



Tackling health and disability-related barriers to progression within the Civil Service

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Foreword

“Identifying and addressing the needs of disabled staff are not about requesting privilege – ... it’s just another part of enabling everyone to bring their best to their work and workplace.”¹

The Civil Service employs at least 27,000² people living with disabilities or health conditions and serves millions of disabled citizens every day. Ensuring those 27,000 civil servants can fulfil their potential makes basic business sense and would significantly enhance the Service’s performance.

Demonstrating that disabled colleagues can progress would encourage those newly acquiring impairments to be open, seek adjustments they may need and continue their careers. It would encourage staff who are afraid to be open to share their experience - a liberation that in itself tends to enhance performance. And bringing the talents and insights of those with experience of disabilities and health conditions to national strategies, policies and services would help government serve all of Britain’s citizens more effectively.

The experience of disability and ill health is highly significant to both employment and service delivery:

- A third of all employees in the UK are disabled or close to someone who is.
- More than three-quarters of people with disabilities and/or health conditions acquire them as adults.
- As the UK ages, increasing numbers of older people will acquire disabilities and health conditions. A third of people aged between 50 and 64 years have a disability and/or health condition
- People with disabilities and/or health conditions are frequent users of public services and strongly affected by public policy – whether in education, health, social care, social security, criminal justice, housing, transport, international development or other areas.

A strong and consistent message arising from this research is that the talents of many of the known 27,000 civil servants with disabilities and health conditions (and potentially many thousands more who have not declared a disability) are under-realised, leading to significant costs to the Civil Service.

With concerted action to be a fully inclusive and diverse employer, the Service could benefit from ‘potential realised’ in existing and future staff – including the thousands who will acquire their health condition or disability while in work. The Service’s wider reputation would grow. And the experience and insights of senior staff with disabilities and health conditions could help transform services and policies for all.

Successive reports for almost 20 years have shone a light on disability-related barriers to progression. There is no as yet undiscovered ‘silver bullet’ to tackle inequality. Actions needed have been clear for some time. What is needed is systemic action, to overcome bias in performance management and progression and support line managers to change practice.

For help with preparing this report, DR UK would particularly like to thank the Civil Service Disability Network, the Cabinet Office Diversity Team, the Diversity & Inclusion Team at the Department for

¹ Email contribution.

² ONS Civil Service Statistics 2014: <http://www.ons.gov.uk/ons/rel/pse/civil-service-statistics/2014/index.html>

Work and Pensions, the Civil Service Disability Champion Lin Homer, Bob Grove from the Disability Engagement Group, and all those who took part in focus groups and interviews.

Agnes Fletcher and Liz Sayce, Disability Rights UK, December 2014

Introduction

To be world-class, the Civil Service acknowledges that it needs to recruit and retain the very best civil servants, irrespective of their background. This means recruiting and promoting on the basis of merit from the biggest pool of talent available. It means not excluding people because of personal characteristics such as their gender, ethnicity, sexual orientation or disability.

Over the last 15 years, representation across gender, ethnicity and disability has improved within the Civil Service. Women now account for 53 per cent of the Civil Service, compared to 48.6 per cent in 1998; 10.1 per cent declared a minority ethnic background in 2014, a significant increase from 5.7 per cent in 1998; and 8.8 per cent say that they have a disability - more than double the rate of 4.1 per cent in 1998.³

Recruitment statistics suggest that the Civil Service is drawing from a reasonably wide range of backgrounds – 48.8 per cent of Fast Streamers are women, 11.9 per cent say they are disabled and 11.6 per cent say they are from a minority ethnic background.

However, in the Senior Civil Service, the picture is less encouraging. Just 3.4 per cent say they have a disability.⁴

It is welcome and important that the Civil Service's leadership has chosen to focus on progression for civil servants with disabilities and long-term health conditions. Many large employers, in the public and private sectors, focus solely on recruitment from the outside and overall numbers in the workforce.

A focus on progression demonstrates ambition, the desire to be an exemplar employer and sends an important message to individuals within the Service that they have as yet untapped talent and potential. It implies that it is the employer's responsibility to unlock that talent and potential, rather than looking outside of the organisation to achieve greater diversity in senior roles.

The Government's 'Civil Service One Year On' plan committed the Civil Service to commission advice on "possible interventions to remove any blockages to our most talented people succeeding in the Civil Service . . . and on how we support them more effectively in their roles".

The Minister for the Cabinet Office commissioned research to examine the blockages preventing women from reaching the most senior levels of the Civil Service early in 2014. This work informed a refreshed Civil Service Talent Action Plan, which was published in September 2014. The same plan committed to commission research examining barriers faced by Black and Minority Ethnic (BME); Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, and Transgender (LGBT); and staff with disabilities and/or health conditions in the Civil Service, which this report responds to.

³ Cabinet Office op. cit.

⁴ Senior Civil Service database, October 2014

Key findings

The issue of why disabled people are not progressing to the Senior Civil Service in significant or proportionate numbers is not a recent one. A key finding of this report is that examination of the barriers to progression and recommendations to tackle them have been around for some time – since at least 1998, when a report on the subject commissioned by the Cabinet Office was published.

There is some good practice to share across departments, for example the Foreign and Commonwealth Diversity Leadership Self- Assessment Tool (v2), which encourages proactive planning and positive behaviours in relation to leading the development of a more diverse workforce.

There are also individual cases of line managers brokering effective arrangements to retain and develop individuals with very significant disabilities and/or health conditions to the benefit of the service. With permission, these could be promoted as anonymised case studies and celebrated and promoted as ways to develop talent and support progression. Some departments, including the Home Office, have targeted improving levels of openness with positive results.

Important actions have been taken since the McDonald report of 2011⁵ responding to low levels of engagement among staff with disabilities and health conditions. New initiatives include centralised reasonable adjustments and specific development and mentoring programmes. There is evident strong commitment to disability equality from senior champions. However, this has not been translated systemically into line manager action and cultural change.

Career development and talent management

Civil servants living with disability and long-term health conditions face substantial barriers to progressing in their careers.

- They are significantly over-represented in the lowest box marking during performance development reviews.⁶ An analysis of eight departments shows that in some they are twice or even three times as likely to be rated “must improve”.

Participants in DR UK’s qualitative research suggested this was for two primary reasons:

- A benevolence barrier. The Senior Civil Service ‘norm’ is still widely perceived to involve supreme flexibility in terms of working hours and location, exemplar communication skills and hyper-resilience physically and mentally: disabled civil servants feel that whatever their talents, skills or potential contribution, they are assumed not to be able to deal with the pressures and are therefore passed over for new responsibilities and promotion.
- Significant problems with workplace adjustments and job structures.

⁵ McDonald (2011) ‘Why are engagement levels so low among staff with disabilities working within the Civil Service? A Report to the Civil Service Task Group on Disability’.

⁶ See responses to written questions in Hansard:

http://www.publications.parliament.uk/pa/cm201415/cmhansrd/cmallfiles/mps/commons_hansard_6007_ws.html

Problems with workplace adjustments both inhibit performance and prevent movement between roles for career development:

- Workplace adjustments (often described as “reasonable adjustments”) are not universally accepted as “business as usual”. They are seen as a privilege not a necessity or a right in parts of the Service and also as a “hassle” and a cost as opposed to an investment.
- Many needing workplace adjustments face long waits for these to be put in place, significantly damaging their own and corporate productivity.⁷
- Adjustments that require innovative arrangements, such as ‘job-carving’⁸ – which are prevalent among some other successful employers – are barely recognised within the Civil Service as a valid option
- Barriers are perceived to be greatest for people with mental health problems, learning difficulties or autistic spectrum issues and the adjustments needed are often little understood.

