

PURSUING BEST PRACTICE

# The health divide: Access and affordability of employer-funded health benefits



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### Health inequality is a workforce risk – let's try to close the gap



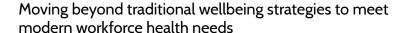
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in Jo Gallacher

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Employees in the same organisation can have completely different access to care, support and outcomes, depending on their role, location or salary. It's a gap that's growing, and, for employers, it's increasingly difficult to ignore.

This is not just a concern for HR but a strategic issue for reward leaders tasked with managing workforce risk, cost and equity. As this report shows, the UK's fragmented health system, combined with inconsistent employer benefit design, is leaving too many employees behind.

The traditional approach to health benefits, often built around private medical insurance for senior staff, is no longer fit for purpose. Organisations are now expected to provide broader, more inclusive support that reflects the reality of stretched public services, rising employee expectations and economic uncertainty.

Yet many are navigating this shift without a clear view of what's working, where gaps exist or how different parts of the workforce are engaging with the support on offer.

Health benefits have expanded organically, and, despite good intentions, can often overlap with other benefits and services, offering multiple access points to care – confusing the very employees they set out to help. This lack of coherence doesn't just affect employee experience but also has a negative impact on overall cost.

If those with the greatest need can't or don't use what's provided, organisations are left exposed to avoidable people risk in the form of absence, presenteeism and attrition.

The solution lies in rethinking how value is defined and delivered. Leading employers are already moving towards more modular, data-led approaches. This includes combining cash-plans with PMI to manage rising costs, introducing digital services that speed access and support remote or in-the-field workers, and simplifying healthcare journeys so that employees know what to use and when.

Success cannot be measured purely by uptake or spend. Instead, it requires tracking meaningful outcomes: early intervention, faster support and better health at work.

As the pressure on public services continues and health disparities remain, employer health strategies will carry more weight while facing greater scrutiny. Reward leaders have a unique opportunity to drive this agenda with clarity and purpose. That means moving beyond coverage and cost, and asking a more important question – is our health strategy genuinely improving the lives of our people?



## From fragmented to future-ready employer-funded health benefits



**David Bourne** 

Market development leader Mercer Marsh Benefits





Reshaping how health benefits are delivered and experienced... isn't a challenge to defer



### Building a smarter health benefits system starts with a conversation around access and affordability

For reward professionals, the challenge of providing employer-funded health benefits is changing. While offering a competitive package will always be important, employers also need to ensure that access to care is fair, affordable and economically sustainable for businesses.

Economic pressures, workforce expectations, evolving health requirements and difficulties accessing care at the point of need are exposing gaps in current provision. At the same time, benefits budgets are under greater scrutiny. The result is growing pressure to do more with the same, or even less.

This report explores how forward-thinking organisations are responding. The most urgent priority is often clarity: understanding what is already in place.

Many employers still operate with fragmented provision spread across multiple providers, departments or business units. A full inventory is the first step toward identifying duplication, inefficiencies and missed opportunities.

The future of health benefits isn't about offering the same to everyone but ensuring that all employees, regardless of role or location, can easily access timely, effective support. This might mean embedding services into existing platforms, offering virtual care, or leveraging underused features in current insurance or occupational health arrangements.

To achieve this, employers need to start by understanding the different contexts in which their people work. A frontline worker in a distribution centre has different access needs than a remote software developer or a hybrid head-office employee. Mapping these employee experiences can highlight where health and wellbeing support is missing or inaccessible and where existing resources can be better used.

Employees are often juggling demanding roles and personal responsibilities, so benefits need to be easy to find, simple to use and relevant to individual needs. That means shifting from broad awareness campaigns to more targeted, personalised messaging.

What unites organisations leading in this space is a mindset shift – from viewing health benefits as a static offering to managing them as a strategic system that can be audited, streamlined and shaped to deliver better outcomes for people and businesses in an affordable and sustainable way.

Reward leaders have a pivotal role to play in reshaping how health benefits are delivered and experienced. This isn't a challenge to defer to next year's renewal cycle – the pressures around access, equity and cost are already here. The opportunity to lead is now.



