

Accelerating progress on our rights to full participation

At Disability Rights UK we are working with our members (individual disabled people and our organisations) to produce our proposals for what would really enable more disabled people and people living with health conditions to get good careers. This is in response to the government's Green Paper 'Improving Lives' on work, health and disability – but the time is right to set out disabled people's own agenda. Here are a few thoughts to throw into the mix – and if you'd like to get involved, here's how: if you are a Disability Rights UK member, join our webinars or policy forum (or join DR UK so you can); or take part on twitter/facebook.

Firstly, we need a genuinely cross-government strategy. The Republic of Ireland has just published a 10 year disability employment strategy, that covers factors which have a major impact on whether disabled people can work – from education and skills to transport¹. Their strategy was agreed by 7 Government Departments. The British Green Paper meanwhile was signed just by the Secretaries of State for Work and Pensions and Health. Whilst it does mention working cross-government, issues it doesn't fully address include:

- Social care: if your personal budget has been cut and you don't have support to get up and get dressed, how do you go to work? Recent opposition to social care cuts has focused largely on the need to 'care for' 'vulnerable' people – but what about social care as a springboard for social and economic participation?
- Skills. It's good news that people with learning disabilities will not have to achieve GCSEs in English and Maths to get into an apprenticeship – but some employers are already going further than that. If banks like Barclays can take on apprentices with no maths qualifications at all – and train them on the job – it should be possible for government and all employers to be more flexible about these entry requirements, which can pose real barriers for disabled people who have missed out on education. One bank found no difference in outcomes between apprentices with or without qualifications – so flexibility is possible without downgrading what an 'apprenticeship'

¹ See: <http://www.justice.ie/en/JELR/Comprehensive%20Employment%20Strategy%20for%20People%20with%20Disabilities%20-%20FINAL.pdf/Files/Comprehensive%20Employment%20Strategy%20for%20People%20with%20Disabilities%20-%20FINAL.pdf>

means more flexibility is also needed on how many hours a week, and over what time period the apprenticeship is completed.

- Transport. You do need to get to work, after all.

Secondly, we believe government needs to re-build the trust of disabled people in the system of assessment and support. We urge government to re-think introducing more mandatory conversations (as suggested in the Green Paper) and instead re-design the process so people can quickly get access to an encouraging, tailored offer of support to keep or get employment. We will have more to say about assessments when we respond to the Green Paper.

Thirdly, we need effective levers to support and incentivise employers – including supporting self-employment by disabled people. Successive governments have focused on large ‘supply side’ programmes to support individual disabled people into work – Pathways to Work, the Work Programme etc. They haven’t been effective. ‘Demand side’ work with employers is needed – but to date where government has worked to encourage employer good practice, results haven’t been great: for instance, research by Kim Hoque and colleagues shows that the ‘two ticks’ symbol (which many employers signed up to) did not encourage adoption of good practice². Contrast this with a much more active government role in the USA. President Obama issued an Executive Order requiring the Federal Government to be a model for the employment of people with disabilities (the term used in the USA). They hoped for 100,000 new hires of people with disabilities from 2011-15. They achieved 109,000 – and by 2016 people with disabilities made up 14% of employees of the Federal Government. They did outreach with different departments and agencies and required each of them to come up with a plan, which introduced accountability. Then Secretary of Labor Thomas Perez asked that all contractors of Federal Government – who between them employ 20% of the US workforce – reach 7% of their workforce being people with disabilities. As he put it at the recent Harkin Summit that I was lucky enough to attend, ‘The largest purchaser of goods and services is the federal government. Shame on us if we don’t use that purchasing power for fairness’.