The result is that civil servants with disabilities tend not to trust the fairness of the performance management or career progression processes. The *Removing Barriers to Success Survey*⁹ found disabled employees are:

- Less likely than non-disabled colleagues to say “My last performance review accurately reflected my strengths and development areas” (40 per cent compared to 50 per cent of overall respondents).¹⁰
- Less likely than other under-represented groups to say “I can use flexible working arrangements (e.g. telecommuting, flexible work schedule or a compressed working week) without harming my career” (41 per cent compared to 51 per cent overall).¹¹
- Less likely to trust progression opportunities. Disabled respondents (26 per cent) were less likely than non-disabled colleagues (39 per cent) to say “Opportunities for career development are available to all employees regardless of disability, ethnicity, gender reassignment, sexual orientation”. DR UK’s qualitative research confirmed this lack of confidence.

Targeted talent schemes have been introduced, using evidence-based methods including mentoring. Both generic and specific schemes have the potential to make a difference. Some progress is occurring, for instance an increase in the proportion of Fast Streamers being open about a disability. However, programmes require sustained and structured follow-up to recoup the individual and corporate investment made. They are not currently evaluated in terms of their impact on progression over a number of years, and they will only work in conjunction with measures to fix workplace adjustments and address cultural barriers to promotion.

⁷ Ibid.

⁸ Customising job duties to create specialist job roles, thus freeing up the time of specialist staff, or to swap job duties to make the most of individual skills. Job carving can lead to improved productivity, service delivery and profitability based on using a higher percentage of the skilled worker’s time to concentrate on completing the tasks that require their professional level of skill. J <http://base-uk.org/employers-recruitment-jobcarving>

⁹ Hay Group (2014) ‘Removing Barriers to Success in the Civil Service: Survey Findings’.

¹⁰ Ibid.

¹¹ Ibid.

Culture

- Discrimination, bullying and harassment are still reported by large and disproportionate numbers of civil servants with disabilities and health conditions. In the *Removing Barriers to Success* survey, 56 per cent of respondents with a disability reported personal experience of discrimination, bullying, harassment or victimisation at work in the past 12 months. This is also highlighted by the latest People Survey,¹² where 23 per cent of those with a disability (8551 people) say they have been discriminated against at work (including 2223 who say this is on grounds of disability). Leadership action to ensure disabled colleagues feel safe from harassment is urgently required.
- The culture and expectations of the Senior Civil Service can inhibit progression of employees with disabilities and health conditions. The Senior Civil Service ‘norm’ is still widely perceived to be male, white, heterosexual and non-disabled; with a requirement to demonstrate supreme flexibility (see above).
- Participants in DR UK’s qualitative research suggested that, whatever their talents, they are too often in effect passed over for promotion because they do not fit the Senior Civil Service idealised ‘norm’. They are often assumed:
 - not to have a “face that fits”;
 - not to be able to deal with the pressures – the “benevolence barrier”;
 - to be unable to respond rapidly, for instance to requests from ministers and special advisers because they cannot be available at any hour or for very long hours;
 - to be liable to excessive sick leave or disability-related absences;
 - to be poor or merely adequate performers; respondents repeatedly told us they were given no opportunity to demonstrate their potential and performance was frequently adversely affected by failure to make workplace adjustments.

Leadership and accountability

There is clear and strong commitment from senior level champions of diversity. However, this is not consistently and effectively incentivised or supported at line manager level.

- Despite positive recent developments, like targeted talent initiatives, research participants reflected that progress had been partial and in some areas may have slipped back, e.g. workplace adjustment processes in some departments/organisations. A 1998 report to the Cabinet Office on progression and diversity reflects some similar difficulties to this 2015 report.¹³

¹² For 2014 – forthcoming.

¹³ Schneider Ross (1998) ‘Succeeding in the Civil Service – a question of culture. Research into the under-representation of women, ethnic minorities and people with disabilities in the Senior Civil Service’: <http://www.schneider-ross.com/wp-content/uploads/2014/08/Cabinet-Office-Report-Succeeding-in-the-Civil-Service.pdf>

The levers to deliver change are not sufficiently concerted or systemic. Some businesses use targets to drive change¹⁴ with accountability at all levels of the business. For example, Channel 4 is setting diversity targets for all senior managers and assessing performance according to tangible change. Some Civil Service organisations have used a range of approaches including data to drive change, talent management and line manager training.

- The Civil Service holds more data than it uses on disability. Gaps in data should not inhibit using existing data to drive better performance on diversity. For example, there is data on differential outcomes for civil servants with disabilities and health conditions on progression, performance and bullying/harassment. However, this important management information is not consistently used to drive improvement
- Management training covers diversity but there is no structured accountability of line managers for diversity outcomes; or consistent approach to building management capacity and confidence or setting and appraising diversity objectives.

Responsibility is dispersed:

- The federated structure of the Civil Service means that there are in effect many Civil Service employers and the resulting variability in interpretation of policies and in processes creates barriers to upwards and sideways progress.
- Similarly, responsibility for diversity, including as it relates to health/disability, is distributed across several departments, notably for disability the Cabinet Office and the Department for Work and Pensions.

Civil Service disability networks are highly valued but often spend too much time acting on individuals' behalf to negotiate for adjustments, doing the job of line managers or HR staff, rather than on drawing on members' expertise to create change – and the contribution made by individuals who lead or are active in networks is not always recognised or valued.

¹⁴ See Channel 4's 2015 Diversity Charter.

<http://www.channel4.com/media/documents/press/news/Channel%204%20360%20Diversity%20Charter%20-%20FINAL.pdf>

Recommendations

Career development and talent management

1. Support equality in performance management, promotion and recruitment

- Those involved in all performance management, promotion and recruitment decisions should be required to undertake unconscious bias training – to reveal and replace low expectations and deficit thinking on disability.
- Civil Service Learning should ensure that compulsory line manager training focuses on what it means to respond effectively to health and disability in the workplace, including the full range of workplace adjustments for different kinds of impairments, to enable everyone to perform to their best.
- Portals should be rigorously scrutinised for any inadvertent bias.
- Job descriptions and person specifications for roles in the Senior Civil Service should be independently reviewed to consider unnecessary health and disability-related barriers.

2. Strengthen and speed up centralised adjustments, support and job structuring

- A clear timetable should be set for the delivery of the Civil Service's new centralised workplace adjustments process and there should be greater clarity about how it is to be resourced.
- Disability passports, disability leave, more consistent support for disability networks and other measures introduced in some departments and agencies in the wake of the McDonald report should be implemented throughout the Service.
- Jobshares and 'job carving' should be actively promoted by senior civil servants, corporate and departmental/agency HR to enable talented disabled people to progress, building on progress with flexible working for parents.
- Creative and innovative adjustments should be made available - and promoted as options – for people living with mental health or learning difficulties or autistic spectrum issues, where perceived barriers are greatest. For example, annualised hours contracts that enable employment of people with fluctuating conditions; remote working and adaptations to management techniques to accommodate different needs.

3. Improve the impact of generic and specific talent and leadership programmes to support the disabled talent pipeline

- More existing staff with disabilities and health conditions should be recruited onto talent programmes. In some cases, the cohort of successful applicants with disabilities is too small to be recorded and retain anonymity, (i.e. it is less than five).¹⁵
- More actively managed career planning processes should be created for staff with disabilities and health conditions after completing talent programmes - with a very senior level champion for each person.
- There should be greater use of techniques known to be effective for progression, including peer, senior level and reverse mentoring and coaching.
- Individuals' progress should be monitored and more tangible in terms of how long and how far people progress. Evaluation of outcomes should be undertaken, alongside satisfaction rates.
- The Fast Stream Forum should work more closely with diversity networks to improve satisfaction rates among Fast Streamers with disabilities and health conditions and to monitor progress.

Culture

1. Exercise visible leadership

- Civil Service leaders should set the ambition to change the perceived senior (non-disabled) 'norm' by working with staff disability and diversity networks to enable more people to be open about disability and health issues and act as effective role models.
- More people living with mental health issues, learning difficulties and autistic spectrum conditions are needed as role models and should be supported to do so.

