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Supported Employment for People With Learning Disabilities in the UK– The last 15 years.

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Abstract

This paper revisits the aspirations of the authors for supported employment development from 1997 against a changing policy context with the introduction of Valuing People and Valuing People Now. It reviews developments in employment policy, innovation, the framework for funding supported employment and changes in the level of employment for people with learning disabilities since 1997. It summarises the issues relating to progress in this area over the period and suggests the need for further action to deliver the government's vision of employment inclusion and to secure the rights of people with learning disabilities to a place in the workplace.

Key Words

Supported Employment; Outcomes; Policy; Valuing People.

Introduction

In 1997, the authors of this paper wrote in the April edition of the Tizard Learning Disability Review on Supported Employment in Britain. Beyer and Kilsby (1997) described supported employment as an alternative to day services, and highlighted research which indicated improved outcomes for people with learning disabilities in relation to income, social inclusion, and cost savings. They highlighted difficulties with low expectations with carers and deliverers, lack of knowledge of disability by employers, and a precarious funding structure for supported employment agencies. They recommended the need for commissioners to prioritise employment and to focus on those leaving special schools and specialist college provision.

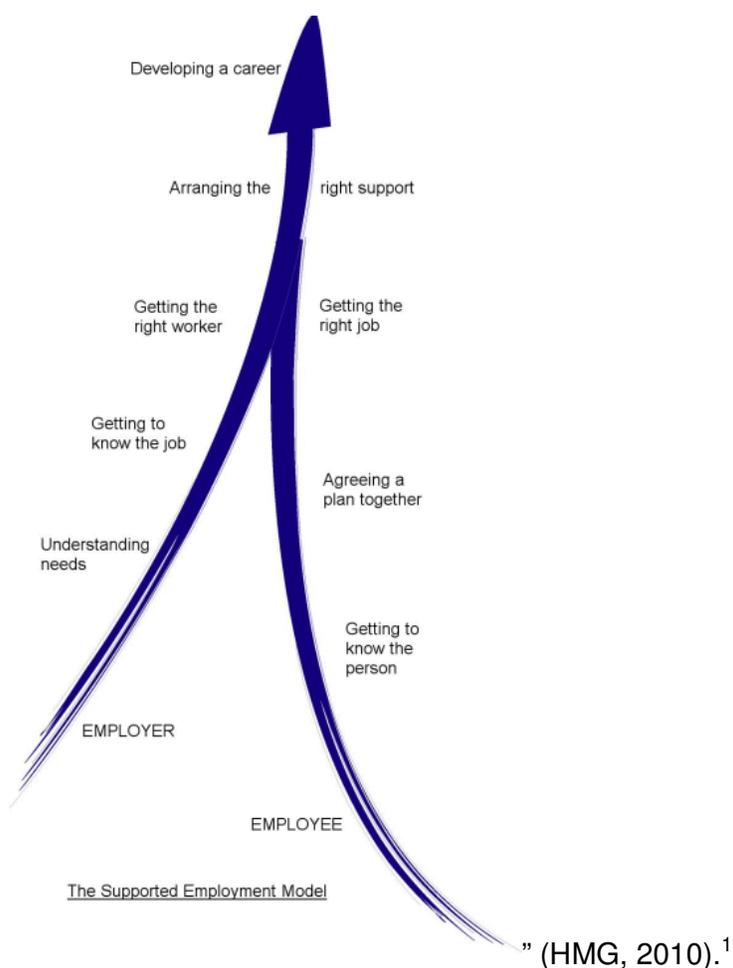
Melling provided a commentary on this article as (at the time) a Manager for supported employment in Kent County Council. She highlighted the need to define supported employment within a clear policy framework for the provision, which also addressed the funding issues across health and social care, learning and skills, and employment. She expressed the view that the future of specialist provision was under risk unless these issues were addressed.

What is supported employment?

