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HEALTH CASH PLANS: OUTDATED PRODUCTS OR UNDERRATED BENEFIT?

- MODERNISING CASH PLAN PRODUCTS
- SOLVING THE BENEFITS PUZZLE

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TIME FOR A FRESH LOOK AT CASH PLANS

Digital tools, personalisation and clearer pathways can turn cash plans from a transactional benefit into a complex health and wellbeing tool

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The workplace wellbeing landscape is shifting fast and cash plans are evolving to keep pace with that change. The cash plan shed its reputation as a transactional add-on for dental checks and eye tests some time ago. Plans are now emerging as powerful levers for inclusive, preventative and data-driven healthcare and wellbeing support.

As employers wrestle with rising private medical insurance costs and widening health inequalities, cash plans offer something rare: simplicity, accessibility and universal relevance. They bridge the gap between everyday health and strategic wellbeing, helping employees manage routine care while giving organisations the insight to understand and support workforce health at scale.

New generation cash plans are digital, dynamic and connected. Virtual GP access, diagnostic tests, physiotherapy, mental health support and preventive screenings are increasingly bundled into single, seamless platforms. Integrated technology allows employees to navigate services easily, and gives employers anonymised data to spot trends, close care gaps and act before problems escalate.

This evolution signals a deeper cultural shift in workplace health: from reactive care to proactive prevention. When designed well, cash plans don't just pay people back; they

empower them to look after themselves, reduce strain on healthcare systems and support a healthier, happier, more productive workforce.

But success depends on simplicity. Engagement still falters when products are fragmented, poorly communicated or hard to use. The most effective plans now offer clear digital access, straightforward claims and strong messaging that makes benefits visible, relevant and easy to source. Even the language around cash plans is changing, with some experts calling for them to be rebranded as health plans or wellbeing plans – doing what it says on the tin.

Of course many of the benefits offered through cash plans are also delivered through other products, sitting within multiple other employee benefits for some employers. Avoiding duplication, and creating the most effective pathways, are key to giving employers the very best value possible from these products. For advisers, this is a key area where a consulting approach can add value.

The cash plan's renaissance is reflective of the demands of cash-strapped employers, who want more for less, who want to reach all staff, and who need to meet increasing demands for health and wellbeing support in an affordable way.

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HEALTH CASH PLANS: OUTDATED OR UNDERRATED?

MODERNISING CASH PLANS FOR TODAY'S WORKERS

Cash plans are evolving to keep pace with changing attitudes towards workplace health and wellbeing? **Muna Abdi reports**

Cash plans have long been a staple of employee benefits but as expectations around workplace health and wellbeing change, the sector is looking again at the role these products play in the workplace.

At a Corporate Adviser roundtable with Unum at the iconic Battersea Power Station, industry leaders explored how cash plans can evolve to stay relevant and deliver value for today's employees. Delegates discussed product design, integration with other benefits and how to overcome

engagement and accessibility challenges. The discussion highlighted how digital tools, personalisation and clearer pathways can turn cash plans from a basic benefit into a core part of workplace health and wellbeing.

Universal appeal

Gallagher employee benefits consulting leader Anders Lewis said the product appeals to the workforce who don't have to be in ill-health to get benefit from these

plans. He said cash plans are a proactive way for employers to support the health of their staff, covering routine care such as dental check-ups and eye tests, giving employees tangible cash back, which is valuable.

Isio director of employee benefit health & wellbeing Allyson Gayle highlighted the role cash plans play in supporting everyday health.

She noted challenges around cost and taxation, but emphasised that cash plans have a place in the benefits mix.

"Cash plans definitely have their place, but there is space for evolution to work more cohesively with private medical insurance, which is seen as a more expensive product and out of reach for certain cohorts and businesses."

Employer benefits

Mercer market development leader David Bourne said cash plans have universal appeal across the workforce, given the



range of benefits offered, which include preventative health screenings, virtual GP services and prescription support.

Bourne contrasted this with PMI, which is often only offered to a small number of employees. He added that cash plans provide ongoing support PMI may not cover.

He said: "The cash plan does give that continual maintenance and monitoring that other healthcare products do not."

He added that it looks like a good time to offer broader health benefits, given the focus on equity and employee wellbeing.

