

The Principles of Workplace Health & Wellbeing Leadership - Guidance

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Foreword

Across UK industry 1.7 million workers suffered from work-related ill health costing businesses 33.7 million working days¹. Reducing this toll of human suffering is a key priority for the Health and Safety Executive. In 2024 HSE challenged industry leaders to work with us to find ways to make a difference. We have now increased our attention to employee health and wellbeing and by applying similar principles we want to raise the profile of a challenge for Leaders which may not be as obvious as a loss of process safety control, but which, all the same is taking a severe toll on businesses and their employees. I am delighted at the response from the chemicals sector, which has risen to that challenge to share experience and expertise in leadership commitment to standards and compliance.

Since the Buncefield tragedy in 2005, the onshore chemicals sector has led the world in first developing, then applying and embedding Process Safety Leadership Principles. These Principles have been widely adopted across both on and offshore major hazard sites, into the chemical industry supply chain and more widely in industries where process safety control is key. As a mature standard, the principles set an expectation; if HSE and the COMAH Competent Authority finds businesses failing to meet that expectation, then robust enforcement action can result.

I know that leaders from across the chemicals sector will readily recognise how they can adopt these principles into management systems which are already structured around applying a very similar approach to managing safety risks. In that way the sector will again lead industry in establishing a benchmark expectation.

The Health and Safety Executive (HSE) took part in the industry working group producing this guidance. HSE endorses the guidance, as it follows a sensible and proportionate approach to managing health issues in the workplace.

HSE's inspectors will continue to expect businesses to demonstrate compliance in managing health risks. In specific health topic areas there are established standards for risk control and failure to achieve those standards may warrant enforcement action. These Health and Wellbeing Leadership Principles reinforce expectations, and where a business chooses to work with these Principles, HSE will give credit to their willingness to make a difference.

Chris Griffin-McTiernan

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Background

In response to the occupational ill-health crisis across GB, the Health and Safety Executive organised the Prevention Summit 2024, which brought together representatives from across industry to learn more about the issues of concern and consider how they might contribute to the solutions.

Delegates from the chemical, downstream oil, bulk storage and adjacent sectors were present at the summit. Recognising the urgent need for collective action, reinforced by the [2024 statistics from the HSE¹](#), they established a working group to drive improvements in occupational health standards. Organisations represented on the working group are listed at Annex A.

The group is collaborating to identify key challenges, develop industry-wide strategies and share best practice, with the objective being to enhance worker health across the sector and potentially beyond.

They have adopted a similar approach to that taken by the newly-reformed Process Safety Leadership Group following the Buncefield incident of 2005 by developing key Guiding Principles for effective workplace health management in the chemical and downstream oil sectors.

These new Guiding Principles and associated guidance, although aimed at stakeholders within the chemical and downstream oil sectors, are transferrable to other industries facing similar ill-health concerns. They are relevant for everyone in the workplace, from senior leaders to frontline workers and they highlight the responsibility everyone has to address workplace health challenges and support a cross-industry approach to improving overall health standards.

¹ HSE: Health and safety at work - Summary statistics for Great Britain 2024

Why do we need these Principles?

Case for Change (HSE)

Work-related ill-health encompasses a broad range of adverse health effects in the workplace including:

- Musculoskeletal disorders - including from repetitive movements and exposure to vibration etc.
- Physiological effects arising from exposure to substances or radioactivity, such as dermatitis, lung damage, noise-induced hearing loss etc.
- Mental ill-health including stress and anxiety.

In the period 2023-2024, HSE's Labour Force Survey identified that 1.7 million workers suffered from work-related ill-health with 0.8 million of these suffering work-related stress, anxiety or depression. Half a million workers were suffering from work-related musculoskeletal disorders.

Work-related ill-health affects more than just the worker though – it impacts on colleagues and productivity and comes at a cost to businesses and the wider economy. The overall annual cost of work-related ill-health for this period was estimated to be £14.5 billion.

Clearly, we need to reduce the incidence of ill-health not only to meet legal and moral duties but also to improve efficiency and reduce business costs. Businesses need to understand the health risks their workers face, so they can introduce appropriate control measures. HSE encourages businesses to focus on leading indicators to gain a true understanding of the risks and introduce preventive measures before exposure leads to ill-health or disease.

Businesses can achieve greater impact on tackling ill-health by collaborating, such as through the sharing of data to understand the broader challenges, and developing creative and effective solutions. HSE encourages businesses to work together in relevant sectors to meet this challenge.

Many businesses include well-being within their occupational health programmes and although not a legal duty, this can be an important way of helping staff to understand health issues and to remain fit & healthy for work.

What do the Principles mean to me and my organisation?

The Principles provide a framework to guide you in adopting a strategy for a proportionate approach to workplace health and wellbeing that will help you identify and manage the causes, and reduce the effects of workplace ill-health.

