health shield
The best of health



BRITAIN AT WORK REPORT 2026

The employer view on workplace wellbeing



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01. Executive summary

Workplace wellbeing is no longer a side issue for employers. Britain at Work 2026 shows it now sits much closer to the centre of workforce planning, day-to-day people management, and business performance. This is happening against a wider backdrop of economic inactivity, NHS access pressures and continued concern about UK productivity.

At the same time, employers are trying to meet rising expectations in a tougher environment. Costs are rising, teams are under pressure, and absence remains a real concern. While many employers feel confident in the support they offer, the data also points to some clear gaps between confidence and capability.

This report explores what employers told us about those pressures and priorities in 2026. It shows a picture that is both encouraging and demanding. Many employers believe they are supporting their people well. But many also recognise that some needs are harder to meet than others, especially when budgets are tight and employee needs are becoming more varied.

Key findings at a glance

- **The top HR challenges named by employers are increasing payroll costs (38%), employee engagement (35%), and resourcing and skills shortages (34%).**
  Cost and people pressures are clearly arriving together.
- **Employers surveyed estimate an average of 11 absence days per employee over the past 12 months.**
  It is a people issue, but it is also hard to separate from day-to-day business pressure.
- **Sickness or ill health accounts for the largest share of absence (38%), followed by mental health issues (22%), and family leave excluding maternity or paternity leave (19%).**
  Absence is not driven by one issue alone.
- **86% of employers surveyed say they are confident their employee health benefits meet employee needs.**
  But that confidence sits alongside clear areas of uncertainty.
- **More than 1 in 3 employers surveyed say they are least confident that their benefits support mental health issues (34%).**
  Long-term health conditions (33%), family and caring responsibilities (29%), and menopause (27%) are also particularly significant.
- **26% say they are not equipped to support neurodiverse employees, and 23% say the same about employees experiencing menopause.**
  Some of the wellbeing issues employers most need to respond to still appear to be among the hardest to support well.
- **Budget is the main barrier to offering benefits employees find valuable (45%).**
  Knowledge of employee needs (43%), diverse employee needs (40%), and low awareness or engagement with benefits (40%) are also important barriers.

Taken together, these findings show a workforce agenda that is growing in both range and importance. Employers are trying to do more for their people. But the survey also highlights where support still feels stretched, where confidence is uneven, and where better evidence may help employers make stronger decisions.

HR is being asked to carry more than ever before – and the survey findings suggest that workplace wellbeing is now one of the clearest examples of that growing responsibility.

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02. Introduction



Jacqui Carr,
CEO, Health Shield Friendly Society

I've seen first-hand how the role employers play in workplace wellbeing has changed significantly. For many businesses, supporting the health of their people is no longer only about policy, compliance or responding when someone is off work. It's now a much more important part of how organisations think about culture, engagement, retention, productivity and the everyday support their employees need.

Our Britain at Work employer survey reflects that change clearly. It shows that many employers are managing a wider range of workforce needs, often at a time when budgets are under pressure, costs are rising and expectations continue to shift.

What stands out to me in these findings is the balance employers are trying to strike. Many feel positive about the support they already offer, and that is encouraging. But there are also clear areas where businesses feel less confident, less well equipped, or limited by what they can afford to do.

One theme I find particularly important is the value of being proactive. There is a real opportunity for employers to get ahead of the drivers of absence, putting preventative measures in place rather than only responding once someone needs to take time away from work. This kind of forward-thinking approach benefits everyone, supporting employees before challenges escalate and helping employers manage the knock-on effects on their wider business. It's an area where the right employee health benefits can make a genuine difference.

This report brings those experiences together to build a fuller picture of workplace wellbeing today. It looks at the pressures employers are facing, the absence patterns they are seeing, the support gaps that stand out most, and the part employee health benefits can play in helping businesses respond in a practical and sustainable way.

I hope you find these insights useful and relevant, whether you're an HR leader, a benefits decision-maker, a business leader or a broker. Above all, I hope this report helps organisations feel better informed and better supported as they look at how best to care for their people.

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03. Survey methodology: The employer perspective

This report is based on quantitative research commissioned by Health Shield.

Methodology details

- Commissioned by: Health Shield
- Audience surveyed: 500 UK HR and Benefits decision-makers in companies with 100+ employees
- Sample size: 500
- Fieldwork dates: 7th April 2026 - 13th April 2026
- Location: UK
- Method: Survey research
- Research agency: Censuswide

Censuswide is a member of the Market Research Society (MRS) and the British Polling Council (BPC), and a signatory of the Global Data Quality Pledge and adheres to the MRS Code of Conduct and ESOMAR principles.

