



## Press release

April 2018

For immediate release

### ***Establishing the ‘real’ causes of long-term sickness absence and its contribution to lost working time***

Exclusive joint research from The At Work Partnership and the Work Foundation provides concrete evidence that the reason someone takes long-term sickness absence and remains off sick, isn't just down to the diagnosis given on the fit note or sick certificate.

This biopsychosocial survey of long-term sickness absence, published in the journal *Occupational Health at Work*, demonstrates that while the initial diagnosis is relevant in triggering the initial absence other factors are often involved. For example ‘comorbid’ conditions – where an employee has a second health condition, such as depression, in addition to their main diagnosis, are important factors in triggering and prolonging absences. Importantly, ‘psychosocial’ factors – such as the employee believing their ill health is caused or made worse by work, poor support from the manager and disciplinary issues – are also important in triggering and prolonging the absence.

The survey also shows that around 3.2% of working time is lost to sickness absence in respondents' organisations (which were generally large employers in both the private and public sectors) – equivalent to 7.3 days per employee a year. Just under half (46%) of total lost working time due to sickness absence is from absences lasting 20 working days or more.

Stress and mental health were the most common reasons for long-term sickness absence referrals to occupational health, followed by combined musculoskeletal and stress/mental health conditions. Musculoskeletal conditions such as back pain were the third most common reason for long-term sickness absence referrals to OH.

Only one-quarter of employees currently on long-term sick leave (at the time of the survey) had been absent with the same condition before.

Most long-term absences tended to resolve after two or three months; however, many respondents reported cases lasting 12 months or more. One respondent revealed that an employee had been off sick for eight years in their organisation.

Report co-author Dr John Ballard said: ‘The findings reported in our exclusive survey confirm that the causes of long-term sickness absence can be complex and that multiple medical and psychosocial issues need to be considered in its management.’

**Further information:**

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**Notes for editors**

The research comprised two online surveys sent to OH professionals in December 2016 and March 2017. The findings are based on responses from 295 OH professionals across all industrial sectors.

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