#### Ensuring fairness, relevance and value in modern health and wellbeing strategies

In the UK, where your postcode can determine how long you live, the issue of health inequality is no longer a quiet concern but an immediate threat for society, government and employers. From postcode lotteries in NHS waiting times to growing rates of mental ill-health among younger generations, the UK's health divide is widening. Against this backdrop, a new conversation is emerging in the workplace – what responsibility do employers have when it comes to the health of their people?

Once seen as a discretionary perk for leaders, employer-funded health benefits are now at the heart of both reward and broader business discussions around equity, inclusion and the social role of business. Many employers are assessing how they can expand their provision to make their health benefits accessible to all, and not just to those at the top of an organisation, who are more likely to be able to afford private medical care on a self-pay basis.

This shift, described as the democratisation of health benefits, signals a move away from one-size-fits-all coverage and towards more personalised, data-driven and digitally enabled approaches.

#### Rethinking strategies

Democratisation is not just about broadening access to health provision but also encourages employers to rethink what fairness, relevance and value look like in modern employee health and wellbeing strategies.

The call for greater access to healthcare provision is nothing new, and neither are the health inequalities within the UK. Just one example is data from the UK Health Security Agency's *Health Inequalities in Health Protection* report (2025), which found that people living in the 20% most deprived areas in England are almost twice as likely to be admitted to hospital as a result of infectious diseases than the least deprived.

Life expectancies and access to care are often dependent on geography, as explored in REBA's 2024 report, *Societal Health Shifts: The Impact on Workplace Health Strategy*.

Covid-19 widened health inequalities in England by disproportionately affecting those already experiencing health inequalities, such as those living in the most deprived areas and people from ethnic minority backgrounds, according to the King's Fund. It found that, as a result of the pandemic, life expectancy in England fell in 2020 for the first time since 2000.

#### Reducing the burden on the state

In terms of solving these issues, much attention is focused on the NHS. However, there is great potential for employers to reduce long-term sickness and the burden on state-funded healthcare. For many employers, the question is not whether to offer health support but how to do so affordably and sustainably. Business conditions remain tough, and supply chain issues, inflationary pressures and economic uncertainty are driving caution around discretionary spending. Health benefits fall into this grey area – valued by both employees and employers, but sometimes vulnerable when budgets are tight.

Still, the wider context of health concerns in the UK has meant that health benefits have transitioned from a 'perk' offered to executives to a fundamental component of workforce planning. Employers want to offer comprehensive and relevant benefits to attract and retain top talent while managing employee absence rates. Many employers understand the value of equity and consistency, but need guidance on how to deliver that without overspending or under-serving.

The move toward democratisation of health is therefore about extending access while finding the right solution for the right people at the right time.

#### How digital health tools can improve health outcomes for employees

Digital health tools are fast becoming a cornerstone of employer-funded health benefits. They offer lower costs, faster access and greater convenience, and provide a way to democratise healthcare offerings without the overhead of traditional in-person services.

For employers, the appeal is obvious. Virtual GP services, mental health apps, teletherapy and wellness platforms mean that employers can extend their healthcare provision more than ever – and with full flexibility for the employee. Reduced waiting times, 24/7 availability and the ability to scale quickly are all major benefits, particularly when trying to reach a dispersed or hybrid workforce.

However, not all digital tools provide the analysis and insights needed for employers to identify people and business risks and redefine their health strategies. Mercer Marsh Benefits' *Health on Demand* report (2025) found that just under two-thirds of employers use digital platforms to gather anonymised health data.

#### Digital ambitions

Employers are, however, looking at ways to improve their data collection from digital tools. REBA's *Future of Health and Protection* (2025) research found that more than nine in 10 respondents (94%) in the UK and Ireland said they want to improve the level of sophistication of their workforce health analysis.

