

Written evidence from Tom Pollard (DEG0003)

My background and expertise

I have worked on mental health social policy for over twelve years, with a particular focus on social security and employment. I have held a range of relevant roles:

- I was Parliamentary Researcher for Lynne Jones MP for a year from 2008, when she chaired the All Party Parliamentary Group on Mental Health.
- I spent over six years in Mind's Policy and Campaigns Unit from 2010, holding a number of positions including Manager of the Social Inclusion and Rights Team.
- While at Mind, I also spent time as the Co-Chair of the Disability Benefits Consortium and the Policy Chair of the Disability Charities Consortium.
- In 2016 I was asked by DWP to join on secondment as a Senior Mental Health Policy Advisor - I spent 18 months working on benefit reform and employment support.

Since leaving DWP, I have spent two years training and working as a Mental Health Social Worker within NHS community mental health services in Camden. I have also worked as a policy consultant and freelancer and have produced two reports as an independent expert:

- In January 2019 I published [Pathways from Poverty: A case for institutional reform](#) with Demos, which explained why, based on my time on secondment, I felt DWP was culturally and institutionally incapable of effectively supporting disabled people.
- In October 2020 my report with New Local, [This Isn't Working: Reimagining employment support for people facing complex disadvantage](#), set out how a localised, community-led approach to employment support could overcome the problems in the DWP-led system.

Although my response to the call-for-evidence below draws on these two reports, I would humbly suggest reading both of these separately, as they are both highly relevant to the inquiry and provide a much greater level of detail and references to other evidence than I have provided in the submission below. I have shaped my response around the questions in the call-for-evidence that were most relevant to my experience and expertise. I'd be very happy to provide further written or oral evidence if this would be helpful to the Committee.

Progress so far and impact

Having worked on issues related to disability benefits and employment over the last twelve years, I would say that, overall, there has not been significant positive progress made in this time. However, I believe that this issue needs to be considered from different angles:

