

MSK at work network – 2nd October 2020

In attendance – Dr Tony Woolf, Chair, ARMA; Dame Carol Black; Laura Boothman, Senior policy adviser, VA; Samuel Lawes, NRAS policy manager; Paul Scallan, ACPOHE; Liba Sheeran – Cardiff university – school of health care sciences; Colette Owen - Physiotherapist. Nick Pahl – Chair and notes

Notes of previous meeting – agreed.

1 MSK and home working

New MSK impact with increase in home working. People's physical activity levels reducing. Need to encourage people to move during the day. VA survey shows an increase in MSK issues. Variation in what employers and employees are doing. Some people being given a pot of money but not being given guidance on what to spend it on. Others being left in dark rework station assessment and who to talk to about it. Employers need to be open about their employees' health – made more difficult by Covid as are people reluctant to talk about their health considering employment market?

Tools to consider – Orebro - <https://academic.oup.com/occmed/article/58/6/447/1375462>; Work limitations questionnaire; ACOPHE home working advice document

Evidence based one pager to be produced e.g. managing MSK at work with focus on home working. covering DSE; how to use any budget, move more and improve health and wellbeing narrative. Colette to draft.

2 NRAS update

- Signposting for employers being produced
- Survey form to be sent round for comment.
- PQ to be asked re parliament re shielding.

Noted BMJ article on Safely returning clinically vulnerable people to work See <https://www.bmj.com/content/370/bmj.m3600>

3 VA

- Press release below and coverage to date. [Daily Mail \(Scotland print edition\)](#) - Back pain problems for Brits working at home. Features stats from our survey and comment from Tracey Loftis, Head of Policy and Public Affairs at VA; [Occupational health & wellbeing](#) - Working from home: four in five develop musculoskeletal pain. Features stats from our survey and comment from Tracey Loftis, Head of Policy and Public Affairs here at VA, as well as Karen Middleton of The Chartered Society of Physiotherapy.
- National Disability strategy – being picked up – supporting people at work . Cabinet office backing with strong CSR bids .
- Work progressing with PHE on MSK health check continuing for people of working age? PHE asking Keele University to feed in.

4 ARMA

- Sill in dialogue with NHS E, HSE and PHE. Lack of clarity where health improvement function of PHE will send up. Speaking to Nusrat Ali at PHE
- MSK aware project – discussions with Carol Black and Steve Boorman – co-ordinated by ROSPA
- EULAR developing projects called points to consider about MSK in the workplace to support EUOSHA campaign which is being launched. Virtually meeting on 22nd October - registration details to be circulated. Also separate strand on working with chronic, inflammatory and non inflammatory

5 Carol Black

Talking to Roseanna O Connor re PHE– don't know where things will land. Some concern by PHE having to fight hard to retain budget that had before. Want to put budget to covid related activities. Chancellor aiming for 3-year settlement – but maybe just one year then 3?

6 PHE and the future re MSK at work - discussion

Don't have answer as to best model for future. Needs to get support from the top politically. Staff and resourcing key for good surveillance, campaigns and data – to understand health inequalities at national level – what is spent where, what works and what are the outcomes. Need structures to deliver that. PHE consultation planned

VA putting in principles document on pieces of work that need to be landed. Don't know about structure e.g. arm's length body about health promotion or within DHSC? Advantages and disadvantages of different options. Put in about ensuring existing Government commitments re health and work and MSK e.g. data collection, health at work and in 5-year strategy for MSK and health which was produced with PHE

Cardiff University project

Digital interventions to help people with back pain to remain physically. Back online and new tool to appear. Talking to BT; – work in private practice and NHS. Bespoke wellbeing ;

Paul Scallan

Research project - Risk factors to do with Return to work recommendations specifically to do with OH professionals - identify areas where different OH professionals need more support;

SOM update

MSK webinar on MSK at work

<https://www.som.org.uk/civicrm/event/info%3Fid%3D316%26reset%3D1>

Webinars coming up

- 28th October – MSK at work – Joe Loftus – MSK Physiotherapist
https://www.som.org.uk/sites/som.org.uk/files/SOM%20Webinars%20list_16.pdf
- C3 RAND / SOM Webinar - 3rd November - [Supporting patients with musculoskeletal conditions to remain in work](#), Prof Gary MacFarlane (University of Aberdeen)

PRESS RELEASE FROM -VA BACK PAIN BRITAIN:

