

# 4

## The Disability Employment Adviser role

This chapter sets out our proposals for how we believe our Disability Employment Advisers could be enabled to work more effectively in relation to our specialist disability employment programmes and therein offer a better service to our disabled customers.

---

## Current position

1. A recent National Audit Office (NAO) report recognised the central role Jobcentre Plus Disability Employment Advisers (DEAs) can hold in helping disabled people to find and retain employment. In terms of the Department for Work and Pensions (DWP) external provision they stated: "Disability Employment Advisers are vital to the effective delivery of the Department's employment programmes".<sup>17</sup> They went on to highlight that many DEAs have a detailed understanding of the issues customers face and have good links with local employers as well as voluntary and community organisations.
2. The DEA can, amongst a range of services:
  - use their specialist knowledge of disability-related issues to help disabled people find and stay in work;
  - assist disabled people (and their employers) to keep their job where a disability is impacting on their work;
  - ensure that disabled customers are provided with information and advice on available support;
  - assess a customer's employment needs to ensure they are eligible to any employment support they are referred to, and that the support is suitable for them;
  - actively engage with employers on matters relating to employing disabled people; and
  - provide specialist advice and support within the community to support disabled people who are seeking to enter employment.
3. Jobcentre Plus has other employment advisers who also undertake a highly valuable job in serving the majority of our disabled customers. Over the last few years we have significantly improved the capacity of our advisers to recognise and assist with many of the disability-related issues that our customers face, for example through the expansion of the Incapacity Benefit Personal Adviser (IBPA) role.

---

<sup>17</sup> National Audit Office 'Gaining and retaining a job: the Department for Work and Pensions' support for disabled people', Report by the Comptroller and Auditor General, HC 455 Session 2005-6, 13 October 2005, page 35

4. Additionally, DEAs are currently supported in their work by Work Psychologists (see Annex C part B for more detailed description of their role). Both support our front-line staff in helping disabled people meet their employment goals. These services are key to ensuring that disabled people are supported by our other employment services wherever possible, i.e. ensuring that disabled people are not directed to specialist support just because of a 'disability' label.
5. DEAs already make a positive difference to the lives of thousands of disabled people every year. However, feedback from our customers, our staff, the NAO and from our independent evaluations indicates that we can do much better in supporting them in achieving their job goals. Areas for concern that have been raised include the:
  - variable levels of training Jobcentre Plus DEAs have received over recent years;
  - variable quality of guidance available to DEAs on what our existing disability specialist and other provision (such as the New Deals) are able to offer at a local level to disabled customers – this has restricted the ability of some DEAs to make appropriate referrals;
  - variable levels of oversight by DEAs on people moving onto, and staying on, WORKSTEP; and
  - the lack of an effective direct feedback loop for DEAs to pass their experiences of local provision to our contract managers.
6. Jobcentre Plus has already taken steps to improve the training available to DEAs, for example, taking the best elements of our Pathways to Work training packages and building in additional, more intensive, disability-specific training. Whilst the new DEA training package has improved levels of understanding of the employment issues disabled people can face, they remain, to some extent, hampered by the variable quality of information available on what our externally delivered programmes offer at a local level.
7. We have a limited DEA resource – it is therefore important that we target the resource where it can have the most impact. We are considering improving the focus of DEAs in the following areas and would value your opinion on the approaches outlined.



## Ensuring the support goes to those who will benefit most

8. DEAs currently act as a gateway to some of our specialist disability services, for example, Work Preparation and Residential Training Colleges, to help ensure that this provision is targeted at those customers who would benefit most.
9. On WORKSTEP we allow a range of providers to carry out the eligibility process on their own behalf, in addition to accepting eligible people referred by the DEA. This was introduced at a time when Jobcentre Plus was much less engaged with this customer group and the programme was failing to meet potential demand. Whilst this direct route onto our services has its advantages it has also raised some questions around whether customers facing the greatest barriers are being adequately prioritised. We are therefore considering reaffirming the DEA role of ensuring that our specialist disability employment services, including supported employment, are only available to individuals who need them.
10. We are also aware from our research that many people stay on our supported employment provision longer than is necessary for them and their employer to reach a position where they can sustain their employment independently.<sup>18</sup> In respect of this we are looking at how our DEAs could work with our customers and providers to ensure that the support given is still appropriate to the customer's employment needs.

## Overview and guidance

11. DEAs are extremely well placed to look at the totality of support that a disabled person may need to enter and retain employment and we believe we can make better use of this position.

---

<sup>18</sup> Purvis, A., Lowrey, J., and Dobbs, L. 'WORKSTEP evaluation case studies: Exploring the design, delivery and performance of the WORKSTEP programme', 2006, Report Number 348, CDS.

