

COVID-19 Recovery Committee
Informal online engagement session
Note of discussion
Thursday, 24 November 2022

Committee member attendees

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Discussion group 1: long-term sickness and health conditions

The Committee spoke with 8 participants who have experience of long COVID or a long-term health condition, or have supported colleagues with health conditions as a trade union representative. The following summary is intended to provide an overview of the main themes that emerged from the discussion.

Stigma

- A social stigma is associated with people who have a chronic illness. This means people with a chronic illness experience barriers to remaining employed or gaining employment.

Legal protections and entitlements

- The UK Equality Act 2010 was enacted to provide protections for people with protected characteristics, but realising its aims is often held back by societal attitudes to reasonable adjustments, flexible working etc. in the workplace.
- Long COVID not being recognised as a disability under the UK Equality Act 2010 means that people who have long COVID cannot benefit from its protections, such as making a claim for an industrial injuries disablement benefit.

Reasonable adjustments and support

- Many people who require reasonable adjustments for a long-term health condition are expected to 'keep up with everyone else' in the workplace and are held to the standard of an average healthy person.
- If reasonable adjustments are put in place, sometimes this can lead to resentment from other employees in the workplace.
- Reasonable adjustments can be expensive to implement, which means employers can be reluctant to agree to them.
- There is also a cost to wider society of a working-age person not working. But these costs are often not considered in the round to support employers to implement reasonable adjustments at an individual level.
- For front-line workers, including teachers, some employers can adopt the view that reasonable adjustments are incompatible with the delivery of certain roles (e.g. remote teaching). This means people cannot continue in the roles in which they are trained or have experience, which can lead to a loss of employment.
- People who have long-term health conditions or caring responsibilities for children with long-term health conditions also require flexibility from their employers to attend

medical appointments. This is not always understood or accommodated.

- Some human resources tools, such as the Bradford Factor, are not designed in a way that recognises the lived experience of people with a long-term illness, who may require to take periods of extended sick leave. This can lead to discrimination in the workplace.

Return-to-work programmes

- Long COVID is a challenging health condition because of the myriad of symptoms that people can experience. Long COVID symptoms can also present in an unpredictable way – symptoms can flare and wane, as well as vary in their severity and impact on the person. People can also experience a re-lapse of symptoms long after they were first diagnosed with COVID-19.
- The nature of these symptoms means that long COVID is a condition that often does not fit with the standard approach to a phased return-to-work programme. These programmes are usually time-limited and are often not designed to support people who re-lapse long after their initial return to the workplace.
- Some organisations appear to have implemented effective return-to-work programmes for people with long COVID, with NHS Greater Glasgow and Clyde being cited as a positive example. However, the approach to developing return-to-work programmes can vary within sectors and good practice does not appear to be shared.
- Some employers have approached a return-to-work programme by offering employees redeployment or reduced hours. This can lead to a reduction pay, which can result in a significant change in a person's (and that of their dependents or family) standard of living.
- If a return-to-work programme does not adequately support an employee, this can have significant financial and

wellbeing impacts on an individual (and that of their dependents or family). Examples included taking an unpaid career break and relying on personal independence payments.

- The Scottish Government could do more to review the maximum return date for phased returns to work in the public sector and promote good practice.
- For parents whose children also suffer from long COVID, there is a lack of societal wrap-around support to return to work for people who have ill children.
- Due to ongoing caring responsibilities, many households are unable to return to work, forced to reduce to one income and/or have no choice but to apply for welfare benefits.
- On a broader level, a healthy society makes for a healthy economy and workforce. Many people appear to be struggling to receive effective medical care or treatment to recover from long COVID, which would enable them to return to the workforce.

Employee benefits and pay

- Employee benefits, such as COVID-19 leave arrangements and payments, have also varied across sectors. The Committee was informed that teachers were brought back into regular pay arrangements in 2021, whereas nurses will return to regular pay arrangements in 2022.

Disability employment gap

- The Scottish Government has a target to reduce the disability employment gap by half by 2038, but some participants felt it was challenging to see how this target will be met based on their lived experience.
- Some participants also felt that the Scottish Government could be doing more through schemes, such as the

“Disability Confident” scheme, to ensure large employers are recruiting and supporting disabled employees.

Creating COVID-19 safe workplaces

- The pandemic highlighted a lack of suitable health and safety personnel in workplaces and the ability to implement risk assessments.
- Since the pandemic started, many managers do not understand the impact of long COVID on employees and are not well placed to support them.
- Employers should receive additional funding for Co2 monitors and air filtration to support service users and employees back into workplaces.