“Supported employment is an evidence-based and personalised approach to support people with significant disabilities into real jobs, where they can fulfil their employment aspirations, and achieve social and economic inclusion. It should start from age 14, to ensure that people can have meaningful work experience and Saturday jobs, to support a person-centred pathway.”

“The overarching guiding principle of supported employment is that it is designed to support individuals who do not necessarily meet traditional criteria for job readiness or employability. Fundamental to supported employment is that everyone can work, with the right job and the right support.”

“Supported employment can best be illustrated as follows:



¹ HM Government (2010). *Valuing Employment Now, Job coaching or supported employment: approach and progress in developing standards*. London: HM Government Publications.

So, how have things changed since 1997? Has a clear policy framework for supported employment been put in place? What innovations have taken place? What is the current state of specialist supported employment provision? Have employment prospects improved for people learning disabilities?

Changes in policy

There has clearly been significant progress in the development of policy and in the profile of employment as a mainstream life option for people with learning disabilities since 1997. 'Valuing People' (DH, 2001) in England, 'Fulfilling the Promises' (WAG, 2001) in Wales and 'The Same As You' (Scottish Executive, 2000) in Scotland renewed learning disability policy, identified employment as a priority, and highlighted supported employment as the preferred option for delivering it. In England, Valuing People aimed to deliver significant planning at local authority (LA) level through Local Partnership Boards. However, a review of progress in 2007 found that employment was one area where progress had been slow.

Valuing People Now (DH, 2009a) restated the priorities for learning disability policy and with it employment had become a significant priority for future action (which was subsequently endorsed by the Coalition Government in 2010). The document proposed a cross government group be set up to remove barriers to the employment of people with learning disabilities and said:

"A priority for *Valuing People Now* ... will be the cross-government strategy on employment of people with learning disabilities which will be published in spring 2009. Implementing this strategy will be a priority for government departments and their delivery agents, and innovative practice needs to be showcased to challenge the assumptions that people with moderate to severe learning disabilities cannot work." (DH 2009a, 3.44).

This was followed by a specific policy paper, Valuing Employment Now (DH, 2009b), launched in June 2009 in response to widespread concern that, despite 8 years of social policy focusing on improving the lives of people with learning disabilities, there had been little or no progress in helping this group of citizens into employment.

Valuing Employment Now presented a much more sophisticated account of the changes necessary to achieve greater inclusion in employment. Its vision noted that a major change in approach was required throughout the system:

"...from health and social care to schools, colleges and learning and training, employment agencies and employers, people with learning disabilities themselves and their families." (DH, 2009b; p 1)

It highlighted the need for action to change minds and to foster a presumption of employability among all stakeholders, positive messages being needed from birth. It highlighted the importance of job coaches, the need to overcome shortages in this provision, and proposed establishing quality standards. It saw innovation in Foundation Learning and the introduction of personal budgets as routes to providing additional job coaching. Barriers in welfare benefits, transport and housing were identified and the business case for employers to recruit people with learning disabilities was also highlighted.

A driver for Valuing Employment Now was the introduction of Public Service Agreement 16 (PSA 16). For the first time it provided the possibility of a shared responsibility across government for getting more people with a learning disability into employment. Linked to this was the NI 146 reporting indicator that required local authorities (LA) to report the numbers of people with learning disabilities having a paid job.
(<http://data.gov.uk/dataset/ni-146-adults-with-learning-disabilities-in-employment>
<http://www.data4nr.net/resources/1226/>).