Interpretation and use of findings

All figures in this report are framed as survey findings from the research sample. They should be understood as findings from those surveyed.

Where subgroup differences are included, they are used to add context to the wider picture. They should not be read as proof of wider market behaviour beyond the survey.

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04. The changing role of HR

Britain at Work points to a clear shift in what employers now expect from HR. That shift is not happening in isolation. It sits alongside wider national concern about sickness absence, workforce participation and how employers support people to stay well and stay in work. **92% of employers surveyed agree that HR roles have moved from being focused on payroll and contracts to being a more complex employee culture and support role**. More than half of those surveyed strongly agree.

That is an important starting point for the rest of this report. It helps explain why so many of the challenges in workplace wellbeing now sit within a wider people agenda. Support for health, culture, engagement, inclusion, absence, and retention are now key responsibilities for HR and people teams.

We can see this shift reflected in national priorities. The government's recent *Keep Britain Working* initiative, for example, is something HR practitioners need to be aware of. The review highlights the urgent need to address rising sickness absence and ill health across the UK workforce. Among its recommendations are a move towards prevention, encouraging early and open sharing of health concerns, and designing workplaces that are inclusive for all. Initiatives like this show just how much HR teams are now expected to lead on health and wellbeing challenges in the workplace.

As a result, the people function is being asked to balance operational needs with human ones. Employers are not only managing contracts and processes. They are also being asked to build trust, respond to varied health needs, and support people through a changing world of work.

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05. The top challenges facing employers in 2026

The survey shows that employers are dealing with a broad spread of people challenges in 2026. No single issue stands alone. Cost, engagement, capability and support are all connected. Those pressures reflect a wider national picture. Employers are managing rising people costs, ongoing skills shortages, and continued pressure to do more with limited capacity.

Managing costs, engagement, and skills

When asked to name their top three HR challenges, employers most often selected:

- **Increasing costs associated with payroll – 38%**
- **Employee engagement – 35%**
- **Resourcing and skills shortages – 34%**

These are followed by:

- **Managing flexible or hybrid working – 31%**
- **Supporting mental health – 28%**
- **Budget constraints – 28%**

The findings suggest that employers are trying to hold together the basics of workforce management while also meeting more complex expectations around employee experience and support.

Business owners are more likely than HR respondents to cite payroll costs, employee engagement, and hybrid working as top challenges. There are also clear differences by business size. Employers with 250 to 499 employees are more likely to say payroll costs and employee engagement are challenges. Those with 500 to 999 employees are most likely to point to hybrid working. Businesses with 1,000 to 4,999 employees are more likely to mention mental health, diversity and inclusion, and long-term health conditions. The largest organisations, with more than 5,000 employees, are more likely to cite budget constraints.

The hurdles of hybrid working

Hybrid and flexible working remains one of the more common challenges in the survey, with 31% placing it among their top three HR issues.

Hybrid working affects more than location. It shapes connection, visibility, consistency of support, manager confidence, and how easy it is for employees to access help when they need it.

For some employers, hybrid working no longer looks like a short-term adjustment. It feels more like an ongoing people and culture challenge, sitting alongside wider concerns about engagement and wellbeing.

Practical pressures and people pressures are landing in the same place.

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06. The reality of absence and its main drivers

Absence remains one of the clearest ways workforce health shows up in business performance. Employers are watching absence closely. In a labour market shaped by skills gaps and productivity concerns, absence has become more than an HR metric. It is a business resilience issue.

Understanding the 11-day absence average

Employers surveyed estimate 11 days as the average number of absence days per employee over the past 12 months.

That figure is higher for some groups:

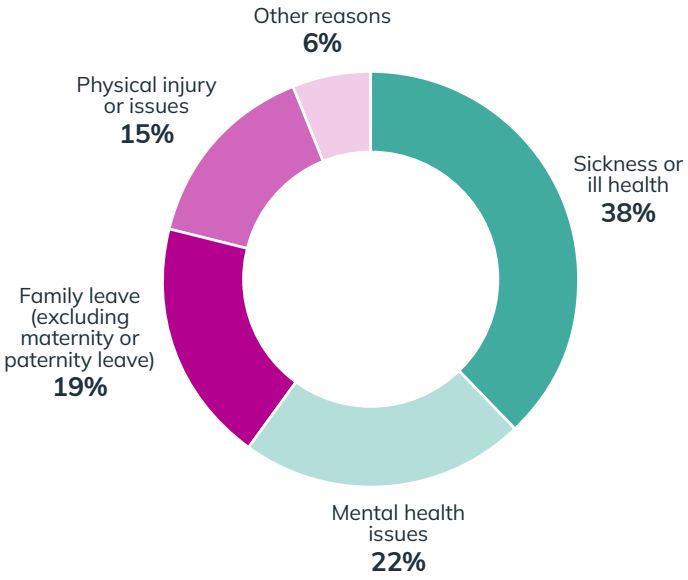
- **13.8 days among employers with 5,000+ employees**
- **12.4 days in the public sector**
- **10.5 days in the private sector**

The lowest average in the survey is among businesses with 100 to 249 employees, at 8.5 days.

