

Petitioner submission of 14 September 2022

PE1942/B: Encourage peer support programmes in public sector organisations

Peer support is an important component in the future of mental health prevention and recovery. We all know the phrases “**a problem shared is a problem halved**” or “**it’s good to talk**”. When we are in a difficult situation, we lose our problem-solving abilities. Social and emotional support are vital to manage wellbeing.

TRIM is a peer support system that enables practitioners to assess their colleagues for symptoms of psychological distress following critical incidents and signpost for early intervention.

STRAW sits alongside TRIM and is about the detection of workplace stress, spotting the signs of psychological distress that might otherwise go unnoticed. This can promote resilience, keep staff at work and reduce harm.

In June 2018, the Williams Review into Gross Negligence Manslaughter in Healthcare stated: ‘*A **just culture** considers wider systemic issues where things go wrong, enabling professionals and those operating within the system to learn without fear of retribution*’.

In order to change public sector culture from shame and blame to a “just culture” **TRIM and STRAW practitioners** would need to be available on every ward, department, and office within public organisations. TRIM and STRAW do not interfere with any legal or internal investigations and supports individuals’ mental health resiliency during these processes.

Cognitive psychologists working at Griffith University in Brisbane, Australia, have published research and information on “Just Cultures”. Their research suggests that many public sector organizations understand and acknowledge the value of creating a “just culture”, but struggle when it comes to developing it. How should they and their managers respond to incidents, errors and failures that happen? There is nothing in place in many public sector organisations to ensure employees resilience is maximised during and after critical incidents, including bullying. Often employee’s mental health has broken down and they are referred to HR or occupational Health.

As the former lead trauma therapist of NHS Highland occupational health department, I have first-hand experience of seeing that many of

the mental health problems and traumas were avoidable as they were caused by human factors. (The breakdown of interpersonal relationships). Deterioration in mental health not only affects the individual but their family. There are also significant costs to the organisation such as investigations, staff sickness and staff cover.

One cognitive psychologist highlights that doing the 'right thing' really depends on one's viewpoint, and that there is not one 'true story' but several. This naturally leads into the key issue of how justice is established inside organizations and the practical efforts needed to sustain it. This psychologist also reflects upon why we tend to blame individual people for systemic failures when in fact we bear collective responsibility.

The **STRAW** package has been developed by leading mental health professionals, including an occupational, academic and forensic psychiatrist. Unlike many other psychological first aid packages, STRAW is based on up-to-date scientific research, including the growing evidence base around peer support.

STRAW not only focuses specifically on mental health conditions and issues that are likely to affect the working population but is also unique in being designed as a comprehensive peer support system for use within high pressure organisations. STRAW aims not only to educate/inform but also enables those involved to take action in order to bolster resilience.

We propose that current arrangements are not sufficient. We need a safe, accountable system of support which maintains humanity and compassion. This system would need to be linked into policy to ensure accountability, early detection, and timely interventions to keep people well and at work.

Whilst interpersonal factors may cause the problems it is interpersonal relationships such as peer support that build resilience (as suggested by [Harvard research](#)).

With that in mind, I recommend to the Members of the Public Petitions Committee to seek the views of the Scottish Government and its associated public agencies on their consideration for introducing TRIM and STRAW into public sector workplaces.