2. Communicate inclusion

- Senior civil servants should communicate powerfully the business arguments for inclusion – in terms of enhanced performance and government leadership in serving the whole of the public - and “make it real” by demonstrating how the greatest barriers are being tackled.

3. Drive cultural change

- Senior civil servants should lead programmes to root out bullying and harassment and ensure managers are equipped to prevent and tackle it.
- They should lead the process of challenging negative attitudes, particularly relating to mental health conditions, learning difficulties and autism spectrum/neurodiverse conditions, and share progress in turning positive policy into practice.^{16 17 18}

¹⁵ Fast Stream evaluation.

Leadership and accountability

1. Clear and accountable objectives

- The Civil Service Board should set the expectation, through corporate objectives, that the service will be a leader on disability equality; and should hold Permanent Secretaries and agency Chief Executives to account for tangible progress.¹⁹
- Permanent Secretaries, agency Chief Executives and the top 200 senior civil servants should be appraised annually on progress within their department/agency on disability equality - in terms of people management and service delivery. This should translate into specific diversity objectives for all line managers.
- The Civil Service-wide network group of diversity leads (Heads of Diversity Group) should work closely with disability networks to enable strategic action, equality-proofed central policy, greater consistency of policy implementation across the Service, and effective monitoring that leads to shared learning.
- Senior level leadership at corporate and departmental/agency level should be specified on career development for people living with mental health issues, learning difficulties and autistic spectrum issues.

2. Clarity on who drives improvement

- Strategy, policy and delivery of disability equality within the Civil Service should be streamlined, so that accountability is clear and not split between the Cabinet Office and the Department for Work and Pensions.

3. Use of data to drive change

- Urgent attention needs to be given at a corporate level to the equality gap in performance appraisal. Data on box marking and the pool of people considered ready for promotion should be published, broken down by diversity characteristics including disability and by department/agency, to drive change. This should build upon research conducted in 2014 by

¹⁶ There are private sector examples on creating disability confidence to learn from, including Shell's 'Be Yourself' video-sharing platform and Accenture's 'Disability: It Happens', both case studies in Nash (2014) 'Secrets and Big News: enabling people to be themselves at work'.

¹⁷ The Time to Change campaign has a variety of resources about tackling discrimination against people with mental health conditions: <http://www.time-to-change.org.uk/>

¹⁸ The National Autistic Society runs training - <http://www.autism.org.uk/Our-services/Training-and-consultancy.aspx> - and has guidance on autism friendly environments: <http://www.autism.org.uk/working-with/leisure-and-environments.aspx>

¹⁹ Organisations to learn from include Channel 4, which has set a 360 degree diversity charter, with accountability for progress at all levels and all segments of the organisation, from commissioning to editing and talent management: see <http://www.channel4.com/media/documents/press/news/Channel%20%20360%20Diversity%20Charter%20-%20FINAL.pdf>

the Home Office²⁰ and the recommendations contained in its report should be implemented in full.

- Management data on diversity, performance and progression – as well as engagement and discrimination/harassment – should inform the objectives of permanent secretaries/chief executives and all those within the Senior Civil Service, with accountability for progress achieved.
- Corporate policy and practice on monitoring data should be reviewed and standardised, to emphasise the uses to which data is put, its confidentiality and the breadth of experiences covered by the definition of disability.

4. Benchmarking and sharing good practice

- Accountability should be driven through initiatives such as the Time to Change Pledge and the Public Health Responsibility Deal, with objectives set and measured.
- Departments and agencies not yet signed up should also consider taking part in the Business Disability Forum's Disability Standard assessment to benchmark and assess progress.
- Publication of data and powerful stories from different departments and agencies should be used to drive benchmarking and learning within the Service.

²⁰ Home Office (2014) 'Understanding the Language of Performance', by K Y Wilson CPsychol.

Methodology

The aim of this report is to help the Civil Service to understand why staff with disabilities and long-term health conditions are still underrepresented at senior levels and to form a set of actions to address the specific barriers that this group faces.

The research:

- identifies the problems and barriers that civil servants with disabilities and health conditions face;
- provides the evidence behind the issues identified;
- provides analysis of the issues;
- evaluates the success of current interventions in removing blockages to progression; and
- provides a clear action plan to improve the status quo.

The research was conducted during October and November 2014. It included:

- Analysis of an independent and anonymous survey on progression, conducted by the Hay Group and open to all civil servants. Promotion of the survey was accompanied by messages particularly encouraging those from underrepresented groups to respond.
- These groups were:
 - civil servants with disabilities and long-term health conditions;
 - civil servants from minority ethnic backgrounds;
 - civil servants who are lesbian, gay, bisexual or transgender.
- Four focus groups and 12 one to one interviews conducted by DR UK with civil servants with a range of disabilities and long-term health conditions.
- A range of face to face and telephone interviews conducted by DR UK with:
 - staff with responsibility for equality and diversity within the Civil Service
 - leaders of a range of diversity and disability networks within the service
 - disability experts within the civil service unions.
- Content analysis of several hundred comments submitted by civil servants with disabilities and health conditions about their personal experiences and views on barriers to progression.
- A desk review of relevant data from within and outside the Civil Service, including HR policies, relevant e-learning programmes and results from the Civil Service People Survey 2014.

Care was taken to ensure a good balance of experience of different types of disability and health conditions, including people experiencing mental health difficulties, learning difficulties, visual impairments, hearing impairments, neurodiverse/autistic spectrum conditions, physical impairments and long-term health conditions.

We sought to hear from people at different levels in different organisations throughout Great Britain and therefore one focus group was held in Leeds and three in London. Telephone interviews and email correspondence broadened the geographical spread of those participating.

Wider context

This research project builds upon several influential pieces of research on disability and the Civil Service. Andrew McDonald's *Civil Service Disability Task Force* report was published in 2011 in response to low engagement levels among disabled staff and high reporting of bullying and harassment in People Survey data.²¹ The key findings of the McDonald report remain highly relevant both to performance and progression. The report found:

- failures in policy implementation
- problems with workplace adjustments
- a lack of understanding and disability awareness
- insufficient access to expert advice on disability
- inconsistent acknowledgement of the value of staff with disabilities.

As a result of the McDonald report several initiatives were introduced, including a new centralised workplace adjustments system, disability 'passports' to accompany people when they change roles, increased support for line managers on 'disability confidence' and specific career progression routes for civil servants with disabilities and health conditions.

A report by Kate Nash, 'Secrets and Big News' published in early 2014, looked at the challenges people feel in sharing personal information about their health with employers. It provides a useful programme to promote disability confidence and data monitoring, which the Service is implementing.

Several departments have signed the Time to Change pledge, recognising that mental health remains a very challenging issue for the service. There is a nascent project on mental ill health, led by the Disability Engagement Group, which aims to address this growing issue within the Civil Service. There has also been work on mentoring, including increasing the number and diversity of mentors.

The McDonald report was not focussed specifically on progression. However, in 1998 a Civil Service commissioned report by equality and diversity consultancy Schneider-Ross looked at the under-representation of women, ethnic minorities and people with disabilities in the Senior Civil Service.²²

Reading it after more than 16 years, its conclusions are salutary – and remarkably similar to the conclusions of this report: "In essence, the main barrier is perceived to be a deeply embedded culture, which has the impact of excluding those who are different. In the main, this is not a question of overt discrimination or prejudice, it is an altogether more subtle (and less conscious) process."²³ "Behaviours of those in leadership positions" and "lack of transparency in promotion and development processes" are cited as key barriers.

"My condition is not visible so people doubt that it impacts on my health and ability to do my job the way that it often does. I regularly get told: 'But you look so well.'"²⁴

²¹https://www.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/60892/report-to-civil-service-taskforce-disability.pdf .

²² Schneider Ross op.cit.