The report trailed greater impact from central government programmes on the employment of people with learning disabilities:

“DWP’s new specialist disability employment Programme [Work Choice] will in October 2010 replace its existing supported employment programmes and is designed to be more effective and to maximise space on the programme for those furthest from the labour market. This will benefit people with learning disabilities.” (DH, 2009b; p21:7)

The WORKSTEP programme had been the flagship disability employment programme for many years, administered through the Department for Work and Pensions (DWP), delivering community and sheltered workshop jobs. Along with Remploy, local authority and third sector WORKSTEP providers had always provided employment for a significant number of people with learning disabilities, particularly in community jobs. Job coaching had emerged as an approach among a number of WORKSTEP providers, but was not a dominant model. This limited the extent to which WORKSTEP could cater for people with higher support needs, or even perhaps mainstream day service users. After consultation, the Work Choice programme was introduced to replace WORKSTEP. In design, the new programme had more to offer people with learning disabilities, with explicit mention of job coaching as a preferred approach for people with learning disabilities and phases that could provide flexibility in length of support. Work Choice has survived a change of government but the introduction of a smaller number of “Prime Providers” has severed the direct provider link to local authorities in the original programme, except where they have been offered and taken up specialist provider sub-contracts. We have yet to see whether the new arrangements impact on the numbers of people with learning disabilities employed. Although some commentators have expressed reservations about whether the new programme will meet the needs of people with moderate and severe learning disabilities, DWP has stated that this is the clearly the intention.

Innovation

There have been innovations in the last few years that have extended our models and broadened our understanding of what can work in raising awareness of employment as a realistic option and preparing people for an adult working life.

As part of Valuing People, the Getting a Life (GAL) project was set up to drive whole system change to improve transition for young people with learning disabilities so that more young people got a paid job and full life when they left education. Working with 12 LAs, GAL has delivered Person Centred Reviews to help young people plan from age 14, as well as awareness and leadership training for professionals, families and young people. Additional employment planning tools have been developed to ensure that employment is viewed as an outcome that is both positive and possible. There has been significant emphasis in helping LAs to develop effective employment pathways, which includes supported work experience in year 10 and weekend jobs. Data from the project suggests that awareness of employment has grown and new support systems have been put in place. Overall, employment rates for those within its target group (Getting a Life Team- Personal Communication) are around 20%, significantly higher than national averages. This suggests that LAs pursuing person centred approaches in transition linked to effective employment support for young people may fare better in achieving employment as an outcome for these young people leaving education.

There have been a number of pilots run of the Youth Supported Employment Project since 1997. This model brings together non-disabled teenagers with teens who have a learning disability in a mutually supportive initiative to find the person with a learning disability a part-time evening or weekend job. This provides valuable experience, raises awareness that the person can work, and enhances people's CVs as well as providing money and the normative first steps on the career ladder we all take. Research has shown that as many as 50% of those on the project have obtained paid work prior to them leaving special school, making them among the youngest people with learning disabilities to obtain paid work in the UK. It has also been shown to significantly increase the expectations of parents, the young people and their teachers (Kilsby et al. 2001, Allan and Kilsby 2007).

The beauty of this approach is in its simplicity and inexpensiveness, and funding has proved relatively straightforward to obtain.

While the self-employment sector represents something like 14% of jobs in the UK in 2010, few people with learning disabilities are self-employed. There has been significant interest in micro-enterprise for people with learning disabilities in recent years, with high profile events with US experts being run. The model does have strengths, including respecting the capacity and assets of people with learning disabilities, a focus on people's interests and strengths, and more flexibility than mainstream employment on working conditions. The Foundation for People with Learning Disabilities has

developed the “In Business” programme (<http://www.learningdisabilities.org.uk/our-work/employment/in-business/>) to help people pursue self-employment and micro-enterprise has developed as a pathway for some people in the Getting a Life and Jobs First demonstration sites. For example, see <http://www.mienterprise.org.uk/>. While this employment approach has impacted significantly for only a few, it needs to be considered as a part of the employment portfolio.

Social firms are businesses that achieve 50% or more of their income through sales and must have a paid workforce that comprises at least 25% of people with disabilities or who would otherwise be disadvantaged in the open labour market. The model is widely used in Europe and there has generally been significant growth in the UK (Spear and Bidet, 2005). The extent to which social firms are beginning to deliver jobs for people with learning disabilities is less clear. Forrester-Jones, McGill and Gwillim (2008) compared 40 individuals with a learning disability working in a social enterprise and 40 others attending day centres. They concluded that social enterprises represented better training settings for future employment compared to day centres but that social inclusion was still inadequate. The Coalition Government is promoting greater growth of social firms and these may have significant potential to provide paid jobs for people in the future.

