



THE BUSINESS

ELEVATE OSH IN YOUR ORGANISATION

As BSI starts to develop a new standard for suicide prevention, we look into why it should be everyone's business to keep people safe when they are at their lowest ebb.

WORDS CLAIRE MOULDS

The last TABOO

Over 720,000 people take their own life globally each year, while more than one in 20 make a suicide attempt at some point in their lives (Samaritans, 2024a; World Health Organization (WHO), 2024a).

As well as being a tragedy for the individual in question, there can be lifelong consequences for their family, friends and colleagues who, on top of grief, might find themselves managing other complex feelings, including guilt, regret, shame and stigma (Mind, 2023).





For last year's World Suicide Prevention Day, co-founder WHO called for organisations, the government and the public to start a conversation about suicide in order to move from a culture of silence to one of openness and understanding (WHO, 2024b).

It's a sentiment echoed by the UK government in a recent five-year cross-sector strategy for suicide prevention, a key theme of which is that suicide is everyone's business, and everyone has a role to play in suicide prevention, including workplaces (Department of Health and Social Care, 2023).

The catalyst

While the global statistics themselves demonstrate a clear need for comprehensive guidance, it was a combination of personal and professional experience that was the catalyst for the creation of a new BSI standard on suicide prevention.

On the third anniversary of his 21-year-old son Adam taking his own life, Marcus Long, chief executive at the Independent International Organisation of Assurance, realised that there was a way for something good to come out of the situation.

'After 20 years working in the standards development and assurance sectors, which are built on the principle of making things better, it suddenly occurred to me: why not apply the same approach to suicide prevention?' says Marcus. 'I know that, for many, suicide is a difficult subject to discuss. That is why having a standard is crucial to breaking down those barriers. Not only will it raise awareness of the issues involved and make key information and guidance accessible, but it will also begin vital conversations that will, ultimately, save lives.'

Marcus approached BSI as a direct result of the highly positive response to BS 30416: *Menstruation, menstrual health and menopause in the workplace*. 'I knew they were unafraid to tackle tough topics. Combined with their ability to bring together

a diverse range of views when developing standards and their huge organisational reach, I was confident that we could make a material difference.

'Ultimately, I don't want anyone else to feel the way Adam did, which led him to the decision he made. I also don't want anyone else to feel the way I have every day since he died – racked with guilt and with "what if..." questions constantly circulating in my head.

'Maybe, if Adam had come across someone that said the right thing to him, or did the right thing at the right time, I'd have him here with me today. I cannot put into words how much I want to make that happen for other people who are close to breaking point.'

'The new standard is something we're passionate about,' says Anne Hayes, director of sectors and standards development at BSI. 'Not only will it bring together best practices, but it will also provide a mechanism for organisations to deliver and implement an effective suicide prevention strategy.

'Crucially, it will be designed so that any organisation can play a role in suicide prevention, intervention and postvention whether among employees, volunteers, members or, if appropriate, service users.'

A preventive role

The standard will be accessible to all types and sizes of organisations, and it will:

- Provide guidance to help organisations put in place systematic, appropriate prevention and intervention measures and support for people affected by suicide and to monitor their effectiveness/impact to identify any need for adjustment
- Highlight situations where specialist guidance may be needed
- Provide guidance on sensitive and responsible communications, including with bereaved people and those dealing with grief, and on support for returning to work
- Include case studies and examples, from organisations of various sizes and types, to illustrate a variety of measures that may be deployed (BSI, 2024).

Psychosocial work risks associated with suicidal behaviour

- Lack of job control
- Lack of social support from supervisors and colleagues
- Lack of meaning
- High job demands
- Long working hours
- Sexual harassment
- Workplace bullying
- Work-family conflict
- Remote working

For a longer list of contributing factors go to: [ioshmagazine.com/suicide-prevention](https://www.ioshmagazine.com/suicide-prevention), where you can also find some common myths about suicide.

Also see [b.link/Samaritans-suicide-myths](#)

Niedhammer et al, 2024; Greiner and Arensman, 2022; Samaritans, 2024a

The planned new standard has the potential to be the first step in a new UK-wide approach to suicide prevention.

'While countries like Australia and Canada have legislation requiring the reporting of work-related suicides, the UK lacks similar requirements,' says Anne. 'This standard, although not legislation, is a starting point in terms of guidelines that organisations can follow to understand the effects of suicide, to positively impact those with suicidal thoughts and to support people who have suffered a bereavement through suicide.'

BSI also has wider ambitions for the new standard. Anne says: 'Suicide is a global >

THE STATISTICS

Suicide in numbers

Suicide is the third leading cause of death among 15- to 29-year-olds globally (WHO, 2024a)



73%

of global suicides occur in low and middle-income countries (WHO, 2024a)

There were 6069 suicides registered in England and Wales (11.4 deaths per 100,000 people) in 2023, the highest rate since 1999 (ONS, 2024a)



The suicide rate for men in England and Wales was 17.4 deaths per 100,000 (5.7 for women). The rate was highest for males aged 45 to 49 (25.5 deaths) and for females aged 50 to 54 years (9.2 deaths) (ONS, 2024a)



Major occupation groups in the UK and US with higher suicide rates include construction and extraction; farming, fishing and forestry; personal care and service; and road transport drivers (ONS, 2024b; Sussell et al, 2021)



Suicide costs the UK economy over £9.58bn a year: £1.46m per person. Employment productivity losses account for one-third of this amount (Samaritans, 2024b)



TIMELINE

BSI suicide prevention standard



JANUARY 2025

Initial draft ready for the BSI committee to review. The drafting panel will revise it based on feedback received.

APRIL/MAY 2025

Public consultation on the draft standard. It will be open for eight weeks.

AUTUMN 2025

Target date for publication of the standard.

issue and we hope that it will be accepted as an ISO standard.'

Diverse perspectives

The new standard will complement the pioneering ISO 45003, which covers psychological health and safety at work.

'We're aware that people will have questions as to how the two standards will work together,' explains Anne. 'We can, however, offer reassurance from the outset that the two standards will only have a positive link.'

The team at BSI is also mindful of how different communities view suicide. Anne says: 'We're always committed to involving diverse perspectives in our work and welcome the input of representatives of different cultures and religions as we move forward with development. It's crucial that it works for everyone.'

The role of OSH

'Employers have a key part to play in supporting practices and conversations that will help prevent suicide,' says Ruth Wilkinson CMIOSH, IOSH head of policy and public affairs. 'We warmly welcome the forthcoming standard.'

While having the right organisational strategies in place will help to identify, prevent and reduce work-related risks, it's also about creating a culture of support, which tackles stigma and protects and actively promotes good mental health.

Ruth says: 'The combination of a lack of awareness and understanding of the issue and it being a taboo topic means that OSH professionals will need to mount a comprehensive education campaign, with management at all levels, to dispel common myths, highlight risk factors (inside and outside work) and reinforce the message that suicide can be prevented. Securing organisation-wide buy-in is fundamental to creating a supportive environment which will help to ensure that the new standard is successful.'

'It's about taking away the fear,' says Marcus. 'The more people are aware that they can do things to prevent suicide, the more we can give people the confidence to believe that they can make a difference.'

 For more, visit [ioshmagazine.com/BSI-suicide-prevention](https://www.ioshmagazine.com/BSI-suicide-prevention)