What this tells us is absence is shaped by organisational context as well as individual health. Larger and public sector employers may be dealing with a more complex mix of workforce needs, support systems, and reporting pressures.

The main drivers of absence

Among employers who had seen absence in the past 12 months, the survey findings suggest the largest share of absence is linked to:



Mental health accounts for a higher share of absence in large organisations with 5,000 or more employees and in public sector organisations, where it reaches 25%.

This tells us that absence is not only about short-term illness. It also reflects wider life pressures, mental health needs, and caring responsibilities.

Recording and monitoring absence

Almost all employers surveyed say they record and monitor absence:

- **98%** record and monitor absence in some way
- **75%** use **HR systems**
- **54%** use **manager reporting**

This suggests employers are not short of absence data. A key challenge is making sense of that data and linking it to the right support.



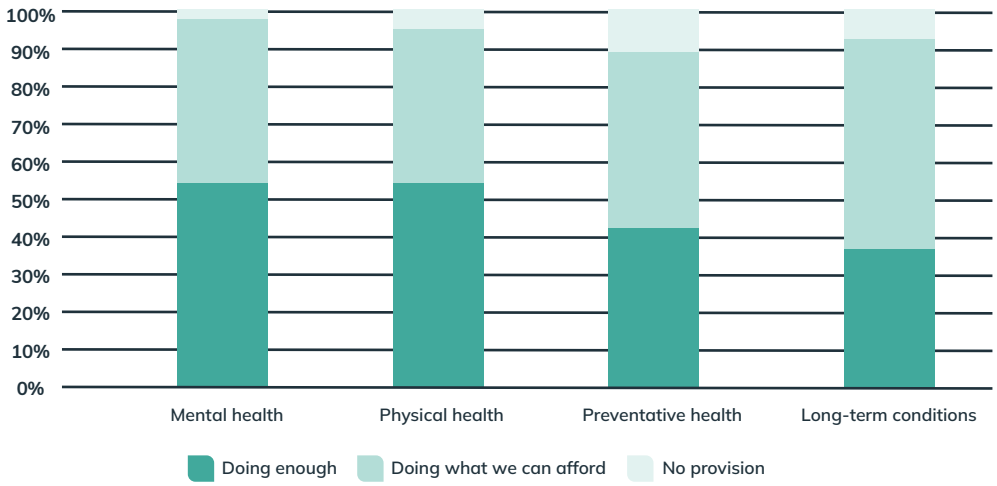
Key observation

The survey findings suggest absence is both measurable and multi-layered. Employers can often see the scale of absence, but the drivers behind it are broader than sickness alone.

The need for proactive care

One of the clearest themes in the survey is the gap between reactive support and more proactive health support.

Doing enough or doing what employers can afford



When asked whether they are “doing enough” or “doing what they can afford”, employers gave a mixed picture.

Just over half think they are doing enough to support:

- Physical health – 55%
- Mental health – 54%

That falls for:

- Preventative health - 44%
- Long-term health conditions - 40%

The findings suggest preventative health and long-term conditions are more likely to sit in the space between good intent and limited budget. Some employers also say they have no provision at all in certain areas:

- 10% for preventative health
- 7% for long-term health conditions
- 4% for physical health
- 3% for mental health

Among employers with 5,000 or more employees, 8% say they have no provision to support employee mental health.

Employers appear more confident in visible and established areas of support, such as physical and mental health, than in areas that depend on earlier intervention or longer-term planning

Preventative care and support for long-term conditions shape how people manage day to day, and whether problems are addressed early or left to deepen over time.

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07. Confidence and blindspots

Britain at Work reveals a broadly confident employer audience, though that confidence is not evenly spread across every area of support.

Confidence in current benefits

86% of employers surveyed say they are confident that their current employee health benefits genuinely meet employee needs. Within that, **35%** say they are very confident.

Confidence is lower in some groups:

- **80%** among companies with **100 to 249 employees**
- **80%** *in the* **public sector,** compared with **89%** in the private sector

Confidence is higher among employers that have implemented a **health cash plan**, where it reaches **94%.**

There are also differences by role. Those with the title Head of Employee Experience / Culture are least likely to say current benefits meet employee needs, at 70%, followed by HR consultants (74%) and Head of People / HR (83%). Chief People Officers are the most likely to feel confident, at 93%.

