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SHORT REFLECTION ON NATIONAL DISABILITY STRATEGY

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July 2021

Victoria Wass and Melanie Jones of disability@work reflect on two policy proposals published in the National Disability Strategy on July 28th: measuring progress on disability disadvantage and workplace disability reporting.

After 30 years of disability employment policy and practice focused on the labour market activation of disabled people, a policy re-focus on the role of business in reducing employment barriers to promote a diverse workforce justifies the description of the NDS as ‘transformative’. One motivation for employers to engage with this is the transparency that comes with the reporting of outcomes. The strategy proposes consultation on workplace disability reporting in a similar manner to gender pay gap reporting.

This is consultation and not implementation and the strategy is big on policy consultation as opposed to policy implementation. Given that it is two years since the NDS was announced, almost five years since the launch of the joint DWP and Department of Health major consultation on disability disadvantage *Improving Lives*, many more years since the last White Paper on disability and employment and the numerous parliamentary committee inquiries and reports on the disability employment gap, more consultation and further delay in implementation will be disappointing and frustrating for disabled people. Progress in disability employment disadvantage reported in the NDS (pp. 48-9) is overstated so there is some urgency to implementing disability employment initiatives.

Workplace disability reporting

Evidence will have an important role in the assessment and potential development of mandatory workplace disability reporting. If funded, a research proposal based at Cardiff Business School, will work with employers to feed evidence on the benefits and barriers to workplace reporting into the process.¹ The majority of organisations don’t currently record the disability status of their employees (accurately or at all) and this will make reporting a much greater challenge than gender pay gap reporting. However, such information is the precursor to better managing disability inclusion and so this challenge needs to be met. We are pleased to see the strategy recognise disability@work’s calls for consistency in the definition and measurement of disability and approach to data collection to support comparisons between employers and we look forward to working with HR professionals to further inform the implementation of such reporting.

Measuring progress on disability employment disadvantage

The strategy states the Government’s belief that it has made progress on its two employment commitments to disabled people: an increase in disabled people in employment by 1 million made in 2017 with 80 per cent achieved by 2021 and a narrowing of disability employment gap by 5

¹ Research Proposal “Supporting Employers to Narrow Disability Employment and Pay Gaps in the UK”

percentage points since 2014 (page 48-9). Such progress might provide some justification for further delay in policy implementation. However, the impression of progress on disability disadvantage given by these statistics is misleading because they include the effect of a growing proportion of working-age people who report that they are disabled (16.5 to 19.7 percent between 2013 and 2020). This increase in reported disability is understood by the Government (see *Shaping Future Support: The Health and Disability Green Paper (2021)*) but it chooses to ignore the confounding effects of the increase on its indicators of progress on disability employment disadvantage. This group of ‘recent reporters’ are more likely to be in employment or close to employment and this generates a false positive interpretation of progress unless controlled for. There is an alternative measure that is relatively unaffected by this reporting change – the proportion prevented from working by disability (PWD). In its report (2021) on the disability employment gap, the Work and Pension Select Committee recommend the inclusion of PWD as a check on this cofounding effect. Using the PWD in Figure 1 (green), there has been no improvement in the relative position of disabled people in the jobs market since 2014.

Figure 1: Comparing the current disability employment gap measure with PWD

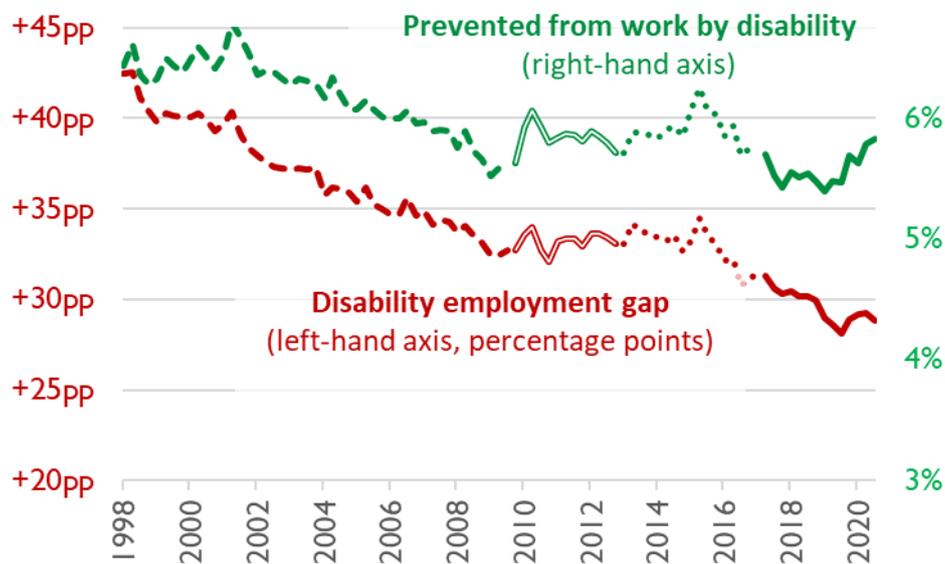


Figure uses ONS data, labour market statistics table Ao8. Different line styles show discontinuities in the LFS data; the figure is ‘chained’ so that the earlier series continues where the more recent series stops.

Baumberg-Geiger B, Jones M, Bryan M, Wass (2021) submission to work and pension select Committee inquiry into the Disability Employment Gap.

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