²³ ibid

²⁴ Email contribution.

Currently, 8.8 per cent of civil servants say they have a disability as defined in the Equality Act 2010; the figure is 3.1 per cent for senior civil servants.²⁵ In contrast, the 2011 census identified that 18 per cent of the UK population is 'disabled'. Other studies identify that disability increases with age (one in 20 children compared to one in five working age adults) and that where people acquire disabilities and health conditions, the majority of people do so during their working lives. The majority of disabilities are not visible and wheelchair users account for just 2 per cent of the UK population. It is therefore likely that:

- a. There are more staff who might meet the definition of a 'disabled person' in the Equality Act than the 8.8 per cent who currently say they have a disability or health condition to the Civil Service.
- b. Most people who do meet that definition within the Service will have developed a health condition or disability during their working life.
- c. Many of them will have become disabled while working for the Civil Service. Retaining their expertise and commitment is crucial. Many will not consider themselves to be 'disabled', may need a period of adjustment to a new experience and may not be aware that they can stay in work and that adjustments are available.

Of the latest Fast Stream cohort, 11.9 per cent say they are disabled. This is promising, given that the Fast Stream is the key programme for graduates with the potential to become leaders in the Civil Service. However, the 'Fast Stream Consultation Survey 2014' indicates that having a disability (or belonging to an ethnic minority) is also associated with lower levels of satisfaction.²⁶

There are very senior disabled people in many organisations – including as executive and non-board level directors. In 2010, DR UK's predecessor, Radar, published 'Doing Seniority Differently',²⁷ which surveyed almost 1500 'disabled high-flyers'. It found examples of people with a wide range of disabilities and health conditions in a hue variety of roles and that mentoring and senior-level support made the biggest difference to people's opportunities to progress. There is no doubt that many organisations in the corporate and third sectors value and profile the contributions of their senior staff with disabilities and health conditions.

There are many examples of evidenced good practice from other major UK employers, such as BT and Lloyds Banking Group, which the Civil Service should draw upon. The Business Disability Forum's Disability Standard allows organisations to benchmark themselves and showcases many others.

²⁵ Annual Civil Service Employment Survey

²⁶ Document provided by the Cabinet Office, unpublished.

²⁷ www.disabilityrightsuk.org/doingSeniorityDifferently

In 2006 BT developed the 'BT Passport', a simple document that can be downloaded from the intranet by every BT employee. The document enables any employee with a disability or health condition to record what their disability is, how it affects them at work, the adjustments needed and those subsequently agreed with their manager. The document is only kept by the individual and their manager – when the individual moves on, they can present it to their new manager; when the manager moves on, the individual can make it available, if necessary, to their new manager.

The Passport enables practical work-focussed conversations designed to be enabling between staff and their managers. It also ensures that employees don't have repeated conversations about arrangements that have been previously agreed and are working well. It is a simple no-cost tool to enable what can be a 'difficult conversation' to take place – and then to ensure that any resulting arrangement can stay in place without having to start from scratch with any staff changes.

BT now has a Health & Wellbeing Passport, a Carer's Passport and is working on other passports to add to the 'Passport family'.

In terms of workplace adjustments, it appears that since the withdrawal of Access to Work from central Government departments in 2006, the devolving of responsibility for adjustments to line manager level and loss of specific HR expertise on disability that the previous trend of improvement had begun to reverse. Action is being taken to redress this but it has probably moved the Civil Service from among the 'top spots' in terms of employment of disabled people.

Lloyds Banking Group began in 2000 to take a systemic approach to the management of adjustments among its 95,000 employees as part of a three-pronged plan on disability.¹ (It also set up specific career developed programmes and supported the development of a staff network).

Lloyds set out clearly the purpose of effective management of adjustments – to enable staff to perform to their full potential and to contribute to the success of the Group. The aim was to “get the basics right”, “to fix things” and to ensure that good management of adjustments became business as usual.

The workplace adjustment process was deemed unfit for purpose and overhauled according to three criteria:

- **one size does not fit all (i.e. assessments should only be undertaken when needed and everything else should be fast-tracked);**
- **line managers should be involved but not drive the process (so not acting as a bottleneck)**
- **funding for adjustments should be centralised to eliminate local concerns over cost).**

Lloyds Banking Group has now provided workplace adjustments to 17,000 staff since March 2010, at an average rate of 150 cases a week, with less than four full-time equivalents in the team. The average case duration for fast-track cases is three days. For those needing assessment the average is 11 days. The satisfaction rating of the process from staff and line managers is 85 per cent happy/very happy.

Mark Fisher, Director of Group Operations and Executive Sponsor for Disability says:

“It makes business sense to help our colleagues with disabilities work effectively and contribute to the success of their teams and the Group. The measures we have put in place are helping us meet this goal and whilst there is still room for improvement we are pleased with the achievements we have made to date.”

Lloyds Banking Group also runs and has evaluated a number of personal and career development programmes for staff with disabilities and health conditions.

Evaluation of the programmes has shown that disabled colleagues who have attended a workshop are more likely to remain with the Group and to gain promotion than an equivalent sample of disabled colleagues who do not attend.

Staff return far more engaged and positive about the organisation and Lloyds has better retention, engagement and satisfaction rates from staff who have attended one of the programmes compared to those who have not.

Other employers provide compelling examples of how an enabling approach to the provision of workplace adjustments can work. For example, the proactive, business-driven approach of “tell us how we can enable you to work at your best” is more productive and cost-effective than a gateway that involves “proving” disability and the need for “reasonable” adjustments.

Research and analysis

1. Career development and talent management

Patchy HR and line manager support

A key finding of the McDonald report, corroborated by both DR UK's qualitative research and the Hay Group survey, was that it is at the line management level where capacity and confidence are lacking and where barriers exist and need to be tackled.

“It is not about your skills it is about who you know.”²⁸

The McDonald report recommended more training for line managers and the Civil Service Disability Champion Lin Homer and the Disability Engagement Group have led work in this area for line managers. However our research suggests that there are several persistent gaps on line management that still need to be addressed. For example there needs to be rapid access to senior level expertise on disability and workplace adjustments so that line managers are supported:

“I've found my own Department's HR to be a bit less joined up and not as disability literate as I would have expected of them. When first I sought assessment for dyslexia they told me I had to go via my GP, when I knew our rules and all internal and external advice on the inter/intranet showed it was the workplace's responsibility, as confirmed by my GP. That and other interactions make me believe there is no one area in our HR that has full disability awareness.”²⁹

Feedback on line manager support in the Hay Group survey was broadly positive for being treated with dignity and respect, and working well with people from all backgrounds. However, those with mental health or learning impairments were less positive and most disabled respondents did not feel recognised for their contributions in a fair and equitable manner.

There is little in the way of compulsory training for line managers overall on diversity. Disability awareness is compulsory. However an online course on unconscious bias is largely optional (HMRC and a couple of other departments/agencies have mandated this).

It should be noted that there are some excellent individual examples within many departments of high-level leadership and practical support for individuals with disabilities and health conditions, particularly where these are obviously severe in physical impact and/or life-threatening:

“The [Department] has an excellent past record of providing compassionate and literally life-enhancing (at least from my own personal experience) support for staff with degenerative and ultimately life threatening disabilities/illnesses.”³⁰

²⁸ Focus group participant.

²⁹ Email contribution.

³⁰ Email contribution.

Workplace adjustments are not consistently well-managed

“I think there is a real difference here between ‘hard’ and ‘soft’ reasonable adjustments. Physical changes, such as access technology, have always been acted upon quickly [...] Soft adjustments, such as types of flexible working, or an amended workload, depend considerably upon the willingness of the line manager concerned to approach the challenge in an open-minded way.”³¹

Compared to 51 per cent overall, only 41 per cent of disabled respondents to the Barriers to Success survey said that they felt able to use flexible work arrangements, such as telecommuting, a flexible work schedule or compressed working week, without harming their career. Just 62 per cent (as compared to 70 per cent overall) said that they can work in a way that enables them to meet their family and/or personal commitments, which are the sort of adjustments that can help people with fatigue, pain or stamina challenges to work effectively.