Support gaps still stand out

When employers were asked which areas they were least confident their employee benefits support, the strongest concern was:

- **Mental health – 34%**

This is followed by:

- **Long-term health conditions – 33%**
- **Family and caring responsibilities – 29%**
- **Menopause – 27%**

At the same time, 13% say there are no areas where they feel their benefits fall short.

The overall picture is mixed. Employers feel broadly positive about their benefits, but Britain at Work shows clear weak spots in mental health, long-term conditions, caring responsibilities and menopause.

Confidence in benefits is high. Confidence across every need is not.

Key observation

Many employers believe their benefits are broadly working. In contrast, the detail shows that some needs still feel less well served, especially where health and life pressures overlap.

The mental health support gap

Mental health appears as a pressure point for employers more than once in the survey – and that alone says something important.

It shows up as:

- a **top three HR challenge** for **28%** of employers
- a cause of absence, accounting for **22%** of time off
- the biggest issue that employers are least confident their benefits support, at **34%**
- an area where just over half, **54%**, say they are doing enough

This repeated pattern matters because it suggests mental health is not a side issue. It cuts across absence, support provision, benefit confidence, and wider workforce planning.



There is also a gap between how employers think employees feel and how employees report feeling, based on the employee-related findings in our *Britain at Work 2026 Report: An employee view on workplace wellbeing.* For example, **74% of employers think employees would be comfortable discussing mental health challenges, while 56% of employees say they would feel comfortable doing so.**

That difference does not tell the whole story on its own. But it does suggest some employers may be overestimating how easy it feels for employees to ask for help, instead choosing to suffer in silence and take time off. Mental health sits firmly in the national conversation, from pressure on NHS services to growing public concern about anxiety, stress and burnout. Britain at Work shows that employers are feeling that pressure not only in absence, but in where they feel least confident their benefits offer enough support.

Key observation

Mental health is one of the clearest pressure points in the survey findings. It is visible in absence, in confidence gaps, and in how safe employees may feel speaking up.

Caring for neurodiverse and menopausal employees

The survey findings suggest many employers believe they are equipped to support a wide range of workforce needs. However, there are two areas that stand out as being more difficult for employers to provision for: neurodiversity and menopause.

Neurodiversity

26% of employers surveyed say they are not equipped to support neurodiverse employees.

That makes neurodiversity one of the clearest capability gaps in the report. It may reflect a mix of factors, including limited confidence, a lack of line manager support, uncertainty about what good support looks like, or a mismatch between employee needs and current benefit structures.

Menopause

23% say they are not equipped to support employees experiencing menopause.

Menopause also appears in the benefits confidence data, with 27% saying it is one of the three areas they are least confident that their benefits provide support for.

These are not small or niche issues. They shape day-to-day working life, inclusion, and whether people feel properly supported. As workforce needs become more varied, many employers may need support that is more inclusive and easier to use in practice.

Neurodiversity and menopause are two of the areas where gaps in targeted support are most visible. They are also becoming harder for employers to ignore, as expectations rise and workforce needs become more varied. This comes at a time when awareness and diagnosis of neurodiversity is rising[1], and when employers are facing growing expectations to offer support that is more inclusive in practice, not just in policy.

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[1] Royal College of Nursing, Increasing our understanding of neurodiversity in adults, 2025. Available at: https://www.rcn.org.uk/congress/congress-events/increasing-our-understanding-of-neurodiversity-in-adults-2025

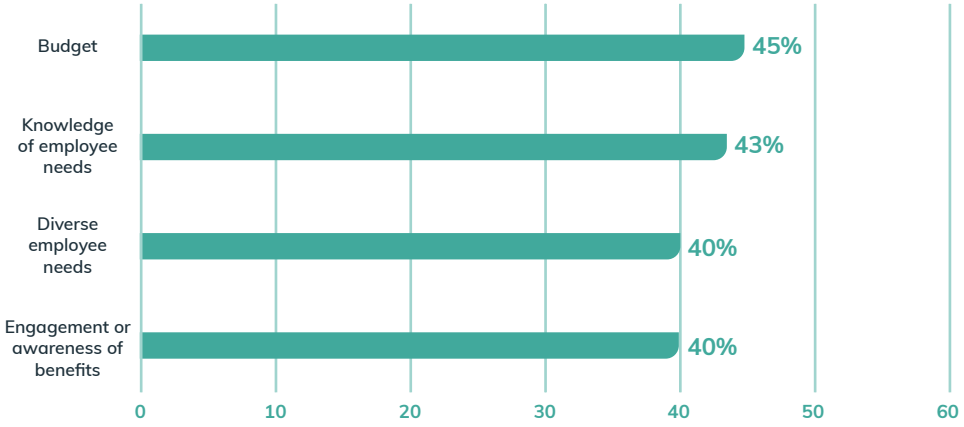


08. Barriers to better benefits

The survey does not suggest employers lack interest in supporting their people, although it does show there are some clear barriers that can get in the way. That challenge is becoming harder as budgets tighten and the cost of employment rises.[1] Employers are under pressure to show value, not simply add provision.

