

Sick pay and work assessments to be reviewed, Jeremy Hunt reveals

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The system of sick pay and GP “fit notes” is to be reviewed by the government, as [Jeremy Hunt](#), the health secretary, highlighted the growing cost of long-term sickness to the NHS and suggested getting people back to work had major benefits for health.

The review will be announced in a draft consultation document published by the Department for Work and Pensions (DWP) on Monday, which will also examine changes to the controversial work capability assessments (WCA) undergone by disabled people in order to obtain welfare.

Ministers released little detail about how sick pay and fit notes, previously known as sick notes, would be changed, but said they wanted to “support workers back into their jobs faster and for longer”. It could involve a greater move towards people having a phased return to work after they are signed off sick and more contact between employers and sick employees.

Hunt said there was a £7bn cost to the NHS of treating long-term health conditions that keep people out of work, and suggested that employment could be a part of recovery. “This green paper launches a wide-ranging debate about recognising the value of work as a health outcome,” he said. “With all the evidence showing that work is a major driver of health, this is a big opportunity: to make sure that people get the support they need, improve their health, and benefit the NHS all at the same time. I hope that health professionals will contribute their expertise so that we can ensure the best possible outcomes.”

The consultation document is aimed at helping to get disabled people and those with long-term conditions back into work, with a specific focus on mental health and musculoskeletal conditions such as arthritis.

Damian Green, the work and pensions secretary, appears to be unwinding some of the policies of his predecessor, Iain Duncan Smith, by reconsidering the work capability assessment. He announced at the Conservative party conference that people with severe, long-term health conditions would no longer have to be reassessed for their benefits under the WCA.

The new review will consult on scrapping the process that puts disabled people into two groups of being unable to work or capable of some work.

“When things need improving, like the work capability assessment and fit notes, we mustn’t shy away from big decisions,” he said. “We must be bold in our ambition to help disabled people and those with health conditions. This green paper marks start of our action to confront the attitudes, prejudices and misunderstandings that, after many years, have become ingrained within the welfare state, within the minds of employers and across wider society.”

However, Debbie Abrahams, the shadow work and pensions secretary, said the review of the disability benefit assessment process did not go far enough. “For Damian Green to claim that this Tory government is confronting the negative ‘attitudes and prejudices’ that it has spent six years encouraging is ridiculous,” she said. “It is an insult to the hundreds of thousands of disabled people who have been on the receiving end of their callous social security regime, like my constituent who was sanctioned after having a heart attack during his jobcentre appointment.

“I have announced that Labour will scrap the work capability assessment and the Tories’ punitive sanctions; anything less is tinkering at the edges.”