectations among employees that they can and should speak up. That has meant more complex reasons for people to contact an EAP: tangles of issues around stress and mental health problems, linked to bullying and harassment, bereavement, whistleblowing, menopause, and health conditions generally.

“It’s been good to see how more people are talking about mental health. It means earlier conversations with friends and family. But it’s not such a good trend if just means more referrals to counselling. The more the NHS leans on EAPs, the more scarce the resources become. GPs are increasingly referring patients with mental health issues to their EAP, if there is one.”

— **Karl Bennett**,
Wellbeing Director, Vivup

“The EAP is no longer something people use to just talk about wellbeing at work. It’s about life in general, for them and their family. So we’re seeing greater needs, more complexity, more distress. And we’ve had to rise to that challenge and adapt to meet demand.”

— **Dr Emelina Ellis**,
Chief Clinical Operations Officer,
Spectrum.Life

More reliance on digital offerings

The biggest changes have come in the way people access EAP services. EAPs have developed around the principle that people would expect a telephone conversation and access to face-to-face counselling. An interest in digital resources and virtual counselling by video call was already beginning — but the pandemic years (2020-2022) transformed attitudes and expectations among organisations, staff and the counsellors themselves. Virtual contact has meant easier access, no need for allowing for travel time, taking time off work and dealing with issues of child or other forms of care. When it comes to counselling, EAP providers have reported there is no evidence that remote counselling is any less effective in terms of clinical outcomes.

“Certainly since COVID there has been more of a shift towards offering digital, virtual, telephone, and online services. There are also more app-based platforms which offer up to date information on current topics, and there is a huge need to keep these fresh and relevant. Consumers are very much wanting convenience-based products now, and they want them at their fingertips.”

— **Jayne Andrews**,
Clinical Lead and Counselling Services Manager,
Smart Clinic

“AI has been a shock. Our trials since the start of 2024 have shown that some AI chatbots are almost better than the counsellors at some things; speed of response, and the accurate and detailed information they are able to provide. There are other things that AI cannot do, however; hold two threads of conversation at the same time and switch between topics easily. The response from clients has been very positive, particularly towards the empathic and informative nature of their replies.”

— **Catherine Betley**,
Managing Director, Professional Help

The growth in additional services

EAP providers have been adding many different features to their offering, as a means of differentiating their offering and being better placed to win contracts with the largest employers: providing services such as Cognitive Behavioural Therapy, Eye Movement Desensitisation and Reprocessing (EMDR), and more support around personal finances. They are also looking at emerging issues and talking points in order to create new markets (around the menopause, or men's health for example).

“EAPs have extended their range and now many help employees with a range of issues associated with the cost of living crisis, so financial wellbeing is now a significant part of the armoury of EAPs.”

— **Sir Cary Cooper,**

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

“There's been an increase in the popularity of EAPs as more organisations see they are vital for supporting staff — and that has driven competition, which is good for buyers in terms of options and choice. There are more informed buyers, people who have been involved with HR and benefits for a long time, and so are more aware of the differences in types and offerings and what works.”

— **Harry Key,**

Head of Global Specialist Services, CiC

“Over the past three years mental health services have evolved at the fastest rate in decades — because they've had to — and EAP services are now better than ever.”

— **Dr Emelina Ellis,**

Chief Clinical Operations Officer, Spectrum.Life

The challenges

Increasing levels of service usage and referrals for counselling

More employees have been making use of their EAP: the average usage figure during 2022 topped 12%, compared with 11.4% in the previous year (and a typical average of around 10% in data collected via the EAPA UK ROI calculator tool).

Evidence suggests EAPs are increasingly dealing with more serious cases of mental ill-health. Long NHS waiting list for mental health support has increased the demands on EAPs, with more employers expecting their EAP to help with longer-term mental health issues.

In 2022, EAPs in the UK provided more than 1.375 million counselling sessions. 68% of employees contacting EAP services in 2022 needed to be offered the support of counselling (636,500 people used an EAP service, and 434,250 were offered counselling).

On average, 1.7% of counselling cases came with a 'red flag' (involving an immediate and serious risk of self-harm and suicide), according to data gathered for the 2023 Holding it Together report. This translates to more than 10,000 lives at risk. Some EAP providers report red flag cases as being at levels above 3%.

Higher levels of employer expectations

Usage figures suggest that EAPs are increasingly being treated as an emergency service. Employers continue to see their EAP as being primarily for staff in crisis. At the same time, there is beginning to be more interest in how EAPs can contribute to preventative healthcare.

Providers also report more pressure from employers to deliver services designed to support neurodiverse staff and also the children of employees, for example. The trend for HR to look to their EAP provider to deliver the training, supervision or clinical governance needed to support an organisation's pool of Mental Health First Aiders.

