

Shaping Future Support – The Health and Disability Green Paper



Consultation response from the British Association for Supported Employment

This response to the consultation on the Health and Disability Green Paper, *Shaping Future Support*, is from the British Association for Supported Employment (BASE). BASE is a national membership charity that acts as an umbrella group for providers of specialist employment support. Most of our 220 member organisations support people with learning disabilities, autism and longer-term mental health needs. We are responding within that context.

We welcome the publication of the Green Paper which we have read within the context of the National Disability Strategy. The Green Paper has a focus on welfare benefit design and assessment, and the support that disabled people receive from the Department for Work and Pensions and Jobcentre Plus. It also contains a chapter on improving employment support and our focus is on responding to that particular chapter.

Overall, the Green Paper feels unnecessarily long, technical and not ambitious enough. It acknowledges that disabled people's experience of interacting with Government services is not wholly positive. We welcome DWP's ambition to improve the quality of its customer-facing services. Systems and provision should be designed to meet customer needs rather than internal requirements and convenience. The language of the Green Paper feels defensive at times and we would urge DWP to look honestly at how its services are perceived by customers and how it engages with those customers.

Improving Employment Support

The chapter on improving employment support opens by stating that the disability employment rate has increased by 8.4% since comparable records began in 2014 and that the number of disabled people in work has grown by 800,000 over the last 3 years. The move to absolute targets, rather than a relative target is problematic as it fails to take account of increased disclosure of disability conditions and a general growth in the labour market. The Work and Pensions Committee report into the Disability Employment Gap¹ acknowledges that the disability employment gap has reduced from 33.6% to 28.8% from 2015 to date. This is not reflected in the experience of people with a learning disability or autism who face an employment gap of over 60%.

Indeed, the ASCOF employment indicator 1E² shows a steady decline in employment rates for people with a learning disability known to social care, falling from 7.1% in 2011-12 to 5.6% in 2019-20.

¹ <https://publications.parliament.uk/pa/cm5802/cmselect/cmworpen/189/18902.htm>

² <https://digital.nhs.uk/data-and-information/publications/statistical/adult-social-care-outcomes-framework-ascof/measures-from-the-adult-social-care-outcomes-framework-england-2019-20>

While we welcome the fact that DWP is seeking evidence about “what works”, it is frustrating that after 70 years of disability employment support, it still isn’t clear about how it should best support disabled people into sustainable employment. This is exacerbated by the rapid turnover of departmental officials and the subsequent corporate memory loss. We risk constant change and the reinventing of support programmes.

There is a growing consensus that locally commissioned services that can reach out to customers are best placed to harness local stakeholder engagement and action. The Work and Pensions Committee recommends that *“DWP should reimagine fundamentally how it provides employment support to disabled people. We recommend that DWP should carry out a significant expansion of the number of Devolved Deal Areas, granting more powers to local authorities to set up their own localised version of the Work and Health Programme...”*

The default position should be that groups of local authorities, perhaps based on the recently-defined NHS integrated care system boundaries, where they have the will and capacity to do so, are responsible for delivering employment support for disabled people. DWP should provide funding and support to enable them to do this...

Where they want to and can, local authorities should have the power to commission their own employment support programmes. They should work closely with the Department for Health and Social Care (or devolved administrations as appropriate), the NHS, the third sector, and education and training providers to achieve this.”

We believe that it is time to recognise that different models of support will work best for different customer cohorts. There is widespread support for Individual Placement and Support (IPS) services and we await full data from the trials underway. This is an evidence-based model rooted in Supported Employment, a technique used globally for over 40 years to support people with higher support needs. We welcome the roll-out of IPS services and recommend a similar programme of support for people with learning disabilities and autism. The proposed DWP Supported Employment Trailblazer, announced in the Green Paper and National Disability Strategy, will see 1,200 people supported towards employment over the 18-month length of the trial. **We welcome the Supported Employment Trailblazer, which follows a previous Proof of Concept, and hope that DWP will be more ambitious in seeking to expand and lengthen the trial if it delivers positive results.**

