

381

Employer respondents

1.4m

Employees represented  
in the research

191

Employer respondents  
have more than  
1,000 employees

## Benefits performance: perception vs reality

### Where do you sit on the governance maturity scale?

REBA's *Benefits Design Research 2026*, in partnership with Howden, reveals a growing disconnect at the heart of benefits strategy. Drawing on insights from 381 organisations – including Boots UK, Centrica, Meta, Santander, Unilever and WSP UK – it shows that while employer confidence in benefits performance is high, only 13% have the governance, metrics and stakeholder alignment needed to truly measure it.

This gap between perception and evidence is leaving many organisations overestimating impact, weakening decision-making and risking misdirected investment.

As scrutiny on benefits spend intensifies, it's essential that employers have a clear view of where they sit on the governance maturity scale to accurately define next steps, deliver strong outcomes and prove return on investment.

This briefing highlights the key findings. Download the full report to see what effective governance looks like in practice, and access a roadmap to get you there.



### About the research

Using REBA's extensive membership, the research team conducted an online survey in January 2026 to produce the full 28-page *Benefits Design Research 2026*. REBA's robust methodology uncovered clear future trends and decision-making patterns among the 381 respondents, representing 1.4 million employees.

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the full report

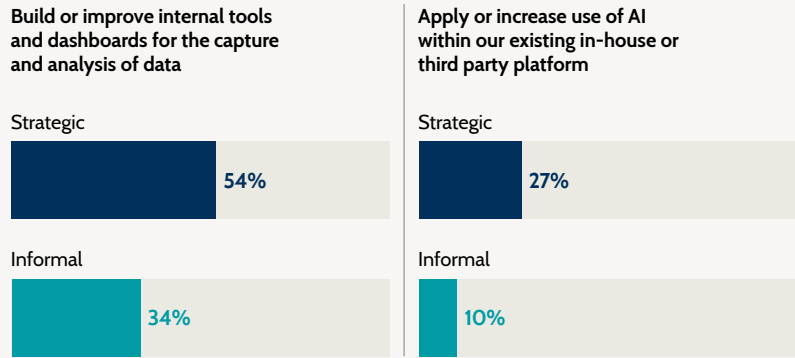


## Key findings

### Mature schemes prioritise digital tools and AI

Compared with informal reviewers, employers that review benefits performance in a strategic manner – with clear goals that are measured – are far more likely to prioritise improving internal digital tools and increasing use of artificial intelligence to improve benefits governance. Their priority over the next two years is to revamp tools and dashboards to capture and analyse data, and/or integrate AI into in-house or third-party platforms.

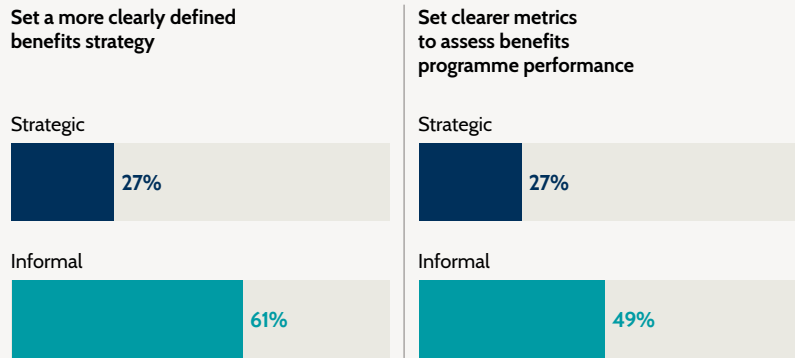
#### Top governance improvement priorities for strategic performance reviewers (N=327)



### Clearer strategy and metrics are priorities for informally reviewed schemes

Most employers that review the performance of benefits informally (largely relying on anecdotes, market trends and external data) say they need to prioritise setting a defined benefits strategy to improve benefits governance. This developing, emerging or informal group is also far more likely to state that they need to set out clearer metrics to assess benefits performance, getting the basics right before moving on.

