



VODG (VOLUNTARY ORGANISATIONS DISABILITY GROUP) RESPONSE TO “IMPROVING LIVES” – THE WORK, HEALTH AND DISABILITY GREEN PAPER

INTRODUCTION

1. VODG (the Voluntary Organisations Disability Group) represents over 80 leading voluntary and charity social care and disability organisations. Our members work with around a million disabled people, employ more than 85,000 staff and have a combined annual turnover in excess of £2.6 billion. They provide a wide range of formal care and support services, including supported living and residential care. In addition, VODG members and their partners deliver a variety of successful employment schemes for disabled people, including internships, supported employment, apprenticeships, awareness-raising campaigns and the direct employment of disabled people. Though diverse in terms of their size, history and individual strategies, our member organisations share common values and a collective vision of full choice and control for disabled people.

2. On behalf of its members, VODG works to influence the development of social care policy, build relationships with government and other key agencies, promote best practice and keep members up to date on matters that affect service delivery. Our overarching aim is to ensure that VODG members, working in partnership with commissioners, people who use services and their families can provide progressive, high quality and sustainable services that reflect the principles of personal choice and control, uphold rights and meet the requirements of disabled people.

3. VODG members are largely dependent on public sector funding as the majority of support is provided to people with life-long conditions. However, funding to support disabled and older people has been significantly reduced since 2010, despite the fact that demand is increasing. In the five years to 2015/16 local authority funding of adult social care reduced by £4.6 billion (a 31% reduction in net budgets). Whilst these reductions, and previous as well as ongoing cuts to welfare benefits and other types of support, will – perversely – make it harder to meet the broadly welcome aspirations set out in the Green Paper, **VODG is committed to playing its part in seeking to halve the 32% disability employment gap.** That gap has been persistently high for far too long and can seriously affect disabled people’s health, wellbeing, self-esteem and ability to live a fulfilling life.

4. VODG members support a large number of people with learning disabilities, physical disabilities, mental health issues, autism and long-term conditions. The Green Paper

makes little specific reference to people with severe learning disabilities and autism. It is important to bear this group in mind in designing approaches to tackle the employment gap, as there is good evidence that even such severely disabled people can obtain and retain meaningful employment.

5. The Green Paper poses 48 questions around six themes. VODG members discussed these themes at a workshop in January 2017 and this response focusses on five areas on which the participants were particularly keen to comment, namely:

- the **role of VODG members as potential employers** of disabled people (related primarily to Chapter Four of the Green Paper);
- the **place of work coaches and other supporting infrastructure** in helping disabled people to obtain and retain employment (related primarily to Chapter Two of the Green Paper);
- suggested **improvements to the welfare system** to assist delivery of this agenda (related primarily to Chapter Four of the Green Paper);
- how best to encourage the **spread and take-up of good practice and innovation** (related primarily to Chapter 5 of the Green Paper); and
- a number of **other relevant issues** arising out of the Green Paper, including funding.

6. This response includes some case examples to highlight issues and approaches already in hand by VODG members. It also draws on evidence from key partners such as Skills for Care (the strategic body for workforce development in adult social care in England) and the National Development Team for Inclusion (NDTi – a not for profit organisation working to enable people at risk of exclusion, due to age or disability, to live the life they choose).

7. However, we are well aware that effectively tackling this agenda will require, in the Green Paper's own words, "concerted action over time " from a range of people and organisations. **In order to play its part in this crucial agenda and to make progress, VODG stands ready to work with DWP, DH and other bodies which are concerned about the waste of potential represented by the disability employment gap.** We hope this consultation response provides a helpful initial contribution to this very important topic.

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THE ROLE OF VODG MEMBERS AS POTENTIAL EMPLOYERS OF DISABLED PEOPLE

8. Many organisations supporting disabled people, including people with learning disabilities, autism and other long-term conditions, do not see their role as simply providing care and support to people who passively receive it. Rather, they work to help the people they support make choices which enable them to lead fulfilling and meaningful lives. Given that many people supported by VODG members are of working age, this should include supporting them into employment. Yet surveys suggest that, for example, whereas some 75% of working age people with a learning disability would like a job of some sort, only 5% actually have one. This is far too few and given both the role of many social care organisations and the large number of staff they employ, there is a particular need and urgency for them to do better. Social care comprises some 19,000 separate employers and employs around 1.5 million people. Moreover, there are some 90,000 live vacancies in social care at any one time and an estimated need for an additional 275,000 roles in the next decade. Furthermore, the UK's future withdrawal from the EU may reduce the number of care workers coming to the UK from EU countries. So it is both morally *and* economically imperative for social care employers, including VODG members, to do more to address the disability employment gap¹.

