

Written evidence from Unity Works (DEG0001)

About Us:

Unity Works is a new organisation supporting people with a learning disability. It has been established by The Camden Society, building on our existing supported employment, training, community well-being, and social enterprise work. We support people with a learning disability to gain skills, qualifications and jobs so they can reach their full potential.

Our response to this call to evidence has been populated from feedback from our employment team who work to broker jobs for people with a learning disability. We work with people across London which often includes individuals from isolated/vulnerable groups.

Due to the nature of our work, all our responses are specifically written with people with a learning disability in mind.

1. Progress so far and impact:

1.1 What progress has been made, especially since 2015, on closing the disability employment gap? How has this progress been made?

Not as much as we would have hoped. Since 2012, employment rates have fallen for people with a learning disability from approx. 11% to 5.6%. This is pre-covid, and during lockdown, people affected by redundancy were most likely to work in sectors and roles that people with disabilities are more likely to work in e.g. hospitality, the arts, catering, retail

There is greater awareness of invisible disabilities (e.g. NAS stat of 99.6% of people have heard of autism) but this is not equal across all sectors of employment. It remains very hard to challenge an employer over not offering interviews/roles to someone who declares a disability. Language remains problematic e.g. SEN/D, and there is little research on what kind of support and interventions support people with disabilities to attain and sustain jobs.

Funding for specialist supported employment services is effective. In 2019/20, our employment team supported 325 people with a learning disability with employment support. 72 people were successful in finding work and 200 attended job interviews. Despite these successes, our candidates have been hit hard by the impact COVID-19 has had on the job market. As of September 2020, 42 people we have supported into work are on furlough, 42 people have returned to work and a further 48 people have been made redundant. We remain concerned that a large proportion of those on furlough will ultimately lose their jobs.

1.2 What is the economic impact of low employment and high economic inactivity rates for disabled people? Are some disabled people (for example, young disabled people or people with different health conditions) more at risk of unemployment or economic activity than others?

Yes. Disabled people as a group more at risk, other groups also more at risk e.g. young people. Many studies are missing voices of intersectional groups e.g. black disabled people, but the T&F study does look at this and finds gender differences, eg.

Further information on this question can be found here:

CAB research: (<https://www.citizensadvice.org.uk/about-us/how-citizens-advice-works/media/press-releases/parents-carers-and-disabled-people-at-least-twice-as-likely-to-face-redundancy-warns-citizens-advice/>)

IES: <https://www.employment-studies.co.uk/resource/labour-market-statistics-november-2020>

T&F:

<https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/abs/10.1080/09687599.2019.1702506?journalCode=cdo20>

To complicate it, support programmes for people with disabilities may be age limited, meaning a cliff edge for those 25+ or without a formal diagnosis/support plan/EHCP.

We also work with a number of college students with a learning disability have also raised concerns that they are at risk of not accessing the right career opportunities they might have accessed pre-pandemic. For example, for supported internships leavers, the roles they were aiming for may not still be available due to budgets, or interruptions during their internship affecting their skills retention. Those who can make use of technology such as Zoom are doing better than those who find this hard- widening the gap in skills, inclusion and wellbeing. They have also had their opportunities for work experience, volunteering and jobs affected by pandemic e.g. charity shops, cafes, FOH, guest hosts

1.3 What has been the impact of the coronavirus pandemic on disabled peoples' employment rates?

As detailed in the IES link above (1.1), disabled people are more represented in roles within the arts, leisure, retail, hospitality and catering sectors, which were and continue to be hardest hit by lockdown. They have also been more at risk of redundancy in these same sectors.

There is also greater competition for remaining roles. Networking is a key skill and if an employer's business (or key contact's own role) is at risk, they are less likely to prioritise accommodating us and our candidates.

We also need to consider that at the beginning of lockdown, a blanket approach to people with a learning disability being clinically vulnerable was taken by PHE resulting in people with a learning disability in work being asked to self-isolate and unable to continue working.

The covid pandemic has also forced us to crash test the idea that flexible working can work e.g. better use of tech, WFH, flexible hours, part-furlough, job carving. Whilst a more flexible way of

working can be seen as of benefit to people with a learning disability, more work needs doing to ensure that people with a learning disability aren't disproportionately affected by the digital divide. This new way of working cannot also be seen as a replacement for all jobs.

2. Providing support:

2.1 Where should lead responsibility for improving disabled peoples' employment rates sit (for example, DWP; Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy; Health and Social Care)?

Lead responsibility should sit with local authorities. Local businesses should be required to be part of BIDs (business improvement districts), help advertise roles to diverse people and provide training or accreditation around diversity. LAs should also lead on providing a way of reporting discriminatory practices.