This being America, they were sued for using procurement in this way – but won. Some of the opponents of his plans became big supporters of the drive to employ more disabled people – because of course once employers start employing disabled people, they learn both the benefits to the workplace and how to accommodate people effectively. Perez also worked with the National Governors’ Association to secure commitments from Governors to state and local action and published the Blueprint for Governors: ‘A Better Bottom Line: Employing People with Disabilities’³. We could debate whether precise target numbers are what we

² See <http://www.disabilityatwork.co.uk/>

³ See: https://www.nga.org/files/live/sites/NGA/files/pdf/2013/NGA_2013BetterBottomLine-Web.pdf

want in the UK – but at least there could be strong government leadership, expecting year on year improvements through procurement and government’s own employment, regularly monitored. It’s about being serious about the plan to halve the disability employment gap. And it’s about learning from business – organisations like Channel 4 are already showing how they can improve employment rates in their supply chain by supporting them to do so.

Government could also work strategically with growth sectors in the economy – like care or business administration – to open up apprenticeship opportunities for disabled people. They could ‘bend’ money invested in business loans to support disabled entrepreneurs. The All-party Parliamentary Group on Disability recently launched a plan to enable a million more disabled people to get work in a number of ways⁴. And small employers need much better practical advice – when they need it – on how to make adjustments and retain or accommodate disabled colleagues.

Fourthly, we need effective support for disabled people. It’s great that government has announced a roll-out of peer support job clubs to 71 areas – because Disabled People’s Organisations DO build trust, enable people to learn from other disabled people, share what is possible at work and support people with the range of issues that may get in the way of working (debt, relationships, housing – to name a few). Next it would be good to disinvest in programmes that are known not to work: as one person said to me recently ‘Forgive us for we do not what we know’. All the resources should go into personalised effective support – or into testing new approaches, working collaboratively with disabled people (and government’s proposal for an Innovation Fund could help here, especially if the work is co-produced with disabled people).

Finally we need to think big. The Summit I attended in the USA was hosted by Senator Tom Harkin, one of the main architects of the Americans with Disabilities Act. He urged the delegates from around the world to accelerate progress on disabled people’s right to work. People came up with ideas like the equivalent of a Nobel prize for the greatest work on increasing employment



Photo 1. Thomas Perez, 26th United States Secretary of Labor in office from July 23, 2013 to January 20, 2017

Source: Wikipedia The Free Encyclopedia

⁴ See: <https://www.disabilityrightsuk.org/ahead-arc>



Photo 2. Joyce Banda, former President of Malawi, speaking at The Harkin Summit
Source: Disability Rights UK

opportunities; or aiming to get disability rights discussed at the global economic forum in Davos; or working globally with economic growth areas, to open routes into employment for disabled people across the world. Joyce Banda, former President of Malawi, called for genuine political leadership to remove the barriers disabled people face, especially in developing countries. She added that in most countries disability rights were non-existent.

Discussion centred on the need to frame the issue powerfully. Disabled people can lead future innovation. One person noted that in the Dakota language there is no word for ‘disabled person’: the nearest equivalent is ‘find the right fit’ – surely a social model concept. Others noted that we could be bolder in drawing parallels between ‘no blacks allowed, no jews allowed’ and the exclusion of disabled people. The case for change is both one of rights and one of economics. Globally disabled people make up a demographic group the size of China. Companies can secure significant return on investment by attracting disabled talent and disabled customers, as Rich Donovan of Return on Disability has shown. That organisation’s strapline is ‘translate different into value’⁵. In February the Zero Project⁶ will launch their next world-wide report on policies and practices on disability and employment that further the right to work⁷.

⁵ See: <http://www.rod-group.com/sites/default/files/2016%20Annual%20Report%20-%20The%20Global%20Economics%20of%20Disability.pdf>

⁶ See: <http://zeroproject.org/>

⁷ See: Ibid.

I hope these international discussions gather momentum so we can push for rights at least as good as those in the USA, Ireland or anywhere else – and can in turn share our learning on what is working well here (for instance many countries don't have Access to Work or equivalent). We have a long way to go to secure the right to work – alongside all our rights in the UN Convention. Global leadership is important – and we urge the UK government to learn from the best policies and practices around the world.