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A new deal for welfare: Empowering people to work

Consultation response from BASE

Overview of BASE

The British Association for Supported Employment (BASE) is an association representing over 220 agencies involved in securing employment for people with disabilities. BASE supports its members to provide quality employment services through its regional networks and by sharing information on best practice and policy development.

Our members represent a broad church; large, small and specialized provision. About 40% of our members are Local Authority providers and we also represent not-for-profit and charitable organisations. We provide a unified voice on behalf of our members, representing all aspects of supported employment from supported businesses, community placements to training and rehabilitation.

BASE is managed on a daily basis by a voluntary executive committee comprising individuals with many years experience of managing within the supported employment sector.

BASE has close links with a range of Government Agencies including DWP, DH and DfES. One of our key roles is to lobby for sustainable policy and funding.

Due to the range of employment support and training programs nationally and locally, individuals struggle to know what services are available and how to access them. BASE believes that individuals should have a seamless pathway into work that suits their needs - whether they are preparing for work, looking for work or seeking help with retaining their job.

In preparing this consultation all members were asked to forward their views. This response consolidates the key points.

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BASE response

INTRODUCTION

We welcome the Governments proposals to increase the rate of economic participation to 80%. We also welcome the move away from the focus on 'incapacity' thus encouraging claimants to be considered as capable participants with a focus on what they can do.

We are, however, concerned that the overall impression given within the Green Paper is a move away from social inclusion towards a reliance on the medical model of disability that could create a two tier system thus excluding some people further from the labour market.

PEOPLE WITH THE MOST SEVERE DISABILITIES AND HEALTH CONDITIONS

- Whilst we support the proposal of the benefit becoming more work focused we are concerned that the classing of individuals as unable to work due to the severity of their disability will create barriers and stereotypes. Our members work with a vast number of people that fall in this category who currently have very successful careers. Providers have spent years trying to remove barriers with employers and society in general. We believe that suggesting a section of society can not work will reinforce existing barriers.
- Who will decide on what constitutes "severely ill or disabled"? We have concerns about the labelling of people in what can only be a medically-based assessment.
- We are concerned that there is no mention of the types of employment support anticipated to be required by this group of people.
- BASE believes that the proposals do not address the existing discrimination faced by disability groups such as people with learning disabilities. Many BASE members run specialised provision with highly experienced staff providing specific, ongoing support for this client group, many of whom are unable to access current JCP provision. The Adult Learning Inspectorate has recognised that specialist agencies

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often provide the best service. BASE believes the proposals need to be more specific in how these individuals will be supported.

- Local Authorities currently invest significantly in employment support. This is primarily through prevocational activity, permitted work support and WORKSTEP. Each of these activities is important in assisting people with more complex needs back to work and can be very effective. We are concerned that the report makes no mention of WORKSTEP at all.

If current levels of investment from Local Authorities were to drop the government target would be even more difficult to achieve. The best providers of WORKSTEP, as identified in this years Adult Learning Inspectorate report, were from the public sector.

- The Green Paper seems to have little notion of what it means to have a fluctuating condition implying that this is something that can be dealt with in an action plan. A great deal of training will be needed amongst employment advisors if this group is to receive appropriate support.

DEVELOPING HEALTHY WORKPLACES

Access to occupational health

- We agree early intervention is the key to success. Both employers and health professionals must be made aware and supported accordingly. We believe there needs to be a nationally funded retention program to kick start this potential.
- Very few small to medium size enterprises have access to occupational health schemes. We feel it is vital that access that occupational health be improved dramatically for SMEs. We welcome the aspirations contained in the Green Paper but have some doubts about whether this will be adequately resourced.

We would urge the Government to work together with employer forums, the Health & Safety Executive, insurance companies and occupational health providers to improve access to occupational health schemes, particularly by SMEs.

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ENGAGING AND SUPPORTING GP'S AND OTHER HEALTH CARE PROFESSIONALS

- We fully regard engagement with GPs and other health professionals as a positive move and would like to see a focus on rehabilitation services within the NHS. More needs to be done to ensure that vocational aspects are fully considered in health assessments and care plans.
- We have doubts about whether the NHS should lead on condition management programs which relies on a medical model diagnosis.

