



**To:** Neighbourhoods and City Development

**From:** Adrian Davis

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**Subject:** Essential Evidence on a page: No 98 In sickness and in health at work: the importance of physical activity

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Top line: There is a high cost to employers from absenteeism and potentially even greater costs from presenteeism. Increasing physical activity through active travel opportunities and activities during the work day are highly likely to be cost effective in improving health.

Globally 60% of deaths may be attributed to chronic diseases eg heart disease, a situation that may be improved through lifestyle changes including physical activity. Globally, 60% of the world's population is accessible directly or indirectly through workplaces and 60% of waking hours are spent in the workplace. The workplace has great potential as a site for developing and promoting workplace health and wellness, reaching staff and families.

The annual Labour Force Survey is the only available data set of sufficient magnitude with a capacity to explore issue of sickness absence from work.<sup>1</sup> 97.7% of English core city<sup>2</sup> workers sampled reported no sickness absence during the 2010 Labour Force Survey reference week.<sup>3</sup> Bristol's absence rate was found to be close to the average for the core cities, at 2.2%. Compared with the other core cities, Bristol exhibits the lowest rate of sickness absence (4.7 days per annum) over the period 2004-2011. Leeds had the highest rate of sickness absence (5.9 days per annum).<sup>4</sup> The cost of sickness absence to Bristol City employers is estimated to be £120 million a year (2010 figures), which is the third highest cost of the core cities, in absolute terms, despite having the lowest sickness absence rate of the eight and only the fourth largest workforce. The Institute for Employment Studies suggest that the full cost to employers is double. Minor illnesses are identified by employers as the most common causes of short-term absence with colds and flu as the single most common cited reason for work absence.<sup>5</sup> In addition, presenteeism may cost 2 to 7 times more than absenteeism.<sup>6</sup>

The National Institute for Health and Clinical Excellence guidance for physical activity in the workplace suggests that, overall, workplace physical activity counselling and fitness programmes were found to be cost effective. In addition, the introduction of a workplace physical fitness programme may be broadly beneficial to employers in that it can help reduce absenteeism. A weakness is a lack of rigorous studies but 11 projects involving 32 organisations and potentially 10 000 UK employees as part of a Well@Work project where physical activity interventions accounted for half of all initiatives provides some new evidence. Physical activity interventions were regarded as "easiest to sell" to employees. In those projects with a major emphasis on physical activity, energy expenditure grew, with notable impediments to implementation being lack of facilities, space and changing. When active travel became a focus this too was successful in raising overall activity levels. Interventions focus on the latter are being implemented across many English highway authorities as part of Local Sustainable Transport Fund work with employers.

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<sup>1</sup> Office for National Statistics 2012 Labour Force Survey. <http://www.ons.gov.uk/ons/guide-method/surveys/list-of-surveys/survey.html?survey=Labour+Force+Survey>

<sup>2</sup> Birmingham; Bristol, Leeds; Liverpool; Manchester; Newcastle, Nottingham and Sheffield.

<sup>3</sup> Batt, M. 2009 Physical activity interventions in the workplace: the rationale and future direction for workplace wellness, *British Journal of Sports Medicine*, 43: 47-48.

<sup>4</sup> Weyman, A., Buckingham, A. 2013 Profiling sickness absence in the City of Bristol. University of Bath.

<sup>5</sup> See <http://www.travelwest.info/evidence> No 64

<sup>6</sup> Main, C., Glozier, N. Wright, I. 2005 Validity of the HSE stress tool: an investigation within four organizations by the Corporate Health and Performance Group. *Occupational Medicine*, 55:208-214

