

SUBMISSION FROM INTOWORK

How services should support young people with autism when they leave school

1. Future needs meeting at schools could go further in ensuring a joined up approach for students with autism spectrum disorders (ASD). Adult services are mostly funded to work with clients from 16 years of age. The transition begins much sooner and local services should be working together when the student is at least 15, ensuring a joined up approach and that the student is familiar with their future service providers. Our service could get involved with careers events, work experience placements and orientation visits if appropriately funded. Work experience especially is under utilised or missed out altogether for students with ASD. This is also the case in college settings.
2. While the Education (Additional Support for Learning) (Scotland) Act 2009 addresses the learning support needs, the social support needs unique to this client group are not addressed. Rather than establishing a hierarchy, support services within colleges could incorporate these networks allowing ASD students to make the most of their experiences. It is easy for these students to become isolated and subsequently their learning suffers. Socially these students need a different approach to ensure equal treatment, especially in work experience placements.
3. Although the local area coordinator post and transition projects have been created, these services are not geared up for the volume of clients that need their support. Our organisation has been approached to offer training to the transitions project in Edinburgh which was not cost viable for us to deliver, although we did work in partnership to highlight other resources available. We have recently piloted a successful job seeking skills transition group for young people leaving school and college (evaluation available). This was achieved without financial support from local authorities.

How other services should be planned and work together

4. Services to support the transition from benefits to work are not working together to support this client group and often cause extreme stress and anxiety. When clients get a job their benefit stops suddenly, the run on is not as automatic as advertised and automated letters from housing benefit, council tax and tax credits begin to arrive threatening to stop payments, demanding they attend identity centres (even though the tax credits were applied for using an in-house system in the job centre) and giving them deadlines to pay full yearly amounts of council tax. Clients with ASD take language literally and nowhere in these local authorities letters applauds the client for successfully coming off benefits or congratulates them for gaining meaningful employment.
5. Although better off calculations are devised from the Department for Work and Pensions (DWP), they do not give accurate information. The

council housing benefit division requires two wage slips and a tax credit award letter before adjustments can be made, this can take months. Support services to help these clients are very thin on the ground and clients do not have time to sort out this volume of paperwork when they are working. The award letters are often inaccurate and helplines tell them to call back later or bounce them around from department to department.

6. The DWP, working tax credits and revenue and benefits departments need to change their approach and work together to ensure clients are esteemed for gaining work. These clients need accuracy, positive reinforcement in all correspondence and timelines. Guidance to local authorities should stipulate that clients with ASD find using the phone difficult and take language literally.

Employment support services – why mainstream programmes don't work

7. Intowork introduced a specialist employment service for people on the autism spectrum over ten years ago, recognising that traditional employment services focused on adults with learning disabilities did not meet the needs of those with autism or asperger's syndrome. Mainstream government/DWP programmes are even less appropriate for those with ASD, given the pressure they are under to achieve quick targets and outcomes. The Pathways to Work programme frequently leads to jobseekers with higher support needs (including those with ASD) being "passed over" in favour of those who are easier to place into work as evidenced in DWP's own research. A National Audit Office Report (May 2010) concluded that Pathways was not working and provided poor value for money. Those limitations have now been confirmed by the UK Public Accounts Committee in a recent (September 2010) report *Support to incapacity benefits claimants through Pathways to Work* which said that "private providers' performance was universally poor in helping claimants required to go on the programme – worse than Jobcentre Plus areas. They tended to cherry pick their clients and still achieved only one third of the targets for mandatory participants".
8. **It is imperative therefore that the autism strategy emphasises the need for specialist employment support** and that resources (outwith mainstream programmes) are made available to address the very low employment rates of people with ASD (only 15% are in full time work).
9. Intowork currently supports over 60 people with ASD in mainstream employment plus a further 45 in the pre-employment stage. Over its ten year span, Intowork has identified some key elements to providing a successful employment service for people with ASD.
10. Specialist knowledge of the condition is essential so that appropriate support can be provided to secure a good job match and improve longer-term sustainability in the workplace.

11. Consistency of support ie preferably the same employment worker allocated to each service user throughout the duration of the service and the knowledge that support will be available when needed.
12. Tailored 1:1 advice, support and guidance that puts the individual jobseeker at the centre and in control of the process.
13. Provision of disability awareness training to employers, enabling them to value the qualities people with ASD bring to a job and understand the support required to make the job a success.
14. These key elements, by definition, will inevitably result in a higher unit cost, but this should be seen in the context of a service whose statistics and evaluations show that it is both effective and highly valued by those who use it. Contrast this with Pathways to Work which has been extensively researched and evaluated by the DWP and other external commissioned agencies which show that it has consistently under-performed, and that aspects of the Department's contracting practice for Pathways were undesirable and in other circumstances should not be repeated. The cost per job under Pathways was (up to March 2009) almost £3,000. More than 30% of Intowork service users get jobs compared with only 15% of Pathways clients.

The need for specialist employment provision should be clearly stated in the strategy.

15. This is in stark contrast to the autism strategy for England which seems to rely on re-vamping existing mainstream provision giving examples such as Pathways to Work (described as the first tailored support for this client group!), Workstep, Work Choice (due to be implemented in October 2010, but may be scrapped under the new Government's welfare plans) and Access to Work. The English strategy also introduces considerable confusion by devoting a significant part of its "employment" section to mental ill health.
16. The Scottish autism strategy needs to differentiate and distance itself from over reliance on re-invented DWP programmes that have been given a mild "autism makeover". These programmes will not serve the employment support needs of people with autism.

Intowork
8 October 2010