



Department  
of Health &  
Social Care

From Helen Whately MP  
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The Rt Hon the Lord Blunkett  
House of Lords  
Westminster  
London SW1A 0PW

*Dear Lord Blunkett,*

Thank you for your correspondence of 6 February to Matt Hancock about the Society of Occupational Medicine's (SOM) views on a cross-governmental approach to occupational health (OH) policy and health at work.

The Government also recognises that there is good evidence on the efficacy of OH as a means to retain employees and reduce health-related job loss. There are clear disparities in employee access to OH, with employees of small employers least likely to have access. Cost and lack of resource are cited as the main barriers to purchasing OH services.

We recently ran a public consultation, 'Health is Everyone's Business: proposals to reduce ill health-related job losses', which sought views on a range of proposals aiming to tackle the issues highlighted in your note. The SOM is an important stakeholder who has helped to shape and further develop these proposals. I would like to thank you for your organisation's continued engagement with officials. The Government response to this consultation is due to be published later this year.

With regard to the specific recommendations you mentioned in your note, I have provided an update on the work below.

The 'Health is Everyone's Business' consultation included a proposal for the new Working Age Health Research and Development Network. This network could work to improve the prioritisation, co-ordination and dissemination of working age health research and encourage innovation that transforms evidence into real world change. Officials are currently assessing the strength of the case for Government to develop such a network, which could share many similarities with your outlined proposal.

We recognise the importance of the OH workforce in delivering OH services. The consultation set out proposals to improve workforce intelligence through the development of an OH data collection service, encourage clinical expansion (of OH doctors and nurses), the development of multidisciplinary working and improved OH service workforce models to support the current OH service model, and direct leadership of the OH specialty helping

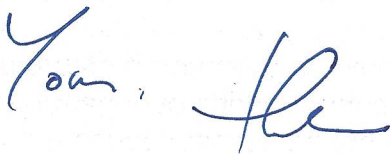
to drive the outlined proposals above. Officials are currently analysing consultation responses and are working with a range of internal and external stakeholders to explore ways in which proposals could be driven forward effectively to compliment other programmes of work with an OH focus.

We also know that many employers, particularly small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs), require more information, advice or guidance on dealing with health conditions. In the recent consultation, the Government proposed to improve the provision of advice and information to support management of health in the workplace and encourage better-informed purchasing of expert-led advice. A potential financial incentive for SMEs and self-employed people was also proposed to help overcome the barriers to accessing OH. We received a good response from a range of stakeholders, and we are currently reviewing the detailed responses to inform decisions on next steps. We expect there to be a continuing dialogue between Government, employers and their representative organisations, and the OH sector, in support of this.

Tangentially, the NHS will be publishing its final NHS People Plan this year, which will include a commitment to develop a minimum standard of occupational health for all staff in the NHS. Occupational health will be a part of making the NHS the best place to work, ensuring that all NHS staff are able to work in a caring and compassionate environment.

My officials will continue work with SOM and other stakeholders to further develop these proposals ahead of the Government response later this year. We are grateful to Nick Pahl, CEO of SOM, and his team for their continued engagement in developing these proposals.

I hope this reply is helpful.

A handwritten signature in blue ink, appearing to read 'Helen Whately', with a stylized flourish at the end.

**HELEN WHATELY**