In the Room: UKIHCA Joins the Keep Britain Working Vanguard



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UKIHCA Independence

UKIHCA is an independent, non-profit professional body operating in the third sector. Free from commercial influence, control or ties that could compromise our independence, we exist to advance the health and wellbeing coaching profession, protect the public and uphold high standards of ethical, evidence-informed practice.

Britain is building its first Workplace Health System. Professional health and wellbeing coaching now has a seat at the table while it is designed. Here is what that means, and what we intend to do with it.

I'm delighted to share some news. **UKIHCA has been accepted as a Keep Britain Working Vanguard organisation.**

That means our profession is now part of the national programme building and testing how Britain stops people falling out of work because of ill health. We join 11 regional Vanguards and more than 200 organisations across all four nations of the UK.[1] Earlier this month I joined the Department for Work and Pensions' session for prospective Vanguard organisations, and we have already begun conversations with the Keep Britain Working team about practitioner standards in workplace health provision.

I've said for a while that our profession needs to be in the room when these questions are discussed. Now we are.

Why this matters

Keep Britain Working started life as Sir Charlie Mayfield's independent review. It is now a government programme, and its September update sets out plans for **Britain's first Workplace Health System**.[2] Its own summary is hard to improve on: **"Britain has a National Health Service. It has never had a Workplace Health System**."[2]

The numbers are stark. Around 2.8 million people are economically inactive because of ill health or disability, up around 800,000 since 2019, at an estimated cost of £212 billion a year.[2] Between 2015 and 2024, the number of 16 to 34 year olds reporting work-limiting health conditions rose by 1.2 million. That's a 77% increase, and 530,000 of it relates to mental health.[2]

But the figure that matters most is about timing. Someone off sick for four to six weeks has a 96% chance of going back to work. Once someone has become economically inactive for health reasons, the chance of working again within a year is 3.8%.[2]

Act early, while people are still in work, and you change lives. Wait, and mostly you don't.

What gives me real confidence in this programme is its honesty. The update admits that support today is fragmented across HR, occupational health, employee assistance programmes, GPs, insurers and vocational rehabilitation, leaving employees and managers to join the pieces together themselves.[2]

Anyone who has supported someone through a health crisis at work will recognise that picture.

It is just as honest about measurement. No provider, the update says, can currently compete reliably on outcomes, because comparable outcomes simply don't exist.[2] That is uncomfortable to read. It is also true. And it applies to us.

What being in the Vanguard is, and isn't

Let me be clear about what this is. UKIHCA has a seat at the table, and a chance to help build the evidence. This is not an endorsement. Keep Britain Working does not endorse particular products or services, and it would be wrong for any of us to describe our involvement that way.

What it does give us is something our profession hasn't had before: the chance to contribute to the design of a national system from the inside, while the rules are still being written. **The BSI employer standard** is being drafted. The minimum specification for workplace health provision is being settled. A roll-out plan will go to the 2027 Spending Review.[2] Decisions made over the next year will shape this system for a generation.

Where health and wellbeing coaching fits

Read the story of the 26-year-old woman in the September update. Six months into a new job, sleeping badly, dreading Sunday evenings. In the new system she completes a short check on her phone, gets a private result, and is signposted to support. Then, the update tells us, she spends two weeks thinking about it before telling her manager she is struggling.[2]

Those two weeks are the gap between knowing and doing. It is where people stall, talk themselves out of things, or decide it's easier to say nothing.

And it is precisely where a UKIHCA-Registered Health Coach works. Insight on its own rarely changes behaviour. Relationships do.

We also need to be precise about what we are not. Health and wellbeing coaching is *not* case management. The system's proposed coordinator connects employee, manager and services, and the update itself says coordination alone is unlikely to change outcomes.[2] Nor is it advice. NHS England's framework describes health and wellbeing coaches as person-centred, and neither directive nor prescriptive.[3] If our work gets folded into either, we lose what makes it work.

What good could look like

Let me be concrete, because I think this is where our profession sometimes loses people.