“Lack of understanding or knowledge about hearing loss and tinnitus, for me meant I was not taken seriously. I continuously had to ask to be seated somewhere quieter to enable to me to hear customers on the telephone [...] I had never made an issue of my hearing as I just wanted to feel and behave normally.”³²

“I found the procedure and the management "assistance" to be unhelpful in the extreme after moving offices. To be told to "put up" with discomfort is unacceptable. Only by union intervention was any adjustment put into place. In the longer term I feel my career was damaged by my requirements for reasonable adjustments.”³³

Eighty-two per cent of respondents to the survey with a disability or health condition said they require a workplace adjustment. Of those who needed a workplace adjustment, 73 per cent have had an assessment.

“I recently was turned down for a job move due to my assistive software; and I know of at one other disabled colleague who gained promotion but when the relevant manager found they were disabled, withdrew the job appointment.”³⁴

Even with the limited number of respondents to the survey, 582 civil servants waiting more than four weeks for workplace adjustments constitutes a huge productivity gap. There has been increased senior level commitment to centralised adjustments and good practice since the McDonald report. However, this research, corroborated by the Barriers to Success survey, demonstrates that this is not being consistently implemented at line manager level, especially where:

- adjustments have a cost in money or time;
- impairments are less well understood;

³¹ Disability Rights UK interview.

³² Email contribution.

³³ Email contribution.

³⁴ Focus group participant.

- objectives need adjustment for impairment related reasons, such as a fluctuating condition or fatigue.
- **“Identifying yourself as needing support is often interpreted by managers as being difficult. Managers seem ill-prepared to deal with disability issues and don't appear to have read or understood the written guidance on workplace adjustments.”³⁵**

This seems particularly prevalent in certain areas of the Civil Service, such as the prison service, where people may sustain injuries in the line of duty:

“The [Department] has nothing in place for arrest-trained staff who through injury or ill health are no longer able to continue in their role. In these cases it is not so much career progression that is affected. It is the ability to continue to work and make a valuable contribution at all.”³⁶

Some research participants did have very good support from managers and from HR. However, the variability creates a particular barrier to progression.

In particular, the element of cost or additional time involved with workplace adjustments remains a significant barrier to performance and to progression, in a time of austerity, particularly in relation to public finances.

“People with disabilities are seen as too expensive to cater for since they stopped civil servants from using Access to Work.”³⁷

Despite some exceptions, the Civil Service is regarded as reasonably good at providing practical adjustments such as the provision of chairs or computer equipment. It is perceived to be weaker at accommodating issues such as pain, fatigue, vulnerability to infection, difficulties with memory or concentration, anxiety and depression - and where adjustments are needed to objectives, targets and roles.

Where people are known and valued by senior staff for their skills and talents before becoming disabled, there appears to be greater flexibility and willingness to make workplace adjustments – and a continuing expectation of progression. In particular, there is a perception among staff at all levels – corroborated by some senior civil servants – that there is greater flexibility on adjustments, such as working from home or additional sickness absence before the trigger point is reached, for senior civil servants.

“Progression of talented employees in my experience is based on performance, and while this is a fair approach, disabled people have to make extra efforts just to get to the same starting point as others. This is due to not gaining empowering adjustments, rather than bare minimum ones both physically and mentally.”³⁸

³⁵ Focus group participant.

³⁶ Focus group participant.

³⁷ Focus group participant.

³⁸ Email contribution.

Many of the less formal career development opportunities that provide important opportunities for progression – temporary promotions and secondments for example – can be undermined by the slow pace of getting workplace adjustments in place. Knowledge that a particular individual has an (expensive) adjustment package may affect recruitment decisions. This disincentive needs to be explicitly and actively tackled.

“Why does HR policy for disabled people vary so much across departments? If a disabled staff member needs to move across departments to ensure their ongoing care is guaranteed (i.e. being closer to a carer) then huge brick walls are thrown up. Isn't it time to have one joined-up civil service HR policy and not individual ones to ensure all current and future equality legislation is met?”³⁹

A 'disability passport' is being introduced to enable adjustments to move seamlessly with an individual across departments and agencies and between roles (with changes to adjustments only where required by the role/workplace), but with no other automatic trigger through change of role or workplace. This should help to tackle the sense among some line managers that to recruit/promote someone with an adjustments package is to “import cost or trouble”⁴⁰.

Lack of belief that progression is possible

Disabled respondents to the Barriers to Success survey were less likely than non-disabled colleagues to say “Opportunities for career development are available to all employees regardless of disability, ethnicity, gender reassignment, sexual orientation” (26 per cent as opposed to 39 per cent).

“The competency framework and job descriptions can deter e.g. 'delivering at pace' – people can only go as fast as assistive technology allows them.”⁴¹

There were a number of participants in the Fast Stream programme among those attending DR UK focus groups. Perhaps unsurprisingly, given the huge variety of experiences among 'disabled people' there was no consistent picture of how well such mainstream programmes cater for civil servants with disabilities. But tracking the careers of talented civil servants with disabilities and health conditions over time would provide effective evaluation of both mainstream and positive action pathway programmes.

Progressing through the ranks in the Civil Service is sometimes dependent on satisfactory completion of psychological profiling. This usually includes some form of emotional intelligence profiling. To be legally valid, the use of personality / aptitude and ability questionnaires in recruitment has to be evidence-based with the desirable trait being held by at least 500 people of the grade / skill set aspired to.

³⁹ Response to Sir Jeremy Heywood's blog of 5 September 2014.

⁴⁰ Focus group participant

⁴¹ Focus group participant.

However, this practice may exclude people on the autism/neurodiversity spectrum and therefore counter the belief that workplace diversity – bringing a variety of skills, insights and experiences to bear on strategy, policy and service development – is a positive thing.

Such assessment processes may assume that the cultural background/mindset of those who held particular roles in the past are appropriate to current needs.

“Rightly or wrongly the Civil Service is known for recruiting ‘average’ people who fit into a mould. To change that mould there needs to be genuine understanding and commitment to progressing the careers of non-stereotypical individuals. ... This necessitates changed thinking within the Civil Service about the skills needs of jobs, and, in particular, identifying ways to value and promote people who could excel in a ‘background’ expert role.”⁴²

Is career progression just for the confident all-rounder?

The majority of survey respondents did not believe promotion decisions are made fairly (16 per cent of all respondents believed they were and just 12 per cent of respondents saying they have a disability or health condition). Results from the Women in Whitehall survey were notably higher, with 47 per cent responding favourably. However, these were primarily SCS employees and this reflects findings in the Barriers to Success survey that the more senior you are the more likely you are to feel that promotion decisions are fair.

“In general when I think about talent management it seems to rely much more on the proactive (from the individual) than reactive (the organisation giving you a tap on the shoulder). I am struck by the need to project oneself and one's aspirations with confidence, both orally and in writing, to believe in yourself and then others start noticing you more. This is hard for many part timers and maybe also for staff with disabilities.”⁴³

Civil Service progression which depends on rapid rotation around departments, such as the Fast Stream, militates against people with mental health / autistic spectrum conditions who may excel in one area of expertise but may not have ‘transferrable skills’ or who require a ‘safe’ and consistent working environment. Similar issues may be faced by people with different needs for workplace adjustments, such as complex ICT systems, that cannot currently be transferred/passported “at pace”.

Given the importance of gaining a variety of experiences to illustrate competencies for interview at SCS level, this is a significant barrier facing those with some disabilities or health conditions.

Corporate diversity networks

⁴² Interview.

⁴³ Interview.