He said these cash plan products also offer significant benefits to the employer, particularly when it comes to better understanding workforce health and addressing potential issues, so helping to boost productivity and wellbeing.

Unum UK CEO Mark Till agreed that the real value of a cash plan lies in the insight it offers employers into the health and wellbeing of their workforce. He said that

Kevin O'Neill



while routine benefits like dental and optical are widely used, understanding patterns through GP appointments, physiotherapy, medical referrals and diagnostic tests can highlight gaps in employee welfare provision.

He described Unum's new cash plan, Health Plan 360, as being designed to bring these services together in one place from a single supplier.

He said: "You can then see the whole pathway, from the GP referral to physiotherapy and onward support, without having to manage multiple providers."

Till added: "It gives employers clear, actionable insights while keeping employee information private."

Benifex head of health Rebecca Rann said this was a real benefit:

She said: "From preventative health screenings, all the way through to getting money back for a consultant appointment, it



Allyson Gayle

covers that whole journey, which is one of the really positive things about today's cash plans."

Accessibility

Accessibility was highlighted as a key factor, with Lucy Pearce, commercial director at Brown & Brown noting the importance of digital accessibility. She said having a digital "front entrance" allows employees to engage quickly with the service. Without this engagement tends to remain low she said.

Delegates agreed that cash plans often have a lot to offer but can be underused simply because it can be difficult for employees to navigate the various services and benefits offered. Till said: "There are a lot of features in the cash plan, but because they can be a bit higgledy-piggledy about where you access them, people don't make the most of them." ►



L:R: Lucy Pearce, Mark Till



He added: "That's why we put them all together in Help@hand, so you can see them all in one place." Help@hand is Unum's centralised health and wellbeing app, available to all workplace customers. He added: "If you can see all these benefits you can probably use them all. But if you can't see them, you won't make the most of them."

Gayle also stressed the importance of navigation and communication in driving engagement. "For an employee, it's not about knowing what you've got, it's about knowing where to go when something's wrong."

Communication and engagement

Pearce emphasised the importance of communication saying that if the plan is clearly promoted and employees understand the benefits, they are more likely to use it. She added: "We know PMI increases are insane out there this year and beyond", underlining the need for employees to engage with the cash plan to manage costs effectively.

Gayle noted that accessibility and cost are key factors when it comes to engagement, and failing to address either of these can limit uptake.

Lewis agreed, pointing out that high excess payments or complicated claims processes will also discourage employees from using the plan and reduce engagement levels.

But Aon principal consultant Joe Broadest noted that engagement goes beyond routine spend, with effective measurement and reporting key to ensuring employees understand and use the benefits.

Rann pointed out that demand for cash plan products was rising, even among employees who paid for these benefits on a voluntary basis. She said: "Despite the rising cost of living, the number of employees prepared to pay themselves for



L-R: John Lappin , Joe Broadest

cash plans, is increasing by 10 or 15 per cent year on year."

She explained that engagement improves when benefits are clearly communicated, helping employees understand the value of the plan and encouraging participation.

What's in a name?

Rann noted that the term "cash plan" does not always resonate with younger employees when compared to private medical insurance, even though understanding the benefit drives uptake.

Till added that when launching the Unum product, the company deliberately avoided the term "cash plan," instead calling it Health Plan 360, which he said helps convey the fact this product supports overall health, and offers more than just the cashback benefit.

Bourne explained that while the classification of cash plans is regulated, the label shouldn't define the product itself.

He noted that the market is evolving, with providers increasingly offering plans under different names such as health plans or reimbursement plans, even though they still fall under the same regulatory category.

Broadest suggested that advisers should reset client expectations about what a cash plan can deliver.

He said: "How do we change that wording with clients and cash plan? Is it going to make them buy more? No. But resetting their expectations of what this can do, that is going to move the dial."

Lewis emphasised the importance of clear communication in driving engagement. He said: "A huge part of our time is spent clarifying and explaining the plan, because if people have no clue what it is, they won't use it. Once they understand it, they're much more likely to take it up."

He added that making the plan simple and easy to understand is key to encouraging wider participation to the benefit of both employers and employees. ■



Rebecca Rann



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HEALTH CASH PLANS: OUTDATED OR UNDERRATED?

