

Written evidence from Volition Forum Central (DEG0133)

The Department of Work and Pensions recently announced they are holding an inquiry into the [Disability Employment Gap](#), investigating the gap between rates and how the DWP can better support disabled people in the labour market, focusing on:

- Trends in the disability employment gap
- The economic impact of low employment rates for disabled people
- The assistance available to help people in work
- The ongoing impact of the coronavirus pandemic

Further details on the call for evidence is available [here](#)

Individuals and organisations were encouraged to submit evidence in response to the Inquiry by 18 December 2020. Forum Central held two sessions via Zoom in December to collect responses from Forum Central third sector members in Leeds to put forward to the inquiry. The two sessions were held on:

1. International Day of Disabled People Employment Discussion – 4th December 9:30 – 11:00am
2. Employment Discussion – 15th December – 1:00 – 2:00pm

The sessions were attended by a range of third sector organisations based in Leeds plus members of the DWP (details of the organisations attending the sessions can be found after the response). The four questions below formed the structure for the discussions during the sessions:

1. What has been the impact of the coronavirus pandemic on disabled peoples' employment?
2. What improvements could be made to support unemployed disabled people?
3. What would you hope to see in the Government's National Strategy for Disabled People?
4. How should DWP look to engage disabled people and the organisations that represent them in formulating the Strategy?

The collated response from organisations can be found below for each question. Due to the tight frame of supplying evidence to the inquiry information has been provided in note form taken directly from the conversations during the sessions. Information from the Leeds Learning Disability Employment Task Group, part of the Learning Disability Partnership Board and Being Me Strategy, has also been included in the collective response.

Forum Central in summary, ask of the DWP that we and our members are able to feed into this work further and be a part of the development of the strategy in a co-produced and timely way. We have a collective network of over 300 organisations in Leeds, some of which run specialism employment services for disabled people and people with mental health concerns. Our members are the experts on the ground and can feed in on behalf of the

people they work with in Leeds and wish to be involved in the production of the strategy and timeline.

Responses to the call for evidence in summary are as follows:

1. What has been the impact of the coronavirus pandemic on disabled peoples' employment?

Those delivering remote employment services told us:

- Unemployment is on the rise. This means there is more competition for jobs. People are feeling disheartened.
- Some organisations are outwardly and blatantly discriminatory, others are ill informed, unconfident, or lacking time, skills, knowledge, or a combination of these
- Some positives - some clients finding working from home helps, meaning they do not have the added barriers of travel to work, getting to an office.
- Digital ex/inclusion is an ongoing concern and challenge both for individuals seeking employment, those in employment and for those supporting people to find employment. They have found that as long as their clients have tech, it has become slightly easier and some have seen an increase in people engaging. though some suggest around 30% of original caseload could not access digital and have where possible, returned to face to face work with these.
- In terms of people being able to get to work - there has been a drop off in opportunity - people were able to access a variety of jobs - some jobs aren't there anymore. There is less opportunity.
- They are still supporting people into work – especially in warehousing and retail etc, with some successes but less than before.
- Those still in employment – the figures will not become clear till we see the end of the furlough scheme, so are still being realised.

Concerns across our membership around rising levels of unemployment

- There will be a rise of unemployment when the furlough scheme finishes -the disability employment gap will widen when the market becomes flooded and there is a lack of jobs and an even more competitive job market.
- Very little chance if you are shielding - to get a job right now and Individuals who have not been in work in the long-term, made even harder under Covid-19 restrictions
- The digital divide for disabled people has made engagement difficult, online engagement has been hard or not possible. Individuals without access to community buildings for support e.g., library and without the means to access digital technology at home have been further isolated.

Mental Health and wellbeing concerns

- Isolation and increased rise in low level wellbeing and a range of mental health issues has meant motivation has dropped for some people and the effects are cyclical.