Digital health tools that can collect data can provide invaluable intelligence about health trends within the employee base – which conditions are most prevalent, where people risks are emerging, and how usage patterns shift over time. This allows for more proactive, strategic decision-making, helping employers allocate resources more effectively and refine their offerings in line with the genuine needs of their workforce.

But there are still critical gaps in personalisation. Most pathways are designed either to direct users to a predefined outcome, such as booking an appointment, or to streamline access at the point of need. What's missing are tools that help individuals to understand their unique health risks and the specific actions they can take to manage them.

This is where the frontier of digital health is heading, but it is also where trust issues emerge. Employees may be wary of employer-provided health apps if they believe their data is being used to profile or monitor them. The CIPD's *Health and Wellbeing at Work* survey (2023) found that a third (34%) of UK employees were concerned that digital health tools may be misused for monitoring or that their private health information could affect job security. The right balance between support and data collection is crucial. Transparency, choice and privacy protections must be built in and communicated if any tool is to be embraced.

There is also a risk that, without trusted tools, employees may turn to unregulated sources such as social media for advice. The consequences of misinformation can be severe, both for individual wellbeing and workplace productivity. By offering credible, well designed digital support, employers can act as a counterweight to this trend.

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Of employers use digital platforms to gather anonymised health data

Mercer Marsh Benefits' Health on Demand report (2025)

#### What's affected by the UK's health postcode lottery?

The availability of specific treatments, such as cancer drugs, fertility treatments and mental health services, can differ across Integrated Care Systems or Clinical Commissioning Groups.

People in deprived areas are less likely to be invited to – or attend – cancer screenings, with vaccination uptake also differing by postcode, the King's Fund finds.

NHS waiting times for GP appointments, diagnostics, elective surgeries and A&E services

differ by region. The North East and Yorkshire often report shorter waits than London or parts of the South West. Yet rural areas may face longer delays as a result of staff shortages and travel distances.

Access to mental health support can be inconsistent. Some regions have robust early intervention and Child and Adolescent Mental Health Services to prevent more complex conditions from arising in adulthood, while other regions have long waits or minimal services.

# CityFibre: ensuring equitable healthcare support from the outset



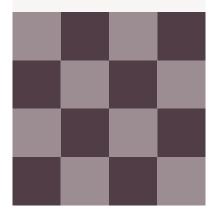
Vicki Twigg

Senior reward manager CityFibre





Usage data and feedback play a key role in our health benefits design



A focus on cohesion and clarity of healthcare pathways will improve navigation of services

CityFibre is a UK-based telecommunications infrastructure provider that has grown over the past decade, expanding from 30 to around 1,500 employees today.

We have developed a comprehensive health benefits strategy aimed at promoting employee wellbeing and addressing systemic healthcare gaps, especially amid mounting pressures on the NHS.

From the outset, CityFibre's leadership committed to a philosophy of equitable healthcare support. The company's chief executive, Greg Mesch, champions a guiding principle that "if you take care of yourself, work will take care of you". This ethos is evident in the structure of our benefits. All employees, regardless of job level, receive fully funded single-cover private medical insurance (PMI). This is complemented by a cash-plan, which we introduced in January 2025 as a strategic response to surging PMI costs where renewal premiums had been forecast to rise by more than 70%.

To mitigate these costs, we increased the PMI excess and allowed the cash-plan to offset it, therefore avoiding passing cost burdens to staff while simultaneously broadening access to healthcare support. Employees were given the option to remain in PMI or switch solely to the cash-plan. The vast majority – nearly 1,200 out of 1,500 – chose to retain PMI access.

#### **Everyday** needs

The cash-plan offers reimbursements for everyday healthcare needs such as dental treatment, physiotherapy and optical care. We also offer voluntary benefits, such as flexible dental and critical illness insurance.

Our biggest health-related costs stem from cancer claims. Though the number of claims is limited, the financial impact can be significant. The business uses its group income protection and PMI provisions proactively to support affected employees through diagnosis and their treatment.

More broadly, mental health support is important to the business. This is managed through a combination of line-manager training, mental health first-aiders, and early HR interventions and timely support.