It was clear from talking to Civil Service disability/diversity network leads that there is significant, largely unrecognised, time and energy devoted by individuals with disabilities and health conditions themselves within the Service to negotiating for and managing their own workplace adjustments and those of others (outside of any formal HR or line management responsibilities) and tackling workplace barriers for all civil servants.

Many individual civil servants, on their own and others' account, are contributing to the corporate objectives of creating a more equal and diverse workforce – and this should be more actively recognised, valued and celebrated. They – and unions – have a crucial role to play in helping the Civil Service as a corporate entity to identify and resolve barriers to performance and progression.

'Estates rationalisation' and unintended consequences

“For someone with mobility problems and mental health issues the flexibility needed in terms of working locations and business travel limit options.”⁴⁴

With the rationalisation of estates in order to make better use of government property and create efficiencies, impact assessments have shown that staff are travelling farther and for longer to their workplaces and this inevitably has a negative impact on those with disabilities and health conditions (and with caring responsibilities).

Some are able to overcome this additional barrier by home or remote working – but there is a perception that home working options are less likely to be supported for more junior staff, despite the fact that this would enable them to perform more effectively (enhancing opportunities for progression).

“Certain office conditions are non-conducive to high functioning autistics and also to people who do not satisfy the Myers Briggs extrovert personality profile. In particular the lack of provision of a permanent desk in an open plan office and loud busy distracting offices. There is no point learning about the needs of different people in management training courses if such needs cannot be accommodated at work.”⁴⁵

Performance development review

There was a strong perception among research participants that civil servants with disabilities and health conditions are disproportionately represented in the bottom box marking during the performance management review process. This is corroborated by the Barriers to Success survey, which reveals that disabled employees are less likely than non-disabled colleagues to say “My last performance review accurately reflected my strengths and development areas” (40 per cent versus 50 per cent).

“The current PDR system has created a culture where only a few people are developed. Those with disabilities and care responsibilities are often over looked.”⁴⁶

⁴⁴ Focus group participant.

⁴⁵ Email contribution.

⁴⁶ Email contribution.

The performance management framework may be creating barriers to progression through box mark quotas and appraisals that take no or little account of the impact of particular disabilities and health conditions and workplace adjustments on performance.

The Civil Service Diversity Team was able during the timescale of this research project to assemble the performance markings for eight Whitehall departments differentiating between disabled and non-disabled staff. The variation between departments is considerable. The available data shows that civil servants with disabilities and health conditions are around two to three times more likely to be assessed as “must improve”.

The Home Office has recently commissioned research on performance appraisal specifically to help identify the issues underlying disparities in performance ratings across selected protected groups.⁴⁷ This was prompted by internal research identifying that BME and disabled staff are less likely to be awarded a marking at the top 20 per cent and more likely to be awarded a marking in the lower 10 per cent compared to, respectively, white and non-disabled staff.

The findings are salutary and would benefit from wide dissemination among the Senior Civil Service and those concerned with equality and diversity. They include that:

- Written comments and numerical ratings were inconsistent. Comments were overwhelmingly positive irrespective of performance ratings. Numerical ratings are only useful to the extent that there is a consistency between judgments and justifications.
- Comments differed across groups. Line managers highlighted different performance factors in summarising the performance of white non-disabled, white disabled and Black, Asian and Minority Ethnic (BAME) staff. They highlighted targets for white non-disabled staff; social skills and attributes such as conscientiousness and confidence for BAME staff; and were less likely to describe white disabled staff as professional. These comments were inconsistent with performance ratings.
- There are few performance factors that differentiate staff in the top 20 per cent from those in the mid 70 per cent. This begs the question of what generally distinguishes staff rated at 20 per cent from peers in the mid 70 per cent.

Absence management

“Having periods of absence due to a long-term health condition or disability can count against you if you are put on absence management as some other departments put a block on recruiting you.”⁴⁸

High levels of sickness absence can also be a factor in determining a bottom box marking. With absence management, while there is a corporate approach, many departments and agencies appear to adapt this to form their own policies. In some instances a higher trigger point is agreed as a reasonable adjustment to an absence policy for a particular individual.

⁴⁷ Wilson op.cit.

⁴⁸ Focus group participant.

Once the trigger point is reached, an example of action expected is that “a written improvement warning will be given”, although “managers may use their discretion to decide not to give a written/final written improvement warning.”

In some departments, guidance is available for dealing with serious or terminal illness and there is also an emphasis on ensuring workplace adjustments are in place. However, research participants do not feel that this is fairly implemented.

During the course of this research, many examples of insensitive, even aggressive uses of the attendance management policy have come to light. For example:

“I am just in total shock. I have been issued with a written warning for being off sick with cancer.”⁴⁹

In a few departments or agencies (for example, the Crown Prosecution Service) disability-related absence is separated out and discounted from sickness absence, which potentially removes a barrier to progression.

Talent programmes are not evaluated over time

“I obtained a place on the ITS 1 course a number of years ago. However necessary adjustments were not made in terms of my training to enable me to successfully undertake the course. I had to stop and come off the course as a result.”⁵⁰

There seems to be little consistent evaluation of talent management programmes for their disability equality impact – either mainstream programmes such as Fast Stream or leadership schemes such as the Future Leaders Scheme or Major Projects Academy. Tracking individuals who participate over time is important to learn what works.

“As an ex-Fast Streamer, I have consistently been told I am high potential for SCS, but think I need a bit of extra support and development to realise my potential. There is not currently anything in [my department] which offers this.”⁵¹

Monitoring of numbers on some programmes does exist] (although often redacted because of small numbers). For example the Positive Action Pathway, which is available to staff in all grades from AA to Grade 6, tracks individual participants and evaluation shows that 23 per cent of participants on the AA/AO programme secured promotion following participation. However across talent and leadership programmes as a whole, this information is infrequently available.

1. Culture

⁴⁹ Email contribution.

⁵⁰ Email contribution.

⁵¹ Email contribution to DR UK research.

Respondents to the *Removing Barriers to Success* survey were asked to summarise the Civil Service's culture in three words. "Bullying" was the 14th most mentioned word by those with a disability/health condition, but only the 60th by non-disabled staff. "Flexible" was the 12th most used word by non-disabled staff, as opposed to 49th by disabled staff. These are disturbing associations – but reinforced by the instances of reported harassment and problems with workplace adjustments both in this and other surveys and by DR UK's research participants.

The 'exemplar' and the 'deficit' models

"Sometimes those who work part-time or need adjustments are (consciously or unconsciously) viewed as unreliable and not given responsibilities as others are. For example I'm a senior grade 6 in a team that has six at that grade. I've been in the team the longest out of those six. When the SCS team leader is away, I have never once been asked to cover any of their duties in a space of almost 3 years."⁵²

There was a perception from DR UK focus group participants and individuals interviewed that performance appraisal and promotion prospects are affected by whether you fit a perceived senior civil service 'norm' or ideal – of being supremely flexible in terms of working hours and location, an exemplary communicator and hyper-resilient physically and mentally. Some participants described the norm as well as 'typically male, white, heterosexual, 'Oxbridge' and non-disabled'.

"Because I am not loud and somebody who goes out with the gang, I was not considered somebody for development by my line manager. Personal development review talks very rarely happened. I do not go out with 'the gang' because of fear of being out late. It is hard for me to do shift working but as it is needed I still do the full range of shifts. In addition my wife and I have two children so childcare also affects my ability to go out."⁵³

These factors were felt to be exacerbated by an approach to progression in the Civil Service that depends upon rapid rotation around departments. This was felt particularly to disadvantage those with mental health conditions and autism spectrum conditions. Barriers identified included familiarising new line managers and colleagues with workplace adjustments.

"Despite having a wide range of appropriate skills, I am constantly overlooked whenever a role/task with any level of responsibility is available on the team. My problems with short term memory meant that I was advised to think very carefully before going for promotion, which led me to believe that I would not be recommended for it if I did, whilst other non-disabled colleagues that I had previously mentored were able to."⁵⁴

⁵² Email contribution.