“The ability of EAPs to meet the massive increase in demands without going fully digital or EAP-by-app is a real threat. The need to provide face to face counselling, or at minimum person to person virtual sessions, is extremely important and fundamental to its success.”

— Sir Cary Cooper,

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

“We don't have to explain what an EAP is for anymore — there's high penetration within the corporate market. But now, with NHS failings around mental health services, employers have started to expect EAPs to be some kind of immediate solution to employee's mental health problems. Clinically, that's not possible. There can be a sense of disappointment, when the EAP has done all it's meant to by passing on a case for long-term help from the NHS.”

— Eugene Farrell,

Mental Health Consultancy Lead, AXA

“We are hearing more questions over what an EAP can do pro-actively. It's a welcome change because if we can focus on anticipating and providing support early on, using digital tools for example, then that frees up time for counsellors to focus on what should be a fewer number of serious cases.”

— Karl Bennett,

Wellbeing Director, Vivup

“Employers want to know more about impact, the ROI, the real value of services being provided.”

— Dr Emelina Ellis,

Chief Clinical Operations Officer, Spectrum.Life

Unrealistic pricing

Contracts are increasingly being won on price. Higher levels of service usage by employees means more costs for organisations, who are then looking for lower unit costs. In turn, that has meant customers preferring lower costs digital options involving less human input.

Employers are also continuing to focus on utilisation as a measure of value. Typically, organisations will only believe they are receiving value for money if utilisation levels are above 10% of the employee population. From an EAP perspective, higher usage rates are an indication of something else: that more staff are being allowed to reach a point of crisis. Providers argue that employers should be aiming for lower rates of use of clinical EAP services as a result of more proactive support around prevention and attention to organisational culture (such as issues of workload, control and psychological safety).

New providers and competition

The interest in employee wellbeing as a key factor in supporting performance, productivity, recruitment and retention has led to more new and existing businesses targeting the market for organisational wellbeing services, including EAPs. In particular this has meant competition from start-up businesses offering digital-only apps and platforms — low-cost and able to provide access at any scale.

“In any other business when there is high acceptance of value and demand you get price increases. Partly because of the financial environment for employers, along with new entrants and increased competition in the sector, there are now tiny margins and contracts that are loss leaders. What was originally around £30 per head has been driven down, and is now more like £5 per head.”

— **Eugene Farrell,**

Mental Health Consultancy Lead, AXA

“It’s the world we live in: there’s a rush to lower cost services including digital providers. Businesses and customers are both thinking about how they get best value. In our main market, the funeral sector, five years ago just 20% of the funerals were low-cost ‘direct to the crematorium’ services, now it’s over 40% — with all the implications for the bereavement experience that comes with that. Everyone is questioning what they are paying for — do I really need a premium service? More often they’re going for the seemingly affordable option.”

— **Catherine Betley,**

Managing Director, Professional Help

“There are so many more companies offering mental health products to employers and employees now than ever before, it is a rapidly growing industry... There are newer and more diverse employee assistance alternatives that have entered the marketplace. Whilst it is healthy to embrace change and competition, care and caution should also be taken to ensure the professional standing, background training, knowledge, qualifications, professional memberships of any organisation offering mental health services.”

— **Jayne Andrews,**

Clinical Lead and Counselling Services Manager, Smart Clinic

“There is huge pressure from what could be called ‘imposter EAPs’, just digital apps without standards. We need to celebrate the EAP, the ROI involved, the level of services and the great results, at what is still a relatively low cost.”

— **Eugene Farrell,**

Mental Health Consultancy Lead, AXA

Lack of counsellor resources

There is a new scarcity of clinical resource. More competition for trained counsellors and a higher turnover as more counsellors look to diversify and move into developing their own private practice. EAPs, like many other sectors, have been impacted by the pandemic and the decision among people over 50 to retire early or reduce work commitments.

“Is the UK training enough counsellors? The demand for EAPs and counselling is growing but do we have enough well trained and skilled counsellors to meet the demands, and are these demands burning out many of them?”

— **Sir Cary Cooper,**

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

Balancing digital and human services

Digitally-based resources and services are an important — and increasingly accepted — part of EAP provision. But the established, leading EAP providers are all concerned with how they can find the right balance between the accessibility of digital and the quality and specialist focus of human interventions.

“I really worry about counselling by AI chatbots or apps online. People in despair need as much face-to-face contact as possible, and the move toward keeping costs down by employers means that they are increasingly more likely to opt for digital-only mental health apps and the like.”