Usage data and feedback play a key role in our health benefits design. We are actively exploring ways to respond to growing demand for neurodiversity support, including ADHD and autism assessments.

Looking ahead, CityFibre is focused on improving the cohesion and clarity of its healthcare pathways. Although multiple services are available via virtual GPs, PMI and income protection providers, employees can sometimes struggle to navigate the best route for their needs. We are looking to create decision guides, clarifying usage and ensuring that employees access the most appropriate and cost-effective services first.



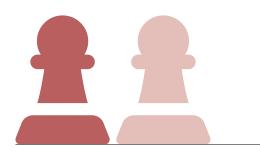
#### Scalable, accessible support that meets employees at their point of need

PMI has traditionally been the cornerstone of employer-funded healthcare in the UK. Yet PMI typically excludes chronic or, sometimes, pre-existing conditions, leaving a gap between need and coverage. This can result in prolonged employee absence or presenteeism, negatively affecting productivity and health and wellbeing.

Growing availability of digital health solutions outside traditional insurance packages, as explored on page 5, is beginning to fill that void, meeting employees at their point of need and offering scalable, accessible support. But this shift also means that employees need to understand, navigate and engage with these tools and services to reap the benefits.

#### Accessibility of integrated pathways

The development of new technologies and virtual care methods has made it possible to provide health



Of employer respondents said that fast access to clinical reviews with consultants and specialists was having a high or medium impact on workforce health

REBA's Future of Health and Protection Research 2025

benefits without geographical constraints, making healthcare more accessible and effective for all types of employees.

REBA's Future of Health and Protection Research 2025 found that more than four in five respondents (82%) said that fast access to clinical reviews with consultants and specialists was having either a high or medium impact on the health of their workforce.

#### Cost-effective alternatives

Employees can now access diagnostics, prescriptions and even some treatments through their letterbox at the click of a button. These technologies provide a cost-effective alternative by offering healthcare services outside the traditional PMI model and therefore keeping claims costs low.

Although on-site screenings and health interventions are effective, some hybrid and remote workers may be difficult to reach. Reward professionals therefore will need to work closely with advisers and health providers to map employee locations, understand demographic needs and assess travel accessibility to inform more targeted benefit design. This data-driven approach enables employers to focus investment where it delivers the most value by supporting the creation of tailored clinical pathways that are not only cost-effective but also convenient and equitable.

#### Navigating the overlap in health benefits

With some employers opting to unbundle certain health packages – such as musculoskeletal or mental health support – from their standard health insurance, pooling or captive, it is important to recognise that the increasing breadth of benefit offerings can also introduce confusion, inconsistency and a lack of single-source management information.

As employers strive to provide comprehensive support, the proliferation of services from multiple providers often results in overlapping, disconnected options that create friction rather than clarity for employees. For example, they may have access to several entry points into care, such as a digital GP helpline through their medical insurer, employee assistance programme or a standalone mental health app, all operating in silos.

While each of these tools provides value in isolation, they can deliver very different experiences across the employee population, particularly when individuals with similar needs engage with different services and receive inconsistent guidance or outcomes. From the employee's perspective, this patchwork can feel disorienting. The decision about where to start and whether one service is preferable to another is not always obvious.

Two employees with the same issues could have markedly different treatment journeys, simply because they took a different route into the system. This divergence may not affect clinical outcomes in every case, but it could affect the perceived quality and trustworthiness of the employer health provision.



#### Vikki Gledhill

Head of reward and pensions Yorkshire Water



To really engage all employees, particularly those who are harder to reach – such as operational workers out at a site or in the field – you need to start with a multifaceted communications approach and market your benefits in the right way. It is vitally important to use multiple communication channels, including a combination of electronic, face-to-face, site noticeboards, competitions, employee stories, health and wellbeing benefit champions, mailings to home addresses and mobile apps. There is no one-size-fits-all approach to engagement around benefits.