POOR HOME WORKING SET-UPS DAMAGE HEALTH OF MILLIONS OF OFFICE WORKERS

- Four in five (81%) desk workers who switched to working from home in lockdown have since had back, neck or shoulder pain, with a quarter (23%) affected often or all the time
- As musculoskeletal (joint, bone or muscle) conditions are already the second most common reason for missing work, charity Versus Arthritis warns of the potential impact on businesses if urgent action is not taken to improve set-ups and employee support
- Nine in ten (89%) of those in pain haven't told their employers about their struggles despite nearly half (46%) saying they take more painkillers than they would like, to get by
- One in three (35%) office workers received no kit, support, or advice from their employer on home working

17 September 2020: Today, Versus Arthritis, the UK's leading arthritis charity, unveils the scale of back, neck and shoulder pain among millions of office workers who switched to working from home since the pandemic began.

A nationwide study found that since the start of lockdown, four in five (81%) office workers have experienced musculoskeletal (MSK) pain due to their home working set up, with a quarter (23%) reporting they experience pain often or all of the time. Lower back pain is the most common complaint, with half of all respondents reporting this (50%), followed by neck pain (36%) and shoulder pain (28%).

With the gains flexible working arrangements provide for people with arthritis and disabilities to get and stay in work, the charity fears that advances run the risk of being reversed without support from employers^[1]. Prior to lockdown, 18^[2] million people in the UK already lived with MSK conditions such as arthritis and back pain, leading to the loss of over 28 million working^[3].

¹ <https://www.versusarthritis.org/media/14594/state-of-musculoskeletal-health-2019.pdf>

The charity argues that government and employers must do more to make people aware of the support they're entitled to and is calling on people to be open with their employers about their MSK health needs. If left untreated, this emerging pain could lead to a future strain on health and care services too, as one in three workers (32%) have seen a medical professional about the pain they experienced in lockdown.

Tracey Loftis, Head of Policy and Public Affairs at Versus Arthritis, said:

"At Versus Arthritis we support and encourage flexible working as it's an effective way to make the workplace more inclusive for people with disabilities and health needs and is not going away. But the pandemic forced a rushed transition to be working from home full-time and many have found themselves working longer hours in unsuitable conditions. Musculoskeletal issues can have a serious impact on your life as well as the economy and our health service. Now is the time to speak up and address them.

"People are reluctant to talk to their employers about their health needs because they don't know their rights or are worried about job security. Employers and government must do much more to make sure workers know what they're entitled to and feel comfortable asking for it."

Caroline Francis, a mental health nurse from Lincolnshire, 50, who's experienced back pain since working from home in lockdown, said:

"I used to be active, out and about with work all the time and going to aqua aerobics classes at the gym. But since working from home in lockdown, not always in the most comfortable position, I have found myself in a lot of pain.

"The pain is the equivalent to what I imagine it feels like to be hit by a truck and I can't sleep because of it. I cannot move my left shoulder or turn my head and it causes intense headaches. I'm lucky if I get two-three hours a night of sleep; it's incredibly disruptive. Even the pleasure of walking my dogs has been snatched away. I can no longer walk them both at once because if they pull it is simply too sore."

Neil Heatherwick, 32 from Glasgow has found that his WFH set up has worsened his pre-existing back pain.

"When I first started working from home, I was basically just sitting at my dining room in the wrong chair. I normally have an adjustable desk where I can sit or stand and that variation is important, but I missed this when I was at home over lockdown."

"I have a pre-existing condition which affects my back and hamstrings, and this gets so much worse after sitting down for a long period of time – either at a desk or in a car. The pain genuinely impacts everything – it's like a constant ache I can't get rid of. I feel less motivated to go out and do things. It can turn into a bit of a bad cycle because the more pain I'm in the less I can do. Lockdown made life tough – as it exacerbated this pain. "

FULL SURVEY FINDINGS:

Not just a 'niggle':

- Nearly half (46%) say they take more painkillers than they would like, to cope with the pain
- Two in five (37%) said their overall mood has been affected by the pain
- One in three (30%) have been unable to concentrate on work
- A quarter (22%) admitted to being less productive because of the pain

Many unsure when they'll be back at their usual desks:

- Over a quarter (26%) of those in the study said their employers have not yet set a date for return to the office
- More than one in ten (12%) employees have been told they won't be returning until 2021 or have been told to work from home in the long term

Not all businesses provided support:

- Over a third (35%) of workers have not been provided with any home equipment or advice to accommodate home working over lockdown

