



The meeting summaries outlined topics discussed by the Minister for Social Security and Disability, and the Disability Unit Regional Stakeholder Network chairs. They do not reflect UK government policy unless specifically stated.

Meeting summary and action points – 9 December 2024

Quarterly meetings between Minister for Social Security and Disability Rt Hon Sir Stephen Timms MP and Regional Stakeholder Network (RSN) Chairs

Attendees: Minister Timms, RSN Chairs – Justin Donne (East Midlands), Louise Mckiernan (West Mids), Marc Goblot (London), Sam Everard (South West), Karen Hoe OBE (Yorkshire & Humber), John McDonald (North East Deputy), Ali Gunn (North West), Anne Wafula-Strike MBE (East), David Bateman (Head of Stakeholder Engagement, Disability Unit (DU) Cabinet Office) and other officials from the DU and the Department for Work and Pensions (DWP).

Apologies: Chloe Plummer (South East).

Discussion point	Action point
<p>Updates from Minister for Social Security and Disability, Rt Hon Sir Stephen Timms MP</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Minister Timms told RSN Chairs that the <u>Get Britain Working White Paper</u> was published on 26 November, setting out the high-level vision for the delivery of the government's manifesto commitments. It has three key elements: 1. a new service to support more people into work and help them get on in work (transforming Jobcentres), including through an enhanced focus on skills and careers; 2. a Youth Guarantee for all people aged 18 to 21 in England, to ensure they have an offer of education, training or help to find work; and 3. local Get Britain Working Plans for areas across England to set out how economic inactivity will be tackled at a local level, bringing together work, health and skills, led by Mayors and local areas. Further detail will be subject to further stakeholder engagement, including establishing a disability panel to ensure that the voices of disabled people are at the heart of these reforms. • The government will provide funding next year to enable local areas across England and Wales to deliver a new supported employment programme called Connect to Work. This programme is entirely voluntary and will provide employment offers to people with disabilities, health conditions or complex barriers to work. • Building on these reforms, the government will then publish a Green Paper in Spring 2025 setting out plans to reform health and disability benefits, to ensure the system supports people who can work to remain in or start employment, in a way that is fair and fiscally sustainable. An accessible 12 week consultation will follow to put the views and voices of disabled people at the heart of any policy changes that directly affect them. 	<p>1. RSN Chairs to send detailed feedback on employment support to the DU for DWP.</p>

Discussion point	Action point
<p>THEMATIC DISCUSSION: Feedback from RSN regions on employment support</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • RSN Chairs' meetings with the Minister are now based upon specific themes, as set out in a forward plan. Minister Timms asked Chairs to share feedback from their regions/members on the <i>employment support theme</i>. DWP officials working on the White Paper were also in the meeting to capture this feedback. Chairs have sent or will send more detailed feedback to the DU, which will be fed directly into DWP. • RSN East Midlands – The NHS seem not to be employing wheelchair users despite there being suitable roles; disabled people feel unwelcome in the NHS sector, with some feeling they can't even volunteer. Disabled people are subject to additional care charges with many using their benefits to pay for this. The outdated rules around savings impacting benefits doesn't fit with the higher cost of living costs and needs to be reviewed. Fluctuating disabilities often complicate consistent employment despite a desire to work. More rigorous checks are needed on Disability Confident employers. The Government should be careful in assumptions they are making when designing concepts for future employment support. <ul style="list-style-type: none"> – Minister Timms commented that the savings threshold is for means tested benefits only, and not for some other benefits (including PIP) which are intended to contribute to additional costs. • RSN West Midlands – Welcomes changes to Jobcentres, as those who have used them have felt anxious around losing benefits and/or under pressure to apply for jobs they felt unsuited for. There needs to be a person-centred approach to support people into meaningful jobs and careers, centred on skills matching. Alongside employment support, a strategy around disability awareness (especially around neurodiversity) 	