⁵³ Interview.

⁵⁴ Email contribution.

Focus group participants were very clear on what they felt the ‘typical’ senior civil servant was like – personal characteristics of socio-economic background, gender, ethnicity, age and (absence of) disability – plus key qualities such as ‘resilience’, availability at all hours / with the ability to respond immediately, for example for briefings to ministers.

This was felt to be at odds with the ‘deficit model’ of disability that still pervades in some parts of the Service – namely that people with disabilities and health conditions are a set of problems and costs rather than people with particular skills, insights and experiences in which to invest so that they deliver value to the Service, to society and the economy.

Even where people’s skills and potential are recognised, for some there can be a paternalistic “benevolence” barrier – they are told not to apply for or expect promotion to “more demanding” roles to protect their health and well-being. This may be driven by sympathy from managers but is experienced as frustrating and an explicit bar to progression.

“It was suggested that I should not apply for promotion/certain opportunities in case I struggle due to my disability/medical conditions, rather than helping and supporting me to try and achieve them.”⁵⁵

The experience of people with non-visible impairments: not always believed, sometimes blamed

Associations with the words ‘disabled’ and ‘disability’ are still largely with wheelchair use and demonstrable visual or hearing impairment. However the reality is that the vast majority of disabilities and health conditions are not immediately visible. As a result some with these conditions can encounter scepticism about whether their condition is real. This is not just a source of harassment but a barrier to progression in that, for some complex conditions, neither the individual nor their manager may be aware of the adjustments that could enable someone to reach their full potential:

“A barrier exists in that my disability is ‘hidden’. My colleagues see me getting my work done, but they don’t see the extra effort I have to put in and how I have to forgo ‘self-development’ work that they do in work hours - doing it in my own time at home and by taking annual leave to go to courses behind their back just so that I can ‘keep up’ with everyone else”⁵⁶

Research participants with mental health, autism spectrum/neurodiverse conditions and specific learning disabilities spoke of the particular barriers they faced and how the absence of a resolving “bit of kit” to deal with the challenges they faced meant that even when highly skilled they got stuck and demotivated. This is echoed by the Barriers to Success survey, found that those with these conditions were less likely to believe in the Service’s commitment to diversity and had an increased likelihood of experiencing discrimination, bullying or harassment when compared to civil servants with other disabilities and health conditions.

“An open and honest manager I had briefly put the problem of having a hidden disability, very succinctly to me: ‘[X], you’re an enigma. You’re clearly very able but

⁵⁵ Focus group participant.

⁵⁶ Email contribution.

you haven't progressed anywhere near as far as you should have. So everyone asks themselves "What's wrong with [X]?" To make a change in the Civil Service, significantly more managers need to be aware they're thinking this; and understand that they should not."⁵⁷

Stuck in the middle – or at the bottom?

Research participants argued that Civil Service processes assume staff progress/develop in a linear fashion and that it tests people's aptitude for a particular grade rather than their core abilities.

In addition, the more senior you are within the service, the more positive action programmes there are. Those at more junior grades with significant skills but also some "deficits", for example in relation to their social or communication skills, can therefore find it harder to reach their full potential.

Cultural expectations of what a senior civil servant is like ("good with the minister"), good communicator, resilient mentally and physically, forms a combined practical and cultural barrier to progression for some disabled civil servants.

"My dyslexia assessment (and IQ test) confirm the feedback I have received over the years that I'm a 'strategic thinker'... This, my core ability, is not expected of a low grade and not tested and assessed for until someone progresses to a higher grade. Because of this I've never been able to bring my full skill set to my work, so rather than working on strategies and driving forward improvements (things that stimulate me) I'm only 'allowed' to do lower level systematic work (which I understand now causes me to 'switch off' due to my ADHD)."⁵⁸

This is identified by several respondents as a significant barrier to progression. For those in junior roles where disabled people are disproportionately represented, there is less opportunity to demonstrate what they can do, "you tick fewer boxes", and have less opportunity to score highly in appraisals. Particularly if people who are younger have already progressed to higher grades, this can become a self-fulfilling prophecy – there is no opportunity to demonstrate aptitude, therefore there is an assumption that you do not have the aptitude and have been "passed over".

There can be a difficulty, once 'stuck' in roles below one's potential, in demonstrating more strategic or high level skill sets. Progression is therefore heavily dependent upon the ability of the line manager to spot and nurture potential.

"I find the most frustrating barrier in the Civil Service is that a lot of support and development is routed through individuals' line managers. If a line manager needs development them self this opens up the possibility that the staff below them can't access development opportunities/get feedback etc. When I've requested things that

⁵⁷ Email contribution.

⁵⁸ Email contribution.

are ‘mandatory’ the most common response is ‘they don’t know how’ and ‘they don’t get that from their line manager’”⁵⁹

Expectations and aspirations

Research participants linked this lack of understanding of, or belief in, the impact of some disabilities/health conditions, to lower aspirations in terms of where they might progress to within the Service. Some talked of being initially ambitious but finding that difficult experiences sapped this ambition. Where careers had stalled, either due to barriers or to health challenges, this lack of progress affected how they were perceived and became a vicious cycle – not having progressed after a given number of years, they were no longer expected to.

This is corroborated by findings from the Barriers to Success survey where, compared to respondents overall, those who say they have a disability or long-term health condition are less positive about development opportunities being made available to them. Those with a disability are markedly less positive about development opportunities being available to all employees⁶⁰. This aligns with feedback from the People Survey, where less than half of respondents agree there are good opportunities for development in their organisation (43 per cent overall; 35 per cent of those who say they have a disability).⁶¹

Openness about personal characteristics

The Barriers to Success survey asked people whether they are open about their disability or health condition. Seventy-eight per cent said yes, 17 per cent said no, and 5 per cent preferred not to say. For those who are open, 66 per cent are open with everyone, 33 per cent with close colleagues including their manager.

Fewer people with mental health conditions (72 per cent) are open about their condition at work compared to those with other health conditions or disability. For example, 90 per cent of those with mobility impairments, 89 per cent of those with hearing impairments and 87 per cent of those with visual impairments are open. The figure for those with a condition affecting learning, understanding or concentrating is also lower at 80 per cent.

There was a consistent message from the DR UK focus groups that people with non-visible impairments, including mental health conditions, dyslexia and neurodiverse/autism spectrum conditions are not understood, accommodated or valued to the same extent as those with visible or more tangible impairments, such as sight or hearing loss or mobility impairments that require use of a wheelchair.

“There is still much stigma around mental health issues. Hidden disabilities are not taken as seriously as physical disabilities.”⁶²

⁵⁹ Email contribution.

⁶⁰ Forty-nine per cent of respondents who are white, male, heterosexual and non-disabled are positive about this, 39 per cent of respondents overall but just 26 per cent of respondents who say they have a disability.

⁶¹ Civil Service People Survey 2014, forthcoming.

⁶² Focus group participant.

Some of the qualitative responses to the survey concern stigma against mental ill health and not feeling comfortable with being open. As work by Kate Nash Associates has shown, there is an important dividend for employers who are successful at “enabling people to be themselves at work”.⁶³

Discrimination and harassment

The survey found continuing problems with discrimination and harassment. Compared to an overall 40 per cent, 56 per cent of respondents with disabilities and health conditions had experienced discrimination, bullying, harassment or victimisation in the previous 12 months. Few had reported it and even fewer were satisfied if they had.

This finding is consistent with the Civil Service People Survey where 23 per cent of those with a disability (8551 people) say they have been discriminated against at work (including 3334 who say that this was on grounds of disability).

2. Leadership and accountability

When it comes to valuing diversity, only 33 per cent of disabled respondents to the *Barriers to Success* survey agreed that senior leadership's actions are consistent with their words.