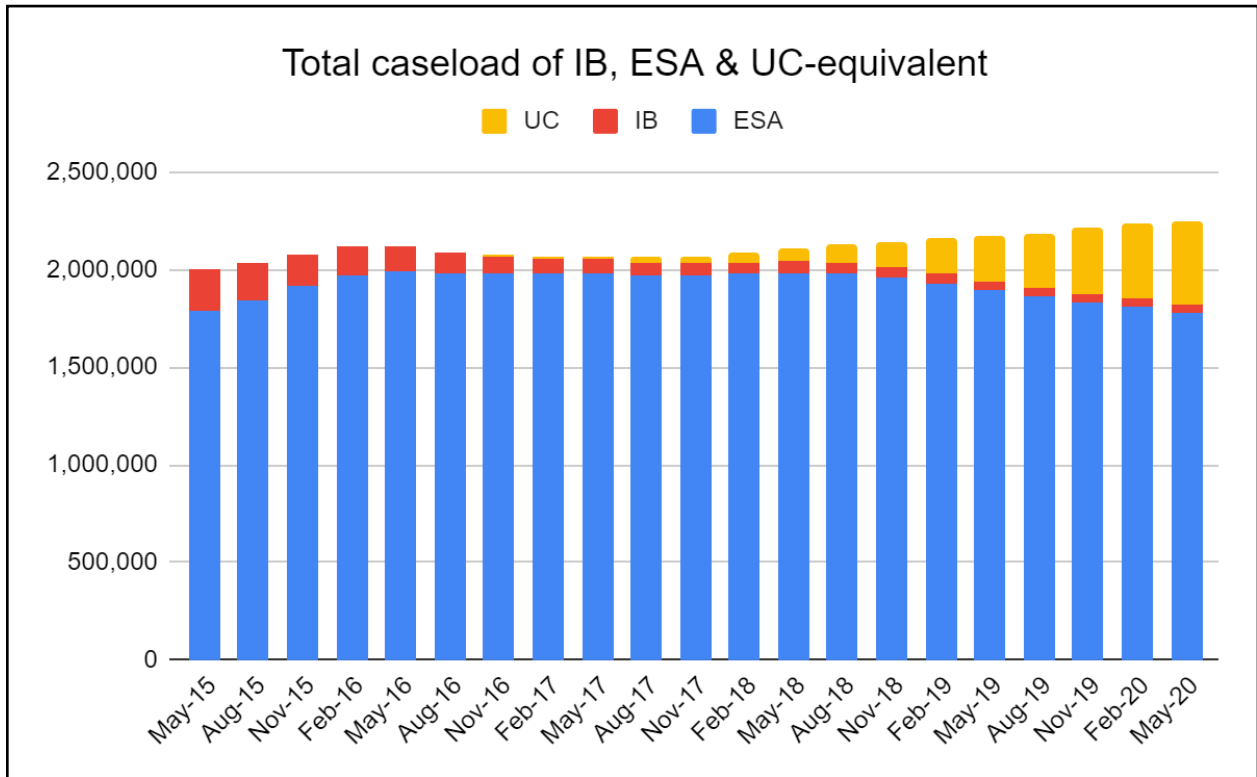
- *The Disability Employment Gap (DEG)*: Although there has been a steady decline in the official DEG figures since late 2015, research suggests that this trend “is accounted for by the expansion in disability prevalence and not by any reduction in underlying disability employment disadvantage”.¹ DEG is a useful indicator but it is not sufficient for demonstrating meaningful progress. For example, if many non-disabled people fall out of work in the aftermath of COVID19, we could see the DEG shrink, but not because of any positive progress in the employment prospects or experiences of disabled people.
- *Disabled people in employment*: As indicated in the DEG research cited above, there has been an increase in the number of people classified as disabled due to changing definitions and methods of recording disability. It also seems likely that more people will be willing to disclose disabilities such as mental health problems as the social stigma attached to this decreases. These are positive trends, as it means more people are having their experiences recognised and, hopefully, responded to appropriately. However, it doesn’t tell us much about whether people who are out-of-work due (in part or entirely) to a disability or health condition face more or less disadvantage.
- *Disability-related unemployment benefits*: DWP’s main focus and area of influence when it comes to disability employment is the benefits it administers for people out-of-work due to disabilities and health conditions, and the associated support it provides and commissions to help them return to employment. The chart below (data sourced from DWP’s [Stat-Xplore tool](#)) compiles the numbers of people on ESA, older incapacity benefits (IB), and the ESA-equivalent groups on Universal Credit (i.e. those marked as having limited capability for work or work related activity²) over the last five years. The chart shows that the overall caseload has grown by over 12% during the last five years (while the overall population has grown by just over 3%³ and the proportion of working-age adults in employment had grown by over 3 percentage points until the start of the

¹ Wass, V. & Jones, M. (2020) [Measuring disability and interpreting trends in disability-related disadvantage](#). *Disability At Work*

² Unfortunately, Stat-Xplore only shows whether a household claim includes at least one person with either of these markers, so the UC figures in this chart are likely to be an underestimate.

³ ONS (2019) [Overview of the UK population: August 2019](#).

COVID19 pandemic⁴). This suggests very little progress has been made over this five year period in supporting people from these benefits into employment.



It is this third angle on disability employment that my submission will focus on, as it is the area I have most expertise and experience, and the one where DWP has the most potential to make a significant impact on disabled people’s experiences and outcomes. However, the current reality is that only around 4% of people on the ESA caseload move into employment each year.⁵ Meanwhile, many disabled people report that the experience of applying for benefits, going through assessments, and undertaking ‘work related activity’ cause them significant distress and anxiety, which impacts on their mental health and their willingness to engage with support.⁶

I started my secondment to DWP on the day the ‘Work, Health and Disability Green Paper’ was launched in 2016, and was involved in many discussions during my 18 months in the department about what could be done to improve benefits and employment support with a view to closing the DEG. However, I do not believe that the scale of reform being discussed, let

⁴ ONS (2020) [Employment in the UK: November 2020](#).