Helping with budget limits and knowledge gaps

When asked what barriers their organisation faces in providing benefits employees find valuable, employers most often selected:



The point here is not just affordability. Britain at Work shows that employers are also struggling with fit, relevance and engagement — understanding what people need, how those needs vary, and whether support is visible enough to be used.

In other words, value is not just about what is offered. It is also about fit, communication, and relevance.

Key observation

Budget is the biggest barrier in the survey, but not the only one. Employers are also looking for better visibility of employee need and better engagement with the support already in place. Preventative and proactive support can only work when employees know what is available, understand its relevance and feel confident using it early rather than waiting until problems escalate.

Everyday challenges: finances, burnout, and sleep

The survey findings suggest that employers are looking beyond traditional health categories when thinking about workforce wellbeing.

When asked which additional workforce health challenges are most relevant to their organisation, employers most often selected:

- **Financial wellbeing – 47%**
- **Burnout – 43%**
- **Sleep and fatigue – 39%**
- **Chronic conditions – 37%**

Other issues include:

- **Menopause and beyond – 26%**
- **Social isolation – 25%**
- **Substance misuse – 19%**

This broader list reflects the way health and wellbeing show up in everyday working life. Financial strain, poor sleep, burnout and chronic conditions all shape how people feel and function at work.

Many employers now appear to be looking at wellbeing through a wider lens – one that includes both access to health support and the pressures that shape how employees feel at work each day.

[1] CBI, Chief Economist's briefing: the rising cost of UK employment. Available at: https://www.cbi.org.uk/articles/chief-economist-s-briefing-the-rising-cost-of-uk-employment/



09. Proving the value of benefits

The survey suggests employers want health benefits to work hard for both employees and the organisation. But proving value remains a challenge in places.

When asked what matters most in a successful employee benefit, employers most often chose:

- **Positive employee feedback – 55%**
- **Reduced absence – 40%**
- **Cost effectiveness – 40%**
- **Supporting preventative care – 38%**
- **High utilisation or engagement – 36%**

Lower down the list are:

- **Easy to administer – 28%**
- **Return on investment evidence – 21%**

This is a useful reminder that success is not measured in one way. Employers want benefits to feel valuable to employees, but they also want them to be practical, used, and worth the spend.

What employers value most in health benefits



When asked what they want employee health benefits to deliver, employers place the greatest emphasis on practical workforce outcomes. Improved productivity is the most commonly cited expectation at 46%, followed by reduced absence at 43%, improved employee morale at 39%, improved retention at 36%, and improved engagement at 35%. Smaller proportions also point to faster return to work, attraction of talent and employer brand impact, but the strongest focus is clearly on benefits that support day-to-day workforce performance and stability.

A few findings appear from the comparison between expected and experienced outcomes:

- **Productivity and reduced absence show the clearest alignment.** Both are among the most important expected outcomes and are reported at exactly the same level in the experienced outcomes, suggesting these are the areas where benefits are most consistently seen to deliver value.
- **Engagement appears to outperform expectation.** While 35% of employers say they expect improved engagement, 42% say they have experienced it. This suggests benefits may be having a stronger effect on day-to-day connection and employee buy-in than some employers initially anticipate.