We simply don’t know how well current programmes are meeting the work aspirations of the different cohorts of disabled people. The Work and Health Programme no longer has a breakdown of customer entries and outcomes by disability type. We have not seen any published statistics for the Intensive Personalised Employment Support (IPES) programme which was recently expanded by 25%. The ASCOF indicator 1E is unnecessarily complicated and unreliable as data is compared differently across the various local authorities. **We urge DWP and the Department of Health and Social Care (DHSC) to engage with stakeholders to reform ASCOF indicator 1E.** The recent autism employment rate indicator will take time to produce reliable data and the confidence range is such that we’re not sure where employment rates lie between 14% or 28%. We need more reliable data.

Early Intervention

Consultation question:

- What more could we do to further support employers to improve work opportunities for disabled people through Access to Work and Disability Confident?

We strongly support the recommendations made about Access to Work in the Centre for Social Justice report, *Now is the Time*³. While the Access to Work Passport is a good idea, it will not be the silver bullet to fixing Access to Work. The programme has steadily become more bureaucratic and unresponsive since the introduction of call centres to handle applications. We receive continual complaints of lost paperwork, closed cases, delays with applications and claims, and poor communications. BASE has been in discussions with DWP for over 4 years about improving the programme but customers continue to experience problems. The programme principles are the envy of Europe but Access to Work is in danger of developing a poor reputation amongst customers, employers and providers.

Urgent action is needed to make the programme fit for purpose. It needs to move away from a need for wet signatures so that third party representatives can communicate digitally with DWP advisors. The payments system needs updating so that payments can be reconciled against claims. The requirement for 3 quotes needs to be reformed and payment rates need to be standardised.

We urge DWP to engage with stakeholders to produce solutions for the many problems experienced by disabled people, employers and providers about Access to Work.

The Disability Confident initiative is increasingly well-recognised amongst employers but there have been relatively few awards at Level 3 and little penetration into small to medium enterprises. Level 1 and 2 awards are straight forward to attain and make few demands of employers. Over 20,000 employers have signed up to the initiative, yet only 372 are Disability Confident Leaders. There is a general lack of accountability within the kitemark system.

We urge mandatory reporting of disability employment rates and disability pay gaps for organisations employing over 250 people. Employers should be required to commit to moving up from level 1 to levels 2 and 3. Employers who do not move up from level 1 after three years should be stripped of their accreditation and barred from applying for level 1 accreditation again for a further 3 years. **Levels 2 and 3 should contain stronger criteria regarding the proportion of their workforce that is disabled.** We are not aware of a single employer that has had its accreditation removed and the initiative has not been evaluated.

Disability Confident should contain a “one-stop shop” for information aimed at employers. This should signpost employers to high quality practical advice and support organisations. There should be an action plan to dramatically increase the initiative’s visibility amongst small to medium enterprises.

³ <https://www.centreforsocialjustice.org.uk/library/now-is-the-time-a-report-by-the-csj-disability-commission>

Consultation question:

- How can we support people who have fallen out of work to identify and consider suitable alternative work before their WCA?

We support the proposal to offer early intervention for people awaiting a work capability assessment. This seems eminently sensible. The earlier we can help people back into work the better for all concerned. Support has to be appropriate to individual needs and we believe there should be much more flexibility in allowing people to move between programmes where it is clearly not meeting their needs. This would mitigate some of the “parking” that otherwise occurs.

