

Work Programme and deaf people: a cause for concern.

In general, deaf people¹ are more likely to be underemployed or unemployed (Kyle et al, 1989; Harris, 1995; Dye et al, 2000), due to the challenges they face to gain and remain in employment. In the current economic climate everyone faces a challenge to obtain a job that matches their skill: deaf people face additional attitudinal and practical barriers.

Since June 2011, the Work Programme was extended to support Employment and Support Allowance (ESA) claimants to find employment through a two-year programme of intensive development and employment search. In the first year, only 1000 ESA claimants with a disability have found work through the Work Programme. Given there are 79,000 ESA claimants (UKDPC, 2012) who have passed through the Work Programme since its inception, it suggests that only around 1% of them have successfully found employment, and we are unclear how many of those will be in sustained employment. It is unknown just how many of the ESA claimants are deaf or hearing impaired.

In the UK, there are 135,000 people of a working age with severe to profound hearing loss (Action on Hearing Loss, 2012). Even if a small percentage were found to be claiming Job Seekers Allowance (JSA) or Employment Support Allowance (ESA), the number of deaf and hard of hearing people potentially attending the Work Programme could be in its thousands. Reports from Work Programme sub-contractors, that cater specifically for deaf people, indicate that only a few hundred people have been referred to them, which leaves the question of where the deaf people are placed and how they are being supported.

Additionally, we are concerned *that* Access to Work as a key aid to the employment of deaf people is poorly understood by Work Programme contractors. Recent figures on Access to Work claimants has indicated a drop in the number of deaf people who are receiving support. If they are no longer supported by Access to Work, then it is highly probable that they are no longer in employment. Again, it is not clear where deaf people are being supported in Work Programmes across the UK

Cause for concern

Jobcentre Plus (JCP) provides extended support for disabled jobseekers through their Disability Employment Advisor (DEA), but there is no indication on how much information about the claimant is passed to the Work Programme providers to ensure they understand the specific support needs of deaf and other disabled people. It is unclear whether Prime Contractors are aware of what deaf claimants need in order to maintain effective communication with their trainers and advisors. Without the appropriate

¹ The term 'deaf people' is used to encompass all individuals who have a hearing loss, including Deaf people who use British Sign Language as their preferred means of communication.

communication support, deaf people will struggle to gain real benefit from the opportunities on offer.

The Department for Work and Pensions will expect Work Programme providers to meet the cost of communication support: there are no special additional funds to cover this cost. Therefore, from the perspective of the Prime Contractor, a deaf person brings extra cost and potentially extra challenges in finding work. Ideally the Prime Contractor should engage a specialist sub-contractor and ensure all communication needs are met. The risk is that too many deaf people will be forced to communicate in ways that do not meet their needs such as by writing on a piece of paper, typing on a computer screen or attempting to lipread; none of these approaches is ideal for an intensive learning environment or in preparation for employment. Instead an appropriate sign language interpreter, speech-to-text operator or lipspeaker (in all cases registered with NRCPD as meeting proper professional standards) would be essential for the deaf person's inclusion in the Work Programme. Any other approach should not be considered a 'reasonable adjustment' providing equality of opportunity.

A deaf accessible work programme

Prior to the establishment of the Work Programme, deaf people were already experiencing unemployment and underemployment in the work place. Many deaf people are unable to attain employment due to the attitudinal barriers at work. For this reason, there should be greater support for employers to overcome such concern. The Work Programme has the essential function to equip the deaf person to be employable and create a bridge with potential employers to promote the claimant's abilities. Is it, therefore, the sole purpose of the Work Programme to focus on the claimants' employability or should they also focus on the employers and the workplace? What part should DWP play support its own providers engage employers and build more positive attitudes to support the employment of disabled people?

UKCoD fears that the current approach to supporting deaf people to gain employment, risks failure because providers will be reluctant to fund effective access to communication support, which is essential for deaf people to engage and to move into appropriate employment.

Recommendations

Record the number of deaf claimants on Work Programmes and monitor the measurable improvements and outcomes achieved by each provider

Encourage referral for deaf claimants to specialist providers, who are more equipped to meet their communication needs.

Improve the quality of data made available by JCP to the Prime Contractor when deaf people are referred, critically the deaf person's access and communication needs.

Disseminate a wider awareness of deaf people's access needs and how they should be funded.

Ensure all communication is in clear and plain English or translated into British Sign Language.

Never assume a deaf person can communicate by telephone and check their preference particularly in access telecommunications.

Identify and allocate communication support for claimants in all situations and plan the claimant's progression, with their support, through the two years.

References

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