

New Occupational Health Taskforce to tackle in-work sickness and drive down inactivity

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Businesses will be urged to tackle in-work sickness and stop people falling out the workforce, following the appointment of Dame Carol Black as the Government's new Occupational Health Tsar.

Dame Carol, who has decades of experience in medicine and policy advisory while having chaired multiple government reviews, will head up a Taskforce that will produce a voluntary occupational health framework for businesses – which will include setting out minimum levels of occupational health needed to stop sickness-related job losses, and help businesses better support those returning to work after a period of ill-health.

Just 28% of employers in Britain provide some form of occupational health, with large employers (89%) nearly three times more likely than Small-Medium Enterprises (SMEs) (28%) to do so.

This much needed framework – expected this Summer – will form part of the Government's drive to reduce inactivity levels and waiting list times.

Minister for Employment, Jo Churchill MP, added:

“Millions of working days are lost each year through sickness. We are helping businesses tackle this challenge head on so we can help boost productivity and grow our economy.

“The work of Dame Carol and her expert Taskforce will be crucial as we drive down absenteeism, which we know is holding back British businesses and really focus on making occupational health support available

to all.

“Our £2.5bn Back to Work Plan will also help one million people, including those with long-term health conditions and disabilities, find work and reap the benefits it has to offer.”

Only 45% of workers in Britain have access to some form of occupational health, and with an estimated 1.8 million workers reporting work-related ill health in 2022/23, the government is acting to tackle long-term sickness to help people stay and succeed in work.

The Taskforce comes as the Government gets a £64 million pilot of a new WorkWell service underway, which will help 60,000 people with health conditions stay and succeed in work through integrated employment and health support.

The Taskforce will meet for the first time today aiming to increase access and uptake of occupational health through:

- Increasing information and visibility for employers on occupational health and the benefits of quality occupational health provision in retaining employees in the workplace.
- Empowering employers to play an active role in improving employee health.
- Removing barriers by focusing on SMEs with restricted finances and by ensuring that the Framework is applicable across sectors.
- Complementing other existing health and disability workplace initiatives, including where occupational health is required in law.

Dame Carol Black, Tsar of the Occupational Health Taskforce, said:

“It is a privilege to Chair the new Taskforce which will review occupational health services available to employees across businesses of all shapes and sizes and then create a framework to support better employee health and wellbeing. We will encourage employers to embrace practices that prevent or reduce ill-health related job loss.

“We know the impact high sickness absence and presenteeism has on businesses and their productivity, which is why I am so pleased to work with other members of the Taskforce to ensure occupational health support is in place for employees and employers alike.”

Minister for Health and Social Care, Helen Whately MP, added:

“A healthy economy is only possible with a healthy workforce.

“We want more people to be able to benefit from good occupational health, especially employees in small businesses, because we know it works.

“This Taskforce will set us on the path towards a healthier workforce, in turn boosting productivity and economic growth. “

The UK Government recently launched its Occupational Health Innovation Fund which has provided £1 million in funding to 10 projects to develop innovative new models of Occupational Health, using technology to improve the capacity and capability of providers and increase access for SMEs.

A show and tell event demonstrating the innovative tools and resources will be held at the Department for Health and Social Care today. It will be attended by the Minister for Employment, Jo Churchill, and Minister for Health and Social Care, Helen Whately.