



**Disability Rights Commission**

**The Employment of Disabled People in the Public  
Sector:  
A Review of Data and Literature**

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**EXECUTIVE SUMMARY**

The Social Policy Research Unit, with Equal Ability Limited, carried out, over the summer of 2004, a review of evidence on the employment of disabled people in the public sector. The Disability Rights Commission wanted the review as context for the anticipated new statutory duty on the public sector to promote disability equality.

The report draws on:

- 1 secondary analysis of the Labour Force Survey, to describe recent trends and the characteristics of disabled public sector employees;
- 2 a review of published research literature; and
- 3 a trawl of public sector employers to identify documentation showing effective disability employment practices.

### **Recent trends in public sector employment**

The number of working age disabled people in public sector employment in Britain grew from more than 660,000 in 1998/99 to just over 790,000 in 2002/03, an increase of almost 130,000 or nearly 20 per cent over the four year period. This compares with a 161,000 increase among non-disabled people, a modest growth of three per cent.

With the expansion of the public sector, the number of female employees increased faster than that of men. Disabled women working in the public sector increased by 101,000 or 24 per cent, compared with an increase of 28,000 disabled men, a growth of 11 per cent over the study period. The increase in employees was largely concentrated in local government and the health service, and rates of growth in these areas for disabled employees were over twice those of non-disabled employees.

Nonetheless, disabled people are less likely than non-disabled people to work in the public sector. Between 1998 and 2003, around 11 per cent of working age disabled people had public sector jobs compared with 18 per cent of non-disabled people. The difference

between these two employment rates, seven percentage points, can be interpreted as the extent to which disabled people are disadvantaged, relative to non-disabled people, in obtaining or keeping jobs in the public sector.

Despite the increasing number of disabled people in public sector employment, inequalities in the proportions of disabled and non-disabled people working in the public sector did not diminish during the study period. People with mental health problems, or learning difficulties, are most disadvantaged in getting or keeping public sector jobs; minority ethnic disabled people are also under-represented in the public sector.

### **Employment circumstances and characteristics of disabled public sector employees**

Disabled public sector employees are typically six or seven years older than their non-disabled counterparts: 42 per cent of disabled employees are aged 50 years or more, compared with 27 per cent of non-disabled employees. Disabled or not, almost two-thirds of public sector employees are women, and they are more likely than men to work part time.

Musculo-skeletal complaints are reported as the main health problem or disability by one in three disabled employees. Together with respiratory conditions, and complaints affecting the heart or circulation of the blood, they account for almost 60 per cent of the health problems singled out by these employees.

Differences between disabled and non-disabled public sector employees in educational qualifications are comparatively small except at the highest level: 22 per cent of disabled employees have a degree or equivalent qualification compared with 30 per cent of non-disabled employees.

Just over half of both disabled and non-disabled public sector employees work in local government, and almost a quarter in the

health service. However, disabled employees are less likely than non-disabled employees to occupy the more senior managerial, professional and technical positions, and differences in occupational status are more marked between disabled and non-disabled men. Disabled employees are also less likely to have taken part in any recent job-related training, partly because they were older and more likely to occupy lower status jobs than non-disabled employees.

Disabled employees are somewhat more likely than non-disabled employees to report that they had taken at least one day off sick during the past week: the proportions are 6.1 and 2.5 per cent respectively.

Nine per cent of disabled women expressed a preference for working longer hours, and six per cent of disabled men, marginally more than their non-disabled counterparts: seven and four per cent respectively.

Disabled employees often earn less than 95 per cent of non-disabled employees' earnings in comparable public sector occupations and organisations. Several groups of disabled employees, including those working in local government and the health service, typically earn much less than that, and disparities in earnings associated with disability are generally greater for men than women.

### **Research on employers' attitudes and practices in employment of disabled people**

It is hard to draw firm conclusions from employer surveys because they define public sector in differing ways, word questions differently and focus either on workplaces or on whole organisations. Moreover, findings specific to public sector employers are not systematically presented in research reports.

Across sectors, respondents' interpretations of disability commonly were restricted to obvious physical and sensory impairment, and awareness of impairments covered by the Disability Discrimination

Act (DDA) 1995 was low.

Between seven in ten and eight in ten of public sector employers were aware of the DDA. In the most recent survey reviewed, respondents in one in four voluntary and public sector organisations named the DDA spontaneously.