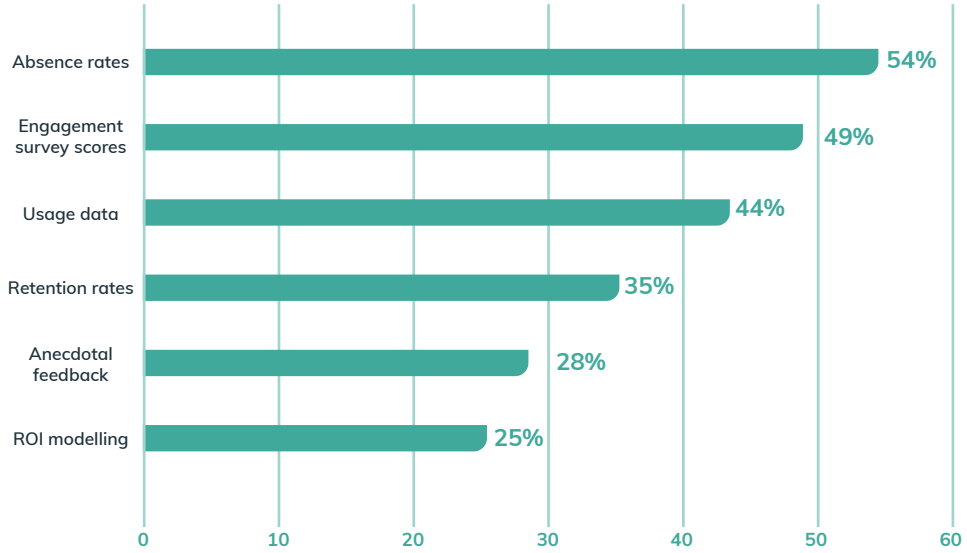


- **Faster return to work also exceeds expectation.** It is cited by 29% as an expected outcome, but 38% say they have experienced it, pointing to a potentially stronger practical impact once support is in place.
- **Morale and retention remain important, but appear slightly weaker in experience than in expectation.** That may indicate these outcomes take longer to develop, are harder to measure, or are influenced by a wider mix of factors beyond benefits alone.

Overall, expected and experienced outcomes are closely aligned. This suggests employers generally see employee health benefits as delivering against the outcomes they expect to receive, particularly where there is a clear link to workforce performance, attendance and engagement.

Proving the value of wellbeing investment

When asked how they currently measure the success of employee health benefits, employers most often selected:



71% say it is easy to measure the ROI of their employee benefits spend, though only **22%** say it is very easy.

The types of data that would most strengthen the case for investing in employee health benefits are:

- **Employee satisfaction scores – 43%**
- **Absence reduction data – 41%**
- **Employee usage statistics – 39%**
- **Real-time dashboard access – 33%**
- **Clear ROI modelling – 29%**

Some outcomes remain harder to evidence than others. Employers most often say the hardest outcomes to measure are:

- **Improved attraction of talent – 29%**
- **Employee morale – 29%**
- **Improved productivity – 27%**
- **Improved engagement – 25%**
- **Financial ROI – 25%**

Key observation

Employers are clear about the outcomes they want from wellbeing investment. Conversely, many are still looking for better ways to evidence value, especially beyond absence and usage data.

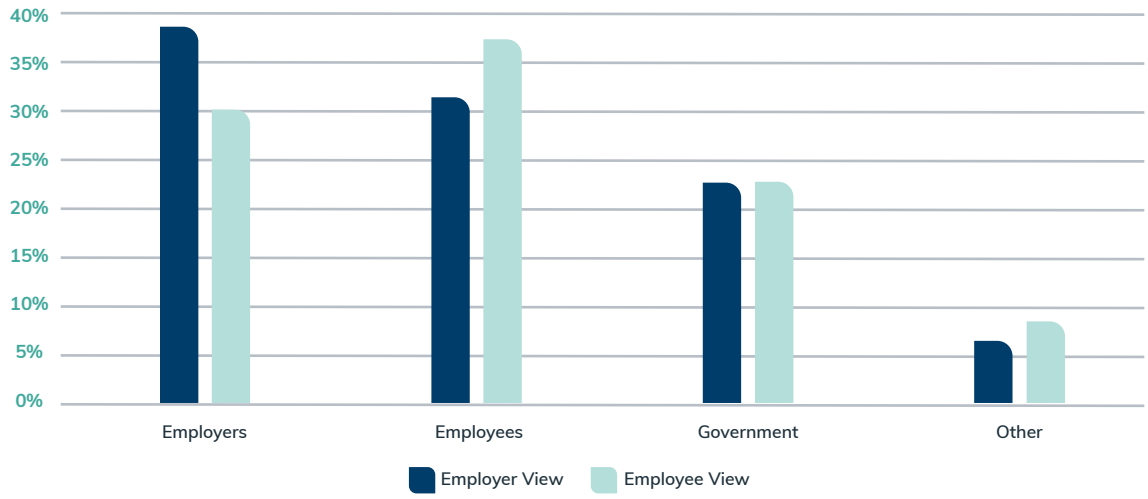


10. A shared responsibility for health

The survey findings suggest employers do not see workplace health as being the responsibility of one group alone.

39% of employers surveyed say employers should take the greatest share of responsibility for reducing absence and keeping people fit for work. But **32%** say employees should take the greatest share, and **23%** say the government should lead responsibility on the issue..

Who should lead on keeping employees fit for work



The employee figures in our Britain at Work Report 2026: The employee view on workplace wellbeing show practically the same balance of expected responsibility. Employees are more likely to place the greatest responsibility on themselves **(38%)** than on employers **(30%)**, while the share for government is the same **(23%).**

One thing is clear. Employers and employees both appear to see health at work as a shared responsibility, even if they are not aligned on where the biggest share should sit.