The benefits of employing disabled people – two case studies

Case Study A: Thomas Pocklington Trust

Four years ago the Thomas Pocklington Trust, a charity for people with sight loss, had just one per cent of people with a visual impairment in its workforce. Three years ago, it took on its first blind office intern and today, 30 of its 100 staff are blind or have sight loss. In the next two years, the London-based charity expects that 50% of its employees, and a similar proportion of its trustees and senior managers, will be blind or partially sighted. Chief executive Peter Corbett hopes other organisations will follow suit: *“The biggest challenge for disability organisations considering employing from the community they support is just deciding that they want to do it. You need a firm strategy on this, leadership from the top, and then you need to make it a priority.”*

¹ VODG (2016). *Closing the disability and employment gap*. Accessed: <https://www.vodg.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2016-VODG-Closing-the-disability-and-employment-gap-a-case-study-report.pdf>

Case Study B: National Star

For a recent learner at specialist college National Star, a year-long internship at EDF Energy was so successful that the company offered him a paid position to continue work they felt was invaluable. This is just one outcome of the Steps into Work supported internship programme run since 2013 by the Cheltenham-based National Star. Staff at EDF Energy volunteer to be job buddies to supported interns and receive guidance from their employer and National Star. A college tutor is permanently based on site to provide additional support to interns so they receive classroom-based tuition and work towards relevant qualifications in addition to working.

Steps into Work aims to bring together a host employer and National Star. The unpaid internship is focused on and supports transition from education to employment, providing opportunities to learn in the workplace and experience an extended time in a supported work placement.

Those on the internship gain critical personal and social skills as well as qualifications that are often harder to achieve via other training methods – for example, training based solely in the classroom. Currently on average 75% of Steps into Work interns progress into paid employment.

Davina Jones, head of business development at National Star, says: *“The overwhelming majority of people with disabilities are capable of sustainable paid employment with the right preparation and support. If that is the starting assumption then the effort needs to be placed on identifying the skills that employer’s value and in helping people with disabilities to develop these.”*

9. However, as the Green Paper clearly sets out, there are myriad barriers working to make it harder for employers in all sectors to employ more disabled people. These include, crucially, the attitudes of employers, practical problems around access and support to do the job, concerns about employee reaction, benefit difficulties. These problems are often compounded when applied to the SME (small and medium-size enterprises) sector, which includes some 85% of adult social care employers. Smaller employers will often shy away from taking on disabled people, citing a range of real or imagined concerns such as the difficulties and cost of providing a suitable environment, aids and adaptations, the risk of extended periods of sick leave, etc. Many of these concerns prove to be ill-founded once a disabled person is taken on but making the initial hiring decision can be problematic. In addition, people who become ill or disabled whilst in a job often face difficulties from both employer and staff attitudes and in practically adapting their role or workplace to enable them to stay in work.

10. In order therefore to help make progress, VODG puts forward the following suggestions:

- we will – individually and collectively – work to ensure that **more disabled people are in employment**, especially within our own organisations, recognising that VODG members support a large number of people with severe learning disabilities, autism and other long-term conditions. As social care employers, we understand the wishes, aspirations and challenges involved in placing more people whom we support into employment; this knowledge and understanding should provide a sound platform from which we can do much better in future. Social care employers need to set an example here, not least by ensuring that job descriptions, person specifications and application processes are not indirectly acting as disincentives to employ disabled people. For instance, brief interviews often do not allow a disabled person to show what they are capable of in a work situation. We also know that any job is not necessarily better than no job – roles for disabled people need to be meaningful and worthwhile as well as capable of being done, after reasonable adjustments if necessary, by a person with disabilities. Given our deep knowledge and understanding of their individual circumstances and requirements, there is also a potentially important role for VODG member organisations to **mentor and support** disabled people for whom we provide care and support into jobs, whether in our own organisations or elsewhere. **Accordingly, we will, as a first step, discuss how to make progress and share good practice at our VODG human resources directors’ network.**

