

## Anne McGuire's Speech to the 2007 BASE Conference

### Views on the future of rehabilitation and employment support - Draft Speech

Can I start by saying how delighted I am to be speaking to you again at your annual conference. Where has the time gone since I last spoke to you all, but how much has happened!

You have a very full and interesting agenda and associated workshops over the next two days and I'm glad that you've found time to include the Government's perspective.

#### Wider change and challenges

I want to start by saying a little about the wider aspect of change and the context within which it is taking place.

Twenty-five years ago, when I first worked alongside disabled people, they were almost invisible in everyday life.

Disabled people had very few rights and, where those rights were in place, they had only been granted reluctantly – thankfully, we've come a long way in a relatively short space of time.

Since 1997, this Government has delivered the biggest extension of disability civil rights this country has ever seen.

Whilst I believe we should take confidence from how far we have come over the past decade, I am under no illusion that we have still got some way to go before disabled people are empowered to participate fully in society.

The Government's vision for disabled people and strategy to address this continuing inequality was set out in the Prime Minister's Strategy Unit report, *Improving the Life Chances of Disabled People*, which was published in early 2005.

The Government made a commitment in that report that "by 2025, disabled people should have the same opportunities and choices as non-disabled people, and be respected and included as equal members of society."

I'm pleased to say that we're making important progress on some of the key recommendations, for example:

- We established an Office for Disability Issues (or ODI) to drive forward a cross-Government strategy – and to provide a source of knowledge and expertise on disability
- The ODI is leading a major cross-Government review of Independent Living
- Many of you will be aware that Government is testing a radical approach to delivering support services to disabled people through the 'Individual Budget' pilots
- We've acted to establish Equality 2025 – a new advisory group which is bringing the voice of disabled people into the heart of Government

But, perhaps more important than any other single measure, we are seeing a cultural shift within Government and the wider public sector which is being driven by the new Disability Equality Duty. The duty places a positive requirement on all public bodies – including local authorities – to promote equality of opportunity for disabled people and to tackle discrimination.

I hope you agree that, taken together, these developments are significant.

But I also want to be frank with you and say that not everything is rosy in the garden. There is still a great deal for all of us to do before we will be able to say that disabled people have true equality in the labour market.

### Welfare Reform & Employment

We believe that work is a right. For too long too many disabled people have been written off as incapable of work and consigned to a life on benefit because of social attitudes and a lack of employment-based support.

Undoubtedly, we are going through a period of change in relation to the future of rehabilitation and employment support – I recognise that change can give rise to uncertainty. But change can also provide us with opportunities;

- an opportunity to build on the progress that we've already made to increase the numbers of disabled people moving into work; and
- an opportunity to contribute to meet the challenges of Welfare Reform.

Opening up employment opportunities for more disabled people lies at the heart of our policy development. Standing still is simply not an option. The number of disabled people in employment, for me, is one of the critical 'acid tests' in understanding how far as a society we are breaking down the barriers to social exclusion.

### Welfare Reform Act 2007

The Welfare Reform Act (2007) embodies our approach to helping more people on incapacity benefits realise their ambition of a return to work.

These reforms are not about forcing people off benefits and into work. Neither are they about requiring customers to undertake work-related activity that would be detrimental to their health or well-being.

We are bringing in these reforms because we believe that disabled people and people with long-term health conditions have a right to work and in the past have not always been given the support and opportunities to do so – this is a critical part of our agenda to providing opportunity for all.

Just as we needed to reform the framework of disability rights, so we need to reform a benefit system that was designed to meet the needs of the last century.

Up until now, the vast majority of people claiming an incapacity benefit have not received enough support to help them move closer to employment.

This is why, next year (2008), we are replacing incapacity benefits with the new Employment and Support Allowance. Instead of focusing on what people can't do, the new benefit will focus on what a person can do.

The revised and improved gateway test for the benefit, the Personal Capability Assessment, will assess a person's capacity and, taking into account the other barriers that a person may be facing will help to identify the interventions that will support a return to work.