Employers should also be required to publish a disability pay gap data (especially key employers such as Big 4) similar to that of the gender pay gap report.

2.2 What is the right balance between in and out of work support, and is DWP getting the balance right? What more should the Department look to provide?

There's not currently enough in-work support included as part of employment contracts. It should be possible to refer people who are in work and either facing issues or wanting to progress in their careers- especially if they are on zero hours. In addition, Access to Work must be streamlined. DWP should hold a directory of free and low-cost reasonable adjustments e.g. recommended assistive tech apps for smart phones

We also need to look at alternative measurements of success that having individuals come off benefits. Rather, changes are needed so that the system doesn't stop people from being able to work; including flexible, portable benefits are needed that allow people to move to areas where there are more (and more suitable) jobs. Specialist programmes can help people return-to-work when they include personalisation rather than sharp targets. Intensive in-work support with employer subsidies can make a difference. Early intervention can help, including better workplace practices and responsive health systems, as well as a healthy psychosocial work environment

2.3 How can DWP better support employers to take on and retain disabled employees, and to help them progress in work?

DWP should signpost employers to providers who can accredit them for Disability Confident L3 and promote diversity through large scale campaigns (similar on scale to the current Brexit campaign).

DWP should also maintain knowledge and links with organisations like ours that can assist and train and support both employers and employees in work and to make changes necessary to ensure employee keeps job and gets progression.

2.4 How effective is the Disability Confident scheme?

Further work is required to ensure that the Disability Confident scheme meets its aims. There needs to be more checks around the ease in which employers can obtain the first stage of becoming disability confident without having to change much internal practice. It would also be useful to look more closely at the

Another way of monitoring the effectiveness of the DC scheme is to ask employees and job seekers whether they feel that vacancies have opened up in sectors where there is a high number of employers with DC status.

2.5 What improvements should DWP make to the support it offers to unemployed disabled people via Jobcentre Plus?

DWP should look at the following ways to make the support it offers to people with a learning disability via JCP:

- how best to use specialist providers
- Develop and run specialised focus groups for job seekers
- Offer counselling sessions
- Offer better training for its work coaches- from specialist providers contracted to provide support to disabled jobseekers. This would help promote integration and allows information sharing.
- Ensure that their staff teams complete disability awareness training through a specialist provider.

In addition, initial referral/ signposting of unemployed disabled person and those with hidden disabilities should be made to the correct support agency within Job Centre at beginning of claim – rather than clients becoming frustrated because their needs are not met – e.g. those with dyslexia etc.

2.6 The coronavirus pandemic continues to make it difficult to offer in-person support. What evidence is there of “best practice” in supporting disabled people remotely—either in or out of work?

- Use of digital apps such as How Do I?
- Remote job coaching via Zoom, FaceTime, WhatsApp
- Mentoring for manager, team and employees from specialist providers

- Training and forum discussions through membership organisations, relationships with providers and BIDs
- Organising meeting of employers / ask the employer sessions and virtual job fairs
- Better awareness of current PHE guidelines: If a job seeker needs a 'support worker' present in order to engage with something, according to LD England the individual in the support role does not count as an additional person. I.e. if there is a limit on the number of people allowed in a space due to social distancing guidelines, the support person does not count towards that number.

2.7 How can DWP put this into practice in services such as Access to Work and the Work and Health Programme?

DWP needs to ensure better organisation and marketing, listening and collaboration with organisations like ours.

It's important to note that people and employers need support to access ATW. We would be looking at DWP reinstating 3rd party consent in completing ATW.

3. Enforcement and next steps:

3.1 Are "reasonable adjustments" for disabled people consistently applied? How might enforcement be improved?

We're not finding that this is the case (especially in SMEs). Reasonable adjustments tend to go out the window when there is a change of work supervisors which can result in clients leaving jobs. Ensuring that employers join BIDS would also help with enforcing reasonable adjustments.

3.2 What would you hope to see in the Government's National Strategy for Disabled People?

The strategy needs to listen to disabled people- one key issue was the title. Originally it was 'a national disability strategy' which may seem small but disabled people felt that by changing it to 'for disabled people' it made it sound less about inclusivity and accessibility and empowerment and more viewing disabled people as a passive group to have things enacted for them, not by them.

The strategy will also need to shine the spotlight on different needs and challenges. It must not shy away from hard topics such as mental health but challenge and facilitate proactive approaches at work. We would also hope that it promotes solutions such as job carving, flexitime, 4 day weeks etc.

3.3 How should DWP look to engage disabled people and the organisations that represent them in formulating the Strategy?

DWP should launch a series of social media campaigns to engage with people and/or their advocates. This should also involve the setup of an enhanced and dedicated team to market, collaborate with organisations, relate back to departments and between disabled people.

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