- we will **constructively engage with Government** to address these challenges. As is made clear later in this response, there are proposed and ongoing changes to benefits and other forms of support which are likely to work against the grain of the Green Paper – these need to be addressed if real progress is to be made. Accordingly, we will seek to build on our existing strong links with DH and our developing ones with DWP. Cross-Departmental buy-in and support are vital success factors for this initiative.

- we will **discuss with delivery organisations** how existing approaches can be used to encompass the disability employment agenda. It could be that the social care sector finds a way to pledge to recruit, retain and motivate more disabled people and those with long-term health conditions in the sector. In this way as Simon Stevens, Chief Executive of the NHS, has committed the NHS to employing more people with learning disabilities², saying: *“This isn’t just the right thing to do for people with learning disabilities; it’s the right thing to do for the NHS as a group of organisations, helping us to deliver better care for everyone.”*

- Although more diverse and disparate than the NHS, the social care sector needs to demonstrate similar commitment. Labour Force Survey data shows that across

² NHS England (2016) *Learning disability employment programme*. Accessed: <https://www.england.nhs.uk/about/gov/equality-hub/ld-empprog>

all sectors, some 87% of all economically active workers say they are not disabled, whilst that figure drops to 83% in social care. So the social care sector appears to have higher numbers of workers recording a disability than the average working population. Nevertheless, we know how few learning disabled and autistic people are in work.

- Similarly, VODG will consider how best to encourage more of its members to join the **Disability Confident scheme**, which is designed to encourage employers actively to seek out, recruit and retain disabled people and people with health conditions and to help to positively change attitudes, behaviours and cultures. This scheme has signed up only 600 employers so far and could be much more widely publicised and promoted.

THE PLACE OF WORK COACHES AND OTHER SUPPORTING INFRASTRUCTURE

11. It was clear from our consultation workshop that, as well as attitudinal and knowledge barriers, there are a range of practical issues which can either support or frustrate the ambitions of the Green Paper. For example, research from the National Development Team for Inclusion (NDTi)³ suggests that:

- supported employment (individual place and support) is the most effective way to achieve positive work outcomes;
- whereas, by contrast, there is little evidence that other models, such as job preparation, work projects or volunteering (as a staging post into work) deliver work outcomes;
- good practice in supported employment tends to be cheaper in achieving job outcomes than less good practice;
- but good practice is not systematically shared or adopted by leaders, commissioners, providers and people being supported. Consequently, the evidence base is not used sufficiently and services with poorer outcomes are rarely decommissioned. For instance, whilst supported employment achieves better outcomes than other approaches, only around one-third of the relevant funding is spent in that way. Spreading innovation and good practice is discussed further later in this response.

³ NDTI (2014). The cost-effectiveness of employment support for people with disabilities. Accessed: http://www.ndti.org.uk/uploads/files/The_cost_effectiveness_of_Employment_Support_for_People_with_Disabilities,_NDTi,_March_2014_final_v2.pdf

The value of supported employment – Project SEARCH

Project SEARCH is a partnership between business, education and a supported employment provider. The goal is to provide three on-site work placements for young people with learning disabilities leading to competitive employment. Originating in Cincinnati in 1996, the Project SEARCH model has grown to over 300 sites across the US, Canada, England, Scotland, Ireland, and Australia. Today, Project SEARCH has become an international model of success that provides people with learning disabilities with the training necessary to gain marketable skills that will enable them to secure competitive employment.

Bradford Project SEARCH is a strong partnership between:

- Host Business - (Bradford Teaching Hospitals Foundation Trust) - provides a variety of placements that teach core skills of the business and a liaison to coordinate the programme;
- Education (Southfield School) - provides a tutor, a teaching assistant and recruits appropriate student participants. The tutor drives the curriculum to support the student during their placements;
- Supported Employment Provider (Hft) - provides a Job Coach to support individuals with placements, job coaching, performing job analysis, travel training and expertise in adaptations to the working environment. Additionally, hft provides follow-on support at the end the programme.

