



Fit notes issued by GPs increase 17% to record high 10.3 million in 2021

Raises concerns for employers as Covid cases start to rise again

The number of fit notes issued by GPs hit a record high of 10.3m in 2021, a 17% increase from the 8.8m issued in 2020, says GQ|Littler, the specialist employment law firm.

GQ|Littler says the rise in fit notes issued may be due to higher numbers of Covid infections in 2021, as people returned to the office and overseas travel resumed, following lockdowns in 2020.

There were 7.3m cases of Covid between April 1 and December 31 2021, compared to 2m in the same period in 2020.

The firm says that during lockdown it's likely that some people continued to work from home whilst unwell and many employees in sectors such as hospitality and tourism were furloughed for long periods, so didn't seek fit notes if they were unwell. However, as 2021 saw the end of furlough and many employers getting staff back into the workplace, but high numbers of Covid cases as the Alpha and then Omicron variants took hold, the combination of these factors likely contributed to the rise in fit notes.

Last year also saw a 10% increase in the number of 'stress-related' fit notes issued, from 257,000 in 2020 to 282,000 in 2021.

GQ|Littler says the increase in stress-related fit notes is likely due to the compounded impact of the pandemic on mental health, as lockdowns took their toll. The firm warns that the cost of living crisis could exacerbate the mental health crisis leading to a further increase in stress-related fit notes issued.

Fit notes offer a medical opinion as to a person's fitness to work. They also suggest accommodations that employers may need to make to bring their employee back to work, for example reducing the number of hours they work. From 1st of July, nurses, therapists and pharmacists will be able to issue fit notes to alleviate some of the pressure on GPs.

Sophie Vanhegan, Partner at GQ|Littler says: "The spike in fit notes may reflect a rise in Covid infections following the end of

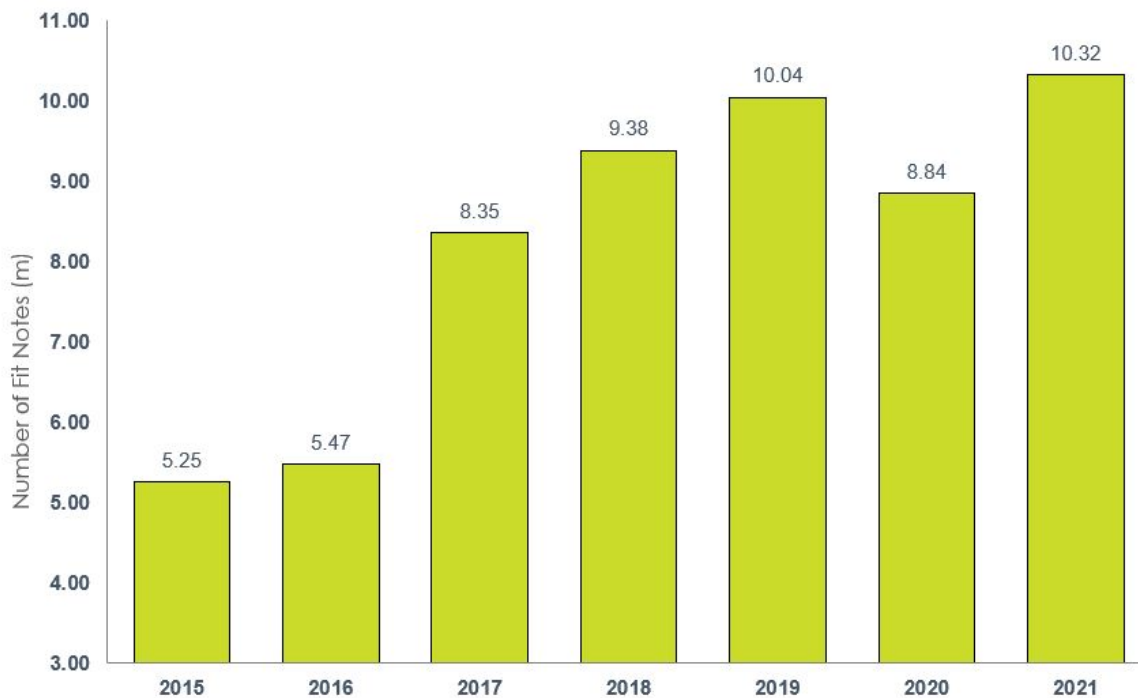
lockdowns in 2021. As Covid cases start to rise again, employers are all too aware that this may hit staffing levels at a time when businesses are already under pressure from staff shortages.”

“One legacy from the pandemic is it is now frowned upon to come into the office whilst visibly unwell. This could also have contributed to the increase in notes being issued in roles which cannot be performed from home.”

Sophie Vanhegan says employers should have processes in place to support employees who appear to be suffering from stress or mental-health related issues. Action that employers can take include: scheduling regular catch-ups, arranging mental health awareness training or appointing mental health ambassadors.

Sophie Vanhegan says: “Supporting employees through their mental health issues is extremely important, not just for productivity and morale. In today’s competitive jobs market, organisations that are viewed as unsupportive may have difficulty attracting and retaining talent.”

Number of fit notes issued hits record high



About GQ|Littler

GQ|Littler is a leading specialist employment law firm and the London office of **Littler**, the largest global employment and labour law practice devoted exclusively to representing management. With more than 1,600 lawyers in over 100 offices worldwide, Littler provides workplace solutions that are local, everywhere.

Offering risk-based contentious and non-contentious advice, our legal expertise includes employment, immigration, data privacy and employee tax and incentives. Our client base spans a wide range of sectors including financial services, technology, healthcare, professional services and luxury goods, in the UK and internationally.

GQ|Littler is recognised as a leader in its field by both Chambers & Partners and Legal 500. The firm is noted for “carving out a reputation in the employment sphere” and offering the “experience, technical expertise and quality of advice of a magic circle law firm, but with the personal touch and client-focus of a boutique firm”.

To better understand the myriad forces transforming the European workplace and the actions employers are taking in response, see

Littler's 2021 European Employer Survey Report. Littler surveyed more than 530 human resources executives, in-house attorneys and business leaders based mainly across Western and Southern Europe.

This story was covered in HR Magazine and People Management.