

Improving support to work resources for people living with rheumatic and musculoskeletal conditions

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Background

Supporting people with health conditions to remain in work is a UK government priority. Rheumatic and musculoskeletal conditions greatly impact people's working lives. This includes inflammatory arthritis (e.g., rheumatoid arthritis, psoriatic arthritis and axial spondyloarthritis), rare autoimmune conditions such as lupus and vasculitis, and other painful conditions such as osteoarthritis and fibromyalgia. They are one of the **most common causes of days lost from work** in the UK and people deciding to stop work earlier than intended.¹

Several resources and interventions are available to enable healthcare professionals to better support their patients to work well.² For example, within the UK, numerous musculoskeletal charities websites, alongside other resources such as Healthtalk.org and the Pain Toolkit, provide work-related information and support for patients. However, people living with rheumatic and musculoskeletal conditions report that consultations with healthcare professionals are mainly focused on medical aspects of their condition and medications, and that work issues are rarely discussed. Support with work-related challenges often remains an unmet need for people with living with these conditions.



Aims

We aimed to explore the awareness and use of work-related support services amongst people with rheumatic and musculoskeletal conditions and online work resources provided by UK musculoskeletal charities, to identify specific areas for improvement.



Methods



We conducted a **cross-sectional web-based survey** of people living in the UK who reported an RMD diagnosis made by a healthcare professional. This included questions on awareness and use of work-related support services in the UK.



The survey was **co-designed with our patient partners** and communicated via national RMD charities and social media between August and November 2021.



We also searched **UK musculoskeletal charity websites** to see what information they provided on work, including breadth and frequency of topics covered. Charities were found using the Arthritis and Musculoskeletal Alliance website and the Association for Medical Research Charities website.



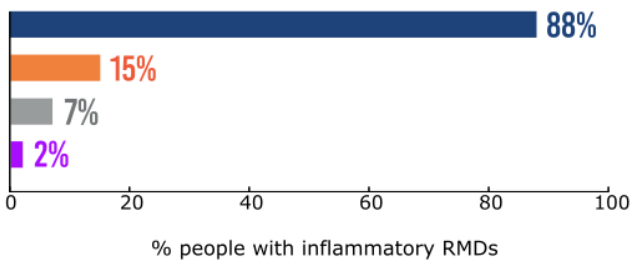
We held a **workshop with public contributors** from across the UK to assess the usefulness of the work topics covered by national charities, as well as any gaps.

Findings

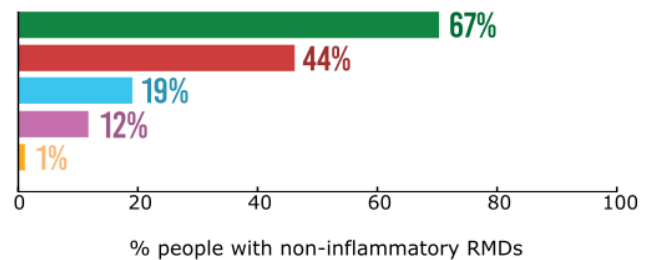
859 people completed the survey, of which 36% were currently employed and 30% were not in paid employment due to illness.



INFLAMMATORY



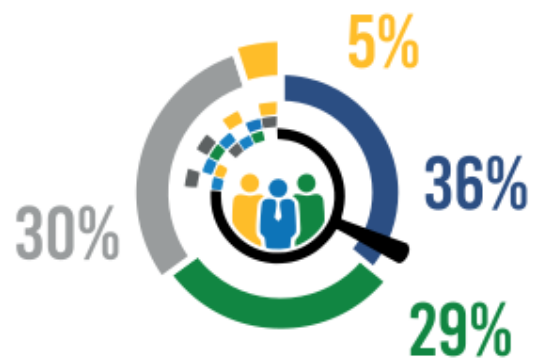
NON-INFLAMMATORY



- Inflammatory Arthritis
- CTD/vasculitis
- Polymyalgia Rheumatica
- Gout

- Osteoarthritis
- Fibromyalgia
- Metabolic bone diseases
- Joint hypermobility
- Other

- ▲ Employed or self-employed
- ▲ Retired
- ▲ Unemployed due to illness
- ▲ Unemployed