Those who begin the programme are known as “interns”. Each intern that begins on Bradford Project SEARCH has an opportunity to work in three different placements at Bradford Teaching Hospitals, gaining over 900 hours of on-the-job work experience by the end of the year. Alongside this, the interns receive classroom time daily, where they engage in an employment curriculum, and complete a qualification in employability skills. The goal of the project is to support each intern into finding full time paid employment. Bradford Project SEARCH is in the middle of its fourth year. Last year’s employment outcomes for its graduates reached 66.7%.

12. However, what was clear from our workshop was that a range of infrastructural issues need to be tackled as part of this overall approach. These include:

- Job Centres send disabled people to social care and other employers without any support or information about what to expect, the types of job role, etc. This was described as “setting individuals up to fail”;
- Job roles can be specified in inflexible ways, limiting the possibility that they might be done (sometimes after being adapted somewhat) by disabled people. For example, not all support workers in care settings need computer experience.
- It can be more expensive to support someone with a disability, particularly at the outset. Yet disabled people are often highly committed to their work and make well-motivated and long-term employees. For instance, people with learning disabilities stay in their first job three times longer than the average and take a

third of the average sick leave. Are there ways of providing financial incentives to employers to get them over the initial reluctance and additional cost of employing a disabled person? Could the apprenticeships levy be used more creatively in this context?

- Drawing on existing good practice should help too. For example, by drawing on the experience of the lottery-funded Talent Match scheme, a £108m investment scheme to tackle youth unemployment in 21 areas of England. Young people with disabilities is one of the strands of this scheme, whose lessons could be widely shared. And some voluntary organisations, such as the Royal Society for Blind Children, use a coach who works with an individual for nine months to help prepare them for work; this is not a service which Jobcentre Plus can provide. Voluntary organisations are probably best placed to carry out such roles, if they were funded to do so.
- Given that a majority of adult social care employers are SMEs, it is important to consider ways of supporting such smaller enterprises to employ disabled people. This is where a great many current and future social care vacancies are likely to be, so initiatives and schemes aimed at larger employers will inevitably miss many opportunities. In addition, many disabled people prefer self-employment as a means of accessing paid work without the problems of workplace adjustments, etc. Boosting the number of disabled people who are self-employed is another way of reducing the employment gap. This might require changes to Employment Support Allowance to facilitate self-employment.
- It is important not to dilute the role of work coaches and to lose their specialist expertise. The range of disabilities means that personalised approaches are more likely to succeed and work coaches need to understand the complexities here. Similarly, the reduction in disability employment advisers in Jobcentre Plus looks very short-sighted.
- Finally, the workshop expressed support for a network of disabled people, both those in work and jobseekers, who could support one another, particularly the latter group, by sharing experiences and insights. This could be very reassuring to disabled people feeling bewildered by the “official” system. It might also match disabled people to jobs. However, such a network would need new funding to get off the ground.

POSSIBLE IMPROVEMENTS TO THE WELFARE SYSTEM

13. As well as the issues around work coaches and disability advisers mentioned earlier, there are some key issues about benefits which the workshop was clear needed to be addressed if this ambitious agenda was not to stall. These were:

- **Access to Work funding:** VODG members feel strongly that Access to Work is a key enabler whereby disabled people are able to get and retain jobs. It is seen as a key ingredient of success and participants were concerned that cuts to this programme would work against the overall policy direction. Moreover, there was felt to be a poor level of knowledge and understanding about Access to Work from both employers and disabled people, despite its importance to this agenda.
- **The 16 hour rule:** The cap on hours which people can work before losing benefits was seen as inflexible and potentially an important disincentive to taking work. It was also thought that fear about the difficulty of returning to benefits within a reasonable time if a job did not work out particularly discouraged disabled people – and those who support them, whether family or support staff – from trying out roles. If a job does not work out, the individual concerned risks losing Employment Support Allowance for up to a year. In that situation it may be more rational not to look for work. One suggestion was that people could “trial” a new job for a period, say 6 months, whilst their benefits were put “on hold”, removing the need to reapply if it didn’t work out.
- **A wider view of costs and benefits:** Much of the Green Paper talks about the health and wellbeing benefits of having a job. Such payback is hard to cost and even harder to offset against the costs of benefits, advice and support into employment. VODG’s recently-published Social Value Toolkit⁴ gives social care employers guidance on how to address the issue of social value, which “shifts the focus from the cost of a service to the overall value of the outcomes delivered.”