Meanwhile, from April 2008, we will be extending Pathways to Work across the whole country, so that these interventions – including support to help people manage their impairment or health condition – are available to as many of our customers as possible.

Green Paper – 'In work, better off: Next steps to full employment'

You will all be aware, I'm sure, that on 18 July 2007 DWP published the Green Paper – 'In work, better off: Next steps to full employment'. I urge you all to read, consider and respond to this important consultation.

In order to achieve our goal of full employment in our generation, we have set some specific long-term aims:

- Achieving an employment rate of 80%
- Eradicating child poverty

To do this we will need to extend employment as an opportunity for all – the modern definition of full employment.

A key element of this Green Paper is the new “jobs pledge”, which aims to help 250,000 people currently on benefit move into jobs through groundbreaking Local Employment Partnerships announced in the Budget.

This takes me nicely on to employers.

### Employers

Our measures will not work if we do not carry employers with us and ensure that they appreciate the benefits to them of recruiting from a diverse pool of potential staff.

We know that many businesses already employ disabled people and are reaping the rewards.

But as research published by my Department earlier this year highlighted, while employer awareness of the Disability Discrimination Act and employer attitudes towards tackling discrimination have both improved over the past four years, there is still a long way to go.

We can't just hope employers will change their perceptions of disability. We need to actively engage with and support them. We need to work with them to open up more job opportunities to disabled people and at the same time ensure that those people have the right support and skills they need to apply for suitable jobs and then get and stay in those jobs.

Building on the recently published Leitch report on skills, we are already working with the Department for Innovation, Universities and Skills and the Learning and Skills Council to make this a reality. I know that BASE are also working with the LSC on the implementation of their 'Learning for Living and Work Strategy'.

We are also now piloting the "Employ Ability" campaign in the four cities of Leeds, Bradford, Manchester and Liverpool. This campaign aims to challenge some of the negative assumptions about disabled workers – and improve employers' access to practical information.

#### Improving our specialist disability employment services

Our programmes, in all their manifestations, have opened up work options for many thousands of disabled people across the country. We have seen people develop their skills and confidence in open employment and in supported businesses.

However, we must strive to do better if we are to enable more disabled people to achieve their full employment potential. We have therefore been reviewing much of our current provision:

- to ensure higher, and more consistent, quality of services; and
- to ensure there is a clearer focus on the individual needs of every disabled person we support.

We are also looking at how to be better at joining up our services with those provided by other public, private and voluntary organisations such as local authorities, and to improve the way in which our disabled customers move from social services and education and then seek to find work that is appropriate to their interests and skills.

As many of you know, we are planning to undertake a public consultation on proposals to improve our existing specialist employment services for disabled people.

I have held back the publication of this consultation to enable us to take account of the proposals in the Green Paper and to take into account views expressed to my officials as they have discussed reform with BASE, disabled people and their representatives.

This consultation will cover our existing Job Introduction Scheme, Work Preparation, WORKSTEP and Access to Work programmes as well as covering the important roles that Disability Employment Advisers perform in supporting disabled people find and retain employment.

We want to promote greater inclusion and equality by ensuring that our mainstream services are accessible to more disabled people, while a more coherent range of specialist services will enable us to respond ever more flexibly to the needs of both our disabled customers and their employers.

Access to Work is one of our most successful programmes, supporting over 28,000 disabled people to enter or retain employment each year. However, we know that there have been some criticisms of the current programme – particularly the speed of delivery and consistency of approach. In response Jobcentre Plus have set up a National Access to Work Delivery Team to

address these issues and I know that they are beginning to making a real difference.

In addition to this, I have requested that the Department commission an independent evaluation of Access to Work so we can better understand the issues that have been raised and we will be including the programme in the forthcoming consultation to give everyone the opportunity to propose ways in which it can be further improved for the benefit of our disabled customers.

I am pleased that BASE have offered to help my officials run some events during the 12-week consultation period. It is important that disabled people and their representatives have the opportunity to consider the consultation and feel able to respond. I hope that you will all take the opportunity to participate in these events and make formal responses to the consultation to help us develop even better and more effective services.

