

Employment for People with Learning Disabilities who have High Support Needs

SUMMARY

Few people with learning disabilities and high support needs have benefited from the development of supported employment over the last two decades. Although current reviews of government policy may increase the likelihood of employment for some, radical steps still need to be taken if employment is to be an option for people with learning disabilities who have high support needs.

One project that has addressed this issue is the Step Out Project at L'Arche in Liverpool. This project, funded as part of the Choice Initiative, demonstrated the importance of work for some people with severe learning disabilities.

This *Update* provides a background to this work, and details some of the findings from the project and explores their implications.

BACKGROUND

People with learning disabilities and high support needs have a limited range of options for what they can do during the day. Local authority special care units have been one of the largest forms of provision for this group of adults, outside of special hospital provision.¹ Yet employment has been identified as a significant route to integration, personal development and self-worth for people with disabilities.² In the USA, over 100,000 people with learning and other disabilities have been employed through supported employment. This model has primarily served people with mild and moderate levels of disability both in the UK and USA.³ In the UK, pilot projects have started to show positive results for people with high support needs.⁴

Current policy issues

The Government continues to pursue a 'welfare to work' policy and seeks to promote employment as a strategy for social inclusion. At a local level government policies for 'modernising social services' emphasise rehabilitation and the promotion of independence, placing employment firmly on the social services agenda. The reform of large-scale day centres is also being addressed.

Supported employment is still not available everywhere. It tends to be funded through a wide variety of less than adequate sources, as there is no central government money available to fund the all aspects of the model. The Government's own Supported Employment Programme (SEP), offering sheltered workshop and open employment with wage subsidy, supports few, if any people with learning

disabilities and high support needs. An inability to come off high welfare benefits, the government's preference for jobs of over 16 hours per week, and a lack of availability of job coach support have restricted access.

Supported employment has been included as an innovative method in a number of experimental projects within the government's New Deal for Disabled People initiative, the National Disability Development Initiative, and the Supported Employment Development Initiative (which seeks to increase the progression of people from the Government's SEP into open employment). The SEP is currently under reform. We have yet to see whether supported employment will form a significant part of the implementation of these innovative programmes, and whether criteria for any revised SEP programme will begin to favour people with learning disabilities and high support needs.

THE PROJECT

In 1997, L'Arche in Liverpool was funded by the Foundation for People with Learning Disabilities, as part of the Choice Initiative to extend their supported employment project to eight people with learning disabilities and high support needs, who indicated that they wanted to experience the workplace.

THE FINDINGS

- At L'Arche, six people with high support needs gained experience of work. For four it was a very positive experience.
- It took a long time to establish participants' preferences, depending on whether they had previous experience of the work place. Two who joined in the second year without any such experience were still exploring the possibilities after a number of months.
- Jobs were found in a variety of settings - a leisure centre, a retail outlet, a factory, a toy library, a lunch club, a playgroup, a car wash and a motorbike showroom. Some potential employers responded negatively.
- No placements were paid, although the possibility of payment was being addressed in one instance.
- All placements were for one or two sessions a week. Several participants expressed a preference for a week, which balanced employment with the familiar day centre or the L'Arche sheltered workshop.
- The job trainers continued to support the participants in the workplace, although in several cases they were able to leave the participant to do aspects of the work with little direct supervision.
- A fortnightly Job Club enabled participants to support one another.
- Several people were invited to communicate the importance of being in the workplace in conferences, visits to special schools and on television.
- Not everyone will necessarily want to work. Two withdrew from the workplace.

THE IMPLICATIONS

- Supported employment for people with learning disabilities and high support needs is still seen as innovative.
- Supported employment agencies need to be well-resourced to provide the necessary level of support. Because of the fragility of funding some people may be unable to continue in placements.
- Job trainers need to remain in the workplace unless the employer is prepared to release staff to give support as time goes by.
- Although there is value in work experience in enabling people to find out about work, the importance of paying people needs to be recognised.
- The benefits system needs to be reformed to enable people to work more easily. This might include the creation of a taper on the loss of welfare benefit income as earned income increases, to ensure people are better off by entering employment, and ensuring people can return unhindered to benefit if jobs are lost.
- Social Services Departments and NHS Trusts need to form closer partnerships with the Employment Service, and explore joint planning and investment strategies if this group is to be helped to explore employment. Joint Investment Plans may provide an important forum for this to happen.
- All statutory agencies must broaden their view of who is capable of being employed with support. More people with high support needs can find a place in the mainstream of work with the support of their carers, advocates and service providers.
- Only through providing the right type of support will we be able to find out what contribution people with multiple disabilities can make, and the extent to which their efforts will be valued by employers.

RESOURCES

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