Fluctuating conditions, fluctuating support:
Improving organisational resilience to fluctuating conditions in the workforce

An executive summary of the second white paper of the Health at Work Policy Unit

Karen Steadman
Victoria Shreeve
Stephen Bevan
About the Health at Work Policy Unit

The Health at Work Policy Unit (HWPU) provides evidence-based policy recommendations and commentary on contemporary issues around health, wellbeing and work. Based at The Work Foundation, it draws on The Work Foundation’s substantial expertise in workforce health, its reputation in the health and wellbeing arena and its relationships with policy influencers. The HWPU aims to provide an independent, authoritative, evidence-based voice capable of articulating the views of all stakeholders.

The second Policy Paper from The Work Foundation’s Health at Work Policy Unit (HWPU) will focus on the challenges faced by employers in managing a future workforce where the prevalence of chronic and fluctuating conditions is set to rise. It will explore the kinds of support which employers will need from doctors and other healthcare professionals, from the welfare and benefits system and from other agencies such as Fit for Work, Access to Work, Occupational Health services and patient advocacy groups. It will also assess whether policy-makers have scope to do more to create a system of incentives and support for the many employers who wish to do more but lack access to advice, resources or support.

The paper was informed by a literature review and discussions with expert advisors, including a roundtable discussion held with patients groups, employer groups and employers in November 2014.
Fluctuating conditions, fluctuating support

Fluctuating conditions and work
It is estimated that by 2030 around 40 per cent of the UK’s working age population will have at least one chronic and work-limiting health condition. For people over 50 in 2014 this figure is already at 42 per cent. One of the features of many chronic conditions is that their symptoms can fluctuate significantly from week to week, and from individual to individual. They can involve chronic pain or levels of fatigue which can be disabling and distressing, and which can disrupt independent living, attendance at work, work productivity and career prospects.

Examples of fluctuating conditions include asthma, depression, multiple sclerosis, rheumatoid arthritis, inflammatory bowel disease and ankylosing spondylitis. Many people will experience more than one. Some of these conditions are first diagnosed when an individual is young and in the early stages of their career, having a life-course impact. Each of them can shorten working lives and is likely to affect a growing proportion of the workforce over the next two decades. This raises questions for employers about how they can manage the reality of fluctuating conditions within their workforce, and what steps they can take to ensure that this does not have an adverse effect on their business going into the future.

What do we know about managing fluctuating conditions at work?
‘What works’, in terms of supporting someone with a fluctuating condition to remain in work, will vary from person to person, and from job to job. Through reviewing the literature and consultation with experts, we encountered several key ideas which should underpin effective support. These include, enhancing knowledge about fluctuating conditions and their management across key stakeholders – clinicians, employees and employers – and providing access to occupational health advice. The relationship between the employer and the employee is crucial, with the importance of good people management highlighted, as well as trust and open communication – particularly given that such conditions are often ‘invisible’ and highly variable, to make person-centred decisions which provide the most appropriate support for that individual.

In particular we highlight the importance of shared-decision making, with key stakeholders sharing their expertise and working together to find the best solutions for both the employee and the employer. Both the employee and the employer need to be empowered not only to make decisions but also to make sure they are implemented at work – sometimes going against the grain of company policy. For those searching for solutions and suggesting changes, as well as for the organisations who are asked to implement them, there needs to be creativity, flexibility, and open-mindedness – shifts in attitudes and finding innovative solutions.
Review of current policy mechanisms
The cross-departmental Health, Work and Wellbeing initiative leads the way in highlighting and addressing health and wellbeing in the working age population. Much of this agenda is underpinned by legislation, in particular around equalities (which includes provision for making reasonable adjustments), health and safety, and most recently, the right to request flexible working.

Improving access to occupational health services is a key part of the programme – marked by the most recent initiative from the Department of Work and Pensions (DWP), Fit for Work, which will be launched in full later this year. This is complemented by the NHS Health at Work network, through which a number of NHS trusts provide occupational health services to businesses locally. Also important is the Access to Work (AtW) scheme, which has since 1994 been providing grants and support to individuals with health conditions and disabilities to make adjustments to work to better enable job retention. Support was enhanced by the introduction of the Mental Health Support Service (MHSS) in 2011.

The key health sector initiative is the Statement of Fitness for Work, or ‘Fit Note’ – designed to enhance GP provision of the formal sickness certification process by including advice and guidance on return to work. This initiative might be seen as part of a wider programme of changing the way clinicians think about patient employment – with increasing recognition that employment should be seen as a clinical outcome, and the enhancement of occupational health training provided for GPs.

Current policy gaps
Having reviewed the evidence around what works to support people with fluctuating conditions to remain in work, and looked at the current policy landscape, we identify some policy gaps which we feel there is scope to address. This was informed by discussions with expert advisors, and through feedback from a roundtable event held with patients groups, employer groups and employers. Gaps have been categorised as follows:

Implementation of legislation
- The Equality Act still fails to protect many employees with fluctuating health conditions from discrimination;

- Reasonable adjustments (and likely flexible working) provisions are in many cases still not being developed with consideration of the significant proportion of employees with fluctuating needs who seek to access them, creating a considerable burden for some employers;

- There is a disproportionate focus on ‘safety’ by employers when implementing health and safety legislation – this does not fit with the broader concept of health and safety we understand today which includes provision for wellbeing and rehabilitation.
Fluctuating conditions, fluctuating support: Improving organisational resilience to fluctuating conditions in the workforce – Executive Summary

**Provision of occupational health support and advice**

- There is limited access to specialist occupational health support for people with fluctuating conditions, including through Fit for Work. For example the focus on longer periods of sickness absence, and a singular assessment might not sufficiently account for fluctuating symptoms. How well small business are provided for is also noted;

- Knowledge sharing between GPs and employers, as facilitated by the Fit Note, is still weak, and more needs to be done to enhance the ability of clinicians, employers, and employees to share knowledge and improve understanding of the variability of an employee’s health condition and implications for their work;

- There is a lack of awareness of the importance of health and work in primary care.