At this point I would also like to say how grateful I am to the BASE leadership and some particularly active members that I know have been working closely with my officials over the last year or so to look at how we can improve these programmes.

If you would like to know more about this consultation, Dr Martin Hill is here from our Disability Employment Strategy team in DWP and he is also leading one of the workshops – “Where Next for Disability and Employment”. I know he will be happy to talk to delegates throughout the conference.

Current WORKSTEP and Work Preparation Contracts

I recognise that providers would like to know the more immediate future of their current WORKSTEP and Work Preparation contracts now so they can make more solid plans over the next couple of years.

With this in mind I would like to announce that we are planning to extend WORKSTEP and Work Preparation contracts until October 2009. My officials are currently looking for incremental changes that could help improve delivery within the current framework and will be in touch with providers shortly to make the necessary arrangements. I hope this will be helpful, but at the same time we must not lose sight of our end goal – to establish a more coherent and responsive range of employment services for disabled people, which will:

- lead to increasing the numbers of disabled people into work;
- focus on enabling disabled people to progress and become more independent;
- ensure we meet the needs of all our customers;
- achieve better value for money;
- meet the challenges of Welfare Reform; and
- provide more effective transitions between health and social services, LSC and DWP provision, with fewer unnecessary handovers between programmes and providers.

Supported employment is a key component of these services, now and in the future. I am confident that by sharing our expertise, our experience and yes our criticisms, we can build on a strong foundation and transform even more lives.

### Remploy

Any discussion about the future of employment support for disabled people would be incomplete without referring to Remploy.

Many of you in the audience today will be aware that a debate is currently taking place about the future structure of the Company. Remploy announced their re-structuring proposals on 22 May, which would see the Company quadruple the number of disabled people they support into work, by transferring some of their resource from their costly factory provision into their Employment Services business, which helps support disabled people into mainstream employment.

Clearly Remploy needs to change. However, we need to safeguard existing disabled employees, to whom the Secretary of State for Work and Pensions – Peter Hain - and myself have given a guarantee of no compulsory redundancies.

Any restructuring of Remploy must be consistent with this aspiration and the rights of all disabled Remploy workers must be safeguarded, including ensuring they continue to have meaningful employment on Remploy's current terms and conditions, including membership of the pension scheme, where they wish to do so.

I must stress that these are Remploy's own proposals and no decision on closing any factory has been made. Remploy continue to consult with their trade unions and other key stakeholders. The Secretary of State will consider the Company's final proposals later in the year.

### Closing

I hope that I've made clear in my contribution today that this Government is committed to equality for disabled people and to providing the rehabilitation and employment support they may need and deserve.

Of course I hear lots of anecdotal evidence from disabled people, service providers, representative organisations, about how well or indeed not so well things are progressing, but as we're in Birmingham today, I would like to share with you the following story I was recently told about the West Midlands Police Force and their partnership agreement with the Access to Work Business Centre in the West Midlands region.

The partnership was set up in 2004, when David Williams (the Police Force's HR Director) publicly declared the intention to increase the numbers of disabled people on their workforce. We seconded an Access to Work team member to them to support their retention work, helped with their HR departments to raise awareness of Access to Work and help them identify how the programme works.

The Access to Work team also supported their managers in identifying where they could make adjustments to their practices to allow disabled staff to participate more independently. As part of the agreement they worked together with a WORKSTEP provider – Shaw Trust – to provide appropriate and timely advice to staff taken on through the WORKSTEP programme. West Midlands Police have since put over 100 people through WORKSTEP and over 50 of these are now working for them in substantive open employment. David Williams has continued to influence other police forces and as a result of this joint working similar arrangements are now being set up with the North Wales and Hampshire Police Forces.

A true reflection that working together really does pay dividends for everyone!

Finally, with your support I know we can build on the improvements we have already achieved for disabled people. Improvements which bring greater numbers of disabled people into the mainstream, securing economic and

social inclusion for them and their families and contributing to the economic life of our nation.

If we get this right, the prize of success – in terms of our society, in terms of our economy, in terms of our country – could not be greater.

Thank you again for your time – I hope you have a very successful conference.

(2,800 words approx)