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Professor Malcolm Harrington CBE
WCA Independent Review
Department for Work and Pensions
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Dear Professor Harrington

Independent Review of the Work Capability Assessment

As charities, voluntary organisations and employment service providers from across the country, we work with some of the most disadvantaged and vulnerable individuals and communities in the UK. For a while, we have been concerned about the accuracy of the outcomes from the Work Capability Assessment (WCA). This concern was compounded by the announcement of changes to Housing Benefit in the Emergency Budget statement in June 2010, where payment will now be tied to the period of the JSA claim. It is concerning that an assessment which we do not believe has demonstrated its ability to place people correctly onto Employment and Support Allowance (ESA) may become the basis of eligibility for a far wider range of benefits.

We welcome your appointment to independently review the WCA, and would like to share with you our firsthand experience in working with people who are being let down by this assessment.

The role of WCA providers

Amongst all the uncertainties, what is clear is that the medical assessors will have a heavy workload over the next three years. The expectation to assess 1.6 million existing Incapacity Benefit claimants over that time period, equating to 41,000 per month, is an ambitious target. It is particularly ambitious considering that DWP statistics show that of the 166,300 who were found fit for work under the current assessment (by June 2009), a third of those people went on to appeal. Your review of the situation is timely, particularly with the current backlog of 50,000 assessments in mind.

Assessment principles

The assessment should be founded on a realistic model of what 'work' is and what is meant by 'limited capability for work' as per the Work-Related Activity Component assessment under ESA. Rather than simply assessing whether someone can work, the WCA should be amended to evaluate the full range of employability factors including an individual's barriers to work, which could then inform the appropriate segmentation for the Work Programme. These barriers can include, but are not limited to literacy, numeracy, confidence, self-esteem.

Recognising conditions

The current WCA is too heavily focussed on physical capability, and needs to better recognise the barriers faced by people with learning disabilities, mental health issues and fluctuating conditions. Given the stigma attached to mental health, our experience indicates that people are more likely to answer questions in the way that they want to be viewed. It is therefore imperative that a trusting relationship can be established to allow the claimant to feel comfortable in sharing such personal information. We recommend assessors are provided with better training on working with people with learning disabilities, fluctuating conditions and mental health issues.

Supporting claimants through the process

Better upfront support needs to be provided before claimants undergo their assessments, as the current support is insufficient. Notifications of assessments are sent out without warning and no further support is offered to help individuals to prepare for the process. Under circumstances where a claim is rejected, individuals are not signposted to any person or organisation who can help them understand why their claim was rejected or who can provide assistance with reinstating their benefits. This causes unnecessary anxiety to vulnerable people.

Post assessments

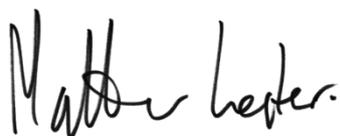
We are increasingly puzzled at the significant proportion (37%) of people who close their claim before the assessment process has ended. Whilst many of these people will have found jobs or may have stopped their assessments for personal reasons, we are concerned about those who may have become frustrated by the system and simply given up. Greater understanding of this group is needed and we urge you to recommend that the DWP begins to track the final destinations of this group in the future.

In addition, we believe a further recommendation should be for DWP to track people post-assessment by their disability type. This will enable the sector to better understand what happens to people with particular barriers who are passed fit for work, and will demonstrate whether the system is capable of supporting them.

Taking these factors into account, we believe the current WCA interview time needs to be lengthened in order to form a realistic impression of a person's employability and to build up the trust required.

We see your review as a real opportunity to make the necessary changes to the assessment before the wider migration from Incapacity Benefits begins next year. We wish you all the best of luck and look forward to working with you on this important issue.

Yours Sincerely



Matthew Lester
Director of Operations