### How to build an inclusive, future-focused health strategy



#### Use data to drive decision-making

Don't assume – analyse utilisation rates, absence data, employee assistance programme trends and claims to understand where the real issues lie. If you don't already collect health data, work with providers who can supply anonymised, aggregated insight across your workforce.



#### Map benefits to workforce segments

Segment your population (by age, role, location, life stage) and tailor benefits accordingly.



#### Focus on accessibility and equity

Make sure benefits are easy to understand and access – particularly for lower-income or frontline staff who may not be desk-based.



#### Be transparent about data use

If you are using digital tools that gather health insights, clearly communicate how that data will and won't be used.



#### Look for scalable, low-cost wins

Virtual GP services and low-barrier health screenings can offer high impact at relatively low cost, plus offer greater access for remote, hybrid and deskless workers.



#### Build the business case

Link wellbeing outcomes to productivity, absence, retention, people risks and employer brand metrics.

CHAPTER 3: COMMUNICATION AND ENGAGEMENT





#### Helping employees to navigate the range of services on offer

Unbundling health services from insurance or pooling arrangements, or insurers offering different access points dependent on health need, may cause confusion around which path employees should take when accessing health support. But when employers clearly explain these changes and guide people to the right care at the right time, it can actually lead to better outcomes. Clear, consistent pathways can reduce confusion and build trust by making support easier to access when it matters most.

Reward professionals and advisers need to work together to map preferred pathways depending on needs, identify potential duplications and ensure that employees aren't being left to navigate a confusing maze of different service points between insurer, occupational health service and employee benefit. However, it's crucial to design benefits pathways with a clear focus on how services connect and support the overall employee experience. Opting for the cheapest or standalone solutions can result in a fragmented journey, where employees must repeat information or have duplicate assessments owing to poor integration.

This also means being intentional about how digital tools are introduced and positioned. For example, promoting a digital GP service should be accompanied by information about when and why it should be used, how it compares with other options available, and what to expect in terms of cost, availability and follow-up care. Clear, consistent messaging can go a long way in aligning employee expectations and experiences.

#### The future role for employers

The NHS continues to face well documented pressures, and the reality is that it will not be able to meet all needs in the foreseeable future. In this context, the role of the employer is evolving from a provider of benefits to an active facilitator of health.

Employees expect meaningful health and wellbeing support from their employers – particularly younger generations, who are more likely to experience stress, anxiety or burnout and are more willing to leave roles that don't prioritise wellbeing.

A study conducted by the Oxford Longevity Project in 2024 found that a quarter (27%) of all British adults would consider lower pay in return for better health and wellbeing services at work. This increases to one in three Gen Z and millennial employees.

Employees do not expect their employer to replace the NHS or become healthcare institutions themselves. However, employers can play a critical role when it comes to signposting, enabling and supporting healthcare provisions.

#### **Tailored solutions**

By offering benefits that are accessible, equitable and tailored to specific workforce demographics, employers can help to bridge some of the gaps in the public system. This includes not just treatment options but also prevention, education and guidance.

Ultimately, it's about helping employees live healthier lives – physically, mentally and emotionally. And the best way to do this is not through one-size-fits-all programmes but with strategies that recognise the diversity and individuality of the modern workforce.

27%

Of British adults would consider lower pay in return for better workplace health and wellbeing services

Oxford Longevity Project survey, conducted in 2024

## Health and wellbeing at work: why it's time to join the dots



#### **Christopher Rocks**

Lead economist and head of secretariat Commission for Healthier Working Lives, The Health Foundation





Only 18% of employers felt 'very effective' at addressing workforce health challenges



Health initiative spend is rising, but this investment is not always evidence-backed or part of a coherent plan

For many employers, the cost of doing business has never felt higher. This makes it more important to invest effectively in workforce health. The right support helps people stay in work, reduces avoidable absence and improves team performance. Yet many organisations still lack the time or capacity to understand what their workforce really needs.

Larger employers, in particular, are spending more on health initiatives, but they are not always part of a coherent plan or linked to evidence. In a survey for the Health Foundation's Commission for Healthier Working Lives, more than half of employers reported increasing their investment last year, but only 18% felt 'very effective' at addressing workforce health challenges.

