

Press release: Improving work health for a healthy economy

A healthy population is the engine of a healthy economy, says Public Health England's (PHE) Chief Executive.

Speaking at the opening of PHE's annual conference, Duncan Selbie said we must look further than the NHS if we are to ensure everyone has a fair chance of good health.

PHE believes that health and wealth are 2 sides of the same coin. Having a job is the key to a long, happy and healthy life.

Illness among working age people costs the UK economy £100 billion a year. About 330,000 every year become unemployed because of health-related issues.

For every unemployed person who gets a job there is an estimated saving to society of £12,035 in a one-year period.

We take an estimated 137.3 million days of sick leave and more than a third of those (£46 million) are due to poor mental health and lower neck and back pain.

But workplace health and wellbeing programmes such as exercise, healthy eating and stop smoking support can make a real difference. Successful programmes such as these have been found to return £2 to £10 for every £1 spent, benefiting staff wellbeing and economic productivity.

Most big employers already have some plans in place that help to improve and protect their staff's health but many small and medium enterprises (SMEs) do not currently benefit from such programmes.

PHE and Healthy Working Futures, a workplace health provider, has set out advice for SMEs, which account for 60% of private sector employment.

It gives SMEs a series of questions on health and wellbeing including smoking, fitness and sleep, which staff can answer anonymously, enabling them to assess the specific needs of their workforce and create tailored steps to improve their staff's health and wellbeing, based on evidence.

Later this week, Federation of Small Businesses (FSB) will also publish new guidelines on how businesses can improve their workers' health, with advice on physical and mental health.

PHE has also created a series of guidance for employers on important issues, such as musculoskeletal (MSK) and mental health, impacting on employees with Business in the Community. Further advice is being developed covering issues including:

- physical activity

- diet and weight
- drugs
- alcohol
- tobacco

Duncan Selbie, Public Health England (PHE) Chief Executive, said:

Work is the key to a long, happy and healthy life. But sickness absence and tackling early retirement due to ill health are still major challenges for the economy.

This new package of support for small businesses will help businesses improve the health of their staff.

We can no longer see the health service as the only solution to our ills. We've got individual responsibility, and so do employers. Keeping people healthy not only benefits the individual but also benefits the economy and the local community.

We must do more to improve health outcomes, and in turn the health and economic productivity of the country. I urge employers to take advantage of this support.

Mike Cherry, Chairman of the Federation of Small Businesses, said:

Improved wellbeing benefits individual businesses. But more than that, it helps the wider economy, government and public services, as well as the local communities where small businesses play such an important role. There's never going to be a 'one size fits all' approach and not every idea will work for every business – that's why we're very pleased to be working with Public Health England in particular to help smaller businesses and the self-employed.

The FSB will soon launch its first wellbeing campaign aimed at providing some simple ideas and suggestions that smaller firms can look to adopt to support themselves and their staff. This sits alongside the medical and health advice service we already offer our members. We are delighted to receive the support of PHE for our campaign and we hope it acts as a catalyst for a positive conversation on wellbeing and mental health.

Louise Aston, Wellbeing Director, Business in the Community, said:

We are delighted to be working in partnership with Public Health England, taking an innovative co-production, whole person, whole system approach to producing a suite of interconnected toolkits that address the two leading causes of days lost at work – mental and musculoskeletal health.

Our suite of toolkits consolidates the very best evidence with the very best employer practice, aligned with freely available resources that are useful to all employers, wherever they are on their journey.

PHE and Business in the Community have developed a series of [toolkits for employers](#).

Northumbria Healthcare NHS Foundation Trust introduced a physiotherapy service for staff with MSK absence from work because it was the second highest reason for sickness absence among staff, and employees had asked for support in this area in health and wellbeing surveys.

Following a successful pilot of early intervention for staff with MSK absence at Wansbeck General Hospital in 2014, the service was extended trust-wide in January 2016.

An additional whole-time equivalent physiotherapist was provided to deliver the service for staff who can either self-refer using the online referral system or be referred by their manager, ideally on the first day of absence.

Staff are then given an appointment with a physiotherapist within 3 days.

Findings show:

- 15% of staff (86) on short-term MSK absence were referred to the staff physiotherapy service
- absence length for staff on short-term absence was reduced by 31% when referred on first day of absence, compared to day 2 or more
- 25% of staff (44) on long-term MSK absence were referred to physiotherapy
- absence length for staff on long-term absence was reduced by 11% when referred on first day of absence, compared to day 2 or more

For further information on this case study, please contact Jaclyn Curry, Media and Communications Officer, Northumbria Healthcare NHS Foundation Trust on 0191 203 1654 or jaclyn.curry@northumbria.nhs.uk.

[Public Health England](#) exists to protect and improve the nation's health and wellbeing, and reduce health inequalities. It does this through world-class science, knowledge and intelligence, advocacy, partnerships and the delivery of specialist public health services. PHE is an operationally autonomous executive agency of the Department of Health. Follow us on Twitter: [@PHE_uk](#) and Facebook: www.facebook.com/PublicHealthEngland.