Take the update's 58-year-old builder with worsening back pain, working for a 14-person firm with no HR and no occupational health. In the new system his employer buys provision through a pooled arrangement, a named case manager picks up his case within five working days, he gets faster physiotherapy, and his duties are adjusted so he keeps working.[2] That is a genuinely better story than the one we have today.

Now just imagine one more element.

Alongside the physiotherapy, a UKIHCA-RHC works with him over a few months on the things that will decide whether his back holds up for the next ten years: staying active, pacing his work, sleep, weight, and the confidence to raise problems early next time.

Not treatment. Not coordination. It's the work in between, which is where so much of long-term health is actually made.

What we will bring

Our contribution to the Vanguard rests on three things.

Professional standards. We will offer UKIHCA's professional standards and scope of practice as input to the employer standard and to the specification for workplace health provision. When "coaching" can mean anything from an app notification to a clinician-led programme, employers deserve to know exactly who they are buying. The programme itself recognises the question.

Sir Charlie Mayfield's original report said the new workforce would need: **national oversight of training and development, and a professional home,**[4] and in June the programme committed to looking at the supply side of workplace health provision, so that workforce capacity does not hold the market back.[5]

That is precisely the gap a professional body exists to help fill.

Recognition of UKIHCA-RHCs in workplaces. We want employers, providers and insurers to recognise practitioners registered against independent professional standards, with health coaching supervision, as part of good workplace health provision. Our work-based pathway to Practitioner and Full Membership means existing workforces can get there too.

Evidence. The programme wants comparable outcomes, including whether people are still in work six months after returning.[2] That is the right bar. The evidence that health coaching helps people manage long-term conditions is encouraging,[6] but the evidence specifically on staying in and returning to work is still developing. We can't just assert our value. The Vanguard is exactly where we can start to show it.

There's local momentum too. **Worcestershire County Council**, one of the regional Vanguards, has launched a practical guide to the healthy working lifecycle for local employers, and the **West Midlands** is exploring how larger employers can extend workplace health support to small businesses through their supply chains.[2] Change like this often moves faster locally than nationally, and that is where many of our members already work.

The standard I'm holding us to

"Shared responsibility" is a phrase that can go two ways. Done well, people are supported to take more control of their whole-person health and wellbeing.

Done badly, the burden quietly shifts onto individuals for problems they didn't create. The programme's June update puts it well: shared responsibility should give employees "*agency and control of their own health journey*".[5]

Agency can be built, with the right support. That is our work.

Keep Britain Working is clear that employees shouldn't be expected to take responsibility for matters within the employer's or wider system's control.[2] The Policy Liaison Group's publication on Workplace Wellbeing's Duty of Care Guidelinea '**Good Work, Good Health, Good Growth'** put it simply:

"*Wellbeing support complements healthy work design rather than compensating for its absence.*"[7]

I agree. If a health and wellbeing coach frames an impossible workload as a personal resilience problem, something has gone wrong. That is where professional standards and health coaching supervision earn their keep.

What I'm asking of you

This is your opportunity as much as ours. If you're a UKIHCA-RHC, Member or a stakeholder:

- Tell us if you work with employers, particularly in a Vanguard region. Your experience is exactly the practitioner insight we want to bring to the table.
- Take half an hour to read the September update. Think about your practice in terms of work: onboarding, early conversations, stay-in-work plans, return to work.
- Start collecting outcome data that would make sense to an employer. Sustained return. Retention. Work ability.
- And be clear, in every conversation, about what health and wellbeing coaching is and what it isn't.

If you're an employer, a provider or a fellow Vanguard organisation, **I'd love to hear from you**.

The start, not the finish

Being in the room is the beginning. What matters now is what we bring to it: clear standards, trusted practitioners and honest evidence. Those are our responsibility. Frankly, they are the reason UKIHCA exists.

UKIHCA's fuller analysis of Keep Britain Working is set out in our **Strategic Perspective** ***'Building Britain's Workplace Health System: what Keep Britain Working means for professional health and wellbeing coaching'***.[8] I'll keep you posted as the work develops.

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