

New plans to boost health in the workplace to keep people in work

3 years ago

The Department for Work and Pensions (DWP) and Department of Health and Social Care (DHSC) are publishing a consultation on ways to increase uptake of Occupational Health provision.

Employers will be encouraged to take up Occupational Health offers to help employees access vital mental and physical health support at work, particularly for those working in small and medium-sized enterprises.

These proposals include introducing a national “health at work” standard for all employers to provide a baseline for quality Occupational Health provision, which includes guidance, an option to pursue accreditation, and additional government support services – for example outreach workers to support SMEs to meet the standards.

It also seeks views on developing longer-term workforce capacity to help meet any increased demand for Occupational Health services in the future by:

- Encouraging NHS leavers or those who are considering a career change to pivot towards the Occupational Health specialism
- Developing a longer-term, multi-disciplinary workforce to provide Occupational Health services

The consultation will also ask employers to share their examples of good Occupational Health provision to help inform other businesses and encourage them to provide the same.

Secretary of State for Work and Pensions, Mel Stride MP, said: “This Government is investing billions in getting people back to work and growing the economy. We need employers to keep playing their part too.

“Healthy businesses need healthy workers – employers will benefit from higher retention rates, more productive workers, and fewer work days lost due to sickness. Improving health in the workplace is a vital piece of the puzzle in our drive to increase employment.”

Minister for Disabled People, Health and Work, Tom Pursglove MP, said: “Long-term sickness is a huge contributor to economic inactivity, and while of course some people are unable to work, better accommodation of health problems in the workplace will open up a wider workforce to employers and support employees with a range of needs.

“Many small and medium-sized business owners already invest significantly in the health and wellbeing of their workforce, but this will be a gamechanger in identifying and removing obstacles to people with health conditions starting, staying and succeeding in work.”

To also help keep people in work, the government will today also publish a separate consultation looking at options to increase investment in Occupational Health services by UK wide employers through the tax system. This follows its announcement at the Spring Budget where it committed to consult on incentivising greater provision of Occupational Health through the tax system.

The government wants to explore the case for providing additional tax relief to businesses on their Occupational Health costs. In particular, the consultation asks respondents for their experiences of providing Occupational Health, including what services they provide and any barriers they experience. It also asks for evidence on the effectiveness of existing tax incentives and asks respondents for their views on the merits of expanding the existing Benefit-in-Kind relief, and thoughts on any alternative tax incentives.

Tax reliefs on Benefits-in-Kind are already available for certain occupational health services. This consultation will test if expanding these reliefs or introducing new ones could be an effective lever to achieve greater Occupational Health provision, as well as thoughts on any alternative tax incentives. The consultation will determine if expanding tax incentives is an appropriate measure to boost Occupational Health provision.

This is all a key component of the measures in the 2023 Spring Budget to grow labour market participation, reduce economic inactivity and get more people into work. The Department is helping millions to return to work with inactivity falling by 360,000 since the peak of the pandemic.

Long-term sickness is currently the main reason people of working-age give for being economically inactive, but just under half of workers have access to Occupational Health services. Over 90% of large employers offer Occupational Health support, compared to under a fifth of small ones.

Occupational Health provision can help employers provide work-based support to manage their employees' health conditions, leading to better retention and return-to-work prospects, and improving business productivity, which can be adversely impacted by sickness absence.

Secretary of State for Health and Social Care, Steve Barclay said: "High quality Occupational Health support in more workplaces would not only help to reduce economic inactivity, but it can lead to a healthier, happier workforce.

"The individual health benefits are clear and by focusing on preventative measures, we can reduce the burden on the NHS and help to bring waiting lists down, which is one of the government's top priorities."

Angela Rowntree, Occupational Health Physician for the John Lewis Partnership, said:

"At John Lewis Partnership we are moving away from reactively managing sickness to proactively supporting our Partners' health and wellbeing at work.

"Our founder, Spedan Lewis understood this when he launched an in-house health service for all Partners in 1929 – nearly 20 years before the NHS was established – and we're proud to be part of his legacy today, providing advice and support to help our Partners achieve their potential in the workplace.

"We welcome this new focus on ensuring other businesses and their employees are able to access better workplace health."

The Occupational Health consultation will run until 23:59 on Thursday 12 October 2023.