

## Submission to the Women and Equalities Committee inquiry into menopause at work

*Workingwise.co.uk is a website for workers over 50. It comes under the umbrella of WM People, which is also responsible for workingmums.co.uk and workingdads.co.uk. The website launched in 2019 and aims to raise awareness about the issues facing older workers as the workforce ages and people retire later in life. That includes everything from menopause, carer responsibilities, returners and combatting ageism in the recruitment and progression process, lifelong learning and flexible working to preparation for retirement.*

### Menopause workplace issues

The workforce is ageing. And this is largely a female phenomenon: menopausal women are **the fastest-growing workforce in the UK** with around 4.4 million women aged 50-64 in work, a figure which has risen by a third in the last decade. Even though these women are the future workforce, they're not having an easy time of it. A recent report by Health & Her found that 370,000 women had left work or were considering leaving because they were struggling to deal with the **symptoms of the menopause** while at work, which include hot flushes, difficulties concentrating, fatigue, mood swings and self-doubt, many of which are compounded by a lack of awareness or understanding.

### Awareness raising

A growing number of employers are beginning to wake up to the problem with the likes of E.On, Seven Trent, many universities, South Lanarkshire Council, Nottinghamshire Police, Pitney Bowes, [Independent Living Fund Scotland](#), Channel 4, Sainsbury's and Morrisons, WH Smith, HSBC to the NHS getting on board with menopause training, strategies, conversations and support.

While some are focusing on education and awareness raising, others have gone further. As part of Channel 4's menopause policy, for instance, women have access to flexible working arrangements; paid leave if feeling unwell due to common symptoms, including the sudden onset of symptoms whilst at work; a private, cool and quiet space; a working environment assessment to ensure that their physical workspace is not making their symptoms worse, and an array of support and guidance resources. The broadcaster also holds menopause awareness briefings for its leadership teams and has a dedicated Menopause Champion.

Insurance firm Aviva recently launched a menopause support app to supplement its awareness training sessions to encourage greater openness about the impact of the menopause at work. Earlier this summer, **Vira Health** soft launched a new app which helps women to manage the menopause and will be working with menopause clinics and workplaces to support women to understand how to manage their symptoms at work.

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workingwise.co.uk aims to promote and share best employment practices for older workers, including on menopause. Things have definitely been improving in the last couple of years. A 2018 [survey](#) undertaken by the TUC, the University of Leicester, University of Bristol and Open University found that only one in 10 organisations had something around menopause in place. By 2019, due to campaigning and awareness raising by organisations and individuals, that figure was closer to three in 10.

Yet there is still much work to do to spread this good practice more widely. A 2020 survey by WiHTL (Women in Hospitality, Travel & Leisure) found that 69% of menopausal women said that their organisation was not menopause savvy and 59% said that they work in a culture that is not supportive of menopause. Fifty two per cent said they did not feel comfortable to openly discuss their [symptoms](#) with their line manager and 54% did not seek support from any other source such as a colleague or HR. Another 2020 survey by Ipsos MORI poll shows only around one in every 20 women aged 40-65 in work are aware of their employer offering proactive policies or support to women around the menopause. And a Vodafone survey showed over two fifths of women in the UK who have experienced menopause symptoms say they have felt too embarrassed to ask for support in the workplace, with nearly two thirds saying there needs to be more workplace support.

It is vital not only that employers have policies or guidance in place to help people experiencing the menopause, but that they feel comfortable and able to open up about symptoms at work where they often face the combined forces of ageism and sexism. Having policies in place is not enough. It is about educating the whole workforce and destigmatising menopause.

### Action

The first step for HR to take is to get business leaders on board with changes through getting them to consider the extent of the issue, how small changes can make a lot of difference and what the current and potentially future legal implications might be of not taking action. Although the Equality Act 2010 does not specifically identify the menopause, it is capable, in some instances, of being considered a disability and as it only affects older women there are potential issues of sex and age discrimination where there is detrimental treatment due to the menopause. Other possible legal issues centre around sex and age discrimination. A report by Menopause Experts earlier this year shows that, while small, the number of cases filed at employment tribunals which relate to menopause is growing as awareness increases amid more talk of menopause on tv, in books such as Sam Baker's [The Shift](#) and in the media.

Once the case has been made, employers need to develop a tailored strategy and action plan that includes reviewing existing policies, listening to employees affected by menopause, introducing a menopause policy or guidance (if none is already in place) and, for larger employers, developing line manager toolkits and a communication and training plan.

Most women only need small changes - reasonable adjustments such as providing employees with fans or a location close to a window if possible, giving them options when it comes to

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uniforms and giving them breaks to recharge when dealing with more acute menopausal symptoms. Working from home can also give women greater flexibility over what they wear, when they take breaks and access to ventilation. Other adaptations include allowing women time off for doctors' appointments.

While some call for menopause leave, others say this could increase prejudice against women in the workplace. The important thing is to see this as not just about older women, but something for the whole workforce. Next is one employer which has focused on general awareness raising. It recently set up a menopause forum on its internal channel so that employees can chat about menopause and has invited all employees to take part in recognition that it is not just mainly older women who are affected. Their partners are also interested, colleagues may be affected and line managers need to understand more about it.

### Growing support

What is clear is that there is a growing amount of support available to women and employers about menopause. For instance, the European Menopause and Andropause Society recently launched [an online resource about menopause in the workplace](#). The website includes global recommendations, research, infographics and statistics, self-assessment tools and guidelines for a menopause-friendly workplace. The Faculty of Occupational Medicine, Acas and the Chartered Institute for Personnel and Development have also launched guidance on menopause in the workplace and XpertHR has produced [a model menopause policy](#) with links to external educational and support resources including Menopause matters, the Daisy Network charity for those going through early menopause and the Menopause Café. Other resources include the Menopause Exchange which has a panel of experts, including GPs, menopause specialists and others.

What workingwise.co.uk would like to see is:

- Greater support for sharing of best practice among employers, including case studies and general information about what works
- Greater awareness that menopause is not just about a small group of people and about the impact of discrimination not just on individuals, but on employers, particularly at a time of acute skills shortages in many sectors
- Greater awareness of the wider social impact of women dropping out of the workforce due to menopause discrimination and greater effort to educate women about their rights around discrimination in the workplace, including when it comes to the menopause
- Stronger rights around reasonable adaptations at work and a recognition of the impact of acute menopausal symptoms. Specific legislation around the menopause would certainly raise awareness due to more media coverage and could prompt greater employer action when it comes to policies, but having a policy is not the cure-all. People need to feel they can speak up about their symptoms.

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