⁵ DWP & DHSC (2016) [Work, Health and Disability Green Paper: Data pack](#)

⁶ Mind (2014) [We’ve got work to do: Transforming employment and back-to-work support for people with mental health problems](#); Hale, C (2014) [Fulfilling Potential? ESA and the Fate of the Work Related Activity Group](#); SSAC (2019) [The effectiveness of the claimant commitment in Universal Credit](#)

alone seriously considered, was anywhere near commensurate to the problems in the current system. Thinking in DWP is fundamentally constrained by the parameters of how things have historically been done and the huge physical and procedural infrastructure that the department oversees. This is compounded by a culture of risk-aversion and centralised control that precludes the type of radical reform I believe would be needed to make significant progress. This critique of DWP is explained more fully in my Demos paper [Pathways from Poverty: A case for institutional reform](#).

With the Government due to embark on a new consultation around their *National Strategy for Disabled People*, I am deeply concerned that the discussion will continue to be stuck within the parameters of the current DWP-led system. In the wake of the coronavirus pandemic, the case for bold reform is even more pronounced given its impact on employment and disability:

- The Institute for Fiscal Studies has predicted that the combined impact of the recession and the experience of living through coronavirus and the lockdown will result in hundreds of thousands more people experiencing long-term health conditions and disabilities, particularly mental health problems.⁷
- Many disabled people may struggle to stay in work due to the additional barriers the pandemic has created, and those seeking work may struggle to find jobs that are appropriate and supportive.⁸ As a result, we are likely to see a significant growth in the number of people on disability-related unemployment benefits.
- During periods of high unemployment in the past, people out of work due to disability have tended to find themselves at the ‘back of the queue’ for jobs, compounding the barriers to employment they already face.⁹

Providing support

I have responded to a number of the questions posed in this section of the call-for-evidence below, but under headings relating to what I see as the key ingredients required to significantly improve outcomes and experiences for disabled people engaging with employment support.

Developing helping relationships

⁷ IFS (2020) [Recessions and health: The long-term health consequences of responses to coronavirus](#)

⁸ Scope (2020) [Disability employment faces a cliff edge](#)

⁹ Beatty, C. Fothergill, S. Macmillan, R. (2000) [A theory of employment, unemployment and sickness](#), *Regional Studies*, vol 34, pp 617-630.

The fundamental flaw at the heart of the DWP-led system of employment support for disabled people is the assumption that it is particular actions, activities or interventions that will lead someone into work, and that people therefore need to be pushed towards these. However, its own seminal review of which of these actions, activities and interventions made the most difference concluded that “the circumstances and context of engagement between adviser and customer, is as (if not more) important than the specificities of types of provision”.¹⁰ Despite having access to this insight 13 years ago, the structure and culture of DWP, with its heavy focus on policy and procedure, has not allowed it to meaningfully act upon it.

Helping relationships, characterised by trust, rapport and understanding have been shown to be strongly predictive of positive outcomes in a range of settings and services, including employment support.¹¹ The need for such relationships is even more pronounced for disabled people, who may well lack confidence about their ability to work or even engage with support.¹² Those providing this support need to be highly skilled at building such relationships, including being able to hear and understand what it is like for someone experiencing a disability or long-term health condition, and the difficult social circumstances that often accompany this. They also need to have the knowledge, time and resources to be able to help the person to address the range of barriers that might stand in the way of them moving into work.

During my time at DWP, the department commissioned some research into what life was like for people who had recently been placed in the ESA WRAG. It showed that people have often suffered not just a decline in their health or disability, but a loss of status, confidence, routine and purpose. Moving from this situation to finding your way back into employment is a very difficult transition to make. For people who have been in this situation for a long time, as many on these benefits have, their routine and outlook can become very entrenched. This has been reflected in my experience of supporting people as a Social Worker in a community mental health team. People tend to find some kind of equilibrium and way of life within difficult circumstances and the idea of disrupting this is deeply challenging and unsettling.

The internal discussions in response to these findings demonstrated how difficult it would be for DWP to undertake reform on the scale needed to be able to foster the types of relationships needed to support people to make these profound transitions. Modest proposals such as giving someone a cup of tea when they came to the Jobcentre were quickly shot down due to health

¹⁰ Hasluck, C. Green, A.E (2007) [What works for whom? A review of evidence and meta-analysis](#). DWP Research Report No 407

¹¹ Ravn, R. L. and Bredgaard, T. (2020) [Relationships Matter – The Impact of Working Alliances in Employment Services](#). *Social Policy and Society*. Cambridge University Press, pp. 1–18

¹² DWP (2020) [The Work Aspirations and Support Needs of Claimants in the ESA Support Group and Universal Credit equivalent](#)

and safety fears. The focus was on how current services and processes could be tweaked to improve interactions with 'claimants', rather than recognising that there was a fundamental breakdown in trust between DWP and people it supports, particularly those with disabilities. My recent research with New Local reinforced this, as local employment support providers spoke about distancing themselves from DWP to avoid being tarnished by its reputation.