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<p>in the national workforce needs to be prioritised, extending beyond reasonable adjustments to cultural/behavioural shifts, i.e. a focus on opportunities for disabled people in skilled jobs/careers. Disabled employment programmes have focused more on health than disability, resulting in the loss of disability expertise in Jobcentres; with few disability employment advisors. Specialist disability trained staff are needed. Disability Confident lacks rigour and it is too easy to obtain accreditation; an annual report could be introduced. The Access to Work processes are creating a barrier to work; ongoing delays are meaning people are having job offers withdrawn and having to pay their own costs upfront and claim back much later. Localised programmes are needed due to disparities around the region. Transport continues to be an issue for employees and job seekers.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> – Minister Timms commented that the <i>Get Britain Working White Paper</i> also includes an independent Keep Britain Working Review on what more employers can do to support disabled people, both in recruitment and retention. He will also look into the numbers of disability employment advisors as this is important. • RSN Greater London – Fears around trying out jobs/setting up own businesses due to issues around loss of benefits and with getting back on benefits if employment doesn't work out. Inclusive workplace culture needs to be created; future improvements to recruitment and careers development won't work until there is improved culture so people feel able to share their disabilities without fear of it penalising their careers (which can be hard if junior). Issues for disabled people (especially neurodiverse) leaving prisons or mental health hospitals, and a lack of employment support; peer support/mentor models could help. Access to Work delays 	

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<p>have increased and people wanting different support have to go through the application again. There are missed opportunities where Access to Work assessors could build evidence about what works, such as keeping a record of good options for assistive technology that could be offered. Disability Confident research shows that employers on the scheme don't have higher levels of disabled people than those not. The Buckland Review has recommendations for an employers index too. Disabled people need better support in the workplace; better choices around assistive technology could help, but procuring it can be highly prohibitive; there needs to be more tailored options and the wider marketplace needs to be more visible.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> – Minister Timms commented that he agrees that Disability Confident needs to be made more robust. • RSN South West – Sam's charity has recently won a Zero Project award for launching the UK's first supported self-employment internship. Universal Credit journals seem to be giving different answers by different work coaches. Sam is discussing with DWP in the New Year. Worry with the new Connect to Work that if people say they can do a small amount of voluntary work, that they are then deemed as being able to work and that this may impact benefits. Also Access to Work isn't available for voluntary work. Concern around the Youth Guarantee (also recently raised with Alison McGovern MP) around what support there will be for those aged 21-25 with and without EHCPs and for those after age 25. Issue around self employed not being able to get Access to Work unless they have a unique tax reference and what happens if the minimum income floor impacts benefits. 	

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<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • RSN North West – Local issue with adult social care referring people to employment support even though they have been assessed as unfit to work through the Work Capability Assessment and this causing confusion with the employment support team. Issues for young people in Manchester trying to get into work; most jobs are available in retail and hospitality and these industries have little or no awareness of the social model of disability and neurodiversity. This is a barrier to getting into work and discrimination examples have made some feel worried about opening up and they feel there are limited roles they can go for (mainly in DPOs). There are fewer LAs/DPOs actually offering employment support programmes, with it mainly being from organisations such as large charities. Where there are programmes it lacks opportunities in the private sector, with many being in councils, NHS etc. Training and employment advisors in Jobcentres also need lived experience. Would like to see the upcoming disability employment gap plans linking in with the Disability Confident scheme. • RSN Yorkshire & Humber – Access to Work takes too long and is too restrictive; applications are often rejected and people are having to self-fund and there is also no support for people who may need help to successfully complete the form. Reasonable adjustments are not consistent, take too long and there are issues for wheelchair access at workplaces, which means some can't even access an interview. There are cases of employers refusing access to buildings for assistive dogs. Work software is often incompatible with assistive technology. Employers often aren't aware of the adjustments that can be made for visually impaired people to enable them to work. Disability discrimination is apparent in recruitment; it can feel like a tick-box where an employer tends to pick someone with hidden disabilities rather than physical 	