In one survey, one in three public sector employers said that they actively encouraged job applications from disabled people. In another survey, however, fewer than one in ten of all respondents said they were very likely to take on people with physical disabilities and less than one in twenty people with mental health problems. Here there was a suggestion that likelihood might be higher among public sector employers. A third survey found that three in ten of all employers felt it would be impossible to employ a wheelchair user or someone with impaired vision.

Seven in ten public sector workplaces in one survey had formal policies covering employment of disabled people.

There are inconsistent findings from surveys on the propensity of public sector employers to make adjustments for disabled employees, ranging from nearly eight in ten to one in four workplaces having in place (or planned) arrangements for flexible working time or varied hours. In the most recent survey reviewed, over half of public sector workplaces that had ever had a disabled employee had arrangements in place or planned for flexible work organisation. Of those public sector employers in that survey that actually had made changes to the workplace or working practices (just over one in four), one in three said the law required them to do so.

From the surveys reviewed there are indications of the public sector out-performing the private sector, but not always the voluntary sector, though some conclusions are derived from a single study. The areas in which the public sector may perform better than the private sector

are:

- 1 likelihood of employing and recruiting disabled staff
- 2 somewhat more inclusive interpretations of 'disability'
- 3 awareness of the DDA
- 4 having a formal policy covering employment of disabled people
- 5 making, or being willing to make, adjustments for disabled staff and citing the law as a reason for making changes.

Caution is needed in attributing differences to sector alone. Size of organisation is recognised as a main variable leading to differences in results between the public and private sector. However, having taken size and other factors into account, one study found that the odds of having employed a disabled person are one and a half times higher in the public sector than in the private sector. It also found that the presence of a written policy relating to employment of disabled people and awareness of the DDA are significant factors in this respect. Accordingly, the interaction between size, having a policy and DDA awareness needs to be explored further in order to understand differences within the public sector.

### **Sickness absence**

Sickness absence rates are higher amongst disabled than non-disabled employees. Surveys have found minorities of employers believing that disabled potential recruits might take more sick leave or have worse attendance and punctuality records than non-disabled people. On the other hand, similar sized minorities were found to believe that disabled people have better records than non-disabled people.

Sickness absence rates amongst all employees are higher in the public than in the private sector, and higher in large than in small employing organisations. The gap between sectors is narrower when data is gathered from the Labour Force Survey than when the less reliable but much more widely publicised employer surveys are used.

Ill-health and sickness absence in parts of the public sector have been linked to levels of stress at work, which can result from inadequate social support networks at work, combined with deteriorating social relationships outside work, as well as from a work culture of long working hours, heavy workloads, low levels of employee control and bullying by managers.

In the one study that looked at differences between sectors in the management of sickness absence, public sector organisations appeared better placed than those in the private sector to offer rehabilitation.

Analysis of the Labour Force Survey found that the risk of leaving employment after becoming disabled as defined by the DDA was lower in the public industrial sectors than in the other industrial sectors.

### **Disabled people's employment experiences**

There is only a small body of research on the experiences of disabled people working in the public sector. Key findings from studies involving disabled people working in health and social care are:

- 1 strikingly lower levels of job satisfaction among disabled than among non-disabled social services staff
- 2 pain emerging as the chief barrier at work for social care workers
- 3 views among health and social care workers that colleagues had limited awareness of disability and of how it affected them at work
- 4 perceptions that disclosure has negative effects on colleagues' attitudes to staff with a hidden disability or a mental health condition
- 5 strong beliefs among 'user employees' in mental health services that their experiences as service users added value to their work with other users.

A study of how deaf British Sign Language (BSL) users and hearing

people work together in statutory organisations concluded that working and social relationships can be improved, and deaf staff's confidence fostered, if hearing staff use BSL in the presence of deaf staff. The power imbalance between unqualified deaf workers and qualified hearing staff can be reduced by recognising competency rather than qualification.

One wider study found organisations of and for disabled people to be more supportive, accepting, flexible and empathetic than other employers.

### **Role of services in promoting employment in the public sector**

From the large number of evaluations of government employment programmes there is no direct evidence of the sectoral destinations of disabled participants who enter employment. Scrutiny of early findings from the evaluation of the New Deal for Disabled People national extension (the Job Broker service) suggests that the public sector may not be well represented.

