

Backs! 2005 initiative

BACKS! 2005 EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

1 In 2003/4 back pain was the biggest cause of musculoskeletal disorders (MSDs) accounting for an estimated 4.9 million working days lost (Self-Reported Work Related Injuries (SWI)). This equates to 1 in every 6 days lost from work-related sickness absence and an average time off per worker of 19 days.

2 The charity BackCare estimates the overall cost of back pain to the NHS, business and economy is £5 billion a year.

3 *Backs! 2005* was a national initiative aimed at reducing the incidence of back injuries at work in line with PSA targets. It was much more than 'just' an advertising campaign (!). It formed part of a three-year plan to combat MSDs, and involved partnership working between the Health and Safety Executive (HSE), Local Authorities (LAs) and stakeholders. Stakeholders included employers, trades unions, health and safety groups, trade associations, and health professionals.

Highlights

- Case study: One duty holder (BAA) with 12000 direct employees and the potential to reach 88000 workers reduced days lost from MSD absences from an average of 21.5 to 1.5 days per case (9 to 1.2 for back pain) by early physiotherapy intervention.
- Publicity: Following the summer *Better Backs* campaign 39% of employers and 32% of workers surveyed recalled the publicity – of these 46% of employers stated they would take action.
- Workplace inspections: Preliminary analysis of some of the data demonstrates inspections promoted action to reduce MSD risks. 51% of a sample of follow-up visits demonstrated clear improvement as a result of a single inspection, achieved by revising working procedures, manual handling training, purchase of new equipment or a combination of these. A further 22% had work in progress.
- National stakeholders: Case study results from National stakeholders suggest reductions in MSD sickness absence and incidents ranging between 10 and 93%. The partnership delivered the potential (based on stakeholder feedback) to reach an audience of around 10 million workers.
- Awareness raising activities: At least 119 events and activities were undertaken in support of *Backs! 2005* with the contribution by HSE of £100K towards events acting as a catalyst.
- Local Authority partners delivered a third of inspections and a significant number of events - and have signed up to deliver even more for 2006/7

4 Early results are encouraging. Final results will inevitably take much longer to filter through via SWI and RIDDOR returns. Further evaluation will continue. Case studies indicate measurable positive outcomes towards Public Service Agreement (PSA) targets in terms of reductions in days lost and number of reported incidents of back injury.

5 The national media campaign *Better Backs* resulted in increased awareness amongst employers, supervisors and employees. Early indicators suggest 39% of employers recalled the campaign publicity, of these 46% stated they would take some action. Results for

supervisors and employees were similar. Greatest impact was achieved in Manufacturing and Construction sectors (BMG survey of 3000 employers, supervisors and employees). And a MORI poll shows heightened business awareness in 2006 compared to previous years, that lifting, carrying and moving objects represents an important health and safety risk to organisations.

6 HSE and LA officers performed 4000 targeted inspections during *Backs! 2005*. Feedback and case study material suggest inspections prompted risk reduction actions. Whilst most sought improvement without formal enforcement action, over 200 notices were issued. This represents an increase in enforcement activity for the MSD topic compared to previous years.

7 Engagement of National stakeholders achieved significant added impact. Stakeholders shared best practice, produced additional targeted publicity, and implemented in-house risk reduction controls with some impressive results - including up to 93% reductions in MSD sickness absence and up to 59% reductions in MSD incidents. The combined potential audience of the National stakeholder group was approximately 10 million workers (based on returns from stakeholders). The actual figure cannot be verified but the figure represents the size of the stakeholder organisations involved in the campaign.

8 Educational events, supported by centrally produced publicity material, were wide ranging, well attended and very well received. The £100K event fund provided by HSE supported 80 events and activities. A further 39 were run without HSE funding. Feedback from partners suggests the offer of funding demonstrated HSE's commitment to partnership and resulted in a greater willingness to run non-HSE funded events.

9 Further partnerships were generated across HSE and between HSE and LAs and within Regions. Despite the short notice LAs rose to the challenge to deliver a considerable number of awareness events, produce linked publicity and deliver over a third of the targeted inspections. LA partners have committed additional resources to *Better Backs* in 2006 continuing their support for the three-year programme.

10 *Backs! 2005* was the largest single topic health related initiative of its kind in HSE. Whilst full costs are difficult to calculate the cost to HSE is estimated at around £3.3M. The initiative brought in a sensible approach to Regulation with an emphasis on partnership, shared expertise and innovation, and a very clear focus on outcomes. It has demonstrated that HSE and LAs are able to work together, and with other stakeholders on a major campaign to target a key area of ill health delivering results nationally, regionally and locally. And that such partnerships maximise impact and results.

11 The results suggest the objectives have been met. The outputs from those involved, and the impact of media and supporting material point towards increased awareness of back pain – and that employers, with support from safety representatives and employees, have acted to prevent back injuries by providing and using sensible practical precautions such as handling aids or changed work practices.

12 *Backs! 2005* has been a significant achievement and has lessons for future project and programme working. Highlights should be publicised so that those involved can see the combined effect and value of their contributions.