Benefit entitlement should be a separate process to identifying employment support needs. The stress caused by benefit assessment has led to many families supporting their sons and daughters financially so that they don’t enter the benefits system. This is particularly the case with neurodiversity conditions. Unfortunately, this means that they may not be eligible for certain employment support programmes such as the Supported Employment Proof of Concept. **We recommend that all DWP funded employment support is open to non-claimants.**

Ensuring Jobcentres Are Welcoming, Engaging and Expert

We strongly support the proposed move away from conditionality. The welfare benefits system should provide a strong safety net for individuals but should encourage people to try out employment options. **We regret the loss of the 104-week linking rules and recommend the development of a modern equivalent that allows people in the Employment & Support Allowance (ESA) Support Group and Work-Related Activity Group the chance to try out work without being reassessed if employment doesn’t work out for them within a 2-year period.** Currently, trying work might trigger a reassessment on to Universal Credit with its lower work allowances. This discourages people from considering employment.

Disabled people face punitive taper on earning whilst claiming Universal Credit. The current taper rate is 63% but people face an additional 20% deductions from earnings for Council Tax benefit. This does not encourage people to try work or extend their working hours. **We urge further consideration of how the different tapers work together to encourage or hinder employment aspirations.**

We also need to ensure that disabled people are supported into well-matched jobs so that sustainability is improved. Statistics for the Work and Health Programme⁴ show about 20-25% of disabled people starting the programme achieve a paid job outcome. We don’t know how long they keep that job. We recommend that DWP examine the churn of disabled people between jobs as we should encourage better placements so that work is sustained and investment offers better returns. Along with improved job retention support, this will reduce the numbers of disabled people leaving employment and re-entering the benefits system.

⁴ <https://www.gov.uk/government/statistics/work-and-health-programme-statistics-to-may-2021>

Consultation question:

- What further support or information would help work coaches to have more effective conversations with disabled people and people with health conditions?

We support giving Work Coaches more discretion about how they best support jobseekers. We have seen a dramatic rise in the number of Work Coaches but this has not been matched by a commensurate increase in the number of Disability Employment Advisors (DEAs). Generic Work Coaches often have limited knowledge about the impact of disability conditions and rely on the specialist support that DEAs can provide.

One of the major problems that jobseekers face is communicating with jobcentres, particularly if they are unable to attend in person. It is very difficult to find contact numbers for jobcentres and even more difficult to speak directly with their advisor. **We recommend that Work Coaches make their work email address available directly to customers.**

Work Coaches must be trained more extensively and have excellent local knowledge regarding services and support to signpost to. Referrals made must be appropriate if they are to support positive outcomes and not just be a tick box exercise. Jobcentre Plus staff need to understand the benefits of right support, right person, right time and make timely and considered referrals when signposting and not adopt a one size fits all approach. **Investment into the upskilling and training of Work Coaches is a must to ensure this is achieved.**

Personalising employment Support

Consultation questions:

- What has been your experience of receiving employment support? What was good about the support? Are there further improvements that could be made?
- How can we make the most of the knowledge and expertise of local organisations to support disabled people and people with health conditions into employment?

The Green Paper states that DWP have invested in developing an evidence base of what works. The department recognises that “one size does not fit all” and goes on to describe the value of flexible, tailored, ongoing support provided by a trained person that the jobseeker trusts. We’ve long known that local, tailored support works. It enables local engagement and facilitates local partnership solutions to meet labour market and customer needs.

Up to now, DWP has maintained a strong focus on national programmes covering large geographical contract areas. The DWP procurement strategy discourages the involvement of specialist, local providers. **We would like to see more devolved responsibility for meeting employment needs.** As the Green Paper states, people have more trust in local services and are more likely to engage.

What the DWP describes as “the hardest to help⁵” are actually the hardest to reach, not to help. They are an untapped workforce who are motivated to work but unable to access support

⁵ Flexible Support Fund Dynamic Purchasing System 2: pre-launch market event slides

designed to meet their needs. Mainstream employment programmes are simply failing to engage with them adequately. The Green Paper lists the range of provision available to disabled jobseekers but there is no analysis of how effective they are.

We believe that different forms of support should be made available to the different customer cohorts. The needs of someone with a learning disability will be very different to the needs of someone who is partially sighted.