Project SEARCH is an approach that was designed in the US at Cincinnati Childrens’ Hospital. As part of Valuing People Now, the Government is evaluating the model in 14 sites in England. Project SEARCH provides a partnership between schools/colleges, supported employment and an employer to provide internships for people with learning disabilities over the course of a year where they have the opportunity to gain marketable, competitive skills. Learning takes place on the job and this is supported by targeted education in the workplace. The project has demonstrated high level leadership by employers in the public sector, particularly in health, to deliver internship placements and ultimately jobs. The evaluation is pending but in early adopter sites where the model has been closely followed, the number of job outcomes appears to be encouraging. Crucially the model offers a creative way to link supported employment and job coaching with education and training in a practical context. It seems to provide a concrete and much needed example of offering a vocational course based on the supported employment model, which leads to real jobs.

As part of Valuing People Now, Jobs First is exploring how to bring together different funding streams around an individual to fund employment support, including social care, Access to Work and either Work Choice or the equivalent from Remploy for people with learning disabilities to get and keep paid work. There are 7 LA demonstration sites. Evaluation is ongoing, and indications are that funding streams can be used together or “braided” to achieve employment outcomes, and that there is sufficient money if there is the willingness to use funding differently.

[Employment rates for people with learning disabilities and cost-benefit analysis](#)

While PSAs were discontinued by the Coalition Government, NI 146 reporting arrangements remain in place and we now have the beginnings of a consistent data set to measure the impact of some of the changes. The latest data for 2009/10 is more stable than the previous year figures, and they shows an overall employment rate for people “known to social services” of 6.4%.² This figure is less than the 10% employed mentioned in Valuing People as a concern in 2001 and includes people who may only work for 1 hour per week. The most common performance in relation to delivery of employment was between 1.7% and 11.1% employed, 75% of local authorities reported employment figures within this range (within one standard deviation above or below the mean). The Labour Force Survey puts the overall employment rate for disabled people at 46%, but the average employment rate for people with severe or specific learning difficulties (a broader category than those receiving social services) over the past two years is far lower at 15%.³

This concurs with Forrester-Jones, Gore and Melling (2010) findings that employment rates for people with learning disabilities remain stubbornly low.

Data from the national survey of people with learning disabilities carried out in 2003/04 provided information on the severity of disability of people in employment. While a wider group than those known to social services, data confirm that rates of employment were 8-11 times higher (male and female respectively) for people assessed as having low support needs compared to those with high support needs, suggesting that people in employment continued to be those with mild learning disabilities (Emerson et al, 2004). The data also shows rates of working 16 hours per week or over were 14-15 times higher (male and female respectively) for people with low support needs compared to those with high support needs (Emerson et al, 2004).

Beyer, Kilsby and Goodere (1996) found in a study of 1,400 supported employees across 201 supported employment agencies that 50% of supported employees in the study worked part-time, defined as anything under 16 hours per week. This allowed the new employees to retain their welfare benefits and often pay no tax. It also reflects the pressures that supported employment agencies were under to obtain jobs with hours that gave people a wage that meant that they didn't lose all their income support and to accommodate those whose residential care costs meant that working full time would be financially unviable.

Fifteen years ago this study showed us that part-time employment has implications for the funding of supported employment. A disabled person working for sixteen hours has been seen as key criteria for obtaining funding support through the Access to Work programme and accessing Working Tax

² “Employed” includes people working full-time as an employee or self-employed for 1 or more hour per week. “Known to social services” includes people aged 18-64 who were assessed or reviewed in the financial year and who received a service; or were assessed and/or reviewed and did not receive a service.