Public messaging

- The Scottish Government could do more to raise awareness of the risks and symptoms of repeat infections and long COVID through public messaging, including tailored messaging about risk factors for specific sectors of society (e.g., children, adults etc.).
- Public health messaging about COVID has evolved over time and now suggests that it is a mild disease due to widespread vaccination. The virus continues to circulate, however, and the higher the prevalence of COVID in the population, the more people who may experience re-infection and long COVID. This could present more issues for public health and the economy in the future.
- Greater public health messaging could also encourage more people to take precautions against COVID (such as social distancing, face coverings etc.), which could lead to increased prevention of its spread.
- Participants felt greater emphasis should be put on preventative measures in government policy due to the potential health risks associated with long COVID.

Discussion group 2: early retirement

The Committee spoke with 8 participants who have experience of taking early retirement, or who work in recruitment. The following summary is intended to provide an overview of the main themes that emerged from the discussion.

Stress and health

- The stress of a workplace can be difficult to manage in older age when people are more likely to be at risk of, or experience, a health condition.
- Older workers in physically demanding roles, including the NHS, are less likely to be able to maintain their duties and more likely to experience long-term health issues, including joint, back and mental health issues.
- Employers need to consider adjusting physically demanding roles, so that the duties and responsibilities change gradually over time. This will help avoid a mass exodus of employees.
- Employers are not always willing to allow reasonable adjustments to accommodate a phased return-to-work.
- Some workplaces put employees under increased pressure during the pandemic to deliver services or meet financial targets. This led to a feeling of burnout.
- The pandemic also meant that some workplaces adopted new ways of working or health and safety arrangements that made the workplace a more stressful environment.
- Some workplaces also redeployed staff during the pandemic, which was stressful.
- Some participants felt that their contribution was not valued by their employer.

Lifestyle

- The pandemic, particularly lockdown periods when some people were not able to work, presented an opportunity for people to reevaluate their lifestyle and choose retirement.
- Retirement has been beneficial for some people's wellbeing, which can outweigh the financial benefits of remaining in employment.
- Retirement has enabled some people to engage in more physical activity, such as cycling, and engage in charitable work that they enjoy.

Caring responsibilities

- People with caring responsibilities for a relative or partner with a pre-existing health condition were concerned about the risk of contracting COVID-19 in the workplace and bringing it home.
- It was challenging for some people to maintain caring responsibilities and work during the pandemic, due to social care visits being reduced or stopping altogether.

Reasonable adjustments and flexible working

- There can be a stigma associated with retiring early, as some participants felt that their colleagues or employers thought that they were 'letting the side down' by choosing early retirement.
- Some public sector employers have not been responsive to requests from people who have retired early to return to work on reduced hours (e.g. 1 or 2 days per week).
- Some employers would rather that older workers retire than offer them flexible working arrangements, such as reduced hours. This is because older workers tend to be on higher salaries, which could be used to employ more junior staff for the same cost to the employer.

- It can be difficult to remain in the workplace on reduced hours in the same role due to practical issues, such as the scheduling of meetings and the length of projects.

Training

- It can be difficult to maintain skills required for a role because older workers are not prioritised or offered workplace training. Many of the costs associated with training must be met by the individual.

Workplace culture and presenteeism

- The pandemic has highlighted new ways of working, yet presenteeism and a traditional attitude to the workplace (such as 9.00AM-5.00PM working days, full-time working hours etc.) is a persistent feature of UK work culture.
- The pandemic has presented an opportunity to think about how employers can give their employees a fulfilled experience at work. Older workers are more attracted to working part-time. But employers, particularly SMEs and smaller organisations, need to develop skills in making their roles more attractive to their employees.
- Older workers are more attracted to working part-time.
- People who are happy are more productive, so this should be an incentive for employers to consider how to make their roles more attractive to employees.

Pension benefits

- Some older workers are members of generous pension schemes that are no longer available. This means they are able to retire early on a comfortable pension.
- The increase in the pension age encouraged some people who were able to retire early to do so.

Mentoring

- Older workers have often built-up considerable knowledge and expertise in their roles, which is an asset to their workplace. This includes skills in critical decision-making and managing risk. Older workers are also more likely to take risks based on their experience of handling risk. In the public sector, losing older workers can therefore have a considerable impact on the delivery of public services, such as the NHS.
- Some employers have matched-up older and younger workers to share their knowledge and experience. These schemes are not the same as job share arrangement, but are a form of mentorship. This can help create a collaborative workforce and provide a means of employing older workers in less physically demanding roles.

Cost-of-living crisis

- Many participants felt the cost-of-living crisis would not reverse their decision to take early retirement, despite some having a smaller pension or savings than they would otherwise have had if they had continued working for longer.
- The increased cost of living was a concern for people with caring responsibilities, who had higher energy bills.