

HSE SAFETY

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Save Money, Reduce Sick Pay With 'Fit for Work'

In late 2014, the government introduced a new Fit for Work (FFW) service (previously known as the Health and Work Service) to provide an occupational health assessment as well as workplace advice to employers, employees and GPs. The assessment and advice are designed to help injured or ill workers return to or stay in work.

Currently, employers pay about £9 billion every year for employee sick pay and other associated costs. The FFW program could potentially reduce these costs for employers by helping injured or ill employees get back to work sooner. Under the program, employers will receive a tax exemption of up to £500 a year for each employee who receives medical treatments recommended by FFW or who receives an employer-arranged occupational health service.

The FFW program is designed to complement existing occupational health provisions and to fill the gap in support for injured workers. After an illness or work injury, it can be difficult for workers to feel motivated to get back to work. They may feel discouraged or the idea of returning to work may feel daunting or even impossible. But high-quality advice and a solid return-to-work plan can change that.

According to government statistics, nearly 1 million employees every year reach the four-week sickness absence point, and about 300,000 people fall out of work and into the welfare system because of health-related issues. A 2011 independent review of sickness absence found that at the four-week mark of an absence, there is an increased chance of the absence becoming long-term and the worker going on to claim benefits. This makes it the perfect time to intervene and create a plan for the injured worker to return to work.

The service consists of the following two elements:

1. **An assessment:** When the employee has reached, or is expected to reach, four weeks of sickness absence, the employee's GP will refer him or her to an occupational health professional for an assessment. The GP will review the employee's illness or injury and look at the issues that are preventing the employee from returning to work.
2. **Advice:** The occupational health professional will offer advice to help the employee return to work. The advice will be accessible by the employee, employer and GP through a phone line and a website.

The assessment will consider non-health and non-work-related issues as well as issues directly related to health or work. This holistic approach will help the occupational health professional give well-rounded advice, since conditions such as stress or anxiety may not be health- or work-related but could still affect an employee's recovery.

After the assessment, employees will receive a plan containing recommendations designed to help them return to work and prevent future injuries or illnesses.

For more information on the FFW program, including when the program will begin, visit the government's website at www.gov.uk and search 'Fit for Work'.