- Discrimination that is present has been made worse, individuals feel like they are bottom of the pile – recruitment and interview process felt to be more discriminatory,
- we've heard examples of individuals feeling they do not want to disclose their disability for fear of rejection, feeling that they would be providing extra strain on the employer to make reasonable adjustments
- Some people's disabilities have increased so needing support through access to work – people have been managed out due to extra support required, e.g., through furlough schemes

2. What improvements could be made to support unemployed disabled people?

Communication and general awareness

- Upfront honesty, open communication, feedback, and encouragement
- Education in general more needs to be done in the media/and on tv seeing people more and more.

Employer Support, Training, information, reporting and incentivisation

- Need upfront investment in reasonable adjustments - but also the longer term - what is there available to adapt and overcome - some really good examples of employers that are prepared and a spectrum of organisations not willing or not informed
- Autism awareness and neurodivergent understanding needed
- Training, support, awareness, penalties, regular checks.
- Need employers not just to say they are Disability Confident and show the badge, but for that to filter through to all recruiters, interviewers, line managers.
- Can employers be incentivised?
- *"Bottom line is companies care about money - if something is a recommendation but there is no financial reward for doing something, then they are less likely to. if they can see a direct financial benefit that might be better".*
- Retention - problems are reasonable adjustments and not going far enough to keep people in work - if some work could be done around that. Especially people in BAME communities - and disabled - tick box employment to fit criteria.
- Incentivisation - targeting attempts to encourage uplift in employment but needs to go hand in hand with understanding and organisations and expertise - how do you link that in? Does an employer have someone to go, to get access to employment - information, training and awareness and early access? When someone is not performing the resolution could be very simple - small practical changes can be made to sustain employment.
- Managers having awareness - new people and specifications - interview skills and induction training and for other colleagues to be given disability training - to work as a team.
- Disability awareness - how has it filtered down to managers and work access - until mentioned. Should it be a criteria for any manager/HR/Employer- toolkits - inductions.

Employee/individual support and issues

- Instant feedback mechanisms for individuals to report discrimination
- Difficult for individuals to know whether or not to disclose their disability/impairment/reasonable adjustment request both on interview and once in post as fear of being disadvantaged if they do so.
- A lot of assumptions - people need more encouragement to talk about and bring their whole self to work.
- *“I was screaming out for work - but there was not enough support”*
- Moving on - those who are in work, there is not enough support for people
- Training - one person can be trained on one particular thing - someone else might need a step by step talk through
- How can people access support and commitment?
- Disabled people are often seen as ‘difficult’ or ‘demanding’ and troublemakers - they might actually be the best person for the job. Attitudes. People afraid to ask for what they need or have had bad experiences.
- Person specifications can be inaccessible. ‘must have 5 years’ experience for an entry level role’ makes it very difficult to keep essential criteria at a base level and government could be pushing people to be more inclusive – e.g., driving license required for roles without driver need, degree requirements for entry level retail jobs.

Employment Support Service Support from the DWP and Improvements

- DPS - applications have not come into fruition
- Systems are impossible to manoeuvre
- Support for employers - engagement - incentivisation - not an act of charity - stigma attached and awareness raising, reasonable adjustment policies within organisations, making it as easy as possible for employer.
- Disability awareness – individuals being sent on CV writing courses for example that are not accessible
- Disability Employment Advisors not front line, individuals not confident and lack of support in navigating the job market
- Reed in Partnership not working, felt that the skills and knowledge not there
- Information and awareness of funding available e.g., some funding available from DWP for Leeds Autism Employment Forum
- Access to Work not delivering – needs improving, estimated 100 workers nationally, inconsistency in advisors, some workers moved to furlough scheme
- How many disabled people does the DWP employ? Leading by example, resolving internal culture and treatment of disabled people in the DWP e.g., Panorama documentary – The Million Pound Pay-out:
<https://www.bbc.co.uk/programmes/m000g6rz>