SOLVING THE BENEFITS PUZZLE

Cash plans are an important part of the wider employee benefits mix, but **John Lappin** hears how care needs to be taken not to duplicate benefits

The cash plan market is becoming increasingly competitive, bringing renewed focus on how these plans fit with wider health and protection benefits, particularly given demands for better management information (MI).

This was one of the key areas of discussion at a recent Corporate Adviser roundtable event, held at the revamped Battersea Power Station. Panellists attending the event said they wanted to see a more joined-up approach for employers, to minimise the likelihood of paying for similar benefits twice.

Lucy Pearce, commercial director at Brown & Brown, sees cash plans as a 'go-to first' benefit. "Cash plans are the gateway to the other insurances. It is where you want employees to go first, before using their PMI.

"If it's communicated well everybody knows it's there and that it's got all of the everyday healthcare benefits." As she points out these plans also offer a range of preventative benefits, which include valuable support for mental health. "If they are using the plan for things like this initially, and other areas where you're preventing issues, it is potentially reducing spend."

For Anders Lewis, employee benefits consulting leader, Gallagher, cash plans

represent a positive way for employers to engage with the health of the workforce. "Everyone should go to the dentist. Most people wear glasses or at least should have their eyes tested. So that's why I think every client should have one, be it funded or voluntary," he said.

Aon principal consultant, Joe Broadest, added: "What is key is that it works well with multiple products. It works in parallel or it dovetails."

David Bourne, market development leader at Mercer, said cash plans have resonance for the whole workforce. However, he said he sees some points of tension where PMI might be offered to part of the workforce, with a lower cost cash plan offered to the rest. He said this could mean both cohorts are potentially missing out. "The ones who are in the PMI plan that aren't getting the cash plan, could benefit as well. You might start a journey with PMI, but then it is deemed as chronic, so you have got to fund your own physio, for example."

Duplication concern

Duplication does pose a challenge amid the zeal of some providers to keep adding more services.

Bourne said: "Every provider has looked at their product and made the decision that



Anders Lewis



Allyson Gayle



more is more. But for our client, we've got duplication."

Broadest added: "If you add in something else, is it going to appeal to the whole demographic or a very specific demographic? Because that's another area where the industry has been guilty of doing one thing to fix one problem, and then not thinking about the other outcomes of that."

Pearce agreed. "There's a lot of wasted spend on duplicated benefits that we can't avoid. Then it becomes a decision you're making about where you are channelling that employer's employees. We find that with virtual GPs, with employee assistance programmes, and mental health services. It is difficult for advisers to deliver that message about which is the right one to use.

"The link between private medical insurance and group risk is not as integrated as it could be, even with some providers who have both. It could make



lives so much easier. On the risk side, one of the biggest issues is that our claims aren't actually registered early enough on the income protection side, and that's huge. If PMI was talking more to income protection, that wouldn't be so much of an issue, because we would be aware of a claim."

Allyson Gayle, director, employee benefits, health & wellbeing at Isio, said: "I feel like it's everyday health, operating proactively, which leads to productivity and value in the workforce. So cash plans definitely have their place. There is a space for evolution and to work more cohesively with private medical insurance, which is probably seen as a more expensive product and is out of reach for certain cohorts and businesses."

A preventative role

Advisers see a significant role for cash plans when it comes to prevention and helping keep workforces in good health.

Rebecca Rann, head of health at Benifex, said: "With cash plans, one of the positive things is that it does cover that whole journey, from preventative health screenings all the way through to money to go to the dentist or to pay for a consultancy appointment."

Broadest added: "Cash plans cover that front door and that diagnostic need, keeping people working, happy and resilient because you take the worry away. Then there's a pathway to the next stage. If they have private medical as well, or even the NHS. You're helping the employer and the employee in multiple ways, in pretty much every situation."

Gayle added: "The worry individuals have is 'what is wrong with me?' How do I get this checked out? How do I go for testing? That's such a key component, if you can give that to your employees at a lower cost with easy accessibility."

Mark Till, CEO Unum UK, said: "If you need an operation, half the time is

diagnosis and half the time is waiting to have the operation. If you can get the diagnosis part done, then you get peace of mind. If you get your diagnosis and you realise that actually it's a very routine thing, then suddenly all that pressure's come off."