That can be a helpful framing for workplace wellbeing. Support matters, access matters, and culture matters - but so do employee confidence, behaviour, and the wider systems around work and health.

The role of a health cash plan

Britain at Work shows health cash plans are relatively well understood by employers and are seen as playing a broad role in workforce support.

Understanding and perception

83% of employers surveyed say they understand health cash plans, whilst understanding is lower among:

- **employers with 5,000+ employees – 65%**
- the **public sector – 70%,** compared with **88%** in the private sector

When asked what they see as the primary role of a health cash plan, employers most often selected:

- **Giving simple access to health and wellbeing services – 43%**
- **A financial support tool – 40%**
- **A financial wellbeing tool – 39%**
- **Preventing health conditions worsening – 32%**
- **A recruitment benefit – 30%**
- **A mental health support tool – 30%**
- **An absence prevention tool – 27%**

These findings suggest employers do not see health cash plans as serving one purpose only. They are seen as supporting access, affordability, prevention and everyday wellbeing.



Bridging the gap between budgets and needs

The survey also points to a useful link between health cash plans and employer confidence.

Among employers with a health cash plan:

- **94% are confident their benefits meet employee needs**
- they are more likely to say they have provision to support:
  - **mental health – 60%**
  - **physical health – 60%**
  - **preventative health – 56%**
  - **long-term health conditions – 49%**

71% of employers offering health cash plans say they offer them across the whole workforce.

The findings also suggest employers see health cash plans and PMI as supporting a similar range of care needs, with more than 9 in 10 saying both support primary care, musculoskeletal care, cancer and early detection, diagnostics, and mental health and neurodiversity. Employers in the survey see health cash plans as slightly better at supporting mental health, neurodiversity and elder care.

Taken together, the results suggest employers see health cash plans as a broad and practical form of support.

In the survey, health cash plans appear to sit where affordability, access and everyday wellbeing meet.



11. Case study: Bidfood

Industry: Food Service and Distribution
Size: Large Enterprise

Bidfood is one of the UK's leading foodservice providers, supplying caterers and businesses up and down the country. Kim Brown, Benefits and Wellbeing Manager, looks after employee benefits for the business, making sure people get the support they need at work. Health Shield has been Bidfood's health cash plan provider for several years, forming part of a wider benefits package designed around employees and their families.

Problem

Two challenges from our report show up clearly in this example. **Low awareness and engagement with benefits** was named as a barrier by 40% of employers, and **financial wellbeing** was flagged by 47% as one of the most pressing workforce health challenges. Even when good provision is in place, people don't always know what's available or feel confident using it. And with the cost-of-living crisis adding real strain to everyday life, that access matters more than ever.

Bidfood faced both challenges. With teams spread across depots nationwide, making support visible and easy to use was just as important as having it in place. Employees need to be aware of what's available, understand it, and feel confident using it.

As Kim explains:

> ***"There's always something happening in the world that can affect different people. Our role is to make sure support is there and accessible when it's right for them."***

Solution

The approach was practical and hands-on, with a focus on broader awareness and engagement.

- Kim runs **benefit awareness session**s across the country, walking people through what's available and how to access support
- Wallet cards give everyone a quick overview of their benefits at a glance
- A benefits platform and app sends regular reminder emails to keep support visible
- Benefit super users in the depots available day to day and answer questions on the spot
- Managers are encouraged to discuss benefits during inductions and one-to-ones
- Real employee stories are shared to show the benefits working in practice

The value of employee benefits often shows up most clearly in real situations. One Bidfood employee used the 24/7 GP service available through the benefits platform while on holiday, when his daughter got badly sunburnt, and was able to get advice on the right cream to help soothe her pain. Sharing stories like that internally helps people understand what support is available and feel more confident using it.

Remarks

Bidfood shows how HR has moved well beyond admin. Culture, employee support, wellbeing, and engagement now sit at the centre of how the business looks after its people.

Support lands better when it feels part of everyday life. By weaving benefits into conversations, communications, and trusted local voices, Bidfood has made wellbeing something people genuinely feel.

Kim puts it simply:

> ***"Health and wellbeing is not an add-on in our business, it's part of our culture now."***

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12. How brokers can help employers navigate wellbeing



By Emily Jones,
Head of Workplace Wellbeing at Broadstone Financial Solutions

Employers are no longer viewing wellbeing as a discrete or optional offering. Instead, it is increasingly embedded in workforce strategy, productivity, and risk management. The data shows that issues such as absence, engagement, and skills shortages are interconnected, meaning wellbeing is now expected to directly influence business outcomes. As a result, expectations have moved beyond simply "offering support" to demonstrating impact by reducing absence, improving engagement, and helping managers support diverse teams. Employers also expect solutions to address a broader range of needs, from mental health and long-term conditions to menopause and neurodiversity, reflecting a more inclusive and personalised view of the workforce.