- Big businesses (with 250-499 employees) have performed even worse, with two in five (45%) employees saying they didn't receive any support at all

Workers in pain feel unable to speak up:

- Nine in 10 (89%) workers who experienced pain due to their home working set up haven't told their employer about it
- One in 10 (11%) say it's because they're worried about job security
- Nearly half (45%) didn't think the issue was serious enough, a fifth (19%) weren't sure what help to ask for and a further fifth (17%) didn't think their workplace would do anything meaningful to help

People's activity levels are tailing off – people's focus on taking care of their mental and physical health has waned since the beginning of lockdown, with this downward trend creating a further cause of concern for MSK health:

- Half (48%) of those surveyed admit they are less physically active now than when lockdown was first put in place
- One in four (27%) workers admit to taking less care of their physical and mental health now than before lockdown

Larry Koyama, a physiotherapist and Versus Arthritis MSK Champion said: *“Exercise and movement are free and one of the best ways to prevent joint pain, while a proper desk set up and the ability to work more flexibly will go miles to improve the MSK health of workers long term. Stepping away from your computer regularly, moving and stretching every hour and taking a lunchtime or end of work walk could all help your body adjust to your new workplace and reduce your joint pain in future.”*

Karen Middleton, Chief Executive of The Chartered Society of Physiotherapy, added: *“This research isn't surprising as Covid-19, months of working from home and reduced activity levels will have had a serious deconditioning effect on millions of people.*

“We know that First Contact physiotherapists working at GP surgeries have been crucial in treating a backlog of patients seeking appointments for musculoskeletal issues throughout this period.

“The expertise of these physios ensures patients get valuable advice on their condition and self-management tools which will help them to avoid taking time off work and potentially resist the need for surgical options later down the line.

“All of this saves time and money for the NHS but more importantly it enables people to recover sooner and get back to work and enjoying their everyday life.”

IN RESPONSE TO THESE FINDINGS, VERSUS ARTHRITIS IS CALLING ON:

Employees – to understand their rights around support at work, and to have a conversation with their employer about their health needs.

Employers – to enable their employees to work flexibly safely and effectively without risking their musculoskeletal health, by:

- Regularly checking in with employees about their pain and musculoskeletal health
- Funding equipment for employees, and making 'reasonable adjustments' for people with disabilities or long-term health conditions that affect their ability to work
- Creating an environment that promotes physical activity, for example encouraging regular breaks, promoting standing or walking meetings
- Enabling people to work flexibly where possible
- Better informing employees of their employment rights and the support they can ask for

Government – to make it easier for businesses and employees to look after musculoskeletal health, by:

- Increasing promotion of the Access to Work scheme* so that more people with disabilities or long-term health conditions and their employers know about the support it provides

- To meet the commitment to new legislation, which would make flexible working the default unless employers have good reason not to enable this

- Ends -

Notes to editors

For more information contact:
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Case study bios

Caroline Francis, 50, Lincolnshire:

A mental health nurse from Lincolnshire, Caroline is used to going out and about to conduct health assessments in her local area.

However, since working from home, she has found over lockdown that her joints have become incredibly stiff and painful. She had a pre-existing condition in her back which caused nerve damage and numbness., but it has undoubtedly deteriorated since working from home as she hasn't been able to keep active and stay mobile.

Sitting still all day has caused immense pain, the equivalent she says to what she imagines it feels like to be hit by a truck. Sometimes she gets little more than two to three hours of sleep a night as a result.

Neil Heatherwick, 42, Glasgow

Neil has had long-term hamstring issues in the past but over lockdown he says working from home and bad posture at his desk has caused worsening back and spine pain. At the office, he normally has an adjustable desk which allows him to alternate between sitting and standing but working at his dining table has meant he is much less mobile.

He has been taking painkillers to try and deal with it and has visited a Chiropractor in recent weeks which has helped. However, at its worst, it can lead to sciatic pain and back spasms which was a common occurrence during lockdown.

Neil says not only has the pain taken its toll physically, it has also affected his mental health and overall mood. Lockdown was bad anyway, but the pain made things much worse. Thankfully though he has friends and family who have kept him upbeat. Virtual Pilates classes led by his physio also helped.

About the research

Survey of a nationally representative sample of 1,040 UK workers who have worked from home over lockdown – excludes those who are self-employed or who normally work from home. Poll conducted between 25th August – 1st September 2020, by Opinium.