



Institute of Directors

116 Pall Mall

London

SW1Y 5ED

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Minister for Disabled People, Health and Work

Department for Work and Pensions

Caxton House

Tothill Street

London

SW1H 9NA

Dear Minister,

IoD response to Fit Note Reform: Call for evidence

About the IoD

The IoD is an independent, non-party political organisation representing approximately 20,000 company directors, senior business leaders, and entrepreneurs. It is the UK's longest-running organisation for professional leaders, having been founded in 1903 and incorporated by Royal Charter in 1906. Its aim is to promote good governance and ensure high levels of skills and integrity among directors of organisations. It campaigns on issues of importance to its members and to the wider business community with the aim of fostering a climate favourable to entrepreneurial activity in the UK.

Summary of the IoD view

The current fit note system does not meet employers' needs and we welcome the opportunity to contribute evidence relating to issues with the system and potential areas for reform.

At present, fit notes generally do not provide employers with a level of detail – regarding expected duration of sickness, potential workplace adjustments, or the specific tasks an employee is able to perform – sufficient to enable them to plan for either a successful return to work or for wider workforce deployment in the case of long-term sickness.

Reform should therefore focus on how more detailed useful information can be provided, along with a means of facilitating a better understanding of the workplace and role in question on the part of the fit note issuer in order to ensure that the recommendations are valid.

Specific questions

15. How effective do you feel the current fit note process is at meeting employer needs?

Ineffective. In an IoD survey of almost 600 business leaders in June 2024, just 14% stated that the current process is effective in meeting employer needs, while a third (32%) considered the process to be ineffective (see Appendix for further breakdown by employer size and region).

How effective do you feel the current fit note process is at meeting employer needs?	
Very effective	2%
Quite effective	12%
Neither effective nor ineffective	30%
Quite ineffective	16%
Very ineffective	16%
Don't know	26%
Grand Total	100.0%

16. What works well with the current fit note process for employers?

Our research found that few business leaders consider the system to work well. However, at a basic level, the current system fulfils its function of confirming to an employer that an employee is unwell and the reason for their absence via a process which is generally well understood by employers.

“The system works and people know how to use it, which is good.” – SME, Electricity and/or gas supply, Scotland

Furthermore, the principle of fit note assessments being undertaken by medical professionals is generally well-supported; employers want the process to provide trustworthy external validation for prolonged employee absences.

17. What do employers feel could be improved with the fit note process so that it meets their needs?

Our research identified limited and/or poor-quality information as the main weakness in the fit note process from the employer perspective. This particularly relates to a lack of information about the expected duration of sickness, the workplace adjustments which could support a return to work, and a focus on the work that the employee can or may be able to perform:

“[It is] difficult to make preparations for return to work with scant detail, and there are often gaps in between notes” – SME, Electricity and/or gas supply, Northeast England

“There should be more of a focus on what the employee and employer can do to support a return to work as quickly as possible.” – SME, Professional, scientific and technical activities, Wales

“They should be replaced by a note of what the individual is fit to do (including working from home) and the time for which they are expected to be unfit to do what the employer wants.” – SME, Professional, scientific and technical activities, London

Employers also raised concerns that pressure and time constraints in the healthcare system are compromising the quality of fit notes being issued, thereby limiting their utility:

“GPs do not have any incentive or time to properly evaluate what the person can do and write anything meaningful so instead just sign them off as the simplest and safest option from their perspective” – SME, Manufacturing, Wales

“Not seen a significant difference since the change from sick notes; they still tend to be blanket sign offs” – Large-sized employer, Manufacturing, East Midlands

This lack of detail not only undermines employers’ ability to engage in meaningful discussions with employees about facilitating successful returns to work, but also hinders their ability to understand the likely implications of the employee’s absence on wider workforce planning.

