

changing Lives

Employment and Disability Network project, funded by The Equalities and Human Rights Commission

Background

The original Changing Lives project was initially funded through Lancaster & Morecambe Vision following on from the first Employability and Skills Conference. A staff member employed by Lancaster & Morecambe College began the work with a pilot group of individuals all encountering various barriers in accessing paid employment. The pilot group consisted of lone parents, people with physical and/or sensory impairments, people with mental health problems and other longer term unemployed people and claimants of incapacity benefit. All of them had been disengaged for a long period of time.

The second phase of the initiative was funded through the Local Strategic Partnership with the aim of addressing inequality, unemployment and social exclusion and carried out an extensive research/practice phase.

'Changing Lives' is not in itself a separate entity but simply a project name that was linked to the Employability and Skills group and the Local Strategic Partnership. The project manager is employed by Lancaster & Morecambe College.

Employers' Survey

During the first phase of the project, an employers' survey was distributed by post and electronically to gather employers' views and perceptions about employing disabled people (people with physical and/or sensory impairments, people labelled as learning disabled and people who have or have had mental health problems). The survey showed that given support, some employers demonstrated good will but assumed that particular jobs were appropriate for particular individuals depending on their disability/health condition.

Relevant findings

Through undertaking qualitative interviews across the district a common theme was highlighted: the negative stereotyping, stigma and misunderstanding that still prevails about the employment of people who have or have had mental health problems and disabled people generally.

Notwithstanding the Disability Discrimination Act, disabled people or those

with particular health conditions still often face what can seem like insurmountable barriers when trying to find paid work.

Employment support agencies funded to help people on incapacity benefit and other disability related benefits highlighted some common themes:

- Employer reluctance when hearing that a potential candidate is disabled
- People on IB with acquired disability/ill health unable to access training and development to change direction in life
- Difficulties that people have retaining employment when they acquire a disability
- Minimal interest amongst employers to explore the real issues of disability/mental ill health
- Employers not using the provisions of the DDA correctly
- Assumptions made about clients with mental health problems as to the skills and experience they have and the kind of work they can do
- Employers discriminate against people who have had mental health problems
- Overall negative perceptions
- Learning disabled people are seen as not being financially viable.

Disability in the UK

Disability should be distinguished from impairment and ill health. Disability is defined as disadvantage experienced by an individual resulting from the barriers that they face in their daily lives (*Improving the Life Chances of Disabled People, Prime Minister's Strategy Unit*)

A distinction needs to be made between disability, impairment and ill health. Impairments are long-term characteristics of an individual that affect their functioning and/or appearance. Ill health is the short term or long term consequence of sickness or disease. Many people with an impairment or ill health would not consider themselves to be disabled.

Disabled people face a wide range of barriers and include:

- **Attitudinal**, for example among employers, health professionals, other service providers, the media and the general public
- **Policy and Organisational**, resulting from policy design and delivery which do not take disabled people into account
- **Physical/Environmental**, for example through the design of the built environment and transport systems etc; and
- **Lack of Empowerment**, as a result of which disabled people are not listened to, consulted or involved.

The cumulative effect of these barriers results in the marginalisation of disabled people from the mainstream of our society and economy. Removal of these barriers is the key to ensuring that disabled people have the opportunity to become full and active citizens.