³ This average is taken over the last eight quarters of data available from the quarterly Labour Force Survey

Credits. Part-time work for low hours has commonly failed to draw down significant funds from central government to help people into employment, a problem that remains. DWP's Welfare Reforms aim to remove perverse disincentives to work.

Research in North Lanarkshire (Beyer, 2008) showed that people with disabilities could be 95% financially better off after employment, experiencing a shift from Income Support to Working Tax Credit once employed. It also found a net cost for supported employment place 48% that of a Social Service Locality Day Service place. The key to this outcome was relatively high numbers of people working over 16 hours (90% of workers), the average being 22.1 hours per week per worker with learning disabilities. Working only a few hours and retaining welfare benefits still means that people pay little tax, and there are lower financial flow-backs to the Treasury, while costs of support programmes remain significant. The North Lanarkshire Supported Employment experience shows that workers, the taxpayer (and council tax payers) can benefit financially if people work for enough hours, but that job coaching input needs to be intensive to deliver to a social services client group.

A more recent study of Kent Supported Employment service (KSE) (Kilsby and Beyer, 2010) showed that the average total gross income for people with learning disabilities from all sources was £112.84 per person per week before employment and £175.14 after employment (+55%). Welfare benefit income fell on average by 28%. The cost of KSE was £9,910 per person, 88% of the cost of a day service place or a potential saving of £1,290 to the LA. From the taxpayer perspective KSE had a net saving of £3,564 per person per year compared to a day service alternative. KSE's experience is that supported employment can be a positive financial option for English local authorities even where the intensity of input and focus on day service clients is less pronounced than in the NLSE case.

A recent study of the role of supported employment in health promotion for people with learning disabilities (Vigna, Beyer and Kerr, 2011) found that 80% of agencies responding reported noticing positive health outcomes for their client through moving into employment). While not verified, these were said to include mental health, physical health improvement, reduction of negative health behaviour, such as smoking, alcohol and drug use and changes in weight and obesity. While awareness and work in around health varied considerable across agencies it does seem that agencies do have the potential to promote health through their mediation in all of the phases of obtaining and maintaining a job.

Evidence discussed earlier does suggest that supported employment has helped to increase the numbers of people who could be described as having borderline and mild levels of learning disability in employment, and there remains a significant number of people with more significant learning disabilities unemployed.

There are advantages to targeting this more able group: their relatively low support requirements make it possible to progress many into paid work rapidly and yield greater cost savings to the taxpayer and the local authorities as they generally have lower welfare benefit incomes and tend to work longer hours.

However, it omits a large number of people. We find little evidence that people with learning disabilities with higher support requirements are benefiting from supported employment. Adult day services, special schools and colleges still show little progression in moving people with higher support needs through into paid employment.

These job seekers are people with learning disabilities requiring higher levels of support, including people with severe physical disabilities and adults currently attending adult day services who have a learning disability or a dual diagnosis. These are groups that tend to have the highest unemployment rates and are more likely to be in receipt of social and health service provision. They are also precisely the customer groups that supported employment was originally set up to support.

Funding of supported employment

It has long been recognised that people with learning disabilities often require additional specialist employment support based on the supported employment model prior to job entry. Similarly, progression through transition from schools to colleges into paid work may take more time for these groups, often requiring the preparation of a person-centred plan agreed with employers, family carers and community supports to support the new employee to fit into the workplace culture and to learn the new skills of their jobs in the most “natural” way without the need for continuous support. Given these factors, it could be hoped that the targets and financial incentives set for progression for people with learning disabilities over the last 15 years would have been realistic and reflect the fact that not everybody will progress into paid employment at the same rate. It could also be hoped that supported employment might be funded from across the system, including education and skills, employment and social care.

