

Natspec response to Improving Lives: The Work, Health and Disability Green Paper



1. Background

- 1.1 Natspec is the membership association for organisations which offer specialist provision for students with learning difficulties and disabilities. Our vision is that all young people with learning difficulties or disabilities can access quality education and training which supports their aspirations for skills, work and life. Our members provide multi-disciplinary specialist support and expertise which enables students aged 16 to 25 to make a successful transition to adult life.
- 1.2 Natspec welcomes the government's manifesto ambition to halve the disability employment gap as part of its stated commitment to building a country and economy that works for everyone. We believe that education providers have a major role in raising the employment aspirations of young people with disabilities, and in helping them prepare for employment and progress into work when they finish their education or training. We are therefore surprised to note that the Department for Education is not cited in the green paper as a key partner of the Department for Work and Pensions and the Department of Health in addressing the disability employment gap.
- 1.3 Our member colleges specialise in education and training for young people with learning difficulties and/or disabilities and we are therefore particularly concerned at the very low percentage of people with a learning disability in employment (just 5.8% of adults with a learning disability known to local authorities). Our response to the green paper focuses particularly on this group, the specific issues they face and the actions needed to help them gain, retain and progress successfully in employment.
- 1.4 We also urge the government to ensure that for the small number of people with disabilities who are not capable of work, there is a fair assessment system that respects the dignity of individuals and a welfare system that provides them with the financial support they require in order to lead fulfilling lives, as full members of society.

2. Tackling a significant inequality – the case for action

- 2.1 We welcome the government's recognition that employment brings not just financial benefits for the individual (and the economy as a whole) but also health, social and emotional benefits, and that unemployment puts all of these at risk. For people with disabilities and health conditions, these benefits are not always derived from full-time paid work, which may not always be a reasonable aspiration, but can result from part-time, supported and/or voluntary employment. We would therefore urge the government to consider how best to encourage and support disabled people into a wide variety of forms of employment, and to recognise

that for some individuals, employment-related support will be just one aspect of the wider support package they need to lead as independent, healthy lives as possible.

- 2.2 The green paper rightly states that the longer a person is out of work, the more their health and wellbeing is likely to deteriorate and the harder it becomes to get back to work. We would also stress that this applies equally to young people seeking to gain their *first* job. We therefore recommend that much greater emphasis is placed on ensuring that young people progress as seamlessly as possible from education and training straight into employment and that the services that support them to do so are widely available and suitably resourced.
- 2.3 The green paper cites a wide range of groups (e.g. carers, third sector organisations, local authorities) who have a role to play in supporting people with disabilities to achieve and sustain employment. We believe strongly that learning providers also make a significant contribution through: raising the aspirations for employment of disabled young people and their families; equipping young people with the employability and vocational skills they need for employment; building their self-confidence and self-esteem; teaching them how to maintain good physical and mental health as far as is possible; helping them to develop the independent living skills they need as members of society and of the workforce; and engaging and addressing the concerns and misapprehensions of employers.
- 2.4 We appreciate that the government has provided specific sums of money to local authorities to support the implementation of supported internships, to help with the implementation of the SEND reforms more widely, and to enable them to conduct strategic reviews of their progress in this area. We would ask government to encourage local authorities to include in their review an evaluation of how effective their local offer is in supporting young people with SEND to achieve employment outcomes.
- 2.5 It is critical that learning providers are properly resourced to offer high quality study programmes, including supported internships, and the individualised support that is needed to encourage young people with disabilities to aim for employment and increase their chances of progressing straight into work when they leave college. Natspec is particularly concerned about the fair allocation of high needs funding to students aged 16 over. Young people with high needs are subject to a system in which there is something of post-code lottery as local authorities make inconsistent decisions in the face of budgetary constraints. Government needs to address this issue if more young people with disabilities and health conditions are to get the level and type of support they need to progress into employment.
- 2.6 We welcome the commitment to personalising the employment-related support available to disabled people and the recognition that the individuals themselves are often the best judges of the nature of the support they require. We urge government to focus on improving the integration of this support, including joint commissioning of services, so that health, social services and the welfare system align to address the individual needs of disabled people seeking and striving to maintain employment.

3. Supporting people into work

- 3.1 We welcome the focus on early engagement in supporting disabled people seeking work. However, we would like to see a support package being immediately available to young

disabled people leaving education or training where they have not already secured employment. Many of these young people will already have been subject to numerous assessments in their place of learning and the most appropriate paths and support packages (e.g. the support of a supported employment service) already identified. They do not need further assessment, but the timely provision of the appropriate support package.