— **Sir Cary Cooper,**

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

“Apps are encouraging us to take our eye off what an EAP is, and the value of really good, professional individual support.”

— **Catherine Betley,**

Managing Director, Professional Help

“AI will be a big element in terms of delivering basic tasks, but we don’t yet understand how AI can best be integrated into EAP practices without harming services. There will be potential for harm to the reputation of EAPs if individuals’ needs aren’t properly understood. What happens if AI gets it wrong and someone harms themselves or others?”

— **Andrew Kinder,**

Professional Head of Mental Health Services, Optima Health

The opportunity

A consultancy partnership with employers

EAP providers are in a key position when it comes to employers shaping and implementing strategies for organisational wellbeing. Their data, insights and expertise help organisations to identify underlying sources of workplace stress (among which specific groups, when and where), which can be fed back to employers to make structural changes around issues like a bullying management style in one part of the organisation or a long-hours culture in another, or levels of job dissatisfaction or insecurity.

There is a shared view among EAP providers that there needs to be more partnership with employers, a specific focus on needs and how they change and evolve over time — a shift from offering a general menu of services to acting more like a wellbeing consultancy, setting objectives and providing expertise to target and address issues.

“There tends to be a rush towards interventions like resilience-building or mindfulness. If you have lousy managers and leaders who lack empathy for their employees then no single intervention is going to make any difference. To improve mental health you have to have the right culture.”

— **Dame Carol Black,**

Advisor to Government departments
on health, work and wellbeing

“Our work needs to be more tailored to specific industries. Employers need to be asking what can you do for us in particular? So in the hospitality industry that would be robust out-of-hours services. There needs to be more focus on practical details — and the advances around digital technology will help with providing support around that.”

— **Harry Key,**

Head of Global Specialist Services, CIC

“Buyers need to be more focused on what they are trying to achieve. An EAP needs to form part of an overall wellbeing strategy, and so there needs to be joint thinking over how an EAP integrates with the bigger picture of OH, HR, MHFAs and wellbeing programmes — all of which depends on the particular profile of the workforce and its different needs.”

— **Andrew Kinder,**

Professional Head of Mental Health Services,
Optima Health

“Together with employers, we need to focus on the data to corroborate plans and interventions and not just rely on gut feelings: not just looking at the data from EAP, numbers of calls and the reasons, but track this alongside employer data on absence and grievances etc, and their overall culture, people, objectives, targets and measurements. Not a tick box but specific reasons and measures.”

— **Karl Bennett,**

Wellbeing Director, Vivup

Encourage early interventions and prevention

The type of usage matters. In the past there could be complaints that usage levels of EAPs were low. Now rates are much higher (having shifted from averages of around 4% to more than 10%), and this has created bigger problems: higher costs for employers and strains on resources (particularly counselling) among EAPs.

The argument is that if employees accessed the EAP earlier, when the first worries around stress and symptoms of mental health concerns occurred, then EAPs (and their organisations) would have to deal with fewer serious and complex cases, requiring longer-term interventions. Effective pro-active campaigns of support and awareness, backed up by digital services, would mean more secure access to clinical services.

Future EAP services are likely to be based around user-friendly, instant access: available for 'in the moment' support, as and when people need immediate advice or reassurance via a smartphone or other personal device. Also, more light touch support around self-management of issues and awareness of good mental health practices to prevent issues from developing; more regular 'drip feeds' of support provided to staff to maintain levels of awareness around response to stress and behaviours, for example; pushing for higher levels of engagement of proactive tools.

“The quicker problems are identified and support is available, the better the personal and organisational outcomes — so using an EAP is in the interests of employees and employers alike.”

— **Sir Cary Cooper,**

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

“There are still some underutilisation issues. We encourage employees to use their EAP proactively, to just check-in on how things are going, to use us as a ‘rant line’ if that’s what they need at the time. That way they’re not just accessing the EAP when there is a crisis.”

— **Catherine Betley,**

Managing Director,
Professional Help

“There has to be a focus on the pro-active over the reactive, getting to people wherever they are, and to help them in that moment.”

— **Dr Emelina Ellis,**

Chief Clinical Operations Officer,
Spectrum.Life

Smarter focus on financial returns

When employers invest in more of a strategic partnership (not just a single catch-all product) there is the potential for higher Return on investment. According to EAPA UK's ROI 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.

Importantly, evidence suggests that the highest levels of returns are among larger employers who give more attention to using EAP data in their wellbeing planning, as well as awareness campaigns around services.

There will be more opportunities for diversity over pricing, with more tailored packages of services being bought by employers based on specific strategic wellbeing needs and objectives: specialist interventions and partnership working over a single general product.