Facts and figures

- It is estimated that there are about **11 million disabled adults in the UK**, one in five of the adult population. **There are about 770,000 disabled children.**
- **Older people** are more likely to be disabled than younger people, but over the past thirty years the incidence of disability has risen fastest amongst children.
- Trends in impairment show an increasing number of children being reported as having complex needs, **Autistic Spectrum Disorders and mental health issues.**
- Among adults there are **increasing numbers** of people reporting **mental illness and behavioural disorders**, while the number of people reporting physical impairments is decreasing.
- Many people may not class themselves as disabled but often face **disabling barriers** whilst seeking to be economically active.
- Compared with non-disabled people, disabled people are more likely to be **living in poverty** with income, on average, less than half of that earned by non-disabled people.
- Disabled people are **less likely to have educational qualifications** and are more likely to be **economically inactive.**
- **Only one in two disabled people** of working age are currently **employed** compared with four out of five non-disabled people.
- Disabled people are more likely to have problems with **hate crime or harassment** – a quarter of all disabled people say that they have experienced hate crime or harassment, and this number rises to **47% of people with mental health conditions.**
- Disabled people are more likely to experience problems with housing and with **an inaccessible transport system** face their biggest challenge.
- More than **40%** of disabled people are **low-skilled.**
- Around **25% of disabled people** of working age are **over-50yrs.**
- Around **10% are from black and minority** ethnic groups.

(Improving the Life Chances of Disabled People, Strategy Unit)

Lancaster & Morecambe district

There are 12,305 people claiming some form of benefit. 6,635 are claiming Incapacity Benefit. Wards that have the higher figures of claimants are also those wards that have a higher deprivation with the West End of Morecambe being in the first 1% in the country. There is a much higher incidence of ill

health and impairment (disability) in these wards.

There is only one Advocacy organisation in the district offering one to one advocacy solely for individuals who already access either statutory health or social care services. The Oaklea Trust, Jigsaw and the Shaw Trust carry out Workstep and job brokering with people claiming incapacity benefit and other disability benefits. Workspace offers sheltered employment opportunities for mental health users and will work on a one to one with people who have had mental health problems looking for paid work; Harvesters offers day services. These are both part of 'Making Space', a charitable mental health service provider. One Voice is an independent disability and carers organisation that has joined together to offer information and advice and other services; Thumbprint is a small organisation that works with people with learning disabilities and Lancashire Employment Team (public sector) will work with those meeting 'critical and substantial need' to find them gainful activity; Action for Blind people will offer a service to those with a visual impairment in the district. Piccadilly Garden offers day service provision to learning disabled people and 'Growing Matters', based at L&M College, offer gardening to learning disabled people and mental health system users. The Adult College offers New Directions and Job Quest for people on incapacity benefit and Standguide, in the private sector, offers courses for those on Incapacity Benefit. The Learning and Development group meets on a regular basis to discuss and advance opportunities for people who have mental health problems.

The Employment and Disability Network

Whilst there is support to disabled (pan disability) job seekers, the findings highlighted the apparent lack of 'group advocacy/social justice campaigns' in the district that could;

- i) represent and promote the interests of this group of people through advising on rights pertaining to employment, and
- ii) increase public and employer awareness of the skills of disabled people and the barriers they so often face when trying to find paid work including an anti-stigma work
- iii) build the capacity of user groups to support disabled people who may wish to find paid work.

The project

Changing Lives (Lancaster & Morecambe College) has received a small grant from the Equalities and Human Rights Commission to develop and establish an **Employment and Disability Network** in the district to serve the interests of disabled people, i.e. people with a physical and/or sensory impairment, long term health conditions, learning disability and those who have or have had mental health problems.

This particular project will bring a number of VCS groups together with education and learning providers and employment support agencies to work with disabled people and mental health service users under the auspices of

Changing Lives. It will build the capacity of disabled people and people with mental health problems and their organisations to create a better local environment and improved understanding of the issues that they face when trying to access paid work and the discrimination they may face at work if in paid employment.

It will carry out a survey of the VCS, public and private sector, to map support, formal and informal, available to disabled people and mental health users and make that available and transparent to the local community. It will offer support to a user advisory group made up of interested disabled people and mental health system users and carry out a number of training and talking events on issues such as the Disability Discrimination Act, 'social model' and user perspectives on considering and finding paid work.

The project will bring together the disparate organisations to establish a 6 month advisory group to support the aims of the project. It will also establish a user advisory group for the development period. The advisory group should meet 5 times over the duration of the project!

We hope that you will consider becoming involved with this project!