The key aim of the Principles is to guide businesses to ensure that:

- Individuals understand that they all have a part to play in the promotion of workplace health and wellbeing management.
 - Approaches will vary depending on individual role and responsibilities within the organisation, as well as the size and structure of the organisation itself.
- Employees throughout the organisation are:
 - Supported and encouraged to be actively involved in workplace health and wellbeing initiatives, as well as contributing to the strategic leadership direction through promotion, engagement, education and training;
 - able to participate in and promote discussion of workplace health and wellbeing with colleagues and contractors to support the health and wellbeing management system.
- Organisations have systems in place that both monitor the incidence and impact of workplace ill-health, and support employees to take effective action where appropriate, including review of management failures that could lead to cases of ill-health.

Adopting the Principles does not mean that change will happen overnight - a strong commitment of resource and an openness to company-wide cultural shift may be required to reap the full benefits. By engaging across your organisation, from board-level down, there is a significant opportunity to instil an effective health and wellbeing culture, and reduce the impact of ill-health across the business.

Trade Association case studies and insights are being developed to provide the opportunity to learn from the experience of other companies.

Putting the Principles into practice

The Principles provide a framework and there will be many different ways for businesses to adopt them depending on the size and nature of the business. We understand that it can be difficult to know where to start, so the workplace ill-health working group has signposted relevant existing guidance in Annex B and will continue to collaborate to

develop further materials as required. The Trade Associations are also keen to share your approaches more widely to support fellow businesses.

Suggested action to translate the Principles into practice are as follows:

- Define and champion workplace health and wellbeing accountabilities at board level. Board members, senior executives, managers and operators should all be held accountable for workplace health & wellbeing leadership and performance.
- Ensure that at least one board member and/or senior manager is conversant in workplace health and wellbeing management to advise the board of the benefits of effective workplace health management and of the health implications of board decisions.
- Provide appropriate resources to ensure workplace health and wellbeing responsibilities and the required competencies to fulfil these are communicated and fulfilled across all levels of the organisation.
- Consider developing a programme for senior managers to actively promote workplace health and wellbeing and engage with the workforce, including both direct and contract staff, to underline the importance of workplace health leadership and to support a positive health culture within the organisation.
- Put in place systems and arrangements to enable active involvement of the workforce in shaping and delivering the workplace health and wellbeing programme and in reviewing performance.
- Ensure that business impacts relating to workplace health and wellbeing are identified, assessed and reviewed regularly using an appropriate risk analysis methodology.
- Set effective leading and lagging key performance indicators for the organisation and periodically review them to ensure they remain appropriate for the needs of the business.
- Routinely review the performance of the health and wellbeing programme at board level. Communicate the findings to workers and other stakeholders internally as well as in Annual Reports as appropriate.
- Seek to engage with others within your sector and elsewhere to learn and share good practice and information on workplace health and wellbeing. Your health and safety management system will need to capture the mechanisms and arrangements to enable this.
- Establish a robust system for the regular review and auditing of the workplace health and wellbeing management system to ensure effectiveness, compliance,

and continuous improvement. Conduct regular audits or reviews and implement corrective actions as needed to address gaps or weaknesses identified. Share your findings and discuss actions across your business – this will help you build and retain corporate knowledge and understanding on workplace health and wellbeing management.

Committing to these steps is likely to lead to significant impact and improvements on workplace health and wellbeing leadership in your business. Look out for further resources to supplement the principles and build on these steps.

Conclusion

Workplace health and wellbeing present significant challenges for global industry, giving rise to issues that are often complex and which may be long-standing and accumulative in nature. There is usually no straightforward cure-all solution – managing and controlling these issues is often an evolutionary process, requiring frequent monitoring and amendment of health and wellbeing programmes in pursuit of gradual and continuous improvement. The Principles of Workplace Health and Wellbeing Leadership support this goal, providing organisations with a firm foundation and framework to build an approach that is individual to that business.

The Principles draw on expertise from specialists in the chemical and downstream oil industries, and they carry significant weight regarding their relevance and quality. We hope that businesses in this sector, as well as across other industries will find them useful as they consider their approach to leadership on workplace health and wellbeing.

Collaboration between the relevant stakeholders from the Prevention Summit 2024 onwards has been key to developing these Principles. The working group is always keen to hear from any interested potential partners who may be able to signpost existing materials and support the development of further resources.

ANNEX A

Prevention Summit 2024 delegates and members of the Workplace Health and Wellbeing Working Group for the onshore chemicals and related sectors who have contributed to this work:

- Chemical Business Association
- Chemical Industries Association
- COMAH Strategic Forum
- GMB Union
- Grain LNG
- Health and Safety Executive
- National Gas
- Tank Storage Association
- Yorkshire Water

ANNEX B

Extensive information on workplace health and wellbeing is available from several sources including:

[HSE: Information about health and safety at work](#)

[CDOIF – Process Safety Forum](#)

[Mental health support & wellbeing in the workplace | Mind](#)