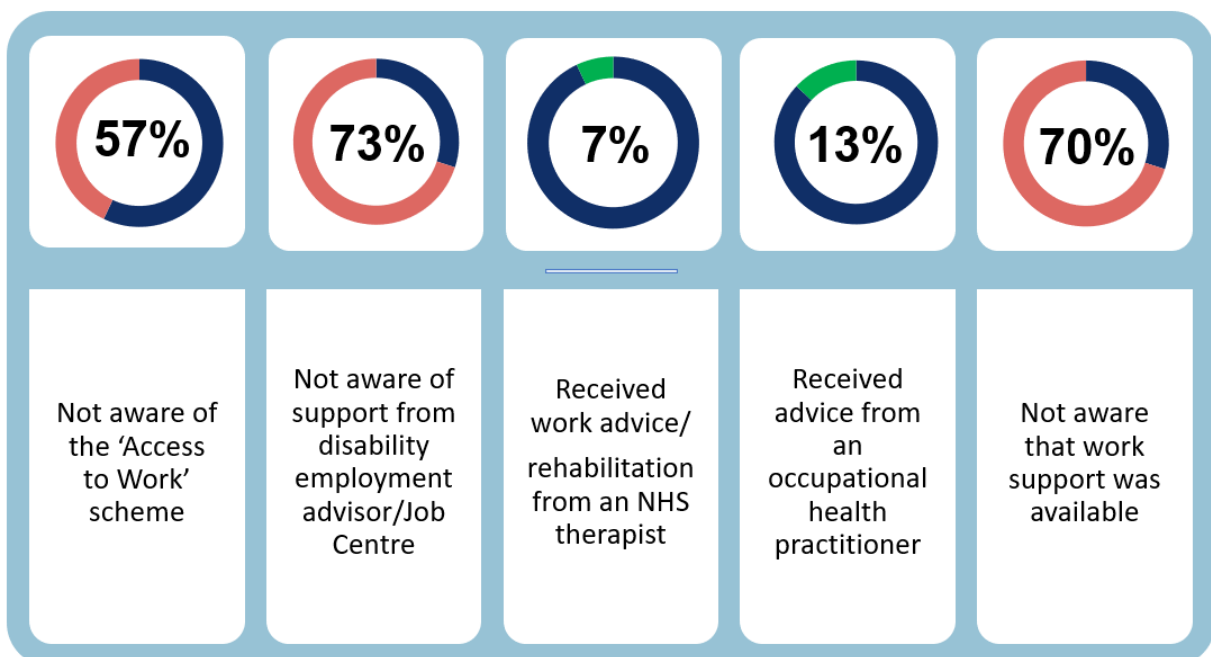
1/3 people reported difficulties accessing information about their rheumatic and musculoskeletal condition(s).

People told us they commonly looked for health information about their condition(s) using general web searches, from condition specific charity websites, friends and family and the NHS. The latter included information they got directly from the clinical services they attended as well as NHS websites. People tended not to look at symptom focused resources such as the Pain Toolkit.



Support to work was identified as an important service gap.

People said they found it difficult to find relevant information, particularly for non-inflammatory conditions such as fibromyalgia and osteoarthritis, and in relation to support to work.



18 UK musculoskeletal charities were identified:

Arthritis Action	National Rheumatoid Arthritis Society
British Dupuytren's Society	Paget's Association
British Sjogren's Syndrome Association	Polymyalgia and Giant Cell Arteritis UK
Ehlers-Danlos Support UK	Psoriasis Association
Fibromyalgia Action UK	Psoriasis and Psoriatic Arthritis Alliance
Hypermobility Syndromes UK	Royal Osteoporosis Society
Lupus	Scleroderma and Raynaud's UK
Myositis UK	UK Gout Society
National Axial Spondyloarthritis Society	Versus Arthritis



There was **significant variation in work information** provided across the charity websites. A summary of the available work information on UK musculoskeletal charity websites can be found below. The work topics considered are listed down the left-hand side, with the charities (anonymised) numbered along the top.

<u>MSK charities</u>	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	11	12	13	14	15	16	17	18	
2010 Equality Act	Green	Green	Red	Red	Green	Yellow	Green	Green	Green	Red	Green	Red	Green	Red	Red	Red	Red	Red	Green
Reasonable adjustments	Green	Yellow	Red	Green	Green	Yellow	Green	Yellow	Yellow	Red	Yellow	Red	Green	Red	Red	Red	Red	Red	Red
Access to Work	Green	Red	Red	Green	Green	Red	Green	Green	Green	Red	Green	Red	Green	Red	Red	Red	Red	Red	Red
Work Choice	Green	Red	Red	Red	Green	Red	Red	Red	Red	Red	Green	Red	Green	Red	Red	Red	Red	Red	Red
Referral to Occupational Health	Green	Red	Red	Yellow	Green	Red	Yellow	Yellow	Yellow	Red	Yellow	Red	Green	Red	Red	Red	Red	Red	Red
Getting advice from HR department	Green	Red	Red	Red	Green	Green	Red	Green	Green	Red	Green	Red	Green	Red	Red	Red	Red	Red	Red
Laws and protections around disclosure of MSK condition at job interview	Yellow	Green	Red	Green	Green	Red	Green	Red	Green	Red	Green	Red	Green	Yellow	Red	Red	Red	Red	Red
Changing / quitting job due to condition	Green	Red	Red	Green	Green	Red	Red	Yellow	Yellow	Red	Green	Red	Green	Red	Red	Red	Red	Red	Red
Driving / transport to and from work	Green	Red	Red	Red	Green	Red	Green	Red	Green	Red	Green	Red	Green	Red	Green	Red	Red	Red	Red
Benefits if unable to work	Green	Green	Red	Green	Green	Red	Green	Green	Green	Green	Yellow	Red	Yellow	Red	Green	Red	Red	Red	Red
Disability Employment Advisor	Green	Red	Red	Red	Green	Green	Red	Red	Red	Red	Green	Red	Green	Red	Red	Red	Red	Red	Red
Physically demanding jobs	Green	Red	Red	Green	Green	Red	Red	Green	Red	Green	Green	Red	Green	Red	Red	Red	Red	Red	Red
Handling discrimination in the workplace	Green	Red	Red	Red	Green	Red	Green	Red	Green	Red	Green	Red	Green	Red	Red	Red	Red	Red	Red
Employer booklets	Red	Red	Red	Red	Red	Red	Green	Red	Green	Green	Green	Red	Red	Red	Red	Red	Red	Red	Red
Information on work freely available	Green	Green	Red	Green	Green	Green	Green	Green	Green	Green	Green	Red	Green	Green	Green	Green	Red	Red	Green