- 3.2 In too many cases, young people are 'stepping off a cliff' when they leave college rather than moving seamlessly onto the next stage of their path to employment. Some will be picked up at a later point when they apply for benefits but may have lost skills and confidence during this period without support, while others may disappear off the radar altogether.
- 3.3 We recognise the value of work experience for young people with limited capability for work. To genuinely support young people into employment, however, the work experience must be tailored to their individual needs and offer the opportunity to build relevant knowledge and skills that will help them gain work. This requires careful planning with employers, ensuring that employers understand the young people's support and skills development needs. Exposure to the workplace in itself is not sufficient. Our members would be happy to provide further guidance on how to plan for and facilitate high quality work experience placements.
- 3.4 Natspec welcomes the planned increase in work coaches within Job Centres and in the range of interventions they will be able to offer. This support needs to be flexible and dynamic and not overly-reliant on the disabled job-seeker requesting it. It also needs to be available over a period of time and not solely, or even mainly, focused on getting the disabled person into work. Merely replicating or adapting slightly the universal support offer to non-disabled job-seekers would not be sufficient.
- 3.5 We advise that if work coaches are to achieve maximum impact, it is essential that they have the appropriate knowledge and skills to work with the full range of disabled people that they may be supporting, and up-to-date knowledge of other more specialist services to whom they can refer disabled job-seekers. Currently, there is a significant lack of understanding amongst some Job Centre staff about people with learning difficulties and/or disabilities and ways to assess and meet the needs of these individuals as they seek and enter employment.
- 3.6 We also recommend that government considers the provision of support to employers from designated staff in Job Centres. It is our experience that access to a named individual who can offer advice on meeting the needs of disabled employees enables employers to implement relatively simple solutions to issues that left unaddressed can lead to much more complex situations, sometimes resulting in the disabled person losing their job altogether.
- 3.7 We welcome the opening up of apprenticeships so that they are more accessible to people with learning difficulties and/or disabilities; Natspec is currently supporting the Department of Education to implement some of the recommendations of the Maynard review, including reducing the English and Maths requirements for some apprentices. We would urge the government to prioritise the implementation of these recommendations, so that more young people with learning difficulties and/or disabilities can take advantage of an apprenticeship, without further delay.

- 3.8 Supported employment services can provide a valuable route into paid work for many people with learning difficulties and/or disabilities but availability of these services varies dramatically across local areas. While it is important that resources are focused on those agencies which are successful in supporting people into work, the government will need to guard against an outcome-payments approach that values quantity over quality, which can lead to individuals being hurried into unsuitable job roles that later break down.
- 3.9 Supported internships can be a highly effective means of enabling young people with learning difficulties and/or disabilities to move directly from school or college into employment. Where they are most successful, learning providers are working closely with local employers to identify genuine job opportunities for young people, with the internship period being used to ease the learner into the role and help them build the necessary skills with the intensive support of a job coach. Some of our members have been very successful in designing and delivering supported internships and we would be happy to provide examples of effective practice to enable further development of this provision nationally.
- 3.10 Natspec strongly believes that government could do more to promote supported internships. Although individual learning providers have done a great deal of work to inform employers about supported internships and to make the business case for engaging in this provision, there is little information available at a national level, and unlike apprenticeships, there is no recognised brand. The sector would benefit hugely from nationally coordinated promotion, including high-profile employer champions and a website and resources, to which employers, who may be initially sceptical about getting involved, can be referred. Without a major drive at national level to engage employers of all sizes, there is a risk that individual learning providers find that locally they have reached 'saturation point'. In some cases, they are victims of their own success as employers recruit their interns, the young people successfully sustain employment, staff turnover decreases and with it future opportunities for new interns.

4. Supporting employers to recruit with confidence and create healthy workplaces

- 4.1 We welcome the government's aspiration to move towards an employment culture that recognises the contribution that disabled people and people with health conditions make to the workplace and where investment in health and wellbeing is the norm. We strongly support the Disability Confident campaign. Natspec itself is Disability Confident-committed while one of our members, Foxes Academy, has achieved Disability Confident Leader status. We are encouraging all our members to commit to the campaign and to support the employers they work with to do the same. Offering more recognition to employers who are disability-inclusive, through a disability-inclusive index, would provide a further incentive to encourage employers to engage with the Disability Confident campaign.
- 4.2 Access to Work provides valuable support to disabled people in employment, but more needs to be done to raise awareness of the existence of this funding, both amongst employers and disabled people. Some of our members have also experienced inconsistent interpretation of the type and amount of support that can be funded through Access to Work amongst different

Access to Work operators. In a few cases, operators have not even been aware that young people on supported internships are eligible for this funding.

- 4.3 In addition, employers are sometimes fearful of the costs of reasonable adjustments when employing disabled people but are unaware that the average cost of reasonable adjustments is about £75, and many are free and simple to implement. Easily accessible information that reassures employers on this issue would be beneficial. We therefore support the proposal both to run campaigns on key topics and to provide a one-stop shop on health and work that brings together practical information, including sources of funding.
- 4.4 We would also like to see this one-stop shop promoting effective inclusive recruitment and retention practices, as well as evidence-based information on the benefits of recruiting disabled people. The one-stop-shop could be one means of promoting supported internships. Natspec would be happy to provide case study examples of young, disabled people who have made successful transitions into work to supplement the evidence available in this one-stop shop, as we believe employers are most likely to be persuaded by examples of other employers successfully recruiting disabled people.
- 4.5 We welcome the potential expansion to other government departments of the Department for Work and Pensions' initiative encouraging suppliers to provide employment and other opportunities to disadvantaged groups, including disabled people. However, government departments will need to ensure that these employers have access to suitable information on meeting the needs of disabled people at work, so that they are able to work positively with the disabled people they recruit as a consequence of this contractual condition.

5. Conclusion

- 5.1 Natspec is happy to further support the Department for Work and Pensions and the Department of Health in their work to address the disability employment gap. We would also welcome the opportunity to work with others to change perceptions and transform the culture around disability, health and work, so that together we can help more young people with disabilities achieve and sustain employment.