

## ASSESSING THE FIT FOR WORK SERVICE ROLLOUT

- **Worryingly, more than 60% of GPs and over 75% of employers are unaware of new *Fit for Work* service.**
- **Government efforts to assist employers with rising costs of sickness absence<sup>1</sup> are no doubt a positive step. However, a recent Cigna survey<sup>2</sup> of GPs and employers has uncovered a few key findings – a less than fit communication strategy and a question of role responsibility.**

The Department of Work and Pensions' (DWP) new *Fit for Work* occupational health service is currently being rolled out. This will offer UK General Practitioners (GPs), employers and employees access to free occupational health information and assessments. To coincide with this the Government has also introduced tax relief on employer funded medical treatments designed to get absent employees back to work sooner.

After a stalled December 2014 launch, the expectations are for the service to be fully operational around the UK by late 2015. Whilst seemingly moving in the right direction, experience tells that initiatives of this nature are only successful when well communicated. Recently Cigna commissioned YouGov<sup>2</sup> to survey awareness and engagement amongst the two key groups involved in *Fit for Work* – GPs and employers.

### Key GP findings

GPs are being asked to refer patients who have been – or are likely to be – off work for four weeks or longer for assessment by an occupational health advisor. The Cigna survey included more than 1,000 GPs and asked about their role in the *Fit for Work* service.

A disappointing two thirds (61%) are not even aware of the service at this stage. Of those who are, over a third have not yet made their minds up about using it. This indicates a need for further education for GPs, who are expected to make the majority of referrals in to the service.

Of the GPs who are aware but don't plan to use the service, the main reason is that they believe it is the employer's responsibility to address the problem of workplace absence. The majority of GPs (53%) are yet to be convinced of the impact this will have in reducing sickness absence levels in the UK. Overall only 21% think the service will be effective in reducing sickness absence.

### Key employer findings

Employers are being asked to consider updating their sickness absence policies and procedures to reflect the availability of the *Fit for Work* service. In addition, employers can now receive up to £500 (tax free) a year for each employee on medical treatments recommended by *Fit for Work*, or an OH service arranged through them.

Cigna asked over 680 employers about their role with the *Fit for Work* service and the new tax free incentive scheme.

Over three quarters (76%) of UK employers are unaware of the DWP's new *Fit for Work* service. Awareness is lowest amongst small businesses - where less than a quarter (22%) was familiar with the service. This is especially disappointing given that the DWP identified them as a key

target audience. However, of all those who are already aware of the service almost half (49%) said they are likely to use it.

The Cigna study found awareness of the tax free incentive scheme to be lower still. Only 14% of employers had any knowledge of this, with small employers again representing the lowest proportion. On a more positive note, over 40% said their organisation would be more likely to fund medical treatments for absent employees as a result of this new tax relief scheme. And this rises to 70% of employers who were already aware of the tax relief.

### **Cigna survey conclusion**

The Cigna survey found a wide-spread lack of awareness of both the *Fit for Work* service and the £500 tax free incentive scheme. There also appears to be a difference in opinion as to where the responsibility for managing workplace absence lies. The indication is that GPs are not yet in a position to accept this responsibility – believing instead that this should sit with the employer.

Fundamentally it's important to highlight that these initiatives are only a limited solution for absence management. Access to a telephonic occupational health service is but one of many tools an employer needs in their kit bag to help control the costs associated with workplace absence. Employers need a holistic approach for employee wellness including a variety of initiatives that not only keeps employees healthy at work but also aids a fast return. Employers of all sizes should consider medical plans when reviewing their employee benefits package. Plans are available to help target key issues that lead to absence from work – such as musculoskeletal and mental health conditions. Through insightful management information employers gain a much deeper understanding of the health concerns affecting their workforce population.

Cigna therefore calls on the DWP to do more to raise the profile of these positive developments. Cigna also calls on employers to review their benefits package and health and well-being strategy. After all, we're all working to achieve a common goal – keeping individuals fit and productive at work.

### **About Cigna UK HealthCare Benefits**

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For more information on *Fit for Work* and the £500 tax exemption, visit: <http://www.fitforwork.org>  
For employers: <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/fit-for-work-guidance-for-employers>  
For GPs: <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/fit-for-work-guidance-for-gps>

<sup>1</sup>DWP 'Health At Work, An independent review of sickness absence', Nov 2011

<sup>2</sup>Cigna & YouGov 'DWP Fit for Work awareness research', March 2015 (1,002 GP responses, 689 employer responses)