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<p>disabilities as they don't need physical adjustments. Attitudes need to be changed and awareness raised. Jobcentre staff aren't empathetic to accommodate disabled people getting into a Jobcentre.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> – Minister Timms said the surge in Access to Work delays is due to an increase in numbers applying for it and we are trying to address this. • RSN North East – The impact of loss of benefits versus employment; no time is given to try and make your business work. The region is trying to build links with the local Jobcentre to bring together employment and disability sectors and work with Disability Confident employers. The support processes that may be needed to employ a disabled person can be overwhelming to smaller organisations; GOV.UK advice for employers is too detailed and complex; it needs to be simplified. Issues with Access to Work waiting times and also the amount given to someone who needs human support isn't enough to allow them to engage with work; often barely minimum wage to pay a support worker and money runs out. Issues with the combined authority only wanting to engage with bigger organisations, whereas to see meaningful change they need to listen to disabled people's voices at a lower level. • RSN East of England – Many disabled people face barriers accessing appropriate support both when seeking and staying in employment; it can be complex and cause anxieties. Tailored support is lacking. Access to Work is one means of providing support but there are so many deficiencies with it and the wait is too long so the employment offer often disappears. Disability discrimination in recruitment and career progression still exists despite legal protection under the Equality Act. Jobs for disabled people should be meaningful with career progression rather than using them 	

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<p>for tokenistic, tickbox purposes. Issues around the provision of accessible workplace accommodation. The benefits system is so complex and the process daunting, which can lead to stress and confusion. Clarity is needed around what benefits someone gets when employed and what someone gets when not employed so fear isn't created. Concerns raised about Universal Credit and benefits don't reflect needs; there is inequality around financial support – it doesn't cover the full cost of living for disabled people, for example extra travel costs may need to be self-funded. Disabled people of multiple protected characteristics can face compounded challenges in employment and when accessing benefits, and can feel they are employed as a "partial person" because the role doesn't acknowledge their intersectionalities.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • RSN South East – Chloe was unable to attend but fed in. Issues include Access to Work delays and processes; in the worst case, these can cause employment offers to be retracted; and lack of consistency as people are passed between different case workers. Disability Confident scheme feels like a tickbox; it doesn't hold employers to account. More support is needed for disabled people to retain employment. Employment support schemes continue to be reduced despite being vital. Employer awareness needed that conditions fluctuate. Laws need to be tighter around reasonable adjustments. Disability Pay Gap reporting should be mandatory. The positive skills that disabled people can bring to the workplace are often overlooked in favour of negative misrepresentations. A significant proportion of disabled people cannot work for medical reasons and shouldn't be forced to work if this is going to impact on their health. 	

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<p><i>Minister Timms asked if any of the RSN Chairs have any good examples of employment support from their regions.</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Justin – in Jobcentres there needs to be more disabled people employed as employment advisors - advisors in Nottingham who were disabled but not specialists made all the positive difference and could really help. • Marc – many neurodiverse people use AI to tailor to their needs/ support with things e.g. language. More could be signposted to AI. • Sam – Crumbs (Bournemouth) support to build learning and professional skills for those with disabilities/mental health conditions. • Anne – Deutsche Bank/J.P. Morgan recruit autistic people who have done well. AI has made things better for neurodiverse people. • Louise – her organisation has funding for an employment support pilot; is piloting a WorkWell programme; and is working on intersectionality. • Marc – his tech business is collaborating on research and development with disabled founders and academics to look into more innovative, personalised, digital solutions using AI and immersive technology which is driven by lived experience and tech expertise. 	

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<p>AOB / Minister Timms closing summary</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Minister Timms thanked the Chairs for their insightful and useful feedback on the theme. He said he would welcome more information from Chairs. Chairs to also send more detailed written feedback to DU so that they can share this with DWP policy officials who are working directly on the <i>Get Britain Working White Paper</i>. • Minister Timms and RSN Chairs agreed that the meeting scheduled for 2 June 2025 would have an <i>assistive technology</i> theme. The meeting scheduled for 10 March 2025 has already been agreed as a <i>welfare reform</i> (health and disability benefits) theme, which will tie in with the Green Paper launch. 	