Lewis added: "Certainly with the PMI side, excess is increasing as well. Being able to not have that as a hurdle to seeking any kind of treatment, where you can go straight to the cash plan, is great."

What does great service look like?

When it comes to delivering good service, advisers want a combination of retail grade apps and human back up. Pearce said: "Having a digital front entrance and the ability to get in quickly and use the service is a key feature that needs to be in the cash plan today. Otherwise, you just see low engagement."

Till added: "If you can combine the ability to get to stuff quickly, which is what digital typically helps you with, but with the human who can provide the emotional support and a bit of intelligence, that's an interesting combination for getting you faster through the rehab journey."

Pearce said: "That's the balance the market is trying to find, but we need the ability to be able to say, I want to speak to somebody before I get frustrated."

Rann added: "The other thing with digital first is people also want to talk to someone because when it comes to their health, they don't know what they don't know."

Gayle said: "Choice is key. Different people do different things. Not everybody is sat at a desk with access to laptops and apps. Firms might have truck drivers for example. You've just got to make sure there's flexibility and choice."

Broadest added that any associated apps needed to be 'retail grade'.

"You say you're going to pay a claim in 48 hours. It's done in 48 hours, if not sooner, that's what the retail journey should be like for an employee, and for us not to hear any noises that it wasn't paid."

Rann said that employees increasingly see the value of these products. This she said is reflected in the fact that there are a growing numbers of workers who are opting to buy these cash plans on a voluntary basis.

Kevin O'Neill, associate and consulting lead, Barnett Waddingham added: "We are seeing more companies opting for flex benefits, which brings its own complexities, especially when people join, and we know some of those who join are going to ►

rinse it, and then the next year costs can go through the roof."

Return on investment

Panellists agreed that different employers wanted different things in terms of management information.

Till said: "We tried to consider what the argument is for an employer to pay for this? And we went to 500 employees and said, if you had a health plan that did X, Y and Z, how many days would you have had off sick? And the answer was on average, four. So if it costs £70, if an employer spent £70 a year to guarantee four more days in the office for each of their employees, it's the best investment they've ever made in their own business, isn't it?"

O'Neill added that clients are "asking us more and more for MI, not just across health and PMI but risk". He suggested that what Unum are setting out to do is streets ahead of anyone else in the market. Lewis added: "The ROI on any health benefits is difficult, and that spans health and protection as well. How spending X will save you Y. But we want to show a cash plan is super simple and probably one of the only benefits where you can see, well, if I pay £70 a year per employee, if it's communicated effectively, everyone should be able to get double that at least. Not that the insurers would want to hear that."

Bourne said: "For me, it's about the MI that you can generate for the employer around what are the health concerns of your organisation and how can we address them. Because otherwise the answers are everyone is claiming optical and dental. Well, okay, but we have to do that anyway. We have to give eye tests. It's about what's different? That is the point."

Broadest added: "It's the analytics of the 'so what?' What the next couple of years could look like. That's really powerful to an employer. It's not necessarily about how it's delivered to them. It's the level of detail in it.



And then somebody can tell them what's next and how they can mitigate that. That's where we've got to with private medical and some of the other insurances."

Bourne added: "It's about having that consistency of the message, the MI is telling you. Because if you go to the PMI scheme, GIP and cash plan, all the MI is going to be presented differently, which is great for the adviser because we can help you interpret it. But if it is one organisation, one provider, it should be consistent."

Pearce added: "The cash plan market itself is starting to provide a little bit more information. We've seen some changes from other providers with reporting that is going in the right direction. With Unum coming in and doing what they're doing, it's going to shake it up. That's going to be good for us as advisers, because that's what we've been asking for a long time."

Gayle said: "We're seeing a lot of clients asking us to think about what their competitors do, and how they can compete more effectively." Lewis said: "That's exactly why the market is thinking we need to up our game. It will be interesting to measure how much this impacts long-term absentees and income protection, if they had a cash plan and if they didn't. If your return to work is 75 per cent, does it move it a week or two?" Till added: "Small movements can make big differences and that can translate into lower premiums."

