

Protecting workers' health – a missed opportunity - The Employment Rights Bill has missed an opportunity to strengthen workers' rights with regards to access to occupational health services. Currently, it is not a level playing field, with only 50% of workers having access and workers employed by large companies far more likely than those employed by small companies to have access.

The benefits of access to occupational health professionals include independent advice and support on managing health conditions in the workplace, and advice on tailored adjustments that can support workers' health. This can often keep people in work for longer and protect them from dropping out of the workforce earlier than needed, which tends to lead to a reduction in income.

For example, one large manufacturing firm with a comprehensive occupational health service found that 68% of workers who were absent from work and referred to occupational health due to MSK were fit for duty by their final assessment, and 57% of workers who were absent from work and referred to occupational health for mental health reasons had returned to work by the time they were discharged.

Worker access to occupational health services offers benefits for:

- The employee – it improves their health and employment outcomes
- The employer – workers remain in post for longer and require fewer sickness absence days
- The economy – fewer workers drop out of the workforce for health reasons and become economically inactive
- The taxpayer – workers who continue in work save the taxpayer additional welfare costs

Proposal - SOM believes that a bill which is designed to be a comprehensive overhaul of employment law should include a measure to require businesses over a certain size to provide occupational health services to all their employees.

While many large businesses already provide such access, around 10% do not. SOM has developed a detailed proposal and costings for this measure which is available on request.

Key messages

- Patient expectations: the public/media dialogue on work and health must shift as to the value of work to health
- Consultation time: is key to effective health and work conversations; this is unlikely when fit notes are completed at the end of a busy GP consultation day
- Clinical expertise from occupational health is important in some health and work assessments with complex cases affecting workplace function
- Training in work and health / occupational health issues should occur to support employers becoming more confident with health and work conversations, and how fit notes can be leveraged to mutual benefit
- High quality health and work assessments using occupational health principles must be used throughout sickness absence journeys as intervention and support points

The Society of Occupational Medicine (SOM) is the largest and oldest national professional organisation of individuals with an interest in occupational health (OH). Membership is for anyone working in and with an interest in OH and supports professional development. Its members include doctors, technicians, nurses, health specialists and other professionals. Its Patrons are Lord Blunkett, Dame Carol Black, Lord Popat and Rt Hon Sir Norman Lamb.