12. We are therefore considering giving greater emphasis to the role DEAs have in developing, with their customers, high-level action plans that identify key goals and the main elements of support that a customer can use to get into and retain work. Action plans should be made in partnership with support from social services and education and training programmes where appropriate. This support may be a mix of specialist and/or mainstream support, internal Jobcentre Plus support or external provider-based support.
13. For example, the DEA may determine that a customer requires specialist work entry support and is highly likely to require some transitional supported employment and an ongoing Access to Work adjustment. This package could then be conveyed to the customer, provider and when appropriate, an employer. It would be the responsibility of the provider, customer and the employer to develop a more detailed employment plan. We believe a broader upfront understanding of this potential package should help ease the transition into work and help the customer achieve their full employment potential.
14. In recognition that a person's life circumstances can change, even in a relatively short period of time, we believe it would be important that these plans are not 'set in stone'. For most developments the discussions between a provider, customer and possibly an employer would be sufficient. A DEA would only need to become involved if the changes impacted on the overall nature of the support delivered, for example if a customer's health condition significantly deteriorated and it became evident that they would not be able to progress to fully independent working in the timescales that had previously been agreed.
15. In summary, from the outset, DEAs would prioritise drawing together a more comprehensive support package – thinking more actively about the full range of support needed to help a customer into sustainable employment. Rather than a fundamental change, this would put in place as a standard feature best practice that already exists.

## Maintaining momentum

16. DEAs will have a role in ensuring that customers are receiving the appropriate help to progress their employment goals. To avoid creating unnecessary checks this would only be at key stages on a work plan. For example, for those:
- not yet in work, after a significant period of time has passed after they started receiving support (e.g. six months), a DEA could check that the provision is still appropriate to their needs;
  - who have recently entered work and are receiving transitional supported employment to help them reach a position where they can maintain their job independently, a DEA could check that a gradual reduction in support is planned; and
  - receiving longer-term support, a DEA could ensure that the support they are getting is still appropriate and helping them develop within their job.

## Feedback and quality

17. Because of their unique position we are considering giving our DEAs a clearer role as a contact point for our customers to feedback their experiences.
18. This does already happen, but not in a consistent way. We recognise that our customers do not always know how to feedback, or even that they have a right to feedback – particularly when they have been on a programme for a long time. We would therefore look to ensure that all customers on our provision continue to be aware of the DEA role and their right to discuss the service/support they are receiving. Some people will need proactive support to give them the opportunity to feedback about the support they receive.
19. Additionally DEAs are, as a result of their contact with customers and providers, in an ideal position to provide their own feedback on the quality and effectiveness of our external services to our contract managers. We are therefore looking to open a more formal channel of communication so that the expertise and knowledge of our DEAs is utilised to a greater degree in quality assurance.



## Other DEA responsibilities

20. The options for enhancing the DEA role covered above do not require a significant shift in their overall role. Many of our DEAs are already undertaking much of this today. If we move ahead with these enhancements across the country, we would need to consider the impact on the range of work currently undertaken.
21. We would want Jobcentre Plus to ensure that DEA workloads allow them to focus their expertise on customers who have complex needs to finding, entering or retaining employment. We need to allow DEAs sufficient time to perform the 'quality assurance' role outlined above, but this should not be at the expense of their other core roles. We would not, for example, like to see a reduction in the role that DEAs play in advising employers on how to make reasonable workplace adjustments for their disabled employees.

## Summary

22. We will continue to improve the capacity of our full range of advisers in dealing with disability-related employment issues. However, we firmly believe that DEAs have a distinct and important role to play alongside other advisers in offering specialist advice and support.
23. We are therefore considering enhancing the DEA role to ensure disabled people are more able to benefit from the expertise on offer and access the right range of specialist employment services at the right time. The improvements we are proposing include:
  - enhancing the oversight role DEAs have in ensuring that our specialist provision goes to those who require it most;
  - giving DEAs a clearer role in monitoring the progress of customers receiving support (particularly long-term) on our specialist services; and
  - giving DEAs clear opportunities to provide feedback on the quality of provision to both providers and contract managers in a way that supports contract managers.

24. In keeping with the principle of disabled people accessing support available to all our customers (wherever possible), DEAs, along with Work Psychologists, will continue to play an important part in supporting other advisers through general advice and case-conferencing to help disabled customers to find and retain employment.

## Consultation Questions

No.	Question
15	We are proposing that only Jobcentre Plus Disability Employment Advisers (DEAs) would be able to refer individuals to the proposed new programme (see Chapter Three). What are your views on this proposal?
16	Do you believe that DEAs should have a higher profile role for people to feedback on the support they receive from our externally delivered provision?
17	If you have used the Jobcentre Plus DEA service to help you find or retain suitable employment, what aspects of the service do you like and are there aspects that you think could be improved?
18	As an employer or provider of our services, in what ways, if any, do you currently use the Jobcentre Plus DEA service to help you employ or retain disabled people in employment? What aspects of the service do you like and are there aspects that you think could be improved?