Cash plans will continue to play an important part in the benefits mix, delivering ROI for employers and tangible benefits for employees. The key issue for advisers is how to help clients build a comprehensive employee benefit package that maximises the range of benefits on offer, while reducing duplication. ■



David Bourne



Rebecca Rann



Joe Broadest

OPINION

CASH PLANS REDEFINED: BETTER CONNECTED HEALTH AND WELLBEING SUPPORT

» Mark Till CEO, Unum UK



What are the big health and wellbeing challenges for HR and how can cash plans help?

HR teams are under growing pressure. With government figures showing 2.8 million people out of work due to ill-health, and sickness absence becoming a major issue – there's a clear challenge. At the same time businesses are navigating tighter budgets, changes to national insurance, and the ongoing need to boost productivity – all of which place even greater demands on HR to find effective, sustainable solutions.

Traditional cash plans just haven't kept pace with the needs of today's workforce. They're often fragmented, requiring employees to access services across multiple platforms, while employers struggle with clunky administration and limited insights.

That's why we created Health Plan 360. A modern health cash plan designed to meet today's workforce challenges – not just a patch on an older system. Delivered to people through our Help@hand app, it brings everything together in one place, allowing employees to manage both their services and claims through a single interface. Meanwhile, employers receive clear, aggregated, and anonymised reporting on usage and outcomes via an online dashboard, helping them to shape more relevant health and wellbeing strategies.

We built Health Plan 360 to be a strategic business asset that simplifies administration, delivers measurable outcomes and maximises return on investment.

How have cash plans moved from a 'nice to have' to a must-have for retention?

Some still see health cash plans as budget versions of private medical insurance (PMI), but when they're designed well, that really shouldn't be the case. They're two very different products. For everyday health and wellbeing needs – like physiotherapy, mental health support or nutrition advice for example – health cash plans are often the first line of support for employers. A plan like Health Plan 360 brings services like these together in a single, accessible package. We've designed it in a way to help people live well and work better.

What stops employers from making the most of cash plans?

Research told us that traditional plans can often feel cumbersome with employers left juggling disjointed platforms and poorly defined benefits, making them hard to promote and administratively heavy. That's one of the key issues we set out to fix with Health Plan 360 by offering a streamlined employer experience that shows how staff engage with the services.

Why don't more employees use cash plans?

Awareness is a major barrier. Research we carried out during the design stage showed that 73% of employees don't understand what a cash plan is, highlighting the need for much clearer communication. Complexity is another issue. Employers often struggle to explain how a package of different services fits together. With Health Plan 360, we've made those services far more connected. For example, if a GP refers someone to a physiotherapist, the referral is triggered automatically and the appointment is arranged – no letters, no separate logins. One interaction leads seamlessly to the next. That kind of integration drives real engagement.

What can providers do to better support HR teams?

HR teams tell us they want clear, simple stories to share with employees. For us, it's as straightforward as...

"Download Help@hand and get instant access to everyday health support". But technology alone isn't enough. People still value the human element – which is why we've built healthcare navigators into Health Plan 360. These are specialists that help employees understand their options and connect them to the right care, whether that's choosing between a GP or physio, seeking a second opinion, or who they should speak to.

Why is now the right time for a more modern approach?

Workforce health is one of the biggest challenges employers face. Absence levels are high,

and HR teams are expected to meet growing needs with shrinking resources. Legacy health cash plans simply weren't built for this. That's why we spent over two years developing Health Plan 360 and address these pressures head-on, providing employees with seamless support for everyday wellbeing, and giving employers measurable data to demonstrate impact. The shift is about repositioning health cash plans from a "nice-to-have" perk to a central part of an organisation's health and wellbeing strategy.

How important is it for cash plans to link with other wellbeing benefits?

It's critical. Our health cash plan supports physical health, mental health, and lifestyle changes in one joined-up model. We call it connected health because services refer between each other, rather than sending the problem back to the individual. One interaction can guide someone through the entire process of getting the right care and treatment. Employees don't just want health support – they need it to be accessible, joined-up, and genuinely effective. A physical health issue can often lead to a mental health issue, so solutions must work holistically. That's why we designed Health Plan 360 to meet the real needs of today's workforce. We believe it can redefine how employers and employees manage health and wellbeing at work. ■