

Health and wellbeing at work

THE GUERNSEY OCCUPATION SAFETY & HEALTH ASSOCIATION RESPONDS TO THE CIPD AND SIMPLY HEALTH RESEARCH



WITH workplace sickness absence levels stuck at high levels, employers need to change how they think about and manage employee ill health. Importantly, they need to recognise that the value of occupational health services goes way beyond simply supporting employees who are unwell.

The call from the Society of Occupational Medicine has come as research from the HR body, the Chartered Institute of Personnel and Development, has shown that the average UK worker took nearly two full working weeks of sick leave in the past year, a record high, and way more than before the pandemic.

The CIPD's 2025 Health And Wellbeing At Work report found employees last year took off on average 9.4 days a year, compared with 5.8 before the Covid pandemic in 2019 and even the 7.8 days reported just two years ago. And in Guernsey, while a definitive overall Guernsey workplace sickness absence rate isn't readily available, a 2023 survey found that around 80% of Guernsey employers view sickness absenteeism as a significant concern or a 'big worry'.

A separate 2025 report indicated that the States' civil service had an average of 8.8 sick days per employee in 2024, with colds, coughs, and flu being the main culprits, and a 2024 survey highlighted that work-related stress or anxiety is frequent.

One way employers have been responding positively is through greater investment in occupational and workplace health support, including access to OH professionals, digital GPs, virtual physiotherapy, online counselling, and health-related benefits and insurance.

In fact, the CIPD research has shown that OH services are now offered by more than two-thirds of employers (69%) – a significant uplift on the approximately half of employees estimated by the UK government to have such access a few years ago.

Access to occupational health support is more common in larger organisations (more than 250 employees). Employees in 86% of such organisations benefit from the health and work expertise that occupational health professionals provide.

With the UK government's Keep Britain Working review of workplace health provision, led by former John Lewis boss Sir Charlie Mayfield, expected to report this autumn, now is the time for employers to use occupational health services more effectively.

Currently, only a minority of employers (just 31% according to the CIPD research) use occupational health professionals proactively to prevent ill risks from occurring in the first place. Even fewer (29%), use the expertise of OH practitioners to develop and map out a comprehensive health and wellbeing strategy for their organisation.

This means that all too frequently employees go off on sick leave and are repeatedly signed off by their GP. A more effective approach would be for an employee whose health is deteriorating to be seen before, or very soon after, they go off sick and provided with the right support based on occupational health advice – so they can remain at work or return to work rapidly with their work being adjusted whilst they wait for any necessary treatment.

'Too often employees have to be absent for a defined period – often many weeks – before even being referred to occupational health,' says Society of Occupational Medicine president Professor Neil Greenberg.

'That is a missed opportunity. Waiting weeks before making a referral often means that employees' health problems are more complex and difficult to manage when they see an occupational health professional. This can lead to undesir-

able outcomes such as being forced out of work and or an early, medical retirement much more likely'.

'If employees with developing health problems can be seen by occupational health professionals, experts in work and health, before they go off sick, everyone wins. A key way to do this is for OH teams to become strategic partners – their organisation's health right-hand, as it were – proactively managing and preventing risk. OH professionals should also work with, advise and guide organisations at board and executive level,' says Professor Greenberg.

'Embracing the health and work expertise of occupational health professionals can be the transformational step-change we need.'

A States of Guernsey report in May 2025 reported on work-related sickness in Guernsey and can be read at gov.gg. It highlights a lack of employer preparedness for sickness and a prevalence of health issues amongst islanders.

The work and wellbeing report states that about 30% of all social security sickness claims are mental health related. That may surprise some readers. 48.6% of survey

respondents said work 'often or always caused them stress or anxiety'.

Over 30% of respondents said they have a longstanding illness or disability. Nearly 20% have a health concern they haven't seen a GP about and nearly 60% said that cost had stopped them using health services in Guernsey.

The report also found that 40% of employers do not monitor absences, 39% don't have return-to-work discussions and more than 30% don't have sickness absence policies. Having these processes in place could help businesses to reduce future absences.

The primary reasons for sickness claims, alongside mental health issues, are musculoskeletal issues and the report explains the importance of addressing both physical and mental workplace health challenges.

And so, better awareness of the issues and knowledge of how to deal with them effectively, could help our businesses to be more effective and efficient and ensure they are happy places in which to work, with so many resulting benefits for employers and employees.

GUERNSEY OCCUPATIONAL SAFETY & HEALTH ASSOCIATION

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