In this context, employers are looking for partners who can simplify complexity and bring clarity. Intermediaries are increasingly expected to act as strategic guides rather than product finders, helping employers prioritise, integrate, and communicate their benefits effectively. There is a growing demand for joined-up solutions that align with real workforce challenges, rather than fragmented services.

Budgets remain the primary constraint, yet the range and depth of employee needs are expanding. Employers are being asked to do more with less, particularly in areas that are complex or sensitive, such as mental health or long-term conditions. Intermediaries are seeing clients forced into difficult trade-offs: maintaining core provision while trying to extend support into under-served areas. This can lead to uneven provision, where high-confidence areas are well covered, but emerging priorities remain under-supported. The challenge is not just financial, but also about prioritisation and perceived value.

While many employers believe they can measure return on investment, fewer have strong confidence in how to do so. This gap elevates the importance of robust usage data and meaningful employee feedback. Intermediaries play a key role in helping employers move beyond assumptions to evidence-based decisions. Understanding who is using benefits, where gaps exist, and how employees experience support is critical to refining provision and justifying spend. As needs diversify, aggregated data alone is no longer enough; employers increasingly need segmented insights to reflect different workforce groups.

Perhaps the most important role for intermediaries is to reduce, rather than add to, complexity. Employers are already stretched, and additional layers of provision or reporting can become counterproductive. Effective support means curating solutions, aligning services, and presenting clear, actionable insights.

Overall, these findings reinforce the intermediary's role as a translator between need and solution – helping employers navigate a growing wellbeing agenda with clarity, confidence, and focus.

About Emily

Emily Jones, Head of Workplace Wellbeing at Broadstone Financial Solutions, works with employers to shape benefits and wellbeing strategies that support both business goals and the needs of their people. She has extensive experience across employee benefits and workplace wellbeing, helping organisations build practical, people-focused approaches that improve the employee experience and strengthen workforce health.



13. Key takeaways



By Paul Shires,
Commercial Director, Health Shield

The findings in this report point to a clear message: workplace wellbeing now sits at the heart of the employer agenda.

Employers are supporting their people across a wider range of needs than before. They're managing cost pressures, absence, engagement, retention and more complex health needs, often all at once. That's a lot to balance.

There are positive signs in the data. Many employers feel confident in the benefits they offer, and believe those benefits are helping with productivity, morale and absence. I also see it as a positive sign that many are now looking at how to support people earlier, more fairly and more consistently.

The report flags some genuine pressure points too. Mental health, long-term conditions, menopause, neurodiversity, financial wellbeing and burnout all call for attention, as does the challenge of doing enough when budgets are tight, this is especially pertinent as workforce needs are becoming more varied and complex.

For employers, the task isn't simply to offer support. It's to offer support that feels relevant, reachable and valued by the people who need it. When support is easier to access and easier to understand, employers feel more confident in the value it brings.

That's why this conversation is an important one to be had by employers. Good workplace health support isn't only about what happens when someone is unwell. It's about helping people stay well, feel supported, and get help early when they need it, so they can remain at their best.

Three priorities for employers in 2026

The survey also points to a useful link between health cash plans and employer confidence.

1. Invest earlier, not later
Prevention is still where confidence drops. But waiting until issues escalate can increase absence, pressure managers, and make support feel reactive rather than useful.

2. Understand what employees actually need
Budget matters, but our research shows knowledge gaps matter too. Employers need a clearer view of where support feels relevant, where it is missing, and which groups may be less well served.

3. Measure usage, not just spend
Employers want benefits to show value. That means looking beyond budget and headline provision to engagement, take-up, employee feedback, and the outcomes support is actually helping to improve.

Britain at Work 2026 tells us that workplace wellbeing is no longer about offering support in principle. The challenge now is making that support timely, relevant and easy to use in practice.



Further reading

For insights from employees themselves, see the first part of the Britain at Work Report 2026 covering the employee view on workplace wellbeing.

The full employee view report is available to download at:
https://www.healthshield.co.uk/blog/resource/britain-at-work-report-2026/

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About Health Shield

Health Shield is a member-owned, not-for-profit, employee health benefits provider dedicated to helping people live healthy, happy lives. Established in 1877 to support railway workers, Health Shield has grown to serve over 480,000 Members and their families, as well as over 5,200 organisations across all industries. Guided by its mutual values, it prioritises people over profit, offering affordable and accessible health benefits to support its members through health cash plans, everyday healthcare coverage, and wellbeing tools.

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