“I don't feel the Civil Service are doing enough to remove the barriers of underrepresented groups. We see year on year the lack of BME/disabled representation at senior grades across the department.”⁶⁴

Results about respecting “individual differences” were higher in the People Survey 2014, which was more generally targeted at the whole of the Civil Service: overall 70 per cent were favourable and 61 per cent of those who said they had a disability. Nevertheless, there is a consistent gap between disabled and non-disabled staff in belief in the Civil Service's commitment to diversity.

Qualitative research revealed some more positive perceptions. Leadership was acknowledged by many to be genuinely supportive of greater workforce diversity at all levels within the Civil Service.

However the key response from research participants is that corporate objectives on diversity are not effectively translated into improvement in the management of health and disability at line manager level and that this has a negative impact on both performance and opportunities for progression.

Corporate objectives on equality and diversity may be forcefully and frequently expressed at senior levels by ministers, Permanent Secretaries and senior diversity champions but they do not always

⁶³ Nash op. cit.

⁶⁴ Email contribution.

resonate with those making management and recruitment decisions. This creates an “accountability gap” – whereby the necessary leverage to create practical change does not exist.

Indeed, in many cases corporate objectives are seen to conflict with the priorities of team leaders and others when it comes specifically to recruiting and supporting the performance and progression of civil servants with disabilities and health conditions. There remains a perverse incentive at line management level, which militates against recruiting and promoting disabled civil servants. This is particularly where:

- workplace adjustments have a cost attached in money or time;
- impairments and health conditions are less well-understood (particularly some invisible impairments);
- even with all other workplace adjustments in place, adjustments are needed to individual job descriptions or objectives/targets because of impairment or health-related issues such as fatigue, pain, infection risk, the speed with which tasks can be performed and the effects of fluctuating conditions.

Others spoke of a general lack of emphasis on good management of people – team leaders with 10 or more direct reports, stretching targets and little time to put the right conditions in place to support others to perform well. This aspect of management is particularly crucial to release the skills and potential of many civil servants with disabilities and health conditions.

There are examples of excellent line management support in accordance with corporate objectives. There are also many examples of poor practice, whether this relates to a lack of understanding of employer legal responsibilities on disability; to misinterpretation or misapplication of corporate policies; or to more subtle forms of behaviour that undermine confidence, performance and progression.

(Some of these findings are likely to hold true for those with sole/majority parental or caring responsibilities or others who are working part-time or flexibly for other reasons.)

Where next?

The initiatives suggested, and in some cases introduced, as a result of research reports by the Civil Service over many years could certainly help to improve the experience of those with a disability or health condition working in the Civil Service and rates of progression.

However, the key to change is not another report or a new “silver bullet” but consistent and persistent action – monitored, measured and valued – to tackle continuing discrimination and harassment and to manage workplace adjustments effectively.

Too many civil servants with disabilities and health conditions still report discrimination, harassment, being passed over for development and promotion opportunities and being unfairly assessed in terms of their performance. Talent is being wasted and a culture of discontent fostered.

Alongside getting the processes right, all civil servants need visible role models to change their perceptions of what people with disabilities and health conditions can achieve.

If talented disabled people, almost 20 years after the Schneider Ross report are still not achieving senior roles in sufficient numbers “on merit” to create change, the Civil Service may need to interrogate more closely what it means by “merit”. It may need to consider positive discrimination to ‘fast track’ talented people, with skills but perhaps also with some impairment-related ‘deficit’ into appropriate senior roles. The Equality Act of 2010 specifically allows for more favourable treatment only in the case of disability. This provision recognises the unique nature of disabling barriers - and may represent a way to catalyse significant and lasting change.

Annex

1. Qualitative research methods

For the focus groups and interviews the key questions were:

1. What more could the **leadership** of the Civil Service do to tackle barriers to progression?
2. What about **culture – attitudes and behaviour**? How are civil servants with disabilities and/or health conditions viewed by the Service corporately? Are there positives? Negatives? What would make the biggest difference to perceptions of disabled civil servants?
3. Which **policies** create the greatest barriers to progression or are the greatest enablers of progression?
4. **Talent programmes** – how well do general programmes work for civil servants with disabilities and health conditions? What about the Positive Action Pathway and targeted initiatives for civil servants with disabilities and health conditions? How could they be improved?
5. What do you consider to be the biggest barriers to progression?
6. What could make the biggest difference?

The tables below give details of those participating in focus groups and in interviews:

A total of 350 people were involved, through sharing views on the key questions by email, participation in focus groups or individual interviews.

| Grade | Number |
|--------------|-----------|
| Grade 6/7 | 19 |
| SEO/HEO | 21 |
| EO/AO | 25 |
| Total | 65 |

DR UK focus group participants

| Grade | Number |
|--------------|-----------|
| SCS | 6 |
| Grade 6/7 | 1 |
| SEO/HEO | 3 |
| EO/AO | 2 |
| Total | 12 |

DR UK interviews with civil servants with disabilities and health conditions

Meetings with those with corporate responsibility or other significant interest in disability equality, included:

- Minister for the Cabinet Office, Rt Hon Francis Maude MP.
- Civil Service Diversity Champion and Permanent Under-Secretary at the Foreign & Commonwealth Office Sir Simon Fraser
- Civil Service Disability Champion and Permanent Secretary at HM Revenue and Customs, Lin Homer.
- Chris Last, Head of Civil Service Human Resources, based in the Cabinet Office.
- Departmental HR Directors at the Home Office and the Ministry of Justice
- Jeanette Rosenberg and Paul Willgoss, Civil Service Disability Network.
- Disability Engagement Group, chaired by Lin Homer.
- Andrew Heyn, Director, Cabinet Office Diversity Strategy and team members.
- Janet Hill, Director, Civil Service Diversity & Inclusion and team members.
- Representatives of the First Association and the Public and Commercial Services Union.

2. Removing Barriers to Success Survey⁶⁵

The Hay Group conducted a survey on progression across the Civil Service from 10th-19th November 2014. The survey's purpose was to provide quantitative and qualitative data about the challenges facing talented people from under-represented groups in progressing within the Civil Service.

The scope covered the entire Civil Service, including agencies, at all grades, and covered England, Northern Ireland, Scotland and Wales. Although open to all, responses were particularly requested from three under-represented groups, namely the LGB&T community, those with a disability or long-term health condition and those with a black or minority ethnic background.

Because respondents were self-selecting, care was taken during analysis to ensure that conclusions could not be inappropriately extrapolated. Additionally, analysis by department (or weighting by department) was not undertaken due to employee number data not being available.

About the respondents

There were 7393 respondents to the Hay Group survey. Of those 1692, almost one in four (23 per cent), said that they had a disability; 4843 (67 per cent) said that they did not have a disability; and 753 (10 per cent) preferred not to say. The positive response is far higher than the 8.8 per cent of civil servants overall who say they have a disability.

| Disability | Responded | % |
|------------|-----------|--------|
| Yes | 1692 | 23.22% |
| No | 4843 | 66.45% |

⁶⁵ Hay Group op.cit.

| | | |
|-------------------|-----|--------|
| Prefer not to say | 753 | 10.33% |
|-------------------|-----|--------|

In terms of seniority, the largest percentage of respondents came from the SEO/HEO grades.

| Job Level | Responded | % |
|---|------------------|----------|
| Administrative Officer, Administration Assistant or equivalent (AO/AA) | 1403 | 19% |
| Executive Officer or equivalent (EO) | 1597 | 22% |
| Senior Executive Officer, Higher Executive Office or equivalent (SEO/HEO) | 2512 | 35% |
| Grade 6, Grade 7 or equivalent (G6/G7) | 1242 | 17% |
| Senior Civil Service or equivalent (SCS) | 140 | 2% |
| Other | 337 | 5% |

Of the 140 members of the Senior Civil Service who responded, 16 (11.4 per cent) said they had a disability. Further data drawn from the Survey is given in the analysis section