A social value case study: United Response

Following engagement with the community and voluntary sector, York City Council produced a specification for its Café West tender which included the consideration of air miles, food waste and employment practices. The charity United Response now delivers the service and generates added social value by offering work placements to individuals with disabilities. The support which workers in the café received is part of United Response’s Training, Employment and Consultancy, an extensive training programme. The York-based project covers everything from IT courses to tips on self-presentation, communication and CV writing. Crucially, job hunters are encouraged to explore work and training options that suit them.

⁴ VODG (2016). *Social Value Toolkit*. Accessed: <https://www.vodg.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2016-VODG-Social-value-toolkit.pdf>

HOW TO ENCOURAGE THE SPREAD AND TAKE-UP OF GOOD PRACTICE AND INNOVATION

14. There was much discussion on this issue at the January workshop, seen as a critical way of building on what works and not endlessly “reinventing the wheel”. There are, of course, national bodies in both health and social care whose specific remit covers the evaluation and dissemination of good practice. In particular, the National Institute for Health and Care Excellence (NICE) and the Social Care Institute for Excellence (SCIE) could usefully be engaged with this agenda, not least given the health and other benefits of supporting more disabled people into work. Other national organisations such as Skills for Care⁵ are providing a forum for good practice relevant to this area. The issue is often that small employers do not know of these sources of guidance, which need more active publicity. Meanwhile VODG actively publicizes developments through its various networks and communications.

OTHER RELEVANT ISSUES

15. **Funding:** There is considerable concern that the pressure to reduce the benefits bill is likely to undermine several of the excellent aspirations in the Green Paper. This is not just relevant to benefits themselves, such as the cut to Employment and Support Allowance in the Work Related Activity Group, but to work-related support such as job coaches, disability advisers and the Access to Work scheme. In time a higher rate of participation in the labour market by disabled people should both reduce the benefits bill and boost tax returns. Assuming the jobs are of good quality, it should also reduce the call on health services. Given the importance of the Green Paper’s agenda, some reassessment of some of these cuts would be timely.

16. **Cross-Departmental working:** As mentioned in paragraph 10 above, close inter-Departmental working between DWP and DH will be vital if this initiative is to succeed. Another important Whitehall linkage is between these Departments and the Department for Education (DfE). There are obviously close links between educational attainment and employment opportunities. One avenue which needs further exploration and development in the context of disability employment is apprenticeships, which need to be made accessible to a wider range of people with disabilities, including more severe learning disabilities. At present the required attainment levels in English and maths work against this. The ability to access apprenticeship funding might also be a way of incentivising employers to take on more disabled apprentices.

17. **Changing mindsets:** There is clearly a big job to do to encourage employers, disabled people and those who care for them such as family and paid supporters to recognise the advantages of employing disabled people and the ways in which potential obstacles can be overcome. This need to change mindsets suggests a requirement for a concerted media campaign to reassure potential employers and to drive up aspiration levels amongst disabled people and their families. Showcasing and “normalising” a

⁵ <http://learnfromothers.skillsforcare.org.uk/>

range of people with different types and severity of disability doing a range of different jobs could do much to dispel myths and anxieties.

18. Retention is also important: Workshop participants agreed with the Green Paper that retaining people in work after they become disabled is another vital element of this whole agenda. Often in this situation there are adjustments which can be made to retain the person in employment, not least through the use of assistive technology. This is often highly cost-effective for employers, given the costs of recruiting and training someone else, and also saves the public purse in terms of benefit payments. Media campaigns, use of Access to Work funding and so on can all play a part in retaining people in sustainable jobs as well as recruiting them into such jobs.

19. VODG is happy to prepare briefing or address further questions as the Green Paper progresses.

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