This lack of trust is caused by the nature of the relationship between DWP and the people it supports - framed as it is around them being first and foremost 'benefit claimants', who are expected to fulfil certain responsibilities in exchange for financial support. This creates a huge power imbalance, with most disabled people seeing the DWP's role as being about gatekeeping and policing the benefits system rather than being a genuine source of support.¹³ The current system is built around an expectation of compliance on the part of those receiving support rather than placing the onus of responsibility on those providing support to genuinely engage people. This was reflected in internal concerns about how to respond to growing numbers of people in the ESA Support Group without having the power to mandate any activity.

To understand the scale of change that is needed in the relationship between DWP and disabled people, a useful historical analogy is the evolution of mental health services over the last 40 years. The gradual move away from more coercive approaches has been driven not just by ethical concerns but by evidence that giving people more choice and control over their support leads to better outcomes.¹⁴ This ongoing process has required an explicit rebalancing of power between service providers and service users. Unless a similar shift is achieved within disability employment support, facilitating the types of relationships described above, there is little chance of achieving significant progress in helping this group move from benefits into work.

Coordinating holistic support

People who are unemployed due to disabilities or long-term health conditions are often also experiencing a range of interrelated social disadvantages such as poverty, debt, issues with housing, and low educational attainment; and in some cases more severe issues such as drug and alcohol misuse, homelessness, and contact with the criminal justice system.¹⁵ The barriers this group face in moving into employment are deeply complex, and so effective support needs to be able to understand and respond to this complexity. Emerging evidence about how to

¹³ Glover, B. (2019) [Pathways from Poverty: The Future of the DWP](#). Demos

¹⁴ Stanhope, V. et al (2013). [Examining the Relationship between Choice, Therapeutic Alliance and Outcomes in Mental Health Services](#). *Journal of personalized medicine*, 3(3), 191–202.

¹⁵ JRF (2003) [Social exclusion and the onset of disability](#); Hughes, C. and Avoke, S. K. (2010) [The Elephant in the Room: Poverty, Disability, and Employment](#), *Research and Practice for Persons with Severe Disabilities*, 35(1–2), pp. 5–14.

commission and fund services that are able to respond effectively to complexity suggests that, in this context, outcomes are achieved through the collective effort of multiple sources of support, rather than through the work of one service.¹⁶ Given this, and the central importance of relationships as discussed above, the question should be which services are best placed to engage with this group, and at what level is this range of services best coordinated in order to ensure they are working effectively and efficiently towards a set of common objectives.

In my recent report with New Local, [*This Isn't Working: Reimagining employment support for people facing complex disadvantage*](#), we argued that responsibility for providing employment support for disabled people and others facing complex disadvantage should sit with local ecosystems of support made up of health and social care services and the third sector. These ecosystems should be coordinated by local authorities based on extensive and meaningful community engagement. Services should be designed and delivered in collaboration with those who will use them, to ensure they reflect people's needs and aspirations, and have their trust and support. Employment should be a key objective across the whole ecosystem, but should sit alongside other objectives such as improving people's health and wellbeing.

The challenge of supporting more disabled people into work needs to be fundamentally reframed from being something for DWP, Jobcentres and the benefits system to address, to being something that is embedded across the range of services disabled people engage with locally. Local areas need the power and resources to properly coordinate and fund these services. Efforts being made by DWP to move this group into employment have been directly undermined by insufficient funding and coordination of this wider local ecosystem of support over many years. Meanwhile, the efforts of these local ecosystems are often undermined by having to deal with the impact that interactions with DWP have on people they support. DWP should be repositioned as a catalyst for better support for this group, that is designed and delivered locally in collaboration with communities, rather than trying to directly intervene to achieve outcomes from Whitehall, at which it has consistently proven ineffective.