This does not appear to have been the case and a clear policy and funding framework for supported employment and job coaching has not emerged as evidenced by the need for the Jobs First demonstration project. It may prove the case that the Prime Provider model within Work Choice makes impractical the more intensive, longer term and more costly support required by those with severe learning disabilities. It is well evidenced that larger contracts can lead to “cherry picking” people with lesser needs in order to meet outcome targets.⁴

⁴ See for example comments from the Chair of the Committee of Public Accounts on Pathways to Work performance, 13th September, 2010.
<http://www.parliament.uk/business/committees/committees-a-z/commons-select/public-accounts-committee/news/committee-of-public-accounts-support-to-incapacity-benefits-claimants-through-pathways-to-work/>

One of the threats to specialist providers has been the possibility that Prime Providers of Work Choice who do not themselves offer specialist support do not subcontract with a representative range of specialist providers. This would reduce choice for people with learning disabilities and, at worst, could lead to there being no appropriate provision for them. These fears are not without empirical foundations – Research in USA and Canada and recent trends within the UK have shown that where a more generic approach is taken to provision, those with higher support needs lose out, and the number of agencies specialising in this area is reduced.

There is much scope for the funding agencies to consider a more seamless approach to fund a person with learning disability's progress into employment. In 2008, a British Association for Supported Employment (BASE) report (BASE, 2008; p 9) made the case that there was a lack of awareness of the diversity of funding streams. It is critical for the survival of the specialist providers of supported employment for people with learning disabilities that funding streams are brought together, and that funding is used differently across the whole of the system. Without this, it is feared that people with moderate and severe learning disabilities will be denied the accessed to the specialist support needed for them to get and keep a job.

Conclusion

Despite significant improvements in policy, not much has changed for England as a whole in terms of the numbers of people with learning disabilities employed. However, there are a number of positive developments to draw on to ensure that this number increases. There is a growing consensus that people can work, that work is beneficial in many ways to people with a learning disability, and to society. In addition, we have a more complex and realistic understanding of what it takes to change employment levels in a significant way.

The Government is continuing to define in more detail what basic standards in supported employment and job coaching are needed to deliver outcomes of employment for people with learning disabilities. It is hoped that these standards will be published in March 2011. GAL, is advancing the process of intervening earlier in the transition of people with learning disability around employment and the tools to do this effectively are emerging and are being disseminated. This seems to be providing encouraging employment outcomes. Project SEARCH is capturing the imagination of educators and employers and is providing more effective ways for employers, schools and colleges and supported employment to work together. The model appears to be delivering job outcomes and positive benefits for employers. Solid experiments in harnessing individual budgets to employment are underway through the Jobs First programme.

There are potential challenges with the economic recession including:

- Reduction in public sector funding and their workforce
- Employment not being viewed as a priority for people with a moderate and severe learning disability

- High levels of unemployment where people with learning disabilities have difficulty in competing for jobs.
- Lack of specialist supported employment provision where people with learning disabilities are well matched to jobs so that employers get the right employee, which meets their business needs.
- Funding for supported employment/job coach provision is seen as expensive and the money within the system across funding agencies cannot be used differently
- Funding agencies do not work together under increasing public sector cuts and continue in their silo-working mentality. This includes learning and skills, employment and social care.

Other challenges remain. There are still many who need to understand that employment for people with learning disabilities is positive and possible. This is amongst people with learning disabilities themselves, employers, family carers, community support providers. We need to become much better at tailoring our skills, training, further education and supported employment interventions more sensitively to the individual abilities and needs of people with learning disabilities if we are to make better progress in the next 15 years with the resources we have.

There are some clear opportunities as indicated by the research. Employment needs to be viewed as positive and possible, with better transitions for young people into employment. Funding across the system needs to be used differently, as employment has been demonstrated to be a more effective use of resources. Life in work is overall a much more effective use of resources than life dependent on day services. The attributes of people with learning disabilities as good dependable workers, when well matched to their jobs and well trained, have not changed. We know, and have now said in many policy documents, what help they need to succeed, which is high quality supported employment. It is critical that a way of funding this is found across the funding agencies is found.

It is noted by the authors that we found similar conclusions in 1997, but we are heartened by the developments since then. We are hopeful that the learning will be taken into account so that we are not drawing similar conclusions in 14 years time.

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