

“IMPROVING THE LIFE CHANCES OF DISABLED PEOPLE”

Response from National League of the Blind & Disabled

The National League of the Blind & Disabled is a trade union organisation of disabled people established 1899 and affiliated to the Labour Party in 1909 and the TUC in 1902. Although the NLBD is now a Section of Community - the union for life, we retain our independence as a disability organisation to the extent that we are separately affiliated to the Labour Party and a significant number of other disability organisations.

The NLBD has extensive membership of disabled people throughout the UK in Local Authority and Voluntary factories for disabled people, and in addition a number of other members employed in open industry, and seeking employment.

We note that the document is extremely comprehensive and we will be using this as a consultation mechanism amongst our members on all the various chapters, which appear to comprehensively map out the lives of disabled people very effectively.

Our members may well make their own contributions to this debate, through their MP's and by participating in discussions within other disability organisations that we are part of.

At this stage I wish to restrict our comments to one section only, and that is Section 7 on Employment, and within that we wish to respond to Recommendation 7.13: Supported Employment.

We are immediately expressing our concern with respect to this Recommendation as we do not believe this gives a true picture of the value of factory based supported employment.

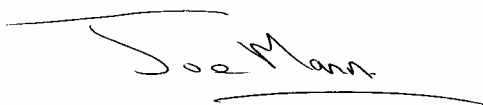
We would make the following points in relation to this:

- If the DWP from 2006 onwards, increases the flexibility of budgets within its current supported employment programmes away from programmes “which fail to integrate disabled people in mainstream employment” then that will undoubtedly threaten the jobs of a significant number of disabled people.
- Since the Workstep Programme was introduced some five years ago enormous pressure has been placed upon the Local Authority and Voluntary factories for disabled people which has resulted in a number of cut backs and closures, all of which has resulted in the downgrading of terms, conditions, and in particular pay of disabled people.
- We have agreement with the previous Disability Minister, Maria Eagle MP, that the Programme will now be reviewed, that we will be part of that review and our contention is that hopefully what emerges from the review will be a situation that will actually advance the interests of our disabled people in employment, particularly in terms of not only jobs, but more in particular the type of jobs disabled people do, and the level of pay and terms and conditions of employment.

- The Recommendation fails to recognise that factory based supported employment, in particular the Local Authority and Voluntary factories (the NLBD has no members in Remploy) very much represent best practice in terms of pay, terms and conditions of employment for disabled people.
- Our members have continually emphasised their prime civil right is one of choice, and they have clearly demonstrated over a number of years that their choice is to work in supported factories rather than take their chances in open employment, where the civil rights agenda has not yet been able to deliver a society which has educated employers to the extent that they wish to employ disabled people on anything other than menial jobs on very low pay.
- With respect to the need to provide value for money, we would agree with that, however how this is evaluated is particularly important, as we would encourage all those concerned to look at the wider picture, which indicates that when disabled people are employed on decent terms and conditions of employment and proper pay, then the value for money to the wider society should be properly judged, and we would welcome an opportunity to put together a criteria to define exactly and precisely what “providing value for money” actually means.
- We agree with the wider objective of social inclusion for all disabled people, but it must be recognised that this cannot be achieved by introducing any mechanism that threatens the jobs that disabled people currently enjoy.
- Finally, we are unsure with respect to your final point within the Recommendation as to exactly how you would see reviewing the links between the current supported employment strategy, and how Local Authorities are meeting resources, would actually work. Local Authority Social Services departments differ very widely in terms of the levels of support and relationships with their own particular factories for disabled people where they have them, and it is clear that where the political support is forthcoming that Local Authorities widely welcome and utilise the factories based within their communities for the best interest of not only disabled people, but also for everyone else in the community through the manufacture within these factories of high quality products that the community uses. It should also be pointed out that many Local Authorities place their factories in departments other than Social Services, such as Building and Works.

With respect to all other elements of the employment chapter, and other elements of the document, we will, as previously stated, continue to review this and ensure that we make a contribution to policy development in this area in the forthcoming period.

With all best wishes,



Joe Mann MBE
 National Secretary
 National League of the Blind & Disabled Section of Community – the union for life