

Tuesday November 2007

THE DEPARTMENT FOR WORK AND PENSIONS

Mental health and employment – meeting the challenge

The Secretary of State for Work and Pensions (Peter Hain):

Mental health conditions are now the single biggest cause of both absence from work and people claiming incapacity benefits. Around 40 per cent of people currently receiving incapacity benefits are doing so because of mental ill-health, ranging from more common problems such as stress, anxiety and depression, to more serious conditions.

But the more common mental health conditions can be relatively easily treated and with the right support need not significantly affect people's lives.

We know that being in work is usually good for people with all types of mental health problems and so there is a clear need to support people with mental health conditions to overcome or manage their problems, helping them to find or remain in work.

I am therefore announcing, in partnership with the Secretary of State for Health, our intention to develop a **National Strategy for Mental Health and Work**, to ensure a coordinated response across government to the challenges faced by people of working age with mental health conditions and improve their employment chances.

- The Strategy will look at issues like **stigma and discrimination** that often prevent people with mental health problems from seeking help in the first place, let alone trying to find employment.
- The Strategy will be overseen by a **high-level group from business, the medical profession, academia, the third sector and stakeholder groups**, chaired by the National Director for Health and Work, Dame Carol Black, and including Lord Richard Layard.

To support the Strategy I am today also announcing a number of measures to ensure that mental health and employment support is delivered in a more holistic way, that we provide more advice and support to healthcare professionals and employers, and improve the communication between these two key groups.

- We will ensure that, wherever possible as they are rolled-out across the country, the **Pathways to Work and Improving Access to Psychological Therapies programmes are linked up**, allowing customers to take up the full range of support available and experience their back to work and healthcare support as part of a seamless package.
- Alongside this, we will establish a **mental health forum** to bring together all those involved in delivering Pathways to Work support, to share evidence and experiences in relation to support for people with mental health conditions.

- We will **pilot an advice and support service for employers**, especially smaller businesses, to help them to manage and support people with mental health conditions to remain in or return to work. We will explore the possibility of this service also providing support and advice for GPs as part of our efforts to more closely align employment and healthcare services.
- We will build on the strong partnerships already created with GPs through our Pathways Advisory Services pilots, which test placing **Jobcentre Plus advisers in GP surgeries**, by expanding those pilots to treble the capacity. The enlarged pilots will have a particular focus on supporting people with mental health conditions and will be supported by a **roll-out of our educational programme for GPs** on health and work issues, focusing specifically on mental health and employment.
- We will also explore ways to improve communications between GPs and employers to improve the likelihood of people working. As part of this we will ensure that the process for GPs to issue **medical certificates** that we are currently developing with employers, healthcare professionals and their representative bodies will allow them to be more positive – moving to a ‘fitnote’ instead of a ‘sicknote’ – and will make it easier for GPs to provide more helpful advice to patients and their employers about their fitness for work, especially for those with mental health conditions.

All this work will contribute to improving the health and employment prospects of people of working age, which is the subject of the review currently being undertaken by Dame Carol Black, which will report to Ministers early in 2008.

This will build on the substantial progress that has been made in this area since 1997.

We have been transforming the support that we give to Jobcentre Plus customers with health conditions or disabilities, moving away from a system that abandons people to a life on benefits to one which helps them to realise their potential. The introduction of Employment and Support Allowance which will replace Incapacity Benefit next autumn, along with the expansion of Pathways to Work across the country by April of next year will create a more positive system, built on rights and responsibilities and offering tailored support to help people back into work.

The new medical test for the allowance, the Work Capability Assessment, will be fairer, more accurate and more robust than the current Personal Capability Assessment. Importantly the mental capacity element of the assessment has been fundamentally improved and will be better able to assess the challenges faced by people with mental health conditions and learning disabilities.

Alongside employment support, the Government has been working to make more treatments and health interventions available to people with mental health problems and there has been a significant increase in mental health expenditure since 1997. Only last month the Secretary of State for Health announced the very welcome expansion of the Improving Access to Psychological Therapies programme. The service will ensure that over the next three years 3,600 new therapists will be trained

and 900,000 more people will be treated for depression and anxiety. This will have a major impact on those of working age suffering from mental health conditions.

We have therefore been working with medical professional bodies to ensure that GPs and healthcare professionals recognise the importance of work to the health and well-being of their patients; ensure speedy and effective investigation, treatment and rehabilitation; and give sound advice on fitness for work. This work has included the development and testing of a number of training and education programmes and other supportive tools.

Equally important is ensuring that employers understand the challenges faced by people with health problems, so that they can make appropriate adjustments to allow people to remain at work while their health conditions are addressed or to return to work in a phased way as part of their recovery. We are working across Government as part of the Health, Work and Well-being Strategy to engage and support employers. For example, the Department of Health's Action on Stigma Campaign, 'Shift' launched a new package of supportive tools on mental ill-health in October, designed to give advice on managing and supporting people with mental health problems in the workplace.

Today's announcement is further evidence of our commitment to achieve a step-change in the support available to help people with mental health conditions find and remain in work.