

LEARNING SEMINAR REPORT

Topic: How can we improve employment opportunities for people with learning difficulties (PLD)?

Date: 2 April 08

Introduction

CPF organised this seminar so that organisations working to support people with learning difficulties into employment could share their knowledge and experience, and identify areas where both policy and practice could be improved.

Eighteen people from ten organisations participated in the seminar. The format included a brief overview by Brian Parfett from the Disability and Work Division, Department of Work and Pensions (DWP), about his department's proposed changes to specialist disability employment services. This was followed by group discussions in a 'knowledge café' style, which allowed people to discuss four key questions about how employment opportunities could be improved. At the end of the seminar recommendations from each of the small groups were posted on the walls and then voted on. These were subsequently sent to Brian Parfett to include in the DWP's final consultation report.

Summary of Brian Parfett's presentation

Brian gave a background to the current DWP's benefits-based programmes that try to support disabled people into employment, including New Deal and Pathways to Work. He also highlighted some of the key issues arising from schemes such as Job Preparation, Work Preparation and Workstep. These include:

- How to become more flexible and consistent in the support offered?
- Improving quality standards
- More focus on supporting people into open unsupported employment (where appropriate)
- Identifying ways to improve Access to Work
- Developing the role of Jobcentre Plus Disability Employment Advisors in relation to specialist disability employment programmes
- More focus on independent living.

Overall, DWP is keen to move towards an improved customer-focused approach, with less rigid programmes. This would include improved individualised support; better links to education and learning; and a greater focus on employers.

Knowledge cafes

There were four knowledge cafes, each one focusing on a particular question. People had the opportunity to discuss three of the four questions by moving from one café table to another.

Q. What are the barriers to getting work? What more could be done to overcome these barriers?

- There is a fear of coming off benefits – experienced by both individuals and families. Therefore more information and guidance is needed about benefits and the transition to work
- Review current financial/benefit restrictions
- More accessible information
- Better individual support by disability employment advisors
- Review who provides the training for employment advisors
- Ensure PLD are making the decisions
- Financial management – more training and support needed
- More work with parents and carers to encourage independence
- More focus on transport/travel issues – taxis, independent travel training, travel companions
- Changes to career advice – encourage more work experience and vocational training earlier
- Paper qualifications are a barrier – need to identify alternatives
- Society needs to acknowledge that people with learning difficulties have aspirations, and we need to be open to these
- Start talking about ‘careers’ in schools – ask employers in to speak about these at an early stage.

Q. What would help people keep their job (and even get promoted) once they have started work?

- Get organisations such as Learning and Skills Council and Department for Work and Pensions to set the standard by employing PLD

- Support workers need to develop skills/knowledge as the person is promoted. The support needs to be appropriate.
- More help from the employers
- Regular communication between employer and employee and support worker.
- Better job analysis at the start essential: what are the expectations of employers? Make sure that there is good support in place before the job is taken up.
- Person finding the job should be the same as the support worker.
- 'Natural support' - look for this – possibly within the employers current staff. More use of 'buddying' to building internal support.
- Long-term support should be as needed rather constrained by the contract.
- Better communication between the PLD and their work colleagues – more explanation at the start.
- People have been promoted more in the voluntary sector possibly because there is appropriate training/support, and the positive attitudes of the people around you.
- The coaches need more help with how to 'teach'
- More training for the trainer courses (Mentoring and Befriending foundation)
- Transferring the skills needed from external support to internal support.
- Employers now need 'multi-skilled' rather than just one job which means that fewer PLD are getting jobs.
- Disabled People's Organisations should team up with employers to undertake research about their knowledge and experience in this area.
- More strategic work with employers including disability awareness training with employers e.g.

what are the benefits to employers of employing PLD; lower sickness levels etc.

- Concern about the interviewing process – especially if people have already been doing the job.
- CV's – more support in writing these.
- Job 'carving' – divide into two smaller jobs.
- Building confidence important.
- Use Access to Work flexibly.

Q. Are some models of employment support better than others?

- Adequate funding for programmes is essential.
- Individualised support including support worker, job coach and mentors important. Someone to provide support through the interview and to work along side the person until they are no longer needed.
- Disability awareness: support for employers is vital. Giving/outlining options on what employing person with LD will/may involve.
- Access to work: support workers; equipment; individualised support; very good for long-term; not good for short-term (getting support in place in time); need support to apply.
- Work experience/work trails (DWP): employers subsidy; time limited- ends with subsidy often; can give an employer first opportunity to employ person with LD; monitoring of placement's progression required; personal development/career plans – vital.
- Must recognise progression; individualised; young people; not fitting people into programme.
- Good job analysis: individual support workers.

Q. What policy changes are needed to improve employment opportunities for people with learning difficulties?

- Changes to policies needed to avoid the benefit trap
- Introduction of a quota system – so that local authorities and some private companies employ more people with learning difficulties
- Commissioning bodies should include a requirement for contracted services to be disabled people-friendly.
- Policy changes are needed so that educational requirements don't act as a barrier to undertaking vocational training.

Summary of key recommendations

1. More work is needed with employers to raise awareness about disability issues in order to create a more supportive environment in the workplace for people with learning difficulties. Possibly exploring further internal job support through in-house mentors;
2. More work with employers to highlight the potential barriers created by designing generic/multi-skilled jobs unnecessarily;
3. Changes to the benefit system are needed (not just JSA but also incapacity benefit) with increased flexibility – including temporary periods or part suspension to allow more time for people to make the transition into work;
4. More work needed to raise the aspirations of people with learning difficulties – including good careers advice in schools and more accessible vocational training courses;

5. Increased support for independent travel, including different modes of transport;
6. More work with parents to encourage them to be supportive of the move into employment;
7. Encourage more changes to develop individualised tailored support rather than people fitting into 'programmes'. More recognition of progression routes;
8. There are some good models of support available – need to learn the lessons from these and explore the potential of scaling these up.

Final Comments by participants

“Irrespective of the potential legislative and policy changes, work with PLD should continue..”

“Work with PLD should focus on individuals and not be generalised”

“Events such as these are important for learning”

“There are good things happening, we should learn to celebrate these”

“Enjoyed the format of the seminar”

“CPF should encourage other funders to follow CPF's approach to learn from the work with PLD”

“More work needed to raise awareness of disability issues”

“There should be more sessions like this”

“ If we keep fighting, we will eventually get there”

Attendance

Sedley Bryden	Brent Advocacy Concerns
Penny Grater	Camden Society
Rita Barragi	Camden Society
Amreeta Maeadeen	Camden Society
Sioned Churchill	City Parochial Foundation
Helal Uddin Abbas	City Parochial Foundation
Brian Parfett (Speaker)	Disability & Work Division, DWP
Mark Williams	Heart and Soul
Mark Burgess	Heart and Soul
Brian Stocker	Newham People First
Kevin Clifford	Newham People First
Andrew Lee	People First
Phil Kallevik	People First
Bonnie Mitchell	Spare Tyre Theatre Company
Arti Prashar	Spare Tyre Theatre Company
Peter Lee	Speak Out Hounslow
Jo Champan	Speak Out Hounslow
Robert Elston	Status Employment

For more information please contact the CPF staff in the list above on 0207 606 6145