There is also a concern among employers that the aforementioned pressures in the healthcare system compromise the ability of the process to identify individuals gaming the system, thus undermining their confidence in the validity of fit notes:

“Employees can be signed off for significant periods with no review, and largely on the basis of what the employee has reported to the Doctor. [The system is] open to abuse.” – Medium-sized employer, Manufacturing, London

“[Fit notes] are effective for the normal case, but do not protect employers against ‘bad agents’ within the workforce. Clearly you need a sensible policy that protects both.” – SME, Health and social work, Wales

“[Fit notes] are issued with little consultation and are in practice easy to obtain and poorly evidenced.” -- SME, Construction, Southeast England

Underlying much of this feedback is the fact that employer input into the fit note process itself is non-existent; the limited detail on workplace adjustments typically provided in fit notes is to an extent an inevitable result of a lack of understanding of the role, workplace, and potential adjustments in question.

“A visit or an interview with the employer to understand the elements of the role would be beneficial in giving a better understanding to the medical professional” – SME, Transportation and storage, West Midlands

Government should therefore consider how employer feedback can be meaningfully integrated into the fit note process in order to improve the quality of the recommendations relating to absence and returns to work.

18. What, if any, additional information might be helpful for employers to have within May Be Fit for Work Fit Notes to support employees to successfully return to work from sickness absence?

In theory, May Be Fit for Work Fit Notes in their current format can include all the information that employers need to support employees to successfully return to work. However, employers frequently report that the notes in practice typically contain very limited information to support them in planning and implementing adjustments.

“Fit notes very rarely say what the employee is fit to do or when they can return on a transitional or changed duties basis” – SME, Professional, scientific and technical activities, Southeast England

“Very often lacking in detail to enable the support of people to returning to work with the activities they could undertake in relation to their role.” – SME, Agriculture, Forestry and Fishing, East of England

“[It is] difficult to make preparations for return to work with scant detail and often have gaps in between notes.” – SME, Electricity and/or gas supply, Northeast England

In addition to more detailed information about the type of activities employees can undertake and the adjustments which can facilitate a successful return to work, information about the individual’s treatment plan may help employers to better plan for a return to work:

“It depends on what is the purpose of the May be Fit Note. If it is to give useful information to the employer about how the employee is being treated for a health issue such that they may be able to work then it is clearly not working as most GPs provide no information on any treatment plan.” – SME, Professional, scientific and technical activities, East of England

The focus for reform, therefore, should be on increasing the level of detail provided within the existing process, alongside improving its quality by facilitating meaningful employer input where appropriate.

It should be noted that additional information for employers would be beneficial on not just May Be Fit for Work notes but also on Not Fit for Work notes. Information about treatment plans, expected duration of sickness, the activities an employee can perform when they return to work, and any reasonable adjustments which may in future facilitate a return to work would enable employers to

better plan for a supported return and to better understand the likely impact of employee sickness on wider workforce management.

19. What do employers need to feel confident in having in-depth work and health conversations with employees?

Employers need more detailed information via the fit note process in order to feel confident in having the kinds of work and health conversations which will support individuals back to work. Such information should include advice from a medical professional, based on a good understanding of the role and workplace in question, regarding the specific tasks the employee is able to perform and the kinds of adjustments – such as various forms of flexible working – which could facilitate their return.

I hope you have found our comments helpful. If you require further information about our views, please do not hesitate to contact us.

With kind regards,



Alex Hall-Chen

Principal Policy Advisor for Employment

Email: Alexandra.Hall-Chen@iod.com

Appendix

IOD MEMBER SURVEY RESULTS: 14-27 JUNE 2024 (584 RESPONSES)

Row Labels	How effective do you feel the current fit note process is at meeting employer needs?
Very effective	1.5%
Quite effective	12.0%
Neither effective nor ineffective	28.8%
Quite ineffective	16.4%
Very ineffective	15.8%
Don't know	25.5%
Grand Total	100.0%

BREAKDOWN BY EMPLOYER REGION: DEVOLVED NATIONS

Row Labels	Northern Ireland	Scotland	Wales
Very effective	0.0%	2.8%	0.0%
Quite effective	25.0%	8.3%	21.4%
Neither effective nor ineffective	6.3%	38.9%	21.4%
Quite ineffective	25.0%	19.4%	35.7%
Very ineffective	31.3%	5.6%	7.1%
Don't know	12.5%	25.0%	14.3%
Grand Total	100.0%	100.0%	100.0%