<u>Key</u>	
Discussed in detail	
Briefly mentioned	
Not mentioned	

Common work topics on charity websites

The most common work topics on charity websites were advice on how to **self-manage your rheumatic and musculoskeletal condition at work**. For example, the importance of good posture, regular exercise, pacing of activities regular breaks and pain management techniques, as well as **purchasing of equipment**.

All of the charities that mentioned the **Access to Work programme** discussed the topic in depth. The Fit for Work programme was mentioned in one instance, despite the programme no longer being available.

The most commonly discussed support regarding travel to work was the **Blue Badge parking scheme**. Occasionally, the availability of subsidies for travelling on public transport was mentioned.



Challenges of using available work resources

Navigating work information on charity websites challenging. There was **limited internal signposting between charities** to those with more comprehensive resources, and **limited information for employers**.

External signposting to NHS and government resources was variable and often absent (e.g., information on Access to Work, occupational health support, employment benefits). **Differences in work policy across devolved nations** were often not acknowledged.

Suggested improvements included using **simpler language** and signposting to ‘bone fide’ information. Patients wanted **positive patient stories** and help with ‘**soft skills**’ e.g., how to have constructive conversations with their employer.

People identified a need for better employer training as not all employees had access to occupational health services.



What is the impact of these findings on practice and policy?

Musculoskeletal conditions can have a substantial impact on individuals' working lives. This study provides importance insights to inform strategies to improve awareness and access to work-related support, as well as development of resources to support people with rheumatic and musculoskeletal conditions to work.





Strategies to improve awareness and access to work-related support for people with rheumatic and musculoskeletal conditions

We are engaging with stakeholders from the healthcare and third sectors to raise awareness of the importance of support to work, and to address the gaps we have identified.



Improvements to existing work resources: a case study

Versus Arthritis have already used this research to inform their approach to developing work-related information, applying the findings from our work, and their two recent surveys: [Identifying work-related training and resources for workplace professionals](#) survey in partnership with the [Society of Occupational Medicine](#) and [Understanding work-related support for people living with arthritis or musculoskeletal \(MSK\) conditions](#).

These surveys, alongside the outcomes from our work, forms part of a wider piece of work to help Versus Arthritis understand what is required to address and remove barriers to work participation.

Versus Arthritis have rewritten the 'work' content of their website, including a range of links to external websites and resources.

Additionally, work is being progressed to:

- Develop a self-management Work adjustment resource
- Add information relevant to employers and workplace professionals to their website
- Embed messaging on work within their Core skills training for health practitioners
- Upskill Versus Arthritis local delivery staff and volunteers on work and rights





Informing future research: bringing work resources together into one platform

The **MRC/Versus Arthritis Centre for Musculoskeletal Health and Work (CMHW)** focusses on **supporting patients with musculoskeletal conditions, their employers, and clinicians**. Several interventions, in different stages of development, have been designed to support (or are relevant to) people with a broad range of rheumatic and musculoskeletal conditions to remain in work. Four recently funded **Nuffield Foundation Oliver Bird projects** also focus on support to work.

These **interventions are designed for slightly different patient groups and with variations in mode of delivery** but there is some overlap. Finding from this study are informing ongoing work to bring these programmes **together in one platform** to be available to patients and clinical team members in such a way that they can make an informed choice as to which is most suitable for an individual person.



Acknowledgements

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References

1. Versus Arthritis. *The State of Musculoskeletal Health 2021* (2021), <https://www.versusarthritis.org/about-arthritis/data-and-statistics/the-state-of-musculoskeletal-health/> [last accessed: 25/02/2023]
2. The Council for Work and Health. Talking work: a guide for doctors discussing work and work modifications with patients. Available: <https://www.councilforworkandhealth.org.uk/work-modifications/> [last accessed: 25/02/2023]