BASE strongly supports the roll-out of IPS services and the Supported Employment Trailblazer and we urge DWP and the NHS to be more ambitious in expanding this provision. They offer a clear evidence-based response to meeting the employment aspirations of some of the most excluded sections of our communities.

Consultation question:

- What more could we do to work with other organisations and service providers, local authorities, health systems and the devolved administrations to provide employment support in health settings and join up local support?

Local authorities, service providers and health systems have already joined up local services but need adequate funding to maintain and expand this provision. DWP does not need to control and commission all employment support all by themselves. They can collaborate with local partnerships to ensure that the right range of provision is available to jobseekers across the country. Greater Manchester has shown how this can be achieved through the Working Well suite of programmes.

Consultation questions:

- What can we offer that would encourage people in the Support Group or LCWRA to take up our employment support?

As stated previously, the benefit system should offer a reliable safety net whilst encouraging people to try out work. By and large, these customer groups don't engage with the national employment programmes and a local offer is more likely to succeed in encouraging customer engagement and address barriers by collaborating with local partners.

We are pleased that the UK Shared Prosperity Fund (UKSPF) will support specialist provision for these groups but wonder why DWP does not see this as a key part of their remit and core budget.

The research⁶ quoted in the Green Paper is interesting. It found that, *“Additional areas of support claimants wanted revolved around the concept of a dedicated support worker who would provide, for instance, in-work support to resolve any problems when starting a new job, and help with*

⁶ <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/work-aspirations-and-support-needs-of-claimants-in-the-esa-support-group-and-universal-credit-equivalent/summary-the-work-aspirations-and-support-needs-of-claimants-in-the-esa-support-group-and-universal-credit-equivalent>

returning to benefits if work could not be sustained. Some claimants also wanted support with wider issues, including issues with housing, finances and debt, emphasising the importance of offering support that addresses claimants' needs holistically.

How support is delivered was also important. Claimants desired continuity of support over a sustained period of time, from someone with good interpersonal skills and lived experience of disability (or an in-depth understanding), to allow trust to develop. This also meant that claimants were hesitant to take up support where they thought this might only be on offer short-term (for instance, where they thought organisations might be closed down or have their funding withdrawn)."

This sounds like the model that Supported Employment offers and this holistic support is better achieved on a local basis.

Consultation questions:

- Would you be happy to access employment support digitally? Please tell us why/why not.
- What should we consider when developing a digital support offer for disabled people and people with health conditions?

For some people, digital access to employment support will work well. For others, it won't. Many disabled people have little in the way of digital access and skills. It should be an option but not the only option. It is not clear why DWP think that digital services are more accessible than face-to-face support. In our experience, personal and direct contact is more reassuring and engaging.

Consultation question:

- How can we better support young disabled people who are moving out of education to find appropriate work?

This section feels like an afterthought within the Green Paper and is not comprehensively addressed. We also await publication of the Department for Education (DfE) SEND Review. **It is good to see the DWP commitment to working closely with DfE to encourage better job outcomes for young disabled people and we welcome the Access to Work-funded job coaching support offered to young people in supported internships.** However, as with other areas of Access to Work operations, it isn't without its difficulties. The system is incredibly bureaucratic and providers face extreme difficulties in managing the system and its administrative burden. The whole system falls apart if appointees are involved and we have come across providers who have yet to receive payments of around £40,000. This threatens the viability of specialist support agencies and has to be resolved.

We know that young disabled people with learning disabilities are unlikely to ever work if they don't enter paid employment by the age of 25 Years. It is vital that there is continued employment support when they leave education, whether with or without a job, otherwise they face a potential cliff edge in their support. DWP can fund provision which will get people on the right provision whilst they are still in education, be this DWP-funded provision, IPS, or local authority-commissioned services. This will ensure that people do not become de-skilled whilst waiting to get on the right provision, and their employment journey can continue more effectively.

Further information

Contact Huw Davies (Chief Executive, BASE)

Email: huw.davies@base-uk.org

Tel: 01204 880733