Creating opportunities

The political narrative around benefits, and the manifestation of this in policy, places the onus of responsibility on individuals to find their way back into work, as a condition of the financial support they receive. However, this is completely at odds with a social model of disability, which suggests that the barriers disabled people face are due to how society responds to them. Employment support tends to focus on trying to shape the individual to meet the expectations of the labour market, but an approach that embraced the social model would also consider how

¹⁶ Brossard, M. Davidson Knight, A. Lowe, T. Wilson, J. (2017) [A Whole New World: Funding and Commissioning in Complexity](#); Collaborate for Social Change

to shape the labour market to be more accessible to disabled people. A holistic, localised approach to employment support for this group has a much greater chance of achieving this.

An example of what such an approach could look like in practice is the idea of 'job brokerage' and how this is interpreted within a DWP-led setting, such as a Jobcentre, compared to how it is understood in a localised and specialist setting, such as a third sector provider. A Jobcentre might have contacts with local employers so that they are notified about upcoming vacancies and can try to help people to apply for these. A local specialist provider would embark on a much more intensive process - proactively approaching specific employers based on the skills and aspirations of the individual they are supporting and seeking opportunities that match these. Many providers will even try to work with employers to 'carve' specific roles that may not have the exact job description the employer had in mind, but will play to the strengths of the individual they are supporting. They will offer ongoing support to both the employer and employee.

At a broader level, local authorities with more power and resources to commit to the task could look to actively shape their local labour market to be more inclusive and to offer opportunities that will be relevant and accessible to residents who have been out of work for longer periods of time due to the complex disadvantages they face. National government can support these efforts through legislation, regulation and policy to protect against discrimination, promote health and wellbeing in the workplace, and encourage more inclusive labour markets and employment practice. Measures to encourage greater flexibility around work and shorter working hours would benefit all employees but would also make work more accessible to many disabled people. However, internal discussion around greater intervention in the labour market and workplace is muted within DWP, due to a fear of being seen to put additional 'burdens' on business. Schemes such as Disability Confident are benign enough, but seem to have little meaningful impact on employment opportunities or experiences for disabled people, which is reflected by the lack of hard outcomes measured in evaluations of the scheme.

Ensuring stability and security

Alongside fundamentally reshaping support and doing more to proactively foster opportunities for disabled people, the other key ingredient in helping more disabled people into employment is providing a stable and secure base from which they can work towards this ambition. Trying to make ends meet on a low income, and having limited control over how you use your time, causes stress and anxiety and leads to diminished 'cognitive bandwidth', which limits your ability to make good decisions and engage in constructive activity.¹⁷ The pernicious idea

¹⁷ Mullainathan, S., & Shafir, E. (2013) *Scarcity: Why having too little means so much*. Penguin Books;

entrenched in the debate around benefits and employment support is that income from benefits makes people lazy and less likely to seek work. This was most starkly demonstrated in the 2017 cut to the ESA WRAG rate, which was publicly justified on the basis that it would incentivise people to move into work, without any evidence whatsoever that the current rate was a disincentive.

Within DWP, benefit rates are treated as a purely political question, when in fact they have a significant bearing on the nature of people's day-to-day lives and hence their ability to engage in support to move towards employment. Similarly, processes such as benefit applications, assessments and reassessments are seen only in terms of managing access to benefits, failing to recognise the impact they might have on someone's willingness to engage with support. The rates and administration of benefits for this group should look to actively foster an environment of stability and security, alongside protecting the integrity of spending. These questions should be a central part of any discussion on the future of efforts to support disability employment.

Next steps

Although it is encouraging that the new Disability Unit sits within Cabinet Office and has a cross-governmental role, I fear that the discussion of disability employment within the upcoming consultation on the National Strategy for Disabled People will be heavily constrained by the parameters of the current DWP-led system. Tweaking the current system within these parameters will result in the same lack of significant progress we have seen over the last decade. What is needed is a fundamental rethink of the current approach and the assumptions that underpin it, guided by the voices and experiences of disabled people but within a framework that is not limited to piecemeal changes to the current system. A much more open-ended process of engagement and consultation should be undertaken to facilitate this, with a willingness to consider structural and institutional reform, not just changes to policy.

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