SUITABLE ACTIVITIES

- We are concerned that the suggested suitable activities will not help many achieve their goals because, in seeking to support people with more complex needs, it omits some vital components:
 - Specialised disability knowledge
 - Thorough profiling resulting in a sustainable job match
 - Hands on support with job application and at interview
 - Initial and ongoing job coaching and mentoring
 - Ongoing support and advice for employers
 - Tailored support for people with higher and ongoing support needs.

PERMITTED WORK

- We welcome the decision to allow unlimited volunteering for people on ESA but have concerns about the lack of detail covering permitted work. It remains unclear what plans the Government has in this area and we would welcome further discussion about the detail of any proposals.

Permitted Work is a key means of engaging people in the labour market. Many people are not able to work over 16 hours per week because of lack of stamina or other health issues. Others use permitted work as stepping stone to full-time employment yet there is no support funding available other than through charitable funds or local authorities.

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- We would like to see more incentives for people to take up permitted work without creating a disincentive to progressing off it into 16+ hours per week. We would urge the Government to set a lower permitted work earnings limit of six times the national minimum wage that would be up-rated annually in the same way as the higher limit is tied to sixteen times the minimum wage.

This would remove the annual complications of workers being asked to reduce their hours of work and employers needing to vary terms and conditions. Many people leave permitted work because it is no longer viable for employers to offer contracts for less than 4 hours per week. It is not generally understood that excess earnings can be deducted from Income Support and much time is wasted renegotiating each year.

WELFARE BENEFITS

- The current welfare benefits system is very difficult to understand. Customers are understandably wary and do not trust the complexities of the system.
- The longer term approach should be to develop a system of welfare benefits that integrate with wages received. This would offer more flexibility for people gradually increasing their hours at work and would help to remove perceptions of benefit traps by offering a more transparent and readily understandable system.
- We warmly welcome the extension to 2 years of the “linking rules” and the decision to make it automatic. This will go a long way to reassure people who are hesitant about leaving welfare benefits. We broadly support the notion that there should be a flat rate of benefits which do not rise over time.

JOINED UP THINKING

- Papers such as the Department of Health’s Improving Life Chances for Disabled People and Valuing People initiative has led to some confusion as to who is leading on employment policy for disabled jobseekers. The Department of Health initiatives have very few, if any, resources attached.

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- Employment can not be viewed in isolation from training and education. It seems little consideration has been given to the strategies being adopted by the LSC and how they can assist in achieving government targets. Current changes to funded learning require individuals on non-means tested benefits to pay for training and this will have a significant bearing on its take up. Pre-entry qualifications are often essential in moving individuals closer to work yet are often classified as 'other' provision by local LSC and funding reduced.

An effective review of the benefit system can not be undertaken without involvement of LSC to ensure appropriate training is available to return people to work or enter work for the first time.

- Previous experience of Welfare to Work Joint Investment plans suggest that relying on joint working through choice does not work. Differences in strategic aims, organisational boundaries and perception of responsibility are not conducive to this approach. Current differences of opinion on the funding of activities transferring from JCP to LSC reinforce this view.
- We would welcome a stronger lead from the DWP and a future White Paper must consider the needs of people within the initiatives led by the Department of Health and Department for Education and Skills.

GENERAL COMMENTS

- The roll out of Pathways to Work will create a demand that current levels of funding and provider capacity will not meet. Significant increases in the level of investment will be required if Government targets are to be met. The wider cost benefits of moving individuals from welfare to work needs to be recognised by the treasury.
- The exclusion of existing claimants from the proposals will create a more complex system, creating 'a rut' from which it will be harder to escape. BASE believes that to meet government targets the proposals should apply to all.
- Outcome payments for employment programs are to be welcomed provided they are sufficiently broad and flexible to ensure that providers are not rewarded for 'cherry picking'.

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- Improved contract procurement and management are long overdue. Contracts should be designed to encourage innovation and not be prescriptive.
- True sustainability can not be measured on a three monthly basis. Future employment programs and payment arrangements need to measure and reward periods of up to 2 years.

TO SUMMARISE

- BASE welcomes the review of the benefit system that will encourage individuals from welfare to work.
- We have serious concerns about creating a group of people that will be labelled as unemployable.
- Government targets will only be met with adequate investment in a variety of support programs which should be outcome based with recognition of variations in support requirements.
- Overall responsibility for achieving targets should be confined to one government agency, ideally the DWP.
- The new benefit system should not discriminate against any type of disability.

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