3. What would you hope to see in the Government’s National Strategy for Disabled People?

- More support in place for people and organisations

- A clearer follow up on Disability confident employers - more than the tick box exercise
- Opportunities for people that have come through online working
- Education in general
- Learning Disability and Hidden Disabilities included in the strategy
- Address the hidden layer - employers would be surprised how many people are not disclosing.
- Awareness and training on inclusive recruitment practises
- Employer engagement as a key part of the strategy
- Review Digital Exclusion and Inclusion
- Review reasonable adjustments and alternative working practice
- Clear accessible information on the effects to benefits and navigating job market
- Big employers have a responsibility and the capacity to engage
- Large regional funding opportunities do not focus on disabled people and are not specific enough, or set up for people e.g., Deaf. Funding for interpreters is often a secondary issue - many clients in a revolving door scenario - at risk of losing benefits if coming off a programme, accessibility of funding applications.
- Acknowledgement for accessible, specialist funding for third sector that can offer tailored accessible employment support for people - some organisations have been efficient at pulling in funding from the ESF - what is the plan after short / mid-term funding finishes
- Clear, open honest plans to change systems - some of our respondents didn't feel a great deal of faith.
- Employer Awareness – support and knowledge – stigmas still attached to disabilities, strong awareness raising needed
- Employing a disabled person often seen as an act of charity – need to be made easier for the employers
- HR Reasonable adjustment policies made mandatory for employers
- Employment schemes can be given very small amounts of money – funding needs to be consistent, greater, and long term
- DWP needs to be working in true and honest partnership with other sectors and organisations.
- New ways / methods of accountability – e.g., mystery shopper idea for recruitment and interview process, making sure national and regional contract holders are meeting their commitments and being hold accountable if not
- National communications strategy
- Linking with new research on employment e.g. job carving – Leeds University
- Mapping and scoping current provision across sectors on a regional and local level to provide strong foundation to work with – not reinventing the wheel, but building on what already exists, connecting / linking an identifying the gaps
- Ensure Experts by Experience (E by E) lead / develop and are meaningfully engaged at all stages of the planning and delivery.
- Develop networks with other organisations on regional/national basis so as to develop best practice / learning.
- Develop a calendar of national / regional events.
- Development of a disability employment forum / nationally and regionally.

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

- *“DWP needs to be really honest what they are asking and what they are offering - these conversations go round in circles - we have given this input before - we know what the effects are. What is going to be done with the information we have provided you?”*
- Need honesty around the expectations. We give our time in consultation, what will change as a result?
- TIME - give us more time to respond to these types of inquiries
- Many of our respondents and attendees expressed frustration and anger around the 4th question. They felt sick of saying the same things, organisations and people have responded many times before saying the same things but nothing changes
- Listen to us, we are the experts
- Engage employers
- Engagement itself feels tick box - give more time
- How many disabled people does the DWP employ? Leading by example, resolving internal culture and treatment of disabled people in the DWP e.g., Panorama documentary – The Million Pound Pay-out:
<https://www.bbc.co.uk/programmes/m000g6rz>
- No changes seen; real action needed
- Specialist funding needed
- Co-produced steering group for the development of the strategy
- Equality, power dynamics need to be addressed. Experts by experience at the heart of the development / leading the strategy, not consultation based. Not tick box.
- Person centred approach to development of the strategy.

Who are we?

Forum Central are the collective voice of the Health & Social Care Third Sector in Leeds

<https://forumcentral.org.uk/>

We support and represent the diverse third sector working with health and social care needs in Leeds; we promote, and support partnership working across the city and provide information for and about the sector. We do this across health and care with a focus on four specialist areas of: learning disabilities, mental health, older people and physical and sensory impairment.

Organisations involved in this response include:

- Scope, Representatives from the Starting Line and Kickstart Employment Services
- Leeds Hearing and Sight Loss Service
- BID Services
- Members of the Leeds Learning Disability Employment Task Group
- The Advonet Group
- Leeds Society for Deaf and Blind People

- Outside the Box
- Leeds Mind- Workplace Leeds
- Leeds Involving People
- Hamara Centre
- People Matters Leeds
- Community Links/Inspire North

Means of Consultation

- 16 individuals who attended an employment focused session as part of the LeedsForAll celebrations on the 4th December 2020
- 10 organisational reps who attended the briefing and discussion session we held on the 16th December 2020
- Discussions with organisational reps individually throughout our regular contacts with member organisations.
- The Leeds Learning Disability Employment Task Group

December 2020