

Fit for Work Service Policy

This policy explains the important role of the Fit for Work service in helping employees on long-term sickness absence to return to work. The Fit for Work Service is a Government-funded service that provides occupational health assessments on referral from an employee's GP or employer, where the employee is absent from work for at least four weeks.

More information on the service is available on the Fit for Work website or from HR.

Employees who can be referred to the Fit for Work service

Managers and/or HR can refer employees who:

- have been absent from work for at least four weeks;
- have a reasonable likelihood of being able to return to work within three months;
- have not undergone a Fit for Work assessment in the previous 12 months and have not received a Fit for Work return-to-work plan as a result of the previous referral; and
- consent to be referred.

It is not mandatory for Church Army (managers or HR) to refer an eligible employee to Fit for Work, nor is the employee obliged to agree to a referral.

The employee's consent must be obtained before the manager can make a referral to Fit for Work. A form to get the employee's consent for referral can be obtained from the HR department.

Managers cannot make a referral to Fit for Work if the employee's GP has already done so.

To be eligible for referral, the employee must be living in England, Wales or Scotland. Self-employed contractors cannot be referred to the Fit for Work Service.

Individuals who are ineligible for referral are able to access the Fit for Work advice line. Ineligible individuals can also contact the HR department or Church Army counselling service at any time for advice or assistance.

Process on referral to Fit for Work service

Either Church Army or the employee's GP can refer employees to the Fit for Work service. The process is as follows:

- The employee is referred to the service, either by our organisation (with the employee's prior consent) or the employee's GP.
- The Fit for Work service contacts the employee to conduct an occupational health assessment, with the employee assigned a case manager.

- The case manager contacts our organisation if necessary and with the employee's prior consent.
- The occupational health assessment results in a return-to-work plan, which can be shared with our organisation with the employee's prior consent.
- The case manager contacts the employee at an arranged point to check if the return-to-work plan is on course and again shortly after the return-to-work date.
- The case manager can make any changes to the return-to-work plan as a result of this contact, with the amended return-to-work plan available to our organisation with the employee's prior consent.
- The case manager can arrange any further occupational health assessments if necessary, for example if the employee has not returned to work as anticipated.
- The employee is discharged from the service if:
 - he/she has returned to work (including a phased return to work);
 - he/she no longer needs any assistance from the service; or
 - a return to work has not been possible after three months.

Contact from the Fit for Work service about an employee

This process means that it is possible that an employee's GP will refer him/her to the Fit for Work service without the organisation's knowledge and the first contact the organisation receives about that employee from the Fit for Work service is when contact is made by the employee's case manager.

It is very important that anyone within the organisation who is contacted by the Fit for Work service about an employee deals with the initial contact properly. In the first instance, the initial recipient of the call from the employee's case manager must contact the HR department, who must be involved as early as possible in the process. This is to allow individuals within the organisation with all the information about the employee's health and situation to assist the case manager.

The initial recipient of the call from the employee's case manager should not attempt to answer the case manager's queries without being in possession of all the relevant information about the employee's health and without having discussed the matter with HR.

Employee's consent to referral to Fit for Work service

Where a manager or the HR department wishes to refer an employee to the Fit for Work service, this should be done only with the employee's prior consent. The organisation will explain to the employee the reasons for the referral, and the referral should go ahead only once the employee has consented. The employee must not be coerced into agreeing, nor badly treated if he/she does not agree to the referral.

This consent should be obtained using our organisation's form for an employee to consent to a Fit for Work referral, which can be obtained from HR or on the intranet

The Fit for Work service will obtain the employee's consent before:

- the initial assessment takes place;
- each version of the return-to-work plan is shared with the GP and our organisation; and
- the Fit for Work service contacts the GP or our organisation, or any third party if this is necessary as part of the assessment.

Return-to-work plan

Once Church Army receives the return-to-work plan from the Fit for Work service, the plan will be implemented where possible. The first step towards this will be inviting the employee to attend a meeting to discuss a phased return to work following long-term sickness absence.

Further meetings will be held as necessary to discuss how the return-to-work plan is progressing. This should include a meeting following receipt of any amended return-to-work plan from the Fit for Work service.

Return-to-work plan status

The return-to-work plan has the same status as a fit note. GPs are not obliged to issue a fit note if the Fit for Work service issues a return-to-work plan.

This means that the manager/HR should accept a Fit for Work service return-to-work plan as evidence of sickness absence (for example, for statutory sick pay purposes) in the same way as a fit note issued by an employee's GP.

It is not mandatory for the organisation to implement any recommendations highlighted in a Fit for Work service return-to-work plan. However, it is the organisation's policy to follow such recommendations where possible, to give the employee on long-term sick leave the best chance of returning to, and staying at, work.

Queries

Employees who have any queries that are not answered above, have any other questions about the policy, or need advice about particular circumstances, should contact the HR department.

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