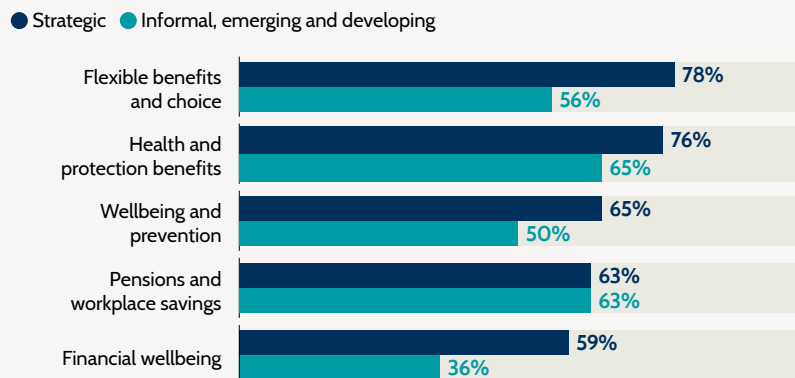
#### Top governance improvement priorities for informal performance reviewers (N=327)



### More robust measurement = better benefits performance

Strategic reviewers are consistently more likely to indicate that their benefits are performing at the desired level compared with those using developing, emerging or informal review practices. They back this up with reviewed and measured metrics, indicating stronger benefits governance. The less formal the review process, the less robustly an employer can claim that a programme is performing to its desired level, despite the positive assertions by respondents.

#### Benefits performing at the desired level based on how strategically employers review their offering (N=327)

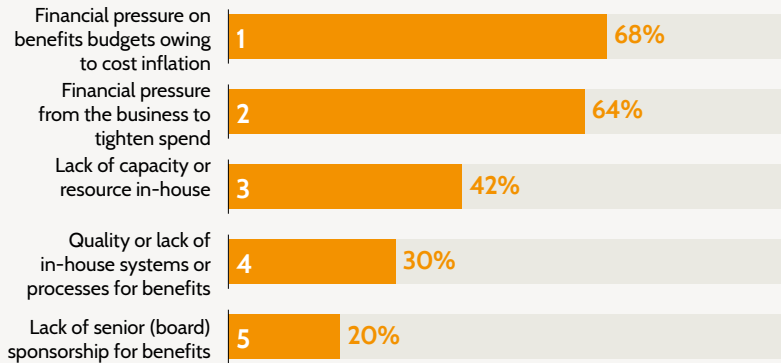


## Key findings

### Capacity and infrastructure hinder desired outcomes

Financial pressures are the dominant barriers preventing employers from achieving desired outcomes from their benefits programmes. Progress is also held back by limited in-house resources or capacity, as well as system and process constraints. Governance maturity isn't just about skill; it depends on the capacity and infrastructure to use data effectively. Many benefits teams need better systems, more bandwidth and specialist external support to improve.

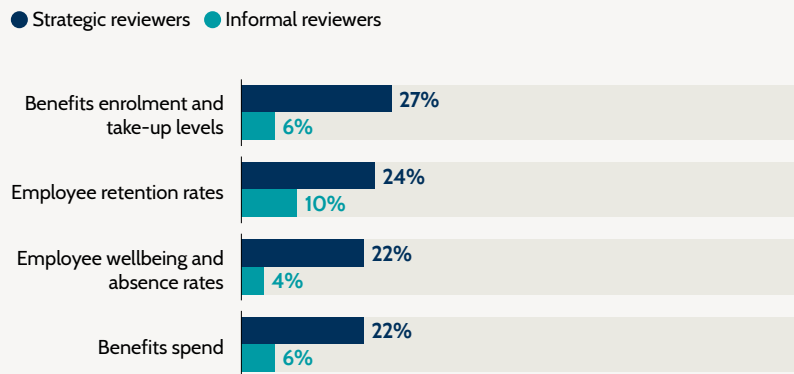
#### Top five barriers preventing desired outcomes for benefits programmes (N=336)



### Full data integration more likely for strategic reviewers

Strategic reviewers use more data points, notably enrolment and take-up levels, staff turnover, wellbeing and absence figures, as well as spend. Yet, overall, few employers collect enough meaningful data points to effectively govern programmes. Without the ability to bring sources together in a simple but meaningful way, it becomes almost impossible to draw correlations or understand performance. Employers need to see what 'good' looks like.