A survey of users of Access to Work found:

- 1 Access to Work used much more in the public than in the private and voluntary sectors, and particularly in central government
- 2 public sector users somewhat more likely than others to have a bigger package of Access to Work supports but less satisfied with the extent to which Access to Work met their needs
- 3 public sector users holding less favourable opinions on employers' involvement in the process of getting Access to Work and less satisfied with the time for the support to be provided, compared with users in other sectors
- 4 a lower overall opinion of Access to Work among public sector users than those in the private and voluntary sectors.

Evidence from a study on public sector supported work settings is that disabled employees in public sector supported factories and businesses were the least satisfied with the support they received,



compared with those in voluntary sector businesses or in supported jobs with ordinary employers. They rated especially less highly the interest of the job, learning new skills and improvement of their pace of work.

There are suggestions that public bodies aiming to establish social firms need to develop genuine worker participation in the planning and implementation stages, and in monitoring.

### **Evidence from employers' documentation of effective policies and practices**

Thirty-one umbrella or similar organisations were asked to circulate a request for documentation evidencing effective policies and practices in the public sector, and some government departments were asked to identify good practice employers. Information was received for 22 employers, a disappointingly low response, and evidence of effectiveness was very limited. Limitations in the method used, and in umbrella organisations' and employers' capacity to respond to the request, are acknowledged. There are, however, indications of limited awareness among umbrella organisations of what their members are doing, uncertainty among public sector employers about whether they are doing anything special, a lack of an organisation-wide strategic view and possibly only limited evidence of effectiveness available.

Many employers were only just beginning to look at monitoring and understanding the effectiveness of their policies. There was, exceptionally, some evidence of progress with employment targets. One example was found, in a NHS trust, of active promotion of workplace diversity resulting in high levels of recruitment of staff with personal experience of mental health problems.

There was some evidence of staff surveys leading to an agenda to improve provision for prospective and existing disabled employees, including setting up an employee network.

Documented practices for which no evidence of effectiveness was offered include use of guaranteed interviews, staff training and adjustments.

Significant importance was attached by respondents to 'being awarded' the Jobcentre Plus Disability Symbol as a form or external accreditation. The system of assessment does not appear to maximise the potential for improving employment opportunities.

From the documents retrieved there were examples of good disability policies but also of failures to link them effectively with mainstream policies. There was a tendency for a lack of explanation and illustration to tie theoretical statements to the real experiences of disabled people and their colleagues. The view of disability was sometimes limited.

### **Conclusions and recommendations**

It is encouraging to find, from the analysis of the LFS, rather few apparent differences in the characteristics of disabled and non-disabled employees in the public sector, though disparities in earnings and occupying senior positions need further investigation and when the quality of employment is considered disabled employees in certain sub-sectors of the public sector are disadvantaged. It is also encouraging that the public sector outperforms the private sector in some respects, though it is hard to explain why.

The proposed duty on the public sector to promote disability equality will require employers to take action in areas which are currently under-developed such as: involving disabled staff; training and awareness raising; monitoring disability within the workforce and among job applicants; and taking an organisation-wide strategic approach.

Guidance needs to convince employers of the value to them of taking

action, involving a prior understanding of what motivates them to change.

Development work might include further investigation of effective practice through equality, diversity and disability networks and recipients of award and accreditations.

At the same time, steps must be taken to counter misunderstandings about disability, with active campaigning to educate the public about disability in general and legislation on disability in particular, and specifically to promote awareness of which conditions are included under the DDA and help to dispel myths about employing disabled people.

### **Overcoming gaps in knowledge**

There is scope for further analysis of the LFS to fill gaps in knowledge:

- 1 multivariate analysis to investigate reasons for the reported differences between disabled and non-disabled employees, with priority given to pay differentials
- 2 comparison of disabled people's employment experiences across sectors, to provide the context within which to evaluate and interpret findings related to the public sector
- 3 longitudinal analysis to explore employment trajectories of disabled people, including movements in and out of the public sector
- 4 longitudinal analysis to investigate in more detail the finding that public sector employees have a lower risk of leaving employment following onset of disability compared with those working in other industry divisions.

There is a role for the DRC to influence the design of further research to introduce consistency in the definition of the public sector and in survey design so that the impact of the public sector duty can be tracked over time.

There is a need for research that establishes what leads to change and which takes account of the perspectives of disabled and non-disabled staff in different positions within public sector employing organisations.