“There should be different streams of activity types of support for different people, because there are very different needs, depending on roles and responsibilities. Investment has to be related to what fits particular staff constituencies and measured accordingly.”

— **Catherine Betley**,
Managing Director,
Professional Help

“It may be that younger employees are more comfortable with online support, and the 55 year-olds might prefer a phone call or a group session. We don't know because there's a lack of granularity around understanding needs and outcomes.”

— **Dame Carol Black**,
Advisor to Government departments
on health, work and wellbeing

“I think we will need to offer shorter, and longer-term solutions should employers be willing to cover the cost of shorter and longer-term therapy for clients. I think we will need to offer more modalities of therapy; again, should employers be willing to cover the cost of these. I would imagine EAPs will start to look a little more like Private Medical Insurance (PMI) towards the next 10 years so we will have to diversify. This will mean more regulation and better choice for our clients, quicker access to services, and less strain on the National Health Service.”

— **Jayne Andrews**,
Clinical Lead and Counselling Services Manager,
Smart Clinic

Next steps

Ensuring high standards through the growth in digital and AI delivery

The growth in the use of digital offerings — and greater reliance on Artificial Intelligence — means attention to standards has to be a vital part of the evolution of EAPs.

The EAPA UK accreditation scheme is critical in distinguishing what constitutes a high quality, trustworthy EAP provider. At the same time, there needs to be ongoing evolution in term of the appreciation and understanding of the market and employer needs: what makes a ‘good’ EAP in the 2020s.

“With the advent of more tech-based services, more AI and online tools, there is a real need to uphold standards. EAPA has tended to provide a light touch approach but there needs to be a firmer role, and for the standards and issue of EAP quality to be more visible among buyers — showing how the sector is coming together around quality and standards for the digital age.”

— **Harry Key,**
Head of Global Specialist Services, CIC

“EAPA needs to keep in setting a high bar, ensuring the sector is providing an evidence-based, gold standard — and thought leadership around what works and what provides value in the changing context.”

— **Dr Emelina Ellis,**
Chief Clinical Operations Officer, Spectrum.Life

Hard research evidence

To move forward in the best ways as a sector, to continue to improve the effectiveness and impact of services, there needs to be a platform of research evidence. There are still key questions that need to be answered through cross-industry sharing of experience and results.

Generally, in terms of the impact and value of EAPs; but also, more specifically, which therapies lead to the most positive clinical outcomes? And among which demographic groups? What are the differences in experience and outcomes between digital and human interventions? How can employers maximise ROI from their different forms of EAP interventions, promotions and partnership work?

More collaboration and openness across employers and providers will be fundamental to developing future services, the reputation of the sector, and the delivery of value to both employees and their organisations.

“Employers now pay a huge amount of attention to staff wellbeing compared with 18 years ago when I first became involved in this area, and they should be praised for that. But organisations put all kinds of schemes in place but don’t evaluate them — it may be they don’t want to share bad result, but we learn as much from what’s not working as what does.”

— **Dame Carol Black,**
Advisor to Government departments
on health, work and wellbeing

Collaboration

EAPs were not designed to be a one-stop solution to mental ill-health. There needs to be stronger integration with HR, wellbeing and Occupational Health functions. Collaboration with employers is essential in the formulation of preventative care strategies, to identify risks among workforce and address them.

For too long, EAPs have been limited to a role as tertiary providers when future sustainability of EAP services and improving organisational wellbeing as a whole will be dependent on having more of a primary role by working more closely with organisations through wellbeing strategy-making and planning.

More collaboration between providers themselves will be important for building the reputation and effectiveness of the industry: sharing data and evidence, protecting standards.

Most importantly, EAPs should come together over the value and importance of services in supporting the UK workforce and improving the mental health of the population.

“EAPs need to evolve and help support their clients to understand some of the underlying and structural problems of their organisations, where it is obvious from the organisational demographics of employees using the service. Greater communications between HR or occupational health on the more macro-issues would be helpful.”

— **Sir Cary Cooper,**

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

“EAPs need to be talking to each other as a community and not just thinking about how to get an edge. In an ideal world we would be sharing opportunities, pointing employers towards specialists and their expertise. Being all things to all clients only weakens the sector offering and identity.”

— **Karl Bennett,**

Wellbeing Director, Vivup

“EAPA is an organisation that is genuinely concerned with the population’s mental health. It encourages employers to do the right thing, to implement good practice. We are concerned about the lack of mental health care in the wider UK and what that means for people at work.”

— **Catherine Betley,**

Managing Director, Professional Help

About us

We are EAPA UK — the Employee Assistance Professionals Association — 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.



www.eapa.org.uk



info@eapa.org.uk



EAPA UK



@EAPA_UK