

Editorial from *Poverty* journal, issue 123 (Winter 2006)

Disabled claimants cannot be pushed into work

Months overdue, and three Secretaries of State later, the Government has finally published its Welfare Reform Green Paper. It avoided some of the more extreme suggestions rumoured, but it represents nonetheless a distinct tightening of conditionality, with new work-related activity required of sick and disabled claimants, and heavier requirements on lone parents to attend work-related interviews – or benefit penalties for failure to comply. The Government will say this is not new: some claimants in the pilot Pathways to Work areas can already face sanctions for non-compliance, and lone parents too can be penalised if they fail to attend work-focused interviews. But the Green Paper proposals represent a significant hardening of the position. Ministers have been seen as determined to ‘get tough’ on benefits claimants, and whatever the detail of their proposals, claimants already feel anxiety and concern that they will be pushed into work (or lose benefit) when they are not ready or able to do so.

What does the Green Paper contain? A welcome recognition that many sick and disabled people would like to work when it is right for them to do so, and a commitment to investment in supporting them to make that choice. But the Secretary of State has no new money for this. £360 million has been committed from his existing budget, but CPAG calculates that it would need at least £500 million to roll out Pathways to Work across the country - this is not a programme that can be delivered on the cheap. Idealistic ideas about the role of the voluntary sector and engaging employers will not be sufficient to move one million claimants into work – and it is difficult to see how more interviews and work-related activity can be provided when Jobcentre Plus is facing substantial staff cuts. Changing the emphasis of the personal capability assessment to look at what claimants can do rather than what they cannot and assessing claimants as more or less severely disabled will require a very high-quality assessment process – the track record is not good when already nearly half of challenged personal capability assessment decisions are successfully appealed. Ministers must remember too that work is not a guaranteed route out of poverty – disabled people still face discrimination in the workplace and without the right training and support they will simply end up in poor quality, low paid jobs. And proposals to reduce benefits to the level of jobseeker’s allowance for claimants who fail to comply means that some of the most disadvantaged individuals facing high barriers to entering employment risk plunging further into poverty. Cuts in benefits are not the way for the Government to achieve its child poverty target.

So whilst we welcome the Government’s commitment to re-engaging with those long written off by the system, let us recognise that many claimants face very substantial barriers to employment, and cannot simply be divided into those who ‘will never work’ and everyone else. This Government has long trumpeted its ethos of work for those who can, support for those who cannot. On both these ambitions, the Green Paper falls short.