#### From doing more to doing better

Too often, health initiatives are introduced in isolation, without a clear strategy. This can make support less effective and widen health inequalities, especially if help is not available or suitable for specific cohorts, such as frontline workers who often have less access to wellbeing resources than office-based colleagues.

Engagement is another barrier. Even with good intentions, it can be difficult to reach the employees who would benefit most. Some staff are reluctant to seek help, or unsure what is available. Fear of getting it wrong can hold people back from starting conversations or taking simple action.

Improving health at work starts with the basics. Communicate clearly what is available and listen to what is useful. Make sure that support is accessible and matches the realities of different roles. Line managers are central to whether support is used, but they need the right training, policies and systems to do this well. Our research found that nearly half of employers say they rely on line managers to manage health-related absence and workplace adjustments, yet only one in four have had specific training.

#### Start with what works

We have heard from employers taking a more strategic approach – joining up their offers and focusing on things that shape day-to-day experience, such as how work is structured, how flexible it is and how people are managed. Some are introducing flexibilities in roles that have been hard to change, such as more local rostering in frontline retail or health, with early signs that this can help with retention and wellbeing. In contrast, isolated wellbeing initiatives tend to under-deliver.

Employers also need to be confident that they are getting value for money and that their investment meets the needs of their workforce. Smart use of data can help ensure that workforce health strategies reflect the needs of different sectors and settings and help direct resources.

Employers cannot solve wider health inequalities alone. But by focusing on what works, using data and acting early, they can make a real difference – both for their workforce and society.

#### Recommended actions

#### Mercer Marsh Benefits



#### Understand what you already have

The constant drive for innovation has resulted in a range of products, and providers arriving at the same conclusion. More is more. However, these evolutions and enhancements have resulted in duplication and direct competition.

To ensure that your benefits programme delivers the best value for money, organisations need to understand all products in detail to maximise the value within.

MMB helps clients to achieve this by breaking down the component parts of their benefit provision, identifying areas of duplication, and identifying where an alternative pathway may achieve the same result without incurring extra cost or affecting the premiums paid.

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#### Make health personal

The best way to ensure that you are personalising your benefits offering is to understand your needs.

This is especially true when it comes to the preventative aspect of a healthcare programme. You need to understand why your employees are claiming, or are absent from work, as well as their potential risks and the propensity for future claims.

Advancements in the ability of AI to predict and project the future, when coupled with employee demographic data, will help to create targeted programmes to address your current and future health risks.

3

#### Help your employees to be better informed

For employees, who will typically make use of their benefits at a time of crisis or concern, being able to seamlessly navigate and arrive at the most appropriate solution can be complicated. This is especially true when you consider the evolutions and enhancements spoken about earlier. Education, awareness and engagement are key, especially as, in many cases, we direct employees to their line manager as the first line of defence.

Although some employees will be informed about their benefits programme, most won't know about all available solutions and interventions – nor will they know the best or most appropriate pathway. By increasing education, awareness and engagement, better health outcomes can be achieved, reducing the health gap and, in time, controlling or reducing premiums.

#### About Mercer Marsh Benefits

Mercer Marsh Benefits provides clients with one source for managing the costs, people risks and complexities of employee benefits.

The network is a combination of Mercer and Marsh experts working across 130 countries to develop local solutions drawn from global expertise.

Mercer and Marsh are businesses of Marsh McLennan (NYSE: MMC), the world's leading professional services firm in the areas of risk, strategy and people, with more than 85,000 colleagues and annual revenue of over \$20bn.

Through its market-leading businesses, including Guy Carpenter and Oliver Wyman, Marsh McLennan helps clients navigate an increasingly dynamic and complex environment.

For more information, visit marshmclennan.com, or follow us on LinkedIn and X (formerly Twitter).



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#### **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. As a result, REBA produces independent reports featuring data-led benchmarking, fresh insights, emerging trends and case studies to identify change and inform better decisions in reward and benefits strategies.

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