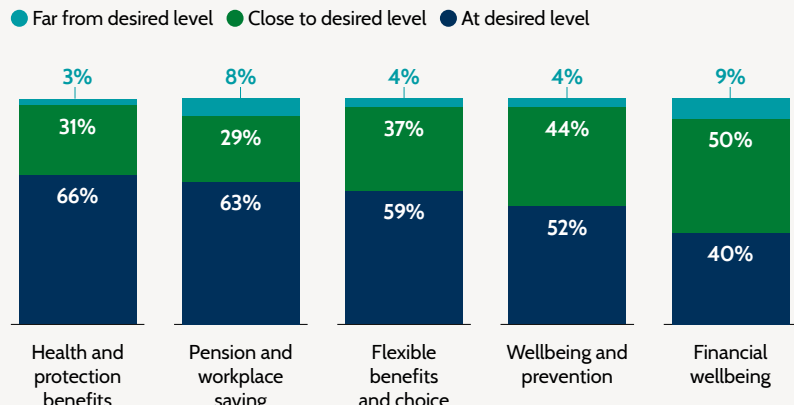
#### Data collected and integrated by strategic reviewers versus informal, emerging or developing reviewers (N=327)



### Confidence in benefits performance unsupported

Employers report that most components of their benefits package perform at, or close to, the desired level. Only a small minority indicate that performance (which supports or impacts agreed HR or business outcomes) falls below expectations. Given that, elsewhere in this research, findings show that relatively few employers formally review benefits performance, a perception bias has crept in. Confidence in performance is often unsupported.

#### How employers rate the performance of their benefits programmes (N=347)



# Recommended actions

From Howden Employee Benefits

## 1 Set a strategic approach to benefits management

It can sound 'over the top', but a strategy is simply a plan to achieve a set of measurable outcomes, through targeted activity. For almost all benefits programmes, that should mean seeking to improve engagement and productivity and understanding the influence your actions have on those results. There won't necessarily be 'right' answers (targets) when you first set out a strategy, but what you can and should do is seek to improve on those targets over time.

## 2 Baseline how you are performing with better data

Once you have a clear end-goal (strategy), seek to understand how you are performing against it – more than superficially. This typically requires gathering multiple datasets and establishing some kind of connection between them. Take engagement as a targeted outcome – what are your people's needs and expectations (survey), what do they take up (membership), what do they use (claims), what was their experience of it (satisfaction/service level agreements) and what influence did it have on the end-goal (retention)? Use this to understand where you are at.

## 3 Establish a clear, robust governance framework

Once you have your strategy and your baseline, then the next step is to establish an agreed approach to ongoing activity, management and measurement. This should cover the stakeholders you want involved in the review process (look beyond the reward and/or people team), the frequency with which you meet, and the data points you'll periodically review to help you understand where action is needed. Quality is better than quantity when it comes to establishing your approach.

## 4 Assess your internal capabilities

One of the major themes of the research was the barrier that internal capacity and tools have on the ability for reward teams to deliver results. As much as employers will want internal control and autonomy in the execution of their benefits strategy, it is important to reflect on what will hold you back from making better decisions and adopt an approach that means you won't fail for want of focus on maintaining the maturity and discipline of approach. Strategy, measurement, wider datasets and new tools are all available from the right partners. Use them.

## 5 Keep reviewing and adopt an 'engineer' mindset

Once your model is in place, the greatest challenge is sustaining it. The keys to avoiding understandable concerns, such as survey fatigue or 'analysis paralysis', are twofold. First, consistency is vital – don't stop gathering data or meeting just because "everything seems okay" or priorities change. Second, adopt an 'engineer mindset' – don't do things for the sake of it; fix problems, which you should be able to see (and ideally quantify) in the data. Even then, don't jump straight to a solution – hypothesise and look for alternatives (including doing nothing).

### About Howden

Today's diverse workforce has different motivations and lifestyles; there's no one-size-fits-all solution. A good benefits strategy begins by balancing the needs of the business, its people, and its budget. It's about digging into the detail and creating a plan that suits your aspirations, then finding the most cost-effective ways to achieve them.

At Howden, we're energising the world of employee benefits. We offer a different level of service, because we're a different kind of business. With employee ownership at our heart, our people are personally invested in delivering exceptional results, ensuring that your success is our success.

**Find out how, together, we can transform your employee benefits strategy.**



### About REBA

The Reward & Employee Benefits Association (REBA) is a thriving community of HR professionals dedicated to pursuing best practice in reward and benefits. Synonymous with excellence, REBA informs and empowers its members to grow their networks, advance their knowledge, source and connect with market-leading vendors, and be prepared for what's coming over the horizon.

REBA's research taps into its diverse network of 4,700+ members and 27,000+ HR contacts to provide objective insights into the reward, benefits and people risk strategies that a broad range of organisations are implementing throughout the UK and internationally.



Download the full report