**Help for employers to fulfil their obligation to individual employees**

- There is limited access to knowledge of ‘what works’ and ‘what has worked’ in making workplace adjustments, given the considerable variation within and between fluctuating conditions;

- There is dissatisfaction around access to financial support and adjustment advice through Access to Work;

- Organisational culture and stigma provide a barrier to work for those with fluctuating health conditions, marked by a poor understanding by employers and colleagues about fluctuating conditions.

**Support for employers to take a strategic ‘whole of business’ view**

- Difficulty in taking a strategic, ‘whole of business’ approach to fulfilling requests for reasonable adjustments and managing access to work funds, as well as fulfilling flexible working requests when many employees require them;

- There is a lack of compensation for employers for employee sickness absence (given the removal of the Statutory Percentage Threshold scheme).

**Recommendations**

We have developed a series of recommendations to address each of the above gaps – suggesting ways in which policy might be revised or updated.¹

At the forefront of these, we call on government to support measures to increase the flexibility of sickness absence policies, to allow employees with fluctuating health conditions

---

¹ In our gaps section we highlighted 4 themes under which gaps sit, one of these was in the ‘implementation of legislation’. We do not directly address this with our recommendations, as we believe increasing compliance with legislation is best achieved through changes in workplace culture and practice – this would be encouraged through our other areas of recommendations.
to preemptively arrange part-time sick leave. Modelled on the ‘Part-time sick pay’ system already operating in the Nordic countries, employees could arrange to reduce hours in agreement with their line managers for a set amount of time, in the early stages of their condition flaring. In addition we recommend that the scope of income protection insurance be further developed so that businesses can better support those with fluctuating conditions to remain in work. This would mean that in the event of sustained absence the employer could continue to pay the employee and receive compensation for this, along with offering them rehabilitation support to facilitate an earlier return to work.

The following table provides an overview of the full set of recommendations. Though some stand alone, in order to comprehensively address existing challenges to providing appropriate employer support for employees with fluctuating conditions, it is suggested that the development of ‘clusters’ of coordinated recommendations be developed. This would provide a more comprehensive strategy for ensuring employers are equipped and able to support employees with fluctuating conditions to remain in, or return to, work.

Many of these recommendations would require costing, feasibility testing and piloting to ensure that they fit the needs for which they are suggested. It is vital to work with stakeholders, particularly people living with fluctuating conditions and employers, large and small, and clinicians to ensure that any solutions developed are appropriate to their needs.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Identified Gap</th>
<th>Policy recommendations</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Access to occupational health support for people with fluctuating conditions</td>
<td>Improving access to specialist occupational health support for people with fluctuating conditions</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1. Development of template for an employee-owned ‘health at work’ record</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. Increasing local commissioning of occupational health and vocational rehabilitation support</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3. Better incentivising the NHS to see work as a positive health outcome for those with long-term and fluctuating conditions</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4. Monitoring how Fit for Work is addressing the needs of service users with fluctuating health conditions</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5. Improving access to specialist occupational health support for small business through partnership with NHS and other providers</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Employers fulfilling their obligation to individuals  

Helping employers to fulfill their obligation to individuals – access, empowerment and knowledge

6. Improving and expanding Access to Work’s provision for fluctuating conditions

7. Undertaking a targeted information sharing campaign for employers about how to create a right to request policy and its benefits

8. Developing a ‘best practice’ database of adjustments and supports for people with fluctuating conditions

Employers taking a strategic ‘whole of business’ view  

Encouraging and supporting employers to take a strategic ‘whole of business’ view

9. Providing advice to employers on how to develop a strategic approach to managing fluctuating conditions in their business

10. Developing models which would promote wider uptake of Income Protection (IP) insurance through the workplace and building the evidence base around the effectiveness of rehabilitation services offered

11. Developing an early part-time sick pay model

If the NHS, the welfare system and modern workplaces are going to support people living with these conditions to have active, high quality and fulfilling working lives then much more will need to be done to ensure that ‘work ability’ is a treatment goal for clinicians, and that job retention and return to work are a priority for the Department for Work and Pensions (DWP) and employers. Sadly, for too many people trying to work with a fluctuating condition, the quality of support they receive also fluctuates far too much.
Acknowledgements

The authors would like to thank the patients groups, employer groups and employers who kindly offered their time to take part in the roundtable discussion and colleagues at The Work Foundation for their support with this paper. The authors would also like to thank all those who kindly offered their expert advice to help shape this paper, in particular Dr Steven Boorman, Professor Alan Silman and Jacqueline Winstanley.

The Work Foundation transforms people’s experience of work and the labour market through high quality applied research that empowers individuals and influences public policies and organisational practices. Through its rigorous research programmes targeting organisations, cities, regions and economies, The Work Foundation is a leading provider of research-based analysis, knowledge exchange and policy advice in the UK and beyond. The Work Foundation is part of Lancaster University – an alliance that enables both organisations to further enhance their impact.

This paper has been supported financially by grants from Napp Pharmaceuticals Limited and Bupa who have had no editorial input.
Fluctuating conditions, fluctuating support: Improving organisational resilience to fluctuating conditions in the workforce – Executive Summary

Contact details

The Work Foundation
21 Palmer Street
London SW1H 0AD

info@theworkfoundation.com
www.theworkfoundation.com
Fluctuating conditions, fluctuating support: Improving organisational resilience to fluctuating conditions in the workforce

Executive Summary

www.theworkfoundation.com