

Briefing

NAS Response to the publication of thresholds for the PIP criteria

17 January 2012

1. The National Autistic Society (NAS) welcomes the government's publication of the thresholds that claimants will need to reach in the new assessment in order to qualify for Personal Independence Payment (PIP). The NAS will respond to the consultation announced this week, after gathering evidence from people with autism, their families and carers.

<http://www.dwp.gov.uk/consultations/2012/pip.shtml>.

2. Looking at the current draft criteria and thresholds, we welcome that common needs of people with autism such as requiring assistance to “plan the journey to a familiar destination” *appear* to be taken into consideration. On first glance (and noting the case study which looks at an individual with autism and an accompanying learning disability) it appears that those with autism and very complex needs may qualify for the enhanced rate of PIP (Daily Living and Mobility components). That said, we believe the descriptors must explicitly state that being capable of carrying out tasks should mean being capable of doing them **repeatedly, reliably and safely** as this should capture the variation of ability depending on circumstances, the presence of carers or the existence of other support. Abilities of people with autism can vary greatly depending on these factors.

3. Furthermore, we continue to have specific concerns about those with less obvious needs who may struggle to have their needs recognised under this assessment. It remains the case that the accuracy and effectiveness of face-to-face assessments will ultimately depend on the ability of those carrying out the assessment to identify the support needs of claimants. The difficulties arising from Asperger syndrome or high-functioning autism can be especially difficult to identify. Average or above average intelligence can mask communication difficulties. There are only few descriptors which may cover this (Communicating: Engaging Socially; and Making Financial Decisions) and in order for a claimant to score the eight points needed to qualify for standard rate support, or the 12 points needed for enhanced rate, is likely to depend greatly on the knowledge and understanding of the assessor and the suitability of the way the assessment is conducted for people on the spectrum.

4. Over the summer, the DWP included people with autism in their testing for the mock PIP assessment. Results of this testing demonstrates that even when claimants explained to the assessor that they needed time to process information and answer questions, that meeting a new person was highly stressful, and that they were often confused by what the assessor was asking, they were deemed to score no points under the ‘Communication’ descriptor.

5. We are specifically concerned with the wording of the ‘Engaging Socially’ descriptor and whether an assessor with limited understanding of autism would comprehensively assess someone under this descriptor. Many people with autism experience high levels of anxiety daily but do not necessarily exhibit “uncontrollable episodes of behaviour”. High anxiety is likely to prevent them from leaving their home, preventing them from carrying out basic activities such as shopping or going to work. Episodes like this can last months and often require significant support - akin to the higher rather than the lower level of DLA to assist them in overcoming it. Yet it is not clear whether assessors would recognise this, given the way that the descriptor is currently drafted.

6. We further have concerns around the mobility component. Adults with autism will most likely only score points under the ‘Planning and Following a Journey’ descriptor. Yet a claimant can only score 4 points if they ‘need(s) prompting for all journeys to avoid overwhelming psychological distress’. This score would be too low for them to be awarded PIP mobility. We would argue that the impact on the claimant of experiencing ‘overwhelming psychological distress’ should mean that the individual should receive PIP mobility.

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